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Schooling for knowledge and cultural survival: Tibetan community schools in nomadic herding areas

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For children of Tibetan nomadic (*drokpa*) families, it is often a struggle to attend school. The long distance from home to school, irrelevance of school learning to daily life and available jobs after graduation contribute to the choice by some parents to keep their children at home for domestic work. Although some parents consider schooling in its present form a waste of time, it is nevertheless acknowledged that proficiency in Chinese and basic knowledge gained from schooling are probably essential if employment is to be sought outside the pastoral community. This case study introduces three primary community schools in the herding areas of Qinghai and Sichuan. In addition to Chinese, these schools teach Tibetan, and take traditional beliefs and cultural values into account. It is argued that recognizing rural life in remote, high-altitude herding areas is under transition and has made Tibetan parents more open towards schooling, in particular if their children have the possibility to attend a local community school.

Keywords: cultural education; institutional schooling; bilingualism; community engagement; ethnic identity

Introduction

The last decade has seen the mushrooming of numerous community run primary schools for Tibetan children in parts of the rural areas in Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, former parts of Amdo (*smad mdo*) and Kham (*kham*). Such schools differ from the regular primary school run by the local education departments in that they are organized by the village community or a local lama, who raises funds in cooperation with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) collaborating with local NGOs. Under Chinese law, these schools are known as *minban* or people-run schools. Sometimes donors choose to support the building or running of existing public schools. Based on field trips to Sichuan and Qinghai in 2004 and 2005, this study aims to provide a brief introduction to the general development of Tibetan community primary schools for Tibetan children living in high-altitude herding areas.¹ Attitudes and expectations to schooling, boarding schools and bilingualism are not always consistent among parents from different rural and urban areas. However, this paper deals specifically with Tibetans settled in high altitude herding areas. Throughout this paper I focus

upon two selected primary schools in Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in Sichuan province and one school in Malho (Ch. Huangnan) TAP in Qinghai province.² The paper explores the significance of these schools for the education of children of Tibetan nomadic families and provides a more nuanced understanding of why Tibetan community schools appear more attractive to Tibetan parents than regular government run schools. This includes an examination of the views of parents about how schooling should take place, and what distinguishes community run schools from government run schools. The paper also points to how these community school help children to become bilingually proficient, in spite of a lack of such proficiency among most of their parents, and the manner in which interactions between parents, school teachers and local education affect the way that schooling takes place. First, I will provide a brief background about education in traditional nomadic communities, in China [People's Republic of China (PRC)].³ Second, the paper provides an introduction of selected nomadic schools in high altitude Tibetan communities. Then, I will consider the role of language use, and how local values are conveyed. The impact of bilingualism is outlined, as Tibetan children living in rural areas usually only speak their mother tongue when starting school. I will also discuss how parents are questioning the values of schooling, although they acknowledge that rural life is under transition, and that their children therefore need to find other ways for livelihood. Finally, I will mention the increasing commoditization, and how Tibetan children from a farmer and nomadic background in general have no ambition in following in the footsteps of their parents – an aim towards which schooling is a necessity. Based on these three cases, the paper points to a tendency towards public schools to some extent have been unsuccessful in popularizing schools in poor nomadic communities, while community-run schools have stepped in and are preferred by parents because they better harmonize with values of the Tibetan community than government schools.

The content of education

Traditional nomadic education

At the middle of the twentieth century, organized formal education in Tibet took place mainly in Buddhist monasteries and the few secular schools that existed were located in towns (cf. Bangsbo 2008). The absence of formal education and teaching in reading skills in the rural herding areas becomes apparent from the extensive ethnographic account by Lobsang Gelek, in which he describes traditional life amongst Tibetan pastoral nomads (Lobsang Gelek 2002).⁴ The Tibetan lama Namkhai Norbu, who travelled in the nomadic areas in Dzachuka region in the 1950s, describes the basic education for nomads to be the Buddhist doctrine, with studies not debarred to laymen. However, it was generally perceived that literacy skills were only for monks, and women were usually not taught to read or write unless they were to become nuns. There was no system of public education in the nomad society, but children could be entrusted to a monk or lama for instruction in reading and writing. Children learned crafts and other domestic skills through observation and working alongside their parents. Young women learned all necessary domestic skills, how to milk and tend the livestock, skills in which they gradually became expert (Namkhai Norbu 1997, 4: 30–32).

Increasing opportunities to attend school have especially provided a gateway to knowledge for girls who traditionally had no other choice than to look after their family and livestock (cf. Lu Mei 2002, Seeberg 2006). Studies of pastoral communities in Amdo show that the main reason for keeping children out of school is a need for labour in the household. It is often the girls who are kept at home, and most of the women among the pastoral herders are illiterate (Lu Mei 2002, 25). As parents grow older they often keep one of the children with them. For the continuation of the household a son might be the best choice for parents, yet female labour is highly valued. Besides childbirth, their main tasks are still the traditional household duties such as milking, cooking, collecting yak dung for fuel, fetching water and so on. It is often a daughter who is chosen to remain in the household after marriage, as she will normally be regarded as the most likely to take good care of her parents in their old age (Lobsang Gelek and Hai Miao 2002, 50; Lu Mei 2002, 14). These studies confirm theories that learning is not just confined to institutional surroundings, but also takes place in many other locations, in particular in the cultural environment at home (Levinson and Holland 1996). Overall there is very little published material available on education for Tibetan nomads. A recent publication on the education of nomadic peoples in different parts of the world does not include studies of Tibetan nomads (Dyer 2006).

Contemporary schooling

It was not until 1986 that nine years of schooling became compulsory in China (PRC). The last decades show a remarkable increase in the level of primary and middle school attendance in China.⁵ Expanded enrolment, increased graduation rates, lower rates of dropout and repetition, and increased resources per student have occurred since 1986 (MOE 2004). Thus, China claims it will fulfil the Millennium Development Goals of providing basic education for all by 2015 (UNDP 2005). China has an ambitious goal “to improve the overall quality of the whole basic education sector”. However, many scholars question the extent to which this has been achieved (Wang and Zhou 2002; Fischer 2005). Even with a better-educated teaching force, instruction in most schools is examination oriented. Authorities recognize the need to educate students to innovate and be problem solvers. The most obvious solution is that schools teach critical and analytical methods of thinking. Thus, recent reforms and research on schooling in China has suggested measuring the academic accomplishments and exam results of schools in a “softer” style, in the form of the students’ capability for independent and analytical thinking (Thøgersen 2000, 5).

Although attainments for primary and secondary schooling have greatly improved, still the enrolment rates for Tibetan primary schools lag far behind most other parts of China. In general, there is a great disparity in economic development and educational attainments between urban and rural areas and between eastern and western provinces.⁶ About 85% of the Tibetans live in rural areas where job opportunities in non-farm or non-pastoral labour are scarce. A large part of the adult Tibetan population is illiterate and many Tibetan children do not attend school. Without adequate education, the majority of Tibetans will be marginalized and excluded from the benefits of modernization and economic development in China.

Local rural Tibetan schools

It is common for Tibetan children from rural herding areas to attend public boarding schools in towns. The construction of roads has improved access to formerly inaccessible areas and made it easier for children to make relatively frequent trips home, provided the schools have a flexible schedule. Parents usually accept that their children attend far located middle school as boarding students. Most parents are, however, often reluctant to send their small children, and especially their daughters, to a primary boarding school far from home. Owing to geographical difficulties in attending school, numerous local communities have established small primary schools located nearby. These schools are often initiated by a local Buddhist lama, who may be partly settled abroad, but actively engaged in the welfare of his home community. Such lamas are sometimes members of the local Community Committee, thereby having some influence in local decision-making and also providing a bridge between locals and officials.

There follows a presentation of two such primary schools, both founded by Tibetan Buddhist lamas (*sprulku*), of which one Tibetan tulku is an elected member of the county religious committee. Funding for the schools is raised mainly through the lamas' respective charity organizations based in western countries. Both schools are located in the Dzachuka nomadic herding areas, Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) TAP in the north-western part of Sichuan province. Traditionally, Tibetan nomads in this area rely on animal husbandry and breeding a livestock of yaks, sheep and horses. No agriculture is possible at these altitudes of 3800 to 4500 metres. Here the temperatures in winter range from freezing point to minus 30 degrees Celsius and during the summer sudden extreme temperature changes can produce occasional hailstorms, which within an hour can turn the entire landscape white. Nomads can earn a cash income mainly through livestock processing and trade. An income of increasing importance to most households is generated by the annual task of gathering Caterpillar Fungus mushrooms (tib. *Yartsa Gunbu*).⁷ The local nomad schools are therefore closed for a month during mid-May to mid-June, enabling children to assist their parents in gathering the mushrooms. Gathering mushrooms is not a picnic excursion, but hard and strenuous work, and both adults and children return from the hills red-eyed and exhausted. Unlike most public schools, the nomad schools are open during the summer and closed during the winter, from the 12th Tibetan month until the third Tibetan month (approximately January to mid-April). Contrary to the high dropout rates at the public primary schools, teachers and parents state the retention rates at the nomad schools are high.

The Sershul primary school is located in a hamlet with several hundred inhabitants and a few monasteries, at an altitude of 4300 metres.⁸ The school is only accessible by jeep, motorbike or, more commonly, horseback. The school was established in 2001 by initiative from a locally settled Tibetan lama, and its students are aged between 7 and 14 years (21 boys and 11 girls) of which 18 are boarding students (in 2005). Attendance is free, but parents and relatives regularly donate milk, butter and occasionally yak dung for fuel during the winter. The children are first in their families to have attended school, although it is not uncommon for their parents to be literate in Buddhist terminology. At the time of my fieldwork the school had three overlapping classes with plans to add one class yearly expanding it to cover the sixth grade, after which the children can continue to middle school in the nearby town, provided they pass the entrance exam in Chinese.⁹ There are public primary schools located at the nearby town, but with no boarding making it difficult for rural Tibetan children to enrol unless they have relatives in the town.

Being a community school the Sershul schools are granted more autonomy and may recruit their own teachers. All schools in China are obliged to follow national educational policies. As an ethnic minority, Tibetans are permitted to localize as much as 20% of the curriculum of their regional schools. The school teachers included casual talk on local issues during class, but otherwise followed curriculum material published by the Ministry of Education by the Five Province Tibet Publishing Group. The staff includes a devoted, but formally uneducated head teacher with several years of teaching experience from employment at the primary school in the nearby town. The head teacher teaches Chinese and mathematics, some of the most important subjects at the primary level. She is fluent in Chinese and speaks the local Tibetan dialect, which is important since Tibetan is the main language spoken in this area, and that most local people speak no or very poor Chinese. This fact also contributes to the aspiration for the parents that their children attend school and learn Chinese. The successful functioning of the school owes much to the head teacher, who seems to be on very good terms with the children, their parents, as well as local officials, and the local NGO supporting the school. A young volunteer student teaches Tibetan (language) while a monk teaches Buddhism, i.e. mainly teaching recitations of prayers and some Buddhist terminology. The remaining staff includes a cook and an “aunt” to look after the children. Facilities are quite simple, but retain the local Tibetan style of minor houses. The dormitory rooms and classroom are unheated, but there is a blackboard and tables and chairs are provided. Although the outside architecture appears as rather simple, the interior wall decorations in the classroom signals Tibetan cultural values in the form of Buddhist quotations and ornamentation designs. The village and the school have been connected with on-line electricity for about a year. The school has a television, which is used to show DVD films – as yet there is no television transmission to the area.

The Dzogchen community primary school was established in 2002 and is located on the outskirts of Dzogchen, a village with a few thousand inhabitants, supplemented by additional Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and educational institutions with studying monks.¹⁰ The village is easily accessible by road and lies at an altitude of 3900 metres. The Dzogchen school is a full boarding school, in contrast to the Sershul school, which provides boarding facilities for some of the children during the summer, while parents move to summer pastures for tending livestock. The school was intended to provide literacy for local girls from nomadic families from poor Tibetan nomad families, but changed its policy according to needs and in 2005 the school had a mixed group of 15 children, aged between 6 and 16 years. Of the first children attending the school a group of 10 (out of 25 children) initially ran back to their families, as they could not adjust to the disciplined life at the school. Their families brought them back, but being unable to adjust to the school schedule they deserted the school again. Attendance is free, but its policy is to be strictly limited to children of poor nomad families. In fact, application for admission for two daughters from a relatively wealthy nomad family was turned down, as the school management had decided admittance was strictly reserved to poor families. The family consequently decided to keep their girls at home. There is a public primary and secondary day school in the village, but the family strongly resisted enrolling the girls in the public local village school, as they considered the school being too “divorced from Tibetan culture”. The community school have two classes and the subjects taught are Tibetan and mathematics. Buddhism is taught by memorizing prayers, whereas regular Chinese lessons have not really started yet. The classroom and dormitories are left unheated during the winter. The school facilities are simple but quite spacious, as full quotas of students are not yet achieved. Architectural style follows local Tibetan housing style, but using less wood than is normal in these areas. Built by donations from a private sponsor, the large, new

Tibetan-style school building could easily have accommodated 35 to 50 students, as was the original plan. However, the main school building has been turned into a private residence for the headmasters' family, and it is also here that the television with a satellite receiver is located. A western NGO sponsored a library building, which is not in use due to lack of effort in gaining reading material. The school is recognized by local officials, but it is autonomous in the sense that the founder of the school decides which staff to employ and which children to admit. There are two teachers – one educated and one uneducated. Six additional staff members take care of practical matters. The school had a mixed class of grade one to three, with plans to gradually extend to grade six. With no teaching in Chinese, it is unlikely that its students will be able to attend middle school. While it is certain that a lack of resource inputs will insure low quality education, resource inputs do not guarantee quality results. The circumstances of this school thus help to show that provision of trained teachers, adequate instruction materials, and reasonable school facilities are inputs which alone “does not guarantee quality: some poorly endowed schools perform better than those better provided for” (Danida 2001, 13).

Finally, I will introduce a small primary community school located in Tsekhok, a herding area in the middle of the Qinghai grassland at an altitude of 3800 metres.¹¹ The Tibetan nomads living here are settled in permanent houses made of mud and brick. Most people are poor and do not join the seasonal migrations to higher summer pastures with their livestock of yaks, sheep and horses. Although there is a public middle school with boarding facilities in the nearby town, a group of villagers established a small primary day school for their children to avoid having to send them away from home. Having limited funding for building a proper schoolhouse, they enthusiastically purchased a tent, although the optimistic goal is to be able to in the future to raise funds for building proper school facilities. With limited funds, their enthusiasm was their main resource. They still managed to both purchase a tent and hire a local teacher. The tent school, located near to a children's home, was established in 1997.¹² Subjects include Tibetan, Chinese and mathematics. The tent was later replaced by a larger tent from donations by a visiting foreign NGO organization. There are 72 students (38 boys and 34 girls, aged between 8 and 12 years) divided between two grades, primary one and two for children aged eight to 12. Many children walk long distances, some for more than 1 hour, setting off in small groups in the darkness of the early morning to reach school in time. The villagers are committed to their children becoming literate in Tibetan. Owing to the weather, the school remains closed during winter. However, it remains open during the period when households busily gather the Caterpillar Fungus mushrooms, a major cash earning commodity for Tibetan households. The school is very basic: water is fetched from a nearby stream and there is neither electricity nor heating in the school tent, but the teacher's tent (which is his home) is equipped with a stove for cooking and heating. There are no toilets, nor any maps or footballs, but there are desks. Also at this school both the teacher and the villagers claim there is a zero dropout rate. Children have to buy their books and pencils. Parents offer milk and butter, dried yak dung for fuel and contribute a small amount of cash towards the teacher salaries. There is also some financial support from the local education bureau at the prefecture level.

Monastery-run schools

In Tibet [Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)], Qinghai and Sichuan Buddhist monasteries have established formal secular schools within the monastery, starting at the primary level with plans to

expand to middle school.¹³ Funding is often obtained through local lamas and their local and international networks of private sponsors and charitable organizations. It is prohibited by law for Buddhist monasteries in China to give official admittance to novice monks under the age of 18, as it is believed that this kind of choice for the direction of one's life should not be taken by the parents, but should be a personal decision taken by the mature person himself (cf. Goldstein 1998, 43; Kolås and Thowsen 2005, 112).¹⁴ This law has weakened the monasteries' ability to recruit monks, as by the age of 18 a young man raised in a secular environment will have acquired habits incompatible with a monastic environment. The curriculum in these schools includes the Tibetan language, Tibetan culture and history, Buddhism, recitation of Buddhist prayers and, at more advanced schools, the Chinese language. By establishing this kind of secular school within the monastery the Buddhist clergy allows young boys to be affiliated to the monastery and provides an early training ground for children who may later become monks and nuns. The same occurs with respect to mosque education in some Muslim areas of China. Such secular schools placed in a religious environment can also be seen as incorporating education into a cultural practice. Although parents might be in favour of a religious education for their child, for people living in remote areas this type of school may be the only kind of education available, or may in some cases be used to avoid sending the child to a public school.

Environment, curriculum and language in schools

The majority of the Tibetan parents interviewed informally in relation to this study mention the same reasons why they try to avoid their child going to a public school.¹⁵ If children from the herding areas are to attend public schools in towns, they usually need access to boarding facilities or to have relatives living nearby. Therefore, parents may prefer to use a local school, which can provide a safe environment, so that their children do not need to travel great distances and stay away from home for longer periods of time. Another reason frequently mentioned was the concept of a heavy nationalistic school environment. Some parents expressed a strong opposition towards the daily raising of the Chinese national flag while singing the national anthem and also a resistance towards Chinese as the language of instruction, as children do not understand Chinese when they start first grade in school. What differentiates these small nomad community schools from public town schools in particular is the absence of the daily flag-raising ceremony during morning session in the schoolyard. Political slogans usually written on classroom walls in public schools are absent in all three of the above-mentioned nomad schools. There are no wall paintings of the Chinese flag and there are no posters portraying socialist leaders such as Marx, Engels and Lenin or Chinese political leaders, such as Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin (cf. Jin Xiao 2006, 117). The only posters in the Sershul classroom are portraits of famous historical figures who made great contributions to scientific knowledge and art, such as Einstein, Edison and Beethoven. Immediately above the blackboard is a photograph of the lama who founded the school. Having a photograph of a local Buddhist lama would not be possible in a public school classroom.

Often ethnic minority parents' perceive the values transmitted by state schooling to be alien or anathema to their own values. Tibetan parents' resistance towards public schools is also based on the observation that Tibetan children studying in public schools linguistically adopt a "code switching" between Tibetan and Chinese and consequently might not become fluent in Tibetan. Parents also expressed scepticism towards the national curriculum, regarding it as too "nationalistic" and of little

relevance, having limited references to Tibetan culture and no mention of Buddhism¹⁶ (cf. Upton 1999; Bass 2005). The local education department at the Prefecture and village district level controls language and curriculum in schools. However, parents in general seemed quite unaware of the government's efforts to permit autonomy of local areas to develop more relevant curriculum. Although most Tibetans are in favour of speaking their own language there is still a pragmatic acceptance of the need to have knowledge of Chinese (*Putonghua*), as it is recognized that without this skill it is almost impossible to obtain a regular job or to acquire any sort of influence within modern society. Knowledge of Chinese is sometimes necessary just for doing basic shopping in nearby towns and is certainly needed in all main business matters. Chinese as a subject in school is therefore accepted and encouraged, although many Tibetans agreed that it is important to insist that Tibetan children should learn Tibetan as their first language and Chinese as their second. Tibetan children at secondary level in urban schools also need to be trilingual, i.e. learn English. These language requirements place a heavy burden on Tibetan school children. The dominance of the Chinese language is obvious. College and middle school students take notes in Chinese and lively discussions on literal issues initially starting in Tibetan quickly switch into Chinese, as Chinese study terminology is more extensive than Tibetan.

Tibetan children living in urban areas usually speak Tibetan and Chinese when they start first grade and they are capable of following classes with Chinese as the language of instruction. However, their Tibetan is often heavily influenced by using "code-switching" and Chinese loan-words. For example, numbers are usually given in Chinese (cf. Tournadre 2003). The daughter of a family I visited in the Sershul area had attended a public school in a nearby town from the first to third grades. The school had no boarding facilities, it was difficult to find accommodation for her and the school environment influenced the girl in a way the family disliked. Consequently they send her to the nomad school as soon as it started. During the 3 years spent in the public school the daughter learned several songs, which she would frequently sing at home, as she was very fond of singing. The songs, all being very nationalistic in character, were a constant source of annoyance to her family, but they kept face and did not reveal their discontent. The daughter also developed a hybrid language, mixing Tibetan and Chinese, which was incomprehensible to her grandparents with their limited knowledge of Chinese. Her uncle explained that it is exactly these kinds of incidents that cause Tibetan parents to hesitate to enrol their child in the public school system. The key point here is therefore whether schools in autonomous regions of China can find a way to protect ethnic minority indigenous values while equipping children with values and skills that will give them access to mainstream society.

Internal written exams are performed at the nomad community primary schools four times per year, but none of the schools has the authority to issue any kind of graduation diploma. The transition to secondary school is a barrier to many students. The heavy workload required to attain bilingual (Tibetan/Chinese) competency [and for secondary students, sometimes trilingual (English) competency] makes it difficult for Tibetan students to compete with Hanyu (Chinese language) in the educational system and many fail to pass the entrance exam to middle schools, which must be taken in Chinese. At the Sershul school the plan is to add one class yearly up to the sixth grade, after which students are supposed to continue to middle school in Sershul town. Thereafter students can continue to "Senior Secondary" school in larger towns such as Kardze (Ch. Ganzi), Dartsedo (Ch. Kangding) or Chengdu. The Dzogchen school also holds some minor internal examinations and its future plans are that students completing fifth grade can continue their studies in nearby towns. However, in order

to accomplish this the school urgently needs to upgrade its classes in Chinese language as its students can only speak a few words of Chinese at enrolment.

Teacher education and pedagogy

As previously mentioned schools are obliged to follow the national curriculum, as directed by the Ministry of Education, but are permitted to incorporate relevant local subjects as 20% of the curriculum. Teaching subject matter for which there are no books requires particular skills from the teacher, and apart from adding Buddhism to the curriculum, it was unclear to me whether any of the teachers at the schools in this study were capable of this. The common means of instruction at most schools is still “rote” learning in teacher-centred classes and the system is heavily examination-oriented. The context of most school textbooks does not invite or leave room for independent interpretation by the teacher or the students (Bass 2005, 443). A disputed topic in teachers’ education is the issue of methodology. To enhance the quality of teaching in primary schools teachers need to be well motivated, well prepared and to have a knowledge of, and the ability to perform, a student-centred methodology of teaching (WB 2007, 72). Where teacher-training colleges seem to be behind in including methodology in their curricula, an alternative school programme working with public secondary schools could make a contribution towards this issue. Since 1997 the English Tibetan Programme (ETP) has been a part of the teaching schedule in “The Nationalities Department of Qinghai Education College”, but the programme has expanded and is now also connected to several secondary schools in Sichuan. It was founded by an American teacher based in Xining and is sponsored by several international funds. The ETP programme includes subjects such as Tibetan, mathematics and chemistry, but its main force lies within its efficiency in teaching English to Tibetan students. From more than 2000 applicants from Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, Yunnan and TAR, only about 60 qualified candidates pass through the eye of the needle to be granted admission to the Xining programme (cf. Thurston 2004). Students become fluent in English within 3 years and after a 4- year college course some students earn a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in English. Although good results are guaranteed by picking the best students, the seemingly improved learning outcomes take credit from using a learner-centred pedagogy, which places students as active participants in the learning process. Students are invited to reflect upon and criticize texts, which for a large part are extractions from well-known western authors. As rightly pointed out by Tabulawa, “... learner-centred pedagogy has social, epistemological and philosophical foundations. For this reason, the pedagogy is not value-neutral” (Tabulawa 2003, 9). Not being a merely technical method it has to be admitted that western values are conveyed to the students. With increasing globalization one could ask whether learner-centred pedagogy will make schools similar over time (Anderson-Levitt 2003, 1) or if it provides an opportunity for local people to create new local cultures (Watson 1997 quoted in Anderson-Levitt 2003). Certainly, students graduating from the ETP programme have first-hand experience in the effectiveness of this methodology, and as they later become teachers themselves they will be capable of applying this methodology to their teaching. The ETP programme has expanded from being initially based in the provincial capital of Xining to include schools in local areas in Jyekundo (Ch. Yushu), Dartsedo (Ch. Kangding) in Sichuan and Golog (Ch. Guoluo) TAP in Qinghai. A large number of the students are young Tibetans from herding areas in Qinghai and Sichuan; in fact, one of the graduate students had completed primary school at the earlier-mentioned “tent school” in Tsekhok.

Vocational training, literacy and numeracy

Some parents regarded literacy as useless unless their child is to enter business, which they have no money for anyway, and others expressed the view that fluency in literal Tibetan was only useful for monks studying Buddhist philosophy. Illiteracy can also be a problem for persons who are unable to read labels on fertilizer or on medicine bottles, etc. Numeracy, however, can be of great value; at local markets it is not uncommon to witness otherwise skilled Tibetan market salesmen lacking numerical skills and consequently inadvertently cheating themselves. Even numerate Tibetans complained of frequently being cheated by market salesmen, especially in negotiations involving the Chinese numbers four (*sí*) and 10 (*shí*). Few Tibetan children who complete primary school actually continue to secondary school and even fewer graduate with a university degree (cf. Bass 2005). The problem is not only that many students fail to pass the entrance exam, but also that attending higher-level schooling is a financial burden to the family. A nomad family I spoke to was aware that the Dzogchen nomad school at present might not be able to provide its students with the skills required to pass an entrance exam at a middle school. Having their daughters enrolled at the school the family was quite unconcerned about this fact; they were content that their girls would learn to read and write. Such an option would be completely unacceptable to most Tibetan parents in urban areas and Tibetan school children in urban areas are often pressed into spending entire evenings and weekends doing school homework.

Studies on education for Tibetans emphasize how important it is that all Tibetan children attend middle schools and that the pathways to higher education should be as open to Tibetan students as much as they are to other students in the country (Fischer 2005; Postiglione, Ben Jiao and Gyatso 2006). No one can disagree that this is the optimal goal. There is a tendency amongst Tibetans to regard the years spent in elementary school as an education in itself which brings a job after graduation, while a scholarly anthropological view on the contrary, makes a distinction between schooling and education, i.e. of schooling being a “regulated institution of intentional instruction” providing a foundation for education which can lead to a job (Levinson and Holland 1996). Good examination grades at the end of the 10th grade do not necessarily ensure a good job, such as a highly esteemed government position, although life-long employment with a pension is no longer guaranteed. The failure to find a good job after graduation has discouraged many rural parents from having their children proceed to middle and senior secondary schools. But, although many children in rural areas do not make it to middle school, attending primary school and being literate can have various benefits. Attending primary school takes place during a period of tender and sensitive years and gaining familiarity with a learning process has a value in itself. Children are interested in learning. When visiting children at home in their rural family environment it is not uncommon to see school-aged children engaged in homework with enthusiasm. Learning basic literacy and numeracy in primary school are also keys to success in post-primary education. Not all children graduating from middle school are fit for or interested in pursuing a university or college education. Experiences from development projects at Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) have shown that a success rate for basic vocational training projects requires that participants have basic literacy and numeracy skills at least at the level of formal primary schooling. This also applies even to basic adult vocational training in skills such as midwifery, secretarial, hotel chambermaids, vehicle maintenance and repair, construction and so on. In addition, unskilled, poor Tibetan labourers with nomad family traditions possessing little or no formal schooling tend to have difficulties in following a daily work schedule.¹⁷

Conclusion: modernity, gaining knowledge and maintaining cultural values

During the political reforms of the last decade, modernization, decreasing access to land and forced fencing of pastoral land are all factors contributing to Tibetan pastoral nomadic life being in a state of transition (cf. Miller 2000).¹⁸ Development and the growth of markets in the Chinese economic sector are unavoidably making their way to the nomad population living in remote grassland areas. However, such increasing commoditization does not seem to be entirely incompatible with traditional Tibetan nomad lifestyles. Few nomads are resistant to settling in houses during the cold winter and modern commodities are being increasingly used, both for reasons of necessity and as status symbols. Travelling in the herding areas one sees Tibetan nomads using radios, wristwatches, motorbikes, and cellular phones. Some traditional black nomad tents are equipped with a solar power panel placed on the rough woven cloth of yak wool on top of the tent. Other nomad tents are equipped with a television attached to a DVD machine, allowing people to watch popular video films on Tibetan nomad life, all produced in China. Each of the two nomad schools mentioned in this study has a television.¹⁹ Thus, the proposed plan by the Ministry of Education for implementing distance learning by digital means in remote Tibetan regions does not seem too far away in the future.²⁰

With future patterns for livelihood still unknown, there is a need to develop new capabilities. Not all students continue to college, and these young students need to learn technical and vocational skills that can turn into jobs. This will provide an immediate reward for their efforts and directly help them and their families. However, when the economy changes some skills quickly become useless. Therefore, vocational education has to be combined with generic thinking skills and problem skills that can make Tibetans more adaptable to the changing economy as well as to equip them with critical thinking skills useful to distinguish between education and indoctrination. While children's labour contributions might be an immediate need in the household, seen in a long-term perspective the household can only support one family. Many nomads acknowledge that their children will most likely have to find alternative work opportunities, probably outside the pastoral community in urban areas. Although parents might resist sending their children to school, education and attendance in school might nevertheless be the only means to a new type of livelihood. Talking to Tibetan youths at colleges and universities in Xining, Tongren, Yushu, Kangding and Chengdu it is alarming to hear their lack of a vision of future jobs and position. Most young Tibetans "only" aspire to a teaching position, partly because this is what they regard as only options available and not many have "wild dreams" of high-status jobs. Lastly, young Tibetans with a nomad or farmer background frequently expressed no particular ambitions to follow in the footsteps of their parents.

Parents have to comply with official pressure for their child to attend a school. Some parents make an effort to send their children to school and support the school's efforts to bring literacy and education to the community. Others have yet to be convinced of the value of education and only send their children to schools in order to avoid fines from local authorities, or they may need their children's help with herding or household duties. The Tibetan primary community schools mentioned in this case does not necessarily provide better exam results than public schools, and Tibetan children living in rural areas might later have no choice but to attend a boarding school if they want to advance their education. Still, the presence of small primary community schools in the rural herding areas allow these children to attend school in a domestic sphere and thereby thoroughly experience their own ethnicity and ethnic cultural values. Thus the important contact with the traditional cultural environment is maintained during childhood, providing children with a cultural education that

complements their institutional schooling (cf. Levinson and Holland 1996; WB 2007, 68). Selected children who are to continue in their parents' occupation will be able to attend primary school and simultaneously gain the necessary indigenous knowledge needed in herding pastoral livestock. This case study shows the importance of community engagement and indicates that an important factor for a successful outcome of establishing and running such local community primary schools in remote herding areas depends, to a large extent, on recognizing and accepting local values. With rural life in remote, high-altitude herding areas being under transition there is an urgent need to provide schooling for all children, as they are likely to engage in alternative work opportunities, probably in urban areas located away from the pastoral community.

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Notes

¹ Part of this study was previously presented as a paper at the Eleventh Seminar of The International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS XI) in Bonn August/September 2006. I would like to thank DANIDA (Denmark) for a grant supporting my fieldwork in 2005.

² Fieldtrips lasted 8 weeks in 2004 and 5 weeks in 2005 and took place on a solitary basis, with selected researched schools based on personal contacts. My position as a western woman travelling alone, with an identity of obviously having some knowledge of Tibetan culture and speaking Tibetan might have encouraged some informants to approach me in a rather unconstrained manner. While using an unofficial research methodology has the disadvantage of not being able to conduct comprehensive survey data collections, it nevertheless has the advantage that persons interviewed might feel freer to express opinions (cf. Hansen 2006). For protection of informants and projects all schools are referred to by their greater district location rather than the accurate place name, as small schools are vulnerable to public interference.

³ For an outline of the impact of politics on the pastoral system and a discussion of nomadism versus mobile pastoralism see Manderscheid (2002).

⁴ Lobsang Gelek is Tibetan and did periodically fieldwork in the Sethar areas between 1969 and 1994.

⁵ A Chinese survey claims that 9-years of compulsory education was universalized by the end of 2002 in the eastern regions (MOE 2004). Statistical data state the level of primary schooling in China to be 92.3% (CSY 2002, tables 4–12, 2000 census).

⁶ A Chinese survey from 2004 accounts that 58.3% of all junior secondary school graduates in China continue to study in senior secondary schools (MOE 2004). A report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states that educational achievement in the eastern regions including Beijing show an illiteracy rate lower than 7% and 67% of the population have at least junior high-school education and more than 9% have at least a junior college education. The rates are considerably lower for the western regions including Qinghai where illiteracy rates range from 15 to 26% and population with at least a high school education accounted for between 32 and 40%, while those with at least a junior college education accounted for 2 to 4%, and the literacy level being slightly higher for Sichuan (UNDP 2005, 57).

⁷ Caterpillar Fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*) is called “summer-grass, winter-womb” (Yartsa Gunbu – *dbyar rtswa*) by Tibetans. *Cordyceps sinensis* is a parasitic fungus that attacks the larva of several moth species (*Hepialus* sp.), which lives in the high altitude meadows above 4000 metres in several regions of the Tibetan Plateau (Boesi 2003, 29; Winkler 2004). The mushroom has a medicinal value and is collected during May and June. During peak season a good mushroom can be sold at local markets for 15–20 rmb. (2–3 US dollars).

⁸ The Sershul school included in this study is a community primary school for nomad children located in Sershul County (Ch. Shiqu), Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan.

⁹ The teachers mentioned that although attending middle school is compulsory most middle schools nevertheless demand an entrance exam.

¹⁰ Dzogchen (Ch. Zhuqingxiang), Dege County (Ch. Dege), Kardze (Ch. Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan.

¹¹ Tsekhog County (Ch. Zeku), Malho (Ch. Huangnan) TAP, Qinghai.

¹² Other primary “tent schools” exist in remote areas in Qinghai (CiC 2000).

¹³ These kinds of secular schools seem to be different from secular schools established by Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Nepal and India, where the aim is more directed towards providing monks and nuns with secular schooling and the opportunity of earning a degree alongside religious training at the monastery until the age of 16–18 years. Thereafter monks and nuns are expected to devote their time fully to studies in Buddhist philosophy or engage in other practical duties at the monastery (Bangsbo 2004).

¹⁴ Goldstein (1998) mentions how administrative clergy at Drepung monastery in Lhasa have established a secular school, whose aim is to provide young novice monks with some secular skills should they choose to leave the monastery later in life, and further that the authorities’ motive in making this concession was to prevent “a pool of potential new political recruits for the activists in the monastery”. Subjects in school are written Tibetan, some basic arithmetic and elementary religion, and later in 1995 Chinese and English are also included (Goldstein 1998, 43–51).

¹⁵ Parents were interviewed by in-depth interviews in a rather casual manner in order to make informants feel unstrained.

¹⁶ The majority of the parents were actually illiterate and being unable to read the schoolbooks themselves, their opinion seem to depend on their children’s behaviour and indication. Here I am simply referring to comments and opinions from Tibetan parents. I am aware of Janet Upton’s (1999) study on the content of the curriculum at the primary level in Tibetan schools, where she argues that curriculum and school books for Tibetan children do contain a fair amount of material relevant to Tibetan cultural life. A recent study by Bass discusses newer contents of patriotic education in school textbooks, pointing out how new Tibetan language curriculum have little reference to Tibet at all (Bass 2005, 442).

¹⁷ Interview with Arthur N. Holcombe, Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund in TAR, Lhasa August 2004.

¹⁸ The privatization of rangeland and livestock development interventions taking place in the Tibetan nomadic herding areas are fundamentally changing the traditional nature of Tibetan pastoralism (Goldstein 1996 quoted in Miller 2000, 99).

¹⁹ In his book about education in Tibet Tashi Tsering describes how most of the schools founded by his foundation are equipped with a television, although they might not have a direct electricity line or running water in the compound (Siebenschuh and Tashi Tsering 2003, 28).

²⁰ See synopsis by Cheng Kai-ming (1999). *Action Plan for Vitalizing Education for the 21st Century* (PRC). Plan proposed by Ministry of Education, 24 December 1998. Endorsed by State Council, 13 January 1999. Centre for Research on Education in China, University of Hong Kong. http://www.hku.hk/chinaed/action_plan.htm In January 2004, the Ministry of Education promulgated the Action Plan for Revitalizing Education between 2003–2007 (*East News Net*, 11 January 2004).

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