

DISCUSSANT PAPER

Making Tibetans in China: the educational challenges of harmonious multiculturalism

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This discussant paper focuses on education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), and provides a background to situate the articles that follow about education in selected Tibetan communities of China and India. It also provides a brief review of education policies concerning free basic education, bilingual education, and hinterland boarding schools. The paper argues that while enrolment rates in most parts of the TAR continue to rise, schools produce only mixed results. This is due to the widespread lack of quality learning environments that can promote a culturally diverse and locally relevant education to foster a harmonious multiculturalism and sustain Tibet's social and economic development. Only by doing so, will schools propel Tibetan academic achievement to levels comparable with the national average. Until then, the potential of education to help Tibetans live and work as critical and innovative thinkers in a rapidly changing market economy in the TAR and across China will remain limited.

Keywords: Tibetans in China; *neidi* school; multiculturalism; education; market; economy; Tibet

Introduction

Tibet is required by China to have an education system that popularizes basic education, and also socializes Chinese citizens into a political discourse consonant with the state programme to build a harmonious society (Wu 1995, 1999; Wang and Lou 2007). The extent to which this so called civilizing mission occurs is reflected in enrolment rates, school curriculum, the medium of instruction, and preferential treatment policies. Yet, the success or failure of this major effort hinges to a great extent upon how much and how many Tibetan households become persuaded by the logic of modern state schooling and the value of schools for survival within an expansive market economy (Postiglione, Ben Jiao and Gyatso 2006). New patterns of population mobility, increased flows of information from outside Tibet, and rapid economic change have had a profound effect on the transmission and replication of traditional culture. Views differ about the way this transmission process has been managed and directed (Dorjee and Giles 2005; Sautman and Dreyer 2005). Nevertheless, the expansion of educational opportunities has made Tibetans more like Chinese, though no less Tibetan, as ethnic identities are remodelled by state schooling and responded to by local communities.

Regardless of the cultural transformations taking place in Tibet, the analysis of the education system, policies, programmes, problems and practices inevitably has to be based on the realities of students, households, schools, teachers and communities.

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The purpose of this special issue is a modest one, namely to bring empirical research on the education of Tibetans closer to mainstream educational research by highlighting selected studies that address such questions as: how are Tibetans being educated? What and how do Tibetans learn in China's schools and universities? What are schooling opportunities doing to lift Tibetan girls out of poverty? How do nomadic Tibetan communities adapt to state schools? How do schools remake Tibetans? What are the views of elite students about their education? What is the case with identity among Tibetans in schools outside China?

Due to the dearth of empirical research on education in Tibet,¹ the invitation to edit this special issue was initially accepted with some apprehension. However, it became manageable by expanding the scope to include Tibetans both in and outside of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), a strong point rather than a shortcoming since most Tibetans in China live outside of the TAR in what has been referred to the rest of ethnic Tibet, including parts of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Yunnan, Gansu and Sichuan.

Also included is an article about the education of Tibetans living in neighbouring India, though we have not covered research on the many other overseas communities (Mac Pherson and Bhuti 2007). Geographical remoteness, high altitude, language barriers, poverty, and bureaucratic hurdles have limited the amount of research on Tibetan education.² There is also a sensible hesitation to undertake educational research without first understanding the centuries old monastic themes, which as Zhang, Ben Jiao and Fu point out in this issue, still have a significant effect on Tibetan thinking styles.

In this issue, Zhang, Ben Jiao and Fu confirm the difference between the intellectual style of TAR Tibetans and Chinese in Nanjing, something that can be seized upon to improve the way in which instruction is delivered. Through systematic examination of the teaching styles of Tibetans at Tibet University and the learning styles they preferred, we get a refined understanding of higher learning in the TAR. Tibetan teachers' styles were not, as expected, significantly more conservative than those of Nanjing University teachers. To deal with the rapidly changing world, Tibetan university teachers have become more creative in their teaching. Yet, teaching and learning in Tibet University remains relatively conservative due to remoteness, economics, and traditions in monastery education, as well as Tibetan people's strong sense of culture preservation.

At the other end of the education system, Bass points out how primary school education has become politically conservative, even while the rest of China moves in the other direction. Through careful examination, she discovers that Tibetan culture has been hallowed out from the content of school textbooks, while the theme of Tibetan cultural backwardness remains salient. Tibetan culture is disengaged from Tibetan Buddhism as historical figures are ridiculed or condemned as rich, evil, lazy aristocrats or duplicitous and corrupt monk teachers. The backward state of the TAR's economy is officially attributed to Tibetan Buddhism and mental attitude, as well as the popular idea that Tibet is unique. For Bass, this education will not produce a generation of Tibetans with the confidence and skills to compete with those from other areas of China, unless they are also educated with relevant Tibetan language skills that permit access to their rich cultural heritage.

Seeberg provides new empirical research to explain the struggle of Tibetan girls for education in Qinghai province. She examines how girls become part of new social

networks that both bind them to their traditional place, while creating new space for their educational empowerment. Based on narrative data by girls about their pursuit of education, Seeberg sees these girls as advantageously situated for primary schooling. Moreover, schools function as change agents that open possibilities for girls' demands for parity in promotion to secondary and higher learning. As males leave home for work in the urban market economy, secondary education places remote Tibetan girls into a habitus where they acquire a modern subjectivity, despite remaining materially locked into a pre-modern terrain and poor socio-economic conditions. Seeberg's empowerment perspective takes us beyond the grim developmentalist view. Within the current seeds of change, she appeals for more culturally responsive policies that have salutary effects of expanding human liberties.

Bangsbo argues that there is a preference for community based schools in nomadic areas of Sichuan and Qinghai, where it is often a struggle to attend school. She conveys the perspectives of nomadic households about the long distance from home to school, the irrelevance of school learning to daily life, and the lack of available jobs upon graduation. Thus, not unexpectedly, the choice by some parents is to keep their children at home to perform domestic work that contributes directly to the household economy. Although some parents consider state schooling of limited value, most parents acknowledge that proficiency in Chinese and other basic knowledge gained in school are essential to life outside the pastoral community. While life in remote, high-altitude herding areas is under transition, this has made Tibetan parents more open to schooling for their children. However, many households prefer community run schools if they better reflect the rugged realities and practical aspirations of nomadic life.

Maslak's study investigates ways in which ethnicity is represented in India's primary school curricula and conceptualized in the Tibetan refugee community by Indian and Tibetan public school teachers. While curricula support the national ethos of the majority, teachers play a significant role in shaping Tibetan students' understanding of their ethnicity. A Delphi study identified teachers' perceptions of factors that contribute to the ethnicity of Tibetan students. Her research demonstrates a multiplicity of practices in the school – particularly in curricula and teachers, which contribute to how ethnicity is conceptualized. Teachers believe they communicate information about ethnicity to students and can help students become critical consumers of the nationally issued textbooks that fail to capture the refugee perspective. Maslak suggests a review of all textbooks to gauge the frequency with which and ways in which India's diverse population is depicted. In short, this research supports revisions that recognize the multicultural and eliminate pedagogy of the excluded.

While this issue of *Educational Review* covers a diverse array of Tibetan communities, this introduction focuses more on the TAR, where Tibetans constitute virtually all of the rural and nomadic population.³ The introduction situates the articles that follow by providing a brief background review of the policies that shape education in Tibet. This introduction also provides results of research on the *neidi* or dislocated secondary schools for Tibetans in urban Chinese cities across the country. The paper argues that while enrolment rates continue to rise, most schooling produces mixed results, or worse, in terms of providing a quality learning environment that can propel academic achievement to a level comparable with the national average, as well as foster a harmonious multiculturalism that can sustain

Tibet's social and economic development. Until then, the potential of education to help Tibetans labour effectively in the TAR and across China will remain severely limited.

The urgency of basic education for all

Although the TAR is one of the most remote regions of China, the prosperity of the mainland and the central government's intention to make the TAR economically prosperous, culturally visible, nationally integrated, and politically secure, have led to steadily rising living standards for many Tibetans (Goldstein et al. 2003; Sautman and Dreyer 2005). Yet, like elsewhere in China, development is unbalanced across localities, and education has had to compete with other investments viewed by local authorities as more able to provide a quicker rate of return (Wu, Ciren and Junmei 2006). Moreover, improvements in school access are behind the rest of the country (N.A. 2006). Contemporary Tibet's main educational policies are set within the context of a socialist state adapting to market economics, while permitting a special status for Tibet's educational needs (Geng and Wang 1989; Wu 1999). Education initiatives have greatly increased the number of children that receive a basic education (N.A. 2005). However, a comprehensive focus on student learning, innovative and critical thinking skills, as well as school based curriculum development and school development planning are still a long way off.⁴ While gains in school enrolment will continue in the coming years, formidable challenges remain wedged between the dual axis of economic development and cultural conservation.

Nomadic regions present the greatest challenge because of their remoteness and poverty levels. This is true of places like Nyerong, a 5000 metre high nomadic county in northern Tibet where households move from winter to summer pastures. The harsh weather (-32°C is common in winter) necessitates using yak dung to heat classrooms most of the year.⁵ When the first community schools were established, the enrolment rate was 2%, rising to 11% in 1980. By 2007, most children attended school and 6 years of basic education is becoming the norm. This has been accomplished by consolidating nearly all of the village schools into seven township schools, led by a county seat primary and junior secondary school. Unqualified teachers were discontinued. Most qualified teachers are imported from other areas of Tibet, and 60 to 70% of them had attended boarding schools in urban China. Many students travel long distances and most live at school, a handicap for households that rely on children to tend herds of yak or sheep. By 2009, the county aims to reach 9 years of universal education and transit everyone to Chinese medium instruction in junior secondary school, despite a 99.9% Tibetan population.

Tibetans are challenged to adapt their cultural heritage so as to capitalize upon the national administration of schooling for their economic and social development (Postiglione 2007). One example of the conundrum faced in Tibetan education during the shift to a market economy concerns language education and the medium of school instruction. Although most primary schools still use Tibetan as a medium of instruction, Chinese is the language of secondary school and the ticket to non-farm sector employment. This causes high dropouts rates in junior secondary school, especially in poor rural and nomadic areas, and sharply decreases the learning potential of many students. Yet, there is an unmistakable vision that long-term

survival entails gaining competency in three completely different languages: Tibetan, as the native language; Chinese, as the national language; and English as the international language. In the short term, competition for jobs in the non-farm sector has already led to a questioning of current language education policy. Rural and nomadic households generally see basic education as providing useful literacy in Tibetan, but little technical skill for competition in the non-farm labour market (Wang 2007).

Popularizing basic education in rural and nomadic regions of Tibet is a daunting task, even though major infrastructural developments have led to increased optimism. The Tibetan plateau has become more easily accessible by road, rail, and air, and telecommunication infrastructure has brought Tibet closer to the rest of China, as well as to the global village. On the one hand, schools have to develop the talents, expertise, values and leadership skills of all Tibetans so as to promote and sustain an adaptable, innovative, and globally conscious community. On the other hand, for most schools in Tibet, poverty dictates that the first priority is to ensure students' basic nutrition needs, health and safety, and in many cases, living accommodations, even before allocating resources to enhance the classroom learning environment. In short, the basic rudiments of basic education still require immediate attention.

Tibetans continue to face the question of how schools can become vibrant institutions within their communities, integrated with their values and traditions, yet functional to the household economy and a rise in their living standards. Cognizance among Tibetans about sustaining their natural and cultural resources is ubiquitous. Tibet's devoutly religious population and internationally popularized cultural traditions are legendary. Trilingual capacity, limited as it is to a tiny (but growing) number of young intellectuals, is impressive nonetheless, especially given that Tibetan, Chinese, and English are vastly different languages. As institutions of selective social and cultural reproduction, the complex role played by Tibetan schools will come to have a significant impact on the aspirations of a new generation of Tibetan youth.

Historical antecedents and education targets

Tibet's early period within the People's Republic of China saw the establishment of a government primary school in Lhasa in 1951 (Zhou 2002) at a time when the Seventeen Point agreement set out to maintain the spoken and written language in school education (Sino-Tibetan Agreement 1951). Beijing assumed responsibility for the management of Tibet in 1951. Monasteries remained the principal educational institutions until the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled during the uprising of 1959. He remains in exile (Goldstein 1989, 1997). Children of some elite families went for study in Beijing, while others studied in India (Mackerras 1994, 1995). After 1959 schools in Tibet began to pattern themselves after those in the rest of China (Nyima 1997, 2000; Mackerras 1999). During the Great Leap period, basic education was expanded rapidly through community (*minban*) schools. China's TAR was formally established in 1965, and land became redistributed and administered by People's Communes (Grunfeld 1996; Xia, Ha, and Abadu 1999). The Cultural Revolution wrought havoc and destruction on monasteries and schools, followed by an admission of errors by government. By 1978, with a loosening of restrictions on

religion, many children studied at monasteries. Communes were abandoned in 1984⁶ and the quality of schools improved, making them more attractive. However, as the household became the unit of production, children laboured more at home and attendance rates dropped (Bass 1998, 215). School enrolment rates stagnated before rising significantly in the 1990s, albeit accompanied by offsetting dropout rates at the upper grades of primary school (Xia, Ha and Abadu 1999).

Literacy rates and school access in Tibetan regions of China have continued to rise year by year. School and classroom conditions are far better than they were a decade ago.⁷ The quality of teachers has inched ahead and more Tibetans are being admitted into secondary school and university. Yet, educational progress in Tibet has been far slower, and not nearly as impressive as in the rest of China, where the popularization of 9 years of compulsory education has been hailed internationally as a major success (Postiglione 2006). It would seem, then, that the basic education in Tibet should move into the fast lane of increased access. Yet, with only 7 years remaining for China to meet its international commitment to “Education for All”, Tibet could be the spoiler unless its educational development shifts into overdrive between now and 2015 (UNESCO 2000).

Efforts have been focused on providing 3 years of education in pastoral/nomadic areas, 6 years in agricultural and semi-agricultural areas and 9 years in cities. By the end of the century there were over 800 primary schools enrolling more than 300,000 students and almost 80% of children were said to be entering school. The 94 high schools only enrolled about 40,000 and 13 technical schools enrolled about 3000 students. Teaching quality was upgraded to where about 70% of primary and junior secondary school teachers were said to be qualified to teach (Zhou 2002). By 2005, 68 counties were said to have achieved 6 years of basic education and 40 counties achieved 9 years (Ma 2005). More recent sources put the number of primary schools at 890 with an enrolment rate of 96% for school age children, and an increasing number of counties universalizing 9 years of compulsory education (i.e. 46 of 73 counties) (Zheng 2007).

Achieving these targets required a significant financial outlay. However, even if access targets, as measured by enrolment rates, move to within reach, meaningful access to high quality learning environments for all Tibetans will remain elusive for years to come.⁸ Above all, quality education for Tibetans necessitates a serious effort and intensive focus on how Tibetans actually learn best.

Preferential education policies for Tibet

Aside from the huge financial outlay for basic education, school access targets in China’s ethnic minority regions could not be achieved without additional policies designed for implementation in ethnic minority regions (Ha and Teng 2001). This is especially the case with respect to the TAR which promulgates its own specific educational measures to attain enrolment targets (TAR ERI 1999). For example, some county authorities instituted a system for school attendance reward points to be converted by households to cash at the end of the year (Postiglione, Ben Jiao and Gyatso 2006). Also, a small part of teacher salaries are withheld in some areas as an incentive for them to sustain attendance and promotion rates. Such short-term measures vary from county to county but some policies are consistently applied throughout the TAR, including the three guarantees (*sanbao*), bilingual education, and the *neidi* Tibet schools (*Xizang neidiban*).⁹

The three guarantees

The “three guarantees” is specifically directed at enrolment rates in primary schools (Tongzhi 1994).¹⁰ It includes measures designed to relieve families of costs associated with schooling. It makes provision for food, at least a tea drink during the daytime for children who live beyond 2 kilometres from school and tsampa (barley flour) and other foods for those who board at school. It also includes providing clothes, school wear in some cases, and a blanket at boarding school. The third guarantee is living quarters, since geography necessitates that most rural and nomadic children be accommodated at school beginning in upper primary and junior secondary school. On its own, the three guarantees are only partially effective, though probably more so than the non-attendance fines, something most poor households cannot afford to pay. The attendance reward point system is sometimes used to supplement the three guarantees and the compulsory education fine. Local officials often plead with village and township parents to send at least one or more children to school.¹¹ When attendance rates are low at junior secondary school, county officials sometimes visit schools to interview household heads at the school about their children’s non-attendance. Rural and semi-nomadic households are often under great strain to arrange grazing for their livestock and to ensure that their livestock remain within particular areas or risk sanctions. Some communities have tried a rotating system of joint household responsibility for grazing livestock so that more children could attend school, with mixed success. In short, the three guarantees is an essential policy. But, without other measures, it is only partially effective in popularizing basic education.

Other problems with the three guarantees include the quality of accommodation[s] and food. Poor construction of dormitory buildings raises safety concerns and winter conditions make it difficult for those schools without electricity to provide light for evening study.¹² Food provisions are usually meagre and require households to supplement what schools provide. Research in western regions of China by Hannum and others points to the importance of health and nutrition for both attendance and learning quality (Yu and Hannum 2006).¹³ Another minor measure accommodates the demands of the harvest seasons, as a head of a township primary school explained: “In the busy spring and winter seasons, we use a ‘*xunhuo*’ measure, which means that the school is called off and students are sent home to help with planting or harvesting. However, this period cannot go beyond seven days.”¹⁴ In recent years as the price of winter fungus has sky-rocketed throughout China, school attendance in many Tibetan areas has dropped. Winter fungus is sold as a medical herb and is harvested in late spring/early summer. Many children leave school for up to a month.¹⁵ A school head in a nomadic region remarked in June of 2007 that all children had been absent during the previous month to gather winter fungus with their families, but they would be back at school soon in order to sit for the region wide examination for placement to secondary school,.

The extent and manner in which the three guarantees are implemented remains a subject in need of further study. Although there has been increased transparency about the use of funds, with some schools displaying the accounting details on a centrally located bulletin board, the extent to which it can offset household hardships varies from place to place. Nevertheless, it remains an indispensable measure, especially within the scheme of other development and infrastructural costs. It is not unusual in interviews with some village or township heads that topics

relating to land and livestock, herding and health care, generate much more enthusiasm than those relating to education. When questions about schools, teaching methods, and learning materials arise, interest levels plateau. Officials follow directives from above but from their purview, there are many pressing non-school related matters in their day to day administrative business. The school is often the only visible physical structure of state presence in a village and its function in the eyes of household heads may vary. Promotion of children to a far away county secondary school is viewed as worthwhile by some families, but many see the small yields and counterproductive aspects because children may return without knowledge and skills relevant to rural life or become detrimentally influenced by urban youth.

Also, the length of junior secondary school for rural and nomadic areas has been 4 years instead of the standard 3 years, since students must spend a remedial year improving their Chinese in preparation for the switch to Chinese medium instruction. This unpopular measure of attending for an extra year is being discontinued. In some cases, promotion to junior secondary school may lead to placement in a *neidi* or dislocated secondary schools – a Chinese style boarding school in an urban centre far from Tibet. Being tracked into the *neidi* school requires a high examination score but is an attractive proposition from the point of view of an increasing number of parents because it virtually guarantees a good jobs upon return to Tibet, (though local TAR secondary school heads are not always in favour of *neidi* schools since they draw away the best talent from Tibet).

Ethnic identity issues are naturally less salient in poor rural and nomadic areas where there is little exposure as yet to other ethnic groups and school instruction is conducted in Tibetan. Moreover, the struggles of day to day life in most households, struggles similar to life among poor rural and nomadic people anywhere on the globe, take priority over questions of ethnic identity. This changes slightly when children enter junior secondary school, where Chinese is the medium of instruction and students have several non-Tibetan teachers.

Medium of instruction

The medium of instruction policy for Tibet remains a key issue. It relates closely to both learning capacity and ethnic identity (Postiglione 1999, 2001; Zhou and Fishman 2003; Zhou and Sun 2004). Unlike many indigenous ethnic minorities in the developing world, Tibetans have had a highly sophisticated written script for over a thousand years (Chodag 1988; N.A. 2005). Originated during the reign of Songsten Gampo in the sixth century, this script was developed over the next fourteen centuries in an area that came to extend as wide as the continental US (Goldstein 1989; Iredale et al. 2001). As compulsory state schooling has taken hold in Tibetan communities, medium of instruction policy has become a focus of some debate, as it is also in other parts of China's ethnic minority regions (Yu 1995; Stites 1999; Zheng 2002; Lam 2005). This is even more relevant to Tibetan secondary schooling, since most primary schooling in the TAR is still conducted through Tibetan (N.A. 2005).

The next decade will be important because it may come to mark the first time that all children in Tibet are exposed to state schooling for 6 years. Therefore, as the focus moves from school access to learning quality, the medium of instruction will probably remain the most critical issue facing the education of Tibetans in China.

There are many multilingual places in the world where the medium of instruction becomes an emotive and politicized issue and the same is the case for Tibetan regions (Nyima 1997; Bass 1998; Upton 1999). As Upton has noted few Tibetans advocate not learning any Chinese. Most agree that Chinese is needed to ensure survival in a market economy since it broadens access to non-farm occupation. Dual track education (Tibetan and Chinese) is generally available in the urban areas, but after the primary school grade three, there is a shift toward Chinese as the medium of instruction, with only language and literature courses taught in the Tibetan language (Postiglione 1997; Pingcuo 2005).

From an educational point of view, unless a student has achieved a threshold level of competency in the second language, its use as a medium of instruction can severely limit the potential for academic success and can lead to other deleterious effects noted by sociologists of education. While many parents may be in favour of Chinese as a medium of instruction due to its currency in the job market, they may not be aware of the countless studies showing that students do not learn well unless they have achieved a level of competency in the second language so as to be able to learn school subjects effectively (Baker 2001; Street 2001). In short, learning should take priority in schooling and while the national language must be studied, it is the responsibility of the school that students learn in the most efficient manner, whether that is in the national language or the language of Tibet (Dai et al. 1997; Zhou 2000). Moreover, students may have a sufficient level of competency in Chinese for effective learning, but unless their teachers are able to teach competently through Chinese, student learning will be affected. In many nomadic counties, there is a shortage of Chinese language specialists, in which case teachers of other subjects who are unqualified as language teachers, will take on the role of teaching Chinese as a subject.¹⁶ In short, the notably low achievement level in education for Tibetans has a great deal to do with the language policy. School achievement statistics for Tibet are not always listed in tables with other provinces due to the significant gap. This keeps Tibetans labelled as bottom achievers in China, with the unintended effect of strengthening Tibetan identity.

While TAR secondary schools use Chinese as the medium of instruction, many secondary schools in Qinghai province, bordering the TAR, use Tibetan for school subjects (science, math, history, etc.) up through senior middle school. Experiments in the TAR that use Tibetan as the language of instruction for science and mathematics subjects have yielded successful results. There are advocates of Tibetan as a language of science and modernity, as well as a means of raising achievement scores since students will learn more efficiently and then can perform better on college and university entrance examinations. This is fraught with some risk however, as proponents of Tibetan medium instruction may be labelled as separatists. China has done a great deal to produce school textbooks in ethnic minority languages, including Tibetan and about 21 other languages. The five province/region Tibetan learning materials leadership group has facilitated the production of Tibetan language learning resources and has visited other countries to learn about how bilingual education is undertaken elsewhere. However, the Tibetan language school textbooks in mathematics, science and other subjects are often direct translations of Chinese language materials. Moreover, the updating of Tibetan language textbooks is slow and costly. Meanwhile, Tibetan medium of instruction is often viewed as a hindrance to advancement as TAR secondary school graduates

soon discover when they have to compete for jobs with the thousands of TAR students returning with good grasp of Chinese from 7 years at *neidi* schools. The *neidi* schools add more complexity to the issue of language education as well shall see later.

Dislocated education

The third major policy with significant implications for rural education in the TAR is the *neidi xizang ban* (inland Tibet secondary schools and classes) or dislocated schools, which send primary school graduates to secondary schools across China (Postiglione, Zhu and Ben Jiao 2004; Zhu 2007). These schools are special for several reasons: first, they take the best and brightest away from Tibet's education system and send them to cities across China for up to 7 years. Second, the graduates return to Tibet for government jobs ranging from school teachers to government officials. Third, given that few Chinese have learned to speak Tibetan, and few Tibetans have lived in China, these bilingual youth are well suited to be cultural middlemen/women between Tibet and the rest of China. The form and content of their education represents the kind that the state would like to be the norm for Tibetans, and the increasing demand on the part of parents for these schools ensures that the *neidi* education policy will continue indefinitely, despite its stratifying effect upon Tibetan society. While school resources and the quality of teachers in Tibet continue to improve, top students are removed in large numbers and sent to study in China.

The call for Chinese cities to establish schools and classes for Tibetans began in 1981 by Central government leaders Hu Qili and Tian Jiyun.¹⁷ Beijing, Lanzhou and Chengdu established such schools in 1985, and were followed by Shanghai, Tianjin, Liaoning, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Hubei, Chongqing, Anhui, Shanxi, Hunan, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Yunnan, in all 16 provinces and cities had them by September 1986, with the financial responsibility shared by the TAR and host city. In 1990 President Jiang Zemin declared that these schools help Tibetans to understand the motherland, and broaden their view of the world, echoing Hu Qili's statement in 1986 that *neidi* schools be a 10 to 20 year strategy. The Tibet *neidi* schools policy was viewed as so successful that in 1999, it was extended to cover students from another far western provincial level entity – the Xinjiang Uyghur Nationality Autonomous Region (Chen 2005).

From 1985 to 2005, more than 25,000 primary graduates were selected and sent to study in these schools to study in secondary schools in different provinces and municipalities of China in 20 provinces and municipal cities (Pingcuo 2005). In 2006, there are 28 junior and senior middle schools and teacher training schools which have inland Tibetan classes. More than 90 universities or post-secondary institutions have admitted Tibetan students. In the first 20 years, the Central government has invested 180.5 million RMB and regional governments have invested 500 million RMB into these inland Tibetan class projects (N.A. 2007).¹⁸ It should also be noted that the provinces and municipalities of China send thousands of teachers and educational officials to Tibet. However, most stay for a few years at most, find life at county level an adjustment, and view students as being slower and difficult to teach those in China.

In the early years of the *neidi* school policy, most schools were junior secondary schools.¹⁹ These schools had a 4 year programme that included a preparatory year

for improving Chinese language skills before embarking on the national standard 3 years junior secondary school curriculum. The schools also contract a teacher from Tibet to teach Tibetan language and literature. In later years, some schools expanded to include senior secondary school. Others converted from a junior to senior secondary school and recruited from *neidi* junior secondary schools. In the early years, most graduates of the junior secondary schools returned to Tibet for summer and then went back to China for 3 years of specially arranged vocational technical education before returning to Tibet. However, over the years, more and more junior secondary school graduates went on to senior secondary schools in China before they returned to Tibet. This transition to academic senior secondary schooling has opened the door for Tibetans to enter universities in China. However, many enter with the aid of preferential policies, that specifically make places available to Tibet *neidi* school graduates. While most students enter *neidi* schools at 11 years old; if they remain there for 7 years of secondary schooling and then go on to university, including a remedial year, this means that many Tibetan students spend 11 or 12 years in China with only about three summer visits home.

Most schools, if not classes, are ethnically segregated.²⁰ Tibetan students do not study with students of Han or other ethnic groups, unless they happen to be from Tibet, and only a tiny number are, usually of mixed marriages. There is some organized contact in sports and cultural events with Chinese students from urban school in the vicinity. Tibetan New Year is observed with special foods and visits from Tibetan leaders.

Not unlike boarding schools for children in other parts of the world, the schools place a great emphasis on discipline, with a teacher being assigned for dormitory work.²¹ Students are not permitted to leave the grounds except for a few supervised hours shopping on a Sunday. All teachers (except one or two Tibetan teachers for Tibetan language and literature courses) are local Han Chinese. Few if any have visited Tibet. The campus usually has symbols of Tibet, including murals, ceramics, statues, photos, etc. Dormitory rooms have phones and children can call home but the cost is not covered by the school. The cell phone phenomenon is new and will probably increase contact with parents, though reception in many rural and nomadic areas of Tibet is still not possible.

Of primary school graduates old who enrol in *neidi* education, about three quarters came from Tibetan medium schools and the rest from Chinese medium schools. According to Zhou (2003), 16% of the TAR population is urban and many of their residents are either bilingual or have achieved bi-literacy in Tibetan and Chinese. The other 84% of the population are rural or nomadic, and hence are usually only speakers of Tibetan. By 1999, more than 95% of the primary schools in the TAR were using Tibetan as the medium of instruction. However, only 13% of secondary school students and 5% of senior secondary school students were attending classes that use Tibetan as the medium of instruction.

While the early cohorts were dominated by urban children of cadre families, the authorities aimed to shift enrolments in favour of children from rural and nomadic families. However, the ratio of rural and nomadic children still does not reflect that in the general population. Students are selected on the basis of examinations, according to quotas set for each region of Tibet. Host *neidi* schools are paired with specific districts in Tibet for student selection. The study programme, curriculum, subject teachers and fees are handled by each *neidi* school. Over time, more *neidi*

schools were added, selection quotas were modified, and rural and nomadic student enrolments increased. Partnerships between the host *neidi* city and TAR districts were adjusted, and students who scored below the cut-off could be recruited as self-paying students. Eventually, the cost of air and/or train fares from Tibet to the *neidi* school were passed on from government to household. Finally, the proportion of students attending regular senior secondary *neidi* schools and going on to college and university rose with massification of higher education.

My research based on oral histories of *neidi* school graduates makes it clear that these dislocated Chinese boarding schools do not conform to the stereotype of institutions to unmake ethnic minorities (Spack 2002). While there is a strict separation between religious and the state education, the schools themselves have not been used to de-culturate by prohibiting the use of native language and the erasure of students' cultural memories. Tibetan families are not coerced to send their children to the *neidi* schools. Moreover, many families whose children fail to score high enough to gain entrance to these schools will pay the extra fee to get them admitted. Still others send their children to the growing number of private (*minban*) secondary schools in China, Chengdu in particular.

The stated mission of the *neidi* schools is not explicitly to civilize the Tibetans. However, Tibetan culture, though celebrated throughout China, especially in its popular media, is defined by the state schools. Unlike many other twentieth century boarding schools for indigenous peoples in other countries, the *neidi* schools for Tibetan students offer classes about ethnic language, and literature. Moreover, the school environment recognizes Tibetan culture through its many representations of art and architecture, music and observance of Tibetan holidays. Behaviour is not controlled through corporal punishment and it is not used if students speak Tibetan while inside or outside of the school. Nearly all students speak of the close relationship they had with their Han Chinese teachers. Discipline rather than fear is the norm shaping behaviour, though the schools also make use of ample reference to moral and political education curriculum, school rituals and teacher modelling to shape behaviour. Communication with students' Tibetan home is not cut-off by school authorities. Parents are permitted to visit and a small but growing number do visit the schools, though for most the travel costs are prohibitive.²²

From the perspective of most students attending the *neidi* schools, adjustment was relatively rapid though climatic and food changes required some adaptation time. Many were in awe of the contrast in economic conditions between Tibet and the urban China. A major challenge for them was Chinese medium instruction, for which most experienced difficulty. It was common instructional practice to require students to keep a diary in Chinese about their daily activities. At the same time, students also study Tibetan language and literature as a school subject at junior secondary school level. Among students, the use of Tibetan on campus is complicated by the Tibetan regional dialects. At junior secondary school, students from different dialect areas often use the majority dialect, usually the Lhasa dialect. After their Chinese improves, especially at senior secondary level, more Chinese is used among students for communication. English is also a required subject in the curriculum. However, the greater emphasis on the study of Chinese and other subjects outweighed the study of Tibetan and English. Attention to the study of Tibetan wanes in senior secondary school as students prepared for the national entrance examination for college and university.

Students who graduate from the Chinese boarding schools generally feel that they learned to become more independent and self-reliant than their counterparts who stayed in Tibet. They also remark positively about teaching methods used. Their employers, many of whom are school heads, comment positively about the capabilities of the *neidi* school graduates, even while being ambivalent about the inland school policy. School heads perceived the *neidi* schools as drawing the best students away from their schools and returning them as teachers who could not teach effectively through Tibetan. *Neidi* school graduates' Chinese language skills were naturally better than their counterparts. However, culturally, students do say that they generally needed months or years to readapt to Tibet, after which they felt no cultural gap between themselves and other Tibetans. Among the cohorts we interviewed, all wanted to return to Tibet after graduation. Of those interviewed, only a few expressed a wish to remain in China, though these few also returned to Tibet. Some considered further education and would be willing to return to China for such study. Nevertheless, staying in China for work was not an option. The intention of the *neidi* school policy is that students return to help Tibet's development. However, enforcement of this policy would be difficult. Many students return to be with their families but many also return because to remain in China would require employment opportunities for them that do not exist, as well as a supportive Tibetan community. Thus, the only way to remain in urban China is to attend university. The irony is that while Tibetans are competing for jobs in Tibet with outsiders (*waidi ren*) from other provinces, they are not prepared to compete for viable jobs in Chinese cities where they are educated. Considering the difficulty of competing for jobs with the migrants coming to Tibet from other parts of China, finding viable employment in Chinese cities, despite having spent up to 7 years there, was not an option. Moreover, the disintegration of the centrally planned job allocation system in favour of market forces has left an increasing number of graduates without jobs. Yet, the high demand for school teachers in rural and nomadic area primary schools of Tibet has virtually guaranteed jobs to *neidi* school graduates. School teaching and security jobs remain among the last protected areas of the guaranteed job allocation system, something which also helps the popularity of the *neidi* schools.

Remaining in China for several years of work after completing studies there could be considered akin to what Chinese students do after completing their studies overseas, where few Tibetans get to go due partly to their triple language burden. Arrangements could be made for Tibetans to return to China for work experience with a salary, or even to teach at a *neidi* ban school after graduation from university. However, these *neidi* graduates are viewed as playing a key role in Tibet for skills transmission, political stability, and as cultural middlemen. Therefore, there is little incentive at present for such arrangements.²³

The result of the *neidi* school policy has also been the deterioration of Tibetan language skills among the graduates (Postiglione, Ben Jiao and Manlaji 2007). After returning to Tibet, not all need to use Tibetan as a working language, but those who work in the countryside or teach at school do face challenges to be effective. The *neidi* school graduates realize the importance of Tibetan language and literature in their work environment and in their understanding of their native culture. Most expressed regret about not learning Tibetan well, and not knowing enough about Tibetan culture and history. Schools in the TAR may not have done much better in

teaching about Tibetan history and culture, yet the Tibetan language skills of their students were far superior. *Neidi* school students undoubtedly had a greater sensitivity, having lived and studied for several years within a Chinese boarding school that emphasized the language and cultural heritage of Han China.

In short, the *neidi* school policy, which indirectly reinforces a Tibetan identity, does not yet foster the confidence necessary for graduates to compete successfully in a market economy for work outside of Tibetan communities in China or elsewhere. Within Tibet, a *neidi* school education does lead them to government posts and teaching positions in schools. Moreover, their work units comment quite positively on their performance, except in the area of Tibetan language skills which are seldom, if ever, outstanding. They are more comfortable than other TAR graduates in a multicultural environment, having not only first hand experience living and studying in urban China, but also having contact with classmates from different regions of Tibet. They express an independence, self-reliance, and leadership capability that elaborates their Tibetan identity and makes them more able to adapt to multiple roles and situations. In this sense, the *neidi* schools have the potential to promote a harmonious multiculturalism in Tibet. Yet, this is undercut by their perceived inadequate knowledge of Tibetan language and cultural heritage.

With half of China's land mass composed of ethnic minority autonomous regions, the role of education in fostering cross-cultural understandings for harmonious ethnic intergroup relations can hardly be underestimated. This underlines the importance of not only access to school but also to more multicultural curriculum that will keep China from being a plurality of separate cultures that are inward looking

Neidi school graduates need not only be provided with preferential treatment to enter universities in China but also encouraged to study overseas in greater numbers with their Han Chinese counterparts. Moreover, those in Tibet who fail to enter *neidi* schools need to be given opportunities to study for at least some period of time in other parts of China, including the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, in order to broaden their understanding of China and the world. This approach resonates with China's emergent global influence. This will also work to moderate the social stratification resulting from the structured inequality in Tibet's education system with *neidi* school graduates elite status among graduates of TAR schools.

Education, harmonious society and Tibetan civilization

The heart of the matter of education for Tibetans lies in the improvement of access to quality education for sustainable development of social, cultural, and economic resources. At the very least, quality education is about learning how to read, write, and communicate; how to perceive, plan, act, and innovate; how to think critically and creatively; how to learn how to learn, how to be confident, engaged, and effectively committed to community development. It means developing a disposition conducive to making the community more effectively integrated into the larger region, national, and global scene. In short, addressing the challenge of providing access to a quality education for Tibetans may well be inseparable from how to mobilize the community around the transmission of relevant knowledge and skills, while building capacity for adapting new knowledge to a rapidly changing

environment. In order to move ahead in Tibet, the student has to move from the periphery to the core of the classroom equation.

The issue of Tibetan cultural vitality has been considered from many perspectives and remains an area of concern. Therefore, improving access to quality education would also include being sensitive to how Tibetan children change and adapt themselves to school, how values are defined and transmitted, what educational/learning environments are provided for ethnic identity construction, and how governance models in Tibetan regions support the localization of selected parts of the school curriculum. For Tibetans to capitalize upon increased educational opportunity, it may be necessary to bring school curriculum closer to community needs, strengthen the capacity of teachers to develop school based curriculum, involve more stakeholders in school governance, and make learning more Tibetan in character by exposing the myth of Tibetan cultural backwardness.

Anyone doing research on ethnic minority education in China cannot help being exposed to this notion of cultural backwardness as the principal reason for underachievement in education (Harrell 2001). This is a curious point anywhere in the world and has been alluded to in other cultural contexts by Amartya Sen, specifically in a reference to the nineteenth century British view of poverty in Ireland:

While poverty in Britain was typically attributed to economic changes and fluctuations, Irish poverty was widely viewed in England as being caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude, so that Britain's mission was not seen as one "to alleviate Irish distress but to civilize her people and to lead them to feel and act like human beings." (Sen 2006,105)

That Ireland is now richer in per capita income than nearly every country in Europe pushes the imagination about Tibet's future, especially given its geographical location where it can increasingly benefit from the rise of the two emergent global economic giants.

Nevertheless, the scholarship on civilizing discourse can place too much stress on the correspondence between state mission and cultural outcomes. More emphasis could be placed instead on the responses to the civilizing mission, as well context factors including the shift from a planned to a market economy, generational changes, expanding information access in Tibet, and China's economic globalization. The civilizing mission has for half a century been a layer of discourse but it has not diminished Tibetan identity. Pluralism is as important as harmony in conceptualizing ethnic intergroup processes in Tibet. It has been the source of much cultural vitality throughout China's history, though not as conflict free as portrayed, as in the case of the Mongol and Manchu Eras when intergroup processes included both harmonious acculturation and conflict prone impact integration. One educational issue, then, is how to situate the autonomy of Tibetan cultural transmission within the national context. The practical challenge is how to make schooling work in a way that brings Tibetan culture into the national and global/international spheres with the least amount of dislocation as the larger community benefits from not only its economic resources but equally from its autonomous cultural perspectives.

Cultural diversity in China rivals that anywhere else in the world. This is not to say that multi-ethnic diversity is strongly encouraged, only that it is increasingly salient and widely recognized. While ethnic minority culture is celebrated, ethnic diversity is managed. The "harmonious society" campaign prescribes Chinese ethnicity as "plurality within the organic unity of the Chinese nation" (*duoyuan yiti geju*) (Fei 1986).²⁴ Yet, there is no question that a more open attitude toward

education for cultural diversity has taken place in some ethnic minority areas of China (Yu 2007). Given that Tibet is the most remote and ethnically homogenous of China's five major provincial level autonomous regions, future developments could have national implications for the way that ethnic intergroup processes are conceptualized in a more globally integrated China. The debate over cultural preservation, ethnic autonomy, and state schooling remains complex. As Appiah points out in his work on the ethics of identity, "We must help children to make themselves: and we have to do so according to our values because children do not begin with values of their own" (Appiah 2005, 137). Making Tibetans within China is an educational task that remains a work in progress. This debate cannot remain disconnected from strategies for the improvement of the learning environment and academic achievement of Tibetans. In searching for reasons why Tibetan educational achievement levels are far behind those in the rest of the country, a variety of perspectives are available but new thinking about a well resourced and community driven learning environment for schools is a natural step forward.

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Notes

1. In this paper, by Tibet it is meant the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China. The TAR is often referred to as "political Tibet", as distinguished from "ethnic Tibet", a much larger region that includes not only the TAR but also the Tibetan areas of the four adjacent Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu.
2. This may explain why much empirical research appearing in English is often by Tibetans themselves, or by long-term foreign experts in development projects who have lived and worked in Tibetan regions for a decade or more.
3. The other two officially designated ethnic groups in Tibet are the 2000 Moinba and 7000 Luoba, though there is some debate as to how they differ from Tibetans.
4. Field notes from visits to rural and nomadic schools from 1997 to 2007.
5. Field notes 26 August 2007; even the county seat school does not have a modern heating system.
6. To this day, one commune still exists in the TAR.
7. Field notes from visits to rural and nomadic schools from 1997 to 2007.
8. At the moment, the education discourse is dominated by the school for jobs paradigm. However, the urgent educational challenge also lies with access to relevant knowledge, integrated community development, cultural vitality, economic alternatives, and more recently, environmental preservation.
9. There has been a great deal of confusion about the translation of *Xizang neidiban* from Chinese to English. The government's former translation of "Tibet Inland Schools and Classes" could give the impression that these schools and classes are held within Tibet. A more recent government translation is Hinterland Schools. In actuality, the *Xizang*

- neidiban* are largely located in major Chinese cities and are basically Chinese Boarding Schools, thus the more English translation would be dislocated schools.
10. The three guarantees, a policy that was discontinued for a short time in the 1990s, still constitutes a major pillar of educational reform in Tibet. Without it, rates would drop drastically.
 11. For example, I was at Sokang school on 1 and 2 September 2001 when Penam county and local officials, 12 in all, met 100 Mag villagers, one household head at a time, to discuss why all of their children were not attending school.
 12. Field notes from visits to rural and nomadic boarding schools.
 13. In the 1990s, I visited many schools without electricity of any kind, but remote schools increasingly have light bulbs for classrooms, the main educational technology aside from a blackboard that is sometimes bereft of chalk. A wood or coal stove in the middle of the classroom is not uncommon.
 14. Rural school head, Penam county, May, 1999.
 15. Field notes, 15 June 2007.
 16. Interview with county education official and secondary school head, 26 August 2007.
 17. The leaders usually address the national meetings concerning Tibet development and education, of which there are three types. One type is initiated by the Secretariat of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. It is called the “Tibet Work Forum”, and has been convened four times in 1980, 1984, 1994 and 2001, respectively. The second type is organized by the State Council of China. It is called “The Second Support to Tibet Conference” held in 1987 and focuses on education. The third type is convened by the Education Ministry and conducted by the State Council of China. In 1993 this forum was named “Support Education in Tibet”. All of these emphasize the importance of education in the development of Tibet and propose strategies on education. See F.T. Ying (1984).
 18. “Concerning Attaining the Target of the Formation of Interior Region Tibetan Schools and Classes for Cultivating Talented Students”, Central Government Document Number 22 of 1984; and, “Circular Concerning Attaining the Central Implementation Target of Cultivating Tibetan Talent in the Interior Regions”, Document Number 25 of 1984.
 19. At least 18 of the schools were junior secondary schools, though only three (Beijing, Chengdu and Tianjin) had junior and senior secondary levels.
 20. The majority of the Tibetan students attend segregated classes in *neidi* schools, though there has been some experimentation. Small numbers of academically superior students were sent to neighbouring schools to study in integrated classes with Han Chinese students. While this is viewed as a positive step toward mainstreaming, is also seen by *neidiban* school heads as draining off the best talent from the *neidi* school (which in turn takes top students away from TAR schools).
 21. Some Tibetan teachers of language and language and literature, and some management personnel were also sent to the *neidiban*.
 22. Fieldnotes from fieldwork visits to three schools in Beijing, Chengdu and Wuhan.
 23. The case is different for the inland (*neidi*) school students from Xinjiang since Uygurs have well established networks based on trading and religious links with other Muslim minorities, especially Hui who have an urban presence throughout China.
 24. There are various translations, including “plurality and unity within the configuration of the Chinese nationality”. In general, however, this is considered by many scholars as a straight-line assimilation theory.

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