

The New or the Old?: Examining the Impact of Urbanization and the Decline of Traditional Herding Livelihoods for Young Tibetans

Urbanization is a global phenomenon, profoundly reshaping societies and economies. In China, this process is primarily government-driven, which often results in governors forcing farmers to migrate into urban areas, over-urbanization in Chinese provinces, and even the impediment of regional economic growth.¹ This state-driven approach, while facilitating rapid infrastructure development and population shifts, often overlooks the basic needs and traditional livelihoods of local communities. For example, a report drawn between 2016 and 2023 by a non-governmental organization, Human Rights Watch, found that in a “whole-village relocation program in Tibet, 200 households out of 262 in the village did not want to relocate to a new location.”² Such data underscores the profound attachment to land and heritage that characterizes many Tibetan communities. This paper will delve into this critical issue by focusing specifically on Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, where the impacts of urbanization are especially evident in the lives and livelihoods of young Tibetans.

Yushu is located in the southwestern part of Qinghai Province, nestled high on the Tibetan Plateau. Historically, Yushu has been a vital cultural and economic hub for Tibetans, mainly due to its vast grassland that has sustained nomadic herding communities for centuries.³ These Tibetan herders’ lives are historically and intrinsically linked to Tibetan yaks. This traditional pastoralism has shaped not only the economic practices of the region but also its social structures and the daily rhythms of life.

Additionally, Yushu has long been a significant center for Tibetan Buddhism. It is home to numerous influential monasteries and a rich spiritual heritage. This strong religious

environment is deeply intertwined with the nomadic lifestyle. Religion affects the daily lives of Tibetan herders in Yushu. This influence can be seen not only in large cultural traditions, such as the pilgrimage to Lhasa, but also in the small, daily practices made by individuals and families. For example, there is a strong attachment to the land and many herders begin and end their day with religious rituals.

Additionally, Yushu is experiencing an overall growth in population. For example, in 2023, the metro area population of Yushu was 382,000, which increased to 390,000 in 2024, which is a 2.09 percent increase, and is projected to reach 398,000 in 2025, which is a 2.05 percent increase.⁴ The majority here are represented as people living in urban areas, not including the herding population. Over the past two decades, Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau has undergone rapid and uneven growth. The total urban expansion rate exceeded 252 percent, a pace that is approximately “1.48 and 2.81 times higher than that of China and the world, respectively.”⁵

The urban center of Yushu City is rapidly modernizing, with growing infrastructure, new housing developments, paved roads, and increasing access to public services. This development sets up a contrast between urban and rural areas, setting the stage for a prominent tension in Yushu between modernity and traditional livelihoods. For example, the vast rural expanses of Yushu Prefecture remain home to traditional Tibetan herding communities. These nomadic people’s lives are still deeply tied to the practice of pastoralism, on open grasslands and in sparsely populated villages. Yet, these practices are declining due to the impact of urbanization, which has been the economic and cultural backbone of Tibetan communities for centuries. Factors contributing to this decline include environmental policies that restrict grazing, increased

market integration, and a growing aspiration among younger generations for educational and economic opportunities.

These changes raise questions about how urbanization and modernization are influencing Yushu. One way to investigate these changes is to examine the attitudes and aspirations of its younger generation. Such tension is evident, especially as traditional herding practices decline; it is the youth who will decide the fate of the new Qinghai province. This study seeks to explore the following research question: “In what ways is urbanization in Yushu, Qinghai, reshaping economic opportunities, career paths, and future directions for young Tibetans as they transition into adulthood, given the decline of traditional herding livelihoods?”

Literature Review

While urbanization in China has been widely studied, its impact in rural areas, such as Yushu, Tibet, is less well documented. As mentioned, urbanization in China is a state-led project that is largely based on government incentives. For example, Ong explores the reasons behind the government’s pursuit of urbanization and its consequences of relocating villagers from their farmlands into “concentrated villages.”⁶ A primary driver of this state-led urbanization is due to the increasing reliance on land revenues, which benefits local governments. Farmland is taken from villagers, who receive little in return, and the land is resold for a much higher price to developers.

Despite these negative impacts, urbanization remains a strong force in China. As shown in a recent report published in 2025, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, China’s urbanization ratio reached 67 percent in 2024.⁷ This rapid growth is due to the policy of the National New-type Urbanization Plan which was released in 2014 as an aim for economic growth. This plan marked a strategic shift towards an increased urban population. The plan

sought to integrate rural residents into urban life, but many rural farmers moved to cities, both willingly seeking better economic opportunities and unwillingly due to state-led rural resettlement. Therefore, urbanization in China, which fueled modernization and economic development, often involved coercive elements and uneven outcomes, particularly for rural communities.

In Tibet, urbanization adds another level of complexity due to cultural and geographical factors. To begin with, there is an increase in forced urbanization of Tibetan villagers and herders in China, according to Human Rights Watch.⁸ This phenomenon is part of a broader “congregation” process. Based on a report published in 2023 examining the governance of urbanizing Tibet, this method of “congregation” concentrates the dispersed rural population into a condensed settlement.⁹ This leads to the dissolution of traditional communities and increased state control, which forced Tibetans into integration into the broader Chinese identity. However, there are some benefits of urbanization in Tibet, including ecological protection, disaster prevention, and poverty alleviation. This rapid urbanization can be seen through the rise of urban cities in Tibet, with an increase from 1.8 million to 3.2 million urban population in Qinghai Province of Tibet. This accounts to a total increase of 76 percent.¹⁰ This demonstrates the rapid and substantial transformation in the Tibetan areas of this urbanization. Finally, looking at Yushu, its urbanization rate increased significantly, especially after the devastating "4·14" earthquake in 2010.¹¹ The earthquake served as a turning point, because it helped accelerate Yushu’s transformation towards "new-type urbanization." Based on a scholarship published in China in 2017, the Chinese government invested massive human resources in Yushu in order to build an urbanized Yushu city.

In the Tibetan Region, a rise in urbanization corresponds with a decline of the herding community. Herding has been a custom of tradition for Tibetans for thousands of years. It is hypothesized that the origin of pastoralism in Tibet can be traced back “4000 years ago, and perhaps as far back as 8800 years ago.”¹² This long period of pastoralism marks a key aspect of the Tibetan lives. Yet due to a combination of ecological degradation, government resettlement policies, and younger generation aspirations, the herding lifestyle has significantly reduced. An article published by Science Direct in 2019, many herders in Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau moved to “towns and cities to take advantage of better education for their children and to improve their quality of life” due to “industrialization and urbanization.”¹³ This, in turn, means that herders are abandoning their traditional lifestyle, which directly leads to a decrease in livestock numbers. This abandonment of the traditional herding lifestyle carries significant implications for Tibetan culture and the delicate ecosystem of the plateau. This also means that a decline of the herding community can disrupt a long-established equilibrium between the herding community and the natural lifestyles.

Additionally, a decline of the herding community can pose many challenges to Tibetan culture and people. For example, there will be a loss in traditional ecological knowledge, because the decline of the herding community meant that fewer individuals are engaged in land-based practices that have long passed down understandings of the plateau’s grassland and grazing techniques. At the same time, as fewer young Tibetans grow up within herding communities, there is a gradual erosion of cultural identity. These thousands of years of history will slowly fade away due to both urbanization and the decline of the herding lifestyle. Thus, this poses a new challenge for the younger generation. Many young people must navigate between honoring

their cultural roots and adapting to new norms, and this tension reflects a broader question about how economic opportunities are being reshaped in the region.

One reason why urbanization has significantly impacted the trajectory of youth in Yushu is due to access to schooling. In recent decades, China aimed to eliminate poverty by making “nine-year compulsory education universally available” to every city, especially the rural areas.¹⁴ Although the compulsory education law was passed in 1986, it was not universalized in many ethnic regions until decades later. Through enacting more policies, over 98 percent of school-age children in Tibet “will enjoy nine years of compulsory education by 2007.”¹⁵ Urbanization has further accelerated this shift by relocating families closer to educational institutions in cities like Yushu. As a result, Tibetan children, especially those from herding families now have increased exposure to standardized education. This again moved them away from their traditional upbringing in a nomadic environment.

This educational transformation directly shifts youth identity and aspirations. Before, youth in herding families were exposed to lifestyles centered around livestock, and their sense of the future was shaped within a nomadic worldview. However, the Chinese state’s policies reshaped education, especially the centralization of education. This centralization was exacerbated by the School Consolidation Policy, launched in 2001, where rural Tibetan children are now compelled to live in boarding schools in distant towns from an early age.¹⁶ This has been a significant driver for rural Tibetan households to relocate to urban areas. Research by Tsering Bum argues that pastoralists in Yulshul (Yushu) who have participated in state resettlement policies are more accurately described as “education and healthcare migrants” rather than “ecological migrants.”¹⁷ Therefore, this shows how, with a combination of Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law and the School Consolidation Policy, Tibetan families are not

simply relocating for economic or environmental reasons, but rather due to state-driven educational policies.

Such an educational setting reshapes the younger generation on how they envision their futures and how they envision their traditional lifestyle of herding. Since children grow up in a standardized testing and confined education, herding has increasingly become viewed as less incompatible with modern aspirations. Thus, this directly leads to new understandings of success and identity among Tibetan youth.

Due to urbanization and the decline of herding communities, there is a need for new forms of employment. Arnold documents that, although many young people are now well educated, there are not enough jobs in traditional Tibetan communities.¹⁸ Due of this, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and other groups have created programs to help young Tibetans find work in new areas. Some of these programs include vocational training centers, career counseling, and some that support entrepreneurship. One key area of focus is the establishment of vocational training centers. These centers are vital for imparting marketable skills to young Tibetans. They learn skills such as nursing, electrical engineering, and various construction trades to help them develop the necessary skills to survive in big cities.

Furthermore, career counseling is becoming an indispensable resource. Given that the concept of a "job market" is relatively novel in this context, these services are crucial for helping young Tibetans identify their inherent strengths. These include encouraging them to consider a broader spectrum of careers beyond traditionally accepted roles within the Tibetan community. Now this mirrors Yushu as well. A paper published in 2015 examined the social and economic effects of state-sponsored resettlement on Tibetan nomads in Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province.¹⁹ This research highlights that as nomads increasingly move to urban areas, the

regional and local economies are shifting. It demonstrates how, while resettlement offers nomad families opportunities in terms of access to public services such as education and health care, it also entails significant new expenses, such as housing, lack of basic skills, and income problems. The study found that few nomads are getting jobs in the city; only 1.4 percent of adults surveyed had found wage labor. This means that even if new jobs exist, resettled Tibetans often lack the basic skills to get them. This provides a context that reveals urbanization in Yushu is reshaping economic opportunities and career paths for young Tibetans by providing some benefits, like economic opportunities, but these new forms of employment present a challenge to acquire them, ultimately leading to uncertainty about many young future directions into adulthood.

From different sections of the literature review reveal that urbanization in Yushu is part of a larger state-driven strategy in China. These policies have relocated rural communities into concentrated settlements. For youth, urbanization uproots the traditional environment and introduces modern systems of living a life. Additionally, herding, which is a key part of Tibetan culture, is declining. The fading herding culture signals a loss of ecological knowledge that youth are caught between the tension as they transition into adulthood. Simultaneously, access to education has expanded due to urbanization, which introduces new possibilities for Tibetan youth. Improved access to formal education, especially boarding schools, has pulled many Tibetan children away from their nomadic homes. Educational reform has led to the relocation of entire families for better schooling. Ultimately, it exposes children to new worldviews. Over time, this leads to a redefinition of youth aspiration and identity in the search of new career opportunities. New career paths exist, but they are difficult to reach. Together, these sections show that urbanization and the decline of herding are not just structural changes because they deeply affect how young Tibetans envision their futures.

While the literature review demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of urbanization, education, and the decline of traditional herding in Tibet, there remains a significant gap in youth-centered research, especially among those who have finished high school and stand at the crossroads between the complex transition from adolescence to adulthood. Their perspective, such as how they make decisions about education, careers, identity, and cultural belonging, is especially important to examine. In addition, most national studies in China focus on Han-majority urban youth, leaving ethnic minority youth in remote regions like Yushu underexamined. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the experiences of young Tibetans as they grow up during a time when herding is fading and city life is changing their futures. Thus, this gap in the existing literature is the key reason why focusing on how urbanization impacts young perspective of the future is essential.

Methods and Materials

To address this problem, this paper uses a mixed-method approach in order to understand the different ways into the complex transition of young people during an important time of crossroads. For the mixed method approach, the previous section involved an extensive review of existing literature in the intersecting field. Urbanization was the main focus, along with youth and adulthood transition, and the decline of the traditional herding lifestyle. These scholarships provided a contextual framework of existing information about this current issue, which is understood at both macro and micro levels. This review helped identify the gap in youth-centered research specific to Yushu. Another method used to address this research question is a small-scale ethnographic case study in Yushu. For the case study focuses on a vocational local school in Yushu, which teaches high schoolers a specific career, such as becoming a Tibetan

thangka painter, greenhouse farming, and language training, which are useful skills that these students can acquire in the future.

To really understand how urbanization changes the perspective of students standing at this crossroad, this study included a questionnaire. The study population included Tibetan students aged 18-21, and a small number of teachers from that particular school. This age group is significant because it marks an important turning point in their lives, as they must decide whether to go back to a traditional herding lifestyle, migrate into the city, pursue a higher education, or even start their own businesses. These students are all about to finish high school, which adds another level of urgency and significance to the decisions they are currently facing. Additionally, for teachers, their perspective offered a complementary understanding of how Tibetan youth are being guided and shaped during this transitional phase. Teachers provided valuable insight into how career counseling and institutional expectations.

The questionnaires were designed in two versions, one for students and one for teachers, drawing from both factual and open-ended questions. The student version explored personal background, aspirations, and attitudes toward tradition and modernity. The teacher version combined demographic questions with reflective prompts about student career paths and educational priorities. All questions were translated into Chinese, and anonymity was ensured to encourage candid responses.

Moreover, data collection was possible through direct long-standing personal connections with the school principal. The principal distributed the questionnaires to students and teachers and later returned the completed responses to me via WeChat in Word document format. In total, this study included responses from thirty-one students and three teachers within one week. After receiving these documents, data analysis was conducted, which involved coding responses to

identify recurring themes and patterns related to career aspirations, cultural identity, and perceptions on how urbanization influences them. This thematic approach allowed for a connection between participant experiences and the broader literature and to evaluate the parallels between the case study and literature review, and what new insights were provided.

Ethical consideration was a main part of these ethnographic studies in anthropology. Informed consent was sent to the principal with a clear explanation of the research purpose and the voluntary nature of this participation. Thanks to long-standing relationships and personal connections, this study was able to establish trust and ensure mutual understanding about the research. Additionally, this whole case study was anonymous, meaning the school name and information about both the students and teachers were kept confidential. The raw data was also stored and accessible only for this research. After conducting this research, storage and disposal are also essential to consider. All raw data, specifically the questionnaire, will be stored securely in password-protected digital files to prevent unauthorized access. This means that the data will be accessible only by the author. For disposal, digital data will be permanently deleted after a period of five years. These measures align with ethical research guidelines, protecting participants' anonymity and maintaining trust in anthropological fieldwork.

Small Case Study

This case study focuses on exploring the perspectives of Tibetan youth and teachers in Yushu as they navigate the complex transition from traditional herding livelihoods to new economic and social opportunities brought by urbanization and modernization. Due to the identified gap in youth-centered research specific to this region of Yushu, the case study provides an in-depth, localized understanding of how young people at a critical life stage are making decisions about their futures. The study draws on questionnaire data collected from

students aged 18 to 21, and 3 local teachers. This age group is particularly significant because it represents a pivotal point when youth must decide whether to continue traditional herding, pursue higher education, migrate to urban areas, or engage in new entrepreneurial ventures. First, looking at the students' responses, analysis of these responses revealed many important key themes, including a secure future, opportunity, concern for Tibetan cultural preservation, and different career paths.

1. Pursuit of a Stable and Secure Future

A fundamental desire for stability and a secure financial future is a primary motivator for most participants. This theme shows that economic stability is a core aspect of many of these students, because it directly leads to the stability of a family. For instance, in the questionnaire, participant #1 says, "I prefer work that interests me and has a stable income, but I don't need to be super rich." This quote highlights a desire for a balanced life that prioritizes stability. Similarly, participant #17 says, "My top concern is having a stable income because my family was not well-off growing up. I want to improve our living conditions and help my mother with medical treatment." This provides a powerful, personal reason for the pursuit of stability. Likewise, Participant #19: "Now I want a job that is both stable and can provide financial security." This shows how dreams can be tempered by a practical need for security. These are all examples demonstrating that students of this age want to have a more balanced financial ability, because it means that they have a deep understanding of the importance of the economy in their lives. Out of all of the responses, the word "stable" was mentioned thirty-two times because it captures a central concern, which is the longing for predictability in an uncertain world. In the context of this rapid social and economic transformation of urbanization, stability may seem both a goal and a coping strategy for young Tibetans to navigate this "new" world.

2. Center of Opportunity and Growth

The overwhelming majority of participants express a strong preference for living and working in a city. Perhaps it is due to the idea that cities provide superior resources and a better path of professional development that is not available in rural or herding areas. Out of all of the responses, twenty-six participants said they preferred the city, three participants expressed a “flexible” and balanced view, one participant said “not sure,” and only one participant explicitly said they preferred living in the rural countryside.

Additionally, from the responses of these participants, we can see a clear tendency towards a preference of the city. Participant #9 says, "I want to live in the city because I think I can grow more there." This quote links the city to a desire for personal development. Participant #12, "I've thought about living in a city. It feels like there are more opportunities there." This directly connects the city to professional opportunities. Participant #18, "I want to live in the city. The city offers better resources and opportunities for development." Participant #20: "I want to live in the city. The city has better education, jobs, and living standards." Participant #30: "Cities offer richer learning resources, diverse job opportunities, and access to cutting-edge information and technology, which are very helpful for personal development." This detailed response explains the inclination of cities from both an academic and career perspective. Moreover, words such as “better” and “grow” all suggest that the city is a key example of the center of opportunity, because these students can learn new ideas from the city center, which is distinct from rural areas. From the perspectives of these students, they want to have success in the future, and they define it by saying “cities” are the most important factor in having a promising future.

3. Rejection of Traditional Herding Lifestyle

From these responses, there is a clear significant number of students who express reluctance to return to herding. From the questionnaire “Have you ever thought seriously about working in traditional herding or returning to a herding lifestyle?,” twenty-three participants said explicitly “no,” 5 participants said “yes,” while 3 participants provided nuanced responses. These nuanced responses include participant #1, who said, “I’ve thought about going back to herd... If I could use new technologies... I’d be willing to return.”; #15 who said “I think traditional herding will eventually be replaced by machines... It’s our generation’s responsibility to combine ancestral knowledge with new methods.”; #30 who said, “I hope to become someone who understands both traditional animal husbandry and modern veterinary medicine... Combining the two could potentially further enhance the development of my hometown's animal husbandry.” These new ideas provide an idea that these students are considering a modernized and reinvented version of the pastoral lifestyle. Rather than a complete abandonment of their heritage, many students envision a future where traditional practices are combined with new technologies. Participant #30 produced a very thoughtful response that captures the core of both tension and possibility. Rather than rejecting traditional herding, this student envisions where tradition and modernity can coexist. This provides a new opportunity, where the traditional herding lifestyle can be preserved and coexist with the rapidly urbanizing Yushu. In the context of the research question, this response highlights how urbanization does not simply lead to abandonment but provides new forms of engagement with the tradition. However, a majority still responded with the answer “no” that they do not want to go back to the traditional herding lifestyle. This may be influenced by to range of factors linked directly to urbanization and the changing socio-economic landscapes in Yushu. As urban centers expand, they offer new forms of employment,

education, and lifestyle that contrast sharply with the uncertain nature of herding. This is why many of these participants denied going back to a traditional lifestyle, as it may not provide a future that benefits them from their perspective.

4. Concern and Hope for Tibetan Cultural Preservation

Despite a strong rejection of returning to the traditional livelihood of herding with the possibility of their parents, there is a strong emotional concern within the younger generation that is moving away from Tibetan traditions. While they embrace modernity, many hope to find a balance that preserves their heritage, especially the Tibetan language. A language is significant because it is directly linked to the characteristics of a culture. When asked about whether the younger generation is moving away from Tibetan traditions as they pursue modern lifestyles, many responded with concerns. Participant #1 responded, "I hope the future will be like a rainbow bridge, connecting modern life and Tibetan tradition, not replacing one with the other." This is the most memorable quote because it demonstrates how young Tibetans are not simply abandoning their roots, but actively seeking ways to integrate them into their evolving identities. The metaphor of a "rainbow bridge" suggests harmony and coexistence. This is more of a hopeful vision in which progress will not erase the traditional heritage of these unique cultures. It represents a balance with many students acknowledging the importance of Tibetan language, customs, and values, even as they pursue modern education and careers in urban environments. Participant #9 said, "I think we are a bit. I worry about it. Tibetan culture has a long history—I don't want it to disappear, so I'm a little concerned." This expresses a specific worry about cultural loss. No matter where the student will be in the future, the strong cultural heritage of Tibetans will continue to demonstrate them and represent a characteristic of each individual. Likewise, Participant #11 expressed, "I'm quite worried about this. As a Tibetan, I don't want

our cultural history to disappear or be forgotten." This directly links cultural preservation to personal identity. Additionally, Participant #14 replied, "I hope we can let Tibetan culture 'live in the present,' not lost to modern waves nor trapped in the past", and Participant #26, "I'm more concerned that the younger generation is no longer willing to learn their mother tongue. I hope everyone will take this seriously." These two responses from #14 and #26 showed that they acknowledge the importance of Tibetan culture. In this way, cultural preservation is an important aspect in their lives, because each identity is shaped by the cultural upbringing.

5. A Career Path Beyond Income

Among the participants, many provided diverse desires for career options that extend beyond personal gains to include helping others or contributing to their community. This is a very heart-warming fact, because it demonstrates that the students' career decisions are not solely driven by a quest for personal gain. They are instead due to the deeply intertwined sense of social responsibility and a desire to contribute positively to their communities. This is a powerful counterpoint to the purely economic motivations often associated with modernization. For example, Participant #3 said, "My dream has always been to become a teacher... I want to help students and improve myself." This shows a career choice motivated by a desire to serve others, helping more students to grow and shape the next future generations. Similarly, Participant #7 remarked, "I've always dreamed of being a great teacher... I believe teachers can help and educate many people." Again, teaching was mentioned. In this context, it is not just a profession but a meaningful symbolization of participants' dedication to share their knowledge within the community and spread the sense of responsibility throughout the culture. Participant #15 took this sense of purpose even further. This participant linked the career goal with local advocacy and gender empowerment by saying, "Now I hope to become someone who is useful to my

hometown and my ethnic group... I want to speak up for Tibetan girls, so they can realize their strength and step into the future.” Her words reflect an awareness of social inequalities. It is also a demonstration of a proactive desire to be a change-maker within her cultural context. This is really important because it reflects that as urbanization and modernization progress, so does the emergence of youth who are willing to actively address these social problems. This desire was also shown in Participant #30’s response: “The key is a sense of meaning... if I feel my work is creating value, such as helping those around me or contributing to small changes in my hometown, I’ll be motivated.” This participant’s motivation stems from the belief that even small, local efforts can have a significant impact. Again, this underscores the rooted moral purpose in these young generations’ perspective. Additionally, participant #14 expressed a similar orientation toward service, stating, “I wanted to be a doctor or nurse and that hasn’t changed, because I want to help others and save lives.” Meanwhile, participant #29 shared a broader cultural vision: “I hope to inherit the wisdom of our ancestors while also learning about modern culture.” This is the most prominent response to the question regarding “future career,” because students are thinking beyond just a job. They’re thinking about how to influence and shape more people.

6. Response from Teacher

Beyond the responses from students, three teachers also responded to the teacher’s questionnaire. One of the most prominent themes was the conflict between traditional lifestyle and modern aspiration. All three teachers recognize a significant shift in their students' career aspirations, moving away from traditional herding and towards modern, urban professions. They observe a growing curiosity for the outside world. Their students also showed a desire for new opportunities. This directly leads to a clear rejection of the herding lifestyle. Teacher #1 notes,

"When they were little, students often said they wanted to be herders on the grasslands or Gesar storytellers. Now, many want to become live streamers promoting their hometowns or work in the city as designers or teachers." This demonstrates how technology can be a way to shift that reshapes economic opportunities from the perspective of the young Tibetans' eye.

Teacher #2 provides a similar observation, stating that while students once wanted to be "herders or horseback riders," they now "want to be doctors or work in e-commerce because they see those jobs as more respectable, higher-paying, and offering more exposure to the outside world." These students want to have new and diverse jobs in the future that allow them to explore the world beyond herding livelihood. Similarly, Teacher #3 describes, "Every time we talk about life beyond our village, their eyes light up. They dream of cities, of new places. But they're also aware of their family situations, so for many, those dreams feel distant and out of reach." This demonstrates a tension between traditional lifestyle and modern aspirations, because these students admire the lives in the city, but realities often make it seem far away. Therefore, all of the teachers mentioned the desire of the students in terms of developing in the city.

Additionally, another key theme that was mentioned in the questionnaires was the deep concern for cultural preservation. The teachers express a shared sense of worry and sadness about the potential loss of Tibetan traditions. They see their students drawn to global pop culture and using their mother tongue less frequently. This could potentially lead to the erosion of their cultural identity. Also, all three teachers hope to find a balance between modernization and tradition. Teacher #1 states, "I can feel that they are drifting away. Kids love scrolling through short videos and wearing trendy clothes. Traditional Tibetan dress is now mostly worn only during festivals." Teacher #2's concern is more pronounced: "The preservation of Tibetan culture among students doesn't look promising. Many are drawn to internet pop culture, speak Tibetan

less often, and show little interest in traditional clothing or Tibetan opera." Then, teacher #3 feels that "tradition is slowly fading amid the waves of modern life and that leaves me feeling a bit sad." These all demonstrate how urbanization, while offering expanded opportunities, also poses a significant threat to Tibetan cultural identity.

Findings

From both the literature review and the case study, urbanization is a recurring theme. The literature emphasizes urbanization as a state-driven process, often involving coercive relocation and the restructuring of rural communities into concentrated settlements. This case study shows how young Tibetans see urbanization as an opportunity. Specifically, a pathway to personal growth, education, and economic stability. A majority of student respondents expressed a strong preference for urban living. They perceive it as access to resources and career possibilities.

Another important theme in both the literature and my case study is about economic opportunities, career paths, and future directions for Tibetan youth. The literature shows that many young Tibetans now have better access to new kinds of jobs beyond traditional herding. These jobs include working in healthcare, teaching, business, and technical fields. The studies also mention programs like vocational training and career counseling that help youth prepare for modern careers. Overall, the literature presents a hopeful picture. This case study supports this positive view. Many students expressed clear goals for pursuing stable jobs in cities, like becoming teachers, doctors, or entrepreneurs. Like the literature, the students show optimism about their futures and believe education is key.

Moreover, both the literature and the case study highlight the decline of traditional herding. This, thus, is an important change affecting Tibetan youth. The literature explains that herding is decreasing because of factors like government resettlement policies, environmental

challenges, and the younger generation's changing interests. In the case study, most students said they do not want to return to a herding lifestyle. Many see herding as difficult and uncertain compared to city jobs and modern careers. However, some students expressed a more hopeful view. Some say that they want to find ways to combine traditional herding knowledge with modern technology. Therefore, there are many parallels between the existing literature and the case study, which proves how urbanization is a driving force that changes students' aspirations for career development in the future. Yet, the original case study provides new insights that help fill the gap in existing research papers, which is the voice of young Tibetans. Even though existing literature mentions the presence of young students, there is limited detailed exploration of their personal perspectives, hopes, and concerns. This case study fills that gap by giving a direct voice to Tibetan youth in Yushu. The case study highlights the diversity of youth aspirations and how urbanization shapes not only economic opportunities but also cultural and social identities. This youth-centered approach can enrich the discussion and offer valuable thoughts, especially in Yushu, Tibet.

Additionally, both the literature review and the small case study show important lessons for Yushu, Tibet, and China overall. The changes in Yushu, like urbanization and fewer people doing traditional herding, are part of bigger changes happening across China. This is because of how the government is pushing a more modernized version of rural areas and those minority areas. Therefore, the case study helps us understand how these changes affect young Tibetans in real life. They have to figure out how to keep their culture while also fitting into the more modernized world. Oftentimes, new jobs and new lifestyles occur, in which they have to adapt. This is not just a problem in Yushu; it happens in many parts of Tibet and other minority areas in China, too. Therefore, by listening to these young people's own thoughts and hopes, the study

shows that they are making their own choices about the future. Overall, Yushu is just a small example and a closer examination of what many other ethnic minority communities in China are going through today.

Limitations

This research provided many new insights into how young Tibetans in Yushu view urbanization, career paths, and cultural change. However, there are also several limitations to consider. First, the sample size was relatively small. While the questionnaire and interviews gave detailed responses, they were limited to thirty-one student participants and three teachers from one specific region and school. This means the findings might not fully represent all Tibetan youth across different parts of Tibet or China. Second, since the research relied mainly on self-reported answers, there may be some bias or gaps in how participants expressed their thoughts. For example, some students may have felt pressure to give more positive answers about their future. In the future, the research could improve in several ways. For example, a larger and more diverse group of participants. This can be high schoolers older and younger than eighteen and those, going into university. Participants can also be from different towns, age groups, and educational backgrounds. This would make the findings more representative. Long-term research or follow-up studies could also be helpful to see how youth aspirations and views change over time. Additionally, combining surveys and interviews with other methods, such as participant observations, could give a deeper understanding of how urbanization is reshaping Tibetan life. Thus, future research can build a more complete picture of today's Tibetan communities.

Conclusion

This research examines how urbanization in Yushu is reshaping the lives and aspirations of young Tibetans, revealing a more complex process than a simple shift from rural herding to

urban employment. By comparing the findings from my small-scale case study with existing scholarship, it becomes clear that while many young people are drawn to city life for better education, stable careers, and expanded opportunities, their choices are not purely economic. Urbanization is also prompting them to reflect on identity as well, rather than viewing this transition as a one-way movement towards modernization and urbanization, these findings suggest a two-way exchange. This is because while urban influences reshape rural youth aspirations, rural culture values continue to inform and adapt to urban experiences. Many of these students even want to combine the advanced city lives with rural livelihoods to help enhance the cultural heritage in everyday decision-making. These insights provide implications beyond academic understanding from existing literature reviews. They provide new ideas on how urbanization in Yushu is not a linear process of abandoning the past for the future. Rather, it is a negotiation between different values and aspirations. Therefore, this research contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how rural youth in Yushu navigate this crossroad of tradition and urbanization.

ENDNOTES

1. Tao Hong, Nannan Yu, Zhonggen Mao, and Shuhai Zhang, "Government-Driven Urbanisation and Its Impact on Regional Economic Growth in China," *Cities* 117 (October 1, 2021): 103299, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103299>.
2. Maya Wang, "Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds," Human Rights Watch, May 21, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>.
3. Encyclopedia Britannica, "Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture," 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yushu-Tibetan-Autonomous-Prefecture>.
4. Macrotrends, "Yushu, China Metro Area Population (1950–2025)," 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/cities/23780/yushu/population>.
5. Chenglong Yin, Annah Lake Zhu, Qiang Zhou, Fei Meng, Ruishan Chen, Fenggui Liu, Qiong Chen, and Xiaona Guo, "Rapid Urban Expansion and Potential Disaster Risk on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau in the 21st Century," *Landscape Ecology* 39, no. 2 (February 14, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-024-01825-z>.

6. Lynette H. Ong, "State-Led Urbanization in China: Skyscrapers, Land Revenue and 'Concentrated Villages,'" *The China Quarterly* 217 (February 11, 2014): 162–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741014000010>.
7. Xuemei Bai and Peijun Shi, "China's Urbanization at a Turning Point: Challenges and Opportunities," *Science* 388, no. 6747 (August 2025): eadw3443, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adw3443>.
8. Associated Press, "China Is Accelerating the Forced Urbanization of Rural Tibetans, Rights Group Says," *AP News*, May 21, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/china-tibet-relocation-a0b07de64a948db06f9bc9e5ff4ce215>.
9. Gerald Roche, James Leibold, and Ben Hillman, "Urbanizing Tibet: Differential Inclusion and Colonial Governance in the People's Republic of China," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 2 (December 1, 2020): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1840427>.
10. Yihang Wang, Zhifeng Liu, Chunyang He, Pei Xia, Ziwen Liu, and Haimeng Liu, "Quantifying Urbanization Levels on the Tibetan Plateau with High-Resolution Nighttime Light Data," *Geography and Sustainability* 1, no. 3 (September 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geosus.2020.08.004>.
11. 牛月志, "玉树市新型城镇化发展路径研究" (Master's thesis, 青海民族大学, 2017).
12. John Isom, "Tibet's Nomadic Pastoralists: Tradition, Transformation and Prospects," *Indigenous Affairs* 3–4 (2009), IWGIA, <https://iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/2925-tibets-nomadic-pastoralists-tradition-transformation-and-prospects.html>.
13. Jianjun Cao, Jan F. Adamowski, Ravinesh C. Deo, Xueyun Xu, Yifan Gong, and Qi Feng, "Grassland Degradation on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau: Reevaluation of Causative Factors," *Rangeland Ecology & Management* 72, no. 6 (November 2019): 988–95, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rama.2019.06.001>.
14. Zhang Tiedao, Minxia Zhao, Xueqin Zhao, Xi Zhang, Yan Wang, Chang Xi, Jie An, and Mr. Chen, "Universalizing Nine-Year Compulsory Education for Poverty Reduction in Rural China," in *Scaling Up Poverty Reduction: A Global Learning Process and Conference*, Shanghai, 2004, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/740651468744044275/pdf/307780CHA0Rural01see0also0307591.pdf>.
15. People.cn, "Tibetan Children to Receive Nine-Year Compulsory Education," 2025, https://en.people.cn/200302/11/eng20030211_111470.shtml.
16. Emily T. Yeh and Charlene Makley, "Urbanization, Education, and the Politics of Space on the Tibetan Plateau," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (December 11, 2018): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1555484>.
17. Ibid.
18. Rebecca Arnold, "Unemployment in the Tibetan Community in Exile," 2009, https://abroad.emory.edu/_customtags/ct_FileRetrieve.cfm?File_ID=5984#page=3.09.
19. Kenneth Bauer, "New Homes, New Lives: The Social and Economic Effects of Resettlement on Tibetan Nomads (Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai Province, PRC)," *Nomadic Peoples* 19, no. 2 (January 1, 2015): 209–20, <https://doi.org/10.3197/np.2015.190204>.

Appendix A

Student Questionnaire

1. Place of birth
2. What kind of job did you dream of doing when you were younger? Has that idea changed now? Why or why not?
3. How do you currently think about your future career? What factors matter most when making that decision? (stable income, interest, family opinion, social status, etc.)
4. Have you thought about whether you want to live in a city or in the countryside/herding areas in the future?
5. Have you ever thought seriously about working in traditional herding or returning to a herding lifestyle? If not, why? If yes, what were your thoughts?
6. Do you think today's younger generation is moving away from Tibetan traditions as they pursue modern lifestyles? How do you feel about this change? Do you accept it, worry about it, or hope for a balance?

Teacher Questionnaire

1. Age
2. What kind of jobs did your students dream of doing when they were younger? Has that idea changed now? Why or why not?
3. How do you currently think about your student's future career? What factors matter most when making that decision? (stable income, interest, family opinion, social status, etc.)
4. Have your students thought about whether they want to live in a city or in the countryside/herding areas in the future?

5. Have your students ever thought seriously about working in traditional herding or returning to a herding lifestyle?
6. Do you think today's younger generation is moving away from Tibetan traditions as they pursue modern lifestyles? How do you feel about this change? Do you accept it, worry about it, or hope for a balance?
7. Whether or not their teaching strategies have changed with urbanization and any corresponding shifts in available careers and livelihoods for young people