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China Fences In Its Nomads, and an Ancient Life Withers
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MADUI, China - In the two years since the Chinese government forced him to sell his livestock and move into a squat concrete house here on the windswept Tibetan plateau, Gere and his family have acquired a washing machine, a refrigerator and a color television that beams Mandarin language historical dramas into their whitewashed living room. But Gere, who like many Tibetans uses a single name, is filled with regret. Like hundreds of thousands of pastoralists across China who have been relocated into bleak townships over the past decade, he is jobless, deeply indebted and dependent on shrinking government subsidies to buy the milk, meat and wool he once obtained from his flocks.

In what amounts to one of the most ambitious attempts made at social engineering, the Chinese government is in the final stages of a 15-year-old campaign to settle the millions of pastoralists who once roamed China's vast borderlands. By year's end, Beijing claims it will have moved the remaining 1.2 million herders into towns that provide access to schools, electricity and modern health care.

Official news accounts of the relocation rapturously depict former nomads as grateful for salvation from primitive lives. "In merely five years, herders in Qinghai who for generations roved in search of water and grass, have transcended a millennium's distance and taken enormous strides toward modernity," said a front-page article in the state-run Farmers' Daily. "The Communist Party's preferential policies for herders are like the warm spring breeze that brightens the grassland in green and reaches into the herders' hearts."

But the policies, based partly on the official view that grazing harms grasslands, are increasingly contentious. Ecologists in China and abroad say the scientific foundations of nomad resettlement are dubious. Anthropologists who have studied government-built relocation centers have

documented chronic unemployment, alcoholism and the fraying of millenniums-old traditions.

Chinese economists, citing a yawning income gap between the booming eastern provinces and impoverished far west, say government planners have yet to achieve their stated goal of boosting incomes among former pastoralists.

The government has spent \$3.45 billion on the most recent relocation, but most of the newly settled nomads have not fared well. Residents of cities like Beijing and Shanghai on average earn twice as much as counterparts in Tibet and Xinjiang, the western expanse that abuts Central Asia. Government figures show that the disparities have widened in recent years.

Rights advocates say the relocations are often accomplished through coercion, leaving former nomads adrift in grim, isolated hamlets. In Inner Mongolia and Tibet, protests by displaced herders occur almost weekly, prompting increasingly harsh crackdowns by security forces.

In Xilinhot, a coal-rich swath of Inner Mongolia, resettled nomads, many illiterate, say they were deceived into signing contracts they barely understood. Among them is Tsokhochir, 63, whose wife and three daughters were among the first 100 families to move into Xin Kang village, a collection of forlorn brick houses in the shadow of two power plants and a belching steel factory that blankets them in soot.

In 2003, he says, officials forced him to sell his 20 horses and 300 sheep, and they provided him with loans to buy two milk cows imported from Australia. The family's herd has since grown to 13, but Tsokhochir says falling milk prices and costly store-bought feed means they barely break even.

An ethnic Mongolian with a deeply tanned face, Tsokhochir turns emotional as he recites grievances while his wife looks away. Ill-suited for the Mongolian steppe's punishing winters, the cows frequently catch pneumonia and their teats freeze. Frequent dust storms leave their mouths filled with grit. The government's promised feed subsidies never came.

Barred from grazing lands and lacking skills for employment in the steel mill, many Xin Kang youths have left to find work elsewhere in China. "This is not

a place fit for human beings,” Tsokhochir said.

Experts say the relocation efforts often have another goal, largely absent from official policy pronouncements: greater Communist Party control over people who have long roamed on the margins of Chinese society.

Nicholas Bequelin, the director of the East Asia division of Amnesty International, said the struggle between farmers and pastoralists is not new, but that the Chinese government had taken it to a new level. “These relocation campaigns are almost Stalinist in their range and ambition, without any regard for what the people in these communities want,” he said. “In a matter of years, the government is wiping out entire indigenous cultures.”

A map shows why the Communist Party has long sought to tame the pastoralists. Rangelands cover more than 40 percent of China, from Xinjiang in the far west to the expansive steppe of Inner Mongolia in the north. The lands have been the traditional home to Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Manchus and an array of other ethnic minorities who have bristled at Beijing’s heavy-handed rule.

For the Han Chinese majority, the people of the grasslands are a source of fascination and fear. China’s most significant periods of foreign subjugation came at the hands of nomadic invaders, including Kublai Khan whose Mongolian horseback warriors ruled China for almost a century beginning in 1271.

“These areas have always been hard to know and hard to govern by outsiders, seen as places of banditry or guerrilla warfare and home to peoples who long resisted integration,” said Charlene E. Makley, an anthropologist at Reed College, in Oregon, who studies Tibetan communities in China. “But now the government feels it has the will and the resources to bring these people into the fold.”

Although efforts to tame the borderlands began soon after Mao Zedong took power in 1949, they accelerated in 2000 with a modernization campaign,

“Go West,” that sought to rapidly transform Xinjiang and Tibetan-populated areas through enormous infrastructure investment, nomad relocations and Han Chinese migration.

The more recent “Ecological Relocation” program, started in 2003, has focused on reclaiming the region’s fraying grasslands by decreasing animal grazing.

New Madoi Town, where Gere’s family lives, was among the first so-called Socialist Villages constructed in the Amdo region of Qinghai Province, an overwhelmingly Tibetan area more than 13,000 feet above sea level. As resettlement gained momentum a decade ago, the government said that overgrazing was imperiling the vast watershed that nourishes the Yellow, Yangtze and the Mekong rivers, China’s most important waterways. In all, the government says it has moved more than 500,000 nomads and a million animals off ecologically fragile pastureland in Qinghai Province.

Gere said he had scoffed at government claims that his 160 yaks and 400 sheep were destructive, but he had no choice other than to sell them. “Only a fool would disobey the government,” he said. “Grazing our animals wasn’t a problem for thousands of years yet suddenly they say it is.”

Proceeds from the livestock sale and a lump sum of government compensation did not go far. Most of it went for unpaid grazing and water taxes, he said, and about \$3,200 was spent building the family’s new two-bedroom home.

Although policies vary from place to place, displaced herders on average pay about 30 percent of the cost of their new government-built homes, according to official figures. Most are given living subsidies, with a condition that recipients quit their nomadic ways. Gere said the family’s \$965 annual stipend — good for five years — was \$300 less than promised. “Once the subsidies stop, I’m not sure what we will do,” he said.

Many of the new homes in Madoi lack toilets or running water. Residents complain of cracked walls, leaky roofs and unfinished sidewalks. But the anger also reflects their loss of independence, the demands of a cash

economy and a belief that they were displaced with false assurances that they would one day be allowed to return.

Jarmila Plackova, an anthropologist at the Academy of Sciences in the Czech Republic who studies Tibetan resettlement communities, said “many people resent the speed and coercive aspects of the relocations. All of these things have been decided without their participation.”

Such grievances play a role in social unrest, especially in Inner Mongolia and Tibet. Since 2009, more than 140 Tibetans, two dozen of them nomads, have self-immolated to protest intrusive policies, among them restrictions on religious practices and mining on environmentally delicate land. The most recent one took place on Thursday, in a city not far from Madoi.

Over the past few years, the authorities in Inner Mongolia have arrested scores of former herders, including 17 last month in Tongliao municipality who were protesting the confiscation of 10,000 acres.

This year, dozens of people from Xin Kang village, some carrying banners that read “We want to return home” and “We want survival,” marched on government offices and clashed with riot police, according to the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center.

Chinese scientists whose research once provided the official rationale for relocation have become increasingly critical of the government. Some, like Li Wenjun, a professor of environmental management at Peking University, have found that resettling large numbers of pastoralists into towns exacerbates poverty and worsens water scarcity.

Professor Li declined an interview request, citing political sensitivities. But in published studies, she has said that traditional grazing practices benefit the land. “We argue that a system of food production such as the nomadic pastoralism that was sustainable for centuries using very little water is the best choice,” according to a recent article she wrote in the journal *Land Use Policy*.

Gere recently pitched his former home, a black yak-hide tent, on the side of a highway as a pit stop for Chinese tourists. “We’ll serve milk tea and yak

jerky,” he said hopefully. Then he turned maudlin as he fiddled with a set of keys tied to his waist. “We used to carry knives,” he said. “Now we have to carry keys.”