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## Qinghai: Settling the Nomads

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**By Dr Susette Cooke**

In August 2005, Vice-President Zeng Qinghong made a four-day inspection tour of Qinghai Province in China's Northwest. Among the "tremendous changes" in the province approved by Vice-President Zeng was the transformation of Qinghai's ethnic Tibetan and Mongol nomads into settled herders. Donning a Tibetan outfit and posing for a photograph with the welcoming local nationalities, Zeng visited one of the former nomads, a Party member, who affirmed his comfortable living standards since settling down, perhaps predictably attributing his altered circumstances to Party policy for China's pastoral regions, in particular the current Western Development policy.

Other nomad views on fixed settlement are not necessarily accessed by the highest Beijing leadership. Casually encountered nomads cautiously indicate deep reservations, like the frowning man on the long-distance bus from Xining to Yushu in Qinghai's south who stared hard at us, then shook his head towards the window. Outside under the swollen snow clouds a featureless cluster of buildings loomed into view, the surrounding fenced ground slashed black with trampled mud. Black yaks stood motionless in their enclosures; several young nomad men leaned around a rickety pool table by the roadside, then the scene was gone.

These buildings, penned yaks and stationary nomads represent the successful implementation of the PRC's national policy "to end the nomadic way of life for all herdsmen by the end of the century", to quote Qi Jingfa, the Vice-Minister of Agriculture, from a Xinhua report in March 1998. Although the Government has missed its deadline, official statistics claim Qinghai's nomad settlement rate at 89% in 2005, meaning about 100,000 families - almost half the provincial Tibetan population, and a

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smaller proportion of its Mongols. Begun in 1986 and intensified through the 1990's, the policy basically entails the settlement of China's nomads in fixed dwellings with fenced pastures, rather than allowing them to maintain their traditional lifestyle of mobile pastoralism (the preferred term for nomads by experts like Cambridge University's David Sneath).

The Chinese Government sees this policy as serving long-term national goals of modernization, market development, governance and, importantly in this part of its territory, of social stability, and considers Qinghai's pastoral areas, and their societies, especially backward and underdeveloped, even relative to the generally poor Western Regions. For the Tibetan and Mongol nomads who will live the policy, a way of life integral to their culture and self-identity appears terminally threatened.

Both nomads and the Chinese Government would agree, nomad settlement is a tale of differing historical evolution and the contemporary Western Development policy. The latter, introduced in 2000 as a strategic project for addressing uneven socioeconomic conditions in the PRC's eastern and western halves, is having more tangible impacts in Qinghai than some other targeted provinces, not least because Qinghai represents almost everything that mainstream China is not. Contradictions are arguably the norm in Qinghai. China's fourth largest province, with the second smallest population (5.18 m in 2000), it covers the northern half of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, contiguous with the two vast autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, and the overwhelmingly Han majority provinces of Gansu (91%) and Sichuan (95%). The sources of China's two greatest rivers, the Yellow and the Yangzi, rise deep within its snowy elevations. Never historically part of the Chinese mainstream in any sense, most of Qinghai was a component of ethnocultural Tibet known as Amdo, in which mobile pastoralism was the normative practice across most of the region. Then considered a wealthy area on the basis of its pastoral heritage, Qinghai today is the fifth poorest province in China by average per capita income. Although 98% of its territory enjoys nominal minority-nationality

autonomous status due to pre-1949 demographic patterns, Han Chinese now constitute the majority ethnicity at 54.5%, concentrated in the capital Xining and its environs but steadily spreading further afield as economic opportunities, and newly-constructed urban environments, beckon. Rich in natural resources, ethnicities, cultural diversity, and compelling landscape, but not GDP or average income, Qinghai embodies the package of uneven features across national, provincial and even ethnic scales that the Western Development project intends to redress.

For the Central Government, nomads like the man on the Qinghai bus are a big part of this unbalanced equation, neither individually rich nor modern, engaged in unproductive traditional practices, but occupying a large and highly valuable space in the state's strategic and developmental environment. Settling them in fixed dwellings is fundamental to the Government's vision of a modernizing Qinghai, anticipated to solve poverty, environmental degradation and damage from natural disasters, accelerate urbanization, and speed up market development, the goal at the heart of Western Development's socioeconomic reconstruction. Perhaps most saliently, as explained in the Party weekly Outlook back in March 1996, it is envisaged as a sure way to change the "mindset" of nomads, specifically converting their thinking towards "wealth accumulation" and "a profound change in values".

A strong cultural bias underscores Beijing's practical legitimation of that vision: Han China's traditional agricultural ideology, which sets farming and the establishment of a fixed civilly-administered population positively against the negative paradigm of mobile - and thereby ungovernable - pastoralists, who were not, historically, Han Chinese. In Qinghai, where pastoral lands account for 95% of the provincial area, the intended scale of change in this part of the country, described by Qinghai Deputy-Governor Deng Bentai as "earth-shaking", is indisputable. Yet fixed settlement of nomads is not a covert policy or undertaking. Numerous policy statements, Government White Papers, national and provincial

five and ten year plans and official media reports since the 1980's advocate fixed settlement unequivocally as a non-negotiable policy goal driven by national socioeconomic interests. Ten years ago Tibetans and Mongols leading pack-yaks loaded with rolls of fencing wire could be seen all over the grasslands, as pasture enclosure, the initial transformational step, got underway. Simple brick or adobe dwellings, often with a nearby low-lying barn for sheep, now dot the Qinghai landscape, where pastoralists are expected to live permanently while raising their livestock. The frowning nomad on the bus expressed his reservation guardedly because opposition to central policy can be considered subversive under certain Chinese laws, but the process has been consistently implemented and may soon be, at least statistically, complete.

Typically for Qinghai, the future of fixed settlement for nomads holds contradictions. Is it as simple a dichotomy as Tibetan traditional versus Chinese modern? International grasslands experts warn of unsustainability, linking a damaged ecosystem and eventual lower productivity, as well as social fall-out. As the Chinese Government reformulates the pastoral regions and their Tibeto-Mongol populations into modern market players, it expects concrete benefits to flow to the state and the individuals involved. The nomads do not advocate a petrified version of ancient Amdo: they welcome better health care, education opportunities, consumer goods and selected technology. However, in a blanket fixed settlement policy devised in Beijing they see the inevitable destruction of ecologically sound pastoral practices and cultural erosion, not to mention their marginalization from the macro decision-making processes that are reconfiguring their region.

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