

Presentation for CECC - April 7, 2003

Panel Topic: "Teaching and Learning Tibetan - The Role of the Tibetan Language in Tibet's Future"

Thank you for the opportunity to address this Commission. In addition to my doctoral research in feminist anthropology on the Tibetan diaspora, I am also writing and pursuing research on Tibetan language issues as well as the production and consumption of Tibetan media. The following presentation is intended to be a brief background for those who are interested in Tibet but not necessarily specializing in the area.

1. **Setting the Scene: the Paradox of Litang**

Subdivisions and Signs

In the course of working on a new primary boarding school in Litang county, I was struck by a number of paradoxes. Since my last visit, a new subdivision had been built in Litang. The broad paved streets and electric wires appeared typical of any new subdivision. However, all the new homes were built in traditional Tibetan architecture. Street after street, the sight of large comfortable Tibetan style homes resting in neat rows was a sight I did not expect and which I found impressive. The city's planners could easily have followed most other Tibetan towns and cities by constructing non-descript concrete homes and apartment blocks. Yet, despite this subdivision, I was at the same time, also struck by the number of public signs only in Chinese language. Most signs for streets, shops, hotels, restaurants, and so on are still in Chinese and rarely in Tibetan.

Chubas and Chinese Medium

In another example, in attending a number of meetings with local county education officials, I was impressed by the Tibetan dress protocol insisted upon by the county head. The county head insisted that all Tibetans attending official meetings must don Tibetan chuba or traditional robes. He himself is never without his Tibetan chuba and is rumored to have sent some Tibetans home to retrieve their robes before re-joining a meeting. Yet I was also struck by the fact that at these countless meetings, much of the conversation was being held in Chinese language. The population in Litang includes many more Chinese settlers now than a decade and a half ago. However, the majority of the local population and county officials remain Tibetans. The Tibetan officials were educated in Tibetan and Chinese but use Chinese as the language of official business. So, therefore, the paradox is that while there is a clear consciousness of the importance of Tibetan culture and language, there are profoundly important ways in which this consciousness is not being realized. Simply adding Tibetan language to the curriculum or solely advocating a bilingual education will not necessarily suffice. It is clearly a complex problem that requires complex solutions.

2. **School in Chungba Valley**

Synopsis

Fifteen years ago on our first return to the Litang area, it was clear that basic education was a critical need in the area. Aside from the monastery, there was in fact little local interest in education as parents then feared their children would exclusively learn Chinese. But in recent

years, with the opening of the region, schools and other projects have become possible. We recently began to raise the necessary funds for the capital expenditure for the school and worked with local government to set up the school's infrastructure and administration. The school currently consists of 210 students from ages 7 to 12, a principal, ten teachers, five cooks, a groundskeeper and guardians for the younger children. Due to the scattered geography of the hamlets and villages, the children could not travel on foot to school on a daily basis. It was, therefore, necessary to build a boarding school that could house approximately 240 individuals. The project began two and a half years ago and the school opened its doors to students in September 2002. *Focus on Tibetan Language*

From the outset of our working relationship with Litang County education officials, we stated our clear interest in two factors. First, we expressed our committed interest in working for a bilingual school that focuses on Tibetan language as the medium but which also teaches Chinese language well. Second, in recognition of the long overdue attention needed for girls' education, we expressed serious interest in seeing gender parity in the study body. The local education officials are also very interested in Tibetan language acquisition along with Chinese language instruction. Chinese is taught as a second language while the main medium at the school is Tibetan.

In terms of curriculum, the students are following the standard curriculum of the other Tibetan schools in the county - history, math, science, physical education, Tibetan and Chinese. The availability of Tibetan-language textbooks is a tremendous resource. However, much more can be done in the field of writing and translating books into Tibetan language to interest and encourage Tibetans of all ages to read more in their native language. Like many other rural and nomadic Tibetan areas, the school in Chungba Valley has the added challenge of dealing with a particular sub-dialect of the Kham dialect of Tibetan. As such, the school has one teacher who speaks the local dialect and can facilitate the learning process using a vernacular that the children already know. Currently, there is an active effort to identify more teachers who speak the local vernacular to facilitate the students' critically important early learning years.

Instructional Interventions: Tutoring & Remedial Classes

At this very early stage in the project, we have introduced a number of practices that are new to schools in the Litang area. First, classes are taught six days per week. Second, there are tutoring sessions during the mid-day break for students wishing further instruction. Also, there are remedial classes for those students who need extra guidance and assistance with their lessons. To help compensate for the teachers' long work hours, they are offered a significant increase above the standard teacher salary. Although the majority of these 210 children have never set foot in a school before, they have learned quickly to apply themselves to their studies. In December the students took their grade one exams and to the surprise of many, they placed first in the county for their grade level. In fact, they were tested twice to ensure the results were accurate. It was recently announced the students have placed first in the prefecture in a number of subjects. Despite the novice status of this school, county and prefecture level education officials are becoming interested in some of the teaching methods at the school.

3. Bilingual & Bicultural in Diaspora: Parallels to Tibet Today

Similar Challenges

In considering the issue of Tibetan language and bilingual education for Tibetans in Tibetan areas today, I find it quite interesting that in a number of ways, there are many parallels between the situation for Tibetans in diaspora and for those in Tibetan areas. I am from the first generation of

Tibetans to be raised in the western diaspora. Growing up in working class neighborhood in a small town with only a few other Tibetan families, there was no context whatsoever for Tibetan culture. My parents faced the typical immigrant challenge of transmitting a distant culture to their children. We managed to learn and then retain the Tibetan language by following a rule of speaking only Tibetan in the home. The Tibetan linguistic environment at home was supplemented by occasional Tibetan lessons at an informal "Sunday School" taught in turn by various literate parents in the community.

Whether Tibetans live in Washington DC or Beijing or a town like Litang, the issue of retaining Tibetan language and finding a way to make it seamless part of life is a challenge. When Tibetans from Tibet visit Tibetans in the US or other western countries, they are often dismayed to encounter many of the Tibetan children who no longer speak Tibetan, sometimes even after years of Tibetan language education in India. A parallel situation is found in large Chinese cities such as Beijing where many of the young Tibetans may understand some Tibetan, but cannot speak, read or write in their native language. I have even encountered Tibetan children in Tibetan towns who also do not speak Tibetan and they tend to be children who attend Chinese medium schools and speak Chinese at home with parents in the white collar work force.

4. **Challenges and Opportunities Ahead**

Developing a Tibetan Economy

Over the years, I have spoken with many Tibetans educated at universities in Tibet and China. It is their experience and feeling that the current system produces a cyclical effect. Tibetans who study Tibetan language become teachers who in turn teach young people who eventually become Tibetan language teachers. Although there is a clear and growing need for Tibetan language teachers, my point here is that Tibetan must become a language that is used in fields other than government work and teaching. In short, what is needed is an economic context actively supportive of and supported by Tibetan language.

Expansion of Tibetan contemporary terminology

There is a burgeoning literature on Tibetan education written in Chinese by both Tibetan and Chinese researchers. I am sure members of the Commission are following that conversation and I would recommend a consideration of this literature to others interested in these important questions. A primary opportunity and challenge ahead for Tibetans is to become not only bilingual but also bicultural. To teach and learn either Tibetan or Chinese at the exclusion of the other will eventually present further obstacles in the future. Yet being bilingual is also not enough. Tibetans need a Tibetan cultural and economic context in which to express, use and further develop their language and their communities. The emergence of larger numbers of Tibetans who are conversant and comfortable functioning in Tibetan and Chinese societies will be an asset to their communities.

The Need for Support

I would like to conclude by stating that Tibetans are now at a critical juncture. Whether inside Tibet or in diaspora, Tibetans have never before faced a period of such rapid social, political and economic change. It is in the hands of the current generation of Tibetans and those interested in Tibet to set the ground work for positive and productive change. The opportunities are tremendous. Clearly, Tibetans need education. But in order to meet that need, Tibetans need resources and support. There are a host of organizations - local level governments, Tibetan and

foreign NGOs, and so on - need the basic capital investment necessary to build schools, clinics, vocational training centers, adult learning centers, libraries, and so on. Tibetan trainers need training. There is a tremendous shortage of Tibetan human resources at all levels. The energy, commitment and intellectual resources are there but funding is needed to train a generation of Tibetans in Tibetan areas who are eager to make a solid contribution.

The opportunity to learn and travel affords researchers not only added perspective but also gives them further responsibility to engage with the realities they encounter. There are the detractors who present rationalized accounts of why educational and Tibetan language engagement in Tibetan areas is hopeless. Some point to Inner Mongolia and even Manchuria as the future of Tibet. But if I did not believe from research and direct experience that positive and measurable change was possible, I would not be here before you seeking support for the survival of Tibetan language and education. As a researcher, a refugee/immigrant and as a Tibetan with roots in a rural mountain village, the issue of the future of Tibetan language and education is clearly a path that needs to be traveled.

Fifteen years ago, the parents in the local community did not wish for their children to attend school because they feared losing their cultural identity. Today, after the construction of new boarding school with Tibetan architecture, Tibetan teachers and even some positive preliminary test results by the children, there is clearly a new energy in this relatively remote community. I only wish I could convey to you at this roundtable what it feels like to experience that kind of excitement at the local level. Now, the challenge ahead with the school is to assist the students in sustaining their new found enthusiasm for learning in a bilingual context.