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# Path of Social Construction in Northwest Sichuan Plateau Pastoral Area

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**Abstract** On the basis of main contents of social construction and key points of construction, this paper analyzes features of conditions of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. The social construction at current stage mainly includes social cause in narrow sense, and social management at meso-level. The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is faced with the best policy and development opportunity. However, there are still many weak aspects. Firstly, social structure is not coordinated with economic structure. Secondly, social construction ability of grass-roots government is weak. Thirdly, the ability to respond to public demands is low. Fourthly, there is a big gap in availability of basic public service. Finally, it presents path selection for social construction of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area; strengthen social construction ability of grass-roots government; promote social construction with livelihood projects as key projects; boost social construction taking advantage of ecological construction; develop basic public service with the aid of external forces; intensify evaluation system for supervision of social construction works.

**Key words** Social construction, Policy opportunity, Weak parts; Path selection, Northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area

24 years after the first work conference was held in 1987, the Second National Work Conference for Pastoral Areas was held in Hulunbeier City of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in August, 2011, to further make definite the importance, arduousness and urgency of speeding up development of pastoral areas. The second work conference determined the development blueprint of pastoral areas which cover 40% of the area of whole China: ecology should take precedence in new policies for grassland in future 10 years. As one of the five largest pastoral areas in China, the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is not only an important functional area of ecological security, but also a grassland animal husbandry production area, (more important, a concentrated region of ethnic minorities). With its distinctive political, economic, cultural and ecological characteristics, the pastoral area plays a significant and strategic role in the state economic and social development. Compared with economic construction, the social construction in northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area lags behind. Speeding up social construction has become an important task for realizing leapfrog development of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. However, the task is arduous because it is faced with many problems, including uncoordinated social and economic structure, low social construction ability of grass-roots government, big gap in availability of basic public services, and low ability of responding public demands, etc. Certainly, there are also policy opportunities such as the state speeding up development of pastoral areas and development of Tibetan area. It is urgent to catch these opportunities, take the ecological construction as opportunity and livelihood projects as major parts,

constantly promote equalization of basic public services with the aid of external forces, and promote coordinated advance of social and economic construction.

## 1 Major contents and key points of social construction

### 1.1 Proposal and important status of social construction

The social construction is an important task for realizing leapfrog development of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area at upstream Yangtze River. The socialist construction evolves from "material civilization + spiritual civilization" → "economic + political + cultural construction" → "economic + political + cultural + social construction". The social construction oriented towards improving people's livelihood has become an integral part of overall arrangement of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Since the reform and opening-up, China has made considerable achievements in economic construction, but the social construction lags behind. According to estimation of well-known sociologist Lu Xueyi, social structure may have lagged behind the economic structure for 15 years<sup>[1]</sup>. There are more and more social problems and conflicts, and people are gradually realizing that China has stepped into a new stage with social construction as major points. On February 19, 2005, President Hu Jintao made a formal speech, in which the concept of social construction was put forward. At the background of transition of economic system, transformation of social structure, deepening of opening-up and rapid economic growth, social construction is receiving more and more attention as a theoretical and practical issue. On January 18 to January 20 of 2010, the Fifth Working Conference for Tibet Held by Central Government was held in Beijing. The conference presented guiding policy for leapfrog development and long-term stability in Tibetan area, and firstly incorporated four provinces (Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Qinghai) into overall arrangement of state

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strategy and Tibetan works. As the second largest pastoral areas in the whole country, the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is marching towards leapfrog development stage. However, in the new trend and with great opportunities, the conflict is still prominent between economic leapfrog development and lagging behind of social development elements. The social construction is arduous and has become an important livelihood project, and also an important systematic project. Speeding up social construction is not only favorable to improving people's livelihood, alleviating social conflicts, but also favorable to strengthening ruling status of the Party, as well as favorable to coordinated socio-economic development.

**1.2 Basic concept and main contents of social construction** Academic circle has different opinions about contents of social construction. This includes broad sense and narrow sense. Professor Zheng Hangsheng considers that the broad sense social construction refers to construction of entire society, including construction of political subsystem, economic subsystem and ideological and cultural subsystem; while the narrow sense social construction focuses on construction of social subsystems parallel to political, economic, ideological and cultural subsystems<sup>[2]</sup>. As to specific contents of social construction, according to summary of Yan Zhenshu<sup>[3]</sup>, there are three types of representative opinions. The first is the "small society" construction, mainly referring to "social cause"<sup>[4]</sup>. The second is the understanding of the social construction from the viewpoint of "social operation", focusing on "favorable operation and coordinated development of society". Zheng Hangsheng believes that it is required to establish and perfect social structure and social mechanism for proper allocation of various social resources and opportunities in social fields, and innovation mechanism for solving social conflicts, problems and risks<sup>[5]</sup>. And the third opinion is that social construction has its special system and contents. Some scholars summarize these as follows: integration of social value, social system construction, social organization construction, and social cause development, etc<sup>[6]</sup>. Also, some scholars analyze contents of social construction through comparison. For example, Lu Xueyi compares the social construction and social development, and concludes that the former focuses on social actions and subjects, while the latter emphasizes results and trends<sup>[7]</sup>.

It is agreed that the social construction is an overall, global and prospective systematic project based on current situations and looking towards long-term future.

## 2 Basic conditions of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area

This area mainly includes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Garze, Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Aba, and part of Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Liangshan (pastoral area and semi-pastoral area of part of Tibetan Autonomous County of Muli). It covers an area of 300 000 km<sup>2</sup> with population of 2.5 million. Compared with other pastoral areas, this area has following distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it is characterized by high and cold and high altitude. The average altitude is greater

than 3 500 m, most areas have an annual average temperature of 0 – 7°C, the plant grows very slowly, and high and cold grassy marshland is major part of northwest Sichuan natural grassland resource<sup>[8]</sup>. Secondly, it is ecologically critical area and ecologically vulnerable area. The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is situated in Qinghai-tibet Plateau where the ecological function is extremely important and sensitive. Adjacent to protection area of "Source of Three Rivers" (Yangtze River, Yellow River and Lancang River), it is source area and water conserving area of Yellow River and Yangtze River, an important part of "Water Tower of China", one of 25 world biologically diverse regions, and central area of ecological protection screen at the upstream Yangtze River. Thirdly, it is the second largest Tibetan area in China, only second to Tibet. The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is the largest concentrated area of Yi people. Due to its status of ethnic corridor, ethnic culture and tradition and state policies toward ethnic groups play a great role in this area. Since the ancient time, there has been the policy of "keeping stability of Tibet through maintaining well-being", so maintaining national unity and stability of Tibetan area are important parts of national strategies. Fourthly, the per capita grassland area of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is rather small, compared with Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang pastoral areas. Fifthly, the population continues growing. Data of the sixth population census in China shows that since 2000, the population in eastern regions has been increasing, while the population in other regions decreases. Western regions have the highest reduction, up to 1.11%<sup>[9]</sup>. However, neither the resource and environment carrying capacity nor the population drawing capacity is high. The population of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area should decrease but continue growing in fact. In 2010, the permanent resident population in Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Garze is 1.09 million, 30 000 (or 3%) more than the registered permanent residents, which is contrary to what most people take for granted. Sixthly, the development foundation is weak. No matter in industry, science and education, or in urban and rural construction, as well as social cause, the development of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area lags far behind the other inland areas. This is especially true for infrastructure. By now, there has been no railway in this area. Seventhly, the externality is distinctive. The ecological economy is main part of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area, so the economy of this area features distinctive externality. Solving the trouble brought by externality for northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is an inevitable theoretical and policy problem. Eighthly, "The Poverty of Plenty". The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is rich in water energy, forest, grassland, Tibetan medicine, biological and cultural resources, particularly the water energy resources, it is the major part of "West-east Gas Transmission" and "South-to-North Water Diversion Project" in China. Nevertheless, the backward situation of this area is a great worry to us. Many people describe such situation as "The Poverty of Plenty", so how to tackle this problem has become a constant concern for many economists<sup>[10]</sup>.

From the situations of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area, it shows that current social construction of this area includes social cause in narrow sense and social management in at meso-level.

### 3 Opportunities and challenges faced by social construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area

**3.1 Opportunities in social construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area** At present the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is in the best policy opportunity and development period. Since 2010, the CPC Central Committee and State Council have taken a series of great measures to speed up strategic arrangement of Large Scale Western Development in the next ten years. This provides unprecedented policy opportunities for the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. These opportunities are mainly shown in three aspects. The first is development policy for Tibetan area. On January 18 to January 20 of 2010, the Fifth Working Conference for Tibet Held by Central Government was held in Beijing. This conference firstly included Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces into overall arrangement of state strategy and Tibetan works, to arrange development of Tibetan area from strategy, economy and organization. These measures fully reflect strategic determination and policy effort of the central government in speeding up development of Tibetan area. The second is development policy and ecological policy for pastoral area. On October 12 of 2012, the standing committee of State Council decided to establish reward-compensation mechanism for ecological protection of grassland, including subsidies for the banning of grazing, awards for the balance of grass and livestock as well as production subsidies, to increase income of herdsmen. On April 6 of 2011, it decided to take measures to promote sound and fast development of pastoral areas. On August 12 of 2011, the Second National Work Conference for Pastoral Areas was held in Hulunbeier City. This conference and grassland work conference issued a series of new policies, which makes definite thinking of development of pastoral areas in new trend. The third type of policies include literacy movement, nine-year compulsory education, ten-year education action plan, 9 +3 free education action plan, settlement of herdsmen, and ten-year medical action plan, etc., in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province.

#### 3.2 Challenges in social construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area

**3.2.1 Uncoordinated social and economic structure.** For a country or region, the most important and basic structure is economic and social structure. If these structures are uncoordinated, there will be many economic and social conflicts and problems. Since the reform and opening-up, great change has taken place in social structure of China. Generally, it has formed the olive-shaped social structure, but the change of social structure in northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area in upstream Yangtze River is not obvious, neither population structure, social spatial structure nor social status structure has been changed deeply. Until the implementation of Large-scale Western Development Strategy, especially the project of transferring electricity from the west to the east, ecological construc-

tion works and other similar works, the economic structure started to change in northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area in upstream Yangtze River.

For over a decade since the implementation of Large-scale Western Development Strategy, the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area in upstream Yangtze River has obtained rapid development, but the social development still falls behind, and the problem of uncoordinated social and economic development is still prominent. Generally, the adjustment of social structure slightly lags behind the adjustment of economic structure, but if this lagging exceeds reasonable limit, the social structure will impede constant change of economic structure.

**3.2.2 Low social construction ability of grass-roots government.** The county and township level government of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area at upstream Yangtze River directly provides basic public services for countryside and grass-roots unit. The lack of financial resources leads to prominent conflicts of "safeguarding living", "guaranteeing running" and "ensuring construction". As old, young, remote and poor regions, their grass-roots government depends on finance to survive. To promote construction of basic public services, we should encourage them develop their ability, increase financial support to ensure that township government can provide financial support for basic public services. In other words, it is required to push forward equal basic public service through ensuring financial capability of grass-roots government.

**3.2.3 Low ability of responding public demands.** The reason for this mainly includes awareness and ability. As representative and defender of people's benefits, the government should be responsible for responding to public demands. However, the government is unable to do what one wants very much to do. They are used to managing public affairs by administrative method, so the ability of their responding and efficiency and quality of public service is not high. This is also connected with low social construction ability. Even if they are aware the importance of timely responding to public demands, they are still unable to do so because they have no such ability, just like "one can't make bricks without straw".

**3.2.4 Big gap in availability of basic public services.** The availability of public services depends on two factors. One is the distance of geographical position, measured by the time taken by any convenient means of transportation. The other is the quantity of public service organizations in unit area, for example, quantity of health organs and compulsory education organizations in unit area. Both conditions exist in the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area in upstream Yangtze River. With large area but small population, complex natural conditions, weak basic traffic facilities, it is still unable to provide or enjoy services because of geographical position, convenience and cost of transportation.

### 4 Path selection in social construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area

The promotion of social construction in northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area should base on its own advantages, put forth effort on overcoming restraints of short plate, integrate social construction resources, increase social construction capability, implement policies inclined to this area, and strengthen

system guarantee.

**4.1 Strengthening social construction ability of grass-roots government** The state should perfect the system of progressive increase of financial transfer payment, to strengthen social construction ability of grass-roots government of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area at upstream of Yangtze River. The financial transfer payment system is an important means of equalization of basic public service and strengthening social construction ability of grass-roots government. It is known to all that the equalization of public service, as a basic goal of public finance, refers to the roughly equal and basic public goods and services provided by the government for the public in different standards at different stages. The transfer payment system is a major means of equalization of public services. In the course of new round of economic development, it is required to continue taking equalization of basic public service as an important goal, taking measures such as perfecting support mechanism and increasing financial transfer payment year by year, to increase support for less-developed regions of northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral areas at upstream Yangtze River. Besides, it is proposed to work out financial policies inclined towards these regions, and increase financial transfer payment used for compensation of public service and ecological environment, to gradually provide local residents with equal basic public services. As ecological function restricted development area and forbidden development area, the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral areas at upstream Yangtze River should be provided with greater financial transfer payment support, to strengthen the basic public service supply ability of grass-roots government.

**4.2 Taking livelihood projects as major parts to promote social construction** The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral areas at upstream Yangtze River should further consolidate achievements made in projects of enriching and stabilizing people, strengthen plan of herdsmen settlement, "9 + 3 free education plan", and ten-year medical action plan, to promote its social construction.

It is required to continue perfecting settlement of herdsmen and gradually pushing forward infrastructure construction, such as villager activity center, school, clinic, and broadcasting facilities. The herdsmen settlement plan is a significant action for improving livelihood of herdsmen in northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area and promoting socio-economic development of this area. According to this plan, from 2009 to 2012, 18 billion yuan (5 billion yuan from finance) will be invested to speed up settlement construction of northwest Sichuan Plateau pastoral area and improve living standards of 100 000 households and 480 000 nomadic and semi-settlement herdsmen in Tibetan area through unified plan and design, public financial support and self construction of herdsmen, to realize the goal of "every family has fixed house, every household has new tents, and every village has activity center". It is planned to basically solve settlement of those nomadic herdsmen and those who have only simple and crude dwelling.

In addition, it is required to continue implementing employ-

ment of "9 + 3 free education students" and pushing forward "9 + 3 free education plan". This plan together with "ten-year action plan for education of ethnic minority areas" have become an effective approach to improving quality of Tibetan area people, and also an important action to keep long-term stability of Tibetan area. Along with advance of "9 + 3" works, students receiving this education are going to look for jobs, so this is a key time for checking the effect of this plan and it is connected with whether this plan can be implemented further. Following measures may be taken. Firstly, establish cooperation mechanism between colleges and enterprises, and set up fixed point practice base for "9 + 3 student" in major enterprises and large-scale enterprises of Tibetan area, to explore more employment channels. Secondly, encourage and support enterprises to employ "9 + 3 students", take some tax preference for instance. Thirdly, adjust the establishment of disciplines according to market demand and development of Tibetan area, increase characteristic departments such as national costume, national characteristic tourism, bilingual preschool teacher education, etc., to help "9 + 3" students in Tibetan area grasp professional skill and find proper jobs.

In line with weak and difficult points in development of hygiene industry in the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area, it is required to constantly implement the ten-year action plan of public health in ethnic minority regions. The northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area is vast in area but small in population. On average, a medical worker provides service for nearly 100 km<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is preferred to establish regional medical service center, equip mobile medical vehicle, regularly deliver medicines and dispatch doctors to visit the villages, towns and settlement places. Also, it is required to take active measures to prevent common serious diseases, such as Kaschin-Beck disease, echinococcosis, etc.

**4.3 Taking advantage of ecological construction to boost social construction** As major region of China's ecological construction, the construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area, as well as limiting construction of development area or forbidding construction of development area, will have more ecological construction projects, and the ecological compensation will become more reasonable. All of these will provide favorable conditions and opportunities for other social constructions. It is required to take an overall planning of economic, ecological and social construction, in the hope of coordinating socio-economic development of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. Therefore, it is required to take the ecological construction as cutting point to eliminate the bottleneck of low ability of social construction. We can improve the social construction ability from the compensation at state level, basin level and through development and utilization of superior resources. Besides, it is recommended to take ecological compensation as the tie, to promote ecological construction, industrial development and social construction of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. In addition, we can draw on experience of inland agricultural regions in subsidy policies of grain, farming equipment, and seed and fertilizer, and turn it into sub-

sidy policy of forestry development and ecological protection in the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area.

**4.4 Developing basic public service with the aid of external forces** Practice has proved that the counterpart assistance of economic developed regions for ethnic minority areas fully reflects the socialist superiority, and it is an important measure to bring into full play the advantages of developed regions and promote coordinated development of all regions. This is further proved in rehabilitation works after "May 12" Wenchuan Great Earthquake. However, this policy is still to be improved. In the first play, the scope of support should be expanded. The pattern of China's counterpart assistance was established in the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s. Beijing assists Inner Mongolia, Hebei supports Guizhou, Jiangsu helps Guangxi and Xinjiang, Shandong supports Qinghai, Tianjin assists Gansu, Shanghai supports Yunnan and Ningxia, and the whole country supports Tibet, but no counterpart assistance is arranged for the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area at upstream Yangtze River. Thus, it is required to make proper adjustment to provide counterpart assistance for this area and strengthen the support at the same time. When implementing the counterpart assistance at provincial level, take developed cities (counties or districts) of developed provinces and coastal areas as major subjects, to bring into play their functions in helping socio-economic development and improving basic public service level of this area. In the course of counterpart assistance, it is required to organically integrate the assistance in developing economy and in developing basic public service. We should fully utilize resource advantages to handle concrete affairs in developing basic public services of the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area. Furthermore, it is proposed to establish incentive mechanism, seek donation from various circles of society and international support, to expand channels of basic public services in the northwest Sichuan plateau pastoral area.

**4.5 Intensifying evaluation system for supervision of social construction works** With strict adherence to Scientific Outlook on Development as guidance, it is required to establish and perfect planning, inspection and evaluation mechanism for social construction, establish and perfect scientific and reasonable

evaluation system for assessing social construction works, stress indexes of social construction, livelihood and enriching people, organically combine performance assessment and social construction assessment, finally to guide leading cadres at all levels to the road of promoting scientific and harmonious development. Besides, we should establish evaluation system for performance of social construction, perfect supervision and feedback mechanism of public decision making and implementation, and constantly improve social construction ability and working level. Also, it is to further improve social supervision mechanism, establish information network platform for social construction, to timely pinpoint and solve problems. It is expected to provide powerful guarantee for building harmonious society through enhancing institutional construction<sup>[11]</sup>.

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