

ROOTS OF TOMORROW

Written Treatment

Submitted to: Choose Our Future — Imagine 2050 **Scenario:** Great Transition **Filmmaker:** Da Liu **Production Company:** Luqu County Zhenteng (ལུའུ་རྫོང་འཕེན་ཅན་) Grassland Governance and Environmental Protection Co., Ltd. **Format:** Documentary Short / 2 minutes 59 seconds **Status:** Principal photography complete

1. Logline

On the Tibetan Plateau, a community of nomads and a social enterprise attempt to reverse decades of grassland desertification — not with machines, but with ancient seeding methods, a monk's blessing, and the hooves of yaks — proving that the path to 2050 begins with centuries of patience.

2. The World of the Film

2.1 Setting: The Tibetan Plateau — Gannan, Gansu Province

The film is set on the "Roof of the World" — specifically the grasslands of Luqu County in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, at altitudes exceeding 3,500 meters. Eighty years ago, this landscape was one of the planet's great high-altitude peat wetlands, supplying 30% of the Yellow River's volume.

Today, vast tracts have degraded into what locals call "**Black Dirt Beach**" (*Heitutan*) — bare, cracked, desertified soil devoid of vegetation. The Tibetan name for the native grass, *Kobresia pygmaea*, is "**Spang gi Sha**" — literally, "Flesh of the Grassland." This grass is not a simple lawn. It is an "upside-down forest" — for every gram visible above ground, 20 to 90 grams of root grow below. A single square meter of healthy turf locks away approximately 10 kilograms of carbon, rivaling tropical rainforest soil. The unraveling of this root mat drives regional warming and accelerates glacier melt.

The degradation of the grasslands mirrors a deeper structural crisis: the erosion of the nomadic lifestyle itself. As nomads are resettled into permanent housing, the cyclical, ecological

knowledge they carry — encoded in songs, crafts, and seasonal migrations — is being lost. The film treats these two crises as one.

2.2 The Central Metaphor: Roots

The film is built on a single, through-line metaphor: **roots**. The Kobresia turf's subterranean root network once held the plateau together. Beneath that, mycorrhizal fungi — the "Wood Wide Web" — connected plants and redistributed nutrients. Both biological systems have been severed.

The word "roots" also describes the cultural knowledge of the nomads, the intergenerational bonds that a settled, industrial society is cutting. The film's closing line — *"We are not the masters of this earth. We are its roots."* — fuses the ecological and human meanings into a single image.

3. Narrative Structure

The film follows a five-scene arc that mirrors the natural cycle of ecological restoration: **Wound** → **Diagnosis** → **Sowing** → **Symbiosis** → **Rebirth**.

Scene 1: Black Beach (00:00 – 00:40)

The wound. Aerial and ground-level footage of the desertified "Black Dirt Flats." The landscape is barren, cracked, lifeless. The narration introduces the scientific stakes: this land once was part of the largest high-altitude marsh area in the world, fed 30% water of the Yellow River. Now it's gone.

The scene establishes the visual and emotional baseline — silence, wind, devastation — against which every subsequent image will be measured.

Scene 2: The Blessing (00:40 – 01:20)

The diagnosis. Juniper smoke rises. A Tibetan monk sits cross-legged on the bare earth, performing a pre-reclamation ceremony. Then, an extraordinary unscripted moment: two horses walk into frame and stand perfectly still beside the monk, heads lowered, as if listening to his chanting.

The narration reframes the ceremony for a global audience: the nomads do not see dead land. They see a malnourished body. The ritual is not superstition — it is a vow to restore the soil's health before any seed is sown. This distinction — **healing before planting** — is both an ancient cultural practice and a principle rooted in modern soil science.

The horses' spontaneous presence visually embodies the bond between animals and land that the film seeks to articulate.

Scene 3: The Sowing (01:20 – 01:58)

The pledge. Workers scatter a diverse mix of native seeds by hand across the barren ground. No plows, no machinery. The narration explains the reasoning: the earth is already wounded, and tilling would destroy the remaining humus, expose soil-sequestered carbon to UV degradation, and kill the few surviving root fragments.

This traditional no-till method is both indigenous knowledge and cutting-edge conservation science.

Scene 4: The Circle (01:58 – 02:27)

The symbiosis. Yaks and sheep are herded across the seeded land. Their hooves press seeds into the soil; their dung provides organic fertilizer. This scene carries natural sounds of hooves, and breathing — allowing the audience to witness the elegance of a ten-thousand-year partnership between humans, animals, and earth.

This is the most visually and emotionally striking passage: the animals are not tools or livestock in this frame. They are the earth's "oldest engineers," performing a role that no modern technology can replicate with the same efficiency and zero waste.

Scene 5: Roots (02:27 – 02:55)

The rebirth. A montage spanning from end May to October. Green emerges from black soil. Grass grows knee-high. Flash-back the contrast between the barren and sandy state of the grass at that time and the situation after the grass grew taller (with basically no exposed soil). The old man, with a smile, held a large mushroom — the mycorrhizal networks below have begun reconnecting.

A simple sentence delivers the emotional climax. *"The seeds broke through. By autumn, the land was firm beneath our feet."*

Title Card (02:55 – 03:00)

The film closes with: *"Who would undertake something whose outcome they cannot witness?"*

4. The "Great Transition" Scenario

The Choose Our Future framework defines the **Great Transition** as "a fundamental, systemic shift involving unprecedented global cooperation... defined by a complete transformation of economic systems, governance, and cultural values to achieve true sustainability and equity."

Roots of Tomorrow embodies this scenario not as a utopian fantasy, but as a **present-tense reality already underway** on the Tibetan Plateau:

- **Transformation of governance:** The film demonstrates a bottom-up alternative to top-down industrial development, where indigenous knowledge and community agency drive ecological outcomes.
- **Transformation of cultural values:** The central argument — that humans are not masters of the earth but part of it — challenges the extractive worldview that drives the "Market Forces" and "Fortress World" scenarios.

The film proposes that the Great Transition is not an event in 2050 but a process that has already begun — that it looks like a monk blessing depleted soil, horses listening, seeds scattered by hand, and yaks pressing them into the earth.

5. Tonal and Cinematic Approach

Visual Language

- **Single equipment:** The entire shooting process was carried out using just one DJI Osmo Pocket 3 camera, with shooting and work being done simultaneously.
- **Natural light only** — the harsh alpine sun is both the antagonist (UV degradation) and the ally (photosynthesis)
- **Long, still holds** (especially Scene 2) to allow the audience to inhabit the landscape

Sound Design

The film's audio arc uses score to highlight contrast: despair → action → persistence.

- Scenes 1–2: Soothing, melancholic music plays blending with diegetic sounds to create a vast atmosphere of despair over the dying land.
- Scenes 3–4: The score shifts to musical pieces with a strong rhythm, blending seamlessly with the ambient sounds of the scene (footsteps, scattering seeds, yak bells, hooves) to enhance the feeling that "action is hope".
- Scene 5: Uplifting music enters as the green emerges, accentuating the core message: "even if you cannot see the final outcome, you still need to keep going."

On-Screen Text (Subtitles)

The use of subtitles is spare and restrained — approximately 50% of the film's runtime carries no text at all. This is a deliberate choice: the footage speaks for itself, and excessive text would diminish the images' power. The language is simple, concrete, and avoids jargon.

6. Who We Are

Luqu County Zhenteng (ལུཁུ་རྫོང་གྲོ་མོ་བློ་བཟོ་ལྷན་ཁག་) **Grassland Governance and Environmental Protection Co., Ltd.** is a social enterprise based in Luqu County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province. The Tibetan name "Zhenteng" means gratitude for the grassland's gifts (རྣམ་ལུང་གི་ལོ་སྐྱོད་ལྷན་ཁག་) and the duty to repay that grace (ལོ་སྐྱོད་ལྷན་ཁག་).

In 2025, the team completed ecological restoration of 6.7 hectares (16.5 acres) of "Black Soil Flats" at Renqing Pasture — the events documented in this film.

The company operates on a dual-engine model: **Scientific Restoration + Cultural Empowerment**, combining modern ecological science with traditional nomadic knowledge.

7. Why This Story Matters in 2050

By 2050, if grassland degradation continues at current rates, over half the Tibetan Plateau's carbon stores will be destabilized — an amount equivalent to approximately 1% of the global carbon pool. The consequences — accelerated glacier melt, disruption of Asian monsoon patterns, loss of water security for billions — are planetary.

Roots of Tomorrow offers a concrete, already-proven alternative. It shows that the Great Transition is not a theoretical framework but a living practice. The film's final question to the audience is not "what will the future look like?" but rather: **"Are we willing to make a pledge that outlasts our own lifetime?"**

End of Treatment