

The Efforts by the Tibetan Diaspora to Preserve its Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

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Thank you, Chairman, for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. I will primarily focus on the current status of the Tibetan language and culture, as well as the efforts by the Tibetan Diaspora to preserve its linguistic and cultural heritage.

For over sixty years, the Tibetan people have effectively preserved our rich heritage in dire circumstances and conditions, thanks to the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration, with the unwavering support of the Indian, US governments and other governmental and non-governmental organizations and individuals throughout the world. As a Tibetan I want to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the United States Congress and the Administration for your continued support to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership. I have directly seen the positive impact of your support to our community.

Tibetan language and culture have been facing significant challenges both within Tibet and among the Tibetan diaspora. In Tibet, the policy of cultural assimilation of Tibetans by the Chinese Government is systematically undermining Tibetan language and cultural identity. Enforcing Mandarin as the primary language of instruction in schools is one case in point, even in those ostensibly offering bilingual education¹. Furthermore, an estimated 80% of Tibetan children are placed in state-run boarding schools where Mandarin is prioritized, effectively severing ties with their cultural heritage²³. The recent closure of Tibetan-centric schools, like Ragya Gangjong Sherig Norbuling⁴, and the relocation of students to state-sanctioned institutions further erode the prominence of the Tibetan language⁵. The situation is worsened by legal and

¹ U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China. 2021. *Tibet: Findings and Recommendations*. Washington, DC: Congressional-Executive Commission on China. <https://www.cecc.gov/sites/evo-subsites/cecc.house.gov/files/documents/TIBET%20UPDATED%201221.pdf>.

² Dolma, K. (2022, September 20). Tibetans fight to keep their language alive. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/20/tibetan-language-education-china-diaspora/>

³ Human Rights Watch. 2020. "China's 'Bilingual Education' Policy in Tibet: Tibetan-Medium Schooling Under Threat." Human Rights Watch, March 5. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/03/05/chinas-bilingual-education-policy-tibet/tibetan-medium-schooling-under-threat>

⁴ Free Tibet. 2023. "Another Top Tibetan School Forced to Shut." Free Tibet, April 12. <https://freetibet.org/latest/another-top-tibetan-school-forced-to-shut/>.

⁵ <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-118jhrhg51694/html/CHRG-118jhrhg51694.htm>

policy restrictions that penalize individuals advocating for Tibetan language rights, with advocates facing imprisonment for promoting their native language education.

The Tibetan diaspora, scattered across the globe, faces significant hurdles in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage. In addition to competing demands of modern life, many young Tibetans, born and raised outside of the communities in exile established for Tibetans, lack regular exposure to their native language, hindering their ability to learn and appreciate it. Limited post-education opportunities as well as opportunities for higher education in Tibetan further compel them to rely on other languages, increasing the distance from their cultural roots. Furthermore, the diminishing population exacerbates the issue. While community-led initiatives like Tibetan language schools and online resources strive to bridge this gap, they are often hampered by insufficient funding and resources. This struggle to preserve Tibetan identity is exacerbated by the ongoing suppression of our language and culture within Tibet itself, where repressive policies threaten the continuity of traditions and contribute to broader cultural disintegration.

Despite these challenges, the Tibetan exile community has shown remarkable resilience and creativity in preserving our linguistic heritage. Tibetan schools in India and Nepal emphasize Tibetan language education as a core part of their curriculum. Cultural institutions and monasteries continue to pass down traditional knowledge and practices. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) has also implemented policies aimed at promoting the use of the Tibetan language in official and educational settings including the critical need of nurturing and sustaining compact Tibetan communities.

However, there remains a critical need for strategic, comprehensive and modern Tibetan language tools that can support education, cultural preservation, and global engagement. This is where the work of Monlam organization becomes crucial.

Since its founding, the Monlam organization has been at the forefront of leveraging technology to safeguard the Tibetan language. As the founder, I have personally dedicated my efforts to creating a suite of linguistic tools and resources that serve both traditional scholars and the wider Tibetan community. One of our landmark projects, the Grand Tibetan Dictionary, is the most extensive Tibetan dictionary ever compiled. It brings together classical texts, regional dialects, and contemporary usage, providing an authoritative resource that supports language learning, academic research, and linguistic standardization.

The Monlam Grand Tibetan Dictionary project showcases the extensive collaboration within the Tibetan diaspora to preserve and promote the Tibetan language. This initiative, which is not feasible for an individual or a small group, has successfully mobilized over 200 editors from various backgrounds, including editorial groups in monasteries and community organizations. This collaborative effort highlights the unity and commitment of Tibetans from different schools and walks of life in safeguarding their linguistic heritage. The creation of the Monlam Grand Tibetan Dictionary stands as a testament to the capabilities of the Tibetan community in exile. The dictionary not only serves as a linguistic resource but also symbolizes the resilience of Tibetan culture amidst ongoing challenges posed by external forces. By fostering such

collaborative projects, the Tibetan diaspora demonstrates its potential to effectively preserve its language and cultural identity for future generations.

The forthcoming USAID-led Tibetan Digital Library Project builds upon such a collaborative foundation, aiming to digitize and archive a vast array of Tibetan texts and manuscripts by working together with more than 60 monasteries and cultural institutions around India and Nepal. This project is spearheaded by the Central Tibetan Administration. It is designed to be a dynamic, accessible digital platform that will allow students, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts worldwide to access Tibetan literature and historical documents that were previously confined to private collections or monasteries. During the initial year-2024, we visited more than 20 monasteries, cataloging and digitizing thousands of resources. Our ongoing efforts also aim to advance the field of Tibetan library science.

In the realm of digital innovation, Monlam alone has created 42 Tibetan software applications, encompassing sophisticated tools like fonts, optical character recognition (OCR), machine translation systems, and AI-driven language models. These groundbreaking technologies have achieved remarkable success, garnering over millions of usages and effectively bridging linguistic and technological barriers within Tibet and the global diaspora. The AI-powered tools, which include advanced capabilities such as Tibetan-to-English translation, text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and OCR technologies, are instrumental in making Tibetan literature and resources more accessible and preserving the linguistic heritage on a global scale.

Looking ahead, the Monlam organization has an ambitious vision for the future. We are actively developing a foundational Tibetan/Culture-focused Large Language Model (LLM). This initiative aims to create an AI model trained extensively on Tibetan texts, enabling advanced linguistic tools for translation, educational applications, and digital preservation. Our LLM project is expected to play a transformative role in enhancing the accessibility and usability of Tibetan language resources in the digital age.

As part of our commitment to education and ethical AI development, we are exploring the creation of an AI model based on His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama. This model could be used to develop educational resources, promote conflict resolution, and foster ethical decision-making in AI systems.

In addition to technological advancements, we are committed to integrating the richness of Tibetan cultural knowledge into modern education. We believe that the future of Tibetan language preservation lies in making it relevant to today's learners. To this end, we are developing modern academic subjects in the Tibetan language, focusing on areas such as science, technology, and social studies, while incorporating Tibetan cultural perspectives. This will empower Tibetan students to learn about contemporary topics without losing connection to their linguistic and cultural roots.

Finally, we envision a transformation of modern education with a deeper influence of Tibetan culture and values. By incorporating Tibetan philosophical teachings and ethical principles into the curriculum, we aim to provide a holistic educational experience that is grounded in our rich heritage.

The preservation of Tibetan language and culture transcends historical artifact conservation, representing a profound declaration of resilience and identity that aims to ensure the survival of a living tradition with valuable contributions to global cultural diversity. Through collaborative efforts, innovative technologies, and unwavering determination, the Tibetan diaspora is bridging traditional preservation methods with modern digital capabilities, striving to safeguard their heritage in the face of systemic repression. By engaging technological innovation and community-driven initiatives, this mission seeks to empower marginalized communities and highlight the importance of cultural preservation, ultimately working towards a more inclusive and culturally diverse future that respects and celebrates the depth and significance of Tibetan linguistic and cultural traditions.

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