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# The “Socialist New Villages” in the Tibetan Autonomous Region

Reshaping the rural landscape and controlling its inhabitants <sup>(1)</sup>

FRANÇOISE ROBIN

The intention behind the establishment of the “socialist new villages” in the Tibet Autonomous Region (2006-2010) is to relocate 50 to 80 percent of the rural inhabitants, whose farming and pastoral practices are considered “backward” and “unscientific.” In theory, this policy is aimed at bringing about a “hygienic” and “entrepreneurial” countryside. There is little doubt that this vast social project, which has been little studied up to now, will have far-ranging repercussions on rural life in Tibet.

Commentators on the Tibetan question regularly express their anxiety over developments in the overall demographic composition of Tibet within China.<sup>(2)</sup> They point to the demographic imbalance (5.4 million Tibetans as against 1.25 billion Han Chinese, according to the census taken in 2000), and are fearful of the siphoning effect of an empty western region from an overpopulated east. The impact of the trains that have been running between seven Chinese cities and Lhasa since 2006 is causing considerable alarm in this respect.<sup>(3)</sup>

However, until now only the urban and suburban areas in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) seem to be undergoing an influx of non-Tibetan peoples. The high plateau, where mountain agriculture and pastoral grazing are practiced, has so far been preserved from immigration. If the transformation of the countryside along Chinese lines is not yet achieved, rural society since 2006 has nonetheless been undergoing deep disruption at the local level, and this example of a “schema projected onto the subsoil of social structures”<sup>(4)</sup> is modifying the lived space in a manner still poorly understood. This disruption threatens to have a long-term effect on the structures of Tibetan identities, individual and collective. In the name of the policy for building “socialist new villages,” nomads are being settled and farmers rehoused in order to speed up their transformation into members of a rational, ordered, densely populated, and hygienic

rural existence, which is also to be entrepreneurial, thus breaking with the traditional and still current way of life. Massive settlement campaigns have already been mounted in the transhumant livestock raising areas outside the TAR. There, going back to at least 2000, in the name of ecology<sup>(5)</sup> or “development,” Tibetan herders have had to settle down in new villages,<sup>(6)</sup> causing damage to their economic and social structures. The campaign launched somewhat later in

1. Since research in the Tibet Autonomous Region is a sensitive matter, and has been more or less impossible since 2008, this article relies partly on official Chinese sources, printed or electronic. The internet references in the footnotes were all checked on 24 May 2009.
2. “Tibet” is understood here as meaning the area of China with a Tibetan population, which covers about 25 percent of the total landmass of China. The most recent census (2000) showed 2.4 million Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region, 1.3 million in Sichuan, 1.1 million in Qinghai, 0.4 million in Gansu, and 0.13 million in Yunnan. This means that over half of the Tibetan population lives outside the borders of the TAR.
3. The trains between Beijing and Lhasa run once a day, while from Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi’an, Lanzhou, and Xining they run once every two days.
4. Pierre Bourdieu and Sayed Abdelmalek, *Le Déracinement: La crise de l’agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie*, Paris, Minuit, 1964, p. 152.
5. “Many policy-makers and development workers have adopted a generic, globalised view of Tibet’s pastoralists, wherein livestock numbers are too high - the result of ‘illogical’ and ‘backward’ practices. (...) Backed by scientific language and reasoning, state planners use the discourse of land degradation as a pretext to impose technological fixes that result in increased social control.” Ken Brauen, “Development and Enclosure in Pastoral Tibet Since the 1980s,” in *Nomadic Peoples*, 9, 1 & 2, 60.
6. At the end of 2008, the Xinhua News Agency announced in these terms the settlement over four years of 90 percent of the 533,000 Tibetan pastoral nomads in Sichuan (“470,000 herds people in Sichuan to move into brick houses,” 12 October 2008, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200810/t2008\\_1012\\_431903.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200810/t2008_1012_431903.htm)).

the TAR (in 2006) seems likely to have a similar negative impact, since it will affect both the herders and the domiciled on a vast scale and within a very short space of time. This article is an initial report on this huge resettlement movement and will present its possible consequences.

## National and regional policies

On several occasions in the second half of the twentieth century, the Chinese state has shown its willingness to remould rural society, such as during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), for example, through setting up production teams and people's communes. Settlement policies aimed at the nomads were likewise established as early as the Second Five-Year Plan (1958-1962) in Inner Mongolia.<sup>(7)</sup> They consisted of turning pastoral lands over to agriculture, and making big reductions in the size of herds.<sup>(8)</sup>

The year 2000 saw the launch of the “Great Development of the West” (*Xibu da kaifa*), aimed at the industrial and infrastructural development of the poor rural areas of Western China, including Guizhou and Inner Mongolia.<sup>(9)</sup> Although it had little immediate impact on the social structures in the countryside, it laid the basis for further changes.<sup>(10)</sup> Moreover, back in 2002 Hu Jintao called for a “harmonious society” to reduce the gap in the standard of living between the cities and the countryside, which is a potential source of social unrest.<sup>(11)</sup> Three years later, a directive from the 5th plenary session of the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party called for building a “new socialist rural life,”<sup>(12)</sup> and this line was confirmed shortly afterwards at the “National Working Conference on Agricultural and Rural Policy.”<sup>(13)</sup> The Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) extended this approach by setting up the new villages as a step towards “modernity”: “Building socialist new villages is a major historical mission in China's modernization process.”<sup>(14)</sup> Whatever the reality of its current implementation in China, this policy is fully underway in the TAR. Following a pilot project launched in 2005 that provides for 2,000 houses to be built in Tolung Dechen (in the Lhasa urban area), the policy began to be officially and zealously applied in the following year. But the TAR has four major features that distinguish it from the rest of the country: it has a mountainous countryside, very low population density (three inhabitants per square kilometre, as opposed to 130 in China), a low rate of urban settlement (13 percent in the TAR as against 31 percent for the whole of China in 2000), and the widespread practice of high mountain agriculture and pastoral herding. We do not know whether these differences were

taken into account in the plans for Tibet. The hasty implementation of the official policy may be explained by the leadership's desire for a rapid reduction in the income gap, which is particularly acute between the towns and the countryside in the TAR.<sup>(15)</sup> A more probable explanation is that the Tibetan leaders tend to be all the more zealous in their implementation of central government directives, because since 1991 there have been doubts over their loyalty.<sup>(16)</sup>

I would add that by 1994, at the regional level, the third “Working Panel on Tibet” (Beijing) had already established “housing projects for needy farmers and herdsmen.”<sup>(17)</sup> In addition, 40,000 herdsmen were permanently settled between 2001 and 2005 in Lhasa, Shigatse, Chamdo, Nagchu, Ngari, and other towns at the prefectural level.<sup>(18)</sup>

7. Cf. David Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia: Pastoral Mongolian Society and the Chinese State*, Oxford, OUP, 2000, p. 84.
8. See Uradyn E. Bulag, “Inner Mongolia: The Dialectics of Colonization and Ethnicity Building,” in Morris Rosabi (ed.), *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2004, pp. 87 ff.
9. On this see David S. Goodman, “The Politics of the West: Equality, nation-building and colonization,” in François Godement (ed.), *La Chine et son occident*, Paris, IFRI, 2002, pp. 23-55. This article can be consulted at <http://www.governance.qub.ac.ok/schools/SchoolofLaw/Research/InstituteofGovernance/Publications/briefingpapers/Filetoupload,47661,en.pdf>.
10. “The construction of Tibet is a part of the strategy of western regions' development. The preparation of western regions' development (...) also created good conditions for Tibet's rural construction and provided more investments to it.” Anon., “Rural construction, the base of Tibet's anti-poverty. Rural Reconstruction: the Basis of Increasing (*sic*) Tibetan Farmers and Herdsmen's Income and of Fighting Poverty in Tibet (II),” *China Tibetology*, 2003, <http://www.tibet.cn/english/zt/Tibetology/Magazine/..percent5C%20TibetologyMagazine/20031200531101051.htm>.
11. See “Farmers' Self-decision Right inn (*sic*) New Countryside Construction: An Interview with Lu Xueyi, a Specialist on Rural Issues,” <http://211.167.236.236/zt/magazine/200402007412143426.htm>. This decision gave rise to the publication of a document entitled “Suggestions of the Party Central Committee and the State Council on pushing ahead with the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside and Suggestions of the State Council on Solving Problems Relating to Farmer Labourers.”
12. *Trade, Agriculture and Development*, OECD, 2006, p. 156.
13. On the topic of building a harmonious society, see the special issue of *China Perspectives*, no. 3, 2007.
14. “Building socialist new villages,” 30 September 2007, <http://english.people.com.cn/90002/92169/92211/6275027.html>.
15. According to official Chinese statistics, the differential ratio was 4:1, compared with 3.3:1 for the national average. Although this had fallen in comparison with 2003 (4.8:1 and 2.7:1, respectively), it rose between 2006 and 2007. Source: “High cost, urban-rural imbalance obstacles to Tibet's future development: report,” [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/31/content\\_11105836.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/31/content_11105836.htm). However, the prosperity gap within the villages seems to have grown appreciably. Thus M. Goldstein, G. Childs, and P. Wangdai (“‘Going for Income’ in Village Tibet: A Longitudinal Analysis of Change and Adaptation, 1997-2007,” *Asian Survey*, XLVIII, 3, May-June 2008, 527) show that within ten years in the villages under study, the gap between the poorest 20 percent and the richest 20 percent grew from 1:8 to 1:12. So, even if the gap between villages and towns is narrowed, the rural poor remain desperately poor.
16. See R. Barnett, “Beyond the collaborator-martyr model,” in Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer (eds.), *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, development, and society in a disputed region*, London, M.E. Sharpe, 2006, 48.
17. “Most of Tibetan people have house property”, 4 February 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200902/t20090204\\_457031.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200902/t20090204_457031.htm).
18. “China's Tibet Fact and Figures,” *art. cit.*

The “socialist new villages” therefore seem integral to the pursuit of these regional policies.

## Some facts and figures

The mastermind behind the “socialist new villages” in the Tibet Autonomous Region is Zhang Qingli, who has been the TAR Party Secretary since 2005. If his project goes according to plan, somewhere between 50 and 80 percent of rural Tibetans in the TAR will be re-housed or relocated under the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010<sup>(19)</sup>). Other sources mention 100 percent.<sup>(20)</sup> Even with the lower target figure of 50 percent, this policy means the total disruption of the social network in the countryside, affecting nearly all Tibetans in the TAR.<sup>(21)</sup>

Officially, this campaign is well underway: nearly 900,000 people are reportedly re-housed or resettled already (290,000 in 2006, 280,000 in 2007,<sup>(22)</sup> and 312,000 in 2008<sup>(23)</sup>). The projected figure for 2009 stands at about 1.32 million people, or 220,000 households.<sup>(24)</sup> The 50 percent benchmark for affected rural inhabitants in the TAR will therefore probably be surpassed a year before the intended date, which means that the 80 percent target could well be achieved by the end of 2010.

We do not know at present whether these figures reflect the real situation or are just symptomatic of the “familiar bureaucratic pathologies”<sup>(25)</sup> afflicting local officials, who are always quick to embellish statistics. However, for several years now, the new uniform villages, visibly aligned along the main roads with their red flags flapping on the rooftops, have testified to the rapid progress of this policy.

Its overall costs have been revised upwards as the years go by. Overall investments are in the region of 2.5 to 3.5 billion *yuan* per year.<sup>(26)</sup> A total sum of 15 billion *yuan* is to be spent on reshaping the rural landscape, of which 80 percent will come from public funds. The regional government has taken on board an increasing amount of the expenditure: 390 million *yuan* in 2006, 465 million in 2007, and 680 million in 2008,<sup>(27)</sup> with a projected figure of 710 million *yuan* for 2009.<sup>(28)</sup> The leadership of the TAR seems determined to take this campaign right through to the end.

## The re-housed and settled populations

These new villages are intended for three groups: the vulnerable (impoverished or sick<sup>(29)</sup>), borderland dwellers, and other rural groups (farmers and herdsmen). These peasants

can either renovate their housing, or destroy it in order to rebuild in another place deemed more appropriate, usually along a road; or else they can buy a new house.<sup>(30)</sup> The wandering herdsmen must settle down into the new housing after selling their livestock.

The only figures available for the proportions of the population concerned refer to the first half of 2006. At that time 55 percent of those affected were farmers, 20 percent were herdsmen, 15 percent were the impoverished and the sick (13 percent and 2 percent respectively), and 11 percent were borderland dwellers. At that time, projected figures for 2007 aimed at an increase in the proportion of farmers (65 percent), and a distinct decrease for herdsmen (8 percent). Other categories were to remain roughly the same. So, starting from a social perspective in 1994, matters then moved on

19. “Party Chief Brings Tibet New Homes,” *China Daily*, 15 March 2007, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/203051.htm> and “China’s Tibet Fact and Figures: People’s Livelihood,” 29 December 2006, [http://en.tibet.cn/newfeature/xzt\\_2006ssysj\\_rmshshbz/t20061229\\_194559.htm](http://en.tibet.cn/newfeature/xzt_2006ssysj_rmshshbz/t20061229_194559.htm). See also Penkyi, “Comfortable housing and happy lives of Tibetan farmers and herders,” *China’s Tibet*, 19, 1, 2008, pp. 4ff; “Tibet to allocate US\$ 62 Mln for low-cost housing,” 22 March 2008, [http://en.china.gate.cn/development/2008-03/22/content\\_13294964.htm](http://en.china.gate.cn/development/2008-03/22/content_13294964.htm).
20. Perhaps this should be taken to mean 100 percent of the rural inhabitants, since these represent around 85 percent of the population.
21. The rural population in the TAR is 98 percent Tibetan. The remaining 2 percent is made up of mixed populations of Tibetans and Tibetan-speaking others (Sherpas, Mons etc.).
22. See for example “Population rises 180 pct in Tibet with lifespan up 31.5 yfears (*sic*),” 6 May 2008, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6405229.html>, and “Tibet to Allocate,” *art. cit.*
23. “310,000 Tibetan rural people to celebrate Tibetan Losar in new houses,” 12 February 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/photo/200902/t2009020212\\_452148.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/photo/200902/t2009020212_452148.htm). This figure is higher than the original forecast (52,000 households) given in “Tibet to Allocate” (*art. cit.*). According to another source, the period from 2006 to 2008 saw the settlement or housing of 170,000 families, i.e. 860,000 individuals (“Change of living conditions in Tibet,” 20 February 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news /200902/t20090220\\_453853.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news /200902/t20090220_453853.htm)).
24. “Tibet to bolster agricultural, animal husbandry in 2009,” 11 February 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/ today/200902/t20090211\\_451880.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/ today/200902/t20090211_451880.htm).
25. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 263.
26. In August 2008, the Xinhua News Agency announced that total costs for 2006-2007 amounted to 7 billion *yuan*, or 3.5 billion annually. As for the shared costs between the various fund providers: in 2006, the only year for which information is reported, 58 percent (1.44 billion *yuan*) came from “public” sources, 16 percent (390 million) was allocated by the TAR, 5 percent (120 million) came from local authorities (prefectures and counties), 3 percent (75 million) came as “public donations,” and 18 percent (400 million) were bank loans (Penkyi, “Comfortable housing and happy lives of Tibetan farmers and herders,” *art. cit.*).
27. “Change of living conditions in Tibet,” *art. cit.*
28. “Tibet to bolster,” *art. cit.*
29. People suffering from Kashin-Beck or “big bone” sickness, the cause of which is still not clear but is sometimes attributed to unclean water.
30. “Those [former inhabited sites] with thick soil and good irrigating conditions are used as farmlands while other lands not so fitful are transformed into woods land” (“Housing project brings tangible benefit,” 4 August 2008, [http://english.chinatibetnews.com/news/Society/2008-08/04/content\\_136086.htm](http://english.chinatibetnews.com/news/Society/2008-08/04/content_136086.htm)). The “ecological” theme of reforestation also plays a role in this campaign, even though it is not often put forward in the official sources consulted for this article.



to a global reshaping, with aims quite other than a simple reduction in rural poverty.<sup>(31)</sup>

## The “socialist new villages”

At the national level, the “socialist villages” are proclaimed as the precondition for “developed production, well-off life, civilized rural customs, a neat and tidy appearance of village and democratic management.”<sup>(32)</sup> In the TAR, there are four main areas of concern.

### Well-being, hygiene, and the reorganisation of living space

The project’s principal justification is the provision of comfort for all. In fact, contradicting the repeated announcements of material progress since “Liberation” followed by the “democratic reforms” in Tibet, rural life there is far from providing guaranteed access to public services. By the completion of the current project all rural housing should be connected to running water. Official figures report that in 2000, only 12 percent were connected, and in 2008 that figure was 61 percent.<sup>(33)</sup> Electricity supplies are to be installed for 90 percent of the population, as against 20 percent of the villages in 2003. While in that same year, one third of the villages could be reached by road, by 2010 that figure should reach 80 percent. In pursuit of this policy for extending service provision, the people’s living space has had to be relocated at strategic points, particularly along the roadsides. Among its other goals, this method is aimed at reducing the costs arising from the local topography and the dispersed nature of traditional dwellings. This kind of “well intentioned” approach is well known. One example is the so-called “villagisation” of Tanzania in the 1970s. There a similar policy ended in failure because of its high social and human costs, and the rapid disruptions of the traditional way of life that it brought about.<sup>(34)</sup>

In the thinking of the central authorities, the regrouping of sections of the population is in accordance with the needs of hygiene and healthy living. They consider the villagers to be dirty and living in unhealthy conditions because of the cohabitation of humans and animals: “The lack of planning in construction of houses and roads and the dirty environments have a negative impact on villagers’ clothing and mental attitude.”<sup>(35)</sup> No doubt the authorities hope that their transformations will lead to support for their policy and the emergence of a new “vision of the world,” thanks to the peasants’ discovery of hygiene and personal well-being.

In addition, the new villages built in straight lines satisfy the “ultra-modernity” of official aesthetics<sup>(36)</sup> by remedying the apparently chaotic dispersal of Tibetan farms. This relationship between the organisation of human space and rationality is reminiscent of the grandiose projects imposed on the Soviet Union, or on Algeria at the time of its colonisation.<sup>(37)</sup>

### Leaving economic autarchy behind

The thinkers behind the project believe that access to hygiene and public service (roads, telecommunications, water, electricity, and telephones) will help change mentalities and foster a spirit of enterprise among the peasants and nomads. In their view the nomads lead a “primitive” life and are “bound by traditional concepts, for example, they were content with self-sufficiency, and did not know how to make money by selling their domestic animals.”<sup>(38)</sup> The measure of the success of this “bet” on the future is that by 2010 average individual earnings should rise to 3,580 *yuan*,<sup>(39)</sup> compared with 2,788 *yuan* in 2007 and 3,170 *yuan* in 2008.<sup>(40)</sup> But we can be sure that if this goal is reached, it will not be solely due to a new way of living or a new mental outlook, but to a trend that has been clearly visible for several years. In three villages in the TAR that were studied over the period from 1997 to 2007,<sup>(41)</sup> non-agricultural income grew regularly, and by 2005 it represented more than two thirds of

31. Yet the rural inhabitants of Tibet are among the poorest in China: “If the provincial poverty rates are in any way comparable, the TAR rates were higher than those of Qinghai up to 1999, and likely the highest in the country.” Andrew Fischer, *State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Economic Growth*, Oslo, Nias Press, 2005, p. 104.
32. “Building socialist new villages,” *art. cit.*
33. “China invests 953 mln yuan for safe drinking water in Tibet,” 29 January 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200901/t20090129\\_449689.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200901/t20090129_449689.htm).
34. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 223 ff.
35. “Rural construction, the base of Tibet’s anti-poverty,” *art. cit.*
36. Scott characterises this aesthetics as “the mastery of nature (inc. human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws,” *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.
37. Scott gives many examples of this. See also, Bourdieu & Sayad, *Le Déracinement*, *op. cit.*, p. 151, for the plan to regroup Ain Aghbel in Algeria.
38. “Northern Tibet grassland takes on new look,” 19 May 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090519\\_477226\\_1.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090519_477226_1.htm).
39. [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200901/t20090120\\_448675.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200901/t20090120_448675.htm).
40. “2008: 312,000 rural Tibetans to move into new houses,” 5 January 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200901/t20090105\\_446552.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200901/t20090105_446552.htm).
41. Goldstein, Childs, Wangdui, “Going for Income,” *art. cit.*, pp. 526-527.



Construction of a new house, Kongpo, TAR.

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total income, as compared with less than one third in 1997. So Tibetan peasants are already fully occupied in searching for non-agricultural income, and that is reflected in the growth of their overall income.

This “significant paradigm shift”<sup>(42)</sup> is therefore not directly connected with current policies, or with the development of new entrepreneurial attitudes. It is, rather, a response to the need to survive by adapting to altered conditions: the market prices for Tibetan agricultural products (barley and wool) have not followed the rise in current prices for consumer goods; the amount of exploitable land per person has fallen; and the construction boom arising from the policies for developing the TAR has caused a massive demand for unskilled labour. Although the majority of non-agricultural jobs are already being done by unskilled Tibetan peasants (employed for the most part on building sites), there are some cases, of course, where an enterprising spirit can be seen to generate income, and the press hurriedly reports on these. For example, Bu Norbu (Nagchu) has founded a yoghurt co-operative.<sup>(43)</sup> Dawa Dondrub (Nyingtri) has started a prosperous agricultural foods business (garlic, colza, nuts, peppers),<sup>(44)</sup> and in 2004, Phuchung (Shigatse) started the first Tibetan horticultural co-operative.<sup>(45)</sup> We should note in passing that the first

and third of the above businesses are co-operatives, where the well-being of the community takes precedence. As Dawa puts it: “The core of Buddhism is to be benevolent. But if you are poor, how could you help others?”<sup>(46)</sup> But such success stories are rare. They should not hide the difficulties faced by the majority in adapting to the demands of an economy based on the pursuit of profit and the development of agri-businesses. The herders seem to be no better prepared: “The rosy picture painted in government publications concerning the boons of ‘unleashing’ market forces only faintly applies to the situation of most Tibetan pastoralists. They continue to produce very much along historical lines, particularly in terms of technology, herd composition and culling practices.”<sup>(47)</sup>

42. Goldstein, Childs, Wangdai, *ibid.*, p. 517.

43. “Northern rural Tibetans: New concept of life,” 13 May 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090513\\_476016.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090513_476016.htm).

44. “Native entrepreneur seeks to spread wealth in Tibet,” 17 March 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200903/t20090317\\_462327.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/news/200903/t20090317_462327.htm).

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. Ken Bauer, “Development and Enclosure,” *art. cit.*, p. 59. The report, *No-one has the Liberty to Refuse* (*op. cit.*, p. 68ff), contains testimony by herders from the Sershul region (Sichuan) who protested against the opening of slaughterhouses in the name of Buddhist principles.

## Border security and population control

The documents consulted for this article rarely mention the “border people,” although they represent a tenth of those affected. But elsewhere this programme has been called “reviving and enriching in the frontier areas.”<sup>(48)</sup> In 2009, the government of the TAR planned to invest 1.6 billion *yuan* for the “economic and social development of its border areas,” with an emphasis on trade, the environment, and security.<sup>(49)</sup> We may recall that, before his posting to the TAR, Zhang Qingli was in charge of the “Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps,” which co-ordinates the clearing and exploitation of land in that large sensitive region of Western China, uniting defence with economic interests:

*Over 45 years of development, our Corps has educated and trained troops for labour and defence whose members [...] are able to fight tirelessly and struggle with unflagging commitment to overcome the enemies of the country. That is why in the great development of the West, our Corps will be able to play a leading role in economic construction, in strengthening national unity and social stability, and in reinforcing our border defences.*<sup>(50)</sup>

There are probably underlying security reasons being applied here. In this sensitive region, which is causing the Chinese government a lot of anxiety, from now on any inhabitants clearly domiciled in regular village units can easily be put under surveillance, and their comings and goings can be tracked. Infiltration by outside elements will be made more difficult. Here again there is a parallel to be drawn with the colonisation of Algeria: in 1845, Captain Richard recommended a similar regrouping of the Algerian people:

*[They are] everywhere and yet nowhere. The essential point is to get them within our grasp. When we hold them, we will be able to do many things that are impossible for us at the moment, and that will perhaps enable us to gain control over their minds after gaining control over their bodies.*<sup>(51)</sup>

Finally, one of the endlessly repeated aspects of the campaign is the implantation of cells for “rural democracy” in the shape of “village committees.” A report published in 2003 recommended linking rural construction with the need to “enhance the role of Communist Party’s basic organization of the village. The village’s Party branch commit-

tee and village community committee should play a vanguard and core role in mobilizing villagers to build their homeland.”<sup>(52)</sup>

So the Party does not envisage a lessening of its role in the villages, but sees it being strengthened. In addition, electricity for all will allow state media to be present in every village: “Television (...) is an effective means of changing their old ideas, broadening their vision and readjusting their behaviour.”<sup>(53)</sup> It is also the means of building the nation. In the case of Tibet, there is the additional need to struggle against Tibetan stations broadcasting from abroad and easily picked up by small battery radios (Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, Voice of Tibet).

## Future prospects

### Increased poverty?

The families targeted by the plan will be pushed heavily into debt. The average cost of a house is 60,000 *yuan*. From the regional government a farmer receives 10,000 *yuan*, a pastoralist 15,000 *yuan*, and an indigent 25,000 *yuan*.<sup>(54)</sup> The local governments also provide support grants. If 20 to 50 percent of the costs are financed by the authorities, 50 to 80 percent will have to be financed by the Tibetans themselves (except for the very poor, who mostly receive support). That spells serious indebtedness (from 30,000 to 40,000 *yuan*) for households in which individual income is scarcely 3,000 *yuan* per year and saving is impossible. Admittedly, the construction boom is offering unskilled peasants many opportunities for work on the building sites, but this argument only applies to short-term prospects; when the TAR has been reshaped and the roads completed, the employment cornucopia for the unskilled may well run out. Logically, this massive indebtedness ought to redirect the rural inhabitants towards more lucrative occupations. But only 15 percent of Tibetans have academic qualifications above secondary school

48. Penkyi, “Comfortable housing,” *art. cit.*

49. “Tibet to boost development of border areas,” 25 March 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200903/t20090325\\_464442.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200903/t20090325_464442.htm).

50. Interview with Zhang Qingli in *People’s Daily*, 10 November 2002, translated from the French version, <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/628104.html>. On this “Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps,” see James D. Seymour, “Xinjiang’s production and construction corps and the Sinification of Eastern Turkestan,” *Inner Asia*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2000, pp. 171-194.

51. Quoted in Bourdieu & Sayad, *Le Déracinement*, *op. cit.*, p. 27 (tr.).

52. “Rural construction,” *art. cit.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. “Party Chief Brings Tibet New Homes,” *art. cit.*

level, the rate of illiteracy in both town and countryside in 2001 was 45 percent,<sup>(55)</sup> and most Tibetans have only a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese. Being defenceless in the face of competition from the better equipped immigrants, they are in danger of simply swelling the ranks of the urban poor.

There is another effect, which has certainly not escaped the notice of the authorities, namely that the high level of indebtedness is likely to lessen the sums donated to the monasteries, which are often considered hotbeds of nationalism.

### The complete disruption of rural life in Tibet

Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad emphasise “the interdependence that unites the structural organisation of space, the structure of social groups, and the type of social relations.”<sup>(56)</sup> The planned process of uprooting in the TAR is going to produce a sudden disruption in the present way of life. This will in turn bring about restructuring of various sorts, and adjustments in patterns of movement, customary rhythms, and ways of social interaction, not to mention a complete alteration of the way of life itself. Consciousness and collective memory, linked to sites and the landscape, will also be transformed. Yet there is never any official reference to these problems, or to the impact on day-to-day religious life. How will the new village centres organise their relationship to the local temples and monasteries, which are the real centres of the life of the community? How will the cults of the earth divinities be conducted?

The transition phase for the herders will be even harsher, as they move from mobility to complete immobility.<sup>(57)</sup> From a Han point of view, settlement appears as a step in the progress towards civilisation, as is shown by the title of an article in the official press: “No longer roaming.”<sup>(58)</sup> But for those affected, becoming rooted into a fixed settlement is actually being uprooted, through a brutal break from a centuries old mode of life, and is a probable cause of traumatic disorders.

### Freedom or coercion?

There is very little consideration given to the question of the population’s participation in these changes, except only to affirm that there is no coercion.<sup>(59)</sup> For example, we are told of the 7,000 herders removed from the source of the Yangtze, and of the several dozen families living on the Hoh Xil reservation, that:

*The relocation is in line with the will of the herdsmen, not a forced one (...) Most of the new houses in the pasture lands were built where the farmers and herdsmen were already living.*<sup>(60)</sup>

But Human Rights Watch asserts the opposite to be true, and they are supported by numerous witness statements.<sup>(61)</sup> According to R. Barnett, the relocation and settlement project in the TAR is “forced, heavily regulated ... without the normal safeguards of consensus and consultation.”<sup>(62)</sup> The few testimonies by refugees in France confirm that coercion is the key to mass participation in the project. Even without the systematic employment of force, it can at least be affirmed that this campaign does not arise in the first instance from the interested parties themselves.

### Controlling the people?

As James Scott shows, the State always seeks to dismantle and recompose societies that evade its comprehension, because the latter are actually “a hindrance to any effective intervention by the State, whether the purpose of that intervention is plunder or public welfare.”<sup>(63)</sup> Life in the Tibetan countryside presents all the characteristics of such societies: dispersal, low density population, apparent irrationality in the organisation of social spaces, and a strong cultural otherness. As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, settlement policies began by targeting the Tibetan herders in the provinces neighbouring the TAR. In the guise of environmental protection, this “emerging form of green governmentality,” as it has been called,<sup>(64)</sup> allowed the imposition of au-

55. Fischer, *State Exclusion and Growth*, *art. cit.*, p. 64. Lhasa is the city with the highest urban illiteracy rate in the whole of China: 35.6 percent in 2002, compared with the national average of 5.7 percent (*ibid.*, p. 135).

56. Bourdieu & Sayad, *Le Déracinement*, *op. cit.* p. 117.

57. There is very little available documentation on the effects of this policy on herdsmen, which may well indicate the existence of more serious problems for them than for farmers.

58. 27 April 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200904/t20090427\\_472485.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200904/t20090427_472485.htm).

59. “Party Chief Brings Tibet New Homes,” *art. cit.*

60. “Tibet official: Displacement of herdsmen covers small population,” 21 June 2007, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200801/t20080116\\_338088.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200801/t20080116_338088.htm).

61. Human Rights Watch, 2007, *No-one Has the Liberty to Refuse: Tibetan Herders Forcibly Relocated in Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region*, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/tibet0607/>.

62. “China orders resettlement of thousands of Tibetans,” 6 May 2007, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?article=China+orders+resettlement+of+thousands+of+Tibetans&id=16462>.

63. Scott, *Seeing like a state*, *op. cit.* p. 78.

64. Emily Yeh, “Green governmentality and pastoralism in Western China: ‘Converting pastures to grasslands,’” *Nomadic Peoples*, 2005, Volum 9 (1-2): 9-29, p. 9.

Village by the roadside,  
Kongpo, TAR.  
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thoritarian policies on the grounds of “ecological migration.” It was also a means of controlling restless populations, or those evading state control, under the unchallengeable pretext of environmental protection. In the TAR, however, such control is not imposed in the name of ecology, which is hardly ever mentioned, but rather for the sake of developing a spirit of enterprise. This could therefore be called “a form of greed governmentality.” At the back of their minds, the authorities are also probably betting that a measure of prosperity will lead to a weakening of religious feeling: according to *China’s Tibet*, in the Tolung Dechen model village “the farmers and herders [...] are enthusiastically improving production, contributing wholeheartedly to their own lift in lifestyle, rather than only pray for help from Buddha.”<sup>(65)</sup>

## Conclusion

The breadth of this project for social transformation, and the manner of its enactment, are without precedent in Tibet. The starting point is the reorganisation of the Tibetan countryside in purely physical terms, but the ultimate aim is to put an end to the autarchic non-consumerist way of life of the Tibetans, who will be introduced to the “healthy and civilised” life of the pursuit of profit. Under a different sky and at another time, a similar mindset was called an “illusory hope” and a “naive representation of social reality and the logic of its transformation.”<sup>(66)</sup>

The desire to control those populations that resist being included in the self-proclaimed multicultural Chinese nation probably plays a part in this policy. Nonetheless, one cannot exclude the possibility that the rulers sincerely wish to improve the lot of the peasants. The TAR has already borne witness to the pitfalls of such a policy, which was unquestionably concerned with improving daily life but paid no heed to local conditions and the wishes of those involved. That was in the 1980s and 1990s, when technicians were sent from China to train Tibetans in growing vegetables in glass greenhouses. But they forgot that fruit and vegetables make up a minimal part of the Tibetan diet, that the peasants did not have sufficient start-up capital, and that, like all practitioners of autarchic agriculture, they sought “the satisfaction of their immediate needs, at minimum cost and risk to themselves.”<sup>(67)</sup> Their attitude is quite different from that of the entrepreneur who seeks to “maximise profit to the detriment of security.”<sup>(68)</sup> After several years, large numbers of the Tibetan peasants had rented or sold their greenhouses to the technicians and their associates. Since then, the flourishing trade in fruit and vegetables in the Lhasa suburbs has be-

come more or less a monopoly controlled by the Hans.<sup>(69)</sup> James Scott has shown that, throughout the world, such projects were bound to fail when they were driven by a desire to order nature and society, when they arose from an ultra-modernising ideology serving an authoritarian state prepared to use coercive methods, and when civil society was unable to put up any resistance.<sup>(70)</sup> The case of the “socialist new villages” in the TAR fulfils these four conditions even more completely than elsewhere in China, since any sign of opposition to the policies of the central government is interpreted as a reflection of separatist tendencies, and this makes civil society more “prostrate” before the state than in other regions.

A policy aimed at professional training might allow rural Tibetans to join the new path that has been imposed on them. Given the confirmed lack of professional training establishments in the TAR, however, this approach does not appear to have been explored.<sup>(71)</sup> Actually, there have been educational campaigns. For example, at the initiative of the Lhasa Department of Agriculture and Livestock, 33,000 farmers and pastoralists attended a course in 2008 on “the scientific cultivation, breeding method in 60 fields such as planting grain, vegetables, raising poultry and using agricultural machinery, ect. [*sic*].”<sup>(72)</sup> There was no mention of the length of the training session, or of the attention to the villagers’ own knowledge (often ignored by “experts”), and even less of the difficulties that the teachers must have encountered in dealing with a largely uneducated population. There was just the announcement that at the end of the training, 94.9 percent of the participants passed the examination, a result that can only arouse suspicion. Moreover, 87.7 percent of them were reported to have found a job; but Goldstein has shown

65. Penkyi, “Comfortable housing and happy lives of Tibetan farmers and herders,” *art. cit.*

66. Bourdieu & Sayad, *Le Déracinement*, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-169.

67. Bourdieu & Sayad, *Le Déracinement*, *op. cit.* p. 165.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

69. See E. Yeh, “Property Relations in Tibet Since Decollectivisation and the Question of Fuzziness,” *Conservation and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2004, pp. 107-131. See also the same writer’s *Taming the Tibetan Landscape: Chinese Development and the Transformation of Agriculture*, University of California, PhD dissertation, 2003.

70. Scott, *Seeing like a state*, *op. cit.* pp. 4-5, 88.

71. Andrew Fischer, *State Growth and Exclusion*, *op. cit.* pp. 64-68.

72. “29,017 farmers and herdsmen employed after training in Lhasa,” 6 January 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/index/photo/200901/t20090106\\_446615.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/index/photo/200901/t20090106_446615.htm).

that in 90 percent of the families in his sample selection, since 2003 at least one person has been looking for non-agricultural income.<sup>(73)</sup> The reported rate of 87.7 percent of the peasants employed in the non-agricultural sector may therefore simply reflect the already widespread situation in the countryside, rather than being a sign of the positive achievements of the course. Finally, this training course cost only 315 *yuan* per person, with each class containing 120 people, so the extent and the effectiveness of the training dispensed are open to doubt.

Similarly, the impact of a training session announced in 2009 for 12,000 poor peasants and intended to enable them “to grow vegetables [*sic*] and breed livestock more efficiently” needs to be put into perspective. The announced total cost of five million *yuan* in fact represents only 415 *yuan*

per person.<sup>(74)</sup> Moreover, it is astonishing to see that the most recent announcement of training provided to Tibetan farmers has a picture showing Tibetan peasants in matching over-garments performing “ethnic dances” for tourists.<sup>(75)</sup>

Not only is this policy going to bring about a rapid loss of geographical and historical landmarks, it also demands from those affected an extraordinary adaptive ability. Furthermore, it completely disregards the empirical knowledge and flexible expertise grounded in a radically different mode of rural life (the *métis* described by Scott). It runs the risk of becoming a source of “violent and brutal disturbance”<sup>(76)</sup> rather than of well-being for the life of the Tibetan countryside. •

• Translated by Jonathan Hall

73. Goldstein, Childs, Wangdai, “Going for Income,” *art. cit.*, p. 531.

74. “Tibet to step up poverty alleviation, agricultural development,” [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090502\\_473583.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090502_473583.htm).

75. “Skills training benefits farmers and herdsmen,” 19 May 2009, [http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090519\\_477032.htm](http://eng.tibet.cn/news/today/200905/t20090519_477032.htm).

76. Bourdieu & Sayad, *op. cit.*, p. 46.