

CONSEQUENCES OF CHINA'S POLICIES ON TIBETAN PASTORAL NOMADS

It was mobility that was the very essence of herding. Pastoral nomads in the Old World Dry Belt, whether in the savannahs of Africa, the steppes of central Asia or the high altitude pastures of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, have always needed to move their animals regularly to make use of the spatial and temporal patchiness of grassland resources. Nomadism was therefore more than just an ecological adaptation or an adaptation to the political environment. It was a 'region-specific, temporally and spatially ubiquitous survival strategy, an independent socio-ecological mode of culture' which was based on subsistence and coexisted as an alternative to the sedentary cultures of agricultural and urban societies. - Scholz (1995).

Nomadism is a strategy to optimize use of available natural resources and capitalise on socio-political conditions. While often ridiculed as primitive or even 'incomplete' by outsiders, it is in fact a highly sophisticated adaptation for exploiting energy captured in the grasslands of the region. - R. Merkle, (2000).

The different approaches to grassland management reveal a tension that seems to be grounded in the different rationality of the 'modern' sedentary pastoral production system and the nomadic pastoral production system. Control is a central dividing component, as the nomadic pastoral practices are centered around mobility and flexibility, whereas the current semi-settled production system limits the herders' mobility, and grazing is sought to be better controlled. This diverging rationality seems to be largely causing a situation where the traditional practices are considered as insufficient to conserve and rehabilitate the grasslands. According to the Chinese grassland degradation discourse, the traditional production system is not sufficiently controlling, and it may therefore easily and it has widely been a central factor in causing overgrazing. In the present situation, herders' level of decision-making in herding and grassland management appears to be decreasing, as the government is directing livestock numbers, pastoral practices, grazing systems, and grasslands are being set aside for rehabilitation". - Irene Breivik, (2007).

For centuries, the Tibetan pastoral nomads and herders have successfully maintained a sustainable and mobile lifestyle, traveling from winter to summer pasture lands and autumn to spring pasture lands. The grasslands on the Tibetan Plateau represent one of the last remaining agro-pastoral regions in the world. The Plateau itself is covered in almost 70 percent of these precious grasslands. The pasture lands are made habitable through the co-existence of the herders and their livestock. Through their efforts they have maintained the sustainable use of this area for many centuries. China's introduction of different policies over the years have not only punished these pastoral nomads and the herders but also threatened the sustainability of this delicate environmental balance. During the **commune system**, in the name of "democratic reform", the nomads were herded into communes, stripped of all possessions, reshaped into production brigades, and given rations according to their work points. No production meant no rations. From the outset, the new class of cadres in command saw the nomads not as stewards and curators of the landscape, but as ignorant, backward and irrational, utterly lacking in enthusiasm for class warfare. At the same time, under the commands of the new cadres, the herd size steadily grew to an unsustainable levels and the chain of grassland degradation began. Twenty years later, in the late 1970s, the communes collapsed, having failed except for one achievement: the number of animals, in all Chinese official statistics, had climbed steadily every year, to record levels: 30 million sheep and goats, six million yaks. In the early 1980s

nomads were given their animals back, but not their land. As soon as they regained some control over their lives, they cut the number of sheep back to more sustainable levels.

Household Contract Responsibility System (HCRS) or **the Grassland law** was adopted in the year 1985. This law was adopted in order to protect the degrading grasslands and to modernize the animal husbandry. Some researchers argue that this law has been implemented in order to gain more control over the pastures and to stop the over-exploitation of the grasslands, which the government appears to consider the most important cause for grassland degradation. Long after the Chinese farmers had been given such guarantees of their land (*land lease certificates*) the nomads were at last (*in the 1990s*) given certificated guarantees of long term leasehold to their land (30 to 50 years). This encouraged conservation of pastures, giving nomads a sense of ownership.

Along with the implementation of the grassland law, the state authority gradually implemented the so-called "**Four-Way Programme**" or 'Si Pei Tao', ordering region-wide fencing regimes and shelters for nomads and livestock. According to the Animal Husbandry Bureau (*one of the four actors of the programme*) stated that this programme was meant to improve people's lives, and control livestock and grazing. On the ground, this program limited the mobility of the livestock and encouraged the herders to invest and spend more time in winter pastures leading to increased grazing pressure on a smaller land area. Thus the Four Way Programme at some point intensified or at least in part, responsible for the problems for which the herders are now being blamed. But at the same time, other policies, driven by China's long standing disdain for mobile people, were also implemented. Limits on family size and herd size were gradually made compulsory. Gone was the annual cycle of overwintering in lower plateau pastures and herding up into the alpine meadows in summer.

Mobility was crucial, moving on before grazing pressure destroys plants, exposing the dying turf to the icy gales and blizzards of Tibet which can strip soil, leaving only bare rock. Nomadic knowledge of how, when and where to graze, and the nomadic willingness to live in portable woven yak hair tents, summer and winter, with their animals, kept the pasture free of invasive toxic weeds, erosion, shrub invasion, and infestations of pests. None of this was known in the 1980s, except to the nomads themselves, and no-one asked them how they dealt with the risks of living at the third pole. It is only in the 21st century that Chinese and global science have caught up with what the nomads have always known.

- Gabriel Laffite, (2010)

In 1990s, even after implementing series of policies and measures, nothing much changed and it became obvious that everything on the grasslands was going wrong. The living turf was dying, eroding and slumping, only to be torn away in wild weather, back to bare rock or "black beach" as Chinese scientists called it. Burrowing rodent populations exploded, in plague proportions. Toxic invasive weeds multiplied. The rangelands were degrading, including the arid area of eastern Tibet where both of China's great rivers, the Yangtze and Yellow, rise from glacier melt. Chinese scientists and administrators turned to just one explanation. The nomads were to

blame. They were overstocking, beyond the carrying capacity of the pastures, and this was the cause of degradation. The compulsory overstocking during the commune system could not be discussed; it was and is off-limits. So only one cause was possible: to blame the nomads. But some recent research revealed that overgrazing and degradation of the grasslands is not entirely dependent on the grazing livestock. The herders even talked about weather changes, rodents and mining activities as important factors causing grassland changes.

In 2003, a grassland rehabilitation policy is implemented throughout the country and in pastoral areas this policy is referred to as the '**Restore Grassland Policy**' or 'tuimu huanco' in Chinese, meaning "closing pasture to restore grasslands". In recent years, moving herders from the grasslands to state build housings is being largely intensified and has now become the central measure in protecting these grasslands. The land lease certificates guaranteeing nomads long term land tenure have been nullified by the new command. Instantly, all their skills, risk management strategies, environmental services, traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation are gone, redundant, as if they had never existed.

For decades, the policies such as de-stocking and rodent poisoning were carried out that goes strictly against the religious sentiments of the herders. For instance, it was made compulsory that one person from each family should join in the drive to poison the rodents (*Tibetan pika*). Over the past 40 years, the Chinese government has sponsored the systematic poisoning of pikas, most recently using grain laced with *Botulin C* strain toxin (*Clostridium botulinum*). Approximately 320,000 square kilometers were poisoned! However some past and recent researchers have argued that these rodents are the keystone species of the grasslands and that large-scale killing of rodents may even be harmful for the grasslands, and is almost certain to affect other wildlife and the broader environment.

Under the "new countryside" programme launched in 2006, the local Chinese government of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) had moved a total of about 300,000 families involving 1.43 million Tibetan nomads and farmers into new or fixed settlement homes. Another 185,500 families are expected to move into new homes by 2013.
- Xinhua, 2011

This new policy, 'tuimu huancao' like most simple ideas, it is overly simple. It assumes the only way to conserve China's upper watersheds is to remove animals and nomads. Yet China's own scientists have now learned, through patient observation, that the grasslands of Tibet, when grazed moderately and intermittently, moving herds on well before the short summer growing season ends, actually maintains a higher biodiversity than on ungrazed pastures, where toxic weeds invade and biodiversity declines. It took Chinese scientists 50 years to discover what the nomads have always known, and Chinese policy remains far behind the latest scientific knowledge. Now climate change has arrived, explaining everything. No longer need China fear its past policy failures as the cause of degradation of Tibetan rangelands. Climate change explains all, especially in Tibet, where climate change is happening faster than in most parts of the planet. But the most immediate impact of climate change is the exclusion of nomads from their lands, labeling them officially as "ecological migrants".

The compulsory “ecological migration” of the Tibetan nomads is grounded in ignorance, prejudice, a failure to listen and learn. China is far from alone in assuming its nomads are backward, and to blame for degrading land. But around the world, governments increasingly recognize that pastoral nomadic mobility holds the key to sustainability on the dry lands of the world. There are other solutions to the problems of degradation of Tibetan lands. Tuimu huacao, closing pastures to convert them to grassland, is not the only way. Nor is it helpful to assert climate change as the catch-all cause of all problems.

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Mr. Olivier De Schutter has mentioned in his Preliminary Observations and concluding statement during his mission to PRC (15 -23 December 2010) that, the herders should not, as a result of the measures adopted under the tuimu huancao policy, be put in a situation where they have no other options than to sell their herd and resettle.

Grassland policies and consequences for herders in Yushu Prefecture (Irene Breivik, 2007)

<i>Policies</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
<i>Four Way Programme</i>	<i>Change of pastoral production system and changes in livelihoods Discontent due to implementation process Unintended consequences e.g. conflict, less co-operation among neighbors More troublesome to change pastures</i>
<i>De-stocking</i>	<i>Difficulties for herders' socio-economic situation Structures affecting women negatively Forcing herders to act in a way contrary to their religious beliefs'</i>
<i>Relocation</i>	<i>Urbanization causing unemployment and social problems Insecurity among herders Hindering local wildlife protection work</i>
<i>Rodent control</i>	<i>Forcing herders to act in a way contrary to their religious beliefs'</i>