



Congressional-Executive Commission on China

The Human Rights Situation in Tibet and the International Response

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Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the commission.

China's education policy in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is significantly reducing the access of ethnic Tibetans to education in their mother tongue. The government policy, though called "bilingual education," is in practice leading to the gradual replacement of Tibetan by Chinese as the medium of instruction in primary schools throughout the region, except for classes studying Tibetan as a language. Since the 1960s, Chinese has been the language of instruction in nearly all middle and high schools in the TAR, where just under half of Tibetans in China live, but new educational practices introduced by the government in the TAR are now leading more primary schools and even kindergartens to use Chinese as the teaching language for Tibetan students.

The trend towards increased use of Chinese in primary schools in Tibetan urban areas has been noted for several years, but as detailed below, there are indications that it is now becoming the norm there and is spreading to rural areas as well. In interviews that Human Rights Watch conducted in September 2019, parents with children at rural primary schools in six different townships in northern TAR said that a Chinese-medium teaching system had been introduced in their local primary schools the previous March. There have been no public announcements of a government policy in the TAR requiring rural primary schools to teach their classes in Chinese, but an official working on educational issues in the TAR told Human Rights Watch that he expects the government to introduce a policy requiring all primary schools in the TAR to shift to Chinese-medium education.

China formally introduced a policy of "bilingual education" in 2010 for schools in all minority areas in China, an approach to minority education considered appropriate internationally when it promotes competency in both the local and the national language. The official position of the TAR authorities is that both Tibetan and Chinese languages should be "promoted," leaving individual schools to decide which language to prioritize as the teaching medium. However, Human Rights Watch's research suggests that TAR authorities are using a strategy of cultivated ambiguity in their public statements while using indirect pressure to push primary schools, where

an increasing number of ethnic Chinese teachers are teaching, to adopt Chinese-medium instruction at the expense of Tibetan, such as allocating increasing numbers of ethnic Chinese teachers who do not speak Tibetan to positions in Tibetan schools.

Chinese-Medium Instruction in Primary Schools and Kindergartens

There is almost no publicly available data about the medium of instruction currently used in primary schools or kindergartens in the TAR or other Tibetan areas. But Human Rights Watch's research found that local authorities in the TAR began preparations from about the year 2000 to encourage and facilitate a gradual shift to Chinese-medium teaching in primary schools in the region. These preparations started with instructions by the central authorities in Beijing that required local administrations throughout China to prepare to introduce bilingual education for communities that are not ethnic Chinese.

What form that policy should take has varied significantly from province to province, but in 2001, all primary schools in urban areas of Tibet began to teach Tibetan pupils Chinese language from Grade 1, instead of Grade 3 as had been the case previously. However, there was no mention by officials as to which language should be used as the medium of instruction in Tibetan pre-schools or primary schools.

In 2010, all provincial-level administrations throughout China introduced formal programs for the implementation of "bilingual education." Chinese analysts distinguish between "Model 1" bilingualism, which emphasizes the use of the local or minority language in classrooms, and "Model 2" bilingualism, which emphasizes the national language, Chinese. But in its 2010 announcement on implementation, the TAR authorities once again did not specify whether Chinese or Tibetan was to be the medium of instruction in primary schools and have continued to use the term "bilingual education" ambiguously, without specifying its meaning. In public reports they imply that the only requirement is extra classes for Tibetans to learn Chinese and that individual schools can choose the medium of instruction. In practice, however, there appears to be considerable pressure to shift to Chinese and Model 2.

This pressure is strongly reflected in official Chinese media reports on the benefits of "bilingual education" in the TAR. In early 2015, a report by China's official news agency, *Xinhua*, said that Chinese-medium instruction had already been introduced, not just into secondary schools, as was well-known, but also into urban primary schools in the TAR: "Different from the model widely implemented in pastoral regions, elementary schools in each of Tibet's prefectures (and municipalities), some junior middle schools, senior middle schools, and Tibet classes in the interior adopt a teaching model that uses Chinese as the teaching language with Tibetan as an addition." In January 2016, an article on Tibetan schools by China's state-run *Global Times* confirmed that "increasingly schools, especially in urban areas, are using *Putonghua* [standard Chinese] as the primary language of instruction, with Tibetan being used only in classes where the Tibetan language is the topic of the class, if it is taught at all."

Then, in June 2016, the Lhasa Education Bureau announced that Chinese was being used as the medium of instruction to teach mathematics in a majority of primary schools in the counties around Lhasa, including rural areas outside the region's capital city. This was the first known

direct admission by the government of a shift to Chinese-medium teaching in some classes within rural TAR primary schools.

Outside the TAR, the Chinese authorities have already imposed Chinese-medium instruction in primary schools in at least one Tibetan area. In the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, the prefectural government ordered primary schools to introduce primarily Chinese-medium instruction in the 2019-2020 school year. A similar plan to introduce Chinese-medium education was reported from Tsolho prefecture in Qinghai province in April 2017. Teaching in all schools in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai is already conducted in Chinese. There are unconfirmed reports that similar policies will soon be introduced in other Tibetan prefectures in Qinghai.

Governmental pressure on Tibetan schools to use Chinese is also evident in the pre-school sector. According to China's official media, the TAR government plans to ensure that by 2020, 80 percent of children in the TAR attend two to three years of kindergarten before entering primary school.¹ In 2016, TAR authorities announced that all kindergarten programs have to become "bilingual." According to an academic paper published in *Xizang Jiaoyu* ("Tibetan Education"), an educational journal in the TAR, "bilingual education" was "basically universalized at preschool level" by 2017, which means that all of the 81,000 Tibetan children in pre-schools and kindergartens in the TAR above the age of 3 are already experiencing "bilingual education."

In its January 2016 article on the Tibetan language, the *Global Times* explicitly linked the critical decline in the use of Tibetan language to the decrease in the use of Tibetan in schools: "urbanization and the increasing amount of the school day spent speaking Putonghua has left the Tibetan language in a precarious situation." It added that "many Tibetan parents have found that their kids are not learning how to speak their mother-tongue."

Human Rights Watch found that among ordinary Tibetans, there is widespread concern about the increasing loss of fluency in Tibetan among the younger generation as a result of changing school policies and other factors. As a former part-time teacher from Lhasa told Human Rights Watch:

In primary school, the Tibetan teachers are very united and have a strong urgency to teach Tibetan, but the biggest problem is that they lack method and materials, and a lot of the kids in a way don't like Tibetan because they think it will be quite useless.... [Older] people always complain about the lack of Tibetan, [and] the fact that their grandkids cannot speak proper Tibetan at home.

Pressures on Tibetan Schools to Switch to Chinese-Medium Teaching

While public policy statements by the TAR authorities remain ambiguous, there are increasing signs that they are using a range of indirect mechanisms to pressure schools in the TAR to switch to Chinese-medium teaching. These measures require Tibetan schools to increase Tibetan children's immersion in Chinese culture and language. They include "mixed classes,"

¹ "250 bilingual kindergartens to be built in Tibet region," *Global Times*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/970539.shtml> (accessed December 29, 2019).

“concentrated schooling,” the transfer of large numbers of Chinese teachers to Tibetan schools, sending Tibetan teachers for training to provinces where Chinese is the dominant language, and requiring all Tibetan teachers to be fluent in Chinese. The measures have indirectly increased pressure on schools in the TAR to reduce the availability of mother-tongue education for Tibetan children over the last decade and are accelerating the gradual shift to Chinese-medium teaching in TAR primary schools.

The number of non-Tibetan-speaking teachers working in Tibetan schools tripled between 1988 and 2005, and under the current program, 30,000 will be sent to Tibet and the Xinjiang region, in the northwest, by 2020. None of the non-Tibetan teachers are required to know Tibetan and they presumably teach in Chinese. While many of them teach in middle schools and high schools in the TAR, there has been an impact even at the pre-school level, especially in urban areas: according to a Chinese study in 2017, 30 percent of teachers in one Lhasa county did not know Tibetan.

In addition, from at least 2016, hundreds of Tibetan teachers have been sent for further training in other provinces, and since 2017, all Tibetan teachers have been required to know Chinese. As early as 2003 the number of primary school teachers using Chinese for instruction in the TAR had increased threefold over the previous 12 years, from 1,698 in 1991 – then 20 percent of total teachers – to 4,228 or 33 percent of total teachers by 2003. We have not been able to find data showing the change since then.

Another measure that has contributed to the switch to Chinese-medium instruction has been the creation of “mixed classes,” the inclusion of non-Tibetan pupils in classes with Tibetan ones. Another measure, known as “concentrated schooling,” involves closing local schools in rural areas and consolidating them in a nearby town, where rural students usually have to board. While this brings benefits in terms of facilities and standards, it also reduces children’s contact with their family and with a Tibetan-speaking environment. These measures all improve Tibetan children’s exposure to Chinese but can weaken children’s access to and familiarity with their own language.

The imposition of teaching practices that encourage the switch to Chinese-medium instruction in the TAR is the result of increasing moves by the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP or the “Party”) since 2014 to shift away from encouragement of cultural diversity, which had been the official policy towards minorities since the early 1980s, including respect for the distinctive cultures and languages of minorities. As detailed in section III of this report, the new policy aims to increase the assimilation of minorities in China and requires officials to prioritize “ethnic mingling” (*minzu jiaorong*) of China’s nationalities and “identification” (*rentong*) by the minority nationalities with “Chinese culture” (*Zhonghua wenhua*). The government contends that these measures are necessary to achieve not just economic development for minorities but also “nationality unity” and “national stability” within China.

Global evidence shows that children’s educational development is adversely affected, particularly in the case of minority and indigenous children, when they are not taught in their mother-tongue in the early years of education. Mother-tongue policy experts agree that children

who have grasped foundational skills and literacy in their own mother-tongue are better placed to learn in a second or foreign language.

Human Rights Watch supports policies that promote genuine bilingual education, in particular through the use of mother-tongue instruction in the early years of education and through curricula sensitive to indigenous and ethnic minority customs and practices. China's policies for Tibetan children in the TAR, however, show decreasing respect for their right to use their mother-tongue or learn about and freely express Tibetan cultural identity and values in schools. Rather, they embody an approach to schools and schoolchildren that appears to be eroding the Tibetan language skills of children and forcing them to consume political ideology and ideas contrary to those of their parents and community.

Justifications for Shifting to Chinese-Medium Instruction

Chinese officials usually justify the switch to Chinese-medium instruction in Tibetan schools by arguing that improved knowledge of Chinese will help Tibetans gain employment in later life, a claim that is widely acknowledged in Tibet. However, the justification for imposing Chinese-language teaching in Tibetan kindergartens is quite different, at least according to a 2014 report by the Chinese scholar Yao Jijun, who said the aim of bilingual education at the pre-school level is to “better integrate the Chinese language” into Tibetan kindergarten children as “a means of eliminating elements of instability in Tibetan regions” (“instability” is a term used in China to refer to political unrest). According to Yao, “Tibet’s stability” depends on the full development of “bilingual education” at the kindergarten level.

Concern with eliminating the risk of future political dissent or unrest is also explicit in Party justifications for its “ethnic mingling” and “cultural identification” policies, which were endorsed by the central leadership as the new direction of minority policy in 2014. Children of minorities in kindergartens and primary schools undergo intensive political indoctrination that asserts the unquestioned benefits of the Party’s policies of ethnic mingling and its other political objectives. The children have little access to alternative ideas, since the media reinforce the necessity of prioritizing the use of Chinese language in education, with little or no discussion of educational alternatives.

There are no signs of significant popular involvement in the decision-making process that leads to these policies, particularly when they involve the minority regions; the policies are designed and imposed by the Communist Party.

School Closures and Protests

Human Rights Watch has reported on protests in a number of Tibetan areas since 2010 against earlier attempts to introduce Chinese-medium education in Tibetan schools. It has also reported on the closure of privately-run schools in Tibetan areas and has received reports that three monastery-run schools were closed in Tibetan parts of Sichuan province in or around June 2018. It notes also an unconfirmed report of the forced closure of a private kindergarten in the TAR in 2008 for giving priority to Tibetan language teaching.

Tibetans in China already suffer extensive restrictions on rights to free speech and opinion, peaceful assembly, movement, and religion that are more severe than in ethnic Chinese-majority

areas of China. Chinese laws preclude them from open discussion of their history, allow them little say in policymaking in their own areas, and place extreme restrictions on their religious practice, access to information, and foreign travel.

In January 2016, a Tibetan campaigner on language rights, Tashi Wangchuk, was detained by the authorities and charged with “jeopardizing state security” after giving interviews to the *New York Times* stating that there was no longer any provision for Tibetan to be taught as a language, let alone Tibetan-medium education, in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai. In May 2018, a court sentenced him to five years in prison for “incitement to split the country” by “distorting the state of education and cultural development in Tibetan areas, slandering the government by saying it restricts the development of minority cultures and eliminates minority language and culture, undermining ethnic unity, social stability in Tibetan areas, and national unity,” according to court documents.²

Despite the risks of speaking out, Tibetan intellectuals continue to express concerns about China’s education policies in Tibetan areas. In response to the April 2017 announcement of a plan by the Party committee in Tsolho Prefecture in Qinghai to reduce or replace Tibetan-medium education in local schools, leading Tibetan scholar and lama Alak Dorzhi posted this comment online:

In recent years in Tibetan areas, self-deluding and arbitrary policy documents in violation of the national constitution and nationality laws, which do not fully respect the Party’s nationality policies or consult expert or public opinion have upset the public time and again. When this happens, the authorities resort to the use of force, those in authority go after the public and use the convenient brutality of stability maintenance measures to try and solve the problem....

Alak Dorzhi added that this issue “has not been considered carefully enough by the authorities.” Despite his cautious tone, his comment was quickly deleted from the internet, signaling the increasing limitations on public debate among Tibetans about language policies in their schools.

Domestic and International Law

The transition to Chinese-medium instruction in Tibetan primary schools is in tension with if not contradictory to some Chinese laws and policies. This includes the 2001 Law on Regional National Autonomy, which states that minority schools “should, if possible, use textbooks printed in their own languages, and lessons should be taught in those languages.”³ The law specifies that minority schools should teach Chinese language only from the early stages of primary education and does not direct that Chinese language be the language of instruction or even taught in kindergartens for minority children.

² “Translated court documents expose China’s sham prosecution of Tibetan language rights advocate Tashi Wangchuk, raise fears about use of torture,” Save Tibet, August 29, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/translated-court-documents-expose-chinas-sham-prosecution-of-tibetan-language-rights-advocate-tashi-wangchuk-raise-fears-about-use-of-torture/> (accessed December 29, 2019).

³ Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy, art. 37, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207138.htm> (accessed December 29, 2019).

International human rights law obligates China to provide Tibetan-language instruction to the ethnic Tibetan population. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which China ratified in 1992, states that “a child belonging to a ... minority ... shall not be denied the right ... to use his or her own language.”⁴ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which China has signed but not ratified, contains similar language.⁵ China also supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which both endorses rights to indigenous language education and the right of indigenous people to control their educational systems and institutions.⁶

Three UN human rights expert committees have repeatedly expressed concern at China’s handling of mother-tongue instruction, and have called on the government to ensure Tibetan children are able to learn in their own language, and to protect those who advocate for mother-tongue education. In 1996, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the international expert body that monitors state compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, called on the Chinese authorities “to ensure that children in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other minority areas are guaranteed full opportunities to develop knowledge about their own language and culture as well as to learn the Chinese language.”⁷ In a subsequent statement in 2013, the committee called on the government to “effectively implement the bilingual language policy to ensure use and promotion of ethnic minority languages and ensure participation by ethnic minorities, including Tibetan and Uighur children ... in the decision-making process of the education system.”⁸

In 2014, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) expressed concern that ethnic minorities in China continue to face severe restrictions in the realization of their right to participate in cultural life, including the right to use and teach minority languages. The committee specifically noted the restrictions faced by Tibetans and Uighurs, “in particular regarding the restriction of education in the Tibetan and Uighur languages.” The committee called on China to “ensure the use and practice of their language and culture.”⁹

China has failed to comply with several key requirements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recommendations of its committee. These include not providing adequate numbers of teachers trained to carry out bilingual education and enough textbooks in Tibetan, together with culturally appropriate teaching materials. In 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of

⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, art. 30.

⁵ ICCPR art. 27.

⁶ UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, art. 14.

⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: China,” CRC/C/15/Add.56, para. 40, June 17, 1996, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2f15%2fAdd.56&Lang=en (accessed December 29, 2019).

⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth period reports of China, adopted by the Committee at its sixty-fourth session (16 September – 4 October 2013), CRC/C/CHN/CO/3-4, para. 76(c), October 29, 2013, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC/C/CHN/CO/3-4&Lang=En (accessed December 29, 2019).

⁹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding observations on the second periodic report of China, including Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China, June 13, 2014, E/C.12/CHN/CO/2, para. 36.

All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern that “Tibetan language teaching in schools in the [TAR] has not been placed on an equal footing in law, policy and practice with Chinese, and that it has been significantly restricted.” It called on the government of China to preserve the language by encouraging its use in education and other fields.¹⁰

Recommendations

To Tibet Autonomous Region Officials:

- Ensure that all Tibetan children are able to learn and use Tibetan in schools.
- End the forced imposition of “ethnic mingling” measures in Tibetan education such as concentrated schooling and “mixed classes.”
- Unconditionally release Tashi Wangchuk and others prosecuted for peaceful opposition to state education policies.
- End the suppression of any activities or organizations calling for increased mother-tongue education and reverse the classification of such activities as “organized crime.” Allow all public discussion of education issues without threat of reprisal.
- Publish the regulations used to assess education in privately run kindergartens and primary and secondary schools in the TAR.
- Make it mandatory to provide clear reasons and the factual basis for closing such schools. Ensure that such regulations do not restrict or prohibit a school’s ability to choose the Tibetan language as a medium of instruction and that inspectors do not unfairly target or discriminate against Tibetan-run schools in their decisions to close schools.

To National Officials:

- Reaffirm the established rights of minorities to mother-tongue instruction in schools.
- Revise the bilingual education policy to ensure the use and promotion of ethnic minority languages in schools, allow mother-tongue instruction in pre-school and primary school, and ensure voluntary and consensual implementation of language policy in schools, including by consulting with and ensuring participation of ethnic minorities during the revision process.
- Ensure that educational objectives and not political objectives hold priority in the formulation of education policy in minority areas.
- Ensure that promotion of “nationality unity” does not violate basic civil and cultural rights and does not restrict public debate over issues such as education and migration in nationality areas.
- End Communist Party political control over schools and their educational decisions.
- Ensure that all teaching and learning materials for pre-school and primary levels are available in ethnic minority languages and as feasible for secondary levels, and reflect culturally appropriate content.

¹⁰ UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, “Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China (including Hong Kong, China and Macao, China),” CERD/C/CHN/CO/14-17, September 19, 2018, paras. 43 and 44(b).

- Ensure teachers who are moved to teach in autonomous regions, including those enrolled in Aid Tibet programs, are provided with in-service training in the relevant and appropriate minority language for the region they are sent to.
- End the layoff of teachers from autonomous regions caused by the current “bilingual” policy, and ensure that all minority teachers are provided with in-service training to match requirements for public school teachers.
- Comply with all outstanding recommendations on education from UN treaty bodies.

I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you, and I welcome any questions you may have.