

# New urban proletariat



Resettlement is a tool applied by many governments as a cure to social or environmental ailments, a step in infrastructure projects or an instrument of social engineering. People are resettled when the land has to be cleared for construction works, when natural disasters strike or environmental conditions deteriorate, but also when states want to assert their sovereignty and enact a process of far-reaching political, economic, and demographic transformation.

Emilia Roza Sulek

Above:  
New in town.  
Pastoralists from  
Martod County in  
Dawu. (photo by  
author; 2007)

IN CHINA, resettlement is part of a large number of state programs affecting both rural and urban populations. Perhaps the best-known case took place as a result of the Three Gorges Dam construction project on the Yangtze River. Another case that gained international attention concerned pastoral populations inhabiting regions as distant as the Tibetan plateau, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. In 2015, the Chinese government pledged that by the end of the year it would move 'the remaining 1.2 million herders', which begs the question of how many pastoralists were already 'moved' previously.<sup>1</sup> The main reason for resettlement was stated to be the need to conserve the environment, which was said to be suffering from desertification brought on by overgrazing; it was said that removing people and their herds from the land would remedy the problem. The second reason given was the government's desire to improve the living standards of the pastoral populations, to give them better access to education and healthcare facilities, as well as markets and other achievements of 'developed' society. This 'developmental' component is inseparable from resettlement; by implementing resettlement the Chinese state is helping the pastoralists to become 'developed' and to make economic 'progress', but it also 'develops' the country or at least its image.

Resettlement is implemented top-down rather than in deliberation with the communities affected by it. The conditions for requiring resettlement also appear to be quite arbitrary. The narrative about desertification has been proven wrong for the last thirty years; a recent book edited by Behnke and Mortimore shows once again that desertification was a *non-event* that grew or was 'cultivated' by different economic and political actors in order to achieve their own goals.<sup>2</sup> The same applies to a belief that there is a causal link between mobility and poverty and that 'underdevelopment' of pastoral regions is a result of pastoral mobility. As is typical of many discourses on pastoral populations, this one too feeds on imagery originating from 'agricultural' and 'settled' societies, which hinders the understanding of pastoral systems and rationalizes interventions. Finally, when applied to mobile populations, the term 'resettlement' is misleading, as it implies that people being 're-settled' are sedentary people, moved from one settlement to another. The Tibetan pastoralists involved often lived in houses during winter and spring, but moved to tents in higher elevated pastures during summer and autumn. They maintained herds of yaks and sheep which provided them with subsistence and cash income. Even though their mobility had already decreased compared to a century ago, due to the fragment-

ation of pastoral lands or growing importance of markets and services that anchored pastoralists to settlements, they did not have an all-year-round dwelling and were not permanently *settled*. Therefore, it would be more accurate in their case to talk of 'settlement' or 'sedentarization' rather than *re-settlement*. Extending to pastoral contexts the use of the term resettlement obscures the magnitude of change and the often over-imposed nature of this intervention.

Sedentarization of pastoralists on the Tibetan plateau is a component of a variety of programs that have similar but not always identical goals, target and scope.<sup>3</sup> These programs impress with their technical and financial investments, but they also raise important questions about the rules of participation and its consequences. Scholars have debated the degree of force or persuasion with which the programs were implemented; although some pastoralists volunteered to take part, others were selected by lottery or by local political leaders in order to meet the desired quota. The results of these programs, both already observed as well as expected to ensue, range from economic impoverishment through loss of nomadic lifestyle and knowledge, to the trauma of displacement, negative impact on community cohesion, religious cults and more.<sup>4</sup>

This essay discusses yet another aspect of these programs: their role in the urbanization process in pastoral Tibet. It gathers my observations from the region called Golok, north-eastern Tibetan plateau, from 2007, when these programs were gradually introduced, and 2014, when they were completed.

## 2007

In 2007, when I started my research,<sup>5</sup> the state programs of moving pastoralists into towns were just gaining momentum. Dawu, prefectural capital of Golok and my home at that time, grew larger as more and more accommodation was built for incoming pastoralists; each new neighbourhood was bedecked with billboards informing people about the goals of the program and the funds invested. It was a hot topic of discussion; pastoralists expressed their doubts and concerns: "Why does the government do it?" And, "Do you think we will really return to our land in ten years?" At the same time, town residents expressed other worries; prophesizing with regard to the newcomers, and fearing an increase in crime and loss of security, they declared: "They will end as beggars, thieves and prostitutes".<sup>6</sup>

I considered conducting research about the program as I was struck by the novelty of this phenomenon and the grim narrative about the governments' hidden agenda of eradicating pastoralism. However, the atmosphere

surrounding the topic was so tense that many people cautioned me not to visit the 'resettlement villages' too often. They perceived it to be a politically sensitive topic, and in their opinion it would be wiser to stay away from it. Still, I managed to speak with many pastoralists and visited their homes, both those in the town and in the highlands. Several themes recurred in their narratives.

First of all, the diversity of the pastoralists' experiences was striking. Some people recalled real environmental problems with the desert encroaching on their land, but others said that they had lush pastureland that could feed even bigger herds than they owned. This could indicate that the correlation between the implementation of these programs and their ecological reasons was often rather weak. In addition, the pastoralists had varying expectations of life in town. Their local officials promised them a 'better life', but this notion was interpreted in numerous ways. Some pastoralists sought education for their children, others closer contact with relatives working in town, or better access to healthcare. Many sought an easier life in terms of workload, with less of the physical work that consumed their days on the grasslands. Finally, there were also those who sought nothing from life in town; they did not want to move, but were *forced* to. The pastoralists' experiences differed with regard to their material situation, depending on their earlier economic status and on what their community leaders had negotiated for them. Most families sold their livestock before moving to town, providing them with some savings. All families were given a simple house and a state subsidy, but on top of that there were also some 'extras'. People from some townships received coal, others grain or clothes, and yet others no help in-kind at all. This diversity of expectations and experiences shows how easily broad generalizations can be inaccurate, even on the scale of just one 'resettlement village', which comprises people from different townships.

Secondly, a certain narrative about poverty was evident in conversations with people regardless of their financial status. This manifested itself when they spoke to me, a European foreigner. However, a Tibetan scholar who studied this topic had similar observations.<sup>7</sup> This was a sign of how a scholar or an outsider can be taken (or mistaken) for a 'carrier of hope', who might pass on their message to an NGO or another official body that could intervene, making the settler's life easier. In hindsight, knowing that many of my informants did not struggle to make ends meet, I concluded that this narrative was an expression of shock caused by the costs of life in town, rather than a representation of people's actual poverty.

# Why town development needs pastoralists



Thirdly, even though many people complained about their current economic situation, some admitted that they had wanted to move and had done so of their own free will. They explained that life in town had already been desirable, but a step they would not have dared or afforded to take had it not been for the state's assistance. Stories about monetary gains, through renting out the houses they were given, showed that some enterprising individuals were making a profit from the program and were using the situation to achieve their own goals. Some families even split into separate households, with the younger generations staying in the highlands and the elder moving to town, in order to enjoy both the old and the new – or to obtain a free house that could be rented out at some later point. These people saw the program not as a permanent move to town, but as an opportunity to increase their economic activities.

Fourthly, the settled pastoralists were often embarrassed for their living conditions, which they saw as not good enough to receive guests. Compared to their houses in the highlands, those in town felt cold and uninviting, with concrete walls and floors, little furniture and not much in terms of decoration. However, leaving material scarcity aside, I later wondered if some houses stood half-empty simply because they were at the time considered to be merely temporary shelter. The psychology of the settlers, not self-made migrants but people who were forcibly moved across the land by the state, could possibly shed light on the austerity of the homes. Back in 2007, many pastoralists believed that they would not stay in the town forever. "In ten years we'll be back on our land", they said. Some had even left some livestock in the care of highland relatives to secure their future return.

## 2014

During my stay in Dawu in 2014, it was clear to see that the town had expanded and that the settlement quarters had been 'swallowed-up' by it. Once built at the edge of the town, they were now surrounded by apartment blocks and new residential districts. It was tempting to ask whether the same had happened to their inhabitants: had they also been woven into the urban fabric?

An expanding town needs people, including those with limited urban experience or skills inadequate to engage in secondary or tertiary sectors. The lack of school education, insufficient competence in the Chinese language or 'lack of skills' had been identified as obstacles to the pastoralists' integration into the urban setting,<sup>8</sup> but the growth of the town created employment also for such workers.

Above: Construction work in progress. This is just one of the settlements for the pastoralists in Dawu. (photo by author; 2008)

The carwash saloons, eateries and construction sites needed a labour force, as did the traffic and cleaning sectors. Street vendors selling plastic jewellery and other cheap goods were recruited from among the settlers. But they also found jobs in shops where pastoralists were the main clients and where common language and cultural affinity mattered; even though growing in size, Dawu remained the capital of a pastoral prefecture and it was the pastoralists who were the driving force of the local economy and the service sector. Finally, the *mani* stone industry offered employment, too. The street adjoining the monastery is now filled with carvers' tents, where before only a handful of people had done this work. Workers armed with drilling machines carve Buddhist prayers on evenly cut stone slabs, which are sold to pilgrims and tourists. Writing skills are not essential, as prayers and other images are often cut through stencils.

The Chinese state settlement programs have to be understood beyond environmentalist policies to 'restore' Tibetan grasslands to their 'original' shape, or as an intervention to improve the standard of life of populations who live far away from towns, schools and hospitals. If settlement was only about environment, one would have to conclude that it did not always match its goals; many sources report that grazing bans were not even implemented and that grasslands in fact suffered under-grazing rather than returned to some idyllic state.<sup>9</sup> If settlement was meant to improve the material standards of people's lives, one would need to ask according to which criteria such change should be measured. The pastoralists' stories concerning their financial precariousness, even if sometimes exaggerated, do not create a picture of affluence and satisfaction. At least in the first years after the move, the 'quality jump' either did not take place or was difficult to see.

The settlement programs should instead be considered within the context of China's urbanization drive. In moving pastoralists to towns these programs produced urban citizens. This dimension of the settlement, as fuelling the town development, was not included in the official portfolio of reasons when these programs were introduced. However, it is in this context that they have appeared particularly effective. Even if the settlers retained their rural resident registration (which in China is still difficult to change) they became *de facto* urban dwellers. Their lives, even with difficulties, became town lives. And where the development of towns creates jobs for people, people are needed for the development of towns.<sup>10</sup>

## New urban proletariat

There is no doubt that people can adapt to the most adverse conditions and find ways to survive. Tibetan pastoralists can do it, as well. Existing literature reports on the initial shock and confusion, and discusses the identity crisis and social and psychological problems that haunt people who are thrown into new and, for many, unfamiliar settings; the next few years will perhaps bring new studies showing how things have evolved. For many people the scenario of going back to the highlands now seems impossible. "They will never go back to their land", as someone told me in 2014. "Here, they can at least earn some money, but who will give them a job when they are back on their land?" It appears that, after the initial years, people came to perceive urbanization as a one-way street or a process from which there is no way back. Likewise, a similar perception was that as soon as one becomes a paid labourer, there is no return. Once you lose your economic autonomy, you will not be able to regain it.

The settled pastoralists indeed made a transition from life defined by self-employment and a high degree of autonomy, to a life working for others. As if this was not enough, it was often work in sectors that are not particularly well-respected. The art of survival for this new urban proletariat depended on their ability to find economic satisfaction whilst being an underclass in the local society. If they wanted to survive, they had to redefine their thinking about jobs that they had previously never wished to do. "People's attitudes to work are changing", as some pastoralists said in 2014. "Even work on a construction site was something we despised. Let alone garbage collecting!"

Towns are the habitat of people who are not economically self-sufficient and who have to rely on others. In effect, they bring forth new needs and job opportunities, binding their citizens with new ties and absorbing newcomers who both fill existing niches and create new ones. Dawu is a special case; it is a growing town that is undergoing substantial investments with the hope to attract tourists, and it provides new settlers with an existing social and economic environment. But how are settlers surviving in other locations? One can only hope that as long as they are relocated into, or near to, existing towns, rather than brand new settlements in isolated areas, they will be able to depend on the existing social and economic structures, into which they can hopefully assimilate, with better or worse results.

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## References

- 1 Quoted in Bauer, K. & H. Gyal. 2015. "Introduction", in Bauer, K. & H. Gyal (eds.) 2015. "Resettlement among Tibetan Nomads in China", a special issue of *Nomadic Peoples* 19(2):v.
- 2 Behnke, R. & M. Mortimore (eds.). 2016. *The End of Desertification? Disputing Environmental Change in the Drylands*, Berlin: Springer.
- 3 For an overview, cf. Foggin, J.M. & J. Phillips. 2013. "Horizontal Policy Analysis. A Tool to Promote Sustainable Livelihoods Development with Implications for Ecological Resettlement and Other Major Development Programs in the Tibetan Plateau Region." (accessed online: <http://plateauperspectives.org/wp-content/uploads/Foggin-and-Phillips-2013.pdf>).
- 4 Cf. Bauer, K. & H. Gyal (eds.) 2015. "Resettlement among Tibetan Nomads in China", *Nomadic Peoples* 19(2). For a cross-regional perspective cf. another special issue: Du, F. (ed.) 2012. "Ecological Narratives on Grasslands in China: A People-Centred View", *Nomadic Peoples* 16(1).
- 5 See pages 55-56 of this Newsletter to read about my research topic.
- 6 This was a common concern expressed by townspeople; cf. Pirie, F. 2013. "The Limits of the State. Coercion and Consent in Chinese Tibet", *Journal of Asian Studies* 72; Yeh, E.T. 2010. "Restoring the grasslands?" *China Dialogue* (accessed online: <http://tinyurl.com/restoregrasslands>).
- 7 These observations and other research findings will appear in Sulek, E.R. & Sodnamkyid (forthcoming). "Everything Costs Money: Livelihood and Economics in the New Resettled Village of Sogrima", *Nomadic Peoples* 21(1).
- 8 This is a well-substantiated opinion shared by many authors, cf. Fischer, A.M. 2014. *The Disempowered Development of Tibet in China: A Study in the Economics of Marginalization*, Lanham: Lexington; Ptackova, J. (forthcoming). *Developing Landscapes and Peoples*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 9 On implementing grazing bans, cf. Du, F. 2012. "Ecological Resettlement of Tibetan Herders in the Sanjiangyuan. A Case Study in Madoi County of Qinghai", *Nomadic Peoples* 16(1):116-133.
- 10 On pastoralists moving to town and the process of urbanization, cf. Iselin, L. (forthcoming). *Mobile Technologien und nomadischer Raum: Motorisierung, Mobiltelefonie und Urbanisierung in Südamdo, Osttibet*. Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton.