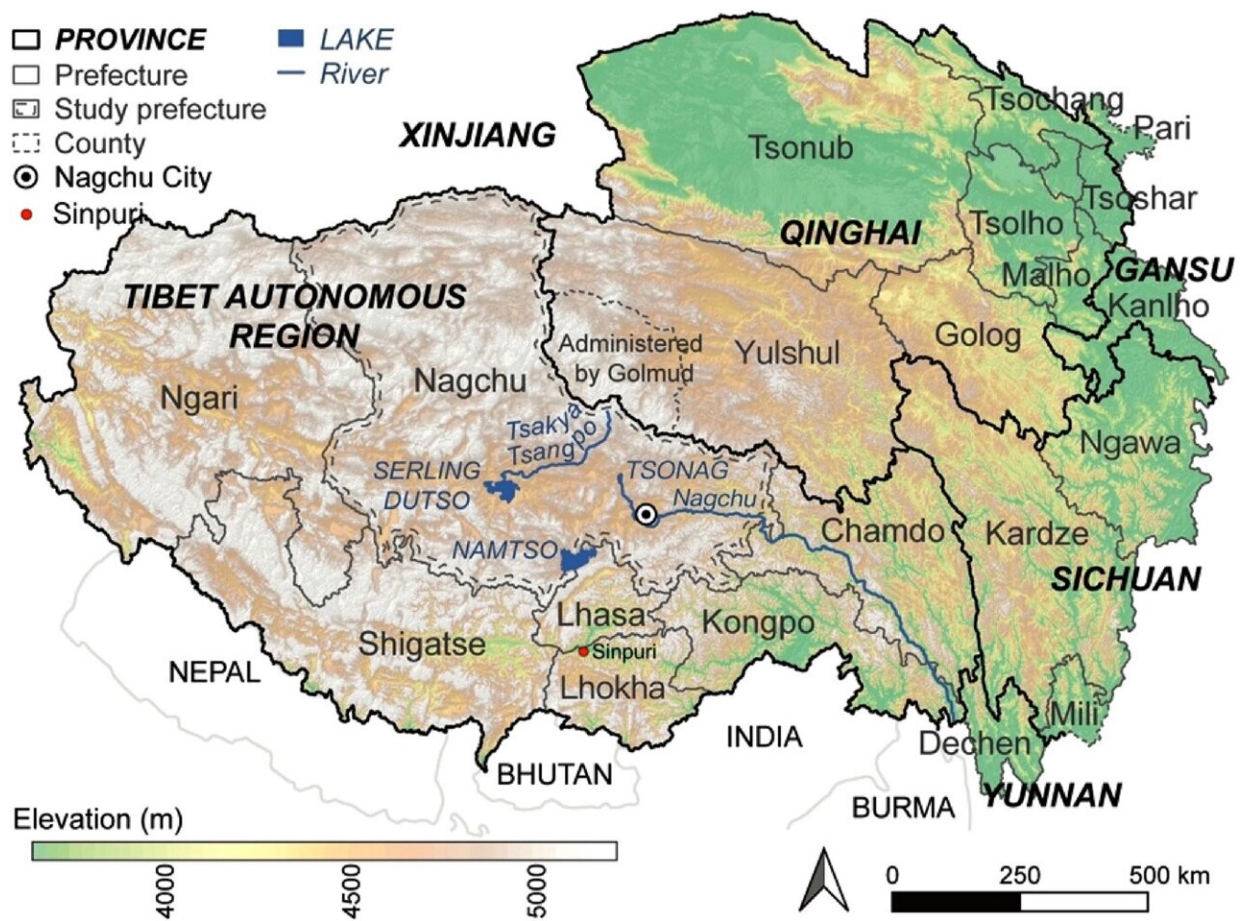


# Investigating the difference between consent and coercion in 'voluntary' resettlement in Tibet

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Map of Tibetan Areas of the PRC. Map by Kelly Hopping. Nagchu is the study area. Credit: *The China Quarterly* (2023). DOI: 10.1017/S0305741023000206

The difference between voluntary and involuntary participation may seem clear, but a study from the Tibet Autonomous Region shows the distinction between the two can, in fact, be murky.

In recent years, the Tibet Autonomous Region government has been relocating residents from high-altitude areas to distant, lower-altitude settlements. Officials characterize this resettlement program as "voluntary." However, they also report that 100% of targeted residents have agreed to move. So, how voluntary is it, really?

Researchers at the University of Colorado Boulder explore this and other questions in a [recent paper](#) published in *The China Quarterly*. Using official documents and interviews, co-authors Yonten Nyima and Emily Yeh offer a rare look inside this politically sensitive area.

Yeh is a CU Boulder professor of geography and Nyima, now an independent scholar, earned a doctorate in geography at CU Boulder.

"In this case, it's not like thugs show up and chase people away—it's a much more subtle process," says Yeh. "We wanted to explore: Does the division between coercion and consent even make sense in such complicated and power-laden situations? What is consent, actually? What is coercion, actually? And when you start to dig into it, it gets blurry and complicated."

## **The resettlement program**

The Tibet Autonomous Region is a 471,700-square-mile area of Central Asia governed by the People's Republic of China. For the study, the researchers focused on a specific region called Nagchu, which has an average elevation of more than 14,000 feet above sea level. Nearly 80% of Nagchu's residents are pastoralists, or nomads who herd yaks, sheep and goats as their primary livelihood.

In 2017, the government launched the "extremely high-altitude ecological resettlement" program to relocate many of Nagchu's pastoralists to lower elevations. The government gave many reasons for the resettlement, such as protecting the environment, alleviating poverty and strengthening national unity, among others. Their stated reasons, however, do not tell the full story and are in some ways misleading, according to the researchers.

"It's part of a broad trend toward resettlement because of a very entrenched idea in policymaker circles that rural is backwards and Tibetan areas are backwards and underdeveloped," says Yeh. "And the fastest way to get them developed is to move them to the city."

Many of the targeted pastoralists in Nagchu did not want to move, for a variety of reasons. They felt heartbroken at the prospect of leaving their homeland, where their ancestors had lived and to which they have a strong spiritual connection, Yeh says. They didn't want to part ways with their livestock or their herding livelihoods, which was a major part of their identities. They also worried about finding new jobs and making ends meet in their new homes.

## **Thought work**

But eventually, they all signed documents agreeing to do so anyway. How and why did they change their minds?

Officials used a three-step process, known as "thought work," to convince all of the targeted Nagchu pastoralists to move, the researchers find. This process started with incentives before progressing to warnings and intense pressure. In this way, [officials](#) manufactured consent, the researchers write.

First, [government officials](#) determined the pastoralists' willingness to

move, typically via surveys or meetings. At this stage of the thought work, they presented resettlement as an attractive and voluntary option. Officials also tried to glean the herders' reasons for not wanting to move so they could figure out how best to persuade them.

From here, they moved onto the second step of the thought work, which involved educating and guiding the pastoralists toward resettlement, per the researchers. During this phase, officials tried to alleviate the pastoralists' concerns and elaborated on the benefits of resettlement, such as better access to medical facilities, schools and other social services.

They also took some of the poorest pastoralists on in-person tours of the resettlement locations and arranged meetings with earlier resettlers to hear stories of their "happy life" after resettlement, as one [government official](#) told the researchers. Officials also held multiple public meetings to pressure pastoralists into agreeing to move.

If all of this were still not enough to convince the herders to resettle, officials moved on to the third and final stage of the thought work. They visited individual households for multiple one-on-one meetings that involved incentives and warnings. One overarching theme of these conversations was that the government knows best and that pastoralists do not understand what is in their best interests, the researchers write.

## **'It's never that simple'**

Over time, all of the targeted pastoralists agreed to move. But many acknowledged they felt they had no choice.

"I would have preferred not to sign if I could refuse ... [but] it was really a matter of whether I wanted to go against the state, a matter of those with power and those without power," one pastoralist told the

researchers. "Officials would not leave me alone until I signed."

Under such conditions, the researchers write, there is no clear distinction between voluntary and involuntary or coercion and consent.

"The assumption that voluntary means you are a free subject who can do whatever you like with no constraints on your choices ... it's never that simple," Yeh adds. "You can't really disentangle consent and coercion, especially not in contexts of highly uneven power relations such as this one. We're trying to show that labeling something as voluntary or involuntary hides a lot of things that are actually happening."

More broadly, the project—and its nuanced findings—is a reflection of geography's interdisciplinary nature. The field encompasses far more than making maps or memorizing place names, says Yeh.

"Fundamentally, geography is not about where places are, but how those places become what they are physically, culturally, socially and politically," she adds. "In geography, we look at the relationship between the social and the spatial and between humans and the environment."

**More information:** Yonten Nyima et al, The Construction of Consent for High-altitude Resettlement in Tibet, *The China Quarterly* (2023).

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