



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Chinese replacing Tibetan language as medium of instruction in Tibet, report says

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The Chinese government is forcing the erosion of Tibetan language as medium of instruction in schools in Tibet, contrary to its own laws and international obligations, says a report released today by Human Rights Watch. The report says that kindergarten and elementary schools in Tibet are teaching students in Chinese rather than Tibetan, risking the children's development and the survival of Tibetan culture.

Nearly all middle schools and high schools in the Tibet Autonomous Region have been teaching students in Chinese since shortly after China annexed Tibet, a historically independent country, in 1959, says the report.

But according to the report—titled “China’s ‘Bilingual Education’ Policy in Tibet: Tibetan Medium Schooling Under Threat”—new education policies introduced by the Chinese government are now also leading kindergartens and elementary schools in the TAR to teach students in Chinese instead of Tibetan. The TAR spans about half of Tibet, including most of western and central Tibet.

The change in teaching language will likely hurt students’ development, as evidence shows that children are negatively impacted when their early education is not in their mother tongue.

Perhaps just as bad, the new policies seem aimed at indoctrinating children with Chinese propaganda from a young age and cutting them off from Tibetan culture and history.

“China’s policies for Tibetan children in the TAR ... show decreasing respect for their right to use their mother-tongue or learn about and freely express Tibetan cultural identity and values in schools,” the report says. “Rather, they embody an approach to schools and schoolchildren that appears to be eroding the Tibetan language skills of children and forcing them to consume political ideology and ideas contrary to those of their parents and community.”

How it works

According to the report, the Chinese government is using many methods to make Chinese the dominant language in Tibetan schools, such as:

- Transferring huge numbers of Chinese teachers to Tibet
- Sending Tibetan teachers for training in provinces where Chinese is the main language
- Requiring all Tibetan teachers to become fluent in Chinese
- Creating “mixed classes” of Tibetan and non-Tibetan students
- Closing rural schools and consolidating them in nearby towns where students have to board, cutting them off from their families and from Tibetan-speaking environments.

These efforts have dramatically changed the makeup of education in Tibet over the past decade. According to the report, a Chinese study from 2017 found that 30 percent of teachers in one Tibetan county could not speak Tibetan.

The effects have also been seen at the earliest levels: The report says all 81,000 children above age three in preschools and kindergartens in the TAR are receiving “bilingual education.”

And though Chinese authorities publicly say they want students to learn both Chinese and Tibetan, one official working in the TAR said he expects the government to introduce a policy formally mandating that elementary schools in the region switch to Chinese-language instruction.

Forced assimilation

China’s new approach to education in Tibet is part of the Chinese Communist Party’s shift since 2014 to a policy of assimilation of minorities.

As part of this policy, officials promote “ethnic mingling” and pressure minorities to identify with Chinese culture.

In the TAR, attempts at forced assimilation were led in part by Chen Quanguo, the former Communist Party secretary of the region.

After leaving the TAR, Chen moved on to Xinjiang (known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan), where he helped set up the concentration camps in which more than 1 million Uyghurs have been detained.

Tibetan protests

Tibetans have resisted China’s attempts to assimilate them and force them to abandon their culture and traditions.

In late 2015, Tibetan businessman Tashi Wangchuk appeared in a New York Times video requesting Chinese officials to support Tibetan language education in Tibet.

As a result, Tashi Wangchuk was arrested, likely tortured and given a five-year prison sentence on charges of “separatism”—meaning attempts to separate Tibet from China.

Despite facing such consequences, Tibetans continue to speak out against China’s language policies, the Human Rights Watch report says.

Flouting international and Chinese laws

The report says the imposition of Chinese-language teaching in Tibetan schools could contradict China’s own 2001 Law on Regional National Autonomy, which says that minority schools “should, if possible, use textbooks printed in their own languages, and lessons should be taught in those languages.”

In addition, China’s actions appear to violate international law. As the report documents, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China ratified almost 30 years ago, says “a child belonging to a ... minority ... shall not be denied the right ... to use his or her own language.”

The report notes that international bodies have criticized China’s treatment of Tibetan language education. In 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination voiced concerns that “Tibetan language teaching in schools in the [TAR] has not been placed on an equal footing in law, policy and practice with Chinese, and that it has been significantly restricted.”

That year, Kai Mueller, head of the International Campaign for Tibet's UN Advocacy Team, delivered an oral statement to the committee saying that, "Tibetans cannot practice their religion freely, nor can they protect their culture and language in a meaningful way."

"China's 'bilingual education' policy is motivated by political imperatives rather than educational ones," said Sophie Richardson, China director of Human Rights Watch, in a statement. "The Chinese government is violating its international legal obligations to provide Tibetan-language instruction to Tibetans."

Access to Tibet

Human Rights Watch provides a number of recommendations for Chinese officials, including that they ensure all Tibetan students are able to use and learn the Tibetan language in schools; guarantee that the promotion of "national unity" in China does not violate cultural and civil rights; release Tashi Wangchuk and other Tibetan political prisoners; and stop suppressing Tibetan individuals and groups calling for Tibetan language education.

To compose its report, Human Rights Watch interviewed Tibetans between 2015 and 2019, including six Tibetan parents or teachers from rural areas in September 2019.

The organization says it primarily relied on government publications, including newspapers and websites, as well as on some academic studies.

Human Rights Watch notes that China places severe restrictions on researchers and journalists from other countries who try to enter Tibet. The report says foreign researchers only get access to Tibet "in extremely rare cases, and then only on subjects that are not sensitive or likely to produce findings critical of the government."

The report also notes that Tibetans "face severe risks of repercussions including potential arrest and prosecution" if they speak with foreigners about issues in Tibet.

In addition, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China recently noted that the TAR is the only region of China that journalists need prior permission to enter.

In late 2018, the US Congress passed the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which calls on China to end its isolation of Tibet from the outside world and requires the State Department to sanction Chinese officials directly responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet.

This week, the International Campaign for Tibet called on the State Department to implement the law fully.

ICT Quote:

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said, "This report by Human Rights Watch clearly shows the Chinese government's agenda of "Sinicizing" Tibetan society. The International Campaign for Tibet urges the Chinese government to implement the recommendations made in the report and the international community to hold the Chinese accountable for failing to respect Tibetans' rights. The China government bilingual education policy threatens the survival of Tibetan as a medium of instructions in Tibet, and with that the very survival of Tibetan identity and culture"



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