



Tibet Action Institute

བོད་དོན་ལས་འགུལ་བསྐྱེ་གནས་ཁང་།



“WHEN THEY CAME TO TAKE OUR CHILDREN”

China's Colonial Boarding Schools
and the Future of Tibet



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Tibet Action Institute combines the power of digital communication with strategic nonviolent action to advance the Tibetan freedom movement. We bring together expert campaigners, strategists, and technologists to develop and implement visionary strategies and innovative training, education, and technology programs, equipping Tibetans with the tools and knowledge to achieve human rights and freedom in Tibet.

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China's Colonial Boarding Schools
and the Future of Tibet

May 2025

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SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

An existential struggle is underway in Tibet today. Notwithstanding decades of colonial repression, Tibetans have maintained their distinct identity. The Chinese government perceives this as a threat to its control and is now using Tibetan children as a means to forcibly assimilate the Tibetan people. Students are targeted by a host of oppressive policies permeating every aspect of their lives. The most devastating of these is Beijing's massive network of colonial boarding schools and preschools. Almost four years after Tibet Action Institute first exposed this system, this report presents new evidence of its corrosive impact. Not only does the boarding system threaten the wellbeing of individual children, it jeopardizes Tibetan language, culture, and Tibetans' future as a distinct people. Tibet Action Institute urges the United Nations and concerned governments to call on the Chinese government to abolish the system of boarding schools and preschools in Tibet.

Drawing largely on rare firsthand accounts from Tibetans who are based inside Tibet or recently escaped into exile, this report finds that:

- Children are highly vulnerable to negligence and abuse in Chinese government-run boarding schools;
- In rural areas, preschool boarding can start as young as age four;
- Students are restricted from enrolling in Tibetan language classes or engaging in religious activities, even during school breaks;
- Tibetan children are losing their mother tongue as Tibetan-medium schooling and language classes are shut down;
- The separation from family and deliberate reshaping of children's identity in boarding schools is causing emotional and psychological harm, including attachment trauma and alienation;
- The colonial boarding school system violates both Chinese domestic law and international law and is contrary to best practices that have been conveyed to the Chinese government for decades by numerous bodies of the United Nations; and
- Initiatives by Tibetans to develop culturally-relevant educational resources have been harshly suppressed by the Chinese government, but the desire and expertise to build a Tibetan-run education system still exists.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping walked through a boarding school in Xining for Tibetan middle-schoolers, smiling, “inspecting,” and greeting students. The children came from Golok (Tibetan: མགོ་ལོག་ Chinese: Guoluo), roughly 300 miles away, and media coverage praised the school as having helped alleviate a school shortage in a poor, rural Tibetan area.¹

But just two weeks later, Chinese authorities forced the closure of a famed Tibetan-run school in Golok (མགོ་ལོག་) – the same area from which the boarding school students came. Located in a rural part of the prefecture, the school had served thousands of Tibetan students over decades, providing a high-quality education with both a contemporary curriculum and traditional Tibetan subjects, as well as Tibetan, Chinese, and English language classes.²

Tibetans have tenaciously maintained their culture, religion, language, and national cohesion. The Chinese government perceives this resilience and separate identity as a threat to its control.

Xi’s visit and the accompanying closure of one of Tibet’s premier educational institutions illustrate an existential struggle underway in Tibet. Tibetans have tenaciously maintained their culture, religion, language, and national cohesion over more than 70 years of occupation by China, despite extreme levels of repression. The Chinese government perceives this resilience and separate identity as a threat to its control. Having failed to eradicate it through oppressive surveillance, repression, and punishment, the Chinese government is now trying to do so through Tibetan children. The strategy: identity erasure through assimilationist boarding schools.

This report provides new and updated information about China’s colonial boarding schools³ from Tibetans either recently escaped to exile in India or still living in Tibet. It follows Tibet Action Institute’s December 2021 report⁴ which revealed that Tibet’s education system has become primarily residential, with approximately 800,000-900,000⁵ Tibetan children ages 6-18 living in Chinese government-run boarding schools. Subsequent estimates based on fieldwork by a Tibetan educational sociologist additionally suggest that at least 100,000 children aged four to six are also in boarding preschools.⁶

Tibet Action Institute has found new evidence that, in order to cement the transformation of Tibetan children’s identity and allegiance, the Chinese government has expanded its efforts to limit children’s access to their language and culture. Students are banned from attending Tibetan language classes during school breaks and parents are forbidden from involving their children in religious activities. In many rural areas, children aged four to six live in boarding preschools.

Research has also revealed numerous instances of negligence and abuse in Tibetan boarding schools. For example, a widely viewed video later removed from the internet shows a teacher violently beating a child, including with a chair. The beating, apparently captured on a security

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- 1 *Bastille Post Global*, “Xi Visits Model High School on Inspection in Northwest China’s Qinghai,” June 19, 2024, available at: <https://www.bastillepost.com/global/article/3926006-xi-visits-model-high-school-on-inspection-in-northwest-chinas-qinghai> (accessed July 2, 2024), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250503055115/https://www.bastillepost.com/global/article/3926006-xi-visits-model-high-school-on-inspection-in-northwest-chinas-qinghai>.
 - 2 An announcement by the school’s founder in April 2025 indicated that government permission had been granted for the campus to reopen sometime in the future as a technical training school, offering courses such as mobile phone literacy.
 - 3 We are using the term “colonial boarding schools” to describe what is commonly referred to in Tibetan as བཅའ་མྱོང་སྡེ་གླུ་ (chardoe) or གཏན་སྡེ་ (tenlop) and in Chinese as 寄宿制学校 (jisuzhi xuexiao).
 - 4 Tibet Action Institute, “Separated from Their Families, Hidden from the World: China’s Vast System of Colonial Boarding Schools Inside Tibet,” 2021, available at: <https://tibetaction.net/colonial-boarding-school-report>.
 - 5 See discussion of grade school boarding numbers in “Separated from Their Families, Hidden from the World,” p. 23. Over the past three years, Chinese authorities have continued to expand preschool and grade school boarding and forcibly transfer more monks and nuns under 18 to state boarding schools. Accordingly, we believe that the higher end of the range is more accurate.
 - 6 Tibet Action Institute, “Eyewitness: China Operating Mandatory Boarding Preschools Across Tibet,” May 24, 2022, available at: <https://tibetaction.net/eyewitness-confirms-mandatory-boarding-preschools-operating-across-tibet>.
-

camera, took place in 2021 in the classroom of a state-run boarding school in Tibet: the Chamdo No. 1 Elementary School in the Tibetan province of Kham (ཁམ་ཁུལ་), now part of what the Chinese government calls the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). A government investigation conducted after public outcry found that the student suffered a three-inch-long wound on their forehead.⁷

Firsthand accounts obtained during our research bolster the findings of our earlier report. Separated from their parents and subjected to a curriculum that is taught in the Chinese language, focused on Chinese history, culture, and identity, and steeped in political indoctrination, Tibetan children are losing their language, sense of Tibetan identity, and are suffering emotional and psychological consequences. Due to a policy of school consolidation and the forced closures of Tibetan-run schools, most parents in Tibet have no other option but to send their children to boarding school. One person summarized the situation:



Parents do not want their children to be illiterate, so with that hope, they send their children to the schools. But when these children return home, they cannot speak in Tibetan with their family members. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

...Some people do not want to send their children to boarding school but they don't have any other choice. Parents do not want their children to be illiterate, so with that hope, they send their children to the schools. But when these children return home, they cannot speak in Tibetan with their family members. They only communicate in Chinese and it becomes difficult at home. The government aims to change these Tibetan children to Chinese by removing Tibetan identity.⁸

Xi Jinping has made politicized and propagandistic education a priority throughout China in the last decade. But in Tibet, occupied by China since 1949-50, it serves a colonial purpose of altering Tibetan children's identity and worldview. The policy of school consolidation shuttered thousands of local schools in China starting in 2001 and in Tibet starting some years later. However, while school consolidation was reversed in China proper starting in 2012 due to popular outcry, it was maintained in Tibet and other non-Chinese areas.⁹

Today, Tibetan children's lives are being irrevocably altered to serve the purposes of the Chinese government. The colonial boarding school system is in blatant violation of domestic and international law. It is also contrary to best practices that have been conveyed to the Chinese government for decades by United Nations bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Special Procedures, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Decision makers, international institutions, and journalists around the world have taken note of the Chinese government's systematic effort to wipe out Tibetan identity through coercive boarding schools and have responded by raising the alarm about these insidious human rights violations being committed on a mass scale. The Chinese government, in turn, has launched a propaganda campaign that vociferously and aggressively attacks any critique of the colonial boarding school system as politically motivated. This has included attempts to discredit and undermine Tibetans in exile who have publicly spoken out about the schools. Chinese officials describe the boarding schools as a benevolent means to bring free, high-quality education to a population that lives in areas so remote that – according to officials – accessing education locally is not possible or practical.

7 *The New York Times*, "How China is Erasing Tibetan Culture, One Child at a Time," January 9, 2025, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/01/09/world/asia/tibet-china-boarding-schools.html> (accessed January 22, 2025).

8 Interview 6.

9 Tibet Action Institute, "Separated from Their Families, Hidden from the World," 8.

The evidence in this report refutes Chinese government claims about the schools. It illustrates the harsh realities of the colonial boarding school system and other education policies in Tibet, namely:

- Boarding can start when children are as young as four years old in rural areas;
- Children are highly vulnerable to negligence and abuse in these schools;
- Tibetan children largely grow up under the influence of the Chinese government rather than that of their families;
- Parents rarely have a choice about sending their children to state boarding schools;
- The schools are fragmenting Tibetan families, Tibetan identity, and the very fabric of Tibetan society;
- The system is part of a colonial strategy by the Chinese government to alter the minds and reorient the loyalties of Tibetans as a people in order to eliminate the basis of Tibetan group identity and potential for collective action; and
- Tibetans are resisting as they can while living under extreme repression.

This report reviews the ways in which the Chinese government's policies are in violation of domestic and international law and then discusses the research methodology used. It then explains where and what Tibet is, examines the policies that prevent Tibetan children from accessing their language and culture, and provides information about children aged four to six from rural areas living in boarding preschools. New evidence is then presented of neglect and abuse within the boarding system as a whole. The report describes the ways in which parents are coerced into relinquishing their children into the colonial boarding system and looks at the devastating impacts of colonial boarding schools in both the short and long term. Finally, it discusses alternatives to the current education system, ways in which Tibetans are resisting policies related to the colonial boarding schools, and makes urgent recommendations for the Chinese government, governments concerned about Tibetans' rights, and United Nations bodies.



All nationalities
have the
freedom
to use and
develop their
own spoken
and written
languages and
to preserve or
reform their
own folkways
and customs.
**Chinese
Constitution**

Violations of Domestic and International Law

The Chinese government's colonial boarding schools in Tibet, restriction on the use of Tibetan language, aggressive cultural erasure, and the physical and psychological abuse that Tibetan children suffer within the schools contravene both Chinese domestic law and international law.

Chinese law explicitly guarantees protections of Tibetan language rights, specifically in the domain of education. China's Constitution states that "[a]ll nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs."¹⁰ The 1984 "Law on Regional National Autonomy" (Article 37) further provides that "[s]chools (classes) and other educational organizations recruiting mostly ethnic minority students should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages

10 The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, "Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Article 4," available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html (accessed May 6, 2025), Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20250503230519/https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html.

as the media of instruction”¹¹ (emphasis added). The law instructs that minority schools should teach Chinese language classes starting in late primary or in secondary school and does not direct that any Chinese language be taught in kindergarten,¹² nor that Chinese be the language of instruction at any point during primary or secondary education. Article 37 of the law was amended in 2001 to provide that minority schools should start teaching Chinese language in “junior or senior grades” of primary school.¹³ In addition, China’s “Law on the Protection of Minors” (Article 27) provides that “[t]eaching and administrative staff in schools and kindergartens shall respect the personal dignity of minors, and must not carry out corporal punishment or covert corporal punishment, or other acts that are an affront to the personal dignity of minors.”¹⁴



The residential schools system for Tibetan children appears to act as a large-scale program to assimilate Tibetans into majority Han culture, contrary to the international human rights standards. UN Special Rapporteurs

Various United Nations (UN) bodies have now pointed out the multiple ways in which the Chinese government’s boarding school system in Tibet – and its aggressive cultural assimilation, elimination of Tibetan as the medium of instruction, coerced family separation, and closure of private schools – conflicts with its obligations under a list of international treaties. In their November 2022 communication to the government of China,¹⁵ the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief pointed out that China’s policies toward Tibetan children implicate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;¹⁶ the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Articles 5, 28, 29, and 30; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Articles 13 and 15; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Article 5; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18;¹⁷ the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Articles 2, 4, and 5; and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, Article 5, as well as various other relevant human rights documents, recommendations, and handbooks. The Special Rapporteurs noted that “the residential schools system for Tibetan children appears to act as a large-scale program to assimilate Tibetans into majority Han culture, contrary to the international human rights standards.”¹⁸

In March 2023, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights echoed the Special Rapporteurs’ concern that the colonial boarding schools violate China’s obligations under the ICESCR,¹⁹ urging the Chinese government to “abolish immediately the coerced residential (boarding) school system imposed on Tibetan children.”²⁰ In May 2023, the UN Committee on the

11 The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy, Article 37,” 1984, available at: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207138.htm> (accessed January 14, 2025), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250506141826/http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/207138.htm>.

12 “Kindergarten” and “preschool” are used interchangeably throughout this report.

13 Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy” (2001 Amendment), Article 37, available at: http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2024-01/10/c_954912.htm (accessed January 14, 2025), *Internet Archive*: https://web.archive.org/web/20250514232721/http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2024-01/10/c_954912.htm.

14 Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, “The Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Minors,” adopted 1991, last revised 2020, Article 27, available at: https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/protection-of-minors-2020/#_Toc53832361 (accessed May 11, 2025).

15 Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues; the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on the right to education; and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, “Communication to the Government of China,” November 11, 2022, available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27444> (accessed January 14, 2025).

16 Article 1, which the Special Rapporteurs noted provides that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” should be “[u]nderstood within the context of minority rights, [to mean] that States should refrain from practices which discriminate against minority groups on their territory.”

17 The Special Rapporteurs noted that Article 18 of “the ICCPR stresses ‘Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom [...] either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching[.]’ [states] that ‘no one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice[.]’ [and] ‘provides that the liberty of parents and legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.’”

18 Special Rapporteurs, “Communication to the Government of China.”

19 United Nations General Assembly, “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” December 16, 1966, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights> (accessed January 15, 2025).

20 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “Concluding Observations,” March 6, 2023, available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E/C.12/CHN/CO/3&Lang=en (accessed January 15, 2025).

Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also noted its concern that the colonial boarding school system conflicts with the covenant's Article 36.²¹ It, too, urged China to "[a]bolish the coerced residential (boarding) school system imposed on Tibetan girls and authorize the establishment of and subsidize private Tibetan schools."²²

Methodology

Research for this report was constrained by the severe risks faced by Tibetans who question or criticize Chinese government policies. Those in Tibet face the possibility of imprisonment or other harsh punishment. Those in exile face transnational repression and serious threats by the Chinese government against their families still in Tibet. Extreme surveillance of the Chinese government-controlled internet means that anything said online is logged, easily searchable using artificial intelligence, and can be used as grounds for punishment. Online communication is further curtailed by censorship, limiting what information Tibetans can see and who they can talk to.

In addition, the Chinese government prevents independent researchers or journalists from traveling freely to Tibet to investigate the status of the issues discussed in this report. On the rare occasion that a researcher or journalist is able to speak with Tibetans in Tibet, no one can openly communicate about these issues without fear of serious reprisals.²³

Research for this report is therefore based on rare firsthand accounts by Tibetans either still in Tibet or who have recently escaped. This includes fifteen in-depth interviews conducted between 2023 and 2024 with Tibetans who had recently fled to India, statements published online by Tibetans in Tibet, and approximately 75 private or public comments by Tibetans in Tibet from January 2022 to April 2025 that were documented by Tibetans in exile. We also draw on several academic sources, media articles, and official statements from the Chinese government.

Because of the risks to Tibetans, names and identifying information of most interviewees and all online commenters have been removed. Online comments and posts by Tibetans inside Tibet have been paraphrased.

21 Article 36 provides that women and girls have the right to education. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – General recommendation No. 36 (2017) on the right of girls and women to education," November 27, 2017, available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n17/398/03/pdf/n1739803.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2025).

22 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Concluding Observations," May 31, 2023, available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/CHN/CO/9&Lang=en (accessed January 15, 2025).

23 The Chinese government periodically selects foreign media outlets to go on propaganda tours to Tibet. Journalists follow a set schedule and are accompanied by government minders. No Tibetan can speak freely without fear of severe repercussions. Occasionally, journalists manage to enter Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region independently, such as David Rennie from The Economist in 2024 [see The Economist, "Why China Takes Young Tibetans from Their Families," June 13, 2024, available at: <https://www.economist.com/china/2024/06/13/why-china-takes-young-tibetans-from-their-families> (accessed October 17, 2024)].

WHAT IS TIBET AND WHO IS TIBETAN?

The Chinese government has for decades been attempting to diminish and obscure the existence of Tibet and Tibetans. Historical Tibet is composed of the three provinces of Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།), Kham (ཁམས།), and Ü-Tsang (དབུས་གཙང་།). In the 1960s, the Chinese government split Tibet into new administrative divisions: the Tibet Autonomous Region and Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties within Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan Provinces.

Historical Map of Tibet



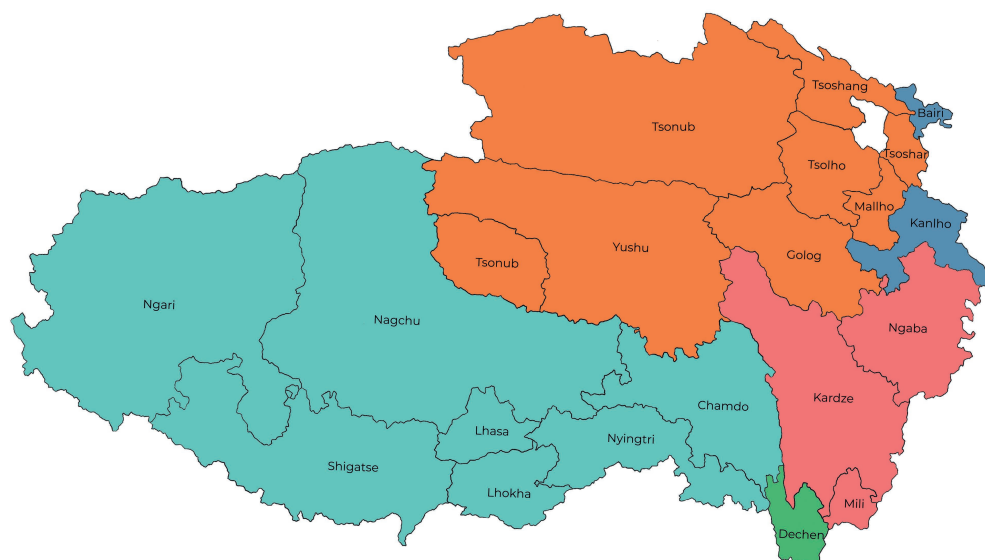
The three historical provinces of Tibet, based on a map from the Central Tibetan Administration.

As part of its effort to redraw Tibet's borders, the Chinese government asserts that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) – roughly corresponding to Ü-Tsang – alone constitutes Tibet. However, this claim is belied by its own map of Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties that make up the majority of the current province of Qinghai, a significant portion of Sichuan, and small parts of Yunnan and Gansu (see map next page). Roughly half of all Tibetans live outside the TAR, and, following the nationwide Tibetan uprising of 2008, the Chinese government's major policy meetings on Tibet have included all Tibetan areas, not just the TAR.²⁴ However, Beijing's public propaganda continues the pretense that Tibet is just a small portion of this area.

²⁴ International Campaign for Tibet, "Tibet's Importance Seen at Major Meeting Promising More Repression," September 1, 2020, available at: <https://savetibet.org/tibets-importance-seen-at-major-meeting-promising-more-repression> (accessed September 22, 2024).

Map of Tibet in Prefectures and Counties Designated by the Chinese Government

- Tibetan Prefectures in Qinghai (part of historical Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།))
- Kanlho (ཀན་ལྗོ།) Tibetan Prefecture and Bairi (དབའ་རིས།) Tibetan County in Gansu (part of historical Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།))
- Tibet Autonomous Region (historical Ü-Tsang (དབུས་གཙང་།); Chamdo (ཆང་མདོ།) Prefecture is part of historical Kham (ཁམས།) and Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།))
- Kardze (དཀར་མཛོ།) and Ngaba (ངཀ་པ།) Tibetan Prefectures, Mili (མི་ལི།) Tibetan County in Sichuan (part of historical Kham (ཁམས།) and Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།))
- Dechen (བདེ་ཆེན།) Tibetan Prefecture in Yunnan (part of historical Kham (ཁམས།))
- Siling (ཟི་ལིང་། Chinese: Xining), part of historical Tibet, is designated by Chinese authorities as a prefecture-level city, with smaller areas under its jurisdiction that include “Tibetan Autonomous” townships



The Chinese government engages in significant propaganda to convince its own citizens and the international community that Tibet is, and has always been, a part of China. In recent years it has tried to normalize its claims to Tibet by using the Chinese word “Xizang” in place of “Tibet,” including starting to refer to the TAR as the “Xizang Autonomous Region.” The Chinese government has been attempting to expand this usage internationally as it tries to reshape the global understanding of Tibet as a unique and separate entity.²⁵

These efforts deliberately obfuscate what Tibet is, where Chinese government policies for Tibet are being applied, and who is being impacted by them. For example, when answering questions about the high number of Tibetan children in boarding schools at China’s review by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in February 2023, a Chinese government official stated that half of students in Tibet (meaning the TAR) were boarding. He went on to say that “as for the figure one million [children in boarding school or preschool] I don’t know where is this figure from, but I have another figure, in 2020 the Tibetan [TAR] population was 3.64 million. The minority groups account for 3.2 million.” He explained that accordingly, there could not be one million Tibetan children in boarding school – refusing to acknowledge the existence of all other Tibetans outside the TAR.²⁶

Despite such attempts to propagandize away half the Tibetan population in order to dodge criticism, evidence gathered for both this and our 2021 report shows that the colonial boarding system targets Tibetans throughout all of Tibet – Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།), Kham (ཁམས།), and Ü-Tsang (དབུས་གཙང་།).

25 International Campaign for Tibet, “China’s External Propaganda on Tibet: Erasing Tibet to ‘Tell a Good Chinese Story,’” January 11, 2024, available at: <https://savetibet.org/chinas-external-propaganda-on-tibet> (accessed September 22, 2024).

26 United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 7th Meeting, 73rd Session, February 16, 2023, available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1v/k1vrez9w0u-at-2:49:32> (accessed September 2, 2024).

REMOVING CHILDREN FROM CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Eliminating Local and Tibetan-Run Schooling

In 2015, the Chinese State Council “Decision on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Education” emphasized the goal that “students of all ethnic minorities will study in a school, live in a school, and grow up in a school”²⁷ in order to realize, among other things, the “long-term stability of the country.”²⁸ In Tibet, this goal is being fulfilled by closing local village schools and shutting down Tibetan-run schools, leaving virtually no option but boarding schools. Additionally, young monks and nuns – traditionally educated within monasteries or nunneries, considered to be the foundation of Tibetan learning and culture – are forced to enroll in government-run boarding schools. There, children are cut off from the normal transmission of culture, identity, and knowledge that would take place in their homes and communities. This is further exacerbated by government actions forbidding children from attending supplementary Tibetan language classes or engaging in religious activities even outside of school during extended school breaks.

In the past 15 years, Chinese authorities have closed hundreds or even thousands of local schools in Tibet, while building and expanding boarding schools.²⁹ This “school consolidation” took place across China starting in the early 2000s, but was halted in China proper because of popular discontent. However, in non-Chinese areas, the policy continued in full force, shuttering more and more schools.³⁰



Pupils at Sengdruk Taktse Middle School, a Tibetan-run private school in Golok (མགོ་ལོག་), forcibly closed by Chinese authorities in July 2021. Source: The Jorlu Foundation.

27 Human Rights Watch, “China’s ‘Bilingual Education’ Policy in Tibet,” 2020, available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/tibet0320_web_0.pdf (accessed November 21, 2024).

28 State Council, “Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Education,” National Document [2015] 46, issued August 11, 2015, available at: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-08/17/content_10097.htm, (accessed January 23, 2025), *Internet Archive*: https://web.archive.org/web/20250506142922/https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-08/17/content_10097.htm.

29 Tibet Action Institute, “Separated from Their Families, Hidden from the World,” 8-10.

30 Human Rights Watch, “China’s ‘Bilingual Education’ Policy in Tibet,” 77.



Distraught Tibetan students at the closing ceremony for Jigme Gyaltsen's renowned Gangjong Sherig Norbu Lobling School, located in Golok (མགོ་ལོག་རྫོང་།). Source: Still image from a video published on social media by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy.

Compounding the lack of alternatives to state boarding schools, the government has also forced the closure of Tibetan-run private schools across the Tibetan Plateau.³¹ These schools used to be an important alternative to state schools, providing a curriculum grounded in Tibetan knowledge, culture, traditions, and history, with Tibetan-medium instruction. Notably, the rapid shutdown of Tibetan schools has taken place even as the Chinese government cites lack of schooling facilities as a justification for the state boarding school system.

Parents want their children to be educated, and China has a national requirement for nine years of primary and secondary education (referred to as “compulsory education”). But because local and Tibetan-run schools have been deliberately closed down by the government, the only remaining option for most families is state-run boarding school. This means that parents must send their children away to spend the majority of their childhood in government-run institutions. As one person explained:

With a policy of compulsory education, all the children must complete their nine years of education. There are no schools in the township [in my area], therefore parents have to send their children to a county boarding school.³²

The compulsory education law, among others, has also been used to force young monks and nuns out of monasteries or nunneries and into state boarding schools. One person explained:

31 See International Campaign for Tibet, “China Renews Attacks on Remaining Tibetan-language Schools,” November 30, 2021, available at: <https://savetibet.org/china-renews-attacks-on-remaining-tibetan-language-schools/#7> (accessed January 21, 2025), Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, “China Orders Tibetan Private Schools to be Closed and Students Enrolled in Chinese Medium Schools in Sersbul County,” April 22, 2022, available at: <https://tchrd.org/china-orders-tibetan-private-schools-to-be-closed-and-students-enrolled-in-chinese-medium-schools-in-sersbul-county/> (accessed January 21, 2025), “China Shuts Down Highly Reputed Tibetan Private School Signalling Intensification of its Forced Cultural Assimilation Policy,” July 19, 2024, available at: <https://tchrd.org/china-shuts-down-highly-reputed-tibetan-private-school-signalling-intensification-of-its-forced-cultural-assimilation-policy/> (accessed January 21, 2025), Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy & Asian Dignity Initiative, “Thematic Report 2022: Sucked our Marrow: Tibetan Language and Education Rights under Xi Jinping,” available at: https://tchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Tibetan-Language-and-Education-Rights-Under-Xi-Jinping_TCHRD-Thematic-Report.pdf (accessed May 12, 2025), *Radio Free Asia*, “China Closes Two Tibetan Monastery Schools, Sends Novices to State Boarding Schools,” July 3, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/china-closes-two-monastery-schools-novices-state-boarding-schools-07032024142557.html> (accessed January 21, 2025), Free Tibet, “Tibetan School Closures,” available at: <https://freetibet.org/take-action/join-a-campaign/linguicide/tibetan-school-closures/> (accessed January 21, 2025), and *Radio Free Asia*, “Exclusive: Five Teenage Tibetan Monks Attempt to Take Own Lives,” available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/teenage-monks-attempt-take-own-lives-09092024153622.html> (accessed October 22, 2024).

32 Interview 3.

Because of the compulsory education policies, the young children cannot become monks now. Earlier, most families sent at least one of their children to become a monk or nun but now they cannot do it. The young children are forced to go to [state-run] school[s]. Parents are threatened, beaten, and sued for not sending their children to school. If the parents are old, the other family members are threatened.³³

Officials threatened that if the parents kept sending their son to the monastery, various government payments as well as their access to government-issued identity documents would be cut off.

A parent from another area described how their child had always wanted to be a monk, and as a teenager, they sent him to a monastery. However, the family was then visited multiple times by local officials who warned the parents that their son could not go to the monastery any more and instead had to go to a government-run boarding school. The parents were concerned that he couldn't learn Tibetan language there, but officials threatened that if the parents kept sending their son to the monastery, various government payments as well as their access to government-issued identity documents would be cut off.³⁴

Monastery schools have also been closed by authorities, who have then compelled parents to enroll their children in state boarding schools. For example, from May to October 2024, Chinese authorities forced the closure of at least three schools at prominent monasteries in eastern Tibet's Ngaba region (Tibetan: ཇལ་ཁ། Chinese: Aba). At least 1,500 students between the ages of 6 and 18 from Muge, Kirti, and Taktsang Kirti Monasteries were forced to leave and, in most cases, enroll in government-run residential elementary, middle, and vocational schools.³⁵

In another community, although the monastery school is still in operation, young monks are not allowed to attend. A Tibetan described how this led to tragedy:

Regarding young monks, our monastery in [location name removed for security reasons] has a school where students are taught the standard [national] curriculum, including subjects like math and science. However, monks below the age of 12 or 13 are forced to attend district boarding schools. Tragically, two young monks from our monastery committed suicide after being forcibly taken to one of these schools.³⁶

In addition to devastating impacts like this, forcing young monks and nuns to attend state-run boarding schools and closing down other Tibetan-run educational institutions eliminates parents' last few options to provide their children with a Tibetan-focused education.

Banning Language Classes and Religious Activities

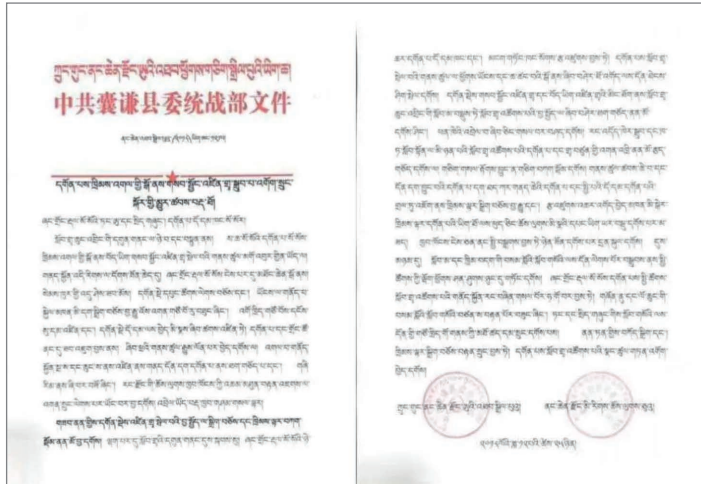
The policies described above mean that Tibetan children largely grow up under the influence of the Chinese government rather than that of their families. However, the government has extended its reach even further, instituting a ban on students attending Tibetan language classes or engaging in religious activities outside of school, while on holiday. Taking classes during school vacation, sometimes over two or three months, used to be a very common practice – a way for parents to fill the major gaps left by the Chinese government curriculum, including enabling their children to develop their Tibetan language skills. However, over the past several years, space for Tibetans to hold supplementary classes for children during school vacation has been virtually

33 Interview 5.

34 Online Commenter 65.

35 *Radio Free Asia*, "China Closes Two Tibetan Monastery Schools, Sends Novices to State Boarding Schools," and *Radio Free Asia*, "Exclusive: Five Teenage Tibetan Monks Attempt to Take Own Lives."

36 Online Commenter 93.



A notice obtained by Human Rights Watch published in December 2018 by Nangchen (Tibetan: རྩ་ཆོན། Chinese: Nangqian) County, titled “Urgent notice concerning stopping illegal study classes in monasteries.”³⁷

eliminated. Instructors have sometimes been jailed³⁸ and there are incidents of teachers and parents being forced to sign letters stating the children will not attend holiday classes or monastery school.³⁹ In this way, the Chinese government seeks to prevent parents from providing the Tibetan language or cultural context children are denied at colonial boarding school, effectively closing off yet more avenues for its transmission.

Parents have also been warned to keep their children away from religion in general. *Radio Free Asia* (RFA) reports how, after several years of restrictions on both monasteries and individuals offering language, religion, and other classes during school holidays, the Chinese Department of Education circulated a wide-reaching notice in January 2024. The notice stated that Tibetan children can participate only in supplementary classes and workshops taught by state-authorized individuals and organizations and on state-approved subjects. The same notice reportedly ordered local authorities to intensify their restrictions on supplementary classes, while also reiterating a ban on children participating in religious activities.⁴⁰

This ban was subsequently enforced through draconian measures, with authorities going door to door in residential areas and commercial establishments at various times of day and night to ensure that no children were studying Tibetan language or participating in Buddhist religious activities. These extreme measures took place across Tibet, including in Lhasa (ལྷ་ས།) (TAR) and Yushu Prefecture (Tibetan: ཡུལ་ཤུ། Chinese: Yushu) and Labrang Monastery in Qinghai.⁴¹

Tibetans have expressed distress about the measures to restrict children’s access to classes and described how, little by little, all options for a Tibetan education are being closed off:

Authorities went door to door to ensure that no children were studying Tibetan language or participating in Buddhist religious activities.

37 Human Rights Watch, “China: Tibetan Children Banned from Classes: Authorities Declare Informal Sessions in Monasteries ‘Dangerous,’” January 30, 2019, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/30/china-tibetan-children-banned-classes> (accessed January 12, 2025).
38 For example, see Free Tibet, “University Student Arrested after Teaching Tibetan,” February 21, 2022, available at: <https://freetibet.org/latest/student-arrested-teaching-tibetan/> (accessed February 24, 2025).
39 Interview 3, Online Commenter 36.
40 *Radio Free Asia*, “Authorities Enforce Ban on Tibetan Students Taking Outside Classes,” January 9, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/outside-classes-01092024140335.html>, (accessed January 23, 2025).
41 *Radio Free Asia*, “Authorities Enforce Ban on Tibetan Students Taking Outside Classes.”

To study Tibetan grammar, history, or culture, we have to go to classes organized by our local monasteries during school holidays. But for the last five to six years, these monastery-organized Tibetan language and cultural classes have been shut down.⁴²



The best hope now is the parents. Parents can teach their children the Tibetan language because there is no other way now. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

The monastery school [used to be] seen as a place to study and learn Tibetan language... and there were many parents sending their children to monastery school during the school vacation. But the number [of students] is smaller now... The best hope now is the parents. Parents can teach their children the Tibetan language because there is no other way now.⁴³

In addition to preventing access to extracurricular language classes, Chinese authorities are engaged in an intense campaign to break Tibetan children's connection to their Buddhist faith, a core part of Tibetan culture and identity. One person described:

Nowadays, students are not allowed to engage in any religious activities and must not visit monasteries and temples. We Tibetans visit monasteries and temples during any auspicious Buddhist days, however, the students are prohibited. If any student is found visiting monasteries and temples, they could face severe punishment.⁴⁴

One former student described how this was enacted at their boarding school:

On some weekends, students are not allowed to go home. For example, during big religious festivals or sensitive times like March 10th [Tibetan Uprising Day] or big Tibetan religious days, [the school] always has class over the weekend because they don't want the children to attend family functions or religious holidays. In this way, they keep the children from learning culture at these big family gatherings. And then when it is a Chinese cultural holiday, they do give a holiday, but you have to make up for that day off [by attending school] on a weekend.⁴⁵

This approach further widens the chasm between Tibetan children and their parents by prohibiting parents from passing on their own religious traditions and value systems to their children. Parents who try to do so are characterized as undermining their children's own best interests and wellbeing.



Educating minors not to believe in religion is an obligation for both schools and parents. Letter from Yushul City Ethnic Middle School

In Yushul (ཡུཤུལ་), parents received a letter from Yushul City Second Ethnic Middle School in September 2023 explaining to them that "Educating minors not to believe in religion is an obligation for both schools and parents....No organization or individual shall persuade or induce students to believe in religion, let alone engage in any activities that would lead to the presence of believers in schools."⁴⁶ The letter continues to lay out the Chinese Communist Party's view of religion:

Preventing minors from believing in religion is a guarantee for children to grow up healthily and achieve a better future....Minors are very vulnerable to religion and even to illegal religious activities. The influence of extremist thoughts affects their physical and mental health and future.

42 Interview 6.

43 Interview 5.

44 Interview 1.

45 Interview 11.

46 Lopsang Gurung, Bitter Winter, "Tibetan Parents Told They Should 'Educate Minors Not to Believe in Religion,'" August 11, 2023, <https://bitterwinter.org/tibetan-parents-told-they-should-educate-minors-not-to-believe-in-religion/>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

Both religious and non-religious parents should educate their children not to enter places of religious activities, not to participate in religious activities, not to participate in religious training courses and summer camps.

The letter concludes by explicitly linking non-religiosity to China's stability, appealing to parents to "build the Great Wall to resist and prevent religious infiltration into the school, maintain the harmony and stability of the school, and help it make its due contribution to the long-term stability of the motherland."⁴⁷

Boarding Close to Home

Tibetan children are often required to board even when they live close to school, suggesting that the intent of boarding school is less about enabling access to education and more about cutting children off from the environments in which Tibetan language, culture, and traditions are transmitted.

The requirement for locals to board only applied to Tibetan children. The journalist was told that "rules are different for Tibetan pupils."

A journalist for *The Economist* who was able to make a rare trip to Tibet discovered that, despite Chinese officials' insistence that boarding schools exist to spare Tibetan farmers' and herders' children "long and arduous journeys to school," even students who were local to the area he visited were boarding. Notably, this requirement for locals to board only applied to Tibetan children, not Hui (Chinese Muslim) children. The journalist was told that "rules are different for Tibetan pupils."⁴⁸

A Tibetan family explained that in Lhasa (ལྷ་ས་), children in grades five to seven used to live at home and attend school during the day. But three years ago, a new rule made it mandatory for students to live in "Education City," a massive boarding school complex four miles outside Lhasa. A recent change – believed to be a consequence of international criticism of the boarding schools – modified this requirement in theory so that children could supposedly go home at night. However, because attendance is still required from 8:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., it is impractical to bring the children home. "None of the parents think this is good because children won't get enough sleep," so in practice, the children are still boarding, 20 minutes from home.⁴⁹



An aerial view of "Education City," Lhasa, showing extensive student dormitories.
Source: Still image from a video published by state media outlet *ECNS*, May 2023.⁵⁰

47 Lopsang Gurung, "Tibetan Parents Told They Should 'Educate Minors Not to Believe in Religion.'"

48 *The Economist*, "Why China Takes Young Tibetans From Their Families."

49 Interview 11.

50 *ECNS*, "Daily Life of Students in Tibet Boarding School," May 15, 2023, available at <https://www.ecns.cn/video/2023-05-15/detail-ihcpmqz3537887.shtml> (accessed August 30, 2024), Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230515112235/https://www.ecns.cn/video/2023-05-15/detail-ihcpmqz3537887.shtml>.

Another person described how local preschools in their area were being closed and children required to board at a central preschool, even if they lived nearby:

Even though the boarding school is nearby, the parents were not given a choice about whether their children boarded or not. Tibetan in Tibet

In the last few years, at least nine of the village preschools in [location name removed for security reasons] were closed and parents were asked to send their children to boarding school. Even though the boarding school is nearby, the parents were not given a choice about whether their children boarded or not. People think the authorities have to meet a quota of children in preschool boarding.⁵¹

A 2023 paper by Chinese geographers provides further evidence that politics, not access to education, fuels government pressure for Tibetan children to live in boarding school rather than at home. The study shows that the vast majority of Tibetan elementary-school children in the TAR could travel to school daily in a relatively short amount of time: 69% of the population live less than 30 minutes from an elementary school based on local transportation standards, and 87% live within an hour. The authors emphasize that currently students are compelled to attend school within their administrative area and recommend, among other things, that they instead be allowed to attend the school that is nearest to them⁵² and that school buses be made available.⁵³

The authors describe young students not being able to take care of themselves at boarding school and needing the emotional support of their families, stating that “it is of great practical significance to identify the areas with scarce educational services and to provide suggestions for optimizing the layout of primary schools in [the TAR].⁵⁴ However, instead of making policy shifts that would enable more children to attend existing schools while living at home, the Chinese government is expending massive resources to ensure Tibetan children are in boarding schools, exposed only to ideas and practices sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party.

51 Online Commenter 63.

52 Cheng, Yang, et al. “Access and Cost of Primary Educational Services in Plateau Areas: A Case Study in Tibet, China.” *Applied Geography* 152 (2023), 6.

53 Cheng, et al., 10.

54 Cheng, et al., 1.

PRESCHOOL BOARDING

Tibet Action Institute's previous report focused on primary and secondary school children forced to attend boarding schools. However, there is now additional evidence that even younger children are being compelled to board across Tibet. At present, Tibetan children aged three or four to six must attend Chinese-language preschool.⁵⁵ In urban areas, they are currently able to go to day school, but in many rural areas, children leave home at age four to live in Chinese government-run institutions. A Tibetan explained:

[M]any people... who live in villages send their children to township [boarding] schools. The children from rural areas stay in these preschools. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

Most of the school facilities are available in township, county, or bigger cities. The government orders all children...to go to preschool and [so] many people...who live in villages send their children to township [boarding] schools. The children from rural areas stay in these preschools. In preschool, there are three grade levels. Only after a child completes preschool would they be promoted to grade one.⁵⁶

The establishment of boarding preschools is reflected in comments from Tibetans across Tibet. Specifically, Tibet Action Institute has documented reports of preschool boarding in rural areas of Ü-Tsang (དབུས་གཙང་།), Rebkong (Tibetan: རེབ་གོང་། Chinese: Tongren), Tsojang (Tibetan: མཚོ་བྱང་། Chinese: Haibei), and Golok (མགོ་ལོག་) Prefectures in Qinghai; Kanlho (Tibetan: ཀའ་ལྷོ། Chinese: Gannan) Prefecture in Gansu; and Ngaba (Tibetan: རྩ་བཀ།) Prefecture in Sichuan. Additional information obtained by Tibet Action Institute corroborates the existence of widespread mandatory preschool boarding in Tibet. Details cannot be shared due to security concerns of the source.

Public documentation of boarding preschools is almost nonexistent. They are rarely mentioned in state media and are not discussed in official statements. Physically and administratively, they appear to often be housed in or attached to township-level elementary boarding schools rather than operating as stand-alone institutions. Whether by design or chance, this makes information about them very difficult for researchers to verify remotely.



Young child in a boarding school dormitory. Source: Still image from a video published by *The New York Times*.⁵⁷

55 While preschool is not technically compulsory under Chinese law, local authorities in Tibet treat it as such. In Ngaba prefecture, local authorities codified this practice into law, but its legality has been questioned (for example, see <https://karrpo.info/2018/05/03/legal-review-on-abas-education-regulation-in-tibet> (accessed November 19, 2024)).

56 Interview 1.

57 *The New York Times*, "How China is Erasing Tibetan Culture, One Child at a Time."

For example, a source confirmed that there is a boarding elementary school in Medrogongkar (Tibetan: མཉུ་གློ་གྲུང་དགར། Chinese: Mozhugongka) – Thanggya (Tibetan: ཐང་གླུ། Chinese: Tangjia) Township Central Primary School – that has an attached boarding preschool.⁵⁸ However, searches for the preschool on both Google Maps and Chinese search engine Baidu only returned results for Tangjia Township Central Primary School. A 2019 media article about students celebrating “Children’s Day” describes the school as boarding but only refers to the elementary school.⁵⁹

Further searching yielded a media article about Chinese volunteers who visited the school. Although the article again only mentions the elementary school, it includes a photo showing a sign by the school gate that reads on the left side: “Lhasa City, Medrogongkar County, Thanggya Township, Central Elementary School.” It reads on the right: “Medrogongkar County, Thanggya Township, Central Bilingual Kindergarten.”⁶⁰

Similarly, Thangkarnang (Tibetan: ཐང་དགར་ནང། Chinese: Tanggaang) boarding preschool in Kanlho (ཀཎ་ལྷོ།) is described at length in the online diary of a university student doing a teaching internship at the preschool. The preschool was also verified by Gyal Lo, an educational sociologist who escaped from Tibet in 2021 and now works for Tibet Action Institute.⁶¹ Gyal Lo’s grand-nieces attended the preschool, and he alerted Tibet Action Institute to the teacher’s online diary. However, searches for the preschool on Google Maps and Baidu yielded only the seemingly misspelled name of the elementary school: Kanggaang Township Central Boarding Primary School. There was no indication of a preschool.

In the student teacher’s online diary, she describes a photo, saying:

It looks very big, but it is actually a kindergarten [preschool] attached to a primary school. There are 30 children in the senior class and 10 children in the middle class in the kindergarten. The children in the senior class can basically speak Chinese, while the children in the middle class can only speak Tibetan.⁶²



After 8:30 we took [the preschoolers] back to the dormitory, and our work for the day was over. Chinese student teacher

The university student outlines her typical day, collecting the children at 8 a.m. for breakfast and then teaching. Afternoon brings lunch, naps, taking the children to the toilet, games, and dinner, followed by “evening activities,” and then “after 8:30 [p.m.] we took them back to the dormitory, and our work for the day was over.” The teacher adds that “because it is a boarding school, most children go back to school on Sunday and stay until Friday before going home.”⁶³

In another rare account, a Chinese newspaper article describes a boarding preschool in Kardze (Tibetan: དཀར་མཛོ། Chinese: Ganzhi) that opened in May 2019. As of that year, there were 433 students, “most of whom came from remote pastoral areas,” some more than 100 kilometers

58 Online Commenter 92.

59 *Sohu.com*, “Tangjia Township, Mozhugongka County: Tibetan Children Celebrate Children’s Day in Advance,” May 28, 2019, available at: https://www.sohu.com/a/317086558_114988 (accessed October 19, 2024), *Internet Archive*: https://web.archive.org/web/20250516092234/https://www.sohu.com/a/317086558_114988.

60 *Yangtze Evening Post*, 一路向西，建行人为爱再出发 [“Heading West, CCB People Set Out Again for Love,”] September 27, 2020, available at <https://www.yzwb.net/zcontent/869957.html> (accessed May 10, 2024), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250516165020/https://www.yzwb.net/zcontent/869957.html>.

61 Dr. Gyal Lo is an educational sociologist and leading expert on China’s assimilation and education policies in Tibet. He taught in the Tibetan Language and Culture Department at Northwestern University for Nationalities in Lanzhou, China, received his PhD in Educational Sociology from the University of Toronto, and later taught at Yunnan Normal University’s Institute for Studies in Education from 2017-2020. He conducted independent fieldwork on the impact and reach of China’s boarding preschools in Tibet and, facing persecution by authorities, eventually fled Tibet to come to Canada. Tibet Action Institute learned of Dr. Gyal Lo and his research just as we published our first report on China’s colonial boarding schools in December 2021. Since then we have collaborated with him to expose the boarding school system and its impacts. Dr. Gyal Lo has been employed by Tibet Action Institute since 2023.

62 “Chinese Volunteer Teacher in Gannan: It’s Not Easy to Say I Love You,” 2017, available at: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/33843383> (accessed February 20, 2024), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221202205909/https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/33843383>.

63 “Chinese Volunteer Teacher in Gannan: It’s Not Easy to Say I Love You.”

away.⁶⁴ The article explained that “the kindergarten has specially decorated the nap room and classrooms with Tibetan characteristics” so as to reduce homesickness. (The accompanying photo of the nap room showed moons, stars, and parachutes on the walls, but nothing identifiably Tibetan.)

The Chinese government does not publish boarding preschool enrollment numbers. However, Tibet Action Institute has reviewed a dataset shared by Gyal Lo of boarding preschools and their enrollment in seven counties of two eastern Tibetan prefectures – Kanlho (ཀའ་ལྷོ) and Ngaba (ངའ་བཀུ). This data shows that almost 9,000 preschool children are boarding in dozens of preschools. The enrollment in each preschool ranges from a few dozen to hundreds of children.⁶⁵ (The dataset is not included here because it was shared with Gyal Lo on the assurance that it would not be published due to the source’s security concerns.) Gyal Lo visited more than 50 boarding preschools in Amdo (ཨ་མདོ) and Kham (ཁམས།). Based on his research, he estimates at least 100,000 Tibetan children are living in preschool residential institutions across Tibet today.⁶⁶

Leaving their homes and families traumatizes both children and their family members. A Tibetan from Tibet who now lives abroad told the *BBC* the story of her relative in Tibet leaving his son, just turned five, in boarding preschool for the first time:



My relative told me that he could hear his son crying crazily. [His son] tried to climb out of the window, but my relative had to leave him there, like that.

Tibetan living in exile

A close relative told me that it had been hard for him to leave his son at boarding school, so he made a plan. He told the teacher: “When I drop him off, I’ll have a short conversation with him and then I’ll leave. I’ll tell my son that I need to step out briefly. You need to tell him, ‘Your father will come back soon.’ And then, no matter how hard he cries, you lock the door as I walk away. Don’t open it until I am out of sight or he’ll try to escape from the classroom and come after me.” My relative told me that he could hear his son crying crazily. He tried to climb out of the window, but my relative had to leave him there, like that.⁶⁷

A Tibetan inside Tibet described a friend of theirs who faced a similar situation where their young child had to be “locked up” in a room so the parent could leave the child at boarding school. The person said, “Making children as young as five to six years old stay at boarding school is unimaginable. It’s totally wrong.”⁶⁸

Conditions in boarding preschools can be extremely poor and staffing inadequate. In the student teacher’s online diary mentioned above, she describes how children sleep on beds with sheepskins as a mattress, and “the beds...are usually shared by two or three children.” Children in the lower bunks are prevented from falling off by boards; children in the upper bunks are tied up with a strap. For naptime, children have to sleep with their heads on their desks. The diary includes multiple photos of children with thick nasal discharge running down their faces while they nap.⁶⁹

64 *Dute News*, 高原学校拔地起 深山回荡读书声 深圳倾力推动甘孜州三县教育扶贫 [Plateau schools are built, the sound of reading echoes in the mountains, Shenzhen strives to promote education poverty alleviation in three counties of Ganzi Prefecture], December 12, 2019, available at: <https://www.dutenews.com/n/article/215034> (accessed January 22, 2025), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20241218034815/https://www.dutenews.com/n/article/215034>.

65 2019 dataset shared with Gyal Lo, reviewed by Tibet Action Institute March 2022.

66 Tibet Action Institute, “Eyewitness: China Operating Mandatory Boarding Preschools Across Tibet.”

67 *BBC*, “Educating Tibet,” March 7, 2024, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct4m8g> (accessed October 2, 2024).

68 Online Commenter 15.

69 “Chinese Volunteer Teacher in Gannan: It’s Not Easy to Say I Love You.”



A bed shared by multiple students at Thangkarnang (ཐང་ཀར་ནང་།) boarding preschool in Kanlho (ཀཎ་ལྷོ།). Source: Teaching intern's online diary.⁷⁰

但支教生活不是为了逃离城市的喧嚣

A dormitory in a boarding preschool in Thanggya (ཐང་གླུ།) Township, Medrogongkar (མཐོ་གྲོ་གུང་དཀར།) County. Source: Still image from a Douyin video posted by a Chinese teacher.⁷¹

“When it gets dark in the evening and I can't take care of myself, I miss my mom and grandparents.”

Child in Tibet

In the same school, Gyal Lo states that the young children were unable to take care of their basic needs, such as dressing, hair brushing, and washing. Children sometimes soiled themselves, in part because they could not communicate their needs to the Chinese-speaking teachers.⁷² When doing fieldwork in 2017, a young boy from Zorge (Tibetan: མཇོང་དགེ Chinese: Ruoergai), eastern Tibet, told Gyal Lo, “When it gets dark in the evening and I can’t take care of myself, I miss my mom and grandparents.”⁷³

In this heartbreaking situation, parents try to provide what comfort they can to their loved ones. In one location, after dropping their children off for boarding preschool, some parents live out of their cars for the rest of the week to be nearby. Sometimes one family from the community stays near the school to support all the children from the village, while the other families take care of that family's work.⁷⁴

Students' contact with family can be extremely limited. At best, children return home on the weekends, but this is not always possible. One person described how authorities require children in their county to attend boarding preschools in other counties rather than their own and only

70 "Chinese Volunteer Teacher in Gannan: It's Not Easy to Say I Love You."

71 "True Feelings of Four Years of Teaching in Rural Areas," July 11, 2023, available at: https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAFpgiWmq-t5OoLqr0QgMMm4E2amXdGbgBWx1ScZTuiv0BIORdQLapBxBtse3SWyU?from_tab_name=main&modal_id=7254563242335391028.

72 Interview with Gyal Lo, April 10, 2022.

73 Gyal Lo, fieldwork notes, 2017.

74 Online Commenter 34.

allow parents to visit every three months.⁷⁵ Another explained that at the preschool where her friend's child is, parents are allowed to bring children home on weekends, but because it is so far away, many children end up staying at school on the weekends regardless.⁷⁶

Parents are allowed to bring children home on weekends, but because it is so far away, many children end up staying at school on the weekends regardless.

Living away from their families in an immersive Chinese environment estranges these young children from their culture. One Tibetan described the impacts she saw:

In these preschools, the teachers communicate with children in Chinese, they teach children to sing political songs in praise of the communist heroes like Mao, or the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] and New China. Although there is a Tibetan [language] class, it is very poor. Most of these children speak only in Chinese, there are very few children who speak in Tibetan. At home, these children communicate with their family members in Chinese and have adopted Chinese customs and have forgotten about their Tibetan customs.⁷⁷

Over time, the physical, linguistic, and cultural separation leads to emotional distance as well. Educational sociologist Gyal Lo has shared his observations of how boarding preschool impacted his grand-nieces and their family. Attending boarding preschool at ages four and five, they almost immediately began to lose their facility with Tibetan, choosing instead to speak Chinese – the language in which they were immersed for most of their waking hours. Even more distressing, they lost their connection to their family, keeping themselves physically apart when they were allowed to go home, choosing not to speak or engage with family members except in a limited way, and remaining emotionally distant.⁷⁸



At home, these children communicate with their family members in Chinese and have adopted Chinese customs and have forgotten about their Tibetan customs. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

The emotional and psychological effects of boarding preschool are well known in China itself. Outside Tibet, in China's wealthy cities, boarding preschool became popular with Chinese parents in the 1990s. But as the psychological toll on children became evident, the trend reversed, and parents chose to place their children in day preschools. A Chinese psychologist described to the *BBC* in 2013 how patients of hers who had attended boarding preschool earlier in life “feel abandoned and irrelevant. They struggle to find their place in life, and they don't know how to behave in their own family....It is brutal.”⁷⁹

Removing children from their families and immersing them in a language other than their mother tongue at an extremely young age contravenes international law and also flies in the face of expert consensus on childhood education. Yet despite the multiple, well-established harms of boarding preschool, the Chinese government has established a system of boarding preschools in Tibet and persists in their continued operation.

75 Online Commenter 4.

76 Interview 1.

77 Interview 1.

78 Gyal Lo, “The One Million Tibetan Children in China's Boarding Schools,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2023, Op-ed, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/15/opinion/china-tibet-boarding-school.html> (accessed September 30, 2024).

79 For example, see *BBC*, “Why Children as Young as Three Are Sent to Boarding School in China,” November 5, 2013, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24624427> (accessed January 14, 2025).

ABUSE AND NEGLIGENCE IN BOARDING SCHOOLS

Accounts
by parents,
teachers, and
students indicate
that beatings
are a regular
part of boarding
school life.

Since our first report on China's colonial boarding schools in Tibet was published in December 2021, numerous cases of abuse and negligence have emerged. While China's propaganda videos depict happy children on boarding school campuses, touting the safety and care provided to students there, independent accounts from Tibet paint a very different picture: one where Tibetan children face mistreatment that ranges from poor nutrition to severe abuse and negligence. Their families have no avenue for seeking redress and in some cases are physically prevented from seeing their children even for health and safety reasons.

Many Tibetan sources expressed concern about the poor quality of the food provided to students, explaining that it poses a health risk and causes health problems.⁸⁰ One parent described that for elementary school boarders, "the food is so poor that the children don't want to go to school."⁸¹ Several people noted that the food was old or of low quality, but also that there was not enough to feed everyone.⁸² In one case brought to Tibet Action Institute's attention, a senior employee at a school was interrogated by authorities after raising concerns about food quality in boarding schools.⁸³

Beyond issues related to food quality, accounts by parents, teachers, and students indicate that beatings are a regular part of boarding school life. A former student now in exile reported that their dormitories were checked while they were in class, and "if [school authorities] found that we had not kept it clean, we were beaten as a punishment."⁸⁴ One interviewee believed that teachers are aware that it is against the law to beat students, but they still do.⁸⁵ Another Tibetan stated that because security cameras monitor school hallways and common areas, teachers deliberately take students to private rooms to beat them extensively.⁸⁶ There are also cases of students bullying or physically assaulting each other, with no protection or intervention from school authorities.⁸⁷

Two Tibetans explained how at the school in their area – which has both day students from nearby and boarding students from other areas – religious symbols or practice were met with physical punishment:

Students are restricted from wearing any sungdue [Buddhist blessing cords] around their necks and wrists and chanting Tibetan prayers. If the students are found chanting prayers and wearing any blessing cords, they are beaten by the teacher.⁸⁸

Physical abuse at boarding school can be extreme. A Tibetan who recently arrived in exile described how in his area of eastern Tibet, Tibetan teachers mostly stopped beating children after a respected local figure drew attention to it. The person continued:

80 Online commenters 7, 8, and 47.

81 Interview 10.

82 Interview 9, Online Commenter 8.

83 Online Commenter 24.

84 Interview 12.

85 Interview 6.

86 Online Commenter 42.

87 Interview 6, Online Commenter 47.

88 Interview 2.

However, Chinese teachers really beat the children badly, they kick and punch anywhere. I have seen children with bruises on their bodies, who have suffered fractures, and sometimes the beatings were so bad that they had problems sitting.⁸⁹



I have seen children with bruises on their bodies, who have suffered fractures, and sometimes the beatings were so bad that they had problems sitting. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

One parent recounted that their middle-school aged child returned home for school break with one area of their body covered in bruises, having been beaten by a teacher.⁹⁰ A Tibetan who works in a boarding school described physical abuse as endemic, saying that teachers feel pressured in their work, and routinely take this out on the children. The person described students as being like “caged birds,” with parents unable to intervene in how teachers treat them.⁹¹

Other Tibetans also described how parents are rarely able to protect their children. The physical distance between where parents live and where their children attend school means that they do not always know what is happening and have no way to get involved.⁹² In other cases, when parents have tried to raise concerns, they or their children have been intimidated into silence.⁹³ For example, one parent described how a teacher called the police after the parent confronted the teacher about their child being beaten. The parent stated that schools often call the police to intervene with parents, and the police always side with the school. The person said that parents are afraid that their children will suffer the consequences if they complain. The person concluded, “there is a systemic problem.”⁹⁴

One interviewee identified nomads as an especially vulnerable group – both students, who are singled out, and parents, who are often unaware of what is happening to their children:

The nomad children living in boarding schools suffer a lot. Those who cook and clean are Chinese or Hui Muslims and they humiliate and insult nomad children for their background. There were several cases of children losing their ability to hear after being slapped on the ears by Chinese staff.

[In my county] cases of corporal punishment in Tibetan boarding schools are normal, since nomads do not make any formal complaints as either they are unaware or they are far away from the boarding school.



A teacher beat up the child, and he later jumped off the school building and died. Former colonial boarding school student

When I was in Grade 3 or 4, a Grade 5 or 6 student committed suicide by jumping off the fifth floor of the school building. Nomad kids are more honest and straightforward, but these traits are often looked down upon and humiliated in the school. A teacher beat up the child, and he later jumped off the school building and died.

The school authorities prevent such stories from getting out and nomadic families often don’t get compensation for their childrens’ injuries or lives.⁹⁵

In recent months, exceptionally rare video evidence of Tibetan children alleging abuse and even being abused has been sent to Tibetans outside of Tibet or posted on Chinese social media. In November 2024, a video emerged of a Tibetan boy being beaten by the school’s Chinese principal on the playground at Tsokhyil Township Ethnic Boarding Primary School in Kangtsa County

89 Interview 5.

90 Online Commenter 38.

91 Online Commenter 14.

92 Online Commenter 16.

93 Online Commenters 8, 14, and 64.

94 Online Commenter 14.

95 Interview 7.



Boarding school principal with a Tibetan child after beating him. Source: Still image from a video posted on Douyin in November 2024.

(Tibetan: གང་ཆ་རྫོང་། Chinese: Gangcha County) in the Tso Ngon (མཚོ་སྒོ་ནན།) region of Tibet's Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།) Province (Chinese: Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai).⁹⁶ The principal, identified as the local Communist Party Secretary, was filmed while a large number of classmates and teachers looked on. The video was shared with the school's parents' association and went viral online, but Tibetans were later barred from sharing it. Despite claims of an investigation, the principal remained in his position.⁹⁷

In another instance, a video recorded from CCTV footage at a boarding elementary school in October 2021 showed a teacher violently beating a child in front of other students, including with a chair.⁹⁸ The school where the incident occurred is the Chamdo No. 1 Elementary School in Chamdo (Tibetan: ཆང་མདོ། Chinese: Changdu). According to *The New York Times*:

The video circulated on the Internet in China more than 1,000 times before it was taken down. The school at which the beating took place has been described in state media reports as having students who lived on campus. The video set off a public outcry. In response, the local government conducted an investigation and said in an official statement that the beating had left a three-inch-long wound on the child's forehead and that the teacher had been suspended.⁹⁹

These accounts illustrate an environment characterized by negligence, lack of care, and abuse – both routine and targeted. The two case studies below provide in-depth examples of how extreme this can be, and the brutal impacts it has on the lives of children and their families.

96 Video available at: <https://s7712.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/video1Principalbeatschild.mp4>.

97 Online Commenters 94, 95.

98 Video available at: <https://tibetaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Chamdo-Primary-School-CCTV-Beating-October-11.mp4>.

99 *The New York Times*, "How China is Erasing Tibetan Culture, One Child at a Time."

CASE STUDY 1:

DELIBERATE MISTREATMENT OF CHILDREN FORCED TO LEAVE MONASTERY SCHOOL

Young monks and nuns appear to be singled out for particularly egregious mistreatment because of their religious background. In one area of Ngaba (རྒྱ་བཀྲ་), eastern Tibet, a group of five young monks reportedly tried to take their own lives in September 2024, after being forcibly removed from their monastery school and transferred to a state-run boarding school. In an emotional video taken after the five children were stopped from jumping into a river, one child cries out, “It’s unbearable to stay in the school, which is like a prison!” Another agrees, saying, “They don’t give us good food and [they] beat us.” Later one says, “We’re discriminated against. Unlike other students [in the school] we’re not taught the regular curriculum and are beaten and harassed and even denied water to drink.” Another adds, “It’s true, we’re intentionally denied even water to drink with our medicine when we’re unwell.”¹⁰⁰

The five monks were among a group of more than 140 young monks and nuns who were forced to leave a school at Muge Monastery at the end of June 2024. The children were then reportedly taken to an elementary school nearby for intensive “patriotic re-education.” Parents were largely not allowed to visit. The children were then taken on a “re-education” tour to China, apparently without the parents’ permission, and were allegedly subjected to abuse. One parent summarized what happened:

...[In June, authorities] took the monks from the monastery and kept them [at a nearby school]. They completely sealed the gate and [the young monks] were not allowed to meet anybody. Many parents begged and cried at the gate, so some of them were [eventually] allowed to meet. ...[The young monks] have been taught military training, praise songs to the Party, exercises, Party thought, etc. They were not given a single day’s holiday. They are treated more like prisoners than like regular students....Parents were crying to see how they were treating our children.

After [being taken on a] tour to China, [the children] didn’t want to return [to stay at the school] but authorities kept threatening the imprisonment of their parents. They again forcefully put them on the bus and took them back to that school, and they stopped giving them food and medicine. The monks tried to escape from the prison-like school and ran. Some of them tried to jump in the river, but villagers stopped them. They would all die if they jumped as it’s a big river. Some of them tried to commit suicide as it was becoming unbearable.¹⁰¹

Another parent emphasized that authorities made many promises about the welfare of the children when parents were told they had to attend state boarding school:

When the authorities came to ask us to send our children to school, they never mentioned that they wouldn’t be able to keep them safe. They made many promises about how they would care for the children – they would provide medicine if they got sick, they would ensure they saw a doctor, and if the children were from poor families, they would offer financial support. Now, with children running away, parents have nowhere to file complaints or express their concerns.

The parent continued:

As parents, it is our duty to protect our children, but as the head of my household, I feel powerless.¹⁰²



Unlike other students [in the school] we’re not taught the regular curriculum and are beaten and harassed and even denied water to drink.

Young monk forced to attend colonial boarding school



They made many promises....Now, with children running away, parents have nowhere to file complaints or express their concerns.

Parent of student forced to attend colonial boarding school

100 *Radio Free Asia*, “Exclusive: Five Teenage Tibetan Monks Attempt to Take Own Lives.”
101 Online Commenter 86.
102 Online Commenter 67.

CASE STUDY 2:

STUDENT DIES AFTER SCHOOL NEGLIGENCE AND LACK OF FAMILY ACCESS

In 2022, a 13-year-old Tibetan girl who appears to have had underlying medical conditions died after her family persistently tried to reach her with prescription medicine at her boarding school. The school first neglected to provide the medicine, and then failed to seek medical attention when she experienced extreme symptoms.

Open criticism of school authorities by Tibetans is rare due to the risk of reprisal from multiple levels of government. However, in an online account shared widely by her family, responsibility for the child's death was attributed to the school. The account appealed to parents, students, teachers, and school heads to improve safety for students.¹⁰³ The following excerpts have been edited for clarity and in some cases paraphrased.

[Name withheld] was 13 years old. She went to [location withheld], Qinghai Province. She had undergone major treatment for a heart condition in 2019 and 2020 and had recovered. At the end of a school break, she caught [what appeared to be] a cold, and was given a prescription at a local hospital. However, when returning to school on March 1, 2022, she forgot the prescription. We told her we would leave it with her homeroom teacher.



When we returned with the medicine, we had to leave it with a guard as we were not allowed to meet her directly.

When we returned with the medicine, we had to leave it with a guard as we were not allowed to meet her directly. We phoned her homeroom teacher who assured us he would ensure she had the medicine as well as any necessary follow up. A later call to the homeroom teacher to check on her went unanswered, and when we reached the teacher the next day he said he couldn't check on her. After three days had passed, he told us she was fine. We...asked him to double-check, providing her school identification number and other details. After many unanswered calls in the next two days, the teacher at last picked up the phone and informed us that she was fine and there was no need to worry. So, we thought she had recovered.



When she was picked up from school, she could barely walk and was very weak. She had not gotten the medicine we had sent, nor had anyone asked about her condition.

Two weeks later, there was a four-day holiday from school. When she was picked up from school, she could barely walk and was very weak. She had not gotten the medicine we had sent, nor had anyone asked about her condition. She said that the homeroom teacher had not been at the school since March and his substitute was so strict that students did not dare ask anything. She had started having severe fever and vomiting from March onward, which continued to get worse. Once during physical education class she almost fainted when they had to run. The teacher allowed her to sit, but did not seek medical advice....

[At the hospital] they explained that due to the delay in her receiving medical care, the illness had affected her heart as well as her brain. After further tests, she was diagnosed with leukemia, in addition to the heart infection. By March 19th, she could no longer walk and was completely bedridden. Sadly, she passed away [about six weeks later].

After the child died, the school refused to accept any responsibility, citing her pre-existing condition. They did not acknowledge the role they had played in failing to notify her family or secure medical care, which would have enabled earlier intervention. The family felt this might have prevented her death or at least would have reduced the pain and suffering she faced.

103 Online Commenter 22.

In addition to the case above, we reviewed several other cases in which the families suspected a student's death was linked to abuse or neglect at boarding school. In October 2024, multiple independent reports indicated that a child in Grade 4 – aged approximately 10 or 11 years old – died after falling out of a window from a top bunk bed at Maba Boarding Primary School (Chinese: Tongren City Bao'an Town Maba Boarding Primary School). Sources reported that authorities responded by holding emergency meetings at boarding schools in the area but did not indicate whether there was any investigation into what happened to the child or whether school officials were investigated or held accountable for the child's death.¹⁰⁴

It appears that once children are behind school walls, it is not easy for parents to reach them.

It appears that once children are behind school walls, it is not easy for parents to reach them. The case of the child who died in hospital is one of several reports we have obtained about schools blocking parents' or guardians' access to their children and obstructing medical care.¹⁰⁵ In another example, a parent described how their children needed to go to the hospital, but when the parent arrived at the school, they were not allowed to come in. The gatekeeper told the parent to call the children's teacher, but the person did not answer, and the parent was told there was no other way to see their children.

NO CHOICE FOR PARENTS

In interviews and conversations with Tibetans either still in Tibet or recently arrived in exile, Tibetans repeatedly described parents as having “no choice,” being “forced” to send their children to boarding school, and, if they disobeyed or refused, being “harassed,” “threatened,” and “punished.”¹⁰⁶ Government officials have been warned they would lose their jobs if they do not enroll their children in boarding school,¹⁰⁷ and, as noted earlier, parents have been threatened with beatings.¹⁰⁸ One person described that in the case of parents who are elderly, “police often take [other family members] and make them work as a part of punishment.”¹⁰⁹ Another described nomads being told to send their children to boarding preschool approximately 18 miles away and facing harassment from authorities if they did not.¹¹⁰ Various financial benefits from the government can also be withheld, such as in this area of Kardze Prefecture (དཀར་མཛེས་ཀྱི་རྫོང་།):

After Grade 1, the children have to stay in boarding school, which is about 60-70 miles away. The children are allowed to come home once a week or every two weeks... If the nomads don't send their children to school, the government does not pay them [a subsidy they usually receive].¹¹¹

One parent described how families of young monks and nuns from Muge Monastery were visited repeatedly by authorities, who “came multiple times a day, knocking on our doors, insisting we send our children to [government-run] school.” All family members received messages about the importance of education, and they were warned that not sending children to boarding school would be illegal. They were assured that their children would have excellent care, including

104 Online Commenter 87.

105 Online Commenters 8, 22, 49, 64, and 67, Interview 2.

106 Online Commenter 77, Online Commenter 45, Interview 5, Online Commenter 39, Online Commenter 2, Online Commenter 34, Interview 12, Interview 2, and Online Commenter 63.

107 Online Commenter 25.

108 Online Commenter 45, Interview 5, Online Commenter 34.

109 Interview 5.

110 Online Commenter 34.

111 Interview 10.

medical care and leave whenever parents requested it. They were also told that parents could choose the school their child attended. These commitments were later all broken. The parent stated, “When they came to take our children, it felt as if they were searching for prisoners we were hiding. They tried every method to take our children from us.”¹¹²



When they came to take our children, it felt as if they were searching for prisoners we were hiding. They tried every method to take our children from us.

Parent of student forced to attend colonial boarding school

The tactic of “thought work” – a Chinese political term for wearing people down through different forms of pressure and threats until they comply – is also used in other cases involving coercive transfer of children from their homes into colonial boarding schools. In a recent article in *The China Quarterly*, Yonten Nyima and Emily Yeh describe how the government moves Tibetan nomadic children to faraway boarding schools to “convince” their parents to leave behind their lives in the grasslands and resettle in urban centers. They detail the case of a Tibetan family reluctant to be resettled, whose children the government moves from a boarding school about 25 miles from the family’s land to one located about 370 miles away. As a result of this impossible distance from their children and thought work by officials, the family eventually agrees to move to the resettlement area closer to the new school.¹¹³

Two sources described similar situations where families moved from rural areas to stay closer to their children in boarding school.¹¹⁴ A 2020 state media article describes how at a large boarding school complex in Kardze (དཀར་མཛེས།), “about 1,000 people in the county who have the conditions to rent houses in Kardze County accompany their children to study.”¹¹⁵ In this way, the Chinese government accomplishes not only its objective of removing children from their families and culture and into the custody of the state, but also that of eliminating Tibetans’ traditional livelihoods, lifestyles, and social structures. Both projects serve to reforge future generations of Tibetans in a new Chinese image.

112 Online Commenter 67.

113 Nyima, Yonten, and Yeh, Emily T. “The Construction of Consent for High-Altitude Resettlement in Tibet.” *The China Quarterly* 254 (2023): 430, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/abs/construction-of-consent-for-highaltitude-resettlement-in-tibet/4690C1EAD2E1B3E798E205AC6DB14304> (accessed January 13, 2025).

114 Online Commenter 26, Interview 11.

115 *China Tibet Net*, 四川甘孜县让边远牧区孩子享受公平优质教育 [“Ganzi County, Sichuan, enables children in remote pastoral areas to enjoy fair and high-quality education,”] April 27, 2020, available at https://m.tibet.cn/cn/news/yc/202004/t20200427_6769741.html, Internet Archive https://web.archive.org/web/20250515031634/https://m.tibet.cn/cn/news/yc/202004/t20200427_6769741.html.

BEIJING'S CAMPAIGN OF FORCED ASSIMILATION

China's education policies in Tibet seek to deracinate Tibetan children from their culture, language, and identity. In the colonial boarding school system, children are first separated from their families, and then bombarded with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology through carefully curated images, texts, and songs, all in Chinese language. A Tibetan who recently escaped from Tibet described:

In boarding schools, the indoctrination process begins from a very young age. The children are taken away from their parents, restricted from speaking their mother tongue – Tibetan – taught in Chinese language, forced to learn and speak Chinese, and taught only state-approved history.¹¹⁶



We got a better score if we wrote in appreciation of Xi Jinping, his leadership, and China. Essays and drawings were judged based on how much we were able to praise the Party, the state, and the army.

Former colonial boarding school student

Students are exposed to persistent messages at school about the centrality of Chinese identity, history, and culture and the importance of the CCP. A former boarding school student described how this politicized education was implemented in their classroom:

...All the materials put on our class walls were in Chinese. All [my] class teachers [were] Chinese....In all the classes, we had pictures of Xi Jinping, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. Xi Jinping Thought¹¹⁷ was taught in classes; it was part of our school curriculum. We got a better score if we wrote in appreciation of Xi Jinping, his leadership, and China. Essays and drawings were judged based on how much we were able to praise the Party, the state, and the army.¹¹⁸



Children are taught to glorify the military as part of instilling a sense of gratitude and loyalty to the CCP. These preschoolers from a village kindergarten (day school) were participating in activities for Children's Day. Source: Still image from a video posted on Douyin by the Aba County Media Center, June 1, 2023.

116 Interview 2.

117 Xi Jinping Thought, so named seemingly in an effort to promote Xi Jinping to the same level of importance in Chinese leadership as Mao Zedong, is a set of governance principles officially incorporated into the Chinese school curriculum in 2021.

118 Interview 12.



Children's Day performance with the theme "Little Chinese Heart, Deep Patriotic Feelings" at Labrang Tibetan Kindergarten on May 30, 2023. The preschool has both day students and boarding students. Source: Douyin.¹¹⁹

All students in China are subjected to a politicized curriculum that is intended to cultivate loyalty to Xi Jinping and the Communist Party. However, in Tibet, education is part of a larger effort to methodically strip away a sense of Tibetanness and manipulate students' primary identification to be Chinese, rather than Tibetan. At best, being Tibetan is rendered a sub-category of being Chinese, with a "sense of community of the Chinese nation" being paramount.¹²⁰

Tibetan educational sociologist Gyal Lo describes how the boarding school system contradicts Tibetans' traditional philosophy of education, and the resulting impacts:

The colonial boarding school system is severing a whole generation of Tibetan children from the identity, value system, and unique cultural practices of Tibetans across the Tibetan Plateau. Whereas the Tibetan cultural viewpoint is based on the intentional development of compassion and wisdom, the curriculum in boarding schools instead cultivates a devaluation of life, both with regard to the self and to others. In essence, the colonial boarding school system in Tibet is fundamentally reshaping the way of Tibetan life.¹²¹

While inundating Tibetan children with propaganda aimed at political indoctrination, the boarding schools also engage in aggressive linguistic and cultural erasure. Children whose mother tongue is Tibetan must undergo schooling almost entirely in Chinese, including preschoolers. Multiple accounts describe Tibetan imagery and materials being prohibited inside or outside the classroom. In addition, Tibetan history and culture are purged from the curriculum, so that children only encounter Chinese identity and culture. For example, in a case where a teacher tried to provide students with a Tibetan language version of a document alongside a Chinese version, they were

119 Available at <https://www.douyin.com/?vid=7239167202669153548> (accessed May 10, 2025).

120 This phrase is frequently invoked by Xi Jinping, for example, see *Xinhua*, "Xi Stresses Ecological Conservation on Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, High-quality Development," June 21, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240621/6861339a5cea4ea58e104862058af8a6/c.html> (accessed February 25, 2025), Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250506143908/https://english.news.cn/20240621/6861339a5cea4ea58e104862058af8a6/c.html>.

121 Interview with Gyal Lo, April 25, 2025.

reprimanded.¹²² In another account, a person described how all preschool activities had to be conducted in Chinese, and children were not even allowed to play Tibetan games.¹²³ A Tibetan who recently escaped from Tibet to India stated:



I feel the Chinese government aims to wipe out our language, traditions, and letters.

Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

I feel the Chinese government aims to wipe out our language, traditions, and letters.... When we were in school, the Tibetan language and Tibetan history were taught. But now all the textbooks have changed, it's completely different. Children cannot study Tibetan and Tibetan history. They are taught Chinese language and the history of China written by Chinese writers.¹²⁴

The Chinese government has released extensive propaganda arguing that Tibetan students receive a “bilingual” education in boarding schools and that the schools teach Tibetan children to value their Tibetan culture and heritage. However, to the Chinese government “bilingual” means heavy use of Chinese and, at best, minimal Tibetan.¹²⁵ State media pieces about boarding schools in Tibet often feature smiling parents and grandparents, and sometimes Tibetan teachers or academics defending the system.¹²⁶ But online, Tibetans express their concern – even despair – about schools one after another changing to a Chinese-medium curriculum and the serious risk that Tibetan children will not be able to speak their own language within a generation.

One Tibetan described the drastic changes they saw in children’s ability to speak Tibetan:

The children are like kids raised in foreign countries. They speak only in Mandarin, and while some still understand their parents communicating in Tibetan, they reply only in Mandarin. Children’s primary language is becoming Mandarin, and in their daily conversations, they exclusively use Mandarin. They must stay at school from Monday to Friday....The state of the Tibetan language is alarming....¹²⁷



Every minute of the day other than Tibetan language class is spent speaking Mandarin.

Former colonial boarding school student

Colonial boarding school students now living abroad describe an immersive Chinese education, with, at best, short language classes in their mother tongue. A former student from Lhasa (ལྷ་ས།) described their experience:

There is one Tibetan class per day for 45 minutes....Even the Tibetan teacher uses Mandarin words during Tibetan class. Every minute of the day other than Tibetan language class is spent speaking Mandarin.¹²⁸

Another former student also stated that all their classes – Chinese, math, Tibetan, science, art, physical education, dance, and music – were taught in Chinese, except for the Tibetan class. In addition, during a daily break, students were required to sing the [Chinese] national anthem, as well as “songs praising the Chinese Communist Party, the State, and the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] – like love the Party, love the country, and love the army” and that school authorities “encouraged us to speak...Chinese.”¹²⁹

122 Online Commenter 4.
123 Online Commenter 72.

124 Interview 1.

125 Human Rights Watch, “China’s ‘Bilingual Education’ Policy in Tibet,” 1.

126 For example, see *CGTN*, “Life at a Boarding School in China’s Xizang Autonomous Region,” available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oauiAGiWjRc> (accessed March 14, 2024).

127 Online Commenter 93.

128 Interview 11.

129 Interview 12.

Another student explained:

Most of the teachers at my school are Chinese. There are very few Tibetan teachers and they only teach Tibetan. Except for Tibetan class, everything is taught in Chinese.¹³⁰

In an opinion piece for the strident state media outlet *Global Times*, a Chinese scholar at the government's China Tibetology Research Centre articulated the motivation for the emphasis on Chinese language and demotion of Tibetan:

...[T]he use of the national common language is the only way to achieve national unity and prosperity in Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet). Learning and using the national common language is essential to maintaining national unity and defending national security. The Xizang region is an important ideological battleground in China as it is a key area where hostile foreign forces attempt to carry out separatist and infiltrating activities.¹³¹

A large body of academic research shows that mother tongue-based education, particularly in early learning and elementary school, is the best way for children to succeed throughout their school years.

Immersing Tibetan children in a Chinese language environment from a young age jeopardizes their success and wellbeing. A large body of academic research shows that mother tongue-based education, particularly in early learning and elementary school, is the best way for children to succeed throughout their school years.¹³² To achieve true bilingualism, researchers say that six to eight years of mother-tongue based education should be followed by a gradual transition to the second language, alongside continued opportunities in the first language.¹³³ Indeed, "one of the most strongly established findings" is that strong bilingual programs can enable development of literacy and learning in a first, minority language, without detracting from students' learning of a second, majority language.¹³⁴

Researchers warn that children's facility in their mother tongue is rapidly lost if they are forced to switch too early or too quickly to a second language. But this is not just a loss of language: it has negative impacts on both their success in school and their long-term sense of connection to their family and community. At school, they may become less motivated, have difficulty learning, or drop out early.¹³⁵ By adolescence, "the linguistic gap between parents and children has become an emotional chasm. Pupils frequently become alienated from the cultures of both home and school with predictable results."¹³⁶ Children risk failing "to become linguistically competent members of their families and communities and lose the ability to connect with their cultural heritage."¹³⁷

These warnings echo almost exactly the accounts and fears of Tibetans who see their children not only losing their language, but losing their interest in and connection to their family, their culture, and their society.

130 Interview 6.

131 Liang Junyan, "Debunking the Lie that People in Xizang Are Forced to Use Common National Language," *Global Times*, April 27, 2023, Op-ed, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289913.shtml> (accessed August 15, 2024), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250515181411/https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289913.shtml>.

132 Jessica Ball, Global Partnership for Education, "Children Learn Better in Their Mother Tongue," February 21, 2014, available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue> (accessed February 22, 2025).

133 Jessica Ball, "Educational Equity for Children From Diverse Language Backgrounds: Mother Tongue-based Bilingual or Multilingual Education in the Early Years," UNESCO, 2011, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000212270> (accessed October 19, 2024), 6.

134 Cummins, Jim. "Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?" *Sprogforum* 7, no. 19 (2001), 18.

135 Ball, "Educational Equity for Children From Diverse Language Backgrounds," 6.

136 Cummins, 19.

137 Ball, "Children Learn Better in Their Mother Tongue."

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HARM

The policies of removing children from their families and communities as early as age four, preventing them from speaking their mother tongue, and indoctrinating them to see themselves as Chinese are causing psychological harm to Tibetan children.



Some younger children, in the middle of the night, would often wake up crying and run to the school gate.

Former colonial boarding school student

Upon attending colonial boarding school or preschool, children suffer both the trauma of separation from their families and that of being suddenly transplanted into a new language and culture. A former boarding school student now living in exile recalled:

I remember the first few days were difficult. I missed my family and I could not cry [because of the trauma]. I could not communicate with other students and teachers because I didn't know Chinese then. There were many other children who missed their family and cried. Some younger children, in the middle of the night, would often wake up crying and run to the school gate.¹³⁸

The student added:

We had summer and winter school breaks and we also had a five-day holiday on National Day of the People's Republic of China, October 1st, but I didn't go home for the five-day holiday. My village was a day ride in a car. Because I didn't see my family very often, the most difficult or challenging part was living away from family and missing them....At school, I was part of a group of around 20 students. We were a group of students who didn't go home often and didn't have much family contact.

The student later explained how this affected them psychologically:

[Boarding schools in Tibet are] a massive project of the Chinese government. As I was very young and did not understand Chinese, I was scared of speaking to teachers and also students. I missed my parents every day. Later I even lost the courage to speak to anyone or go to any place where there are people. I really did not learn much during my days in boarding school. I was sad and lost.¹³⁹



Sometimes, I felt like a prisoner in the school.

Former colonial boarding school student

Other former students agreed, saying that being separated from family and not being able to go home was the most difficult aspect of colonial boarding school.¹⁴⁰ One said, "Sometimes, I felt like a prisoner in the school."¹⁴¹

At its worst, forced attendance at colonial boarding school has resulted in children taking their own lives. In 2024, *RFA* reported that a 17-year-old monk who had been made to attend colonial boarding school had committed suicide. Their sources described how the boy was removed from his monastery at age 14. Not allowed to return to the monastery even during school breaks, the boy would periodically become depressed, stop eating, become ill, and be sent home to his family.

Although initially authorities allowed him and other young monks to wear their monks' robes at school on certain occasions, and to sometimes leave the school, restrictions tightened in early

¹³⁸ Interview 12.

¹³⁹ Interview 12.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 14.

¹⁴¹ Interview 13.

2024. At this time the young monks were told they had to disrobe and stay permanently at school. One of the sources said, “He had said that if he would be permanently stripped of his robes and required to go to school in his plainclothes, then he would kill himself.” With the new restrictions in place, the boy became depressed again and took his own life.¹⁴²

Separating children from their families, culture, and traditions while forcibly indoctrinating them with CCP ideology, government-run boarding schools “[create] a gap between the parent and children to learn the language and Tibetan way of life, culture, and tradition.”¹⁴³ The destruction of Tibetan language ability and roots in Tibetan culture alienates children from their heritage, which manifests in different ways. Many younger Tibetans “don’t know names of local places, plants, birds, and animals.”¹⁴⁴ One person who went to boarding school even before Xi Jinping brought in extreme measures of all-Chinese teaching and indoctrination recalled feeling like he had “lost touch” with everyday household chores like saddling a horse or lighting a kitchen fire. He was even scared of animals like yaks, thinking they would attack him.¹⁴⁵

Children’s social-emotional connection to their families and community is also damaged. A Tibetan who recently escaped to India described how he sees colonial boarding school impacting his own family:

“ [My] niece who goes to boarding school likes to stay alone at home when she comes home for vacation. She doesn’t like to communicate with other family members. Tibetan who recently fled Tibet

[My] niece who goes to boarding school likes to stay alone at home when she comes home for vacation. She doesn’t like to communicate with other family members. Tibetan children who study in Chinese boarding schools develop cultural and communication gaps with their grandparents and parents as the [grandparents and parents] do not understand Chinese.¹⁴⁶

Another Tibetan described:

[M]y nephews and nieces...only speak in Chinese. When they get...home after school, they cannot really do any household chores. The children have become ungrateful – arrogant in a sense – and the parents think it’s better not to send the children if they are only learning this at school.¹⁴⁷

The damaging social, emotional, and psychological impacts of boarding school life on Tibetan and other non-Chinese children are documented in a handful of Tibetan and Chinese academic papers. One 2020 study by Chinese academics on boarding elementary schools in “ethnic areas” of China stated that the schools often failed to adequately protect students’ physical and mental health, particularly for young students. The researchers found that, due to the absence of parental care, boarding students often felt helpless and extremely lonely. Teachers and dormitory administrators described younger students often crying at night for their parents, and how every year, the new students would cry for several days before quieting. Additionally, many students experienced frequent bullying, which caused significant psychological distress and fear.¹⁴⁸

A 2021 study on the mental health of 3,500 Tibetan middle school students living in boarding schools in two areas of Ü-Tsang (དབུས་གཙང་།) concluded that “psychological problems among

142 Radio Free Asia, “Exclusive: Teen Tibetan Monk Takes Own Life After Being Forced to Leave Monastery,” May 28, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/monk-robe-death-05282024152017.html> (accessed January 24, 2025).

143 Interview 3.

144 Interview 3.

145 Interview 3.

146 Interview 6.

147 Interview 4.

148 Luo, Zhengpeng & Yuan, Ziqian. 民族地区小学寄宿制教育:功效、挑战与发展 [Primary Boarding Education in Ethnic Areas: Efficacy, Challenges and Development]. *Contemporary Education and Culture*, 12, no. 6 (2020), 106.

Tibetan middle school students [are] relatively high. Among them, nostalgia, study pressure, psychological irritability, loneliness, interpersonal tension, and inferiority are the most prominent.” The same study also highlighted the unique challenges faced by Tibetan girls going through puberty away from home, describing their mental health as “extremely unstable.”¹⁴⁹



[S]ome students develop feelings of despair, with some even having suicidal thoughts.

Chinese academic researcher

The negative impacts of boarding school on Tibetan children’s wellbeing have been known for at least a decade. As cited in Tibet Action Institute’s first report, a 2016 academic paper found that more than one in three Tibetan students from Grades 7-12 at two schools in eastern Tibet were experiencing high levels of alienation – described as a deep sense of anguish or loss, as well as an inability to connect meaningfully with others. The paper cited academic research showing that behavioral issues, substance abuse, and suicide are associated with high levels of alienation.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, a 2014 study found varying degrees of mental health problems among Tibetan boarding school students, including apathy, anxiety, and interaction disorders.¹⁵¹ Another 2016 paper warned that without an emotional outlet, students will face “anxiety, irritability, mood swings, and, in severe cases, depression,” with some also becoming withdrawn. It continued, “More concerning is that some students develop feelings of despair, with some even having suicidal thoughts.”¹⁵²

These studies corroborate the enormous psychological, emotional, and social harm that Tibetans describe observing among children who attend colonial boarding schools. Feelings of loss and homesickness combine with the deliberate reshaping of identity to gradually alienate children from their families and communities while altering their sense of who they are. Over time, this creates a permanent distance and irreversible estrangement between children and their own families. It also changes the children’s relationship to their larger community and to Tibetans as a people, breaking social cohesion and dismantling norms and institutions that have held Tibetans together for centuries.

149 Zhao, Hengshan, Jiang, Yongzhong & Ye, Fujun. 异地办学和寄宿制下藏族中学生心理健康实证研究: 以西藏那曲、阿里两地中学为例 [An Empirical Study on the Mental Health of Tibetan Middle School Students Under Off-Site Education and Boarding System: Using Middle Schools in Nagchu and Ngari Regions of Tibet as Examples]. *Journal of Guangxi Institute of Education*, no. 4 (2021), 182.

150 Cao, Gazang. “Alienation of Tibetan Adolescents in Rural Boarding Schools.” *Frontiers of Education in China*, 11, no. 4 (2016), 503-504.

151 Xiaoping, Wang & Tashi Dondrob. 藏区寄宿制学校有效植入家庭教育策略探析 [An Analysis of Strategies for Effectively Implanting Family Education into Boarding Schools in Tibetan Areas]. *Industry and Information Technology Education*, (2014), 89.

152 Li, Chengxiang. 关于少数民族地区寄宿生心理存在的问题研究: 以天祝藏族自治县为例 [Research on Psychological Issues Among Boarding Students in Ethnic Minority Areas: A Case Study of Pari (Chinese: Tianzhu) Tibetan Autonomous County]. *Educational and Teaching Research, Gansu Provincial Institute of Education and Science*, (2016), 13.

FROM COLONIAL IDEOLOGY TO RACIST POLICIES

The assumption of Chinese superiority and Tibetan inferiority undergirds every aspect of the Chinese government's colonial education system in Tibet.

This ambitious project of wholesale ethnic conversion, aimed at replacing the foundations of Tibetan identity with those of a homogeneous and monolingual Chinese cultural identity, is driven by the colonial ideology of Han supremacy, a topic discussed in our 2021 report.¹⁵³ Government statements, policy directives, and writings by a number of Chinese academics¹⁵⁴ betray a racist worldview that stereotypes Tibetans as ungrateful savages who are too backward to either seek out or appreciate the blessings of modernization bestowed upon them by China's civilizing mission.

The assumption of Chinese superiority and Tibetan inferiority undergirds every aspect of the Chinese government's colonial education system in Tibet.¹⁵⁵ Most obvious is the outright promotion of Chinese language and cultural norms alongside the simultaneous demotion of Tibetan language, culture, and religious practice throughout every aspect of the school system. But the prejudice also reveals itself in other ways. For example, a Chinese government delegate, when responding to questions before the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), explained that instruction of Tibetan children had to be in Chinese because the Tibetan language suffers from a lack of vocabulary in the STEM subjects.¹⁵⁶

This claim ignores the reality that Tibetans in Kham (ཁམས།) and Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།) (Chinese: areas of Qinghai and Sichuan) taught math, chemistry, biology, and geography in the Tibetan language until around 2020, when authorities began reducing the space for Tibetan as a legitimate medium of instruction and privileging the exclusive use of Chinese. It also ignores that a shortage of technical vocabulary is a challenge common to all languages when encountering new subjects. It was not long ago when Mandarin borrowed thousands of loanwords from Japanese and English when China introduced new disciplines like sociology and the natural sciences into its curriculum.¹⁵⁷ All languages have undergone terminological expansion in fields like modern science and technology, and Tibetan is no different. The claim that the STEM subjects cannot be taught in Tibetan is particularly cynical in light of the fact that the Chinese government itself publishes a sizable "Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of Science and Technology."¹⁵⁸

Official justifications for the boarding school system in Tibet display the savior complex familiar to classic colonialism. The same Chinese government delegate speaking at the UN went on to rationalize the system, explaining that "due to the plateau situation [in Tibet] the amount of oxygen is comparatively lower. I've been to that area to do research and I've found the height of the local students is generally lower than the students in other areas. And the people are scattered in different areas. So it is difficult for these students to go to school and it is difficult to guarantee the quality of education."¹⁵⁹ A recent article by *Le Monde* highlighted similar arguments made in China's state media that claimed "the average altitude of 4,200 meters, isolation and harsh climatic

153 Tibet Action Institute, "Separated from Their Families, Hidden from the Word," 11.

154 For recent examples of academic bias, see controversy around an article published in *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2025-31211-001.html> (accessed January 29, 2025).

155 For example, see Huatse Gyal, "Our Indigenous Land is Not a Wasteland," *American Ethnologist*, February 6, 2021, available at: <https://americanethnologist.org/features/reflections/our-indigenous-land-is-not-a-wasteland> (accessed January 24, 2025).

156 United Nations – UN Web TV, "7th Meeting, 73rd Session, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)," beginning at 1:42:17, available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1v/k1vrez9w0u> (accessed January 24, 2025).

157 Leibold, James and Dorjee, Tenzin. "Learning to Be Chinese: Colonial-Style Boarding Schools on the Tibetan Plateau." *Comparative Education*, 60, no. 1, (2023).

158 China Tibet Online, "The Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of Science and Technology Officially Published by Minzu Publishing House," March 30, 2023, available at: http://m.tibet.cn/eng/news/tibetan/202303/t20230330_7389179.html (accessed November 26, 2024), Internet Archive: https://web.archive.org/web/20250506144824/https://m.tibet.cn/eng/news/tibetan/202303/t20230330_7389179.html.

159 United Nations – UN Web TV, "7th Meeting, 73rd Session, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)," beginning at 144:36.

conditions on the Tibetan plateau contribute to poor quality education up there” – and better exam scores when children attend boarding schools in Chinese cities.¹⁶⁰

Rather than supporting the expansion of high-quality schooling led by Tibetans, Beijing under Xi Jinping has made every effort to undercut Tibetan-led education initiatives and forcibly replace them with Chinese ones.

These attitudes impose a racist framework onto Tibetans. Rather than supporting the expansion of high-quality schooling led by Tibetans, Beijing under Xi Jinping has made every effort to undercut Tibetan-led education initiatives and forcibly replace them with Chinese ones. Substantial work done over the past two decades by Tibetan academics, teachers, and parents to develop educational solutions that are culturally respectful and locally relevant has been reversed, including the closure of private Tibetan-run schools, sidelining of Tibetan teachers within schools, and removal of teacher training resources for Tibetans. Gyal Lo, the Tibetan educational sociologist, describes how there used to be teacher training schools in many Tibetan counties, but Chinese authorities closed them more than a decade ago. Now, “they are intentionally not having Tibetan teacher education, which lowers the quality of teaching. [Chinese authorities] later blame the quality of teachers and say we need to have Chinese teachers.”¹⁶¹

At its core, the Chinese government’s colonial boarding school system represents a chilling example of settler colonialism in the 21st century. These institutions echo the heinous residential schools and other forms of child separation that ravaged Indigenous communities in North America and Australia in the 19th and 20th centuries, subjecting them to mass cultural erasure, forced assimilation, and bequeathing to their descendants a legacy of intergenerational trauma. At a time when Western nations have begun to reckon with their genocidal legacies – in November 2024, President Biden officially apologized for the US government’s role in what he called “a blot on American history,”¹⁶² following the example set by Canada and Australia in showing remorse for their colonial crimes – the Chinese government shows no such capacity for reflection. On the contrary, Beijing has shown it is interested only in exploiting the misdeeds of the Canadian and American governments to justify Chinese atrocities against the Tibetan people.¹⁶³

Ultimately, China’s colonial boarding schooling system seeks to sever Tibetan children from their families, their language, and their heritage, methodically ensuring that the next generation of Tibetans grows up estranged from their own culture. This is not mere historical repetition – it is a calculated, modern-day assault on a people, engineered with the precision of a draconian state that cloaks its colonial ambitions and oppressive policies in the language of “progress” and “development.”

160 *Le Monde*, “The Tibetan Children Taken to Boarding Schools to Sever Their Roots,” April 8, 2025, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/08/the-tibetan-children-taken-to-boarding-schools-to-sever-their-roots_6739949_4.html# (accessed May 12, 2025).

161 Interview with Gyal Lo, April 25, 2025.

162 *BBC*, “Biden Apologises for Indian Boarding Schools ‘Blot on History,’” October 25, 2024, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c704z4qxzeno> (accessed February 22, 2025).

163 For example, see *Global Times*, “China Strongly Opposes US’ Illegal Visa Sanctions on Officials Over So-Called Forcible Assimilation in Xizang,” August 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296824.shtml> (accessed May 12, 2025), *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250515195921/https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296824.shtml>.

CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVES AND RESISTANCE

The experience of attending boarding school threatens not only the wellbeing of individuals, but the very existence of Tibetan language and culture – and, therefore, the survival of Tibetans as a distinct people.

The Chinese government is trying to forcibly merge Tibetans and other non-Chinese people living under CCP rule into a single national identity in an effort to forestall potential challenges to their rule by removing cultural differences. In Tibet, children are being used as a primary means to this end, manipulated through a host of oppressive educational policies that permeate every aspect of childrens' lives, both inside and outside of school. The most devastating of these is the system of colonial boarding schools and preschools which expose children to abuse and neglect, see children as young as four living away from their families, indoctrinate children in CCP ideology, and separate them from their language and culture. Few other schooling options still exist, with local village schools having been closed, private Tibetan-run schools shut down, and children barred from joining monasteries or nunneries. Such measures leave parents with no choice but to send their children away. The impacts of colonial boarding school are compounded by Chinese authorities banning extracurricular weekend and holiday classes in Tibetan language while also forbidding children from participating in religious activities, even when they are at home.

Through the boarding system and related policies, Tibetan children become alienated from their language, religion, culture, families, and identity. Ties to their community are lost, and children suffer mental and emotional harm. The experience of attending boarding school threatens not only the wellbeing of individuals, but the very existence of Tibetan language and culture – and, therefore, the survival of Tibetans as a distinct people. The Chinese government's approach is undergirded by a colonial view of Tibetans as inferior to Chinese people and in need of civilizing.

There is an alternative path. Tibetan educational sociologist Gyal Lo speaks of what Tibetan education could be: "...a culturally relevant education where young generations can inherit their culture and learn their language, at the same time learning a second and third language. It needs to make them capable in their traditions, culture, and language, and also in the modern context." Rather than investing in building massive boarding school campuses as the Chinese government is currently doing, Gyal Lo says resources should be put into building an education system that employs and serves Tibetans. Tibetan educators should be empowered to design the curriculum and develop the textbooks based on Tibetan culture. In addition, teacher training programs need to be reinstated and village schools must reopen. Early childhood literacy in the Tibetan language should be a priority, but preschool-aged children must be allowed to stay in their parents' care so that their emotional needs are met and they can learn while based in their own home.¹⁶⁴

Resources to bring forward a truly Tibetan education system still exist. Less than a decade ago, a gathering of 300 Tibetan academics, parents, and teachers took place to discuss what a Tibetan early childhood learning would look like. The keynote address focused on the need for culturally relevant, mother tongue education as the basis for intellectual development in preschool years, and educational policies that are based on and responsive to the unique culture, language, identity, way of life, and way of thinking of Tibetans as a people.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, Tibetan professors and teachers were using their limited space to develop rich new resources for Tibetan-language education sensitive to the diversity of dialects and local traditions within Tibet and

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Gyal Lo, April 25, 2025.

¹⁶⁵ Throwo Gyantsen. 鉴泽教育研究中心第四届藏区教育论坛藏区学前教育学术讨论会主题演讲论文 [The Principles of Physical and Mental Development of Infants and Young Children and Preschool Education in Tibetan Areas]. Keynote paper of the 4th Tibetan Education Forum: Tibetan Preschool Education Symposium of Gyantsen Education Research Center, November 11-19, 2016.

catering to children's primary psychological and developmental needs. These Tibetan educators made sustained efforts to advance culture-based child literacy, which plays a key role not only in facilitating early language acquisition but also in elevating the level of discourse capability one is able to acquire in adulthood. Unfortunately, since 2022, the Chinese government has banned all such efforts, prohibiting publications that promote Tibetan children's literacy, forbidding bookstores from carrying such materials, and criminalizing their dissemination in schools. Today, although these initiatives have been suppressed – along with Tibetan-run schools – the latent potential for Tibetan-led education is still there.

Despite the grave risks, Tibetans still seek ways to preserve their language, culture, and identity and to ensure that Tibetan children grow up seeing themselves as Tibetan, speaking Tibetan, and knowing Tibetan history.

In a place where even an inkling of dissent leads to extreme punishment,¹⁶⁶ open opposition to Chinese government policies is rare. Tibet scored a zero in Freedom House's most recent "Freedom in the World" rankings, making it the least free area in the world except for Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.¹⁶⁷ Yet despite the grave risks, Tibetans still seek ways to preserve their language, culture, and identity and to ensure that the current generation of Tibetan children grow up seeing themselves as Tibetan, speaking Tibetan, and knowing Tibetan history. They use cautious wording to discuss language and education policies online, expressing concerns and sharing ideas for what individual families can do. Some parents have found unsanctioned ways to keep their children out of government-run boarding schools, avoiding detection by authorities.¹⁶⁸ Teachers have tried to incorporate more Tibetan into their classes.¹⁶⁹ And at times, students, parents, intellectuals, and others have bravely spoken out.¹⁷⁰

But the toll of colonial boarding schools is high and Tibetan children are losing their language and identity day by day. In Canada, the United States, and Australia, colonial attempts to eliminate Indigeneity through boarding schools and other means of forced separation failed, but resulted in horrific damage to Indigenous children and families, as well as to Indigenous nations' societies, cultures, and languages. This harm continues to reverberate through generations.

It is not yet too late for the Tibetan people to avert this fate. The resources and capability exist to shift away from the harmful policies being embraced by the Chinese government today and towards a Tibetan-led education system that sustains the culture and traditions of the Tibetan people while providing a modern, high-quality education. In order to achieve this outcome, there is much that the international community can and must do to support Tibetans. The following are our recommendations for concerned governments, United Nations bodies, experts, and leaders, as well as for the Chinese government itself.

166 For example, see *Radio Free Asia*, "Tibetan Language Rights Advocate Under Surveillance After Release from Detention," November 13, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/tibet/2024/11/13/tibet-language-rights-activist-detained/> (accessed January 15, 2025) and *Radio Free Asia*, "Tibetan Champion of Language Preservation Dies after Release," December 23, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/tibet/2024/12/23/champion-language-preservation-dies/> (accessed January 16, 2025).

167 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2025," February 2025, 7, available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/FITW_World_2025_Feb.2025.pdf (accessed March 16, 2025).

168 Interview with Gyal Lo, October 10, 2024, Interview 16.

169 For example, see *Radio Free Asia*, "China Expels Teacher for Pushing for Students to Use Tibetan Language," April 17, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/teacher-expelled-04172024160617.html> (accessed October 11, 2024).

170 For example, see *Radio Free Asia*, "Netizens Demand China Reinstate Tibetan Language Use in Schools," April 4, 2025, available at: https://www.rfa.org/english/tibet/2025/04/04/tibet-language-white-paper/?int_cid=story_card:rc_v1_2025-04-04-tibet-language-white-paper:story_page:1of3:18of19 (accessed April 22, 2025), *Radio Free Asia*, "Four Tibetan Teens Detained for Resisting Going to Chinese Schools," October 8, 2024, available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/tibet-teens-detained-buddhist-schools-china-10082024170151.html> (accessed October 25, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT:

1. Immediately halt the coerced removal of children from monasteries and homes and into state boarding schools.
2. Impose a moratorium on further construction of boarding schools and preschools.
3. Conduct a public investigation into the alleged abuse, neglect, deaths, and mental health concerns within Tibetan boarding schools.
4. Abolish the boarding school system, halt the closure of village and monastic schools, allow private Tibetan schools to reopen, and permit children to engage freely in religious life.
5. Drop charges against and release from prison all Tibetans who have been incarcerated because of advocating for the use and preservation of Tibetan language, including in schools.
6. Reverse the deceptively-named “bilingual education” policy that replaces Tibetan with Chinese as the medium of instruction and allow a Tibetan-language curriculum developed by Tibetan educators that responds to the needs of Tibetans rather than being centered on Chinese identity, history, and culture.
7. Stop firing Tibetan teachers and instead, hire and train more Tibetan teachers in Tibetan areas, especially in rural communities, and halt their displacement by Chinese teachers, ensuring that Tibetan students have access to high quality education in the Tibetan language and in their home communities, without being separated from their families.

TO GOVERNMENTS CONCERNED WITH TIBETANS’ RIGHTS:

1. Call for the immediate abolition of the colonial boarding school system in all meetings with Chinese government representatives, including during visits by Chinese leaders, visits to the People’s Republic of China, and high-level meetings of intergovernmental fora, as recommended by UN Special Procedures, the UN Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
2. Conduct investigations into and enact economic sanctions and visa restrictions on authorities at schools where physical abuse or negligence is known to be taking place and on intellectuals and officials responsible for developing and implementing educational policies in Tibet that violate Tibetans’ human rights. These policies include the colonial boarding school and boarding preschool system in Tibet, elimination of Tibetan-medium teaching, closures of Tibetan-run private schools and vacation classes, and forced transfer of children from monastic schools to state-run boarding schools.
3. Member states of the UN Human Rights Council, acknowledging the scope and severity of violations related to boarding schools in Tibet, especially in light of the urgent risks they pose to children, should support a special session on China in 2025.
4. Underwrite educational programs that support promotion and preservation of Tibetan language and culture, including Tibetan-run weekend schools, language and culture vacation camps, and intensive Tibetan language immersion programs; development of Tibetan-medium curriculum and Tibetan-language digital content, including children’s comics and videos; and higher education opportunities for Tibetan students, teachers, and scholars, especially those from Tibet.
5. Provide financial resources to support Tibetan language training through public institutions and to diplomats.

TO THE UN SECRETARY GENERAL:

1. The Secretary General should condemn the policies that allow Tibetan children to be separated from their families and indoctrinated in government-run boarding schools from age four and up.

TO THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL:

1. Halfway through his tenure, the High Commissioner for Human Rights has not adequately addressed the widespread and systematic abuses discussed in this report that threaten all Tibetan children. He should unambiguously and categorically condemn the Chinese government's system of boarding schools and its anti-Tibetan curriculum, and call on Chinese authorities to: abolish the boarding school system, halt the closure of Tibetan village and monastic schools, and allow private Tibetan schools to reopen in all Tibetan areas.
2. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, in coordination with Special Procedures and CRC, CEDAW, and CERD experts who have already expressed concerns about colonial boarding schools in Tibet, should announce an initiative to carry out an investigation into all colonial boarding schools and push for standing invitations for Special Procedures to visit Tibet, including the TAR and areas outside it.
3. The Human Rights Council, acknowledging the scope and severity of violations related to boarding schools in Tibet, especially in light of the urgent risks they pose to children, should convene a special session on China in 2025.

TO UN TREATY BODIES AND SPECIAL PROCEDURES:

1. The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, having previously communicated directly to Beijing about assimilationist education policies in Tibet, should continue to express grave concern over the colonial boarding school system and related policies and their impacts on Tibetan families and children.
2. Mandate holders should use the evidence in this report as the basis for another communication to Chinese authorities, expressing serious concern about the abuse and negligence rife in the boarding school and preschool system, as well as severe psychological and cultural harm.
3. The findings of this report should help inform the Committee on the Rights of the Child's forthcoming review of the Chinese government.

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“WHEN THEY CAME TO TAKE OUR CHILDREN”

China's Colonial Boarding Schools and the Future of Tibet

The Chinese state is using Tibetan children as a means to forcibly assimilate the Tibetan people. Students are targeted primarily through a system of colonial boarding schools and preschools, which expose them to abuse and neglect. Some children as young as four are compelled to live away from their families. They are indoctrinated to be loyal to the Chinese Communist Party and are separated from their language and culture.

Chinese authorities have meanwhile removed other options: village schools and alternative Tibetan-run schools have been shut down, and young monks and nuns have been forced to leave their monastic institutions to attend state-run boarding schools. Even during school breaks, students are restricted from enrolling in Tibetan language classes or participating in religious activities with their families.

Tibet Action Institute urges the United Nations and concerned governments to call on the Chinese government to immediately conduct a public investigation into the alleged abuses, deaths, and mental health concerns at Tibetan boarding schools, to abolish the coercive system of boarding schools and preschools, and to enable Tibetan children to access high-quality mother tongue education while living at home.



More on China's Colonial Boarding Schools in Tibet:



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