



# CHINA

## USING ACCA TO HELP SAVE THE SOUL OF A HISTORIC TIBETAN TOWN

The beautiful and ancient Tibetan town of Yushu (called *Jiekundo* in Tibetan), in the eastern part of Tibet (which is now officially called the "Tibet Autonomous Region"), was shaken by an earthquake on April 14, 2010. The 7.1 magnitude earthquake triggered landslides, toppled houses and killed 10,000 people - many trapped under collapsed buildings. 85% of the city's buildings were damaged or destroyed, many of which were traditional Tibetan-style multi-family courtyard houses.

The Chinese Government's speedy and well-coordinated response to the Yushu earthquake was widely praised as a model of quick, efficient and effective disaster relief. But it quickly became clear that the motives behind this efficient government response to a terrible disaster were anything but humanitarian: the Provincial Government used the earthquake as an opportunity to impose a new kind of city planning on this very old, traditional Tibetan town.

Under China's centralized system for controlling land, even buildings that were not damaged by the earthquake ended up being demolished in Yushu, and the land they occupied was being seized and designated for different purposes, in an ambitious plan for transforming Yushu into a "New Metropolis" of gleaming high-rises and shopping malls, surrounded by new subdivisions of upmarket "Tibet-theme" villas with 2-car garages, jacuzzis and fake plaster architectural details tacked on for show. For construction companies, property developers and contractors, the earthquake was a real boon.

### What the GOVERNMENT is doing in Yushu :

The government's official plans call for relocating ordinary and low-income families that have always lived in the old center of Yushu to new housing colonies far outside of town, where they will be forced to live in grids of cheap concrete block houses (of a standard 80 square meters, regardless of family size) that are neither earthquake-safe nor appropriate for the climate, and where residents will be forced to commute long distances into town for their jobs.

This lucrative "replacement housing program" is being handled by huge government contractors, and neither NGOs nor residents have been permitted to participate. In these ways, thousands of households are losing their land and houses, as well as their communities and way of life. But even very soon after the earthquake, there was a very strong local opposition to these government relocation and reconstruction plans.



### What the TIBET HERITAGE FUND is doing to show an alternative :

The Tibet Heritage Fund group helped several residents to repair and earthquake-proof their slightly-damaged historic multi-family buildings in the center of town. The project was used to demonstrate an alternative post-earthquake redevelopment model in which the people continue to stay in their old neighborhoods and in their traditional communal housing - instead of relocating to the government's individualistic standard housing units that are outside of town.

The THF's decision to focus on *in-situ* rebuilding was also an indirect strategy to secure people's ancestral properties, prevent their eviction and preserve the soul of the town, since the government was reluctant to demolish historic buildings that survived the earthquake. The THF group hoped it would be able to modify the official plans for redeveloping Yushu.

Several years after the earthquake, conditions in Yushu are still hard, but with support from ACCA and other donors, the THF team has been able to work with residents to restore a small cluster of traditional earthen buildings and a temple in the city's historic core - all with official permission from the government. The reconstruction process also included the introduction of seismic construction elements into these historic structures which make them better able to withstand the earthquakes that are likely to recur in Yushu.

This core restoration project in the historic center of Yushu is just a start, but it has demonstrated valid alternatives to relocation and mass pre-fab reconstruction, and the project continues to generate interest among residents and officials in Yushu.



## ACCA in CHINA :

### PROJECT CITIES (total 1)

- Yushu (earthquake area)

### SMALL PROJECTS

Small projects approved : 2  
Total budget approved : \$18,000

### BIG PROJECTS

Big projects approved : 1  
Total budget approved : \$39,000

### SPECIAL PROJECTS

- To study the effects of relocation on rural Tibetan families and demonstrate alternatives. \$5,000.

### SAVINGS + CDFS

No community savings or city development funds yet in China

### IMPLEMENTING GROUPS

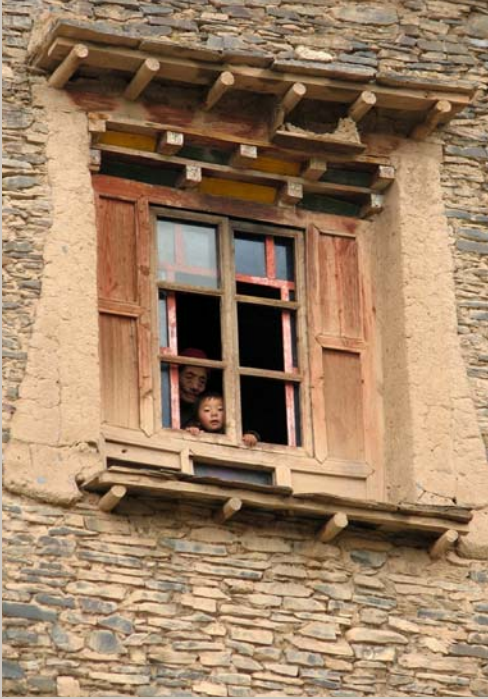
The project in China is being implemented by the Tibet Heritage Fund.

## TIBET HERITAGE FUND

The Tibet Heritage Fund is an intrepid group of Asian and European activists, scholars, artisans, architects and Tibet-lovers who have worked in China, India and Mongolia for 25 years to restore traditional houses, neighborhoods and monasteries.

They use the restoration process to revive the traditional building crafts and cultural practices that go into these beautiful buildings, which continue to be under serious threat in many ways. Although their work has focused on the meticulous physical restoration of historic structures, the THF group has always sought ways that the mostly poor families who live in these old buildings and neighborhoods can stay and be part of their architectural and cultural revival, rather than be evicted to make way for tourist boutiques or faceless tower blocks. In these ways, the projects are no less than a struggle for the soul of these Tibetan towns, and the people who live in them.

The THF team's work has been cited as a UN-Habitat Best Practice and won three UNESCO Heritage Conservation awards.



*There's nothing wrong with Tibet's agricultural villages, where rural families have been thriving for centuries. The houses are usually large, to accommodate big extended families and all sorts of farming and cattle-raising functions, and they are usually clustered together, on the slopes of hills, around the Buddhist temples and monasteries which are the center of the village's social,*



## YUSHU: "Socialist Village" relocations

**SPECIAL RESEARCH PROJECT : Another chance opens up for the Tibet Heritage Fund to work with some ancient Tibetan farming villages to explore alternatives to relocation to new government-built settlements**

For several years now, in almost all Tibetan-inhabited areas in China, the government has followed a policy of relocating traditional villages to new "socialist villages." The government claims that Tibetan agriculture is too unproductive and so the relocations are billed as promoting urbanization as an alternative. In Yushu Prefecture, this policy is now being implemented with renewed energy in all the villages. Families are being encouraged - and sometimes forced - to leave their ancestral family houses and agricultural land and move into newly-constructed settlements of 80 square-meter concrete houses (the same model they're building for earthquake relocatees in Yushu town) that are all identical and laid out along a grid, usually on the flat land down below their old villages.

Because of the work the Tibet Heritage Fund had been doing to restore traditional houses and revive one neighborhood in Yushu's historic town center, after the earthquake, the THF team began to receive requests for help from many of these villages that were facing the prospect of losing their houses, farms and traditional way of life, because of this ongoing village relocation program. With support from a \$5,000 grant from ACCA, the THF team began to study the traditional village houses and get data about the families who still remained in several villages, to understand the effects of the relocation and to develop and demonstrate alternatives. Their study began initially in six villages in Yushu Prefecture where they had received request for assistance: Leyi, Kesa, Mussu, Bue, Inda and Lhatse.

The families all said the same thing: that the new houses in these "socialist villages" are much too small for agricultural use, with no space for animals, tools, grains or hay. They are also too small for the extended Tibetan families, in which four generations usually live together under one roof. These new houses are also totally unsuited to the local climate, are not designed to withstand earthquakes and come without even the most basic infrastructure. To make matters worse, they are being built in the worst-possible topography for dwellings - on the lowest-lying land at the foot of hills, where the arable land has always been preserved for farming and grazing, and where there is a real danger of overflowing rivers in the monsoon season (as the THF team saw in Ladakh in 2010).

On their journeys around the Yushu area, the THF team found many historic villages (most having been continuously inhabited for centuries) that had already been demolished, to force reluctant villagers to move to the new government settlements. But the good news is that in many of these villages, the team found handfuls of families (in one case only one brave family!) holding out, still occupying their ancient family homes, refusing to leave and desperately looking for a solution.

The THF group is now working with these six ancient villages in Yushu to survey and document the houses and to explore alternatives which enable the families to continue living in their homes. As part of this pilot initiative, which is being supported by ACCA and other donors, several traditional family houses will be repaired and upgraded, to demonstrate an alternative to the relocation policy, in which these agricultural families keep their traditional houses and continue their traditional farming work, but perhaps add new income-generating elements, like starting home-stay businesses within the house.



*Above: Three photos of these new "Socialist Villages" the government has built in Tibet, usually right below the centuries-old villages they are supposed to replace.*