

TIBET SPECIAL

Aviation industry a game-changer for locals

Jangra Yeshe, a girl from an impoverished family of herders in Damxung county, Tibet autonomous region, did not expect she would live a life different from other children in her neighborhood.

She is the seventh child of a nine-children family living on the grassland of the Nying-drong township.

Life was simple throughout her childhood. After attending school, she did jobs such as sheep herding and shearing, while also making butter at home.

While herding on the grassland, she loved to fly paper planes.

"I hope some day I can fly a real aircraft and see our grassland from the sky," Jangra Yeshe used to say.

Her dream came true three years ago, with the help of a poverty-relieving program launched by a local general aviation company.

At the end of 2016, when she studied at Lhasa's No. 2 Secondary Vocational and Technical School, Jangra Yeshe received a call from the Lhasa-based Snow Eagle General Aviation Co. The organization made her dreams come true when it selected her as one of several pilots from poverty-stricken families.

She later learned that she was among the 28 winners selected by Snow Eagle General Aviation from a greater number of candidates, as part of the company's poverty-reduction efforts.

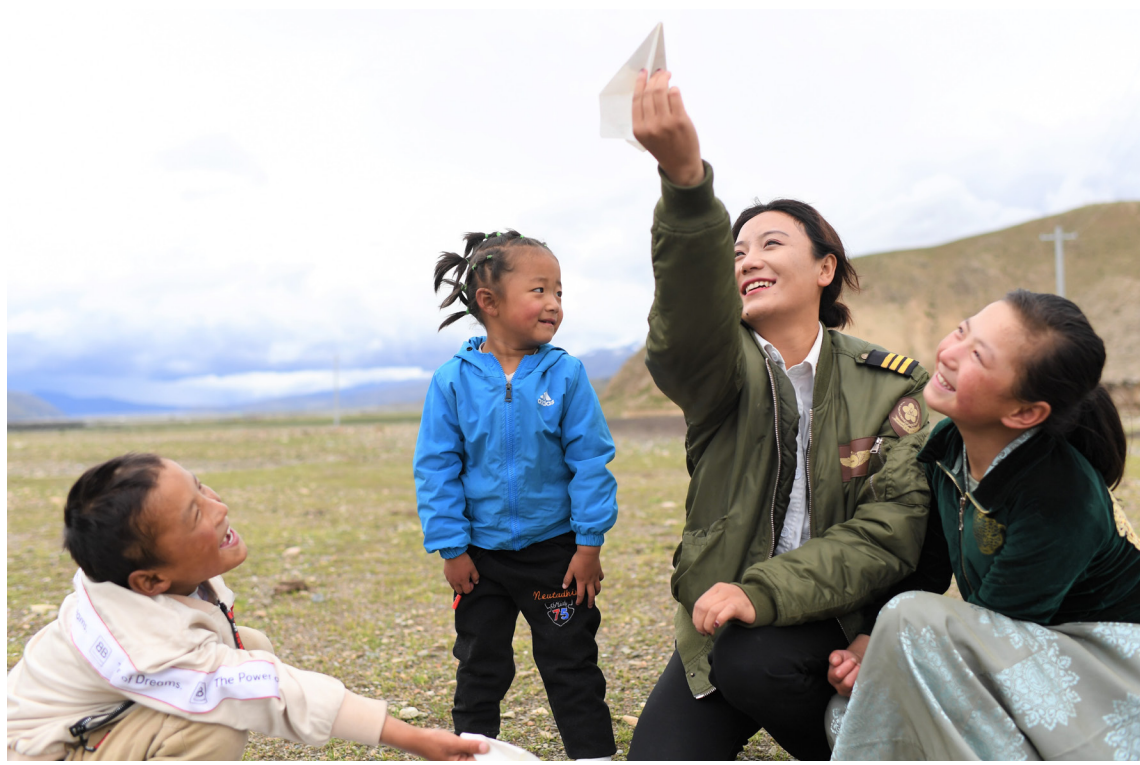
Sixteen of the students would take courses for pilots and 12 for crew members, Jangra Yeshe said.

Funded by Nanjing, Jiangsu-based Ruor General Aviation Development Group, Snow Eagle was founded in 2016 in Lhasa.

With business covering short-distance transportation, emergency rescue, urban management and sightseeing, Snow Eagle is one of the first general aviation companies for high-altitude plateau operations in China.

"I couldn't believe I would have a chance to receive training for a pilot," Jianre Yixi said.

According to Snow Eagle, the cost for training a helicopter pilot is about 1.45 million yuan (\$207,000) and a crew member about 480,000 yuan.



Jangra Yeshe flies paper planes with children in her home village in Damxung county. PURBU TASHI / XINHUA



Above and left: Jangra Yeshe, from an impoverished family of herders in Damxung county, is a licensed helicopter pilot at Lhasa-based Snow Eagle General Aviation Co. PURBU TASHI / XINHUA

Jangra Yeshe said she departed from Lhasa for Nanjing on Jan 12, 2017. The journey consisted of a train trip from Lhasa to Golmud in Qinghai province and an air trip from Golmud to Nanjing.

"That was my first time traveling by plane. I was so excited in imagining how cool it is to fly a helicopter myself," Jangra Yeshe said.

Once arriving at the Ruor General Aviation training school in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, she found that learning to fly is a far more arduous task than she expected.

"During the first month at the training school, we spent a lot of time on studying the basic theories for flying, doing exercises and learning Putonghua or standard Chinese.

Learning Putonghua is the most difficult for our Tibetan students," Jangra Yeshe said.

Helicopter training started on Feb 24, 2017.

"Flying a helicopter is much more difficult than flying other aircrafts because all the operations are manual," the girl said.

She added that positioning from the air is even harder. "You need to circle around again and again to position yourself accurately. The practice makes you very uncomfortable."

The girl said she encountered her biggest challenge in her training during a flying test.

"I was flying alone for a three-hour trip from Suzhou to Yangzhou, another city in Jiangsu. The ground position-

ing system malfunctioned during the process, which made me extremely nervous.

"Fortunately the system quickly returned to normal," Jangra Yeshe said.

After 150 hours of flying training, the girl said she became capable of responding to many kinds of emergency.

"Even without GPS, I can fly guided by my eyesight and land safely," Jangra Yeshe said.

After obtaining licenses for flying a helicopter in March 2018, she started her career as a pilot in Snow Eagle.

"The training program and the job as a helicopter pilot have brought fundamental changes to me and my family," Jangra Yeshe said.

She said she currently has a monthly salary of 11,600 yuan.

"In the first month, I gave most of the money to my parents, leaving only 600 yuan for myself," Jangra Yeshe said.

She said she hoped to buy an apartment in Lhasa city and live together with her parents.

"It's too cold to live in my old house in Damxung county in the winter. It should be more comfortable in Lhasa where centralized heating is installed in residences," she said.

She said her parents and neighbors have expressed their pride in her since she became a pilot.

"Once I flew a helicopter back to Damxung on a mission, the villagers praised me as a fairy flying into the blue sky and the pride of Damxung," she said.

Pema Yangzom, a girl from Chushul county, is another beneficiary of the Snow Eagle program.

She was trained as an airplane crew member.

"I brought with me only 800 yuan when I arrived at the training school in Suzhou. Now I earn 8,000 yuan a month," Pema Yangzom said.

She also expected to buy an apartment in Lhasa and live together with her 86-year-old grandmother.

"Thanks to the efforts of the government and the business community in poverty reduction, I'm offered a good opportunity to change my destiny and that of my family," Pema Yangzom said. "I will work harder and make greater contributions to society."

According to Sumtsen, deputy general manager of Snow Eagle, the company has currently employed 110 staff members, with 75 percent of them being residents of Tibet.

"The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau was once known as a 'no-fly zone' and it was extremely difficult to fly helicopters there.

Now the first group of young Tibetans has flown civilian helicopters to the Mt Qomolangma base camp after professional and intensive training," Sumtsen said.

"We will continue our efforts in poverty reduction and train more local professionals to better serve the socio-economic development of Tibet and help more young people realize their dreams."

— YUAN SHENGGAO

Farming improvements offer poverty alleviation for residents of Tibet

Summer is the best time for the growth of sheep in the Tibet autonomous region.

Local herdsman Dogon led a herd of more than 1,400 sheep to a ranch of lush grassland at the foot of a snow-covered mountain.

Dogon, in his 50s, is a herdsman in Jingdrol village in Awang township of Gojo county, Tibet. He said he is one of the largest husbandry business operators in his village.

"As they grow fast, it's a very profitable business to raise sheep," Dogon said.

He said he sold more than 100 sheep last year, earning more than 300,000 yuan (\$42,900). More residents in his village have begun to raise sheep as a result of his success.

The local variety of the animal is called Awang sheep, which feature a larger body, better-quality wool and meat.

The Awang sheep is currently a dominant variety in Chamdo city and has played a crucial role in local poverty reduction.

Supported by local businesses and research entities, the Awang sheep industry has developed into a pillar sector of the local economy.

One such entity is the Awang Sheep Breeding Base in Bolo township in Gojo county.

The base is home to more than 3,400 sheep and lambs.

"We offer most of the lambs to nearby farmers, in addition to satisfying our own demand for meat and wool production," said Kelsang Tsering, manager

of the base.

He said the base has an incentive policy specifically designed for impoverished families.

"We provide them with lambs for free. When the lambs grow up one or two years later, we would purchase the sheep at preferential prices, leaving reasonable profits for both the raisers and our company," Kelsang Tsering said.

In 2019, the base spent 2.28 million yuan to purchase 2,400 sheep from 800 impoverished households. Kelsang Tsering estimated the average net income per household from the deals was 2,850 yuan.

The base also offered jobs to 10 local residents. Each of the employees, mostly from poverty-stricken families, was paid at least 2,300 yuan a month on average.

Among the employees, Ashak is one of the highest paid because of his hard work and a willingness to learn.

"My family was among the low-income families in the village several years ago. But now I earn about 7,500 yuan a month, which has helped lift my family immediately from poverty," Ashak said.

According to the government of Gojo, the county is currently home to 42,000 Awang sheep. The number is expected to reach 130,000 by 2025.

In Markham, another county in Chamdo city, planting grapes is a major means of poverty reduction and increasing farmers' incomes.

In Mogshod township in the Lancang River valley, Yang Peizheng operates a 0.24-hectare grape farm.

In 2019, the farmer earned more than 8,000 yuan by selling grapes to a local winery.

"This is a sharp contrast to what we were four years ago. My family then grew corn and highland barley, and could hardly make ends meet," Yang said.

According to Yeshe Dorje, head of the Mogshod township government, there are a total of 132 hectares of grape farms in the township.

Last year, Mogshod's grape output reached 350 metric tons and farmers' revenue from planting grapes totaled 1.77 million yuan.

"That means an increase of 8,400 yuan for each household on average," the official said.

Mogshod and its neighboring townships of Naxi and Chutsankha are located in the dry, hot valley of Lancang River.

"Plentiful sunshine and ease of irrigation with water from the Lancang make the region one of the most suitable places in Tibet for growing grapes," Yeshe Dorje said.

Also helping local farmers increase their revenue is the East Tibet Zhenbao Winery in Naxi township.

Grapes from the three townships are mostly sold to the company.

"We spent more than 2 million yuan for grapes from local growers last year," said Chogt-



A herd of sheep graze on a grassland at the foot of a snow-covered mountain in Awang township of Gojo county. ZHAN YAN / XINHUA



Chigtsuo, deputy manager of East Tibet Zhenbao Winery, shows one of the products of the company. ZHAN YAN / XINHUA

suo, deputy general manager of the company.

She added the company has employed 28 locals, with their average per capita monthly salary reaching 3,600 yuan.

In Chamdo city, grape planting area totaled 1,300 hectares, according to the city's poverty-reduction office.

The office said there are five wineries using locally grown

grapes as raw materials for winemaking.

Local statistics show that these enterprises produced 600 tons of grape wine and reported combined revenue of 64 million yuan last year. More than 400 residents have been lifted from poverty with the help of the companies.

— YUAN SHENGGAO