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Translating ecological migration policy: a conjunctural analysis of Tibetan pastoralist resettlement in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the transmission of China's Ecological Migration Policy from the central government down to Tibetan villages and townships for implementation. It examines the specific ways through which the policy is translated from Chinese to Tibetan and communicated through various local dialects to concerned pastoralists. In order to achieve the Ecological Migration Policy's purported objectives of environmental conservation, livelihood improvement, and urbanization, township government officials at the grassroots level mistranslate and miscommunicate policy meanings to villagers to render an otherwise unfeasible, impractical policy implementable on the ground. Tibetan pastoralists actively engage with this resettlement project to fulfill their desires and aspirations for accessing healthcare and educational services in urban areas. However, this pursuit of legibility is induced by the state's negligence of rural pastoralist life and elimination of alternative educational facilities in rural communities. Both negligence and elimination of educational facilities in rural areas concentrate and increase investments in education and healthcare in urban settlements. These conjunctures ultimately drive Tibetan pastoralists to "choose" their only available option, to resettle in urban townships.

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Introduction

In 2013, I was employed by an environmental non-government organization (NGO) in China. That winter, I visited Nangchen County in Yulshul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province to observe the implementation of a national environmental awareness campaign. One of the local pastoralists whom I interviewed about the campaign invited my colleagues and me for tea at his house. During tea, our host – a man in his fifties – asked me what at the time seemed to be a bizarre question. “Why,” he asked, “does the government make an annual payment of 10,000 yuan to my family?” I did not have a ready answer. After several rounds of back-and-forth questions, answers, and speculation, my colleagues and I concluded that the cash he received was “payment for ecosystem services” (PES, *shengtai buchang*). When the national government implemented its Ecological Migration Policy (EMP, *shengtai yimin zhengce*) in the

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mid-2000s, Tibetan pastoralists were encouraged to sell off their livestock and move into resettlement towns as a way to purportedly restore grasslands by relieving the impact of livestock overgrazing. In turn, the resettled families received free houses and PES based on the size of the grazing land they had given up. My astonishment at his question stemmed from the fact that I had assumed local pastoralists clearly understood this environmental transaction between the government and themselves. In theory, the EMP is a rational transaction between a government interested in environmental conservation and mobile pastoralists the state deems a threat to the environment.

After listening to my lengthy explanation of PES in the local Tibetan dialect, my host shook his head and stated that he had no idea the money was “PES.” In fact, he had never heard of such a thing. “I thought it was *sa rin!*” He said, using a Tibetan term meaning “price for land.” “I refused to accept it [cash payments] starting two years ago!” He added. He explained that he had assumed these payments were a trick by the government to indirectly take away land from the pastoralists for mineral resource extraction purposes. His assumption was echoed by many other pastoralists I interviewed in Yulshul. Some of the resettled Yulshul pastoralists believed that PES, or rather, *sa rin*, is money the government provides as a way to permanently strip people of their use rights to grazing land.¹ My interviewees told me it is important they retain their grazing rights so that they can return to pastoralism if life in resettlement towns does not yield a good income or a comfortable life.

According to my host, local township officials used the narrative of *sa rin* to explain the purpose of these annual cash payments. He stated that his decision to sell all his yaks and resettle in Nangchen town was prompted by his need to access medical facilities and to send his two children to schools located there. The PES, the “price for land,” was not enough to support his family’s daily expenses, education fees, and medical bills. He was able to live a comfortable life in town only because of the income he earned from harvesting caterpillar fungus. Later on, I learned that “price for land” is not the only mistranslation used by local bureaucrats to explain PES and the EMP; they referred to PES as the subsidy for “poverty alleviation.”

This experience has led me to examine the ways environmental policies are conceptualized and practiced on the ground by township-level bureaucrats and Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai. I seek to understand the transformation of policy meanings as they are translated from written Chinese to written Tibetan, verbally communicated by local bureaucrats to pastoralists, and interpreted among pastoralists themselves. I explore the social effects of state policies as these are interpreted and reinterpreted by different actors on the ground and implemented based on various perceived meanings and interpretations. To answer these questions, I situate my ethnographic analysis in the theoretical framework of the anthropology of policy. Cris Shore and Susan Wright write that, “Policies are not simply external, generalized or constraining forces, nor are they confined to texts. Rather, they are productive, performative and continually contested.”² They argue that policies are not transferred from one actor to another; rather, they are interpreted and reinterpreted as they travel across different cultural landscapes. Policies, once created by

¹Even though resettled pastoralists do not have the legal right to graze animals on what officially is public land, they still retain use rights to harvest caterpillar fungus, an endemic fungus on the Tibetan Plateau highly valuable in Tibetan and Chinese medical practices.

²Shore and Wright 2011, 1.

policymakers, travel into new contexts where they acquire life forms of their own and achieve goals that are often unintended in the original objectives. Drawing on the work of Shore and Wright, I identify the ways state policies, particularly the EMP, are implemented on the ground by township level bureaucrats in rural Qinghai Province, and the ways in which the meanings and effects of this project are imagined and produced by local bureaucrats and Tibetan pastoralists.

Some scholars argue that pastoral resettlement schemes actually create more economic hardships and environmental hazards. Yet such schemes are undertaken by governments worldwide due to an ideologically grounded anti-pastoralism bias which aims to render them legible to sedentary governments.³ While acknowledging the drastic social and cultural impacts of the Ecological Migration Policy (henceforth EMP) on Tibetan pastoralists, I do not analyze Zachen Tibetan pastoralists merely as passive recipients and victims of state policies. Instead, I complicate the concept of legibility. James Scott has argued that where there is a statist project of legibility, there is always resistance, or at least the will to resist.⁴ However, targets of these projects are not necessarily anti-government or anti-legibility. Often times, they participate in statist projects of legibility to take advantage of the social and economic benefits the state directly or indirectly provides.⁵ In the context of Zachen, Tibetan pastoralists seek to become legible in the eyes of the state in order to gain access to health and educational facilities located in towns. Reinterpreting policies on their own terms, both Tibetan pastoralists and local bureaucrats engage with these resettlement policies in ways that serve their own interests.

My analysis is based on twenty structured interviews and sixty household surveys with Tibetan pastoralists, as well as interviews with local county and township officials and civil servants in the winter of 2014 in Zachen Township, Zado County, Yulshul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. I argue that implementation of the EMP and pastoralist resettlement program in Zachen is enabled by four conjunctures: Policies are formed at the national level and passed down to local level township bureaucrats for implementation. These township bureaucrats become the “makers” of the policies because they reinterpret the policies to render them meaningful and practical for implementation. This is particularly significant in Tibetan areas of China such as Zachen because policy communication first requires translation from written Chinese to standard written Tibetan, as well as verbal communication between local Tibetan bureaucrats and mostly illiterate pastoralists in the vernacular. Second, state educational policies that decree nine years of compulsory education and school centralization indirectly force pastoralists off their grazing lands with threats of monetary fines and denial of state financial and material subsidies if families do not send their children to schools. Third, pastoralists’ desires and aspirations to seek educational opportunities and access medical facilities require them to resettle in towns where these services are available. Fourth, the income earned from caterpillar fungus harvesting enables Zachen pastoralists to resettle in towns. The assemblage of these four different conjunctures suggests that at least in Zachen, pastoralist resettlement is not subject to the coercive deployment of state sovereign power as is often perceived.⁶ However, the active and conscious “choice” of resettlement made by the pastoralists

³Scott 1999; Homewood 2004; Little 2014.

⁴Scott 1999.

⁵Li 2007.

⁶Buckley 2014.

themselves is also shaped by the state through the active elimination of educational services in pastoral areas and passive negligence of rural education and healthcare services. Both passive negligence and active elimination concentrate and increase financial investments in education and healthcare facilities in urban areas.

The cultural politics of policy translation

New meanings and interpretations are created as texts are translated from one language to another, and as they travel from one cultural context to another. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues that translation is an act of “faithless appropriation,” meaning that it is a process of rewriting texts through which new meanings are formed when different languages and cultures interact.⁷ Talal Asad argues that cultural translation is “inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power,” that languages of dominant and the dominated societies are unequal, and thus the dominated languages are “more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process.”⁸ Both the translators of policies and ethnographers are subject to the reality of unequal languages, and thus are integral parts of the structure that reproduces inequalities across cultures and languages. Other scholars perceive translation as a “mutual enrollment and the interlocking of interests that produces project realities.”⁹ In this view translation constructs networks of interactions by creating coherent representations through translation. To extend the argument of translation from specific policies and projects to ecological knowledge, Paige West argues that scholars often fail to understand environments as both materially and symbolically made. As a result, they may perceive the environments of the places they study to be knowledge to utilize as resources for environmental conservation. This process of translation reduces complex cultural practices into genres and categories that are easily understandable to scholars and environmentalists.¹⁰

The process of policy development and translation in contemporary China speaks to the critical issues raised by these scholars. In Tibet, new genres and categories of Tibetan language and lexicon were developed by the state in the 1950s when the region was incorporated into the People’s Republic of China. In order to promote socialist ideologies in Tibetan areas, the Communist Party established translation bureaus to translate Party ideology and policies into Tibetan. Thus “faithless appropriation” and “forcible transformations” of the Tibetan language was initiated at the dawn of the PRC.¹¹ In the case of state policies in Tibetan areas of China, policy formulation and implementation require an understanding of the processes of translation and communication, the way policies transform and produce new meanings and practices as they are translated from Chinese to Tibetan, and the means by which these are verbally communicated between local Tibetan bureaucrats and illiterate pastoralists.

Every year in March, China’s National People’s Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference meet in Beijing to determine major policies and work plans. Right before these annual plenary sessions begin, the

⁷Tsing 1997, 253.

⁸Asad 1984, 157.

⁹Mosse and Lewis 2006, 13.

¹⁰West 2005.

¹¹Tsering 1994.

civil servants of the state's Bureau of Translation are busy translating major documents, reports, and policies into Tibetan, Uighur, Mongolian, and other officially recognized minority languages. These documents, reports, and policies eventually are disseminated down to the local level. This is how China's Tibetan policies are produced. They are formed by policymakers of the central government, translated by Tibetan civil servants, and eventually disseminated to Tibetan citizens, including pastoralists and farmers. However, for pastoralists, these written policies are useless since most are illiterate. Even literate pastoralists I spoke to could not understand these written policies. "There are too many big words that I do not understand!" One pastoralist who used to study in the local monastery told me. Two major problems stand out with these translated policies. First, too much political jargon that does not meaningfully render the actual content of the policies is included. Second, the policies are translated into standard written Tibetan, which many Tibetans without a high level of literacy cannot understand.

Even a perfect translation and a high literacy rate would not make written communication meaningful in Zachen, because the main mode of interaction among pastoralists, as well as between local government bureaucrats and pastoralists is in various Kham dialects.¹² State policies are communicated by township officials to local pastoralists at community meetings. Often times, township civil servants bring copies of written documents to the meetings to be distributed, but most pastoralists do not concern themselves with these. Instead, they listen to how township leaders interpret the policies through local Tibetan dialects. This form of policy interpretation through speeches gives both the speaker and the listener a wide space for reinterpretation of the policies and the production of new meanings. For example, once I observed a Zachen Township civil servant explain the government's policy to clear grasslands of plastic waste. In other words, he was explaining a waste management project, which was in turn part of a broader environmental conservation policy. After he was done speaking, one enthusiastic pastoralist stood up and made a speech about his support for the policy, suggesting that they should also prohibit mineral extraction activities in the Zado area. This pastoralist was waved to sit down by the civil servant, who admonished him for misunderstanding the policy. Such policy (mis)communication and (re)interpretations regularly take place in these settings. Sometimes, local bureaucrats try to clarify their positions. Yet in most cases I observed, they do not bother to argue with pastoralists because they are more interested in completing their assigned task of conveying policies rather than achieving any practical action. In this sense, they are engaged in a ritualized practice of performance¹³ with the aim to demonstrate to their superiors the evidence of their hard work and intimate relationships they have built with the masses.

The politics of sedentarization and resettlement

Pastoralist resettlement is politically and ideologically embedded in statist practices of frontier development and administration. The tragedy of the commons is the general framework through which resettlement and sedentarization projects of pastoralist

¹²Kham is a region in Southwest China historically located between Tibet and Sichuan. It is currently divided between the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Qinghai. A majority of residents are Khampa people.

¹³Yarchak 2005.

populations are globally envisioned and justified.¹⁴ This idea is often invoked in Chinese policy discussions to justify resettlement and sedentarization. According to Marc Foggin, “whether considered from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture or a Socialist Marxist ideology, extensive pastoralism generally has been viewed as a backward, undeveloped, or unproductive form of livelihood.”¹⁵

In Tibetan pastoralist areas of China, the tragedy of the commons is used to explain the purportedly negative impact of pastoralism on the natural environment.¹⁶ However, ecologists who have studied pastoralist land use practices on the eastern Tibetan Plateau find that rangeland privatization and fencing reduces pastoral mobility, which in turn prompts population growth of plateau pika – a small mammal which is believed by many pastoralists and ecologists to contribute to land degradation.¹⁷ In addition, removing indigenous people from their land has other adverse consequences, such as the loss of cultural heritage, the loss of protection against destructive measures such as mineral extraction, and overreliance on the government to do all the conservation work after local people are removed from the landscape.¹⁸

Economic development of pastoral regions is often used as a rationale for resettlement. Pastoralists are often perceived as irrational and backward, which in turn justifies the need for planning and development.¹⁹ Policy makers believe that the only way to “develop” pastoralist areas is to make people lead sedentary lives. Through the moral discourses of environmental conservation and poverty alleviation, pastoralist sedentarization has been carried out in many parts of the world. However, studies show that in many cases, sedentarization does not lead to economic prosperity or to environmental conservation.²⁰ Some scholars suggest that environmental degradation and poverty alleviation are used to justify political administration and taxation.²¹ Pastoralists are resettled in towns with the promise of access to modern public services such as healthcare and education. However, resettlement also entails more expenses that were previously not incurred in subsistence pastoralism, such as out-of-pocket costs for education, food, fuel, and basic commodities.²² Even though resettlement creates economic and environmental problems, sedentarization programs are still undertaken by various governments worldwide. Ideologically grounded perceptions of pastoralism as “backward” play a strong role in the implementation of these projects.²³

Sedentarization and resettlement projects in Tibetan areas are statist projects of legibility. They are efforts by the state to control and administer its ethnically and culturally diverse frontiers through high modernist projects of social engineering.²⁴ James Scott has suggested that legibility is resisted by people in authoritarian states. However, Zachen pastoralists I interviewed do not resist statist projects of legibility. In fact, they actively seek to *become* legible to the state, albeit for reasons that differ from those of

¹⁴Hardin 1968.

¹⁵Foggin 2008, 27.

¹⁶Banks et al. 2003; Nyima 2017.

¹⁷Li et al. 2017.

¹⁸Stevens 1993; Stevens 1997.

¹⁹Wang and Bai 1991.

²⁰Little 2014.

²¹Scott 1999; Cencetti 2011.

²²Bauer 2015.

²³Homewood 2004; Little 2014; Gyal 2015; Kabzung 2015.

²⁴Cencetti 2013.

the state. Zachen pastoralists seek legibility in order to gain access to hospitals and schools, not because of development or environmental concerns. Arguing along a similar line, Michael Zukosky has suggested that pastoralists in the Altai region of northwest China had a “positive perception of settlement” because the new settlement offered them a consumer lifestyle, healthcare, education, and transportation services.²⁵ However, in contrast to Zukosky’s findings, while Zachen pastoralists embrace educational and health services through statist projects of legibility, their lives in their new urban homes are also subject to precarious uncertainties. For instance, Zachen pastoralists I interviewed did not express a generally “positive perception” of their home lives, but instead sought to be near schools and hospitals. They also worried about the economic hardships they could suffer if the caterpillar fungus they harvested to supplement their incomes is depleted or if its price plunges. They often invoked the language of potential “starvation” and hoped to return to their grazing lands one day if urban life became economically impossible.

The ecological migration policy and other pressures for resettlement in Qinghai

Shortly after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese government orchestrated a “gold rush” to turn Qinghai into a source of mineral resources to power China’s industrialization. This prompted some Hui and Han Chinese from eastern China to resettle in urban areas of Qinghai to seek new livelihoods and economic opportunities.²⁶ This increase in the non-Tibetan population in urban areas has been counterbalanced by a Tibetan population increase in rural regions.²⁷ Beginning in the 1990s, Tibetan pastoralists in Qinghai were encouraged by the state to resettle in towns. One of the first attempts to settle Tibetan pastoralists was the Four Allocation Policy (*Sipeitao*) in the mid-1990s. This was aimed at reducing poverty in pastoralist areas of Qinghai.²⁸ In Yulshul, it was implemented by township governments in conjunction with county-level departments of animal husbandry and forestry. The project offered subsidized housing for local herders, fences for enclosing grazing land, and shelters and fodder for livestock. Prior to the implementation of this policy, most Yulshul Tibetan pastoralists lived in tents and moved their herds between winter, spring, fall, and summer pastures. The Four Allocation Policy attempted to reduce the mobility of both people and livestock by providing settled shelters and fencing in grazing land. The implementation and enforcement of this policy continued into the 2000s, supplemented by lifestyle improvements such as televisions and solar panels.

In 1999, the “Open up the West” (*Xibu da kaifa*) campaign was launched by the national government to develop China’s western provinces, including Qinghai, so that these “underdeveloped” frontier provinces could catch up with the coastal industrial provinces. As part of the campaign, a new program termed “Retiring Pasture to Restore Grassland” (*tuimu huancao*) was begun in 2003.²⁹ This program divided grasslands into three zones: zones in which grazing is completely prohibited, zones in which

²⁵Zukosky 2007, 115.

²⁶Fischer 2008a; Rohlf 2016.

²⁷Fischer 2008a.

²⁸Gruschke 2008; Foggin 2008.

²⁹Bauer and Nyima 2010.

grazing is prohibited temporarily, and zones in which grazing is allowed seasonally. Scholars suggest this program was launched in response to massive floods and drought in the downstream regions of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers in the late 1990s.³⁰ These floods were blamed in part on the poor conservation of upstream grasslands in Qinghai, resulting in massive soil erosion.³¹

The ecological value of Qinghai is significant. The area is characterized by its major watersheds. Glaciers and high-altitude grasslands feed three of Asia's major rivers – the Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong – which provide fresh water to at least 600 million people downstream. On a global level, the Tibetan Plateau is known as the “water tower” of Asia as it is the source of Asia's major rivers such as the Indus, Sutlej, Ganges, and Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra). It also is considered “the third pole” because it holds the largest reserves of glacier ice outside of Antarctica, Greenland, and Canada. The glaciers of the Tibetan Plateau account for up to seventy percent of the glacial coverage in the Himalayas, providing water to approximately forty percent of the world's population.³²

The EMP was implemented after the establishment of the Sanjiangyuan (“Source of Three Rivers”) Nature Reserve in Qinghai in 2000. It is the world's second largest nature reserve, encompassing 395,000 square kilometers of Qinghai Province.³³ The whole of Yulshul Prefecture is included in this nature reserve. With Yulshul becoming the heart of Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve in 2003, the pressure to implement the EMP was immediate. During the planning stage of the policy, the central government announced its intention to remove more than one million Tibetan pastoralists from the grasslands and resettle them in towns on the Tibetan Plateau.³⁴ Government officials view this as both an environmental conservation and economic development project for China's rural pastoralist regions.³⁵ The basic principle of the policy is to encourage Tibetan pastoralists to become “ecological migrants” (*shengtai yimin*). The policy requires pastoralists to reduce their livestock numbers or, better still, sell off all their livestock and move into state-built concrete houses located in the seats of townships and counties. In return, the state promises the pastoralists an annual payment (PES) based on the size of the grazing lands that the pastoralists had given up.

The last state policy that has had a profound social impact on resettlement practices is China's Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy (*jiunian yiwu jiaoyu*). This policy requires every Chinese citizen under the age of eleven at the time of implementation to complete nine years of formal education, up to the junior middle school level. The policy has been implemented in pastoral areas of Qinghai since the 1990s, but it was reinforced in the mid-2000s along with a policy to centralize schools in towns. As part of a national policy to centralize school systems, prefecture and county level governments of Qinghai shut down village schools as a way to invest more resources into county-level schools.³⁶ The justification for this effort is that the quality of school infrastructure and

³⁰Yeh 2005.

³¹Others argue the flooding was likely aggravated by China's urbanization process, rather than by rangeland degradation upstream. See Fischer 2008b.

³²Foggin 2008.

³³Bum 2016.

³⁴Bauer 2015.

³⁵Wang et al. 2010; Du 2012.

³⁶Makley 2018.

teaching is low in village schools. This has meant that pastoralists are supposed to resettle in county towns to access supposedly high-quality education and facilities.

The integration of the Compulsory Education Policy and school centralization effort as a social mechanism to indirectly force pastoralists to settle is evident throughout Yulshul. My interview and survey participants in Zachen consisted of people from three of the four communities in the township. When I asked my local guide to take me to the houses of the people from the fourth community, he stated that it would be hard to find them because most had not resettled. According to the Zachen township governor, only thirty percent of the residents from the fourth community had resettled, compared to a rate of eighty percent for the other three communities. My guide explained, “They have a powerful and influential village leader who was able to maintain a school in the village so that the villagers do not need to move into the towns.” This suggests that Zachen pastoralists from the other three communities possibly would not have had to resettle had they had influential elites in their communities to bargain with local authorities to retain schools in their villages. This example illustrates how, although central government directives inform the details and rationale of state policies at a national level, local level policy implementation is not unitary and cohesive.³⁷ Policies are subject to interpretation and manipulation of bureaucratic procedures at the local level, serving the political and economic interests of different elite groups.³⁸

Ecological migrants or education and healthcare migrants?

While the state’s declared goal of the EMP is to restore grasslands by resettling pastoralists in towns, most of the people I interviewed did not consider their way of life an environmental threat to the grasslands. My interview and survey participants were resettled from pastoral areas of Zachen Township to Zado County between 2005 and 2008. They told me their decision to resettle was a conscious choice. Yet this was their only option to access schools and hospitals. The local township government and the county education bureau often pressured them to send their children to school with threats of monetary fines and denial of material and financial subsidies.³⁹ Among my sixty survey participants, ten households decided to resettle in Zado because all of their livestock had died off due to diseases and snowstorms. Seventeen households resettled to be near schools. Thirteen households chose to resettle because they had sick members in the family. Visiting hospitals from their grazing land in Zachen was inconvenient due to poor conditions of mountain paths. Thirteen stated that they wanted to live in Zado County in order to access both schools and hospitals. Only seven responded that their reason for resettlement was due to “not enough grass for livestock” because of grassland degradation on their grazing land. Their responses illustrate how Zachen pastoralists’ “conscious choice” of resettlement was not an active choice. This “conscious choice” was structured by the state’s elimination of alternative schooling opportunities in pastoral areas, and passive negligence of healthcare and education in rural pastoralist communities.

³⁷Harwood 2014.

³⁸Smith 2009; Gupta 2012; Tenzin 2014.

³⁹A similar phenomenon has been described by Yusuke Bessho for in the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai, where Tibetan pastoralists decided to become ecological migrants to access medical benefits and schooling opportunities in urban settings. Yuseke Bessho 2015.

Charlene Makley has observed that in Rebgong, a Tibetan area in southeastern Qinghai, villagers are directly pressured by local state officials to resettle.⁴⁰ Such explicit pressure was not evident in Zado because resettlement was carried out indirectly through enforcement of the Compulsory Education Policy and the centralization of schools in urban towns. Second, Rebgong is closer to Xining, the capital and political center of Qinghai Province. Areas close to the capital city are often subject to periodic inspections by provincial officials, putting greater pressure on local officials to implement policies. Hence, when I asked Zachen township officials why one village was exempt from the resettlement policy, they told me that this village was located in the furthest corner of Yulshul, thus no provincial or prefecture officials would bother to visit and inspect. This logic of governance and policy implementation reflects the continued validity of a traditional Chinese proverb, “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away.” Today, it is still used among Chinese bureaucrats to imply that policy and law enforcement in distant administrative centers are not feared or taken seriously by the ruling elites and people of frontier communities.⁴¹

Some townships in Yulshul have retained primary schools. There is one primary school in Zachen township seat; however, when I visited the school in 2014, there were fewer than seventy students in the first three grades. According to local residents, the quality of the teaching was notoriously bad. Zachen pastoralists who send their children to this primary school still need to resettle since their grazing lands are often far away from the township seat. Since the school only has three grades, families ultimately still need to move to Zado so their children can continue their primary and middle school education. The state’s education policy, in this case, has been a more effective strategy to encourage resettlement since education is widely supported by Tibetan parents and therefore less controversial than encouraging people to resettle by blaming them for environmental degradation. One Zachen township civil servant told me that despite the fact that education at the county town is supposed to be better quality, it is still a “fake education.” He explained this term by suggesting that schools do not provide pastoralist children with necessary practical skills to increase their chances of employment in cities. Most resettlement towns do not have productive industries, thus unemployment is a crucial concern of both the resettled pastoralists and local government officials.

While the state deems these resettled pastoralists ecological migrants, my data suggest otherwise. A more suitable name would be “education and healthcare migrants.” One of my interviewees, a woman in her forties, explained her decision to resettle:

Pastoralists’ way of life is hard. Every day, we herd yaks from early morning till late in the evening, there is no break from that. We need to constantly worry about snowstorms, and attacks from wolves on livestock. I do not want my children to lead a nomad’s way of life like me. I want them to go to schools, to get educated, and to become salaried employees of the government to start a comfortable life. To do that we have to move to Zado since there are no schools on the grassland.

Despite the fact that this woman decided to resettle on her own, her reasons still mirror how the state stigmatizes pastoralist ways of life and encourages sedentary ways of living. For instance, in my interactions with local government officials and environmental

⁴⁰Makley 2018.

⁴¹Rogers 2004.

activists, they often cited snowstorms and wildlife attacks as reasons why a nomadic life is precarious, despite the fact that historically local pastoralists had managed to survive big snowstorms because of their mobility, communal pooling of resources, storage, and sheltering livestock.⁴² Being a state employee and starting a comfortable life are rationales provided to pastoralists by local officials to encourage resettlement. Most government employees in Zado are in fact from pastoralist backgrounds.

Caterpillar fungus

Without the income they earn from harvesting caterpillar fungus, Zachen pastoralists would not be able to sustain their livelihoods in resettlement towns. The economic benefits of caterpillar fungus allow both pastoralists and local bureaucrats to interpret and manipulate the EMP in ways that serve their different interests. My tea host (see above) would not have been able to refuse PES had he not had income from caterpillar fungus. On the other hand, the local bureaucrats would not be able to use the Compulsory Education Policy to indirectly force pastoralists to settle if the pastoralists did not earn extra income from caterpillar fungus to pay their educational and medical bills. In other words, caterpillar fungus, along with the Compulsory Education Policy and school centralization policy, had a vital role in making the EMP possible.

Caterpillar fungus harvesting has become the most important source of cash income in many areas of the Tibetan Plateau. Chinese consumers drive its current market. Its price surged by 900 percent between 1997 and 2008 after accounting for inflation.⁴³ As of 2018, despite occasional dips, its general trajectory was still rising. In the Tibet Autonomous Region, forty percent of rural residents' cash income is from caterpillar fungus, and in some regions, this is as high as eighty percent.⁴⁴ In Yulshul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, caterpillar fungus harvesting accounts for between fifty percent and eighty percent of pastoralists' total cash income.⁴⁵ My own survey data corroborate these findings. In the sixty household surveys that I conducted with resettled Zachen pastoralists, I found that the average total annual income of a resettled Zachen pastoralist household was 44,415 RMB (US\$6461). Of this, 36,578 RMB (US\$5321) was from caterpillar fungus, 7087 RMB (US\$1031) was from PES, and just 750 RMB (US\$109) was from casual labor such as driving a taxi or running a grocery shop. This data suggests that eighty-two percent of total average income is from caterpillar fungus harvesting, compared to just and sixteen percent from PES.⁴⁶ These annual average household incomes are high, given the local economy of Tibetan areas of the PRC. However, both pastoralists and local government officials worry that the caterpillar fungus economy will collapse. Harvesting takes place every year between April and June when local Tibetan pastoralists collect fungus in the mountains. My interviewees told me they find fewer and fewer

⁴²Yeh et al. 2014.

⁴³Winkler 2009.

⁴⁴Winkler 2008.

⁴⁵Gruschke 2011.

⁴⁶This survey work was conducted only among resettled pastoralists with the main objective of understanding the reasons and rationales for resettlement; therefore, I do not attempt to make generalizable interpretations about other communities using this set of survey data. The primary respondents to the surveys are the heads of households. Tibetan heads of households make major family decisions regarding resettlement and other socioeconomic issues. In the case of this survey, the heads of households were mostly older males, with the exception of a few adult males and three older females.

caterpillar fungus every year. They recalled the high quantity of caterpillar fungus they could collect in past years, and stated that there is a danger of resource depletion due to overharvesting. The impact of caterpillar fungus harvest on the survival of the species is poorly studied, with no conclusive evidence produced by researchers to date. A second explanation for the potential collapse of the caterpillar fungus economy is the potential for pharmaceutical production of the fungus. There have been experiments by Chinese scientists to produce caterpillar fungus in lab settings. In addition, the caterpillar fungus economy has integrated Tibetan pastoralists into China's cash economy while at the same time marginalizing them by "making them highly vulnerable to the whims of Chinese urban consumer demands through a narrowing of livelihood options."⁴⁷ Of course, the commodification of caterpillar fungus also offers a degree of autonomy from relying on wage employment. I asked my interviewees about their plans if the caterpillar fungus economy collapsed. Most responded that they would "starve," or become beggars. Others stated that they would move back to the grasslands to herd yaks, but at the same time they were worried this would not be possible because of state policies and the initial start-up costs. For instance, one interviewee said:

My family would starve to death without caterpillar fungus. Everything here [resettlement town] costs money, we need to spend money everyday! The poverty alleviation money from the government [PES] is not enough at all to pay for food, fuel, and schools! We might need to move back to the grassland someday, but it will be difficult since yaks are so expensive now. There is no way we could afford to buy back yaks to restart a pastoralist life.

When I conveyed this pastoralist's thoughts to the Party Secretary of Zachen Township, he stated that he was well aware of these worries and was concerned about the potential threats to social stability if the local economy were to collapse. His concerns were legitimate in the context of rural governance in China, where townships often are the site of protests by villagers against corruption and the inability of local officials to provide economic development opportunities.⁴⁸ He told me a return to the grasslands would only be possible with the financial support of the government to buy yaks for the pastoralists. His major goal was social stability; he would allow pastoralists to move back to the grasslands if this maintained social stability, regardless of the policy goals of the EMP. He was worried that without supplementary income from caterpillar fungus harvesting, local residents would not be able to afford to live in resettlement towns, and thus would protest against the government to increase the PES amount. The Party Secretary was firm on his plan to send the pastoralists back in case of a collapsed caterpillar fungus economy. However, he was also concerned with the price of yaks. Reduction of the yak population after the implementation of resettlement policies, and the continued desire of the resettled pastoralists for yak meat and other yak products such as butter and milk, have driven up the price of yaks exponentially. Ironically, pastoralists who have not chosen to resettle currently benefit the most, as they can harvest fungus while maintaining their herds. When I asked my respondents whom they thought were well-off economically, they often referred to members of the fourth community (those who had chosen not to resettle). These

⁴⁷Yeh and Lama 2013, 3.

⁴⁸This was particularly the case prior to villages being exempt from agricultural taxes in 2006. See Chen 2014.

pastoralists, many of my respondents noted, had income from both caterpillar fungus harvesting and their yaks.

Township government meets pastoralists: communicating policies on the ground

Unlike my tea host from Nangchen County, to refuse to accept PES is not an option for Zachen pastoralists. Each resettled pastoralist household has a bank account opened for them by the government. PES money is directly transferred to their accounts at the end of each year by the Prefecture Department of Finance and the Bureau of Animal Husbandry. Whether or not the pastoralists withdraw money from their account is not the concern of local township officials. According to a Zachen civil servant, they had tried to “educate” the pastoralists about the nature of PES by telling them that it was not intended for land but for “poverty alleviation.” I pointed out these funds were PES, not poverty alleviation grants. “That is complicated to explain,” he said. “Because then we need to explain things about overgrazing and then the pastoralists would not agree with us.” In order to achieve the government’s policy objective of resettlement, the local bureaucrats transform the meanings of the EMP into concepts they believe are reasonable and sensible for pastoralists.

In authoritarian regimes, policies are formed by legislators at the top and passed down to the local level for implementation by “street-level bureaucrats” who usually become the “makers” of policies, because they reinterpret these to render them meaningful and practical for implementation on the ground.⁴⁹ The street-level bureaucrats throughout Tibetan areas of China are the officials and civil servants of township governments, the lowest level of formal political administration in the country. Township civil servants work closely with village leaders to implement environmental and development projects, as well as other policies, on behalf of the state. It is the only level of government to which members of local communities have relatively easy access. In Tibetan areas, most township-level civil servants are ethnic Tibetans. Their performance is measured by their superiors based on the final output of policy implementation, not on the processes. However, obscure policy processes and a lack of transparency induce distrust between pastoralists and local government officials. The conspiracy theory developed by my tea host is an example of how insufficient and ambivalent explanations lead to distrust of the government. This distrust, rooted in the Maoist years of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), has extended into reform-era China, with historical memories and traumas of the state inflicting economic, political, cultural, and environmental disasters upon the masses.⁵⁰ This means that even well-intentioned policies can backfire when pastoralists and local policy implementers are unable to work together due to a lack of trust. This distrust is well understood by township civil servants. Thus they are unconcerned about the original meanings and goals of the policies. As their main intent is to complete the task shouldered onto them by the higher levels of the government, they translate policies into the local vernacular in ways that are sensible to local pastoralists. In this case, the notion of PES was translated as “poverty alleviation grants” by township civil servants when they disseminated and communicated the EMP to pastoralists.

⁴⁹Lipsky 1979.

⁵⁰Mueggler 2001; Makley 2007.

This translation was accepted by most of my interviewees and survey respondents as unproblematic. It was a way they chose to interpret the EMP, one that was reinforced by local civil servants through mistranslations and ambivalent verbal communication. When I explained the EMP and PES based on the state's policy narratives to Zachen pastoralists, few Zachen pastoralists expressed worries. They told me they were taking the money only because they had been told by local officials that it was for poverty alleviation. In reality, they do not have the option to not take the money, because it is directly transferred to their bank accounts. However, most of them said that the policy did not make any sense. One elderly pastoralist refuted my explanation this way:

We *drupa* [pastoralists] have always lived in harmony (*'cham mthun*) with nature (*skye khams*). We have lived and herded yaks for thousands of years! How come suddenly now our way of life is a threat to the environment? I tell you! Only we can protect this sacred land, and the minerals buried underneath it. The Han Chinese are just trying to kick us out of grasslands using these excuses so that they can dig up our land and extract minerals for money!

This statement points out two issues: First, local pastoralists view statist narratives of the EMP as irrational and environmentally unfriendly, which is completely opposite of the policy's stated goals. This pastoralist invokes the threat of mineral extraction, which is particularly justified in the context of Zado. In the summer of 2013, pastoralist communities in Zachen confronted state mining companies in a mountainous area sacred to pastoralists. The provincial Ministry of Land and Resources claimed that this was a regular mineral inspection. Zachen pastoralists argued that it was a purposeful process to conduct mineral extraction. The confrontation resulted in police forces being sent in to remove the protestors. As I was told by Zachen pastoralists, after days of negotiations between Zachen pastoralists and officials from the prefecture and province, the incident was resolved by halting the mineral "inspection." During this process, leaders and civil servants of Zachen Township played a major role in mediating between the pastoralists and the armed police forces. Second, there is an inherent distrust of central and provincial level government officials, who are often Han Chinese. The rejection of the statist environmental discourse of the EMP, fueled by this ethnically framed distrust of policymakers, led to a failure to implement the EMP as an environmental policy. Instead, the policy has taken on a social life of its own, shifting from being an environmental policy to an economic policy of poverty alleviation.

Zachen Township civil servants are all college-educated Tibetan residents of Zado County. Most were raised in pastoralist families and still have kinship ties to pastoralists in Zachen. When faced with implementing the EMP, they are forced to play two roles. First, they are supposed to be civil servants loyal to the state who carry out official policies. Second, they need to work closely with local pastoralists to show that they are benevolent officials who care about their fellow Tibetan pastoralists.⁵¹ In order to position themselves between higher authorities and local pastoralists without upsetting either side, they "remake" the EMP through new narratives of price for land, poverty alleviation, and Compulsory Education Policy. Through a process of policy mistranslation and manipulation, they are able to achieve the EMP's ultimate resettlement objectives.

⁵¹Makley 2018.

One civil servant in Zado County told me that he was involved in enforcing the Compulsory Education Policy because it was the only way to encourage people to resettle. When I asked him if they ever used the environmental objectives of the EMP to encourage resettlement, he said no:

If we tell people that they need to move to county towns because their livestock is bad for the environment, nobody will listen. Even I think it's ridiculous. I am from a pastoralist family. I herded yaks at home when I was on school holidays as a young man. Livestock does not destroy the environment, greedy miners destroy the environment! As government civil servants, we have our duties, no matter how stupid they are sometimes. We need to fulfill our duties or otherwise we will lose our iron rice bowl [*tie fanwan*].

He told me this in Tibetan but used the Chinese term for “iron rice bowl,” which describes a lifelong civil service job with a stable salary and other benefits. His existence in the bureaucracy and his continued practice and engagement in what he terms “ridiculous” and “stupid” policies is a way to make a living. This civil servant's words are reflective of how the Chinese bureaucracy works in reality – it is not unitary and homogenous as it is often perceived to be by outsiders. At the township and village levels, interpersonal networks and power dynamics are often negotiated through the on-the-ground political and economic interests of local villagers and township government employees.

The case of Zachen Township is similar to the dynamic township-village relationships in other parts of China. For instance, in his study of township-village politics in Laxiang County,⁵² Ben Hillman argues that since de-collectivization in the 1980s and village level elections in the 1990s, the power of township authorities has been reduced, particularly by tax reforms that have limited their power to extract wealth from villages. With significantly reduced political and economic power, township officials have to rely on informal institutional practices to implement policies.⁵³ Limitations on township government's political power are directed at transforming local governments into “service-oriented” agencies that provide education and health services to villagers; however, their service capacity is considerably reduced without tax revenues, thus they have to rely on informal practices and external revenues to generate political merit.⁵⁴ These informal practices are reflected in the words of this Zachen township government civil servant, use of the state's comprehensive education requirements to indirectly implement the EMP, methods of managing political and economic relationships, and ways of sustaining kinship ties with the pastoralists.

The informal practice of policy implementation I have described is particularly critical for township governance in Tibetan areas of China. Qinghai is the most subsidized province in China after the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR),⁵⁵ meaning that it has a project-based economy with a strong reliance on the economic support of the central government. Since township governments throughout China cannot extract tax revenue from their constituents, their main sources of revenue are state subsidies, and indirect income from policies and projects to be implemented.⁵⁶ Thus, the continued existence of various development and environmental policies and projects, “no matter how stupid they are

⁵²The name of the anonymous county at the center of Hillman's book. See Hillman 2104, 6.

⁵³Hillman 2014. See also Kennedy 2007.

⁵⁴Smith 2010.

⁵⁵Fischer 2014; Fischer 2015.

⁵⁶Nyima 2012; Makley 2018.

sometimes,” are critical to the political and economic sustenance of township governments and the wide range of official and unofficial employees they support.

Conclusion

The Chinese state views translation as an integral part of its social engineering imaginary of frontier ethnic regions, as is evidenced by the establishment of various levels of translation bureaus that are staffed with bilingual workers. The state envisions that its policies generated in the power center of Beijing will be seamlessly translated from Chinese to other ethnic languages, disseminated among the speakers of those languages and dialects, and studied, understood, and carried out as directed. But translation is never an easy or straightforward project; it is a process of faithless appropriation that becomes a forcible transformation in the unequal encounter of dominant and dominated languages. These cultural and linguistic problems are further intensified as the translated materials travel down the bureaucratic chain of hierarchy, to be studied and interpreted in ways unintended and in manners that serve particular individual and bureaucratic interests of grass-roots government officials and villagers. The translation of China’s Ecological Migration Policy (EMP) in Tibetan pastoralist communities embodies these problems. The EMP was formulated by legislators in Beijing, translated by state linguists, and implemented in pastoralist villages by township government civil servants. Facing the difficulties of conveying the cultural, linguistic, and ideological underpinnings of the EMP, local bureaucrats manipulate its original meanings into narratives of the “price for land” and poverty alleviation projects, narratives that are acceptable to Tibetan pastoralists.

Through these locally produced meanings, Tibetan pastoralists resettle into urban areas not due to the EMP’s declared goal of environmental conservation, but as a result of their desires and aspirations to seek medical and educational services available solely in urban centers. Here I have complicated the concept of legibility to demonstrate that Tibetan pastoralists are not anti-legibility and anti-state; in fact, they seek a particular form of legibility based on their aspirations for improved lives. In this sense, Tibetan pastoralists are agentic and make their own choices. However, “choice” in this case is complicated by the actual availability of different choices. While pastoralists make conscious choices to resettle on their own terms, they do not have multiple alternatives to choose from. The resettlement towns are the only places where their desired services are provided. Thus, their conscious choice to resettle is shaped by the state through the active elimination of educational services and passive negligence of education and healthcare services in rural areas. In this case, the relationship between agency and structure is dialectic, rather than oppositional.⁵⁷ This account of “choice” making by Tibetan pastoralists in relation to discourses of agency and structure deserve further research and in-depth exploration.

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⁵⁷Ortner 2006.

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