



RESPONSE TO CHINESE GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA ON COLONIAL BOARDING SCHOOLS IN TIBET

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An analysis of Chinese government data reveals a disturbing trend: a significant majority of parents in Tibet have been coerced into sending their children to state-run residential boarding schools. These institutions are designed to systematically erode the children's Tibetan identity and culture, turning them into hyper-nationalist Chinese citizens loyal to the Chinese Communist Party. According to a report by the Tibet Action Institute in December 2021, between 800,000 to 900,000 Tibetan children, comprising at least 78% of all Tibetan students aged 6-18 were in these institutions by 2019. Additionally, at least 100,000 Tibetan preschoolers aged just 4 to 6 years old are now believed to reside in state-run residential preschools in rural Tibetan areas.¹ Beijing does not admit to or acknowledge the existence of this program, withholding any official data.

In response to increasing international scrutiny and condemnation of the boarding school system, the PRC government has initiated a propaganda campaign aimed at concealing the true nature of this coercive education system. This includes speaking only about its existence in the Tibet Autonomous Region – a fraction of Tibet's landmass home to under half the Tibetan population. This appears to be an effort to deny that Tibet covers a much larger area, including those designated by China as "Tibetan Autonomous" Prefectures and Counties in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan, and that the requirement to send children away to board is active throughout all of Tibet. Beijing argues that boarding schools in Tibet are the only way to provide schooling due to geographical factors. Additionally, Beijing contends that Tibetan language and culture are not only taught but also celebrated within these institutions, and insists that Tibetan parents are content with and appreciative of sending their children away.

Beijing's spurious claims about the colonial boarding school system in Tibet are answered below.

IS CHINA FULFILLING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION FOR TIBETANS?

China claims boarding schools deliver high-quality education to Tibetans who were - prior to occupation - uneducated and largely illiterate.²

¹ New York Times, "The One Million Tibetan Children in China's Boarding Schools," Gyal Lo, September 15, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/15/opinion/china-tibet-boarding-school.html>

² For example, see Global Times, "My first-hand observation of Xizang education proves West's slander, distortion wrong," June 12, 2023, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1292423.shtml> ("To begin with a simple statistic: before the peaceful liberation of Xizang (Tibet) in 1951, literacy was less than 5 percent of the population; today, literacy is more than 95.5 percent. To begin with a simple statistic: before the peaceful liberation of Xizang (Tibet) in 1951, literacy was less than 5 percent of the population; today, literacy is more than 95.5 percent.") and Xinhua Global Service, "Boarding schools in China's Xizang stand as testament to educational equity," January 6, 2024, available at:

While the illiteracy rate in Tibet was high at the time of China's invasion, the number was similar to that in China itself. And Tibet, like the rest of the world, has seen literacy rates rise significantly in the period since the early 1950s.³ It must also be noted that every family in Tibet - regardless of social status - would have core members who were highly literate as it was common practice for every family to send one or more children to live as a monk or nun in a monastery.

The problem in Tibet is not that Tibetan children are being educated and taught, but rather *where* they are being taught, along with *what* and *how*. China's education system in Tibet now requires the vast majority of all school-age children to reside in state-run boarding schools and thus live apart from their families and communities from as young as four years old. The curriculum is taught almost entirely in Mandarin Chinese and heavily imbued with political indoctrination, so that Tibetan children are taught to be loyal and nationalist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) subjects while learning little to nothing about their own, rich history and Buddhist culture and traditions.

ARE TIBETAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TAUGHT AND CELEBRATED IN COLONIAL BOARDING SCHOOLS IN TIBET?

In numerous state media reports and official statements, China claims that Tibetan language and culture are a central part of every child's education.

Reports from Tibetans in Tibet – unable to speak freely for fear of detention or other repercussions – indicate that children in boarding schools have very poor, basic Tibetan skills, if they retain them at all, speak in Chinese, and are also changed culturally, leading to a feeling of estrangement in their own family.

Tibetan is offered as a single language class at many of the colonial boarding schools (it is unclear if Tibetan is taught at all schools and to every age group) meaning Tibetan students are taught their mother-tongue as if it were a second language – much like Spanish is taught in the United States. The rest of the school curriculum is taught in Mandarin Chinese and so Tibetan students spend the majority of their school day learning and speaking in Chinese and not Tibetan.

China does not actually refute this. For example, a propaganda video from October 2023 intended to “dispel the myth” of the colonial nature of boarding schools in Tibet shows a posted

<https://english.news.cn/20240106/24e51ec7a05e40c5b8b89d0ec72ee5b4/c.html> (“In old Xizang, the illiteracy rate exceeded 95 percent. Nowadays, the retention rate of nine-year compulsory education has reached 97.73 percent, higher than the national average. The boarding schools maximally guarantee that children in remote areas enjoy the right to education. And because of these schools, both rural and urban students can share high-quality educational resources and receive school education equally, thus narrowing the rural-urban educational gap.”)

³ World Economic Forum, “*This is how much the global literacy rate grew over 200 years*,” September 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/09/reading-writing-global-literacy-rate-changed/> (“According to data compiled by Our World in Data and the World Bank, the literacy rate of the world's population from secondary school age onward was only 12 percent in 1820 - around one person in ten. In 1900, it still barely exceeded 20 percent. From the 1950s on, world literacy began to take off, hitting 42 percent in 1960 and 70 percent in 1983. Today, the global literacy rate stands at 87 percent, or almost nine out of ten people worldwide.”)

class schedule (written in Chinese) with 40 classes in Chinese and 10 in Tibetan.⁴ A similar article in a Chinese state publication states that middle school students receive seven hours per week⁵ of Tibetan instruction per week - fewer than the 10 presented in the propaganda video. The class in “Tibetan calligraphy” in the same propaganda video is actually just teaching students how to write in Tibetan. In September 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) mandated preschool instruction (also called kindergarten) be in Chinese, and this is the same through all the grades.⁶

While Tibetan students may also receive some instruction in Tibetan dance, it does not appear to be a part of the regular curriculum and rather offered only through physical education classes or, in some areas, as a part of extracurricular activities. The students are not being meaningfully taught about their own rich cultural traditions, which are inextricably linked to Tibetan Buddhism, any expression of which is strictly prohibited at the boarding schools. Instead, the milieu in which they are immersed for the majority of their life at the boarding schools is one that aggressively glorifies Chinese Communist culture, history, and political thought.

So determined is the Chinese government to wipe out Tibetan children’s footing in their own language and culture, that it bans children from learning Tibetan and participating in religious activities even during school holidays. Since 2021, China’s Education Department has banned the teaching of Tibetan language through informal classes and private tuition, including through monasteries.⁷ In January 2024, in areas across Tibet, authorities were going door to door at various times of the day and night to investigate whether Tibetan parents were secretly teaching their children Tibetan or allowing them to be exposed to Buddhism. The Education Department’s order calls for strict disciplinary measures against anyone violating the ban.

GRATEFUL AND HAPPY PARENTS?

Chinese propaganda claims Tibetan parents are grateful that their children are receiving an education in a safe environment at boarding schools.

Like parents everywhere, Tibetan parents want the best for their children, including educational and career opportunities. The Chinese government has created a false dichotomy by shutting down most non-boarding school options and leaving boarding schools as the only viable option for most Tibetan children to receive any education at all. Tibetan parents who want their children to go to school now have no choice other than to send them to boarding school, even from the youngest age. A range of punitive measures and consequences are employed against parents who try to refuse to send their children to boarding school.

⁴ China Daily, “Unveiling the Truth About Tibetan Boarding Schools: Debunking Western Media Narratives,” October 26, 2023, available at:

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/26/WS653a3f3aa31090682a5eaf12.html>

⁵ Global Times, “In Xizang, Tibetan language, traditional culture passed on well to children in kindergartens, schools,” March 30, 2023, available at:

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1288302.shtml> (“For instance, middle schools students have seven class hours allotted to the learning of the Tibetan language, which is the same as other major subjects such as Putonghua and mathematics.”)

⁶ Chinese Ministry of Education, “Notice from the General Office of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of the “Children’s Homonym” Plan for Mandarin Education for Preschool Children,” July 23, 2021, available at: http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A18/s3129/202108/t20210802_548318.html

⁷ Radio Free Asia, “Authorities enforce ban on Tibetan students taking outside classes; Investigations night and day to find offenders,” January 9, 2024, available at:

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/outside-classes-01092024140335.html>

The fact that the vast majority of Tibetan students ages 6-18 are boarding, in addition to at least 100,000 aged 4-6 in preschool,⁸ means that China's colonial boarding school system is resulting in family separation on a massive scale. In the immediate term, this leads to psychological trauma and harm to both parents and children; in the longer term, it destabilizes Tibetan society and endangers its continued survival. This appears to be exactly the Chinese government's goal.

DOES TIBET'S GEOGRAPHY MEAN BOARDING SCHOOLS ARE NECESSARY?

China claims Tibetan children must attend boarding schools because they live in remote areas with poor transportation and dangerous travel conditions.

In almost all of its propaganda on the colonial boarding school system in Tibet, the Chinese government claims boarding schools are necessitated by Tibet's geography. Tibetan children, they say, live in rural and remote areas, without access to safe roads, making it dangerous and impractical for them to commute long distances to the nearest township school every day.

However, as highlighted in its own propaganda, China has focused on substantial infrastructure and road development in Tibet. For example, in central and western Tibet, officially referred to as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) by China, reports from Chinese state media in March 2023 revealed that 95% of townships and 78% of villages are now linked by paved roads. Additionally, an extensive network of passenger bus lines now covers 73% of the TAR, further facilitating connectivity.

In reality, who attends boarding school has little to do with geography and instead is determined by China's political agenda. In 2012, due to widespread resistance by parents, the Chinese government rolled back a policy that had shut down local village schools in remote areas in China, consolidating education in township boarding schools. In Chinese areas, local village schools were re-established, and the government ruled that the first three grades of elementary school should, "in principle," be non-residential throughout the country, while students in the upper grades of elementary school should be day students, with a boarding option for children who needed it.⁹

This reversal did not happen in Tibet. Instead in 2015, the State Council "Decision on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Education" called on officials to "strengthen boarding school construction" in minority areas and "achieve the goal that students of all ethnic minorities will study in a school, live in a school, and grow up in a school."

In other words, Tibetan children are forced into boarding schools not because they live in remote areas, but because they are Tibetan. Indeed, even in larger urban areas across Tibet, including Lhasa, children who live no more than a ten-minute drive from their boarding school are required to live there, rather than returning to their families in the evenings.

⁸ New York Times, "The One Million Tibetan Children in China's Boarding Schools," Gyal Lo, September 15, 2023, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/15/opinion/china-tibet-boarding-school.html>

⁹ State Council, "Guanyu guifan nongcun yiwu jiaoyu xuexiao buju tiaozheng de yijian" [Suggestions of Office of the State Council on Adjusting the Distribution of Rural Compulsory Schools], State Council Issue [2012] No. 48, September 6, 2012, available at: http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2012-09/07/content_2218779.htm