



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Ngaba highlights erosion of Tibetan language instruction

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A cursory glance at China's laws and policies gives the impression that people are free to speak and learn in languages other than the national language of Mandarin. But a closer look reveals how China's education policies in Tibet are forcing Tibetan children to assimilate and risking the survival of their mother tongue.

Although China's bilingual education policy states schools in Tibet should use both Mandarin and Tibetan as the medium of instruction, in recent decades the practice of bilingual education has changed to impose Mandarin as the dominant language. In many places Tibetan is taught only as a language class. This not only violates the spirit of China's regional ethnic autonomy laws, but also undermines Tibet's rich heritage of linguistic diversity.

In Tibetan areas, including the officially designated Tibet Autonomous Region, Mandarin has already become the medium of instruction in 95% of schools, including at the kindergarten level, according Human Rights Watch's China's 'Bilingual Education' Policy in Tibet report. Considering the overall trend in erosion of Tibetan language and the current development in the Tibetan region of Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), it seems the Chinese authorities aim to convert the medium of instruction to Mandarin in the remaining schools in the TAR and Tibetan areas outside the TAR, where Tibetan is still the medium of instruction in some areas.

In recent years Tibetans have resisted the prioritization of Mandarin as the medium of instruction by petitioning the government and staging public demonstrations.

In this report, we compile information about recent developments in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, and the Tibetans' sentiments concerning the planned change in medium of instruction. We include a heartfelt request by a Tibetan educator in the region about the effect of imposing Mandarin as the medium of instruction.

Mandarin as medium of instruction in Ngaba schools

In recent weeks, even as the coronavirus outbreak in Ngaba area showed some signs of improving, Tibetans in the region were shocked to learn about the phasing out of Tibetan as the language of instruction from their primary and middle schools in favor of Mandarin.

When schools reopened for the academic session in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, Radio Free Asia reported that the parents learned, through announcements during meetings, of an impending change in the language of instruction for the primary and middle schools in Ngaba in which Tibetan will no longer be the medium of instruction. According to RFA's sources this change may come possibly as early as fall 2020 or the next academic year.

Although official documentation regarding the change is yet to be seen, Tibetans in Ngaba presumably perceive announcements by school administrators as authoritative, considering past experiences and the current trend of phasing out Tibetan as a language of instruction in many Tibetan areas.

Trend against Tibetan language

ICT has observed a marked shift from Tibetan-medium education to Mandarin-medium education since the 1990s. The policy stance was officially strengthened in 2010 and 2016. Both the National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) and the 13th Five Year Development Plan for National Language Works (2016-2020) aim to further promote and entrench Mandarin against minority languages.

Beginning in 2014 China adopted a new policy to deepen its control over ethnic communities. In order to achieve the goal of “national unity” and “national stability” in China, the Chinese Communist Party launched a policy to promote ethnic communities to identify themselves with “Chinese culture.” This policy was confirmed during the 19th Party Congress in 2017, according to HRW. Sinologist Jessica Batke in her analysis of the 19th Party Congress wrote that “PRC’s perceived security needs have finally trumped the CCP’s historical attachment to the idea that it supports and represents all the country’s ethnic groups equally.”

With no real protection for “minority” languages in the education law, constitution, Chinese language law, regional ethnic autonomy law or 2010 Ten-Year Education Plan, Tibetan areas, which once enjoyed relative linguistic freedom, are now gradually transitioning toward a model in which Mandarin is the medium of instruction. Officials refer to this policy as Model 2, whereas Model 1 requires Tibetan as the medium of instruction. According to a teacher in Khyungchu (Chinese: Hongyuan) county in Ngaba, there are 41,137 students in primary and middle schools in Ngaba, and more than 70% of them are currently taught under Model 1.

The People’s Congress of Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture passed a regulation in late 2017 concerning Tibetan language education. The regulation came into force on Sept. 1, 2018 after being passed during the 5th session of the 13th Sichuan People’s Congress on July 26 of that year. Article 8 in the regulation states that “...the national language and Tibetan are to be the basic languages of instruction ... in primary and middle schools in Tibetan-populated areas.” However, Human Rights Watch’s “China’s ‘Bilingual Education’ Policy in Tibet” report points out that Sichuan provincial officials “appear to be emphasizing the Chinese-language dimension of bilingual education.” Since Ngaba Prefecture is part of Sichuan Province, it is anticipated that Mandarin will become the dominant language in Ngaba schools.

Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture consists of 12 counties and 1 municipality with a total population of 914,106, according to 2015 statistics. Per the prefecture government, Tibetans are a majority in the prefecture, accounting for 58.1% of the population followed by Chinese (20.6%), Qiang (18.6%), Hui (3.2%) and other ethnic groups (0.2%).

Resentment from Tibetans

The current conversation over the introduction of Mandarin as the language of instruction has taken place in the form of petitions submitted during CPPCC meetings and on state-permitted social media portals such as WeChat. The planned change in medium of instruction drove many local Tibetans in Ngaba to come together and voice their fears and concerns over the fate of Tibetan language instruction. Intellectuals, teachers, parents and public representatives expressed their thoughts and fears mainly in the form of petitions, critiques and posts in a state-permitted social media portal.

Voice of America noted there were at least 40 posts on social media as of April 17. Tibetan arguments for the continuation of Tibetan as a language of instruction point to the provisions in China’s laws regarding minority languages; the Tibetan language’s place as the bedrock of Tibetan identity religion and culture; Tibetan children facing a disadvantage for higher education if taught in Chinese’ and the need for effective education in one’s native language.

Although the criticisms have not escalated into mass protests, as was the case in other parts of Tibet’s Amdo region after similar changes were introduced in 2010 and 2012, similar concerns about China’s apparent interest in reducing the use of the Tibetan language fueled both movements. In response to these concerns,

Chinese authorities have censored some of the social media posts, and the Tibetan members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) have been ordered to discuss their opinions with higher-ranking authorities rather than expressing it on the internet, according to the Tibet Times.

A summary of Tibetans' criticism of the proposed policy change is below:

- Arguing for the continuation of Tibetan as a language of instruction, the Tibet Times highlights an intellectual and teacher writing under the online alias "Triangle," who points out that Tibetan students in Khyungchu county who receive education with Mandarin as the language of instruction have better Chinese skills than students from nomadic families. However, these students do not go far in their higher education. Tibetan students, numbering around 60 or 70 students, receiving education in their mother tongue outcompete their peers and graduate into higher levels. He also points out that under Ngaba Prefecture, Khyungchu, Ngaba and Dzoge (Chinese: Ruo'ergai) counties currently have Tibetan as a language of instruction in their schools. In Dzamthang (Ch: Rangtang) and Sungchu (Ch: Songpan), most schools have Mandarin as the language of instruction.
- Zoega Thadrol wrote that it is an undisputed fact in pedagogy that education should be primarily in one's native language. It is also an inherent human right, and nobody should have the power to take away that right.
- A CPPCC member from Khyungchu county writing under the online alias "Illumination of Time" (see image) on April 15 stated that he and others in the CPPCC from education and health professions dissented from the planned change in language of instruction during their CPPCC meeting. They were ordered to raise the issue with higher authorities and not to discuss it on the internet. As a CPPCC member, the writer promised to raise the issue wherever necessary without hesitation as per the hopes and opinions of the local public.
- In the wake of a ban on the expression of opinions on the internet, CPPCC members and teachers in Tsaruma village in Khyungchu county petitioned government officials on April 20, appealing against the planned change in language of instruction. Their petition expresses concern over the children of Tibetan herder families facing a disadvantage in getting higher education and a discontinuity in their ancestral traditions if they are taught in Chinese as the language of instruction.
- In a five-point critique, a Tibetan with the online alias "Path of the Light" argues that a change in language of instruction is not simply about the change of medium of instruction. It will impact Tibetan traditions, religious belief, way of life and heritage, thus rendering the new generation of Tibetans "neither Tibetan nor Chinese."
- On April 11, an intellectual commentator identifying himself as an ordinary teacher and a parent in Khyungchu county wrote a critique remarkable in its scope and analysis of the planned imposition of Mandarin as a medium of instruction in Ngaba schools.

The critique is translated into English by ICT and shared below:

Please Respect the Constitutional Rights of Citizens

Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right to criticize and make suggestions regarding any State organ or functionary (Article 41 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China).

Article 4 All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The State protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities (Article 4 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China).

Recently teachers, parents, and people from all walks of life have been talking about whether “Teaching Model 2” will be implemented in the next school year. Some people say that this is impossible, because the Constitution and relevant laws provide that all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own languages. Others say that if “Teaching Model 2” is implemented, ethnic education in our prefecture will definitely go backwards for decades. Some other people say that “Teaching Model 2” has been implemented before, but practice has proved to be impractical, and it was given up in order to implement “Teaching Model 1,” and ethnic education can't bear this kind of shifting and changing any more. There are also people who say that the implementation of the “Teaching Model 2” will ruin the future of future generations of herdsmen, and it will lead to public grievances and endanger social stability.

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Article 4 of Chapter 1 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Amended in 2004) stipulates “that all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages.” This freedom is a freedom granted by the Constitution. Obviously, since it is the freedom granted by the Constitution, it is protected by the Constitution and no organization or individual can violate it. Article 5 of the Constitution stipulates, “The People's Republic of China practices ruling the country in accordance with the law and building a socialist country of law.” What is the rule of law? The rule of law is opposed to the rule of man. The rule of law is ruled by the law. The rule of law means that the government must not force individuals unless it implements well-known rules, which means that everyone should obey the law and be governed by the law. The main function of the rule of law is to restrain arbitrary power. What is the ultimate value of the rule of law? It fully guarantees the freedom and rights granted to every citizen by the Constitution. In accordance with the spirit of the rule of law, any words and deeds by officials that do not conform to the provisions of the Constitution are illegal and invalid.

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What freedom is deprived by the implementation of “Teaching Model 2”? That is, the freedom to learn other subjects in Tibetan language and script is deprived. At present, there are 41,137 students in general bilingual primary and middle schools in Ngaba Prefecture, and more than 70% of the students are in “Teaching Model 1” classes. This means that “Teaching Model 1” is the most beneficial and loved teaching Model by parents and students in our prefecture. The reason for that is simple: because the mother tongue education is the best tool for learning and imparting knowledge. This is a law of nature, and basic common sense. History has proven that any practice that violates the law will surely fail. A few years ago, the prefecture introduced the advanced teaching method of “learning before teaching, training in the classroom.” In our schools with “Teaching Model 1” learning and using advanced teaching methods of China became a big fashion. It needs adequate time to learn, adapt and master an advanced teaching method; two or three years are not enough. It is sure that in the future, the development of “Teaching Model 1” will go to a higher level, and more parents will therefore choose schools of “Teaching Model 1”. Chinese is the lingua franca of China, and every Chinese citizen has the obligation to learn. However, this obligation should not be the reason for infringing on various ethnic groups because they use their own languages to learn and impart knowledge on mathematics, physics, chemistry, politics, history, and geography. These two, rights and obligations, should coexist in harmony.

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Both theory and practice have fully proved that the educational quality of “Teaching Model 1” is far better than that of “Teaching Model 2.” For the implementation of “Teaching Model 2,” there is no theoretical basis, no proof of practice, nor is it consistent with the spirit of the Constitution, and there is no adequate social foundation. Why should we implement “Teaching Model 2”?

Some people say that there is a certain gap between the teaching quality of schools of “Teaching Model 1” and that of non-bilingual general schools. This is a fact and cannot be denied. But can this be compared? Ethnic minority education in our prefecture started late, and it has only been a course of a few decades. During this period, it has switched teaching Models several times, which seriously affected the normal development (of “Teaching Model 1”). It is now at the stage of steady development, like a small tree which is

just growing up. Non-bilingual general schools are like big trees stretching into the sky. Therefore, it is obviously unfair to compare the two with each other. There is still some left, how did this gap between ("Teaching Model 1" bilingual schools and non-bilingual general schools) arise? So far, I have not seen any comprehensive, objective and scientific research works in this regard.

There are also some people who say that those talents cultivated by "Teaching Model 1" are weak in the talent market and have poor working ability, and they are even not able to write a qualified application. I do not deny that there is no such extremely rare phenomenon, but this is not the key problem. Here, we need to pay attention to several important issues. First, most of the ethnic Tibetan cadres and staff in the four grassland counties of our prefecture were trained in "Teaching Model 1". The achievements of the economic and social development in our four grassland counties are obvious to everyone. If you want to know the facts, you can just see them from the successive governmental work reports. Think of this earth-shaking change and development, a vast number of people who "can't even write a qualified application" could not do it. Secondly, the underlying issue involved is the question whichever coming first

between equality and efficiency. Pursuing test-taking efficiency blindly will definitely undermine language equality and educational fairness, and it will cause more trouble. These days, there are many countries where ethnic conflicts are caused by language problems. A few years ago, in Qinghai Province, because of the "Red-Headed Document" issued by the provincial government to convert "Teaching Model 1" into "Teaching Model 2", a large-scale student protest was carried in Tsoho Prefecture. Ethnic equality is the fundamental principle of the party and the State in solving ethnic issues; anything that undermines ethnic equality is unpopular. Moreover, equality is the core value of socialism and cannot be questioned or shaken. Third, can "Teaching Model 2" improve teaching quality and educational efficiency? The answer is "No! It can't." Why? Because the mother tongue is the best tool for learning and imparting knowledge. If there are certain difficulties in learning mathematics, physics, chemistry, politics and history in the mother tongue, it is even more difficult to learn these subjects with less-skilled Chinese as a second language and quality of the teaching can be imagined. Fourth, if "Teaching Model 2" is implemented, the predictable result is that the Tibetan language will eventually "die" in the historical museum, because schools are the most important places to teach, use, promote and develop languages. Once a language cannot take its root in the school, it cannot survive in the real world for so long. Then, no one has understood or studied the vast history, culture, and religious works in the Tibetan language. The well-known and profound Tibetan culture cannot be carried forward. This is not only a huge and irreparable loss of Chinese culture, but also a loss of human civilization. In the end, this people called Tibetans, who with a long history and excellent cultural traditions, will disappear from the earth. According to the theory of Chinese ethnic theory, the "Chinese nation" is composed of 56 ethnic groups. If ethnic minorities are assimilated one by one and the culture of ethnic minorities disappears, will the "Chinese nation" still exist?

Whether or not to implement "Teaching Model 2" is on the surface a matter of choosing a medium of instruction. However, it involves bigger and more important issues, that is the survival and development of ethnic languages, the vital interests of the majority people of the ethnic group, and the future of the survival of a people. Therefore, if this issue is not handled properly, it may cause an irrecoverable situation and lead to an irreparable mistake. Who can afford this responsibility?

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The implementation of the "Teaching Model 2" not only has political risks, but it's also unreasonable, irrational, and unconstitutional.

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Since around 2010, in our prefecture's four grassland counties, local monks, intellectuals, and herdsmen have voluntarily organized and carried out extensive and continuous activities to eliminate Tibetan illiteracy. Many of the herdsmen who joined the literacy programs are not young, and even 60 to 70-year-old people have voluntarily participated and successfully completed the course. What does this show to the world? This shows that the Tibetan people in our prefecture have a strong desire to learn reading and writing in their own language. This also explains why so many parents and students choose the "Teaching Model 2" schools. It also shows that the study, use, and promotion of Tibetan language have a solid social foundation as well.

Members of any nationality have strong and deep feelings for the culture of their own, and at the same time, they will also strive to protect their culture through various legal

channels. This is reasonable and legal. The use and development of the spoken and written language of one's mother tongue is the freedom and rights granted to each citizen by the Constitution. The 2004 Constitution Amendment clearly stipulates: "The state respects and protects human rights". In the Constitution, "human rights" has been written in black ink on the white paper clearly. Then why are freedom and rights of use and development of the spoken and written language of one's mother tongue still not fully guaranteed? Right now many teachers, parents, intellectuals, and people from all walks of life in our prefecture and beyond, as well as our province and beyond, are discussing online whether our prefecture should implement "Teaching Model 2," and voices against implementation of it can be heard from everywhere. The most widely used bases are terms are the relevant provisions of the Constitution and laws. People are legally demanding the protection of the freedoms and rights granted by the Constitution, and that means they trust the people's government. Once people lose trust in the government, the consequences will very serious.

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Article 20 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy states: "If a resolution, decision, order or instruction of a State organ at a higher level does not suit the conditions in a national autonomous area, the organ of self-government of the area may either implement it with certain alterations or cease implementing it after reporting to and receiving the approval of the State organ at a higher level; the said State organ shall give a reply within 60 days from the date of receipt of the report." Both the theory and practice have fully proved that the implementation of "Teaching Model 2" is not suitable for the actual situation in our prefecture. As an autonomous prefecture of an ethnic minority area, and according to the provisions of the Autonomy Law, it is entirely suitable for us to file applications and explanations not to implement "Teaching Model 2."

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The above is written by me as an ordinary teacher and a parent. I sincerely urge the relevant leaders give it a serious consideration!

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