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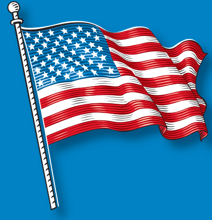

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TRIBUNE SPECIAL REPORT | CHINA'S GREAT GRAB

The price we pay for China's boom

Tribune photos by Pete Souza

China's herds of cashmere-producing goats have helped graze the grasslands down to a moonscape.

PART ONE: Our love of cheap cashmere holds a hidden cost for Asia's land and America's air.

By Evan Osnos | Tribune foreign correspondent

ON THE ALASHAN PLATEAU, China

Shatar the herdsman squinted into the twilight on the ruined grasslands where Genghis Khan once galloped.

He frowned and called his goats. The wind tasted like dust.

On the other side of the world, another morning dawned in the historic embrace between the world's low-cost factory and its best customer. Every minute of every day last year, America gobbled up $463,200 worth of Chinese goods—including millions of cashmere sweaters made from the hair of goats like Shatar's.

In less than a decade, a deluge of cheap cashmere from China has transformed a centuries-old industry, stripping the plush fabric of its pricey pedigree and making it available in big-box America. Chinese-made cashmere sweaters now go for as little as $19.99.

But behind the inexpensive Made in China tag is something Americans rarely see: the cascade of consequences around the world when the full might of Chinese production and U.S. consumption converge on a scarce natural resource.

With all the grand ways to measure the impact of China's ascent—the mountains of exports, the armadas of oil tankers—there might seem little reason to take stock of a commodity as innocuous as cashmere. Yet the improbable connection between cheap sweaters, Asia's prairies and America's air captures how the most ordinary shifts in the global economy are triggering extraordinary change.

This is the story of how your sweater pollutes the air you breathe—and how the rise of China shapes the world.

PLEASE SEE **CHINA,** PAGE 14

Every minute of every day last year, America gobbled up $463,200 worth of Chinese goods—including millions of inexpensive cashmere sweaters.

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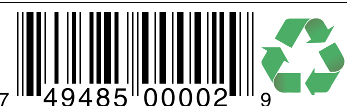


TRIBUNE SPECIAL REPORT | CHINA'S GREAT GRAB

How cashmere pollutes the world

CHINA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The country's enormous herds of cashmere-producing goats have slashed the price of sweaters. But they also have helped graze Chinese grasslands down to a moonscape, unleashing some of the worst dust storms on record. This in turn fuels a plume of pollution heavy enough to reach the skies over North America.

China's breakneck consumption of raw materials is part of an economic revolution that has lifted 400 million Chinese out of poverty but at a growing environmental cost around the globe. And with their burgeoning appetite for Chinese goods, American consumers have become crucial if unwitting partners, financing the political survival of Beijing's one-party regime.

Not only has China's demand for resources proved strong enough to turn its grasslands into a dust bowl, it has driven illegal logging into prized tropical forests and restaged a risky Great Game for control of vital oil supplies.

Every product—every T-shirt, every SUV, every child's toy—has a global footprint defined by the resources and energy used to make it. In the case of cashmere, America snapped up a record-smashing 10.5 million Chinese sweaters last year, 15 times as many as a decade ago, and far more than every cashmere sweater imported last year from Italy and the United Kingdom combined.

It's impossible to say how much any single product contributes to China's choking air pollution. But the spike in demand for cashmere is taking a toll on the soil, air and water in China as well as the U.S.—a cost that never appears on any store's tag. And many consumers are unaware of the link.

"I would never have imagined," Colleen Young said amid the bulk Cheerios and plasma TVs at a Costco on Chicago's North Side. "When you're shopping for a sweater, you would never think of pollution. Maybe the poor animal, maybe slave labor. But never pollution."

Still, she gazed appreciatively at the $69.99 lavender crewneck in her hands, pulling at the Chinese-made sweater's waistline to test the quality. "That's a really good price," she said. "This is every bit as nice as the one I bought at Bloomingdale's."

A grassless prairie

As goats go, Shatar's are thoroughbreds—crystal-white coats, pure bloodlines and the durability to withstand China's punishing north, where summer boils to 107 degrees and winter sinks to 33 degrees below zero.

Straddling the Mongolian border, far from China's throbbing cities, the Alashan Plateau produces the world's most expensive cashmere—that downy underlayer of a goat's hair that sells for at least six times the price of ordinary wool. Side by side under a microscope, Alashan cashmere makes a single human hair look like rope.

Shatar, 51, who like most Chinese nomads uses one name, grew up here. He has ridden two decades of China's cashmere boom, enlarging his herd by one-third, to more than 300, and steadily pushing production. The profits have given him a small three-room house and paid for his daughter's college education.

But something in Alashan has gone wrong.

Shatar called his goats once more, and the animals trudged into view. Their wispy coats fluttered in the wind. They limped up a hill and slumped to the ground around him. They were starving.

"Look at them. They have nothing to eat," Shatar said. Throwing handfuls of dry corn, he added, "If it keeps up this way, I'll have to sell half the animals."

This stretch of China's mythic grasslands, one of the world's largest prairies, is running out of grass. The land is so barren that Shatar and other herders buy cut grass and corn by the truckload to keep their animals alive. Goats are so weak that some herders carry the stragglers home by motorcycle. Shatar expects most of his goats will live 10 years, half the life span of their parents.

The animals' birthrate is sinking too. Shatar once had 100 new goats each spring. This year he got 40. Even the precious cashmere has begun to suffer. Hungry goats are sprouting shorter, coarser, less valuable fleece.

Shatar crouched to grab a clump of gravelly dust from his family land. When he was young, it was carpeted in green.

"Our life depends on nature," he said softly. "Things are getting worse year by year."

He stood and cast aside the handful of thin, russet-colored earth. It vanished into the breeze.

Cashmere goes big box

The "diamond fiber," as cashmere is known in China, has shed some sparkle in the West. There are cashmere bikinis and hoodies, jogging suits and baby clothes. Target is pushing a tousled "Casual Cashmere Look."

Of all cashmere products, though, nothing changed faster than the simple sweater. China sold its cashmere sweaters to America for just $34 on average last year, a full 75 percent off the import price of the Scottish version.

The sudden shift from elite to everywhere has convulsed an industry that once prided itself on its posh cachet.

"This growth has been truly incredible," said Andy Bartmess, chief operating officer of Scottish cashmere producer Dawson International. In a September speech to Chinese producers, Bartmess pleaded with them to halt the tumbling price. "Cashmere has a hundred-plus-year history as a luxury product," he said. "The last few years have begun to destroy that reputation."

The *Capra hircus*, a.k.a. the goat, keeps its most valuable asset hidden. Its cashmere is combed each spring from beneath the coarse "guard hair" of the goat's outer coat. It takes two or three animals to produce a sweater, twice that for a sport coat.

Many have tried to breed cashmere goats outside the bleak, harsh plateaus and mountains of Asia, but few have succeeded. That has left global supplies of the stuff at roughly 15,000 tons a year—70 percent of it from China.

Until recently, not much had changed in the business since the 16th Century, when Kashmiri craftsmen spun shawls out of material delivered to India by Silk Road caravans from China, Afghanistan and northern Persia. Very little ever came from Kashmir itself, but the name stuck.

By the early 19th Century, French Empress Eugenie created an icon by wearing shawls delicate enough to be drawn through a ring. In the 1870s, Scottish mill owner Joseph Dawson mechanized the processing of cashmere, and a blue-blood tradition was born.

The whiff of empire endured: For decades, Chinese and Mongolian herders sold nearly all their raw fiber to Europe and the U.S. for Western mills to process and sell. Brands such as Italy's Loro Piana and Scotland's Pringle were the Western outlets for China's raw material.

"The president of Dawson would come over [to Beijing] like a king and say '50 tons from here, 80 tons from there.' He would stay in the presidential suite," said Christian Murphy, the British-born managing director of Beijing-based Alphatex Knitting Co. "That's how business was done."

From the grasslands to the shelf, it was a stable, stodgy business.

Deng Xiaoping changed all that. In 1979 the Chinese leader launched his historic drive toward a market economy, and China's garment industry exploded. In a pattern that later would ripple through products from electronics to furniture, China swiftly claimed the bulk of the world's $350 billion textile trade.

It now exports an estimated 20 billion finished garments a year—more than three pieces of clothing for every person on Earth.

'Warm the Whole World'

Wang Linxiang is the Henry Ford of cashmere. In 1981 he was a 30-year-old Communist Party official overseeing a lethargic state-run plant in Inner Mongolia when he set out to make as many sweaters as the West would buy. With a new name, Erdos Cashmere Co., and a new motto, "Warm the Whole World," Wang opened the age of mass cashmere production in China, ending the fabric's exclusivity.

Since then, hundreds of competing companies have sprouted across China. Special industrial parks devoted to the business of cashmere have opened on the plains of northern China.

"If you cooperate with us, you're 100 percent guaranteed to make money," declared Zhang Zhijun, manager of the Zuoqi Jiali Co., striding through his 1-year-old factory.

Zhang was in a good mood; one of his partners, Edenweiss International, said it had just received an order for 300,000 cashmere coats from Wal-Mart.

As with everything from groceries to socks, such high-volume retailers have changed the way customers think about cashmere prices.

"When we negotiate and are able to reduce prices by additional purchases or large quantity, we are going to pass that along to [customers] in every case," said Jack Weisbly, a Costco executive who oversees cashmere products. "I think once the consumer was able to buy a cashmere sweater for $100, rather than $300, consumers came to appreciate and expect it."

But that fierce price competition leaves cashmere industry veterans concerned. The big-box revolution is putting pressure on both their business and the land that sustains it.

So many cashmere plants and other industries have opened in Alashan that authorities must ration water, forcing each factory to close for days at a time. Herders are forgetting the names of grasses that have vanished as their goats have helped denude the land.

"Desertification is a big problem, and we know that all types of goats are rather voracious and tend to damage the fragile pasture," said Swiss cashmere executive Francis Patthey in a speech to Chinese suppliers.

The problem is being ignored, Patthey said. And it's easy to see why. With U.S. demand at an all-time high, companies continue to build new factories and buy more expensive equipment—putting themselves deeper in debt. That glut of production, in turn, pushes prices ever lower.

At Lingwu Zhongyin Cashmere, a high-end producer where workers were busy stitching Saks Fifth Avenue labels onto pale blue sweaters, executive Ma Feng said he worries that the system is overheating.

"People forget this: Cashmere is not like cotton," Ma said. "It's a very limited natural resource."

The limits of that resource have become impossible to ignore. Just down the street from Alashan's cashmere factories, bright yellow sand dunes rise from the horizon like an implausible movie set.

Without grass and shrubs to hold the dunes in place any longer, the deserts in Alashan are expanding by nearly 400 square miles a year. The land, it seems, is reclaiming itself from the people.

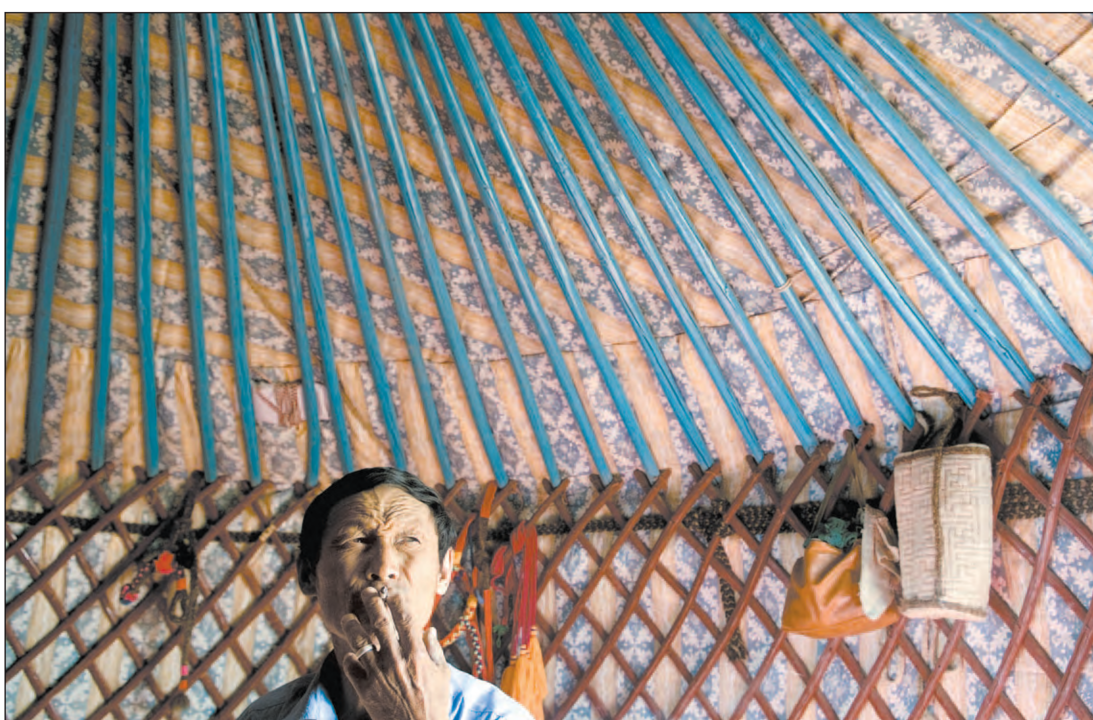
Making the plains bloom

Not long ago, the Alashan Plateau was one of the world's least-inhabited places.

The size of Colorado and Arizona combined, it is unrelentingly severe, with ridges as tall as the Rockies, seas of sand and epic grasslands straddling China's border with Mongolia. In a good

Tribune photos by Pete Souza

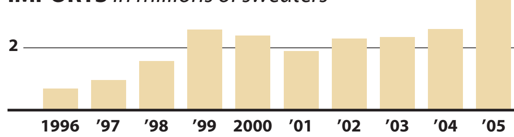
A worker sews labels on sweaters in China. Most Americans are unaware of the link between inexpensive cashmere and its toll on the environment. "When you're shopping for a sweater, you would never think of pollution," one Chicago shopper said.

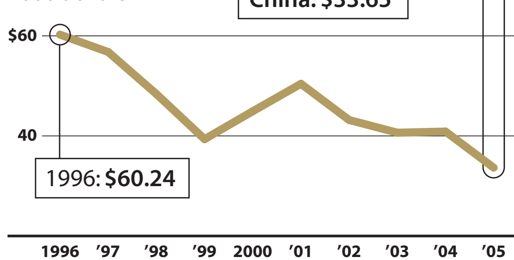


Like many others, herder Biligedeli shifted from camels to more lucrative goats. But amid a vanishing grassland, his herd produced just two surviving kids this year, down from 70 a year ago.

OUR APPETITE FOR CASHMERE

In 2005 the U.S. imported a staggering 10.5 million cashmere sweaters from China. The import cost was the lowest in at least 10 years—and half of what such imports from Italy cost.





Source: Cashmere and Camel Hair Manufacturers Institute

Chicago Tribune

Rise of a global power requires non-stop growth

By Evan Osnos
Tribune foreign correspondent

BEIJING—In less than a generation, China has transformed the lives of more people at greater speed than any society in history. Its future hinges on maintaining that feat.

In the late 1970s, the world's most populous country concluded it could no longer allow politics to keep it poor. Mao Tse-tung's communist revolution of 1949 had succeeded in ensuring China's sovereignty, but turmoil and famine had left it out of step with the 20th Century. So Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, set out to fast-forward China past as much of the 20th Century as possible.

China has since lifted a third of its 1.3 billion people out of poverty and minted its first generation of billionaires. The economy is surging so fast—faster than in any major country—that Beijing announced last year that China's economy actually was 17 percent larger than officials had previously tallied, the economic equivalent of stumbling on an Austria that had gone unnoticed.

China's massive workforce, authoritarianism and capitalism have proved a potent mix, allowing the nation to sprint through stages of development that took other countries a century to cover. Private telephones were a rarity at the dawn of the 1980s; by last year, the number of mobile phone users passed 350 million. The one-time land of bicycles has become the world's second-largest car market, on pace to surpass the U.S. within two decades.

Like centuries of emperors before them, though, Beijing's leaders know their power rests on a fragile political bargain: As long as life improves, most of China's people do not challenge the Communist Party's grip on power. The bargain requires creating millions of jobs a year or facing rumblings from below.

Years of growth have stirred popular resentment that wealth is not shared equally. Protests, some violent, are more common today than at any time since the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989. In an effort to stem the widening income gap, President Hu Jintao has directed more investment into poor, rural areas. But the gap still widens.

Looming is a more fundamental problem: Where will China's raw materials come from?

With its white-hot growth outstripping its natural resources, a nation that once was devoted to socialist self-sufficiency has become one of the world's busiest importers. On any given day, Chinese ports receive tin from Bolivia, copper from Zambia, oil from Sudan and timber from Indonesia.

China already consumes more grain, meat, fertilizer, coal, steel, copper, cement and refrigerators than the U.S., by one count. Yet its per capita consumption remains many times lower than America's.

And that is a troubling prospect. If China's 1.3 billion people are to live like Americans, says UCLA geographer Jared Diamond, China would double the global environmental impact and demand on natural resources. In other words, the world would need another Earth.

TRIBUNE SPECIAL REPORT | CHINA'S GREAT GRAB

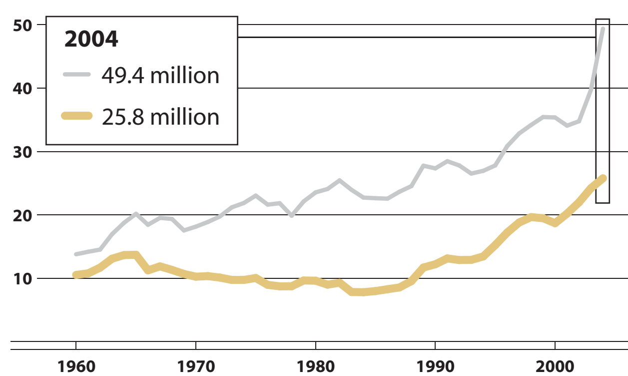
THE HIDDEN COSTS OF CASHMERE

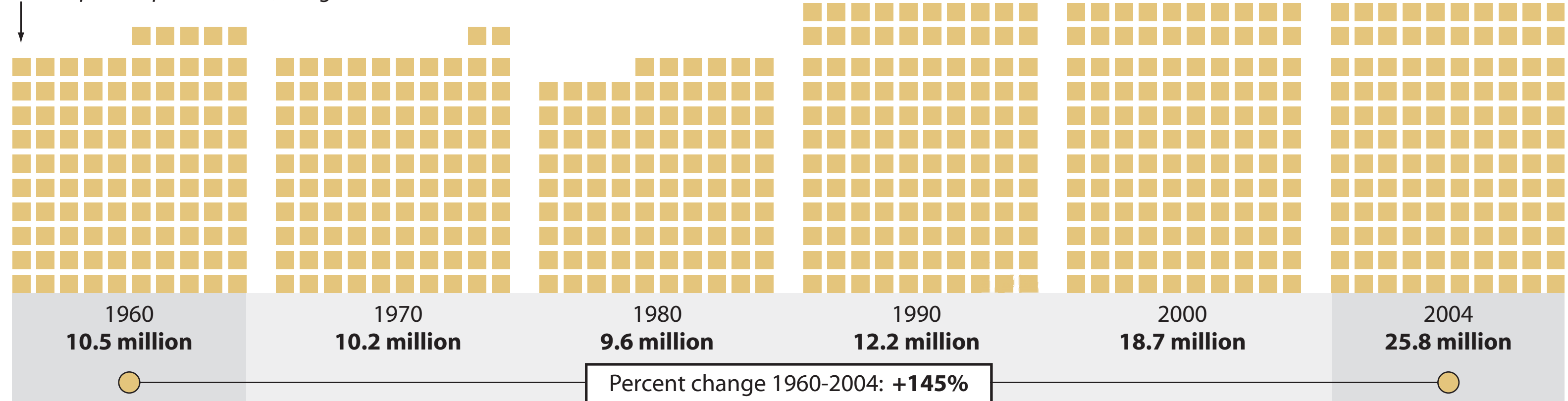
China's cashmere industry exploded in the 1990s when importers turned away from more expensive European goods. Herders drove increasing numbers of goats onto shrinking grasslands despite drought conditions and ecological damage to lands already overgrazed and overplowed. The pace is slowing now, but the desertification is contributing to annual dust storms that carry pollutants to the U.S.

LIVESTOCK NUMBERS

For China's Inner Mongolia region, scale in millions

Goats Sheep





Note: Although sheep outnumber goats, they are less destructive because goats' spiked hooves damage the soil.

A DUST STORM'S LONG JOURNEY

The increased number of cashmere goats in the Gobi Desert has quickened the denuding of the land, already the source of annual dust storms that are capable of reaching the U.S. In 1998, scientists were finally able to document this phenomenon with satellites and track a storm around the globe. The storms continue to be a problem.

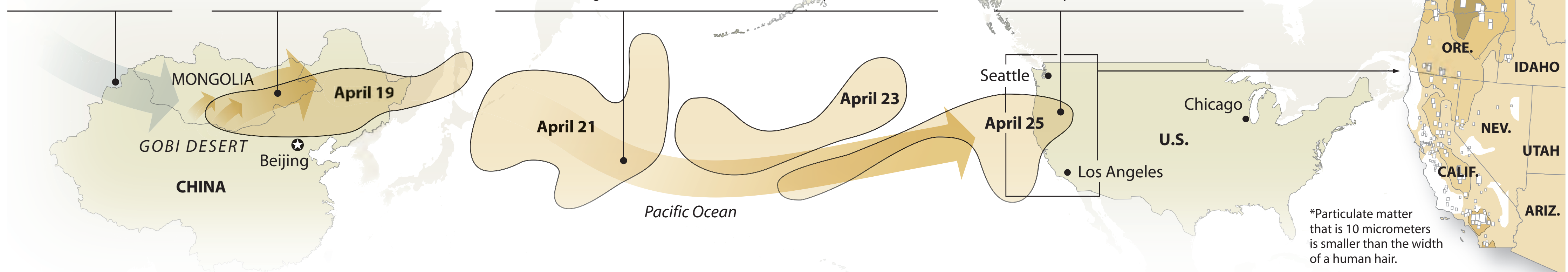
Cold spring winds form in Russia and head southeast toward the Gobi Desert.

The winds pick up dust from the Gobi and elevate it to the upper level of the lower atmosphere, about 5 miles above Earth.

The dust moves across the Pacific, swirling up and down with the normal pattern of storms. In most storms, up to 90 percent of dust becomes trapped in weather patterns and gets rained out. But during this event, most of the dust stays intact.

GOBI DUST REACHES U.S.

On April 25, Gobi dust discolors the sky over the U.S. Heavy dust over the Pacific Northwest prompts air pollution advisories. Two or three of these springtime storms per year produce spikes of Asian dust.



Sources: Inner Mongolia Bureau of Statistics; "The Asian Dust Events of April 1998" and its lead author, Rudolf Husar of Washington University in St. Louis

Chicago Tribune/Sue-Lyn Erbeck and Keith Claxton

year, it gets 6 to 12 inches of rain.

For centuries, pastoral nomads had lived more or less as they had since Mongol tribes ruled Eurasia. They raised camels, sheep, cattle and goats, roaming to let the land recover. It was dry but dotted with rivers and small lakes.

"When I was young, the whole area was green," recalled Ge Lasheng, 63, a doctor who lives near Shatar the herdsman. "There was a creek here that ran for 3 kilometers in either direction."

But in the 1950s, the father of modern China, Mao Tse-tung, urged his people to open the western frontier and make the plains bloom. In the tiny grassland village of Yaoba, leaders answered the call by luring homesteaders with the slogan "Develop the prairie of Yaoba!"

Ancient uses of the land changed almost overnight. Nomads were required to settle down. Villages appeared where none had existed before.

Near Shatar's home, migrants arrived in 1956 and established the town of Wuliji. They dug deep wells and opened a factory to make wooden tables and chairs. Within a decade, they had chopped down all the local trees, and the factory closed.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, migrants helped triple Inner Mongolia's population to 21 million. Some tried to cultivate land that had never been farmed. Many others swarmed to the fast-growing cashmere trade.

By 1982, recurring droughts plagued the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia, straining already arid lands. Still, national leaders pressed ahead with further development. When Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the Erdos cashmere factory in 1990, he urged his people to expand the processing industry.

Like many other herders on the Alashan Plateau, Biligedeli, 51, shifted from camels to goats, whose hair is more lucrative. "A herding family will watch what animals bring the most economic benefit," he said.

But details as seemingly insignificant as the shape of a hoof or the style of eating were changing the fragile grasslands.

"Have you ever done any ballroom dancing with someone who steps on your foot? The goats have stiletto heels," which break up the delicate plants that hold the dust in place, said Martin Williams, an authority on desertification at the University of Adelaide in Australia. "The camels have broad, soft pads. So a camel can tread on you and you wouldn't feel it."

Goats also are expert foragers.

"They graze down to lower levels and pull up stuff, where a camel would be browsing," Williams said. "The goats nibble at the bark around seedlings which transports nutrients to the plant, so once that bark has been damaged, the plant will die."

Across Inner Mongolia, the number of goats soared tenfold from 2.4 million in 1949 to 25.8 million in 2004. Camels, meanwhile, declined 8 percent to 10,100.

Today, China's grasslands, the world's third-largest, are turning into deserts. In just five years, from 1994 to 1999, the Gobi Desert expanded by an area larger than the Netherlands, according to the UN Environment Program.

Not only does that rob farmers and herders of valuable land, but similarly eroding grasslands on the Tibetan Plateau in western China also deposit silt into the headwaters of rivers that flow to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Southeast Asia.

Biligedeli the herder lives amid the consequences. His land is barren. Standing beside his goat pen, he stared at his ailing herd, which produced just two surviving kids this year—down from 70 a year ago.

Sand as fine as talc clung to the base of scattered grass. Irrigation has further desiccated the soil. From the western edge of Biligedeli's parched plot, the wind off the plateau raked the ground and headed east—straight toward the country's industrial heartland.

A plume of destruction

On Sunday, April 9, Beijing residents woke to an unnerving sight: the sky was orange.

Shatar and other herders buy cut grass and corn by the truckload to keep their animals alive. Shatar expects most of his goats will live 10 years, half the life span of their parents.

A blizzard of dust hung in the wind and blanketed cars, trees and rooftops. It mixed with industrial pollution and formed a soupy cloud. Environmental officials warned children and the elderly not to open windows or go outside while the city weathered the worst air pollution of the year.

Such storms are increasingly common. In the 1950s, China suffered an average of five dust and sand storms each year; in the 1970s, the average rose to 14, and in the 1990s storms struck 23 times each year, according to a 2005 study by the Asian Development Bank. That study found that for the past decade, Alashan has been the source of most sandstorms originating in China.

A storm in 2002 forced 1.8 million South Koreans to seek medical help and cost the country $7.8 billion in damage to industries such as airlines and semiconductors, said the state-run Korea Environment Institute.

Scientists thought that was as far as China's pollution could reach. But a wave of new research is detailing how China's dust and dirty air hurtle across the Pacific, fouling the sky, thickening the haze and altering the climate in the U.S.

"We had one storm in East Asia which we called the perfect dust storm," said Barry Huebert, an oceanographer at the University of Hawaii. "There are good images of it following over the Pacific as a yellow plume. When it got to Colorado, it reduced visibility enough to make the national news. It continued east, and the last measurement was in the Canary Islands" off the west coast of Africa.

What scientists call trans-Pacific transport is an airborne highway of dust and pollutants. Indeed, just as China's air comes to the U.S., North American pollution traverses the Atlantic. But China's air poses particular hazards because it is some of the world's filthiest. Roughly 300,000 people die each year in China of diseases linked to air pollution, according to a Chinese research institute.

The main culprit is coal. About 70 percent of China's soaring energy needs are met by coal-fired power plants. Many private homes also burn coal, combining to give China some of the world's highest emissions of sulfur dioxide, soot and other pollutants.

The goats play an important role as well. Dust from the animal-ravaged grasslands of Alashan is snatched by wind and sent east, where smokestacks frost it in a layer of pollution. Together the noxious brew reaches the U.S. within five days, where it can combine with local pollution to exceed the limits of healthy air, said Rudolf Husar, an atmospheric chemist at Washington University in St. Louis.

Of most concern are ultratiny particles that lodge deep in the lungs, contributing to respiratory damage, heart disease and cancer. One storm that began in China and Mongolia in spring 1998 caused a spike in air pollution that prompted health officials in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and British Columbia to issue warnings to the public.

That storm was strong enough to drape a brown cloud over the West Coast. Most of the time, China's dirty dust is invisible to everyone except the growing ranks of researchers troubled by it.

From China, with dust

From 2,500 feet in the hills above San Francisco, Steven Cliff peers down on a spectacular range of forests, skyscrapers, clouds and sea. But Cliff and other researchers are more concerned about what lies years over the horizon.

Cliff unlatched a plastic box filled with eight highly sensitive air monitors. From atop Mt. Tamalpais and other sites on the West Coast, researchers are discovering that polluted air from Asia hits the U.S. far more regularly than was believed even two years ago.

"As pollution levels in Asia continue to rise, I believe that we will observe more Asian pollution in the U.S. in the future," said Cliff, an atmospheric scientist at the University of California, Davis.

Asian dust already accounted for 40 percent of the worst dust days in the Western U.S. in 2001, according to a study by researchers at NASA and Harvard. Despite efforts to reduce emissions, a top Chinese environmental official warned last year that air pollution could quadruple within 15 years because of the rapid rise in private cars and energy use in China. More Chinese pollution will make it harder and more expensive for cities like Los Angeles to meet strict federal air standards.

Chinese environmental authorities recognize the damage contributed by overgrazing and are struggling to stem it. They have stitched massive checkered straw mats into the surface of the desert, dropped seeds from planes and planted millions of trees nationwide. Nothing has solved the problem.

Officials on the front line of the advancing deserts are scrambling to undo the damage that got them here. In Inner Mongolia they have banned grazing on 163,000 square miles—more than a third of the province—since 2000, with broader bans to come. Other herders have been required to lock up their animals and feed them by hand.

Just as the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s sent millions migrating to California, Chinese herders are moving off the grasslands to try farming and other trades. As grazing gets more difficult, China's impact on the market is reversing: the price of cashmere has begun to climb.

"This year, grazing bans have cut production in growing areas by 20 percent," Zhongyin Cashmere executive Ma said amid a factory floor of humming knitting machines. "In the long run, the output is going to decrease year by year."

The American cashmere industry says it cannot solve the crisis in the grasslands. The problem is "probably bigger than the industry," said Karl Spilhaus, president of the Boston-based Cashmere and Camel Hair Manufacturers Institute. "It's a government problem and a world problem."

If China's measures to address the issue don't have a real impact, pollution will keep rising both within China and abroad. For a world that has come to rely on China's distant engines of production, that will bring the costs much closer to home.

Yet it was easy to forget all that on the clear fall morning that Cliff checked his mountaintop sensors. A cool wind spiked the air, and cars glided back and forth across the Golden Gate Bridge.

Christmas was coming, and stacks of cheap, fluffy cashmere were already in the stores.

The pull of cashmere

On the other side of the world, Shatar the herdsman saw no choice but to leave his land.

After a long, bitter summer, the same cashmere goats that had brought him prosperity now cost him a fortune to keep alive. He was trucking grass and corn from 120 miles away, consuming the very windfall that cashmere could deliver.

So Shatar and his family packed up their motorcycle and shuttered the house that cashmere built.

They moved the herd 50 miles south in search of grass. He was leaving the plot where his father was born. But he would do anything to avoid resettling in a town, the fate of hundreds of other herders who are succumbing to their industry's overuse of the land. Many of those former nomads can be found in Alashan's towns, listlessly growing wheat and raising dairy cows—the nomad's equivalent of a desk job.

"Herdsmen can't take farming life because we've been doing this for generations," Shatar said.

In November, just two months after leaving his land, Shatar returned. He was determined not to end up like the other herders in town. Cashmere was too good to give up.

Lu Jingxian and Ari Sznajder in Beijing contributed to this report.

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