



EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE



Tibetan students protest against the ban on the Tibetan language in education, EasternTibet

Despite years of investment under the Western Development Strategy, the vast majority of Tibetans in Tibet are severely disadvantaged both socially and economically by the inadequate provision of education. The investments poured into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the Tibetans areas of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan by the Chinese government have in large part bypassed the fundamental importance of education, resulting in a majority of illiterate Tibetans who are unable to actively participate in their own society.

The first formal system of education developed in Tibet around the seventh century with the introduction of monasteries as an institutionalized form of religious education. Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, stipulations in the 1951 “17 Point Agreement” promised to develop Tibetan educational opportunities. This agreement points out that “*the spoken and written*

language and school education of the Tibetan nationality shall be developed step by step in accordance with the actual conditions in Tibet”. Article 53 of the Chinese Constitution states that every minority group has the freedom to use and develop its language and to maintain its customs and religion. Moreover, Article 12 of the Chinese Education law of 1995 also stipulated that the “*schools and other educational institutions primarily for ‘minority’ nationalities may use the spoken or written language in common use among ethnic group or in the locality as the language of instruction”.*

However, in the 60 years of Chinese rule in Tibet, few of these provisions have been implemented, and the gulf between the educated elite, most of whom are Han Chinese, and the urban and rural poor, has widened to a vast degree. According to Kalsang Wangdu, the Chinese government’s linguistic policy has led to perhaps the greatest language shift and loss in the



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world. *“In the larger discourse on relationship between the Chinese government and the minority groups, education policy in general and language policy in particular is one of the core issues of conflict”*.¹

On paper, the number of educational institutions has increased; as stated by the Tibet Statistical Yearbook, in 2005 the TAR had 886 primary schools with 326,952 students enrolled and 110 regular secondary schools with 135,888 students. However, the quality of the education appears to offer little benefit to Tibetan children. According to the Chinese authorities’ own statistics, overall illiteracy in the TAR in 2005 was 45% - close to half of the population. Tibet is the most backward region of the PRC in terms of economic development and level of educational attainment.²

According to a 2003 report by the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Mrs. Katarina Tomaševski, China spends only half the internationally recommended proportion of GDP on education - just 3% of GDP instead of 6%. The Special Rapporteur pointed out her dismay at the high illiteracy rate in Tibet and called upon the Chinese government to fully integrate human and minority rights in education policy, law and practice.³

The Chinese government claims that it promotes education in ethnic minority regions and that 94.7% of all ethnic counties achieved nine-year compulsory education.⁴ On average, Tibetans complete only 2.2 years of schooling whereas, according to a 2000 census, the rural Chinese average is 7.3 years of schooling and the urban Chinese average is 10.2 years. The most common reason for the low

levels of schooling among Tibetans is their inability to pay. Furthermore, parents’ fears that the Chinese-centric environment of the schools will cause their children to lose touch with their Tibetan culture have kept many children from completing their studies. The official language in most classrooms is Mandarin, which is not only difficult for Tibetan children to understand but is also another method the government exercises to assimilate the Tibetans in to Chinese culture.

In the Chinese government’s 2015 White Paper on Tibet, the figures about education in TAR appear to be highly inflated with enrollment rate for school age children at above 98 %. According to scholars’ figures, around 40-60% of Tibetan children do not attend school at all and the literacy rate by the turn of the last century stood woefully low at about 50%.⁵ In the TAR, less than 25% of Tibetan children graduate to secondary school⁶, and in rural areas where 80% of Tibetans live, even the primary schools at best provide only three years of schooling.⁷ Therefore, scholars generally tend to question the credibility of government data and treat them as more of propaganda.

Discrimination towards Tibetan students is common – Chinese students are often given preferential treatment, a practice that carries over outside of the classroom. Harassment and bullying towards Tibetan students is sometimes encouraged by the Chinese teachers, and fees are often made up or more expensive for Tibetan families than their Chinese counterparts. Tibetan girls are commonly deprived of an education especially in rural areas where families often struggle to send even one child to school. Chinese authorities continue to view monastic education in the Tibetan

¹ K. Wangdu, “China’s minority education policy with reference to Tibet”, Tibetan Review, June 2011, http://www.academia.edu/1319076/China_s_minority_education_policy_with_reference_to_Tibet

² Ibid.

³ E/CN.4/2004/45/Add.1

⁴ E/C.12/CHN/2, China’s report Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, July 2012

⁵ B. Nima, “The Choice of Languages in Tibetan School Education Revisited”, Chinese Education and Society, vol. 41, issue 6, 2008

⁶ G. Postiglione, B. Jiao, M. C. Goldstein, “Education in the TAR: policies and practices in rural and nomadic communities” in J. Ryan, “Education Reform in China”, Routledge 2008, <http://www.case.edu/affil/tibet/documents/Educationinthetar-politicsandpracticesinruralandnomadiccommunities.pdf>

⁷ C. Bass, “Tibetan Primary Curriculum and Its Role in Nation Building”, Educational Review 60 (1), 2008



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tradition as a threat, and thus attempt to regulate and limit the number of students pursuing these studies. In an effort to prevent younger children from receiving monastic education, authorities passed a law banning monks and nuns under the age of 18.

The official language in most classrooms is Mandarin, which is not only difficult for Tibetan children to understand, as about 80% of Tibetans do not speak Mandarin, but also leads to the assimilation of Tibetans in to Chinese culture, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Except in Qinghai, the Tibetan language medium is used only up to the primary level in most of the schools. Almost all the secondary schools use Mandarin as the medium of instruction and Tibetan is either dropped or retained only as a language subject.

For the majority of Tibetans who do not speak fluent Chinese (the Tibetan and Chinese languages are fundamentally different) there remain few avenues for success in the Chinese-dominated economy. Employment is almost impossible to come by, with the influx of Han Chinese migrants arriving in Tibet from other parts of the nation. Tibetan parents often decide to send their children to India, where they can receive an education and practice their culture freely. The Tibetan Children's Village alone received around 14,000 children from 1980 to 2010.⁹ However, in July 2008, the Tibet Autonomous Region Party Committee Discipline Department issued measures which state that children who return from schools in exile and parents working for the government

or members of the Communist Party who fail to bring children back to Tibet could face unspecified 'disciplinary action'.

In October 2010, protests by Tibetan school and college students over plans to restrict the use of their language have spread from several areas of Qinghai to Beijing. Several hundred Tibetan students at Minzu University of China protested to express their concern about the downgrading of the Tibetan language. This followed protests by hundreds of Tibetan students in the Rebkong and Chabcha areas of Qinghai sparked by new measures to increase Chinese-language medium teaching and undermine Tibetan language study.

The scale of the protests across Tibet reflects the strength of feeling among Tibetans about the marginalization and erosion of their language, the bedrock of Tibetan identity, religion and culture. The demonstrations follow a new emphasis in Qinghai province on the importance of Chinese language for Tibetans and a new 'bilingual education' imperative that is designed to transition 'minority' students from education in their mother tongue to education in Chinese.¹⁰

Further student protests took place in November 2012 in Chabcha and Rebkong¹¹. Eight students were detained in Chabcha and 18 in Rebkong. In April 2013, eight of these students were sentenced to up to four years in prison.¹²

⁸ K. Wangdu, "China's minority education policy with reference to Tibet", Tibetan Review, June 2011, http://www.academia.edu/1319076/China_s_minority_education_policy_with_reference_to_Tibet

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For more information, see ICT report <http://www.savetibet.org/protests-by-students-against-downgrading-of-tibetan-language-spread-to-beijing/>

¹¹ See ICT report: <http://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-student-detentions-after-protests-in-chabcha-rebkong/>

¹² Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Chabcha Student Protesters Sentenced Up To Four Years, April 2013 (<http://www.tchrd.org/2013/04/chabcha-student-protesters-sentenced-up-to-four-years/>)