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Feature: Resettled Tibetans "can't live on charity forever"

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*Growing degradation of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau grasslands is threatening the traditional lifestyle of Tibetan pastoralists, who are thought to make up around half of China's total ethnic Tibetan population of 5.5 million people, spread across the Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province and parts of Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan. Some have spontaneously migrated far from their native places in search of better pasture. Others are now being relocated by the government to new, permanent settlements where, as **Matt Perrement** reports from Qinghai, they face an uncertain future.*

Five minutes drive beyond the town of Banma, some 650 kilometres south of Xining, rows of identical, one-storey buildings sit against a backdrop of brown mountains. If the buildings were longer and the enclosure walls slightly higher, visitors might think they had stumbled across a detention centre. In fact, this is a settlement project for Tibetans whose ancestors led a nomadic existence for thousands of years.

Resettlement in this south-eastern corner of Qinghai Province began late last year as part of official efforts to slow desertification and reduce chronic rural poverty. Local Tibetan leaders say that as many as 20% of herding families in the area are slated to leave their pastoral livelihoods, but families taking part in the first round of relocations, which began just five months ago, are facing unemployment and even food shortages, leaving other herders reluctant to give up the relative stability of nomadic life.

Although far from idyllic, the new homes are at least robust. In exchange for traditional dwellings that in some cases were no more than a draughty tent, the new villagers now have sturdy, three-roomed houses, each equipped with its own TV set, in a walled enclosure.

"The house is nice," concedes Danla (旦拉), a 29-year old mother of two daughters. "But we were never short of food or fuel when we were nomads," she adds.

The former nomads have few material possessions to fill their new quarters and the television is of dubious value given that most people in the new community speak only one or two words of the Mandarin Chinese in which programmes are broadcast.

Annual cash payments of between CNY 2,600 (USD 325) and CNY 5,600 (USD 700), promised for ten years, complete the settlement package and are supposed to cover the loss of produce such as Yak meat, butter, milk, hide and dung, to tide families over during the transition to a sedentary life.

But the local economy, which draws almost exclusively on Han migrants to staff schools, hospitals and other government posts, offers few opportunities to the Tibetan families who have traded their community assets for an uncertain future.

"I don't know anyone who has found a job. My husband and I stay home everyday and do nothing. Life is very boring now," according to Zhou Qiong (周穷) another "ecological migrant" to the area. "The government money is not enough to buy fuel or food for a year," she continues. "I cannot speak or read Chinese so it is impossible to find work. I am afraid that we will starve."

Wealthier neighbours and relatives have been able to make up for shortfalls until now, but all recognise that this is unsustainable. "We can't live on charity forever," says Zhou.

Two government policies designed to achieve "ecological restoration" have turned Zhou and her neighbours into state dependents.

Starting in 1999, a tuigeng huanlin (退耕还林, "return cropland to forest") policy—devised in response to dramatic floods that were blamed on upstream deforestation—has given grain hand-outs to farmers who plant sloping land with trees. A tuimu huancao (退亩还草, "return pasture to grass") variant was designed for grassland areas to ease pressure of over-grazing. According to the State Forestry Administration, responsible for implementing this policy, more than 50% of a target 14 million hectares of land had been "returned" by the end of 2004.

The following years have seen a wave of yimin fupin (移民扶贫, "poverty alleviation through migration") programmes in western provinces. ([Click here to see Jim Weldon's 2003 article on this,, "Moving out of Poverty,"](#)) In ecologically fragile areas, where most of China's remaining destitute live, these programmes are now also being described as shengtai yimin (生态移民, "ecological migration").

People in the new community outside Banma are unclear about which policy has determined their fate, but it makes no material difference to them.

With no rangeland and negligible job prospects their main concern is how long the compensation package will last. "We were promised barley" according to Yang Zhong (样忠), "But received nothing."

"To find work in the local town you need money to buy jobs, but I am just a disabled nomad," adds the 43

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year old father of three young children.

Several Tibetan families in the Banma area also say they continue to pay school fees of around CNY 100 per year, despite the central government's nominal, current policy to cover all educational expenses for poor families in western provinces.

Access to health care is not guaranteed either. "Doctors in the town will not treat us unless we have money," says Danla, whereas "In the village they would still treat us and accept payment later."

"At least as nomads we can cover our most basic needs such as food," says Duoduo (多多), who moved into the area after selling his herd of yaks to pay for his mother's funeral expenses. "My land in Sichuan has also been confiscated by government," he adds. He now lives on charity in Duorima Village where the local monastery houses him for free, but says he still has to borrow to feed and clothe his family.

Some of the Tibetans have never set foot inside a school. In one semi-nomadic village near Banma, enrollment rates are still as low as 20%, and many local people do not read or write Tibetan, let alone Chinese.

To make sure that minimum targets for school attendance are met the local authorities have, according to the Tibetans, introduced a bizarre lottery system whereby certain families are ordered to enroll their children or pay a hefty fine. Local people see this as an effort to guarantee jobs for Han teachers who face the sack if numbers dip.

Community leaders believe that Tibetans will only send their children to school when they sense that there are real employment opportunities. Until that time, most believe that children are better off foraging for medicinal herbs from the mountain slopes to generate income rather than paying for an education that leads nowhere.

But although the nomads see few benefits in government schemes to settle them, the environmental pressure on their traditional livelihoods is real enough. "The grass has become poorer over the last 20 years," admits Yang Zhong, but he blames the Plateau Pica—a rodent whose burrows allegedly hamper the regeneration of grass—rather than overgrazing. "Nomadic families obey the laws of nature," he claims.

Yet large tracts of Qinghai's grassland are turning to desert, and land pressures have already led to violent conflicts. Unrest has not yet reached the Banma area, but local sources say that land encroachments near the border with Sichuan, 200 kilometers away, left three dead several years ago.

For many years people in areas worst affected by grassland degradation have been leaving their traditional grazing areas, going much further afield to find pasture. "I will stay here as long as the villagers allow me to," says Lezhi (乐智), a hardy 55-year old who has been on the move since he was 18, in search of pasture for his 75-strong herd of Yak.

"I have been to Aba [in northern Sichuan] and many other villages around here," he says. "But the grassland here is good and I can rent land here long-term. I still have land in my native village, but if I had stayed there my yaks would have starved to death. Now it is all desert."

Hokama Village has been a sanctuary for Lezhi. Friends in the local community gave him a foot in the door and he has managed to live a relatively stable life for the last ten years, grazing his animals along a remote valley.

Many others have followed. Altogether 18 or 19 households have moved into the community, which officially comprises 169 households. But "It is impossible for these migrants to stay permanently because the land is limited," says the community leader.

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