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Beyond the Military Prism: China's Development Objectives in *Xiaokang* Villages in Tibet Autonomous Region

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Beyond the Military Prism: China's Development Objectives in *Xiaokang* Villages in Tibet Autonomous Region

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Abstract

In 2017, China unveiled a policy to develop more than 600 *bianjing xiaokang cun*, or 'moderately well-off border villages', in 21 border counties in the Tibet Autonomous Region. This study examines how the policy is being implemented in 44 villages in four border counties in Ngari prefecture and in Droma county in Shigatse City using qualitative data about development policies, political activities, and geographical locations of the villages. While acknowledging the strategic significance of these villages for China's military objectives, including territorial claim-making, the study urges scholars and policymakers to pay attention to broader and longer-term objectives of the policy, such as populating border areas, Party-building, and achieving political and administrative control at the grassroots. Further, we argue that the policy has important implications for understanding how the Chinese state funds and implements development policies in its vast borderlands.

Keywords: Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), *xiaokang* villages, dual-use infrastructure, economic development, poverty alleviation, Tibet policy, India-China relations.

China has built 628 *bianjing xiaokang cun* (边境小康村) or 'moderately well-off border villages' since 2017 when the policy was first unveiled in the border counties of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) (*Renmin Ribao* 2018). The Chinese construction has generated considerable debate among policymakers, scholars, and in the media about the nature of these villages and China's military strategy vis-à-vis India. The dominant thinking is that villages are for 'dual use', meaning their use involves both civilian and military purposes (Nithiyanandam 2024; Jun Hart 2024; Kumar, A. 2024). Further, they are also considered part of China's salami-slicing tactics to solidify spurious claims over the territory of neighbouring countries or as bargaining chips at boundary negotiations as in the case of Bhutan (Barnett 2021; Shekhawat 2022; see also, Nithiyanandam 2024; Kumar, A. 2024). The creation of this infrastructure by China and the possibility they might be used for military purposes drive a sense of anxiety in India over China's plans for future military actions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and is seen as proof by outside observers of yet another case of China's hegemonic behaviour in its neighbourhood (Xiao and Chang 2024).

This study acknowledges and addresses the military objectives China's policy of building *xiaokang* villages in border counties in the TAR but it furthers the discussion and analysis by arguing that domestic socio-economic and political goals in these villages are equally important to the Chinese state. These include rural revitalization, increasing the population of border areas, and commercialization of agro-pastoral products on the one hand and ensuring stronger control of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) regime over the Tibetan population on the other (Xizang Zizhiqu Nongye Nongcun 2024; *Xizang Xinwen Wang* 2021). *Xiaokang* villages across the

Eastern Sector of the India-China boundary dispute are relatively well covered in the literature (Nithiyanandam 2024). This study, therefore, examines Chinese government policies in *xiaokang* villages in four counties of Ngari prefecture (Ali diqu, 阿里地区) in western TAR and in Droma county (Yadong xian, 亚东县) in Shigatse city (Xigaze/Rikaze shi, 日喀则市) in southern TAR to highlight the socio-economic and political goals and to place military objectives in perspective.

Of the 628 villages planned to be built over a three-year period in the first phase, 427 were designated first-line border villages and 201 as second-line villages.ⁱ An unspecified number of villages is being built in the second phase of the programme that started in 2020. However, only 604 villages were completed in the first phase ending in 2020 with another 20 being completed by 2022 (*Xinhua* 2020; *Xinhua* 2022). The 44 *xiaokang* villages examined in this study are located in Ruthog, Tsamda, Gar and Purang counties in Ngari prefecture and in Droma county in Shigatse cityⁱⁱ (Figure 1). All but one are first-phase villages and each village is identified based on information from official sources on its designation as a *xiaokang* village. After identifying the list of villages, they were located using Google Earth and their distances from the Line of Actual Control (LAC) or the international boundary with India (IB) or Bhutan measured. We gathered qualitative data about these villages from official sources at the county, prefecture, and provincial levels, media reports from *Xizang Ribao* (Tibet Daily, 西藏日报), *Xinhua*, *Sina.com*, *Sohu*, and social media posts (on *QQ*, *Weixin*, *Bilibili*, and *Douyin*) to understand the nature of socio-economic life, government policies, and Party activities being carried out.

Figure 1

County-level Map of Tibet Autonomous Region



Source: Modified by authors from original map by the Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh (<http://www.tibetmap.com/TARbr.html>).

The remainder of the essay is divided into three parts. The first provides a brief overview of the origins of the policy on *xiaokang* villages with a reference to the critical role played by the Tibet Aid Program in its implementation; the second examines China's domestic objectives including those of Party-building and ensuring stronger Party control in the restive minority province; the third section looks at the location of *xiaokang* villages in the counties being studied and draws some inferences from a military perspective. The concluding section offers a discussion of the implications of *bianjing xiaokang cun* (moderately well-off border villages) beyond the dominant military prism. The paper argues that military objectives and economic development objectives are linked together by the Chinese Party-state's larger and long-standing concerns over regime legitimacy and internal consolidation.

Origins and Methods

The origins of the current plan for *xiaokang* villages, at least ideationally, can be traced back to CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping's speech at the 6th Tibet Work Forum in 2015 when he argued that "to govern the country, we must govern the border areas, to govern the border areas, we must stabilize Tibet" (*zhiguo bi zhibian, zhibian xian wen Zang*, 治国必治边, 治边先稳藏) (*Xinhua* 2015). While there is lack of contextual information to trace policymaking and decision-making processes, publicly available documents, however, indicate the origins of the idea can be traced back to the early 2000s. The idea got initial traction in the annual Central Rural Work Conference (Zhongyang Nongcun Gongzuohui, 中央农村工作会) of the 16th Central Committee in 2003, where then CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao gave a positive assessment of the concept proposed by the rural and urban development research department of the Chengdu Mountain Institute (Chengdu Shandisuo, 成都山地所), a research institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, that aimed to solve the "three rural problems" (*san nong wenti*, 三农问题) - low agricultural productivity, low peasant income, and undeveloped rural infrastructure - in Tibetan areas (Zhongguo Kexueyuan 2004). According to media reports of the time, the TAR provincial government had entrusted the Institute with designing a plan for developing *xiaokang* villages in 12 areas in nine counties in TAR. It is important to note that a specific focus on border counties was still missing in these discussions. In 2016, once again, the TAR provincial government tasked the same institution to give recommendations for initiatives while taking cues from Xi's direction for development of border areas (Guojia Shengtai Kexue Shuju Zhongxin 2019).

As such, therefore, the policy has a longer genealogy than generally attributed in leader-centric official discourses in the CPC's thinking on borders and border governance. Considered over the long-term, the development of *xiaokang* villages and the assertion that defending the border is key to better governance and stability is the latest phase of shifts in policies and discourses on these issues. The current policy in the Xi era builds on the post-Mao policy focus on stability and security through development by adding stress on enforcing ethnic unity and ensuring significantly greater resources devoted to these tasks (Luo and Deng 2024). It must be further underlined that these policies are not limited to TAR but apply to all of

China's vast borderlands (Leibold 2024b; see also, Allen, Impiombato and Attrill 2024).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify why it took more than a decade for the national and provincial leadership to undertake the initial plan even though politically powerful agencies such as the National Development and Reform Commission and top leaders like Hu had voiced support for the initiative. The gradual, protracted process of unveiling the plan for developing *xiaokang* villages in TAR has implications for our understanding of Chinese policymaking and implementation - it should help debunk narratives of the Chinese political system's efficiency in planning and executing developmental projects at great speed. It is time for scholars to examine these difficulties to better understand China's policies in border areas.

Meanwhile, for the purposes of this essay, suffice it to say that the plan for *xiaokang* villages originated in debates over managing rural problems, a severe socio-political challenge discussed since the early 2000s in China, and that it has taken a long time to implement. This implementation has depended on a combination of policy instruments including, critically, the long-running Tibet Aid Program.

Started in its current form in 1994 after the Third Tibet Work Forum, the Tibet Aid Program has been ramped up massively in Xi Jinping's tenure (for more see, Kumar, D. 2024b; Leibold 2024a). Under the Program, partner provinces, cities or central agencies and institutions extend support to localities in TAR they have been paired with in several policy areas such as poverty alleviation, and medical and education assistance.

Take for example, Tsamda County in Ngari, which was one of the poorest counties in TAR before poverty alleviation goals were said to have been achieved in 2020 for the whole country. In this border county, several *xiaokang* villages exist including Tsaparang (Zhaburang cun, 扎布让村) (see Table 1) supported by Hebei province under the Tibet Aid Program with a particular focus on poverty alleviation and "group style" (*zutuan shi*, 组团式) medical and education assistance (Sohu.com 2020). As is the case with other parts of TAR, poverty alleviation has involved large-scale relocation of people to small towns and settlements from nomadic and temporary settlements. However, villages like Tsaparang, one of the earliest ones in Tholing town, are not entirely new settlements but rejuvenated villages with investments in new social and physical infrastructure and relocation of famers and herders (QQ.com 2024). In another example involving Tibet Aid Program actors - Pangda village (庞达村) in the Chumbi Valley - state-owned steel companies like Baowu Steel from Shanghai provided prefabricated steel houses (Baowu Group 2020).

Note should be taken also of the uneven implementation of policies in *xiaokang* villages. Chinese official narratives often highlight 'demonstration villages' (*shifan cun*, 示范村) to showcase successful implementation of the policy. It is these villages that Chinese officials are usually shown as visiting. The fact, however, is that not all *xiaokang* villages receive the same facilities or degree of attention owing to the usual difficulties of terrain and distance among other factors.

Domestic Objectives

China's Tibet policy in Xi Jinping's 'new era' (*zhi Zang fanglüe*, 治藏方略) broadly consists of four goals - stability, development, ecology, and strengthening the border - that are often emphasized from local to national levels as the "four events" (*sijian dashi*, 四件大事). That Xi "attaches great importance, always cares about, has feelings for Tibet, and personally steers the direction of Tibet work" (*gaodu zhongshi Xizang gongzuo, shizhong xinxi Xizang, qingsi Xizang, qinzi wei Xizang gongzuo ba duo dingxiang*, 高度重视西藏工作, 始终心系西藏、情系西藏, 亲自为西藏工作把舵定向) has often been stressed by officials and the Party-state apparatus (see *Qjushi* 2022). This underlines the strong central government backing for the policy of *xiaokang* villages.

At the same time, it also needs to be underlined that despite the centrality of stabilizing Tibet in Xi's nationalist agenda, the nitty gritty of policy implementation is unlikely to be supervised at the micro level by either him or his immediate policy circle. In its current form, the policy of building *xiaokang* villages was a provincial level initiative through the 'TAR border areas *xiaokang* villages building plan (2017-2020)' (Xizang Zizhiqu bianjiang diqu *xiaokang* jianshe jihua, 西藏自治区边境地区小康村建设规划 (2017-2020)) in response to Xi's exhortation in 2015 that border defence was essential for national security (*Huanqiu Ribao* 2020).

Building small-scale infrastructure like schools, mobile towers, and roads, and building grassroot organizations such as CPC committees at the village level, and the establishment of cooperatives, together form part of a policy being pursued in the region since 2009 with the aim of facilitating an increase in the population of border areas and permanent settlement of nomads. In this context, the government has pushed to relocate farmers and herders to these villages both from nearby places as well as from faraway locations. Under this policy beginning in 2016, the government has aimed to relocate more than half a million people from what it considers ecologically sensitive areas such as Qiangtang (羌塘) in several counties in Nagchu in northern TAR to Lhasa, the capital, and to border prefectures such as Nyingchi and Lhoka in southwestern TAR bordering Arunachal Pradesh (Yao Shuang 2022; Nyima and Yeh 2023; Human Rights Watch 2024). Several villages including Pangda in Bhutanese-claimed territory and Ngari have populations relocated from nearby places.

Meanwhile, *xiaokang* villages have also been the targets of Party-building activities with a broader focus on grassroots governance. These initiatives aim at developing grassroots Party organizations in villages as "battle fortresses" (*zhandou baolei*, 战斗堡垒), which include a range of activities such as cultural activities to propagate the Party's ideology and policies, establishing village Party committees, and recruiting new members, among others (*Zhongguo Gongchandang Xinwenwang* 2019; *Qjushi* 2020; *Yunnan Chang'an Wang* 2023). Media reports show that *xiaokang* villages along the LAC are also targets of these initiatives. In addition to Party bodies such as village branches, under a programme started in 2011, the Party authorities send

work teams from higher levels to villages (*zhucun gongzuodui*, 驻村工作队) across the region. Thousands of cadres have served in villages for short terms since then, including in *xiaokang* villages, helping build grassroots institutions and spreading the Party’s messages (*Xizang Xinwen Wang* 2017).

Creating farmers’ and herders’ cooperatives is a region-wide policy which is also key to implementing the policy of *xiaokang* villages. Such cooperatives serve multiple purposes including the Party-state’s greater control over mobile populations in border areas, spurring commercialisation of agro-pastoral products to create local sources of income, and populating remote areas (Zhongguo Gongchangdang Xizangzizhiqu Weiyuanhui 2020; Wang and Ning 2019) including some villages in territories claimed by other countries, such as the Pangda village in Bhutan. Commercialization has been spurred by the Tibet Aid Program to better economically and commercially integrate TAR’s economy into China’s domestic and foreign supply chains (Ye and Yu 2024) - as Table 1 shows, most villages have such cooperatives as the main source of income for the relocated population (*Sina.com* 2022). Since 2009, these cooperatives have helped authorities to have a greater control of society through a widely used model of “party base + cooperative society + farmer” (*dangzhibu + hezuoshi + nonghu*, 党支部+合作社+农户) governing these cooperatives (*Xizang Xinwen Wang* 2021).

Location

Strong borders in terms of better infrastructure, connectivity, and reliable sources of livelihood for the local population help further political and social stability and thus also aid military other strategic goals.

This study uses the metric of distance from the LAC or the international boundary (IB) with either India or Bhutan - as calculated from Google Earth - to differentiate between *xiaokang* villages and to provide some perspective to the issue of their dual use. Villages located within approximately 50 kms as the crow flies from the nearest point on the LAC or international boundary are defined as being *close* to the LAC with the implication that they can be of potential military use such as for territorial claim-making, for tactical support for military operations, as well as for day-to-day support for security forces guarding the border.

Table 1

Distribution of Border *Xiaokang* Villages in Ngari Prefecture and Droma in Shigatse City

County	Village	Town/Township	Approximate distance from LAC/IB/Bhutan border (in kms)	Key Features
Tsamda (札达县, ཅ་མདའ་རྫོང་) 13 villages	Tsaparang (扎布让小康 村, ཅ་པ་རང་)	Tholing (托林镇, འཛོལ་རྫོང་)	45 kms [31°28'01"N 79°40'17"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> part of tourist circuit covering the Guge kingdom ruins

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> investments under Tibet-Aid Program from Hebei
	Baka (巴卡村)	Tsosib Sumkyil Township (楚鲁松杰乡, ཚོ་སྤོང་གསུམ་རྒྱུ་མཚོ་)	83 kms 31°12'51"N 80°53'55"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty alleviation site near Mount Kailash
	Tsosib (楚松村)	Tsosib Sumkyil Township (楚鲁松杰乡, ཚོ་སྤོང་གསུམ་རྒྱུ་མཚོ་)	4.5 kms [32°06'34"N 78°42'36"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> housing project older village earmarked for art and culture festival for propaganda activities
	Bolin (波林小康村)	Tholing (托林镇, མཚོ་སྤོང་)	15 kms [31°20'20"N 79°25'39"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tourism and construction of comfortable living environment for visitors
	Rebujialin (热布加林村)	Qangzê Township (香孜乡, ལྷོ་རྩེ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་)	65 kms [31°55'47"N 79°32'41"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty alleviation demonstration village cooperative based on the model of village committee + cooperative + farmers + shares (private companies) established in 2018.
	Shipki (什布奇村)	Diyag Township (底雅乡, ཉི་ཡག་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་)	2.5 kms [31°48'41"N 78°44'42"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Dongbo (东波村, མདོ་རོ་)	Daba Township (达巴乡, མདུ་པ་)	30 kms [31°07'08"N 80°07'19"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nearest village to tourist attractions like Dongga Piyang (东嘎遗址), Tholing Monastery (托林寺), and Tholing-Guge Scenic Area (土林-古格风景名胜區).
	Kyunglung (曲龙村, ལྷོ་ལུང་)	Daba Township (达巴乡, མདུ་པ་)	50 kms [31°04'18"N 80°33'27"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognized as the capital of the ancient Zhangzhung Kingdom - a part of Kyunglung (Qionglong) Silver City Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, TAR Cultural Relics Protection Institute, Northwest University, the Ngari Prefecture Cultural Relics Bureau, the Tsamda County Cultural Relics Bureau and other units have conducted several archaeological surveys and excavations at the

				Kyunglung (Qionglong) Village site
	Qumudi (曲木底村)	Qusum Township (曲松乡, ལུ་གཞུག་ཤང་།)	25 kms [32°12'01"N 79°11'04"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Kazibolin (卡孜村, མཁར་རྩེ)	Qangzê Township (香孜乡, ཕྱང་རྩེ་ཤང་།)	65 kms [31°49'54"N 79°37'34"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> development of economic forestry and fruit industry tourist attraction
	Luba (鲁巴村)	Diyag Township (底雅乡, དི་ཡག་ཤང་།)	35 kms [31°43'30"N 79°15'00"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Riba (日巴村)	Dzarong Township (萨让乡, རྫོང་འོང་ཤང་།)	18 kms [31°36'56"N 79°06'56"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Sarang (萨让村, ཟུང་རྩེ)	Dzarong Township (萨让乡, རྫོང་འོང་ཤང་།)	15 kms [31°33'57"N 79°03'04"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation part of "Ten Enterprises Helping Ten Villages" (十企帮十村) poverty alleviation campaign with contribution from the Tibet Xiangyi Construction Engineering Co., Ltd., (西藏翔翼工程建设有限公司)
Ruthog (日土镇, རུ་ཐོག་ཐོང་རྫོང་།) 8 villages	Domar (多玛村, རྫོང་མར་ཤང་།)	Domar Township (多玛乡, རྫོང་མར་ཤང་།)	95 kms [33°42'25"N 80°22'33"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> archaeological sites- Guozi Kangmaer Earth Fort Ruins (郭孜康玛尔土堡遗址) and ruins of the Zangkar Xiaxu Fort (藏卡尔侠戌堡遗址)
	Wujiang (乌江村)	Domar Township (多玛乡, རྫོང་མར་ཤང་།)	70 kms [33°37'04"N 79°48'43"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Derub (德汝村, རྩེ་རུབ་ also called Kugtang, 库让, ལུག་ཅང་།)	Risum Township (日松乡, རི་གཞུག་ཤང་།)	27 kms [33°22'15"N 79°41'48"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> white-haired goat development base
	Guoba (过巴村)	Risum Township (日松乡, རི་གཞུག་ཤང་།)	60 kms [33°07'03"N 80°03'32"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poverty alleviation site with focus on creating employment through gravel collection plant

	Rejiao (热角村)	Ruthog Town (日土镇, ཅུ་ཐོག་གྲོང་རྒྱུ)	15 kms [33°24'31"N 79°11'50"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rural tourism development border area ecological landscape corridor
	Longmenka (龙门卡村)	Rabang Township (热帮乡, ར་ཐང་གྲོང་ཁོལ་)	85 kms [33°05'08"N 80°22'09"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Ruthog (日土村, ཅུ་ཐོག་གྲོང་)	Ruthog Town (日土镇, ཅུ་ཐོག་གྲོང་རྒྱུ)	25 kms [33°24'57"N 79°38'37"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Chakgang (甲岗村, ལྷགས་རྒྱང་)	Risum Township (日松乡, རི་གསུམ་གྲོང་ཁོལ་)	27 kms [32°52'25"N 79°50'32"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cooperative for stone/gravel plant
Gar / Senge Tsangpo (噶尔县, ལྷགས་རྫོང་།) 6 villages	Gar Chongsar (噶尔新村, གླུ་མོང་གསར་)	Günsa Township (昆莎乡, དུལ་ཤ་ས་)	75 kms [32°06'37"N 80°03'14"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kunsha Modern Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Technology Demonstration Park (昆莎现代农牧科技示范园). Xinjiang-Tibet Highway runs through the middle of the village poverty alleviation cooperative: Gar Kangdao Cooperative (噶尔新村康道合作社)
	Jiamu (加木村)	Senggekanbab Town (狮泉河镇, ཤེང་གཤམ་འབབ་)	60 kms 32°27'45"N 80°09'38"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dairy cattle breeding and forage planting demonstration base located near Kunsha Modern Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Technology Demonstration Park
	Ruma (鲁玛村)	Tashigang Township (扎西岗乡, བཟ་ཤིས་རྒྱང་)	65 kms 32°13'00"N 80°02'00"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tsampa Processing Factory Farmers and Herders Professional Cooperative
	Tashigang (扎西岗村)	Tashigang Township (扎西岗乡, བཟ་ཤིས་རྒྱང་)	20 kms 32°30'37"N 79°41'33"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> located near several tourist attractions
	Dianjiao (典角村, བདེ་མཚོག་)	Tashigang Township	Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation

		(扎西岗乡, བཟོ་ཤིག་རྫོང་)	17 kms [32° 35'22"N 79° 35'02"E] Google Earth Group 2 1 km [32° 41'44"N 79° 27'32"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the newer Group 2 village is just opposite the Indian post across the LAC while the older Group 1 village is 17 kms further away.
	Xiazuozuo (下左左村)	Zoco Township (左左乡, གཙོ་ཚོ་རྫོང་།, also called Goicang གོ་ཇང་)	125 kms [32° 16'24"N 80° 49'11"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation
Burang (普兰, ཐུ་རྩེང་རྫོང་) 7 villages	Bangren (帮仁村)	Hor/Huo'er Township (霍尔乡, ཧོར་ཤང་)	80 kms [30° 46'25"N 81° 37'06"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation located near tourist attractions such as Mount Kailash, Koga Monastery, Lake Manasarovar, Purang "International Market", Mount Namunani, and Gongpuri Monastery
	Xiongba / Xungba Chongco (雄巴村, གཞུང་པ་རྫོང་ཚོ།)	Parga Township (巴嘎乡, པར་ག་ཤང་།)	65 kms [30° 45'55"N 81° 21'47"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapang Yongcuo Tourism Service Professional Cooperative tourism related to Lake Manasarovar
	Rengong / Dongmar (仁贡村, རྟེན་གྲོ་མར་)	Burang Township (普兰镇, ཐུ་རྩེང་རྫོང་)	25 kms [30° 27'20"N 81° 06'58"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> located on Peacock River, one of the four major rivers in Ngari, the birthplace of the Guge Kingdom (Zhangzhung civilization).
	Gangsha / Kangsa Chongco (岗莎村, གང་ཤ་ལ་རྫོང་ཚོ།)	Parga Township (巴嘎乡, པར་ག་ཤང་།)	85 kms [30° 58'31"N 81° 17'08"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relocation site for poverty alleviation focus on tourism - located at the foot of Mount Kailash. Gangsha Village Yak Transport Team was upgraded and transformed into the Tibet Kailash Tourism Service Co., Ltd.
	Kejia (科迦村, འཛོམ་ཞགས་པ་)	Burang Township (普兰镇, ཐུ་རྩེང་རྫོང་)	21 kms [30° 11'45"N 81° 16'09"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tourism for Kejia Gongpa monastery (科迦寺, འཛོམ་ཞགས་པ་དགོན་པ་) one of the national key rural tourism villages announced in 2020 by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opposite Hilsa village on the China-Nepal border (near Gunji village, Uttarakhand)
	Chide (赤德村, ཇི་ཇེ)	Burang Township (普兰镇, ཐུ་རྩེ་རྫོང་)	15 kms [30° 17'31"N 81° 10'26"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relocation site for poverty alleviation • nearest to Kalapani in Nepal and to the Old Lipulekh Pass-Kailash Parvat Road Viewpoint in Uttarakhand, India and near Om Parvat, Uttarakhand
	Xide (细德村, ཇི་ཇེ)	Burang Township (普兰镇, ཐུ་རྩེ་རྫོང་)	13 kms [30° 14'45"N 81° 10'53"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nearest to Old Lipulekh Pass and Kailash Parvat Road • opposite Hilsa border village on the China-Nepal border
Droma (Yadong) (亚东县, ཡ་དོང་རྫོང་) 10 villages	Pangda (庞达村)	Dromomey Township (下亚东乡, ཇོ་མོ་གླང་ཤང་།)	inside the Jigme Khesar Nature Reserve in Bhutan Group 1 [27° 18'24"N 89° 00'27"E] Google Earth Group 2 [27° 19'16"N 89° 00'24"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relocation site for those from Shangdui Village, Duina Township, Chomo County • border village near Doklam, bordering India (Sikkim) and Bhutan
	Renqinggang (仁青岗村, རེན་ཆེན་གླང་།)	Dromomey Township (下亚东乡, ཇོ་མོ་གླང་ཤང་།)	8 kms (Bhutan) [27° 26'01" N 88° 54'03" E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • border guarding village (joint police-civilian activities) • relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Duina (堆纳村, དུ་ན་མ་)	Duina Township/ Duna (堆纳乡, དུ་ན་མ་)	18 kms (Bhutan) [27° 58'47"N 89° 13'57"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relocation site for poverty alleviation
	Asang (阿桑村, ཨ་སང་།)	Dromomey Township (下亚东乡, ཇོ་མོ་གླང་ཤང་།)	1 km (Bhutan) [27° 24'28"N 88° 57'32"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • border guarding village • one of the frontline villages during the Doklam standoff (2017)
	Guru (古汝村, ཀུ་རུ་)	Tuna Township (堆纳乡, དུ་ན་མ་ཤང་།)	20 kms (Bhutan) [28° 05'41"N 89° 16'36"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • border village that is being built as a pilot demonstration site • Kajigangba Sheep Breeding Farmers and Herders

				Professional Cooperative (卡吉岗巴羊养殖农牧民专业合作社)
	Sangang New Village (三岗新村) (Rubinggang, 汝丙岗村)	Dromotod Township (上亚东乡, ལྷོ་མོ་རྫོང་ཤང་།)	2.5 kms (Bhutan) [27° 30'59"N 88° 58'13"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • second-phase <i>xiaokang</i> village with construction beginning in 2023 • rural revitalization demonstration village • green ecological industrial park • Galingang Village Tourism Resort Cooperative ‘Red tourism’ (related to PLA/Party history) site (Zhang Jingwu Memorial Hall, 张经武纪念馆) • professional cooperative for sheep, salmon farmers/breeders • established after merging three villages, Gangu, Galingang, Rubinggang villages after the earthquake in 2011
	Chema / Phyemar (切玛村, རྩེ་མར་)	Dromomey Township (下亚东乡, ལྷོ་མོ་རྫོང་ཤང་།)	5 kms (Bhutan) [27° 26'39"N 88° 55'21"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relocation site for poverty alleviation • Chomo salmon breeding industrial cooperative
	Tangbu (唐布村, ཐང་བུ་)	Tuna Township (堆纳乡, དུང་སྐྱ་ཤང་།)	7 kms (Bhutan) 28° 03'49"N 89° 24'09"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • caterpillar fungus is a key source of income
	Shang Kangbu (上康布村, གཤམ་བུ་)	Kangbu Township (康布乡, ལམ་བུ་ཤང་།)	13 kms (IB) 27° 46'30"N 88° 59'32"E Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Key Rural Tourism villages (全国乡村旅游重点村) in 2020. • established in 1989
	Chunpi (春丕村, ལྷོ་མོ་)	Xia Sima Town (下司马镇, ཤང་གཤམ་པོ་མ་)	7 kms (Bhutan) [27° 29'18"N 88° 54'22"E] Google Earth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relocation site for poverty alleviation • tourist site

Sources: Compiled by the authors.

Note: Of the 37 *xiaokang* villages known to exist in Ngari (Zhongguo Zhongyang Dianshitai 2022), this study only looks at 34 - three could not be identified either by name or location.

Note on names of places: The table uses the following format for names of places: Roman version of Tibetan name, name in Chinese, and name in Tibetan. Wherever the names of places are not available in Tibetan or English, names have been transliterated using the *pinyin* system.

By the benchmark of distance, 14 out of 44 villages - approximately one-third - are not close to the LAC. But this figure has to be qualified. The difference between *xiaokang* villages in Ngari prefecture in the western part of TAR and those in Droma in southern TAR is significant. In the case of the former, out of a total of 34 *xiaokang* villages identified, just over half (20) are close to the LAC, while in the case of the latter, out of ten villages identified in the Droma county, nine are located near the international boundary while one (Pangda) is inside Bhutanese territory - thus, relatively fewer villages can, serve as tactically-useful platforms for military operations in Ngari. This can suggest several things - that terrain difficulties in Ngari are not as difficult as in Droma for *xiaokang* villages to be sited so close to the LAC, that for the moment at least, security objectives and territorial claim considerations are much more serious with respect to Droma than they are in Ngari, or both.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, the location of *xiaokang* villages is determined by contingent factors such as geography, economic conditions, and other policy factors. Not all villages are newly-built; most have been “revitalized” (*zhenxing*, 振兴) through relocation of farmers and herders - a region-wide policy creating farmers’ and herders’ cooperatives, and funded by a mix of policy tools including subsidies to residents and the Tibet Aid Program. Villages like Demchok Village (see Table 1), for example - near areas involved in Sino-Indian tensions, including the latest round in 2020 - are older settlements being redeveloped (Xizang Zizhiqu Nongye Nongcunting 2019). Meanwhile, Sangang New Village (Sangang Xincun, 三岗新村) - part of the second phase of *xiaokang* villages (2020-2025) - was established at a new location and housed earthquake-affected people by merging three villages (Ganglingan, 嘎林岗, Runaigan, 如丙岗, and Ganggu, 岗固) in 2011. Similarly, *xiaokang* villages in the area of the former Guge Kingdom and near Kailash Mansarovar Lake were selected due to their importance for tourism. Considering these local factors and the bureaucratic processes to select villages for development under the programme is critical in understanding larger implications and differentiating multiple goals.

The geographical location and socio-economic infrastructure of these villages are part of broader policy objectives such as repopulating border areas, settling nomadic populations, and spurring local sources of income and economic growth through tourism and revitalization of animal-husbandry and handicraft industry. The construction of infrastructure in the villages also provides a source of employment for local Tibetans. Thus, the revitalization of these villages contributes to national security in a strategic rather than a limited tactical sense. This said, some problems that these policies were aimed at addressing, continue. Tibetans continue to escape (although in much lesser numbers than in the past) and precious commodities such as gold are smuggled across the border in Droma (Namgay 2018), most likely with the tacit complicity of Chinese border security forces, underlining a degree of porosity of borders evading the Chinese state’s efforts at increased securitization.

Of more immediate concern to India and Bhutan should be the newly-established border *xiaokang* villages. In our study, new villages are few in number but crucial as they are located very close to the LAC and near or within Bhutanese territory. These villages are built to make territorial claims by ‘establishing facts on the ground’.

There is also evidence that apart from Pangda village, China has started settling nomadic populations in northern Bhutan (Barnett 2021). These settlements have not yet been designated as *xiaokang* villages but serve the same purpose and might be designated so in China's 15th Five Year Plan (2025-2030).

Settling population in or near the LAC has obvious implications for the India-China boundary dispute. Article VII of the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question signed between India and China in 2005 states that the two countries "shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas" while demarcating the boundary (Ministry of External Affairs 2005). Therefore, the objective of the Chinese policy to increase the population of border counties, principally through settling nomadic populations in new settlements, especially in occupied areas in the Western Sector of the boundary dispute, is an attempt to exploit this clause even if these *xiaokang* villages might not support the People's Liberation Army tactically.

In a highly securitised discourse, China's policy of *xiaokang* villages can be easily (mis)interpreted as being part of a military strategy. However, we argue that despite its implications for military operations, the slow and non-military institutional origins of the policy, and its focus on socio-economic development as well as territorial claim-making should be acknowledged. This is not to say that China cannot or will not develop *xiaokang* villages to serve larger military goals, but the nuanced perspective employed here allows us to study equally consequential matters such as China's approaches to borderland governance and how China funds and might sustain dual-use infrastructure in border areas.

Conclusion

Border defense has been a key objective during Xi Jinping's tenure and developing border *xiaokang* villages is one of several policies towards this end. And yet, it is not simply territorial objectives against India or Bhutan that are at stake here for Beijing for if it were, China could have simply built purely military stations at possibly lower costs and with lower effort instead of *xiaokang* villages. But as this study makes clear, there are several more objectives of *xiaokang* villages besides their functions supporting Chinese military objectives.

The Chinese Party-state's efforts are also about achieving efficient administration and political stability in TAR. Its policies aim to penetrate deeper into local society through village-based cadre teams, Party-building at the village level, mass activities for ideological and legal consciousness and, in the *xiaokang* villages, also the establishment of farmers' and herders' cooperatives.

China's socio-economic plans in *xiaokang* villages and the implementing agencies involved highlight a larger development policy objective that analysts and observers should be aware of. It should be noted, for example, that *xiaokang* villages exist also in Yunnan province with similar goals (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Nongye Nongcunbu 2021). Many villages in TAR are sites of relocation as part of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization programmes with one focus being on tourism around the Kailash Yatra and the ancient Guge Kingdom.

With its strategy of Economic and Technology Development Zones in TAR that aim to develop the Tibetan economy away from traditional sectors and toward export-oriented industries, construction, and even high-tech manufacturing (Kumar, D. 2024a), it is quite possible that *xiaokang* villages will become part of this approach. This can lead to a greater interest in TAR for economic exchanges across the LAC/international boundary. While economic development can potentially address livelihood concerns of Tibetans as well as mitigate their political concerns, the possibility that such development will bring with them further domestic social and political challenges - for example, a rise in Tibetan disaffection due to Han inward migration and discrimination in favour of the latter - cannot be ruled out either. Add to these also diplomatic challenges over the boundary dispute with India.

Taken together, the Chinese-Party state's policies with respect to *xiaokang* villages reflect anxieties about territorial and political control over minority-dominated border areas. Attempts to improve socio-economic conditions in border areas by settling nomadic populations in *xiaokang* villages serves multiple purposes. For one, it aids the narrative of the Chinese state as a modernizing influence and a welfare state in comparison to both Tibet's perceived past as a feudal society as well as conditions in border areas in the countries bordering Tibet - India, Nepal and Bhutan - where populations can often be cut off from the mainstream and possess low development indicators. For another, the settlement of populations can serve the function of better central administration, including surveillance, by breaking access to traditional patterns of movement or migration, and ties to the land. Making it even more difficult for Tibetans to flee their homeland into exile is certainly one objective.

China's *xiaokang* villages are, thus, simply the latest method in a long historical process of state construction and territorial consolidation in its peripheries. And more than ever before, the Chinese state has the means - administrative, economic, military, and technological - to corral nomadic populations into fixed settlements more amenable to both economic production and centralised control while also serving border security and territorial claim-making purposes.

Endnotes

ⁱ The villages are categorized into first and second line *xiaokang* villages for the purposes of assigning subsidies and other state support to villages. The residents in the first line (第一钱) villages get higher subsidies and support than the second line (第二钱) villages. Officials and cadres in the former also get higher salaries and benefits (Xizang Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu 2023).

ⁱⁱ This works uses Tibetan names as far as possible as listed in maps by the Amnye

Machen Institute Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh available at <http://www.tibetmap.com/TARbr.html>. If there is a better-known Chinese name, this is mentioned in brackets. Wherever Tibetan names were unavailable, the Chinese name available was used.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that Ngari Prefecture and Droma in Shigatse fall under the jurisdiction of two separate military districts of China's Western Theatre Command. The former comes under the Xinjiang Military District while the latter is under the Tibet Military District (Wei 2015; Guo 2019).

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