

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Construction of Consent for High-altitude Resettlement in Tibet

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Abstract

In 2018, the Tibet Autonomous Region began resettling pastoralists from high-altitude areas to newly built settlements in distant, lower-altitude farming locations under the “extremely high-altitude ecological resettlement” programme, with a stated dual purpose of environmental protection and improving pastoralist well-being. The programme is said to be based on a principle of “government guidance and voluntary participation.” However, despite its stated “voluntary” nature, the government reports a 100 per cent rate of agreement to participate. After examining the ecological rationales for resettlement and pastoralists’ reluctance to move owing to livelihood concerns and attachment to homeland, the article examines how consent is achieved. Based on official documents and reports as well as semi-structured interviews with officials and pastoralists in Nagchu Municipality, the core target area for the programme, the article identifies a three-step “thought-work” oriented process – beginning with an initial survey, followed by group incentives and warnings and then individual incentives and warnings – which is deployed until pastoralists sign a resettlement agreement. The process illustrates the dialectical relationship between coercion and consent.

摘要

自 2018 年起，以保护生态和改善民生为由，以“政府主导、群众自愿”为原则，西藏自治区实施“极高海拔生态搬迁”项目，将生活在高海拔牧区的牧民远迁至在海拔相对较低的农区新建的安置点。政府宣称，牧民搬迁出于自愿，搬迁同意率达到百分之百。基于对项目核心区那曲市的牧民和官员的访谈，结合官方报道，在讨论完搬迁的生态保护理由以及事实上牧民因搬迁后的生计之忧和故土难离之情并不愿搬迁之后，本文探讨了政府是如何使牧民同意搬迁的。文章指出了以一个以“思想工作”为核心的分三步的建构同意的过程。首先是对牧民进行搬迁意愿调查，紧接着是对牧民进行从集体（第二步）到个人（第三步）的思想引导，恩威并施，直到所有牧民签署搬迁同意书。这一过程显示了被强制与同意之间的辩证关系。

Keywords: Tibet; pastoralism; resettlement; consent; thought work

关键词: 西藏; 畜牧业; 搬迁; 同意; 思想工作

“The only thing that makes me feel better about the fact that we will soon have to move to Sinpuri (Senburi 森布日) is a better education for our kids,” said Taklha, a 44-year-old pastoralist in March 2022. Taklha was living in Tsonyi (Shuanghu 双湖), a high-altitude county in north-west Nagchu (Naqu 那曲), Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).¹ Reputed to be the “highest county in the world,” Tsonyi is a prime target for the “extremely high-altitude ecological resettlement” programme (*jigao haiba shengtai banqian* 极高海拔生态搬迁), which was launched by the TAR government in 2017.

1 We provide Tibetan place names followed in parenthesis by Chinese place names. We use pseudonyms for people for their safety.

Although ecological resettlement, or resettlement based on ecological rationales, has been taking place in Tibetan areas outside the TAR for almost two decades, most notably in Sichuan and Qinghai,² this is the first systematic ecological resettlement of pastoralists within the TAR. There are 450 villages slated for relocation in their entirety from the targeted areas in north-west Nagchu, west Shigatse (Rikaze 日喀则), east Ngari (Ali 阿里), and west Lhokha (Shannan 山南), to lower elevations in the south of the TAR by 2025.³ Taklha's family was resettled in July 2022 to Sinpuri, Lhokha, over 630 kilometres from their original home and nearly 70 kilometres south-west of Lhasa, the TAR's capital.

When township officials first informed them of the resettlement programme during a village meeting in 2017, Taklha, his 36-year-old wife, Tencho, and Taklha's 73-year-old father did not want to leave their land and pastoralist livelihoods. Then, because they were not persuaded to move during village meetings, township officials visited Taklha and his family many times over the next three years for "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作). In September 2020, the county government moved the boarding schools attended by the family's three children, aged 10, 13 and 15, which were located in the township seat (40 kilometres from their home) and in the county town (156 kilometres away), to a newly established nine-year school at the resettlement site in Sinpuri. As a result of multiple rounds of thought work and the relocation of his children to a site more than 600 kilometres away, Taklha finally signed an agreement in March 2021 stating that he voluntarily and willingly agreed to resettlement.

The relocation is particularly ironic in the case of Tsonyi, the primary target for the resettlement programme in Nagchu Municipality, given that north Tsonyi was not historically a site of permanent settlement. In 1976, households such as Taklha's were resettled there from Shantsa (Shenzha 申扎), a pastoral county more than 300 kilometres to the south.⁴ At the time, resettlement to Tsonyi was presented as necessary to "protect, rationally develop and utilize the rich resources of the uninhabited land ... and alleviate the livestock and grass contradictions in Shantsa and Palgon (Bange 班戈) counties."⁵ The move was thus presented as beneficial to the 2,053 pastoralists who were moved there with their livestock. However, official reports suggest that "thought work" was deployed to persuade them to move.⁶ In 2010, less than a decade before the current resettlement project began, the government disparaged Tsonyi as having been "desolate and uninhabited" before state development efforts began in 1976.⁷ As state imperatives have shifted from production to ecological security, however, future development for pastoralists today is deemed to lie with lower altitude settlement without livestock, far from both Tsonyi and their original home of Shantsa.

Resettlement and the Question of Consent

Development-induced displacement and resettlement are practised in countries around the world, owing to projects conducted by governments, transnational conservation and development organizations and private corporations. China, however, has the world's highest levels of development-related resettlement and displacement.⁸ Discussions of dam-reservoir resettlement have dominated the literature,⁹ but resettlement is also commonly carried out for reasons ranging from poverty alleviation, urban (re)development, reservoir and other infrastructure construction, to ecological

2 Foggin 2011; Bauer 2015; Du 2017; Bum 2018; Ptáčková 2020.

3 TARG 2018. Here, village refers to an administrative village, China's lowest-level administrative unit. Administrative villages usually consist of several smaller pastoralist communities, today called natural villages. This nomenclature was adopted in Nagchu in 1985.

4 Zhang, Mingyu 2010.

5 Tang 2022.

6 Zhou, Zhang and Tian 2020.

7 Zhang, Mingyu 2010.

8 Xue, Wang and Xue 2013; Wang, Mark, and Lo 2015.

9 See, e.g., Wilmsen, Webber and Duan 2011; Habich 2015; Wilmsen and Wang 2015.

restoration.¹⁰ China's experiences with displacement and resettlement are distinct given that they are almost always government-led, in the service of government interests and for the implementation of state projects.¹¹

While the Chinese government portrays resettlement as voluntary, a survey of literature on resettlement in China by Mark Wang and Kevin Lo shows that most resettlement programmes have been involuntary in that they fail to uphold the principle of free, prior and informed consent.¹² The World Bank defines voluntary resettlement as that which meets, in advance, the dual conditions of providing informed consent and allowing the power of choice; the latter is only possible "if the project location is not fixed."¹³ This condition is rarely met in China, as resettlement locations are almost always determined in advance and without consultation, which often leads to high levels of dissatisfaction.¹⁴

While international organizations focus on "free, prior and informed consent," many researchers argue that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary resettlement is itself a false dichotomy.¹⁵ Arguably, resettlement is coercive by definition, since a person leaving on a completely voluntary basis would not be considered as a resettlement case in the first place. Adopting this view, Peter Vandergeest, Pablo Idahosa and Pablo Bose argue that those who suggest that resettlement and displacement can be addressed through voluntariness "typically pay little attention to the sometimes difficult-to-see processes through which consent is manufactured within the context of unequal power and the structure of choices."¹⁶ They note in a review of case studies that this unequal power works "less through open coercion than through subtle processes of unequal negotiation and compromise."¹⁷

This article undertakes an inquiry into the process by which consent is manufactured in such a context of unequal negotiation and compromise. In the face of past critique, China's central government has promoted policies that mandate local officials to ensure that all resettlement is "voluntary." But how is a "voluntary" programme able to achieve a perfect success rate? Based on interview data as well as official reports on resettlement, we identify a three-step "thought work" process that progresses from incentives to warnings, or from "induced voluntarism" to "compulsory voluntarism,"¹⁸ and which has resulted in 100 per cent of targeted pastoralists from Nagchu agreeing to resettle in distant, lower-altitude locations.

In our analysis, we approach "consent" – indicated by the signatures of pastoralists on papers that document their voluntary move – as something that is constructed through a set of structured processes rather than as a reflection of the unconstrained agency of self-sovereign subjects. Indeed, even in liberal contexts, the limitations of consent as a concept have been amply examined, from the informed consent of human subjects research protocols to the contexts of medical research, big data and sexual relations. Even more so in China's non-liberal, increasingly authoritarian political context, "consent" cannot be extricated from a dialectical relationship with coercion.

Field Site and Methods

Situated at an average altitude of 4,500 metres above sea level, Nagchu is the highest and largest pastoral region on the Tibetan Plateau (Figure 1). Out of its 1,190 administrative villages, 414 (35 per cent) are located at over 4,800 metres,¹⁹ mainly in the Changthang (Qiangtang 羌塘),

10 Rogers and Wang 2006; Lo and Wang 2017; Rogers et al. 2020.

11 Wang, Mark, and Lo 2015.

12 Ibid.

13 World Bank 2004, 21.

14 Jiang, Yanpeng, Waley and Gonzalez 2018.

15 Wilmsen and Wang 2015; Xue, Wang and Xue 2013.

16 Vandergeest, Idahosa and Bose 2007.

17 Ibid., 18.

18 Gebre 2002.

19 OPADNP 2017.

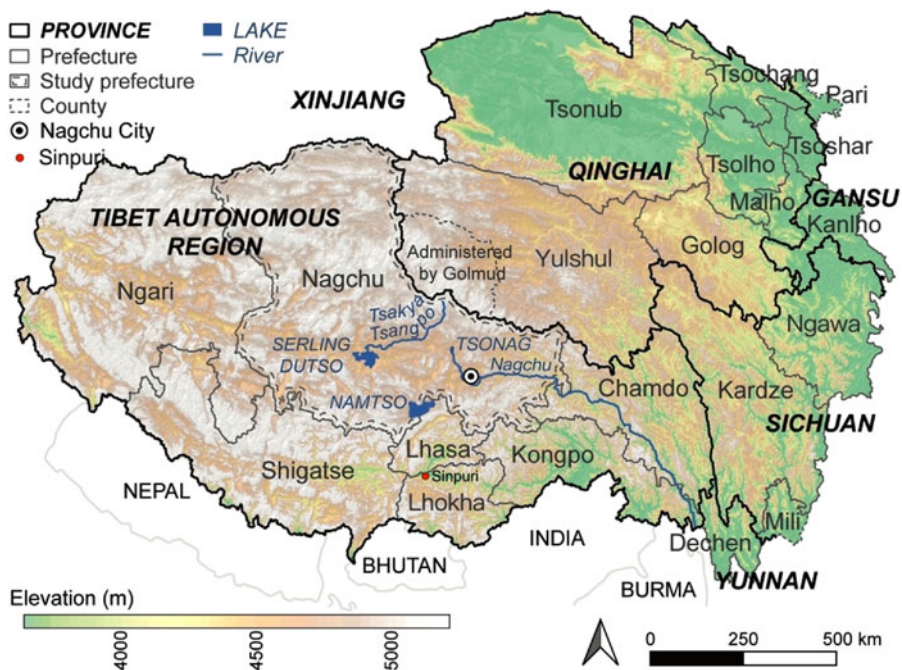


Figure 1: Map of Tibetan Areas of the PRC

Notes: Map by Kelly Hopping. Nagchu is the study area.

the high-altitude arid steppe of north-west Tibet. Nagchu is also the core target of the “extremely high-altitude resettlement” programme, with 61 per cent (274 out of 450) of administrative villages and 64 per cent (85,350 out of 133,000) of the people slated for resettlement.²⁰

Nagchu is also the largest pastoral region on the plateau in terms of rangeland area and livestock numbers. Nearly 80 per cent of Nagchu’s population (388,808/504,838) comprises Tibetan pastoralists who herd yaks, sheep, goats and horses.²¹ Average annual per capita disposable income in 2021 was reported to have been 15,426 yuan, 91 per cent of the TAR average and 81 per cent of the national average.²² While harvesting and selling caterpillar fungus has become the most important source of cash income in east Nagchu over the past two decades, pastoralism continues to be the primary source of livelihood in west and central Nagchu.

This article is based on semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2018 and 2022, with 93 pastoralists – 56 already resettled and 37 due to be resettled – and with 29 officials at four levels of government (regional down to township), as well as on official documents and reports. The first author, a native of Nagchu who has conducted research on pastoral policies for over a decade, approached pastoralists and officials with whom he had developed rapport and contacted other interviewees through snowball sampling. Interviewees ranged from 22 to 82 years of age, with a mean of 53 years; 59 were men. Interviews were conducted virtually by the first author in the local Tibetan dialect (with pastoralists), Lhasa dialect (with non-local Tibetan officials) and Chinese (with Chinese officials).

20 TARDEE 2019.

21 Municipal Statistics Bureau of Nagchu 2021.

22 Nagchu Municipal Government 2022; Regional Bureau of Statistics of Tibet 2022; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2022.

The Government Rationale for Resettlement

The TAR government rationalizes the “extremely high-altitude resettlement” programme as an ecological, socioeconomic and political strategy “of great significance in protecting ecological environment, improving people’s well-being, alleviating poverty, strengthening national unity, maintaining social stability, consolidating border defence and building a well-off society in an all-round way.”²³ Rangeland degradation and human–wildlife conflict are cited as two ecological problems ameliorated by the programme. The director of the Office of Nature Reserve Management, TAR Department of Forestry and Rangeland, which is responsible for conservation work, stated:

Ecological resettlement on such a scale is to allow people living at high altitudes to have access to better healthcare and public services while simultaneously reducing human activities, returning nature to wildlife and protecting the plateau’s ecological environment ... With global warming and people’s ever-increasing demand for materials, increasing competition between livestock and wildlife for range forage causes much difficulty in the protection of nature reserves ... rangeland [in the high-altitude areas] degrades at an annual rate of 3 to 5 per cent.²⁴

However, such claims about rangeland degradation on the Tibetan Plateau have been questioned for their accuracy and methodological reliability.²⁵ Analyses have demonstrated that narratives and statistics related to rangeland degradation in the TAR are shaped by political-economic factors and are often internally inconsistent or contradictory.²⁶ Furthermore, recent studies have found that climate change, particularly warming, is more important than grazing in reducing vegetation cover on the Tibetan Plateau, particularly in the more arid ecosystems of the west TAR.²⁷ Experimental studies have also suggested that grazing removal does not counteract the negative effects of climate warming.²⁸ Human–wildlife conflict has been documented in the Changthang, including brown bears damaging pastoralists’ houses in their search for food, predation of livestock by bears and snow leopards, and competition for forage. However, many methods of conflict mitigation, such as corral improvements, insurance schemes and improved housing, do not require resettlement.²⁹

Socioeconomically, high altitude is cited as a crucial barrier to improving the well-being of residents and eliminating poverty. A deputy head of the TAR Poverty Alleviation Office stated that: “High-altitude areas have a harsh natural environment, relatively inadequate infrastructure, and poor public services, such as healthcare and education. It is difficult for people to survive, develop the economy and get out of poverty.”³⁰ The provision of social services is frequently cited as a justification for resettlement across China, despite scholarly arguments that in situ provision of social services is both feasible and more culturally desirable.³¹ Furthermore, since 2015, China has been resettling Tibetans to newly built border villages that are often higher in altitude than their original villages, as part of a geopolitical strategy along its borders, contradicting the official narrative that high altitudes are inhospitable to human life.³²

Finally, the narrative of “strengthening national unity” and maintaining stability refers to the Chinese state’s long-standing deployment of development as a way to produce Tibetan gratitude

23 TARG 2017.

24 Zhou, Zhang and Tian 2020.

25 Harris 2010.

26 Nyima 2019.

27 Lehnert et al. 2016.

28 Hopping et al. 2018.

29 Farrington and Tsering 2019.

30 Zhang, Jingpin, and Jueguo 2018.

31 Foggin and Torrance-Foggin 2011.

32 Barnett 2021. However, border villages may not be as high as 4,800 metres, the benchmark elevation for the high-altitude resettlement programme.

to the Chinese state and to eviscerate support for the Dalai Lama, which officials see as the primary prerequisite for political stability in Tibet.³³ The TAR Party secretary also articulated this political rationale in a January 2020 speech to newly resettled pastoralists: “The broad masses of resettled people must truly appreciate where our happy life comes from, resolutely draw a line with the 14th Dalai Lama and the Dalai Clique, and resolutely listen to and follow the Party at any time and in any situation.”³⁴

Pastoralists’ Reluctance to Resettle

At Sinpuri and one other resettlement site near Lhasa, resettled households are provided with new two-storey houses ranging from 80 metres² to 240 metres² in area, dependent on household size, at a reported cost of 60,000 yuan per capita.³⁵ The resettled households must cover 10 to 30 per cent of this cost, unless they are poverty-stricken households, in which case the cost is waived.³⁶ However, access to land is not provided at the resettlement sites and thus households must make a living either through self-employment, such as running a grocery store or teahouse, or through wage labour. The TAR government has proposed that resettled households can obtain employment in an industrial park being established at Sinpuri, in enterprises, self-established cooperatives or at construction sites.³⁷

At the same time, the TAR government also cites payments under existing programmes in pastoral areas, such as the “Rangeland ecological protection subsidy and reward mechanism,” a programme that subsidizes pastoralist households for partial grazing bans and reducing livestock numbers, as a source of income after resettlement.³⁸ Indeed, the Tsonyi county government requested that the TAR government not transfer the pastoralists’ *hukou* 户口 (household registration) after resettlement so that they could continue receiving such payments, an indication of limited wage labour opportunities in Sinpuri.³⁹

Interviewees and state media reports alike suggest that the proportion of resettled people who successfully find wage employment is quite small. For example, a July 2022 report showed that long-term employment among resettled pastoralists was just over 12 per cent.⁴⁰ Similarly, an April 2022 county Party committee report showed that the official goal of zero unemployment had not been achieved nearly four years after the first group of pastoralists was resettled from Rongma (Rongma 荣玛) township, Nyima (Nima 尼玛) county.⁴¹ In addition, the development of income-generating projects in the industrial park has been quite costly relative to the projects’ capacity to absorb labour.⁴² In short, the livelihood transition from pastoralism to wage employment is clearly very challenging for pastoralists, most of whom are uneducated, do not possess skills that match labour market needs and do not speak much Chinese, which is a prerequisite for most employment within the TAR.

Research on earlier resettlement of Tibetan pastoralists outside of the TAR shows that while housing conditions, access to education, healthcare and transportation have often improved, the living standards of the majority of resettled pastoralists have not improved or have even declined given the absence of sustainable livelihood alternatives.⁴³ At Sinpuri, resettled pastoralists have also

33 Yeh 2013.

34 Jiang, Cuilian, and Chen 2020.

35 Cao, Bin, Cheng and Zhang 2018; TCG 2018.

36 Ibid.

37 Wang, Min, and Han 2020.

38 See Nyima 2021; Zhang, Jingpin, and Jueguo 2018; Jiang, Cuilian, and Chen 2020.

39 TCG 2018.

40 Cao, Jian, et al. 2022.

41 NCPC 2022.

42 For example, 620 million yuan was invested in the establishment of leather processing and wool spinning workshops that would hire only 300 to 400 people (Ciji 2021).

43 Bauer 2015; Du 2017; Ptáčková 2020.

experienced non-payment of wages for construction labour.⁴⁴ In our interviews as well as official reports, pastoralists' concerns about livelihood were foremost among their reasons for not wanting to move. This is particularly the case for wealthier households. Indeed, the most impoverished, who might otherwise have been more interested in resettlement, had already been targeted by China's "Poverty alleviation resettlement" programme several years earlier. Unlike the "extremely high-altitude resettlement" programme, which targets entire villages, poverty alleviation resettlement in Nagchu only targeted specific households and thus had much more scope for individual consent. By June 2017, 33 impoverished households from Tsonyi county had agreed to move to Tsachuthang (Caiqutang 彩曲塘), a resettlement village in Yangpachen (Yangbajing 羊八井), 90 km north-west of Lhasa, through the poverty alleviation programme.⁴⁵ One head of an average household in Tsonyi, who did not take part in the poverty alleviation programme, expressed his livelihood concerns about moving through the high-altitude resettlement programme:

I heard the new houses in the resettlement sites are very spacious and luxurious with several rooms ... Here, we [eight people] all stay in this one-room house during the daytime while some sleep in the storeroom at night as there is not enough space. But it is just unrealistic to move there, as leaving pastoralism would be like a yak out of pasture or a fish out of water ... So, I wish the government would build us a new house here rather than wanting us to relocate.⁴⁶

Indeed, while official reports overwhelmingly portray the programme as a benevolent policy reflecting the Chinese state's great care for the welfare of Tibetans, they nevertheless contain information indicating the unwillingness of pastoralists to resettle.⁴⁷ For example, state media coverage of the first group of pastoralists resettled from Rongma shows that over 80 per cent of the pastoralists signed the resettlement agreement only after being visited repeatedly by township officials who sought to persuade them of the advantages of resettlement, including better housing, education and healthcare for elders.⁴⁸ These visits occurred more than a dozen times in some cases. Similarly, a former township head in Tsonyi county agreed to resettle only after the county Party secretary talked to him many times at home. He told Xinhua News: "Although life was very hard in Tsonyi, I still could not bear to leave my home that I had worked so hard to build for more than 40 years. At the beginning, I didn't want to move out."⁴⁹ A report in July 2020 from Nyima county similarly indicated strong resistance to the programme from wealthier households. The head of one household was quoted as telling township officials, who had come to his home for "thought work," that "having no worries about food and clothing, [we] live a happy life. But suddenly [when] told we need to resettle, it has caused great psychological trauma to us, particularly our elderly parents."⁵⁰ Outside Nagchu, a report from Nakartse (Langkazi 浪卡子) county in west Lhokha in October 2020 implied that pastoralists from high-altitude villages did not actually stay at the resettlement site. Township officials and village leaders were required to continue building on "thought work" to prevent resettled villagers from "running at both ends," that is, going back and forth between their new and old homes.⁵¹

The pastoralists we interviewed also gave several additional interrelated reasons for their unwillingness to resettle. First, and most importantly, middle-aged and older pastoralists in

44 PSBTC 2021.

45 TCG 2017a.

46 Interview with pastoralist, Tsonyi, January 2019.

47 TCG 2017b; PDNC 2020; PDSCPC 2019; NCG 2020b.

48 Zhang, Jingpin, and Jueguo 2018.

49 Zhou, Zhang and Tian 2020.

50 NCG 2020a.

51 PDNC 2020.

particular articulated a strong affinity for living on the grasslands and attachment to their own home places. One middle-aged pastoralist, who had spent some time in Lhasa in mid-2020 to care for his wife in the hospital, expressed his views as follows:

Even though it is lower and warmer in the farming area in the south, with many of the most sacred pilgrimage sites [nearby] and better social services, I feel much happier living on the grasslands, particularly in summer when it is very hot in the south. Nowadays, with a paved road even to my village and ever-improving mobile coverage, we can enjoy both modern conveniences and a pastoral life. So, I am grateful to the state for the comfortable life today but leaving our own land would be the worst thing that could happen, particularly for older people. As the saying goes ... elders long for home like birds missing their nests. My father has spent his whole life seeing livestock and the grasslands every day. It would be very sad for him to leave them in his old age.⁵²

A news report on the TAR Party secretary's visit to Sinpuri in January 2020 also mentions pastoralists' affinity for livestock and grasslands: "At first, the villagers had a strong concept of 'it is difficult to leave one's homeland' and were reluctant to leave the place where their ancestors lived."⁵³ Similarly, the only quasi-academic article on the programme published to date states: "Many [resettled] elderly people say they are not used to having no livestock ... and express nostalgia for their homeland through videos and photos."⁵⁴

Another middle-aged man spoke about what the Changthang means to him:

Right from the beginning when township officials came to tell us about resettlement at the village meeting, they said "the soil and water of our land cannot support us."⁵⁵ To outsiders, including our township head, who is a young *bodpa* [a Tibetan from a farming area to the south], our land must look poor without much *na* and *bang* [types of meadows]. But for us, it is our home. As the song goes, "Those not accustomed to the land may see the Changthang as a sad place, but for [us] who are familiar with it, it is our *phayul*."⁵⁶

Indeed, five interviewees independently cited the same song lyrics, which reference their *phayul* – homeland or native land. Literally meaning "fatherland," *phayul* is a term saturated with emotional attachment to ancestral territory.

Related to the villagers' attachment to the land is the importance of their self-identification as *drokpa* (pastoralists), which is no longer relevant once they are resettled far from grasslands and without livestock. In contrast to shifting cultural valuations in some other Tibetan areas,⁵⁷ a sense of pride in the *drokpa* identity is palpably evident in Nagchu. One 53-year-old man reflected:

We often say that the black-headed ones [i.e. Tibetans] depend on black hair [i.e. yaks] and [yaks] depend on the grasslands. Now moving to the south, we will have neither grassland nor yaks. I heard those already resettled ... are still called *drokpa* by the local farmers [in the resettlement site]. But are we still *drokpa* without grassland and livestock? ... On the grassland, I am the owner of my own life. But once I leave pastoralism, I may become a servant of or have to depend on others. To me, being a *drokpa* is not only about livelihood but also about my dignity.⁵⁸

52 Interview with pastoralist, Tsonyi, September 2020.

53 Jiang, Cuilian, and Chen 2020.

54 Gong 2020.

55 This slogan is frequently invoked to support the benefits of resettlement.

56 Interview with pastoralist, Amdo, February 2020.

57 Bum 2018.

58 Interview with pastoralist, Amdo, March 2021.

Finally, more than one-third (36 out of 93) of interviewed households expressed concerns about their ability to pay their share of the cost of their resettlement house, which is equivalent to at least half of the average annual rural per capita income in Nagchu and can rise to many times that amount, depending on household size. Indeed, the Tsonyi county government requested that the regional government waive cost-sharing requirements, stating that “since the majority of the pastoralists have relatively low economic income, they are under greater financial pressure to bear the remaining 30 per cent.”⁵⁹

The Pressures of Policy Implementation

The Chinese government requires participation in all resettlement programmes to be based on the principle of “government guidance and voluntary participation” (*zhengfu zhudao qunzhong ziyuan* 政府主导、群众自愿):

[We should] fully respect the wishes of pastoralists, extensively solicit opinions from the masses, do in-depth and detailed thought work with the masses, and refrain from coercion or “campaign-style” resettlement. [We should] give full play to the leading role of government at all levels.⁶⁰

“Thought work” is thus seen as a tool for producing consent; “consent” gained in this fashion is not recognized as being in a dialectical relationship with, but rather is completely distinct from, coercion.

The task of implementing resettlement is passed from the regional level down successively to municipal, county and township levels; township officials are the primary implementers. The task of convincing pastoralists to resettle is classified as a “hard target” (*ying zhibiao* 硬指标) – a mandatory target that strongly affects performance evaluation, and thus whether an official is awarded and promoted, or penalized or worse. Because China’s upwardly accountable system of governance makes officials responsive to superiors rather than citizens, local officials have neither the incentive nor the authority to prioritize the wishes of pastoralists, even if they are sympathetic to them. As one township head explained:

When the higher levels [of government] make resettlement a hard target, we must fulfil it even if it goes against the wishes of pastoralists. What we can and must do is undertake thought work and try every means to make pastoralists accept the policy. Otherwise, we ourselves will be in trouble.⁶¹

In fact, the resettlement programme is not only the subject of hard targets but is also understood as a demonstration of political loyalty. One TAR report notes:

Attitudes towards and performance in the “high-altitude ecological resettlement” programme should be taken as the criteria for assessing whether [officials] have a sense of the “four consciousnesses” and whether they closely align themselves with the Party committee and the TAR government.⁶²

The “four consciousnesses” has been a CCP catchphrase since 2016, essentially referring to allegiance to Xi Jinping.⁶³ For ethnically Tibetan cadres, the pressure to demonstrate political loyalty

59 TCG 2018.

60 OPADNP 2017.

61 Interview with township head, X township, April 2019.

62 TARFD 2018.

63 The four consciousnesses are political consciousness, consciousness of the overall situation, consciousness of the core and compliance consciousness.

is particularly intense given the always present potential for perceived disloyalty to be treated as “splittism” (i.e. separatism).

Faced with these pressures to demonstrate political loyalty by fulfilling resettlement targets, lower-level officials have turned to a campaign-style policy implementation process, despite guidance to avoid campaigns. Campaign-style implementation is the “extraordinary mobilization of administrative resources under political sponsorship to achieve a specific policy target within a defined period of time.”⁶⁴ Operationally, the guidance given to lower-level officials for implementing the high-altitude resettlement programme is summarized in a 12-character formulation: ensure that pastoralists “move out, settle down, have things to do and get rich” (*bandechu wendezhu youshigan nengzhifu* 搬得出稳得住有事干能致富).⁶⁵ In his January 2020 speech, the TAR Party secretary called for officials to “educate and guide the masses [pastoralists] to be prepared to endure hardship for the sake of the happiness of future generations.”⁶⁶ This and other similar statements suggest that authorities are well aware of the hardships experienced by herders after resettlement.

Manufacturing Consent

The procedure used by local officials to achieve consent begins by offering incentives, making the state appear benevolent. It moves on to issuing increasingly intensive warnings through which power relations become more visible and the range of choice increasingly limited. Although not formally articulated as such, through our interviews and based on official reports we find that there are three key steps in the process.⁶⁷

1. “Determine pastoralists’ willingness to resettle” (*banqian yiyuan modi* 搬迁意愿摸底)
2. “Disseminate, educate, guide” (*xuanchuan jiaoyu yindao* 宣传教育引导)
3. “One-to-one education and guidance” (*yiduiyi jiaoyu yindao* “一对一”教育引导)

Step one usually takes the form of a survey and, in some cases, meetings between villagers and officials at the township, county or municipal level to ascertain households’ willingness to resettle. This stage initially presents resettlement as completely voluntary, and attractive. The Amdo County Poverty Alleviation Office described one such survey as follows: “The Amdo County High-Altitude Ecological Relocation Propaganda Team ... went to villages Two, Three and Four of Seu (Sewu 色务) township to carry out five days of publicity about the high-altitude relocation policy and to do a thorough investigation of relocation willingness.”⁶⁸ The purpose is, in the words of a county head, “to find out reasons for unwillingness to resettle so we can find a way to deal with them – not necessarily to really resolve them, but to find a way to persuade the pastoralists to agree to resettle.”⁶⁹

The second step, “disseminate, educate, guide,” aims to counter any concerns expressed by pastoralists in step one. It is conducted through meetings between officials and villagers during which “thought work” is undertaken. In this phase, officials inform pastoralists that they will be provided with job training and assisted in obtaining employment after resettlement. More importantly, they are told that they can retain their land use rights, receive payments from existing pastoral programmes and continue to raise livestock in their home area by pooling livestock into cooperatives. These cooperatives would be run by a small number of young adults who would be allowed to stay behind to graze household livestock for an unspecified amount of time.⁷⁰ However, over 70 per cent

64 Liu et al. 2015, 85; Sun 2020.

65 TARG 2017.

66 Jiang, Cuilian, and Chen 2020.

67 NCG 2018a; 2018b; OPADAC 2018; NCG 2020a.

68 OPADAC 2018.

69 Interview with county head, X county, May 2019.

70 NCG 2018b.

(66 out of 93) of the pastoralists we interviewed were sceptical about whether this would be adequate for their livelihoods, particularly given the uncertainty over how long such an arrangement might be allowed. Indeed, the Tsonyi Party secretary explicitly told Xinhua reporters that such grazing would only be a temporary measure: “During the transition period, young people will still graze livestock in Tsonyi. When supporting industries at Sinpuri mature, they will leave Tsonyi ... In the near future, the entire Tsonyi will resettle to Sinpuri.”⁷¹ Similarly, a county official described this as “a stopgap measure (*quanyi zhiji* 权宜之计) to get the pastoralists to sign [the agreement].”⁷²

Officials also tell pastoralists in meetings that they will have much better access to social services such as education and healthcare after resettlement. However, in the words of one pastoralist, “[we] do not want to risk losing [our] livelihoods just for the sake of better social services.”⁷³ Like many others we interviewed (42 out of 93), he considered access to social provision as important but not essential. In one township (Toma, Duoma 多玛) in Tsonyi, all students were sent to a newly established nine-year school in Sinpuri before their parents had resettled, a tactic understood by parents as another way to persuade them to move. Other townships “would have done the same, if the school could accommodate more students,” according to a Tsonyi county official.⁷⁴

County and township officials also try to counter negative information and rumours by using the slogan, “Don’t create, believe or spread rumours” (*bu zaoyao, bu xinyao, bu chuanyao* 不造谣不信谣不传谣), from China’s ongoing nationwide anti-rumour campaign, which was launched in 2013 and is aimed at cracking down on dissent and criticism.⁷⁵ The tactics include threatening administrative punishment (*xingzheng chufa* 行政处罚) – warnings, fines or administrative detention – for those who do not comply.⁷⁶ For example, three pastoralists in one village of Nyima county were publicly criticized at a village meeting in 2020 for having spread “rumours” after they shared two stories about the first group of pastoralists, who were resettled in 2018, on the village WeChat group. One story was about a resettled pastoralist caught stealing because he had no meat to eat. The other claimed that some resettled pastoralists had returned to their home county to beg for meat and butter. When we asked what he thought of the public criticism, one of the three pastoralists replied, “the saying goes, 30 people, 30 ideas. But nowadays it is 30 people, one idea. You had better not say anything different from what they [township officials] are saying. As the saying goes, people are not afraid of officials [as persons] but are afraid of their power.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, two years later, a Nyima county government report raised the need to improve resettlement, including by making sure that those who were resettled “had meat to eat,” suggesting that the rumours were not without basis.⁷⁸

The second step typically also includes in-person tours of resettlement sites.⁷⁹ One Chinese deputy county head explained the purpose of such visits:

Given that few households are willing to resettle, we take poverty-stricken people – those with few livestock – and some well-respected villagers on tours of resettlement sites. The purpose is to try to impress them with the nice apartments with modern facilities – running water, electricity, internet, etc. – and the convenient and comfortable living environment with clinics, food markets, kindergartens, public toilets, garbage collection points, police stations, etc. in

71 Chen, Zhang and Tian 2021.

72 Interview with county official, Tsonyi, June 2021.

73 Interview with pastoralist, Nyima, June 2021.

74 Interview with county official, Tsonyi, April 2021.

75 NCG 2018a; Creemers 2017; Zou and Tang 2021.

76 NCG 2018a.

77 Interview with pastoralist, Nyima, August 2021.

78 NCG 2022.

79 NCG 2018b.

the residential compound. We also arrange for them to visit some earlier resettlers and listen to their stories of their happy life after resettlement.⁸⁰

The same official added, “we want these people to set an example for others to follow after we persuade them first.” Officials refer to those who agree relatively quickly to resettlement as people who “firmly support the Party’s policy” (*jianjue yonghu dang de zhengce* 坚决拥护党的政策) and hold them up as exemplars.⁸¹

Pastoralists who tour resettlement sites are indeed impressed with the brand-new apartments. Nevertheless, over four-fifths (76 out of 93) of our interviewees were not convinced at this stage, as illustrated in this comment by one elder who visited Sinpuri:

Both the houses and the living conditions at the resettlement site are something I never dreamed of – they are so impressive. The stories of those households that we visited are also very impressive. But to be honest, we do not want to move ... things are different from household to household: one household cannot speak for all ... just like the place where yaks can cross the river is not where goats will necessarily be able to ... As the saying goes: when one horse runs, it looks so fast; when one person speaks, it sounds so true. From official channels – this tour and TV news – we hear happy stories after resettlement. But unofficially we also hear some unhappy stories. Both can be true. So, we need to listen to both and then decide according to our own conditions.⁸²

Others, although similarly unconvinced, felt obligated to comply with the programme, referencing the state discourses emphasizing material benefits as development and progress. For example, one 60-year-old pastoralist explained that if it were totally up to him, he would not want to move; however, he added: “I, like some others, agree to move, not because I want to, but because I feel I had better follow the state policy, as the officials said, because all the good things today, like houses, roads, bridges, schools and clinics are from the benevolent state.”⁸³ Here, he invokes a term, “the benevolent state,” used by Nagchu herders to acknowledge significant material improvements compared to the past (whether pre-1959 Tibetan society, the high socialist period, Cultural Revolution, or the more recent past). The term accepts as given the hegemonic narrative of the Chinese party-state as the benevolent provider of material goods, although it can also be deployed to make further claims on the state.⁸⁴ Its use here thus illustrates the impossibility of disentangling consent from coercion – that is, the dialectical relationship between the two. The pastoralist clearly does not want to move and yet agrees to do so with reference to a hegemonic discourse in which Tibetans have no choice but to express gratitude to the state.

This pastoralist signed an agreement to resettle after one of the multiple public village meetings that form a key component of “disseminate, educate, guide.” Village leaders and Party leaders are especially pressured into signing at such meetings. Their signatures are then used to put pressure on other households.

Those who still refuse to resettle are subsequently subject to the third step, “one-to-one education and guidance.” This is a much more labour-intensive process in which township officials pay frequent visits to individual households to carry out “thought work.” Like the previous “education and guide” public meetings, these visits combine a mixture of incentives and warnings but are more focused and intense. One herder described a one-to-one thought work session:

80 Interview with deputy county head, X county, June 2020.

81 TCG 2017b.

82 Interview with old pastoralist, Tsonyi, June 2020.

83 Interview with old pastoralist, Amdo, February 2020.

84 Nyima and Yeh 2016; Yeh 2013.

The township official, a Tibetan woman ... used the example of giving one's daughter to a man [i.e. arranged marriage]. She said that while there are girls who end up in an unhappy marriage, many end up in a happy marriage, even though they did not like it at first. She said the state is like our parent and knows what is best for us, and on behalf of the state, they [cadres] are encouraging us not to go against a good decision made by the state. She said otherwise, if she has to report me to the higher levels [of government], I may suffer – the thought work then may not be as pleasant as [how] she is talking to me [now].⁸⁵

This session combines threats of future, more coercive thought work sessions by higher-level officials, with the hegemonic narrative of the state “knows best.” The state attempts to convince pastoralists that they do not, in fact, know what is in their own best interests and that the thought processes leading to their lack of consent thus far must be flawed.

This threat of further thought work imposed by higher levels of government is commonly used at this stage. In Amdo (Anduo 安多) county, seven household heads were called to the township headquarters after refusing to sign the resettlement agreement after initial “one-to-one education and guidance.” There, they were subject to thought work and warned about further thought-work sessions at the county government office until they were adequately “educated” about the programme. They were also warned of administrative punishment if they refused to take part in such sessions. During these thought-work sessions, township officials also attempted to elicit resettlement consent with promises that consenting pastoralists would be allowed to continue to raise livestock until they were too old to do so. In doing so, however, the township officials, themselves under pressure to achieve targets, promised something they could not in fact deliver, given that higher-level officials have indicated that such an arrangement would be temporary and that the policy itself contains no such provisions. Nevertheless, the officials lectured herders, telling them, “You will only be better off – not worse off – after resettlement by enjoying both pastoral and urban life. So, what do you worry about?”⁸⁶ These promises, empty though they may be, particularly with regards to continued pastoral access, together with the threat of additional thought work, convinced the reluctant pastoralists to sign.

Another common tactic is to issue warnings that refusal to accept a current policy will lead to less favourable future offers or ineligibility for future development projects.⁸⁷ The flip side of the state's paternalistic benevolence is the threat of withdrawing any future generosity if recipients refuse to accept what is presented as development.⁸⁸ This process was described by another pastoralist who initially refused to sign the agreement:

After the village meeting where many, including me, said we did not want to move, two township officials came – initially along with a village head and another village official – to talk to me six times over two months. They talked about the many advantages of moving, just as they did at the meetings ... Later, they said if we moved voluntarily as planned, we might receive free furniture, TVs, and modern facilities, like gas stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, etc. If not, they said, in the end we would still have to move, [but] without these preferential benefits and at the same time we might have to pay a higher share of the cost of the houses. In the last visit, they said we had better actively cooperate with the government, or we would be going against the wishes of the state and would be held responsible for any negative consequences and would not be given any future development projects. At that point, I had no choice but to sign the agreement, with a saying in my mind: when a place is flooded, no

85 Interview with pastoralist, Tsonyi, February 2022.

86 Interview with pastoralist, Amdo, May 2022.

87 Barnett 2021; Nyima and Yeh 2016; Nyima 2021.

88 Yeh 2013.

stone on the ground remains dry [meaning that nobody is left unaffected by change and that one individual is powerless to resist change].⁸⁹

A final example of a pastoralist who signed the agreement at the end of the third step clearly illustrates again the way in which the manufacturing of consent is inextricable from its apparent opposite, coercion. Vari, a pastoralist in Nyima county, had a large number of livestock for his six household members. He stated:

With my signature on the agreement, officials would say I agreed to resettle. That is both true and untrue. True, because I did agree to sign. Untrue, because I would have preferred not to sign if I could refuse ... [but] it was really a matter of whether [I] wanted to go against the state, a matter of those with power and those without power. Officials would not leave me alone until I signed.⁹⁰

He understood his own signature the same way as officials did, as attesting to his agreement to move. At the same time, he understood that his “consent” was elicited by an understanding of the consequences of continuing to refuse. It demonstrates, in other words, the false dichotomy of coercion and consent.

In the end, agreements are signed (Figure 2). A typical agreement reads as follows:

Agreement of Households in X village of Seu ownship in Amdo county on voluntary resettlement to the Lhoka Region:

My name is X. [I am] the head of the household. [We] live in X Village of Seu Township. There are X people in my family. After discussion within the family, we voluntarily agree to resettle to Sinpuri village, Gonto (Gangdui 岗堆) town, Lhokha municipality, by actively accepting the TAR policy of high-altitude ecological resettlement and abiding by the unified arrangements [made] by the township Party committee, township government, village Party committee, village committee and relevant higher levels of government.

With the resettlement agreements thus signed, “the voluntary participation rate in the resettlement reached 100 per cent” according to a township head⁹¹ and as reported both by state media and local governments.

Conclusion

The PRC government has increasingly adopted policy protocols against relocating citizens by force while continuing to implement resettlement policies and making local cadres responsible for implementing them. In some instances, urban redevelopment and poverty alleviation resettlement have been accomplished through “infrastructural attack,” the deliberate disrepair of infrastructure and the withdrawal of services that give residents no choice but to move.⁹² In the TAR, where the provision of infrastructure-as-development is central to the state’s narrative of legitimacy, a different set of strategies focusing on “thought work” is used, as we demonstrate with the case of the “high-altitude ecological resettlement” programme.

Under pressure to demonstrate their political loyalty and to meet hard targets, county and township officials engage in a three-step process to persuade all households in targeted villages to resettle. After an initial presentation of the programme as being both highly beneficial and completely

⁸⁹ Interview with pastoralist, Tsonyi, December 2020.

⁹⁰ Interview with pastoralist, Nyima, March 2021.

⁹¹ Interview with township head, X township, March 2021.

⁹² Chu 2014; Wilmsen and Wang 2015.

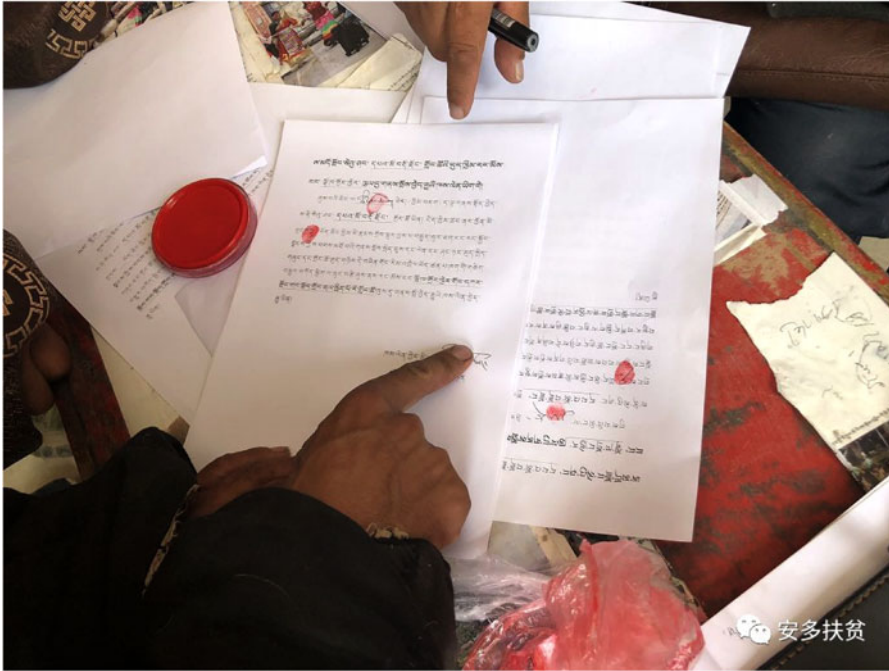


Figure 2: A Household Agreement Accepting Voluntary Resettlement
 Source: OPADAC 2018.

voluntary, these officials conduct a survey to determine households’ willingness to participate. This is followed by a series of whole-village meetings and, if possible, a visit to the resettlement site. As a process of group thought work, the meetings both encourage villagers to sign agreements and warn of consequences for not doing so, including more severe thought-work sessions, less favourable future resettlement packages and ineligibility for future development projects. In addition, villagers are threatened with administrative punishment for “spreading rumours” or refusing to participate in thought work. Finally, holdouts are intensively targeted on an individual household basis for further thought work until they sign statements which assert that they have given their voluntary assent. Although our research was focused on pastoralists in Nagchu, similar processes have also been described in government reports for Shigatse, Ngari and Lhokha, where the policy is also being implemented.⁹³

The 70th anniversary of Tibet’s “peaceful liberation” in 2021 epitomized the entanglement of state narratives of development as deserving of gratitude and the apparent achievement of securing 100 per cent voluntary agreement to resettle. To mark the occasion, the central government gave a washing machine to each rural household in the TAR. Officials in Tsonyi county had these washing machines sent to Sinpuri, rather than pastoralists’ current residence, regardless of whether they had signed a resettlement agreement yet. The presumption is that all pastoralists will eventually resettle. Furthermore, development gifts are provided only for those who follow the wishes of the state-as-parent – one who always “knows best.” Like the sending of children to school in very distant resettlement sites before their parents have agreed to move, this is another structuring of life circumstances that makes only one choice appear tenable. In short, through the process of thought work, no clear distinction can be made between voluntary and involuntary resettlement: coercion and consent constitute a false dichotomy. In contexts of unequal power relations, such as with the

93 PDNC 2020; Barnett 2021; Organization Department of Ngamring County 2020; Gegye County Government 2019.

TAR high-altitude resettlement but also much more broadly, consent cannot be understood as arising from sovereign agency but rather is always already structured and constrained.

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