



Congressional-Executive Commission on China Hearing

“Preserving Tibet: Combating Cultural Erasure, Forced Assimilation and Transnational Repression”

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Chair Smith, Cochair Merkley, and other Distinguished Members of the Commission:

Thank you for your steadfast and groundbreaking leadership on the issue of Tibet.

Today, I will speak of Tibet as Tibetans know it: the entire Tibetan plateau - an area of approximately 900,000 square miles - made up of the three traditional provinces of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, and with a total Tibetan population of what is today around seven million people.

China misleadingly claims there are just 3.2 million Tibetans in Tibet because Chinese leaders are counting only those Tibetans in the “Tibet Autonomous Region” or the T.A.R. - that is mostly central and western Tibet. They’ve taken almost all of eastern Tibet, and have carved up and sub-fragmented Tibetans and the lands they live on into four Chinese provinces, ten autonomous prefectures and two autonomous counties. In this way they distort and confuse people as to what is the true picture inside Tibet.

For 70 years, generation after generation of Chinese leaders has tried to break the faith and loyalty of the fiercely independent Tibetan people to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, to Buddhism, and to a distinct Tibetan identity that existed for well over a thousand years before the People’s Republic of China was even founded.

But after using countless strategies, resources, and unimaginable violence, Xi Jinping now believes the best way for China to conquer Tibet is to ‘kill the Tibetan in the child’. He is doing this by taking nearly all Tibetan children away from the people who will surely transmit identity to them - their parents and families and spiritual leaders and teachers - and handing them over to agents of the Chinese state to raise them to speak a new language, and practice a new culture and religion - that of the Chinese Communist Party.

A little over a year ago, Tibet Action Institute released a report showing that at least 800,000 Tibetan children are living in a massive network of boarding primary, middle and secondary schools across all of historical Tibet. This shockingly high number means that at least three out

of every four Tibetan children aged six to eighteen are now separated from their families and living in state-run colonial boarding schools where the medium of instruction and the entire curriculum is focused on fostering loyalty to China.

Tibetan is taught as a single language class, and Tibetan culture is most often reduced to nothing more than song and dance and the tokenized wearing of traditional Tibetan clothing. The practice of Tibetan Buddhism is strictly forbidden.

China doesn't hide the fact that these schools exist. There is plenty of online propaganda claiming the students in boarding schools are happy and receiving a modern education. This propaganda nearly always features - very prominently - that single Tibetan language class. But what it hides, and what was not included in our report, is the existence of boarding preschools in rural areas.

And though we were hearing reports from Tibet that parents were being forced to send children as young as four and five years old away, we could not find any details on where they were being sent or what schooling they were receiving. It was only on the eve of releasing our report, that we met an expert eyewitness who'd recently fled from Tibet and confirmed the existence of mandatory boarding preschools for children in rural areas.

Dr. Gyal Lo, a Tibetan academic who holds a PhD from the University of Toronto and has over thirty years of experience in the field of education in China and Tibet estimates an additional 100,000-150,000 Tibetan children now live in boarding schools. He's visited more than 50 such preschools where children are required to live from Monday to Friday, and where they are immersed in a completely Chinese learning environment, including participating in war reenactments dressed in PLA uniforms or Red Army suits.

One Tibetan teacher described the situation in her area like this: "Usually there are very few Tibetan teachers; the majority are Chinese. So teachers only speak in Mandarin and conduct all school curriculum in Mandarin, including nursery rhymes and bedtime stories. When [the children] join primary school...hardly any of them can speak Tibetan."

Dr. Gyal Lo witnessed the impacts of these preschools in his own family when, after just three months, children who'd grown up in an entirely Tibetan speaking household preferred to speak in Chinese. He also saw them growing emotionally distant from their parents and grandparents and acting like guests or strangers in their own home.

Try to imagine your children or loved ones at this age and the heartbreak this is causing for these families. I have a six-year-old, and three-year-old twins, and so I am fully immersed in this period of childhood development right now. Kids at this stage need the care of their parents and family to help them eat, bathe and get dressed and - perhaps more importantly - to scare away the monsters at night, to comfort them when they are hurt or sick, and to reassure them that everything is going to be okay.

Tibetan parents don't want to send their kids away. And most wouldn't, if they had a choice.

Some parents refuse, and many more want to, but China's repression makes the price of resistance extremely high. Those who do face financial penalties and the loss of essential government support systems such as health care, education, and the national identity cards required for every activity. In order to avoid sending their kids away, some families split up - sending one parent to live with the child in an urban area where they can attend a day school. Other parents sleep in cars near the boarding preschools in order to be close to their children at all times. And, of course, the children are suffering too.

Research by scholars in China and Tibet, as well as reports by other outside sources, clearly shows the removal of children from their homes, as well as the highly regimented and isolated boarding school life, is psychologically traumatizing Tibetan children. And firsthand accounts of Tibetans who attended boarding schools in Tibet show pervasive racism and discrimination will inevitably lead them to develop feelings of shame and ethnic inferiority.

These impacts of the colonial boarding school system in Tibet sound hauntingly similar to those of the residential boarding school systems used to eliminate Indigenous identities in Canada, the US and Australia. This is because Xi Jinping and Chinese leaders are pursuing the same strategy, for the same reasons, in Tibet, in East Turkistan and Southern Mongolia. They are trying to quell resistance and consolidate China's rule over foreign lands and peoples.

And while Chinese officials argue the schools in Tibet are "fundamentally different from boarding schools of the colonial era" – in part because the students get to attend schools with modern facilities – they miss the point entirely that what matters most is what Tibetans want for their children. Even if the schools are gleaming new and the children wear Tibetan chubas, have one Tibetan class a day and are occasionally fed Tibetan food, Tibetan parents don't want their children to have their identity and mother-tongue stripped away from them and replaced with that of a Chinese nationalist.

Dr. Gyal Lo likes to simplify this issue by saying: "It is not about how good the school facilities are, but what is happening inside. The fundamental question is: who is teaching what to whom?"

In Tibet, the answer is clear: The Chinese state is removing Tibetan children from their homes by force or coercion and placing them in schools where they have to speak Chinese and conform to Chinese culture and tradition while stripping them of their own identity, including their religion and their mother tongue.

If this is not colonial education, I don't know what is.

And when viewed together with the all out attack on Tibetan Buddhism and the nomadic way of life, we can see that Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party intends to destroy everything that makes Tibetans Tibetan. Calling it "Ethnic Unity" or "Ethnic Fusion" or assimilation or

sinicization doesn't make it different, or any less colonial, than what was done by governments of Canada, the U.S., and Australia to the First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples.

And what it is is crystal clear to Tibetans. Just as it is clear to Uyghurs, and to Southern Mongolians. China is committing genocide in Tibet. And at a time when our nations are finally reckoning with these atrocities, that Xi Jinping is pursuing a strategy targeting children for the elimination of language and culture – a colonial strategy that is now reviled and condemned around the world – should be, along with the Uyghur genocide, a massive red flag for the international community of the true nature and intention of the Chinese Communist Party.

But this doesn't have to be the end of the story. Tibetans inside Tibet have not stopped fighting. We hear about their acts of resistance every single day. And our Uyghur, Southern Mongolian, Hong Kong, and Chinese activist brothers and sisters are fighting too. Now is the critical time for the world to step up and help.

To that end, Tibet Action Institute respectfully urges:

- All members of Congress and senior Administration officials to publicly condemn China's colonial boarding school system in Tibet and call on the government of China to immediately halt the implementation of this system, and especially boarding preschools;
- The members of this Commission, together with other members of Congress, to request the Administration to lead Democracies in exposing and publicly opposing the colonial boarding school system in Tibet at the UN Human Rights Council and in other multilateral fora;
- The Administration to sanction Chinese leaders and officials responsible for the colonial boarding school system, and especially the intellectual architects responsible for developing and implementing this system;
- Congress and the Administration to secure programmatic support for Tibetan organizations working to preserve and advance Tibetan language and culture, especially the establishment of Tibetan language programs and schools for Tibetans living in the United States;
- The members of this Commission to create a task force based on the understanding that China's campaign of ethnic elimination in Tibet, East Turkistan, and Southern Mongolia, as well as its repression in Hong Kong and threats against Taiwan, are interlinked and part of the same problem of Chinese colonialism, and therefore require a unified framework to generate policy responses adequate to compel current and future generations of Chinese leaders to change course. Recognizing that this problem constitutes a crisis requiring an international response, this task force would explore and recommend to the Administration all available diplomatic, economic and political responses, including the option of forming an International Contact Group; and
- The members of this Commission to press China to allow the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Procedures, and other independent human rights experts immediate, meaningful, and unfettered access to Tibet, including access to colonial boarding schools, and especially boarding preschools.