

Education in Tibet

DESPITE YEARS OF CHINESE GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT UNDER THE WESTERN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY, the vast majority of Tibetans in Tibet are disadvantaged both socially and economically by the inadequate provision of education. The investments poured into Tibetan areas by the Chinese government have in large part bypassed the fundamental importance of education, resulting in an illiteracy rate of over 45% among Tibetans, diminishing their ability to actively participate in their own society.

The first formal system of education developed in Tibet around the seventh century with the introduction of monasteries as an institutionalized form of religious education. In the early 20th century as part of educational reforms the first group of Tibetan students was sent abroad to England for schooling. Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, stipulations in the 1951 “17 Point Agreement” promised to develop Tibetan educational opportunities.

In the 60 years of Chinese rule in Tibet, few of these promises have come to fruition, and the gulf between educated Chinese living in Tibet and the urban and rural poor, has widened to a vast degree. On paper, the quantity of educational institutions has increased; as stated by The Tibet Statistical Yearbook, in 2005 the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) had 886 primary schools with 326,952 students enrolled and 110 regular secondary schools with 135,888 students. However, the quality of the education appears to offer little benefit to Tibetan children. According to the Chinese authorities’ own statistics, overall illiteracy in the TAR in 2005 was 45%—close to half of the population; this figure was up by slightly from 44% in 2004, indicating that the investment being poured into the TAR and other parts of Tibet is doing little, if anything, for basic education.

Chinese law stipulates that expenses must be shouldered by the lowest levels of government, which creates difficulties for poor counties that can rarely afford to pay for the construction and maintenance of a school. Despite official emphasis on the correlation between education and poverty reduction, education in the TAR has been consistently under-funded to the extent that overall illiteracy is 45%, compared with the illiteracy rate in neighboring

Sichuan province of just 6.4% in 2005 (See Andrew Fischer’s article “Perversities of Extreme Dependence and Unequal Growth in the TAR” available: www.tibetwatch.org). In fact, according to a 2003 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Education, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) spends only half the internationally recommended proportion of GDP on education—just 3% of GDP instead of 6% (see report by Special Rapporteur on Education, Katrina Tomaseveski, “The Right to Education,” UN doc no: E/CN.4/2004/45/Add.I, available www.ohchr.org). It is common for local governments to offload the responsibility to fund and construct schools on Tibetan parents who may lack the resources and skills to do so, resulting in unfinished or poorly built schools. Many of the existing schools are unable to pay for proper maintenance, supplies and salaries for the teachers.

Efforts by the Chinese government to provide nine year compulsory education for all Tibetan children have been unsuccessful. On average, Tibetans complete only 2.2 years of schooling whereas, according to a 2000 census, the rural Chinese average is 7.3 years of schooling and the urban Chinese average is 10.2 years (see <http://www.tibet.net/en/pdf/diirpub/environment/diir2007/chap-2.pdf>). The most common reason for the low levels of schooling among Tibetans is their inability to pay. Furthermore, parents’ fears that the Chinese-centric environment of the schools will cause their children to lose touch with their Tibetan culture have kept many children from completing their studies. The official language in most classrooms is Mandarin, which is not only difficult for Tibetan children to understand but is also another method the government exercises to assimilate the Tibetans in to Chinese culture. According to some estimates, 80% of Tibetans do not speak any Mandarin. (See ICT’s report “Tracking the Steel Dragon” available: www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/tracking-steel-dragon for more information on economic and social disparities in Tibetan and Chinese education.)

Discrimination towards Tibetan students is common and fees are often made up or more expensive for Tibetan families than their Chinese counterparts. Tibetan girls, because of their lower social status, are commonly deprived of an

education especially in rural areas where families often struggle to send even one child to school. Chinese authorities continue to view monastic education in the Tibetan tradition as backward, and thus attempt to regulate and limit the number of students pursuing these studies. In an effort to prevent younger children from receiving monastic education, authorities passed a law banning monks and nuns under the age of 18. (For more information on restrictions to monastic life, see ICT's report "The Communist Party as Living Buddha" <http://www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/communist-party-living-buddha>).

For the majority of Tibetans who do not speak fluent Chinese (the Tibetan and Chinese languages are fundamentally different) there remain few avenues for success in the Chinese-dominated economy. Employment is almost impossible to come by, with the influx of Chinese migrants arriving in Tibet from other Chinese provinces. Tibetan

parents often decide to send their children to India, where they can receive an education and practice their culture freely. However, in July 2008, the Tibet Autonomous Region Party Committee Discipline Department issued measures which state that children who return from schools in exile and parents working for the government or members of the Communist Party who fail to bring children back to Tibet could face unspecified 'disciplinary action.' (See ICT's report "Tibetan Children due to face forced confessions, punishment for studying in India" <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/tibetan-children-due-face-forced-confessions-punishment-studying-india>.)

ICT recommends the Chinese government direct greater investment into developing the Tibetan education system and that authorities engage with Tibetan stakeholders in creating a curriculum culturally and socially appropriate for Tibetans.