

BOOK REVIEW

Open Access



# Review of "Exile from the Grasslands: Tibetan Herders and Chinese Development Projects" by Jarmila Ptáčková

Yonten Nyima<sup>1,2</sup>

## Book details

Ptáčková, Jarmila

*Exile from the Grasslands: Tibetan Herders and Chinese Development Projects*

Seattle, WA: The University of Washington Press, 2020

Pp. 188

ISBN: 9780295748191

**Keywords:** Pastoralism, Tibet, China, Resettlement, Rangeland degradation, Pastoral livelihoods, Caterpillar fungus

Since the early 2000s, China's pastoral development policy has been increasingly oriented toward modernization—transforming traditional pastoralism into a modern intensive production system that the government calls “modern pastoralism”—and reversing purportedly pervasive rangeland degradation. Major projects have included rangeland use rights privatization and enclosure, sedentarization, construction of concentrated housing, livestock pens and shelters, pen raising of livestock, and increasing livestock offtake rates. Contemporary Tibet, which is divided into the Tibet Autonomous Region and parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces, constitutes China's largest rangeland area and has thus been a prime target for pastoral development. The implementation of pastoral development projects and their impacts on Tibetan pastoralists are the focus of Jarmila Ptáčková's book based on fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2017 in Amdo, northeastern Tibet, in Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces. Ptáčková focuses on the resettlement of pastoralists, relying on case studies primarily from Rtse Khog (Zeku),

a pastoral county in Qinghai, compiled from government documents and interviews with pastoralists and officials. She clarifies that the book is a record of Tibetan pastoralists' decade-long experience with the implementation of development projects and not an attempt to explain the seeming irrationality behind development projects, or the complexity of their implementation, or to offer answers to all questions related to project outcomes. As such, the book provides a descriptive empirical account rather than a theoretical analysis of the implementation and impacts of Chinese development projects in pastoral Tibet.

The book begins with a brief discussion of two of the latest ongoing developments as vivid examples of state-induced projects that have brought about unpredictable, inconsistent, frustrating, and challenging changes to which Tibetan pastoralists must adapt. They are the Targeted Poverty Alleviation programme, a nationwide campaign launched in 2015 to eliminate absolute rural poverty by 2020, and the widespread promotion of rural cooperatives in which pastoralists must pool their livestock and pastures to develop an intensive market-oriented livestock industry. In the process of change, Ptáčková argues, pastoralists are passive recipients of state-instigated projects, as they must respond to

Correspondence: [yonten.nyima@nyu.edu](mailto:yonten.nyima@nyu.edu)

<sup>1</sup>Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, New York City, USA

<sup>2</sup>Independent Researcher, New York City, USA



© The Author(s). 2021 **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

decisions made by others. Throughout the book, Ptáčková describes how Tibetan pastoralists struggle to respond and adapt to local officials' implementation of development projects and how they grow frustrated with the displacement and uncertainty these projects cause.

Chapter 1 presents the broader context of pastoral development projects implemented since the 2000s, focusing on the Great Opening of the West (*xibu da kaifa*), a development strategy adopted from 2001 to 2050 in China's western regions to narrow the development gap between eastern and western China. Ptáčková suggests that this strategy is in fact a nation-building strategy that not only seeks to promote development in western regions but also to fully integrate the western regions, where the majority of China's national minority groups live, economically, socially, and culturally into the Chinese-dominated state in order to build a prosperous and stable China. She further suggests that although the development strategy only began at the turn of the century, the concept of modernity adopted from the West over the past two centuries, upon which the strategy is based, has been a key driver behind China's development efforts. In this context, development means to modernize and "civilize" what the Chinese state believes are "backward" societies, including Tibetan pastoral societies, to transform them into China's modern mainstream. On the other hand, Ptáčková points out that given the state's promotion of this single model of development, people in rural western China, including Tibetan pastoralists, internalize the label of backwardness imposed by the state and thus see the necessity of state-led development.

This is an important point. To my knowledge, many Tibetan pastoralists, particularly those in remote areas, indeed appreciate and feel gratitude to the Chinese state for unprecedented developments over the past two decades, such as rural paved roads, telecommunications, electricity, improved access to social services like education and health care, and new sources of employment and income. This, however, does not mean, as Ptáčková rightly argues, that Tibetan pastoralists readily welcome and accept state-driven, top-down development initiatives. Ptáčková highlights problems with development initiatives, including insufficient consideration of local conditions, incompatibility between national goals and local expectations, and inconsistencies between national objectives and actual local implementation. Ptáčková argues that these issues leave Tibetan pastoralists frustrated with policies that are often incompatible with their desires or needs. According to Ptáčková, this, along with relative marginalization and impoverishment from development processes, has become a source of frustration and discontent among Tibetans because outsiders—mostly Chinese investors—benefit the most from these processes.

The subsequent chapters explore the implementation of Chinese development projects in pastoral Tibet through the lens of resettlement of Tibetan pastoralists in Amdo. Chapter 2 examines government rationales behind resettlement: to improve the socio-economic well-being of pastoralists, to gain political control of migratory pastoralists, and to protect rangeland from degradation. While the first and third rationales are explicit narratives that are circulated widely in policy statements and news reports, the second rationale is implicit; by improving pastoralists' socio-economic well-being, the state can achieve political stability without direct political control. This chapter focuses at length on the third narrative of rangeland degradation. Ptáčková points out that the Chinese government's concerns about environmental degradation, including rangeland degradation, in western China originated in the late 1990s as concern for the environment and sustainable socio-economic development in eastern China, as environmental degradation in the west was believed to have caused environmental problems in the east. This "upstream downstream" argument has been applied particularly to rangeland degradation on the Tibetan Plateau, the source region of China's major rivers, leading to the establishment of the Three Rivers' Headwaters Nature Reserve in Qinghai in 2000, which was upgraded in 2003 to a national-level reserve that covered half the total area of Qinghai Province. Resettling pastoralists from the reserve's core protected zones has been one solution to what is perceived as widespread rangeland degradation due to what the government considers as overgrazing and rodent damage. While acknowledging that there is localized rangeland degradation caused by overgrazing and the overpopulation of pikas, Ptáčková argues that government policies, including privatization of rangeland use rights, the use of fencing, and pika control programmes, are the underlying causes of rangeland degradation rather than Tibetan pastoralism. Although she calls for a more complete and balanced understanding of the causes of rangeland degradation, including the role of climate change, Ptáčková does not appear critical of the pervasive rangeland degradation narrative itself and cites official figures without qualification. This lack of criticism is curious given that narratives are often shaped by political-economic factors, depending on purpose and audience (Nyima 2019).

Chapter 3 discusses the implementation of resettlement in Qinghai. It introduces major development and environmental projects under which, starting in 2003, Tibetan pastoralists were resettled usually near roads or administrative centres. Ptáčková describes how, under these projects, resettlement was implemented either as a means (rangeland protection) or a goal (urbanization and pastoral development). Chapter 4 describes the

implementation of development projects in Rtse Khog (Zeku). It reviews the development of Zeku, rangeland management practices, and the implementation of development and environmental policies through resettlement. Ptáčková points out that protecting rangeland from overgrazing caused by overstocking, ecological restoration, and poverty alleviation were cited as government rationales for this resettlement. According to Ptáčková, overstocking was due not only to population growth but also to government policies. It would be interesting to know whether the concept of carrying capacity is ecologically relevant to the Zeku rangeland and, if so, whether its application would be feasible in practice, as well as whether there is an indigenous concept of carrying capacity among pastoralists in Qinghai and, if so, how they put it into practice. Chapter 5 details the resettlement of pastoralists in Zeku and discusses why and how pastoralists decided to resettle and their experiences of resettlement.

According to Ptáčková, many pastoralists were willing to participate in the resettlement projects due to advantages advertised by local officials, including fully or largely subsidized housing, the ability to send children to school, and resettlement subsidies. However, the decision to resettle was often made with insufficient or even false information, under government pressure, or out of fear of not obtaining future state aid, and the process was not based on the principle of free, prior, and informed consent. Ptáčková points out that while implementation varied from place to place, overall, local officials were more concerned with fulfilling resettlement quotas than with environmental and socio-economic goals, which resulted in a significant gap between policy goals and on-the-ground outcomes. She suggests that while it was hard to prove whether the environmental goal of resettlement was achieved, the living standards of the majority of resettled pastoralists did not improve 10 years after resettlement without alternative income sources, and some pastoralists wanted to return to pastoralism if possible. The main challenge for resettled pastoralists was to find sustainable livelihood alternatives. To overcome this challenge, pastoralists found creative ways to bypass regulations and make the most of the resettlement projects. An ideal scenario for pastoralists was to have subsidized housing while not having to abandon pastoralism, which demonstrates that although Tibetan pastoralists are passive recipients of development policies with no involvement in policy making, they are active agents in policy implementation. This observation has been reported elsewhere in Tibet subject to state interventions (see, for instance, Tan 2018).

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, reflects on findings presented in the book from a broader perspective.

Ptáčková argues that the failure to achieve the stated objective of improving pastoralists' socio-economic well-being is not merely due to China's top-down policy approach but to local implementation where, under enormous pressure to achieve policy targets within a defined period, local officials prioritize their own financial and career interests over those of pastoralists. In my view, this reflects a general flaw in China's system of upward accountability in which, without electoral pressures, officials at each level are held accountable to higher authorities rather than to the public. Recent examples include the implementation of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation programme (Zeng 2020) and the provision of affordable housing (Sun 2020), which show that under top-down pressure to fulfil targets, local officials have neither the incentive nor the authority to resolve the mismatch between policy and implementation. In addition, given the absence of a free press and an independent civil society, officials are not subject to strict media and public scrutiny, and thus less pressured to be accountable to the public. Therefore, the impact of China's top-down authoritarian system on officials' behaviour cannot be overlooked as a contributor to the gap between policy and practice (Gore 2019). On the other hand, Ptáčková argues that the national goals of China's environmental and development projects often outweigh local interests and, consequently, local expectations are not met. She highlights two national goals that are particularly relevant to Tibet: the environmental goal of ensuring sustainable development in downstream China and the political goal of fully integrating Tibetans into the Chinese state. Ptáčková argues that in the process of pursuing these national goals, Tibetan pastoralists face dual challenges of finding alternative livelihoods and maintaining their cultural identity. This, Ptáčková speculates, may contribute to growing discontent among Tibetan pastoralists and may become a source of political instability, contrary to the official goal of promoting political stability. The book concludes by suggesting that the future of Tibetan pastoralism will depend on how well pastoralists can cope with ongoing state interventions.

*Exile from the Grasslands* is a well-balanced account of Tibetan pastoralists' responses to, and experiences of, Chinese development projects. A take-home message is well summarized in the Preface (p. xi):

The contemporary state-induced development process affecting the population of Tibetan pastoralists, among others, cannot be reduced to pragmatic integration or forceful assimilation. It is both.

It is worth noting that the book could have been more compact and readable in two ways. Firstly, the chapters could have been organized by theme instead of by place to

avoid thematic repetition scattered across different chapters. Secondly, much of the technical details, particularly the statistics, could have been placed in footnotes to avoid distracting readers from the main points. That being said, this book serves as a credible and timely source of information on contemporary state-led development and transformation in pastoral Tibet. I am certain that it will be of great interest and value to scholars, students, and practitioners in the fields of pastoralism, Tibetan studies, and development studies. For Tibetan readers, the word “exile” in the book’s title is a reminder of the unprecedented experience of being exiled from their homeland since the incorporation of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s, an experience that continues today. Lastly, the provision of place names and terms in both Chinese and Tibetan is a helpful and respectful practice that scholars and writers writing about Tibet, particularly those in China who often neglect the Tibetan spelling of place names, may consider following.

**Acknowledgements**

Not applicable.

**Author’s contributions**

The author wrote, read and approved the final manuscript.

**Author’s information**

None.

**Funding**

Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials**

Not applicable.

**Declarations****Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Not applicable.

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

Received: 19 February 2021 Accepted: 22 February 2021

Published online: 31 March 2021

**References**

- Gore, L. 2019. The communist party-dominated governance model of China: Legitimacy, accountability, and meritocracy. *Polity* 51 (1): 161–194.
- Nyima, Y. 2019. Political-economic factors in official reports on rangeland degradation: A critical case study from the Tibet Autonomous Region. *Area* 51 (1): 104–112.
- Sun, X. 2020. Campaign-style implementation and affordable housing provision in China. *The China Journal* 84: 76–101.
- Tan, G. 2018. *Pastures of change: Contemporary adaptations and transformations among nomadic pastoralists of Eastern Tibet*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Zeng, Q. 2020. Managed campaign and bureaucratic institutions in China: Evidence from the targeted poverty alleviation program. *Journal of Contemporary China* 29 (123): 400–415.

**Publisher’s Note**

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen<sup>®</sup> journal and benefit from:**

- Convenient online submission
- Rigorous peer review
- Open access: articles freely available online
- High visibility within the field
- Retaining the copyright to your article

---

Submit your next manuscript at ► [springeropen.com](https://www.springeropen.com)

---