



TIBET'S NOMADS FACING CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPOSSESSION

Number 5 in a series of 10 briefings on climate and Tibet

Whatever one makes of China's claims to historic sovereignty over Tibet, no Chinese claim to have exercised actual day to day control over the lives of Tibetans until the 1950s.

Only in the latter half of the twentieth century did China's power extend to the vast grasslands of Tibet, intervening decisively in a rangeland quite unfamiliar to Chinese eyes. At the height of China's revolutionary drive to catch up with the industrialised West, the Tibetan grasslands were suddenly in the hands of Chinese cadres with no experience of pasture dynamics. Productivism was the new ideology, to intensify meat production for China, especially for the influx of Chinese migrants building new towns, oil wells and mines in Tibet.

These cadres took charge, holding the power of life or death, able to withhold rations to punish nomads unable to fulfil predetermined production quotas. In the name of "democratic reform", the old landlords owning nomadic lands had been executed, but the new cadres held greater powers than any landlord had. The nomads were herded into communes, stripped of all possessions, reshaped into production brigades, and given their orders. No production meant no rations. Starvation, especially in 1959, 1960 and 1961, was common.

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. The cadres were told it was more important to be red –to show a fervour for revolution- than expert. Out on the grasslands, the idea that nomads were the experts was laughable. Not only were the nomads devoted to the Buddhist lamas, they seldom slaughtered their animals, and allowed wild herds of antelope to mingle freely with their sheep, goats, yaks and horses. Clearly, these nomads were unscientific, unproductive, superstitious and in need of revolutionary regimentation. They must be made to increase herd size, slaughter rates, meat production, fencing and a civilised, sedentary way of life.

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, as is shown in Chinese official yearbook statistics. Nomads could once more draw on their intimate knowledge of plateau and alpine meadow pastures to regain the mobility that is the secret of both productivity and sustainability.

But Chinese attitudes did not change much. With no tradition of grassland governance to draw on, Chinese leaders persisted in seeing the nomads as primitive and irrational. Meat, wool and dairy production met the subsistence need of the nomads, and their neighbours, the farmers of Tibet; but nomads failed to commercialise slaughter rates. Little meat was available for monetisation.

A rainforest is immediately recognisable as complex, with a huge variety of plants dependent on each other. A grassland, to the outsider, seems far simpler and less wonderful; yet on close observation, the grazed grasslands are as complex and amazing as a rainforest.

Chinese scientists now know that Tibetan nomads gradually cleared plateau forests for pasture over thousands of years, creating complex meadows kept diverse by steady grazing pressure. By skilfully introducing domestic herds, then moving them on, the nomads maintained an extraordinary biodiversity of grasses and sedges, enabling human life to flourish at the third pole. 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.

In the 1980s and 1990s 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. And still the nomads failed to commercialise, bypassing the opportunity to get rich, as China abandoned class warfare and embraced capitalism.

In the absence of climate change as the universal explanation, and the absence of both productivity and sustainability, plus ongoing scientific ignorance of basic plateau grasslands dynamics, Chinese scientists and administrators turned to just one explanation. The irrational, ignorant, greedy nomads were to blame. They were overstocking, beyond the carrying capacity of the pastures, and this was the cause of degradation. The compulsory overstocking of the revolutionary years could not be discussed; it was and is off-limits, a shameful loss of face China is yet to look at afresh. So only one cause was possible: to blame the victims.

As the weight of mature yaks declined, nomad livelihoods also deteriorated. Although urban Tibet enjoyed a centrally funded construction boom, nomadic rural Tibet remained poor, with most nomad families trying to earn money away from their herds, roadbuilding, labouring on official projects, selling medicinal plants and mushrooms to Chinese traders.

In the 1990s, new policies again extended the reach of state power out onto the open grasslands, this time in the name of scientific development, not revolution. The nomads were at last given certificated guarantees of long term leasehold to their land, long after China's farmers had been given such guarantees. This encouraged conservation of pastures, giving nomads a sense of ownership.

But at the same time, other policies, driven by China's long standing disdain for mobile people, were also implemented. Sedentarisation, fencing, limits on family size and herd size were gradually made compulsory. Mobility was gone. No longer were nomads free to nomadise. Gone was the annual cycle of overwintering in lower plateau pastures and herding up into the alpine meadows in summer.

Forced to live in rudimentary, unsanitary, almost windowless houses, their herds behind fences, the lives of both herds and herders, and the quality of land, all deteriorated. Countless reports by international and Chinese scientists now reveal the cost of concentrating animals and people behind fixed fences. Inevitably the land eroded, the grasses trampled to death, production fell, animal weight fell further, and the nomads experienced the ill effects of overcrowding: higher rates of parasitic infections, dust diseases, tuberculosis and many other diseases.

China's leaders remained fixedly convinced they were bringing civilization to the nomads, and regularly announced proudly how many nomads had been sedentarised. There were no programs to invest national funds in rehabilitation of degraded grasslands, to engage with nomads as partners in sowing grass seeds to revegetate bare patches. The state had not learned that there was anything to be learned from Tibetan nomads. None of these increasingly restrictive policies achieved the goal of intensifying meat production. The "come out rate" of herders selling animals for slaughter hardly rose, and China's long held dream of Tibet as a source of meat was fading. A new source of worry was emerging for China: water security. The Yellow River, drained for irrigation and industry as well as urban populations along its length, ran dry in winter, for the first time in history. The Tibetan source became precious. The new slogan was that "Tibet is China's Number One Water Tower."

After Tibetans, at great costs, made public their frustrations with China in 2008, an independent delegation of Chinese lawyers went to remote areas of Tibet to see for themselves why Tibetans are unhappy. The Gongmeng Open Constitution Initiative Report describes the nomads of Kanlho (Gannan in Chinese): "The economic structures based on animal husbandry have left Gannan's Tibetan areas relatively poor, and the standard of living for ordinary farmers and nomads is below the subsistence level. Aside from investing in production, the normal farmer and nomad's disposable income each year does not amount to much. When researching in Xiahe, local scholars told us that aside from basic agriculture, local industrial systems are practically absent. Former processing industries surrounding agriculture, such as weaving and slaughtering operations, have all closed. There has been far from adequate guidance and investment in agriculture, the main industry in Tibetan areas; and there has been inadequate attention on the production and enterprise of ordinary farmers and nomads. When interviewing farmers and nomads in Xiahe county in Gannan a lot of farmers and nomads told us that they didn't have the funds to expand production and could only maintain a certain scale of production. If they wanted to raise more sheep or cattle they were restricted by limitations on pasture and funds. They wanted to open a store but had no capital. There were in fact very few Tibetan stores." The fading of the dream of meat, and the rising anxiety to conserve water sources coalesced into a new slogan. As the 21st century arrived, a new slogan gained power as a Marxist explanation of the situation: there is a contradiction between grass and animals. This is a simple observation: the more the sheep, yaks and goats eat, the less grass there is. Thus grasslands policy became a simple zero/sum proposition: if China wants to protect grass to protect watersheds from degradation, and since no meat was forthcoming, the grazing animals have to go, and the herders too.

This is the new policy, tuimu huancao in Chinese, meaning closing pastures to restore grasslands. 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. The tuimu huancao policy is a disaster. The certificates guaranteeing nomads long term land tenure have been torn up, nullified by the new command. State power has relocated nomads into concrete block settlements on the edges of their former lands, with basic rations to ensure they do not die of starvation. Instantly, all their skills, risk management strategies, environmental services, carbon sequestration, traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation are gone, redundant, as if they had never existed.

This is a tragedy comparable to the 19th century herding of Indian tribes onto reservations in the US, or Aborigines onto mission stations in Australia. Colonisers justify colonialism as a mission to civilise the backward. We now know the cost.

Until very recently, the nomads of Tibet occupied, sustainably and productively, the entire plateau, the whole two and a half million square kilometres of the third pole, skilfully using all land where plants grow, not just part. That extensive, mobile land use was well adapted to the realities of Tibet.

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, accelerating the drying out of Tibetan lakes, the dying of wetlands and croplands, and the melting of glaciers. Climate change now impacts on the farms, wild animals, lakes, rivers and glaciers of Tibet (see other Briefings in this series). But the most immediate impact of climate change is the exclusion of nomads from their lands, labelling them officially as "ecological migrants", as if they are victims of an impersonal force, called climate change.

Officially, the nomadic way of life is anachronistic, a relic of the pre-climate-change era. The nomads must go, for the greater good of China, to protect downstream water users, who number hundreds of millions. In reality, the vast grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau are a cultivated, curated creation of the nomads and their herds, over a period of 8800 years, not a primordial natural landscape best conserved by excluding domestic animals after 88 centuries of grazing.

Like the dispossession of the American Indians and Australian Aborigines, 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. For constructive alternatives to current policy, see other Briefings in this series.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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