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# **International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) Contribution: Cultural dimension of the right to education**

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The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is a not-for-profit advocacy group that works to promote human rights and democratic freedoms for the people of Tibet. In this submission, we aim to highlight both best practice and challenges in the preserving cultural rights within education. Tibet is defined as the historical region of Tibet that now encompasses the Tibet Autonomous Region, and autonomous prefectures and counties of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan.

**Key points:**

Cultural rights in Tibet are not protected in the school curricula. While Tibetan language is protected by law, it is not protected in practice. Similarly, references to religious matters are banned from educational materials, which results in Tibetan literature being banned because Buddhism features significantly in Tibetan literature.

The school system is designed to integrate Tibetans into the Han-dominated and defined cultural majority. While the school system previously preferenced Tibetan candidates for teaching and administrative positions, this has changed since the introduction of the policy to end preferential treatment in education and employment.

In addition to language and religion, other areas of Tibetan culture are also monitored and controlled by the Chinese government. It is however notable that it is acceptable to promote Tibetan culture if it is for commercial interests, such as in the tourism sector.

Then main challenge to culturally inclusive and quality education is a lack of motivation and commitment to creating a culturally diverse society with quality education. We therefore recommend, the formulation of a clear and legally consistent education policy that delivers culturally relevant education using mother-tongue language instruction. Such a policy should allocate funds to support textbook translation, bilingual teacher training, developing culturally and regionally defined curricula, and viable career pathways for Tibetan language graduates.

1. **Please provide information on how, in your country, the issue of respect for cultural diversity and the cultural rights of each person is reflected in school curricula (legislative, institutional and policy framework, and implementation)**

Although the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights[[1]](#footnote-1), it is notably selective in its application of these rights.

Cultural rights in China are indirectly recognized through language and freedom of religion rights, whereby non-Han nationalities theoretically enjoy the right to learn and use their native language and practice one of the official five religions of China.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite these legal protections, the government restricts specific cultural activities, which it perceives to be threatening the government’s authority. As a result, the government attempts to control the boundaries of acceptable culture.

In the school curricula, cultural rights are respected in so far as classes are either taught in Tibetan (usually at primary level) or offer one Tibetan-language class subject. In general, the curriculum aims to standardize education across China, and therefore does not adapt its contents to local cultural practices or norms.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, Tibetan language books are generally translations of Chinese textbooks and do not contain cultural references associated with Tibetan Buddhism as religious content is education materials is banned by the government. As described by Postioglione et al in his examination of nomad education in the Tibet Autonomous Region[[4]](#footnote-4):

“It is obvious that modern school education is not embraced by local people. This is a prevalent problem throughout Tibet. School courses diverge from Tibetan culture in modes of thinking, emotional expression, and value orientation, and they also include elements that do not exist in traditional culture, which makes school knowledge hard to understand and learn. For instance, in the textbook, there are sentences like “Guilin’s landscape is the greatest*.*” However, in the mind of Tibetan children, *great landscape* means holy mountains and sacred lakes. There are clear differences in the meaning of the concept *landscape*, and the textbook on this point is confusing and unacceptable for Tibetan children”.

1. **Please provide information on how, in your country, the issue of respect for cultural diversity and the cultural rights of each person is taken into account in the organization of the school system and schools (legislative, institutional and policy framework, and implementation)**

There is limited respect for cultural diversity and cultural rights in organization of the school system. Since the 1990s, the central government has sought to promote Chinese-medium instruction at all primary and secondary schools.

While respect for cultural diversity and the rights of each person was taken into account in the organization of the school system through recruitment of Tibetan teachers, this policy has changed when schools ended preferential recruitment practices that hired Tibetans for positions in majority Tibetan locations. For example since 2001, various governments in Tibetan areas have begun to end the job allocation system that guaranteed or preferenced local Tibetans for local government gobs and posts. The recruitment policy was replaced by a meritocratic Chinese language exam open to all citizens, which favored Han-Chinese graduates[[5]](#footnote-5)

In addition to these general trends, it must be noted that cases differ across the historical region of Tibet. For example, we have observed some schools where cultural rights have been respected, but this has been through the initiative of local teachers, administrators and officials who have enjoyed greater flexibility, and do not reflect regional or national policies.

1. **Please clarify to what extent the measures described above relate not only to the issue of languages in education (in this regard, please briefly explain the context and provide details on the State language policy), but also to the arts, heritage, science, history, values and religions, or world views and ways of life, in all their diversity.**

As mentioned earlier, Tibetan culture is predominantly reduced to language and religion. Both areas of Tibetan life are highly controlled and face serious homogenizing threats from the Han-dominant government bureaucracy and labour and consumer market.

In addition to language and religion, Tibetan culture is also characterized by its distinct arts, heritage, science, history, and values. However, these elements of Tibetan culture are not promoted in the education system. They are intentionally restricted so that government can cultivate a Han-centric cultural identity. This therefore results in a lack of culturally relevant learning materials and teaching techniques, which are needed for quality Tibetan language education.

The recent regulations on “ethnic unity and progress”, passed on January 11, 2020, in the Tibet Autonomous Region is an example of the state’s position on cultural difference. [[6]](#footnote-6) The regulations set controls on religious, socio-economic and educational activities. In sum, cultural differences should be reduced and Chinese culture should be treated as the center of all culture (Article 11), although cultural promotion for commercial purposes such as tourism is tolerated (Article 13).

1. **Please specify the specific and particular difficulties encountered in ensuring an inclusive and quality education that allows cultural diversity and the cultural rights of each person to flourish at the same time;**

The main challenge to ensuring inclusive and quality education that supports cultural diversity is the lack of a supportive and clear national policy on cultural diversity.

At the national level, there is no clear and consistent commitment to pursue culturally and linguistically relevant education policy.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is evidenced in the inconsistent laws that protect language and religious rights, as well as the introduction of the recent regulations on ethnic unity in the Tibet Autonomous Region. In the long-run, the lack of a clear and supportive national policy on cultural diversity has resulted in a lack of funding and support for bilingual teachers, and culturally informed curricula and Tibetan language resources; all of which has resulted in the gradual loss of Tibetan language and culture.

Subsequent challenges that precipitate from a lack of national commitment is an absence of a consultative culture. The lack of consultation with teachers, students and families in curricula design remains a major barrier to quality education delivery. Such consultations would facilitate the development of culturally and regionally relevant learning materials and teaching methodologies. For example, teaching programs could reflect the needs of students and teachers, the local cultural and environmental context, as well as local dialects.[[8]](#footnote-8) Learning materials could also include literature with references to Tibetan Buddhism, as Tibetan Buddhism is a carrier of Tibetan culture.

1. **Have specific mechanisms been established to consult and ensure the participation of stakeholders, in particular the populations concerned and parents, for a better understanding and effectiveness of the right to education, including its cultural dimension? What place is given in this context to the voice of children?**

It is questionable how much Tibetans or their representatives are involved in the direct design, implementation and evaluation of education programs and curricula in today’s China.

From the research conducted, no examples of established consultation mechanisms were found. While some of the research literature refers to cases of consultation in research projects[[9]](#footnote-9) or specially designed local projects, no evidence suggests consultation mechanisms were established or used by government officers.

The researcher Adrian Zenz describes an example of locally designed projects in Yushu, Qinghai. Zenz notes that some schools with ethnically minded headmasters have been actively seeking to Tibetanise their school environments by constructing new buildings that feature Tibetan-style architecture, putting up official posters of Communist heroes and western scientists with quotes in Tibetan language, and posting Tibetan motifs and translations of state slogans.[[10]](#footnote-10) Zenz also highlighted how one Yushu school replaced the nation-wide standardized daily morning exercise routine with traditional Tibetan dancing to ensure that the young generation grows up with a knowledge of ethnic dancing.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Zenz has also conducted research on Tibetan professors who have worked with students and teachers to develop new Tibetan language teaching materials.[[12]](#footnote-12) In sum, inclusion of Tibetan culture in teaching environments is notably absent from Tibetan schools led by Han or sinicised Tibetans.

1. **What recommendations should be provided to States and other stakeholders on these issues?**

Given so-called ‘minority’-language education increases enrolment rates and leads to higher educational performance, it serves the state’s goal to increase education indicators and development. With a view to improve educational performance and improve inter-ethnic harmony and the rights of Tibetans, we recommend the adoption of a clear and legally consistent education policy with respect to delivering culturally relevant teaching using mother tongue language instruction. To implement this policy, we recommend:

* Funding for the development and dissemination of Tibetan bilingual teacher training courses.
* Investing in the production of culturally relevant Tibetan textbooks for secondary and tertiary schooling subjects,
* Producing new translations of textbooks covering non-humanities subjects.
* Abolish bans on religious content and themes in Tibetan literature at schools.
* Include household involvement in the management and planning of schools and the development of school-based curriculum to increase the relevance of education to nomadic life.
* Improve bilingual education standards to facilitate transition from primary to secondary education, and develop vocational education and training programs that prepare youth for non-pastoral employment.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* Safeguard, in principle, guaranteed rights to enjoy one’s own culture, to profess and practice one’s own religion, and to use one’s own language, in private and in public.





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1. United Nations, 19 February 2020, ‘International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights’, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-3&chapter=4&clang=_en>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Articles 4, 36, 116, 119, 121 and 139 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China in the National People’s Congress Observer, 2018, ‘Constitution of the People’s Republic of China’, <https://npcobserver.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/PRC-Constitution-2018.pdf>, and Article 23 of the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law in Congressional-executive Commission on China, 14 February 2006, ‘Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People’s Republic of China (Chinese and English Text)’, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regional-ethnic-autonomy-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-amended>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eirini Gouleta, 2011, ‘A bilingual education professional development project for primary Tibetan teachers in China: the experience and lessons learned’, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, page 5-6, 9. See also Ma Rong, 2013, ‘The Process of Bilingual Education Development in the TAR since 1951’, in James Leibold and Yangbin Chen, (eds*.) Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*. Honk Kong University Press, page 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gerard Postioglione, Ben Jiao, Li Xiaoliang, and Tsamla, 2013, ‘Popularising Basic Education in Tibet’s Nomadic Regions’, in James Leibold and Yangbin Chen, (eds.) *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*. Honk Kong University Press, pages 124-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew M. Fischer, 2014, The Disempowered development of Tibet in China: A Study in the Economics of Marginalization, Lanham and Plymouth: Lexington Books. The policy was reinstated in 2011 by Chen Quanguo in the TAR. See Andrew M. Fischer and Adrian Zenz, 2017, ‘The Limits to Buying Stability in Tibet: Tibetan Representation and Preferentiality in China’s Contemporary Pubic Employment System’, The China Quarterly, Vol. 234, June Issue, pages 527-551. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 中国西藏新闻网 (Ch. Zhongguo Xizang xinwen wang, China Tibet News), 15 January 2020, ‘西藏自治区民族团结进步模范区创建条例’ (Ch. Xizang zizhiqu minzu tuanjie jinbu mofan qu chuangjian tiaoli, Regulations on the establishment of a model area for ethnic unity and progress in the Tibet Autonomous Region), <http://epaper.chinatibetnews.com/xzrb/202001/15/content_10887.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kelsang Wangdu, 2011, ‘China’s minority education policy with reference to Tibet’, *Tibetan* Review, June issue, page 19, page 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Op. Cit., Postioglione et al, 2013, pages 107-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Op. Cit., Gouleta, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Adrian Zenz, 2010, ‘Beyond Assimilation: The Tibetanisation of Tibetan Education in Qinghai’, *Inner Asia*, Vol. 12, page 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., Zenz, 2010, page 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., Zenz, 2010, pages 293-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Op. Cit., Postiglione et al, 2013, pages 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)