Education and Social Change in China
Inequality in a Market Economy

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Foreword by Stanley Rosen

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Education in Rural Tibet

Development, Problems, and Adaptations

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Like other aspects of Tibet’s development, rural education gives conflicting impressions. China assures the world that great gains have been made in literacy and basic education, while the Western media is fueled by the image of nomads forced into schools that deprive them of their culture. Despite interventions of several international nongovernment organizations, there has been little effort to gather systematic data on rural education in Tibet. Descriptive literature and policy justifications can be found in several academic journals, some of which are more tightly coupled to the official state line than others. Books focus on a number of topics, including traditional Tibetan culture and values, monastery education, historical accounts of the development of state education, and modernization of education. While most are within the framework of the State’s views, there is by no means a consensus on all topics. Among the many contested educational topics, for example, is bilingual education. Political sensitivity makes it difficult to run bilingual education experiments with a high degree of objectivity because proponents risk being labeled as extremists. Though a viable system of bilingual education is indispensable to national development, one scholar points out that China’s minority languages, including Tibetan, are not easily engineered to promote the national developmental aims. Another researcher of Tibetan education argues that despite the Western rhetoric, Tibetan language textbooks contain a fair amount of materials relevant to Tibetan cultural life, though not as much as Tibetans crave, and that some “forceful lessons about Tibetan culture can be taught to students through lessons that derive from works that are culturally and historically distinct.” These points are in keeping with Bass, who provides a comprehensive overview of educational reform in Tibet since 1950, noting that the basis of educational policy in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) are measures designed to improve school access for ethnic minorities in China. Case-study data and analysis of specific rural communities can further increase understanding of the situation.

Are rural Tibetans attending school or dropping out, and why? How effective are Tibet’s educational policies? Does the situation differ a great deal from education in other rural areas of China?

Region, Field Site, and Data

This research aims to identify the factors associated with school attendance and discontinuance, including specific educational policies and practices. Two counties, Penam and Lhundrup, were studied. The focus was on the villages of the xiang (township) in each of the two counties. The counties differ on the basis of their remoteness from the major centers of economic activity. More important, however, the xiang and the villages within them differ greatly for the same reason. A brief background sketch of each county is provided here.

Penam County is on the southern banks of the Yarlong River, about 290
kilometers from Lhasa. It encompasses about 2,460 square kilometres and its 40,000 Tibetans account for 99.82 percent of the population, spread over 11 xiang (two of which are herding xiang) and 113 villages. It sits high astride a mountainous area ranging from 3,850 to 5,300 meters and is surrounded by three mountains above 5,700 meters. Tibetans here produce barley, wheat, potato, peas, and rapeseed; the local economy also depends heavily on livestock (yak, oxen, horses, donkeys, mountain goats, sheep, and pigs). The xiang that was the focus of the fieldwork is located in the middle of a deep, twenty-four-kilometer-long ravine that hugs the Nianchu River. Roads are poor, there is virtually no electricity, water is drawn from a common well, and economic development is below the TAR average.

The second county, Lhundrup, is located in central Tibet on the Lhasa River, about sixty-five kilometers from Lhasa. It encompasses an area of over 4,000 square kilometers and is comprised of cultivated land, grasslands, and forests. Though surrounded by breathtaking mountains, it has a vast area of fairly level, cultivated land. The county is in the Yarlong River belt, and its boundaries are formed by the two mountain ranges. The northern part, bordering the Lhasa River, averages over 4,000 meters in altitude whereas the southern part averages 3,850 meters. Despite droughts, mudslides, severe hail, and blizzards, the local residents manage to produce barley, wheat, and some marketable vegetables. They also depend upon yak, oxen, sheep, and mountain goats and produce some traditional handicrafts.

Penam County’s Mag xiang and Lhundrup County’s Khartse xiang were the field sites for this research. These are typical subsistence xiang within Tibet. However, Mag is more remote from the county seat than Khartse, and this was reflected in their levels of economic development. Mag had 185 households and Khartse about 199. The Mag xiang data came from 153 households in four villages: Sokang, Makang, Gokhang, and Goeto. The Khartse xiang data came from 150 households in four villages: Thongmon, Chashi, Bhongdrong, and Ghangkha. Data were also collected from schoolchildren (101 from Mag and 109 from Khartse xiang). Finally, 305 teachers across three counties—59 in Penam, 173 in Lhundrup, and 73 in Gongga—were surveyed.

Field visits began in December 1998 and took place once or twice per year thereafter. Most lasted one to three weeks. Meetings were conducted with county education department officials before proceeding to the xiang and village levels. Upon arriving in the xiang, residence was often arranged in a village school and interviews were conducted with the xiang head and central school principal. There was little interference, and we could move around as we liked. The days were spent visiting homes and schools and interviewing families, their children, village heads, and school personnel. At the village level, interviews were conducted with families, school personnel, and students at school. The main survey instruments were three questionnaires for parents, children, and teachers. Their design was based on an initial visit to the project villages, background documents and interviews, and experience with similar studies in other ethnic minority regions. The household interviews focused on the family profile, education and work experience, perspectives toward the school, school participation, contact with teachers, school fees, educational relevance, household labor, and economy. The interviews were used to gain an understanding of the factors that support or block school participation. After being translated into Tibetan, the survey instrument was piloted and revised. The survey was administered by five to six Tibetan research assistants who were teachers from Tibet University and other schools and colleges in the TAR. After training, their interviews were monitored at random in different household settings. Completed questionnaires were photographed, with originals sent to Hong Kong in packages of twenty, and the data were entered according to a coding scheme. The open-ended responses in Tibetan were translated with the English printed alongside and sent with the questionnaires.

**Schools**

Village schooling has to be seen in regional- and countywide context. According to the TAR Vice Director of Education, the enrollment rate was 60 percent in 1991, when most villages had only popularized two to three years of education and less than 20 percent of Tibetans had a primary education. At the turn of the century, only 6 percent of the counties had achieved nine-year compulsory education, 70 percent had achieved six-year compulsory education, and 22 percent had achieved or nearly achieved three-year compulsory education. By 2001, the official enrollment rate was 83.4 percent; illiteracy and semiliteracy stood slightly above 50 percent. Three-quarters of all schools were village-level teaching points (jiaoxuedian). The rate of qualified teachers at the primary schools was only 67 percent. At the county level, Penam was typical with sixty-eight schools, including one primary and one junior secondary school in the county seat. There were eleven xiang, each having one central primary school surrounded by village-level feeder schools, fifty-five in all. The schools had 344 staff, 285 of whom were teachers, serving 7,305 students (450 at the secondary school). Of the 6,855 primary school students, 3,648 were at central primary schools (county and xiang levels) and 3,207 were at other primary schools (village schools and teaching points). Thus, 19 percent of the county population was at school, and the official enrollment rate was 90.2 percent, though fieldwork led to viewing this figure as inflated.
The school levels in Tibet conform to the system in other parts of remote rural China, in which the villages are responsible for early primary education, with small schools of one to three rooms handling primary grades one to three. The xiang has a central school with grades four to six that draws graduates from the surrounding villages and boards many of those children. Graduates of the xiang central school may go on to attend junior secondary school in the county seat or designated secondary schools for Tibetans in Chinese cities across the country.

Education at the village and xiang levels typically has gone through several historical stages of development. For example, the first period of Mag xiang’s school development under the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government was from 1960 to 1966, when there were six minban (locally established and supported) schools and one central school. The second period, from 1967 to 1980, was the communal period, when the xiang was divided into production brigades, each having a school, thereby increasing the number to ten. By the end of the period, the enrollment rate had reached 79 percent. The third period was the land reform period, 1981 to 1992, when the rural production responsibility system began, and children were desperately needed for household production work. School access and equity were a major challenge during the land reform period following the Cultural Revolution. From the household point of view, there was less of an incentive to send children to school, and there was little systematic organization of either the management of schools or the work of teachers. Therefore, even though the population increased by almost 20 percent, school enrollment dropped to 35 percent and only 11 percent of the girls attended.19

Those families with four children usually sent one to school. The view of the xiang head was that some children had to care for the old while others had to work hard at home. He explained that parents have an ideological problem (sixin‘g wenti) because they do not see the value of schooling. In 1998, Khartse xiang had the lowest enrollment rate of all xiang in Lhundrup County. There were 396 students of school age, of which 318 were said to be enrolled in school.20 The central primary school had 163 students (out of an eligible 196) in seven classes (two grade fours). During the first visit, grade five had five students; the following year that number dropped to three.21 Meetings were held in each village on several occasions to explain the importance of sending children to school. Parents were told that their children should learn scientific knowledge to improve farming, as well as to become literate for agricultural and business purposes.

Three schools were consolidated during the period, leaving Mag xiang with seven schools across its eleven villages, serving 589 households and 4,556 people (2,277 males and 2,279 females).22 In 1984, the county used 6,969 yuan (about U.S.$870 today) to build the Sukang Xiang Primary School. Most other educational costs had to be covered by the local people. If the county government provided building materials, it was often the village people who did the construction work and maintenance and helped out in other respects. Beginning in 1985, the county government began to expand minban education, and in 1989, the xiang government set up a system of school rules and regulations (guizhi zhidu). Despite the compulsory school law, the imposition of fines was ineffective at addressing the rapidly rising school dropout rate. As one official put it, “People did as they pleased and there was not even a party organization (xiaoxiandui), a book of primary student rules and regulations, or a work and rest system.”23 School matters were formerly under the xiang party secretary but later came under the authority of the principal of the xiang school.

In 1992, a 100-square-meter school with two rooms was built. By that time, Sukang School had 260 students, with eight teachers in nine rooms, thirty-two sets of desks and chairs, ten blackboards, and three tape recorders. Funds generally went to teacher salaries. There were no ink, pens, paper, or maps. The school had a tiny area of land that was used to plant barley and, on June 1 (Children’s Day), the barley was sold. Lhundrup County allocated funds directly to village schools. The xiang provided some funds to the school at the Children’s Day festival each year.

Before the end of the century, the xiang village schools and their central school were much like their counterparts in the rest of rural Tibet. Village schools were small, run-down buildings without lights or electricity. Of the seven schools in Mag xiang, for example, five were the poorest buildings in the villages. In two of the village schools (Zemai and Puxi), the classrooms had only three walls, so teachers conducted class in the yard. The lucky schools had chairs, desks, and blackboards. As the research progressed, it became apparent that all children had desks and chairs. Chalk, pens, papers, and dictionaries were another matter, and these were often difficult to acquire.

Khartse xiang had one complete primary school and three village schools. One village school opened during the commune period and was re-established in 1992. At that time, there was one minban teacher, and because it was located near a monastery, a literate monk taught at the school. At first, families did not send children to the school, though enrollment eventually reached twenty-one and then leveled off at twenty-nine despite pleas by the school principal. Another village school took in children from four villages and had two teachers for primary grades one through three. In the past, each village had its own school, but the poor conditions led to consolidation. The third village school catered to two villages. Built in 1995, it was enlarged in 1998.

The major cost for schools was the recurrent expense of teacher salaries.
While the rest of rural China had phased out the locally paid minban teachers (and minban schools), rural Tibet still had many of these at the end of the century. Teachers were usually locally educated, recruited, and paid, with low levels of education, perhaps a year or more higher in primary school than the grade they were teaching, and no training as a teacher. Few could speak Chinese.

In the early PRC period, there were three types of teachers at the village minban schools in Tibet: lamas and monks that resumed secular life (huansu), former housekeepers or domestic servants of landlords, and those in the old society who had it quite well and had attended some kind of private schooling. According to a local agricultural specialist, these teachers had good Tibetan language skills, but their mathematical ability was very poor. There were no teaching materials, so they often read scriptures, told stories, and read legends. Most were older with little or no teacher training. After 1965, the minban teachers were recruited from the graduates of these primary schools, so they were younger and had some formal schooling. It was not until near the end of the century that there was the beginning of a steady stream of young Tibetan teachers from outside the xiang who were graduates of teacher training colleges.

Minban teachers were sent to the county to hear the gugan “backbone teachers” share their experience of teaching and were paid according to three ‘salary levels. At the top was the 182 yuan per month category, followed by the 117 and 127 yuan rate levels, the latter being about average. It was explained that salaries were previously based on attendance, as is still the case in Penam County, but that this was discontinued in Lhundrup County because it led to abuses of the system.

A typical teacher organizes instruction for a non-age-graded one-room schoolhouse.

After I teach the first class, I teach the second one while the first one does review. This is an interruption to the teaching, but most of the teacher’s energy has to be put on the year-two students, because this is related to the teacher’s salary. In general, the teacher can send a year-two student to go and teach the year-one students and all the teacher has to do is to go and take a look once in a while.

In fact, a certain portion of the salary was withheld by the Penam County education authorities each year and was awarded back to teachers based on attendance rates and students’ passing of examinations for promotion to the upper primary xiang central school.

It was also not unusual to see a student standing at the front of the room for a good part of the day, chanting the lines on the blackboard, with the class following in unison. Because most of the teachers were locally recruited and had similar household economic pressures, teachers sometimes did not appear at the village school and children would spend most of the morning on the school ground, singing couplet songs, playing on the dirt field, or climbing to the un-netted basketball hoop.

The TAR government was taking steps to upgrade and convert minban teachers and train and place young graduates of teacher training colleges in xiang schools throughout Tibet. At the end of the century, the Khartse xiang school had nine teachers, including three from Lhasa (one the principal), one from Hefei, one converted minban teacher (minzhuangong), plus four minban teachers. Sometimes converted teachers still had minban teacher salaries. Teachers who had training usually received it from Lhasa City Normal School or the Hefei Normal School. There were also a few graduates of the neibidan (inland) schools recruited to the xiang central school to teach grades five and six. Their years spent attending school in Chinese cities meant that their Chinese was better than that of the other teachers, though the reverse was true of their ability to speak Tibetan.

Given the lack of resources and highly trained teachers, schooling itself was boring and monotonous, though the children seemed to survive by their own wits. Classrooms were cold, dark, and unheated in winter except for a stove in some part of the classroom. The schedule was irregular, depending on the weather and time of year. Few students attended during the harvest, when they were needed at home. The school day began at ten o’clock with six class hours to follow, including two hours for eating and resting. Each class session lasted about forty-five minutes. Primary school children were taught Tibetan with some Chinese in the morning, followed by mathematics in the afternoon. Most children had school books in Tibetan script, except for the subject of Chinese language. The village schools teach Tibetan, Chinese, and mathematics, but never get through the first volume of the Chinese reader. Before Tibet began to produce its own teaching materials, the schools began to use the “Five Province/Region Tibetan Teaching Materials” (wushengqu jiaocai) national standard school textbooks across a range of subjects that were translated from Chinese into Tibetan language. Not surprisingly, much of the curriculum is divorced from daily life. Yet, the TAR primary school texts do have pictures of yaks, agricultural tools, and names familiar to local people. The Tibetan epic Gesar is also taught in school. The xiang central school and some of the primary schools have wall hangings, similar to those found in classrooms throughout China, including Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Chinese leaders, including Mao, Deng, and Jiang are also represented, as well as Chinese historical figures, especially scientists, and Western figures such as Einstein, Mozart, and others. No pictures of Tibetans grace the school or classroom walls.
Constraints exist on religious activities in school, yet religion penetrates most aspects of village daily life. Religious symbols, prayers, offerings, donations, and rituals are evident everywhere. Nevertheless, religious scripture cannot be brought into the school, and, unlike virtually every home in every village in Tibet, there are no prayer flags on the school. When literate teachers were scarce after the Cultural Revolution, some monks were invited to teach at schools, and later some who were expelled from monasteries for nationalist activities found work as village teachers. In neither case was religious symbolism, in form or content, permitted in the schools. Children who want to become monks must now wait until they are at least eighteen years of age, though this is not strictly enforced in some cases. In Mag yang, where four of the county’s twenty monasteries are located, 10 percent of the graduates eventually become monks/lamas or nuns.  

Aside from the policy restricting children from monastic study until after they have completed basic schooling, there are a number of other measures that have been implemented to increase attendance. Until nearly the end of the last century, the “one child kept policy” permitted parents to keep one child at home to support the household economy. For example, if a family had four children, three were to be sent to school. That policy is no longer recognized. In September 2002, we watched as about 100 village families were interviewed, one by one, in the xiang central school by county and xiang officials about why they still kept one child home from school.  

Other educational policies are derived from national policies for minority regions, including bilingual education and boarding schools. Because of the sparseness of the population in rural and nomadic areas, boarding schools are a central part of the educational system. For example, in Kharts, there were forty-two children with their teachers living in the xiang primary school.  

There are educational policies that apply specifically to rural Tibet, the most well known of which is the sanbao policy, which is designed to relieve families of costs associated with schooling. It provides baochi (food), tea for children who live beyond two kilometers from school during the daytime, and tsampa (ground barley meal) for those who board at school. It also provides baochuan (schoolwear and/or a blanket) for boarding school children and baozhu (living accommodations) for boarding rural school children.  

Despite the policy, rural children bring their own food to school, which can be a heavy burden for poor rural households to bear, though children are provided with tea three times a day. School officials and parents repeatedly emphasize that no fees need be paid for school. However, by the end of the century, 20 percent of the textbook fee (less for the lower grades) was collected from parents (although on our last visit to Mag in 2002, this practice had been discontinued).

Households

Most households we visited were three- or four-room structures, separated into two floors, the lower occupied by animals and the upper containing a kitchen, a sleeping room, a storeroom, and sometimes a prayer room. Within the household compound, prayer flags fluttered at each corner of the roof, and homes were surrounded by a mud brick wall with a wooden door under an archway. Some families had a common sitting area open to the outside light where guests could be received in warmer seasons.

Village life revolves around the growing seasons. Therefore, interviews were mostly done in winter, mid-summer, or just before or after the harvest. Herding was done year round, but the pace was less urgent than in agriculture. School-age children contributed significantly to herding, which often required little more than watching over and moving a small number of livestock from one place to another. Households would work together during harvest season, when children seemed to play an even more essential role. During the interviews, we were able to move from the village school, where we lived to the households, spending a morning or an afternoon at each household.

Xiang Household Profile

Though the surveys were carried out by trained researchers, they are used here only to reflect the general household situation, attitudes, and issues that relate to the schooling of children. Percentages are reported when they seem meaningful in the context of investigation.

The average number of people in each household was 6.47, and the average number of schoolchildren per household was 1.51. The family structure across the two xiang varied but averaged 17 percent polyandrous and 3 percent polygamous. Over 60 percent of families viewed themselves in the middle-income range, and, with the exception of two, the rest saw themselves as poor. There was a government initiative for nomadic and poor rural households that remained poor after the land reform. They would be moved to new areas (kaifadi), and some of these xiang families were affected by this policy. At least half of the families had one adult engaging in nonfarm labor. This usually means they have migrated to a more prosperous area for work, including the cities.

Almost half of the village family members had no skills outside of those related to basic farming and animal husbandry. About 30 percent of Kharts xiang households, who lived closer to Lhasa, had members with carpentry or weaving skills, with about 10 percent having masonry skills and 3 percent having skills to paint simple Tibetan art. Those who had these skills had
better possibilities of finding work in nonfarm settings. However, they still had to compete with outside migrants who were often advantaged over the rural Tibetans by their Chinese language skills and networking with large infrastructural projects. The demands of the household economy made it necessary for many families to borrow money, and about one-third had done so. Usually the loans came from relatives or from the monastery, though a small proportion, about 5 percent, were given by banks. Despite the sanbao policy, families with children in school were more likely to borrow money. Between 36 and 47 percent had loans ranging from 20 to several thousand yuan, the average being about 1,500 yuan.

Prosperity depended on owning land and livestock. The amount of land per household in both xiang ranged from two to forty-eight mu, with the average being around ten mu. About 90 percent of the families owned sheep, goats, cows, and or dzos. A much smaller proportion owned oxen or yak. Horses were found only in a third of households, usually one per family for transportation. Others had donkeys and pigs, and many had a few chickens. The difference between the two xiang was mainly in the number who had oxen (70 percent in Khartsen) and chickens (59 percent in Mag). Almost 40 percent of households had battery-powered tape recorders used for playing music and about a quarter of households had a hand- or foot-powered sewing machine. Loans affected the ability to pay school fees, whereas the number of animals affected children's contribution to household labor and the lack of household machinery, such as tractors and sewing machines, provided less opportunity for schools to capitalize on vocational training. One xiang's proximity to Lhasa gave it an advantage in acquiring information.

**Household Youths' Access to School**

Parents were asked about their oldest school-age child because there was no particular preference expressed as to which child was sent to school. Larger families would tend to educate a younger child before an older one. However, patterns varied depending on the age of the parents, the timing of the village's push into popularizing primary schooling, the form of marriage, and the gender of the children. Sometimes we would come upon a household with most members out working or at school, and either a grandmother whose children were already grown or a daughter or son, yet without children, would be interviewed.

Most parents agreed that the school's teaching of basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills could be of some benefit to the household. From their perspective, however, these skills could be acquired in one to three years. Though households had few if any reading materials, some said that the storing of barley for transport and sale could be improved if one could read labels and calculate costs. Parents were requested to provide one or more reasons why they sent a child to school. About a third associated schooling with attaining a better life, something they were told at meetings with the village and xiang leaders. In general, this meant that, with education, children could become better off than their parents. About a fifth of the parents in one xiang and a third in another indicated that having their child in school provided him or her with a path to becoming a local government official. Three reasons for sending children to school—becoming literate in Tibetan and mathematics, having a better life, and becoming a local official—were most often cited in the interviews as reasons to attend school. Few associated schooling with learning a manual skill. In both xiang, even fewer associated school with their child's being a good parent or with helping their child develop good morals, become a good citizen, or serve the public. Such notions are difficult to make sense of in communities where schooling is not only a relatively new phenomenon but also one that is culturally removed from traditional monastery education. Finally, only about 10 percent of xiang households responded that sending a child to school had to do with increasing the possibility to earn more income, revealing a significant difference between official and popular perspectives. In fact, between 10 and 20 percent indicated that sending their child to school was a way to avoid being fined by the authorities. Regardless of the financial penalties for not going to school, there were also household opportunity costs associated with school, in particular, the loss of household labor. For this reason parents usually ignored the penalties, because the other penalties were more costly. As one parent put it,

The child is useful because if a cow goes into another household's fields and eats or tramples crops, we will be fined for this and it can cause much hard feeling between families.

This view was expressed by more than one parent. In one case, a parent pointed out that a child can actually save the family money by staying home from school to keep the cows from grazing on another household's fields. Another family who had recently borrowed money for building a new home in the village was very concerned about paying off the loan. When asked whether having their son attend university someday would be a guarantee to a better family income, the mother replied

Our son can never attend university because we have no connections and no money. But, we have to send him to some schooling because many of the villagers close by here are starting to send their children for education. We hope he can learn a skill like carpentry.
Attendance and Discontinuation

It was easy enough to acquire the basic county-level statistics for school attendance. These were supplied by the Education Department, and on the first field visit, the enrollment figures were between 70 and 80 percent. However, it was more difficult to learn of the statistics for individual xiang and villages. Village schools sometimes had attendance figures for the village posted on a blackboard. As there was an incentive to report higher rates, these figures were not always reliable. In fact, the figures did not always correspond to the number of children at school that day. One of the ways to circumvent this problem was to examine the profile data gathered from the household interviews. Because each household filled out a profile sheet that contained the names, ages, and school enrollment status of each school-age child, it was easy to check these against official data. In fact, the household data indicated that the official data were not greatly exaggerated, even though the true figures were lower. This was probably due to the fact that the villages we were examining were not as well off as the average county villages. The problems with attendance figures in rural education in China are well known and are not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that official figures are more often inflated than attendance figures.

Xiang School Enrollments

Of the 153 families surveyed in Mag xiang, there were 103 with children of school age (between six and fifteen; see Table 6.1). Of the 150 families surveyed in Khartse xiang, there were 103 with children of school age (see Table 6.2).

There are a few points of note. First, the proportion of girls to boys in the population is much higher than in other parts of rural China, something probably due to less population control resulting in less infanticide. Second, the proportion of girls to boys in school is not far from the national average. Third, little more than half of school-age children were in school, a rate below official county-level figures. Fourth, there was little difference in the attendance rates across family structures, whether monogamous, polygamous, or polyandrous.33

Although compulsory schooling in China begins at six years of age, most village children in rural Tibet do not begin school until about two years later. Attendance increases after that. In the case of these two xiang, it reached full attendance for boys and not quite full attendance for girls (86 percent). In one xiang, for example, attendance peaked for boys at about age nine to ten and for girls at age eight to nine. Most children of school age begin at age eight

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<th>No. of school-age children in family</th>
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<th>No. of girls</th>
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Table 6.3

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<th>School-age children at school (%)</th>
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Table 6.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children attending school before age eight (%)</th>
<th>Children attending school at age eight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mag xiang</td>
<td>&lt;40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khartise xiang</td>
<td>&lt;15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and most have stopped attending by age fourteen. By age fifteen, only about a third of boys are attending, which is more than the figure for girls (see Tables 6.3 and 6.4).

Family Perspectives on Attendance and Discontinuation

Household Labor

The major reason children failed to attend school was their role in farming and livestock tasks. Families with school-age children were asked about household labor's effect on school attendance, and slightly more than half said their children never miss school for that reason. Yet, a little less than half said it sometimes, rather than frequently or always, affected their children's attendance. Nevertheless, it was very common to hear from teachers and officials that household labor responsibilities greatly contributed to school discontinuation (see Table 6.5).

As for the kind of work that children were doing at home that might interfere with school attendance, there was agreement between parents of the two counties about children tending livestock. Given the seminomadic nature of the household economy in the region, this was one of the most sensitive issues between the educational authorities and households. Livestock is a
Table 6.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ Replies Regarding Their School-Age Child’s Housework and Homework (%)</th>
<th>Mag xiang</th>
<th>Khartse xiang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Believe their children never miss school because of family labor</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe family labor affects their child’s school attendance</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe their child spends less than one hour on homework assignments</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents check child’s school assignment some or most of the time</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents do not understand their child’s homework some or most of the time</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents understand their child’s homework assignment most of the time</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe their child liked studying Tibetan most</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe their child liked studying mathematics most</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe their child liked studying Chinese most</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that Tibetan is the most useful subject</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

central element in the rural economy, and young children can be more helpful in this respect than in agricultural work. This was slightly more the case in one xiang, where about four in ten parents indicated their children were assigned such tasks. In fact, when interviewed separately, children reported much higher percentages than their parents. About three out of four students said they had to tend livestock. Thus, parents were more aware of the sensitivity of this issue than children and answered more conservatively. Observations bore out children’s responses. Because every household had livestock of various sorts, parents were not able to tend to both agricultural and husbandry work simultaneously.

There were also important differences between the two xiang in some cases. For example, more than half in one xiang said their children had to ship goods by cart, whereas only 1 or 2 percent in the other so indicated. It was common to see school-age children sitting on a horse-drawn cart in the poorer xiang, whereas the other xiang had a few motorized tractors that a school-age child could not handle. These small tractors, though not owned by most families, could be shared to handle goods transportation for several families.

Finally, fetching well water was also a task that villagers indicated their children needed to do from time to time, though not as often as tending livestock. Again, parents’ indications were conservative when compared with their children’s. We noted that girls and young women were generally entrusted with this task, since this related closely to cooking tasks.

The issue of household labor continues to be part of an ongoing issue among the village leaders, school principals, and household heads. A system was devised in which a group of households would pool their herding resources by rotating to a different family each day so as to free up children to attend school. Although this practice was used by some families, it did not become widely institutionalized, partly due to its being seen as out of step with the new household responsibility system.

**Homework and Housework**

Fewer than 10 percent of the children interviewed reported they had no chores to do, half of the rest said they had chores to do before going to school, and more than half reported they had chores to do on arriving home from school. The figures increased dramatically for nonschool days, with nearly all having to do household chores. Yet most parents did not think household chores interfered much with teacher-assigned homework, and children had a similar view.

Most children reported doing less than an hour of household chores on school days and that this did not interfere with class assignments, which they generally completed on time. They did not think these assignments took too much time or were burdensome. Most reported finishing their homework assignments on time. In fact, most parents said their child did less than an hour of homework a night, and, in separate interviews, students agreed. Thus, whereas 80 to 90 percent of xiang students reported getting assigned homework regularly by their teachers, more than half said they did less than an hour of homework a day and most of the rest said they did between one and two hours.

It appears that village teachers do act in concert in terms of assigning work to students and that schools adjust the days of class to the growing seasons and harvesting duties where necessary. Yet, although homework was not a problem insofar as it was jeopardized by home chores, attendance at school was. In fact, homework was largely symbolic in many ways. Village teachers’ time after school was also spent on agriculture or animal husbandry tasks, though this was less the case for the new teachers assigned from outside the region.
A high proportion of parents, roughly 70 percent, said they checked on their children's homework most or some of the time. Nearly as many parents did not understand the homework some or all of the time, with only a fifth to a third saying they understood it most of the time. In this sense, the parental support was more a ritual act rather than hands-on coaching.

School Subject Preferences

As for the content of the schooling offered, the ethnic culture of the region was reflected in parents' responses. Two-thirds to three-quarters of parents said their children liked studying Tibetan the most, followed by mathematics. Regarding whether their children liked studying Chinese the most, a smaller percentage agreed. Two-thirds to four-fifths believed that Tibetan was the most useful subject, much more than for mathematics and two to three times more than for Chinese.

Culture and Economy in Rural Education

The research indicates that rural Tibetans are now beginning to attend schools in greater numbers. Enrollment rates have been rising and will continue to do so. However, the data show that dropout rates are also rising along with the attendance rates and that they are rising faster than in other parts of rural China. The reasons include the fact that household labor is especially critical in the harsh climate of Tibet, but, more importantly, there are serious doubts about the benefits of schooling, in particular as it related to attaining jobs in the increasingly nonfarm wage-labor sector. School attendance is in some ways a ritual performed at the request of the authorities who themselves are pressured to get the abysmally low attendance rate figures to rise in order to satisfy Beijing's need to present its attendance rates at international meetings. There are also indications that more and more of the graduates of the inland Tibet schools are not finding urban jobs and are appearing in rural xiang-level schools as teachers, most without teacher training. Moreover, it is likely that before long, the wave of migrant labor that has entered Lhasa and other cities of Tibet will begin to spill over into the county seats and other rural townships, making local inhabitants compete even more for their livelihood in nonfarm occupations. In short, post-Mao reforms have freed Tibetan villagers to migrate to the cities; however, the ineffectiveness of their education restricts their ability to find jobs there.

Education in rural Tibet could hardly exist without the sanbao and other policies that help households afford school fees and opportunity costs. Yet, the sanbao policy is less of a special preferential treatment policy for rural Tibetans now that it was extended in 2003 by the State Council to poor rural areas throughout China. Like other autonomous areas in China, established to provide for the special situation of economy and culture of China's national minorities, Tibet needs special consideration in the area of education. Unless educational policies show how rural schools make Tibetans suitable competitors with outside migrants, they risk losing some of their legitimacy. The blame cannot be placed on Tibetans and their culture just because educational policies, including school subsidies, bilingual instruction, and boarding schools do not address the special situation of rural Tibet. To rural Tibetans, the school is a place that promises progress. Yet, there is little sense that the schools have become key institutions for helping Tibetans integrate into the market economy.

Schools are supported by the government with no fee burden to rural households. Moreover, points earned for attendance in some places may even bring money back into the household. Yet the opportunity cost is still steep for many families in terms of the labor it draws away from the largely poor rural household economy. Many families would like to keep at least one child at home to support the household economy consisting of both agricultural and herding tasks. Most important, it is less apparent to families that schooling represents a path to a better life through jobs acquired. This can be discouraging, as the schools are also the only place in the village without any religious symbols.

Thus, schools faces an uphill battle for the hearts and minds of a people who are struggling to pull themselves out of poverty while seeing migrants from elsewhere moving in to take advantage of infrastructural projects and other jobs for which they are poor competitors. Otherwise, attendance rates would be higher and dropout rates lower. Some families are aware that their children's attending school could lead to a position in the local county government or the neidiban (inland Tibet secondary schools). However, there were few apparent examples in the villages where this research took place. While families are coming to realize they have to make schooling part of their strategy for a better life, it is not easy for the average household to see the connection between a commitment to it and the rigors of daily life. The official ideology about the value of schooling makes its way to families through the village leaders, who struggle to convince parents to keep their children in school, using fines as a last resort.

Thus, it is left up to Tibetan schoolteachers to link state schooling to cultural values that support improved standards of living, community development, and jobs. Unfortunately, their training hardly prepares them for this role, and it is difficult to attract good teachers without more funding. As the graduates of the neidiban schools return and find urban positions much harder
to come by, they will increasingly be found teaching at rural township boarding schools. This could have a positive effect on the quality of rural education. However, graduates of teacher training colleges within the TAR may have advantages in terms of training received in teaching methods and Tibetan language skills.

Although the rural schools do provide a learning environment, there are significant gaps between the quality of teaching at the village, township, and county levels, with many villages still relying on minban teachers. Children who live in villages closer to the township school are advantaged, and children in households remote from village schools attend less frequently. Though the schools accord opportunities across gender, attitudes in school and home affect attendance rates, which drop off faster for girls than boys as they move up the school-grade ladder. Families are aware of equity issues and are concerned about the possibility of having to pay school fees in the future.

Although there is no doubt that poverty directly affects attendance and dropout rates, cultural factors cannot be totally discounted, especially because much of the content of school curriculum is divorced from community life. In short, rural Tibetans would probably give more support to state schooling, even accepting some of the acculturation sacrifices involved, if they could see a more direct economic return in the form of helping them attain good jobs that make them competitive with outsiders.

Of course, this might also hinder the possibilities for Tibetans to master the mainstream knowledge required to earn high university entrance examination scores. This is not to say that Tibetan cultural capital has lost its market value within the economic life of the TAR. As Tibetan educational levels rise and Tibetans improve in competing with migrants from other parts of China in the marketplace and government, there may very well be a renaissance of Tibetan culture that reconstitutes itself within the larger cultural environment of China and improves access to social networks attached to job allocation. In the meantime, educational policies and practices that emphasize Han cultural capital will be a central part of the education system. Unless Tibetans begin to achieve higher levels of success in education, they may continue in their tendency to believe that schooling does not outweigh the sacrifice of their indigenous cultural capital.

Notes

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1. This is more the case for Education in Tibet, published by the Education Commission of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), while National Minority Educational Studies is published by a national university, under the Ethnic Affairs Commission.


5. Catherine Bass, Education in Tibet: Policy and Practice Since 1950 (London: Zed Books, 1998). The educational policies adopted for ethnic minorities are carried out by the Department of Ethnic Minority Education under the State Ministry of Education (which became the State Education Commission in 1985 until 1998), with corresponding organizations and appointments made at the provincial (minzu jiaoyu chu), prefecture (minzu jiaoyu ke), and county levels (minzu jiaoyu yu).


7. Fish are also plentiful, and forest resources support traditional family-produced handicrafts and grain oil products. Other locally produced goods include boots, mattresses, perfume, and fertilizer.


9. An area of 4,517 square kilometers, with 180,000 mu of cultivated land, 37,180,000 mu of grassland, and 1,320,000 mu of forests. The population is 52,000, and there are 19 xiang and 169 villages.

10. The Nianqingtanggula and Zhiyongkala mountain ranges.

11. It belongs to the Pengbo River area. The entire county averages 3,900 meters above sea level. With 3,000 hours of sunshine a year and only 120 days without snow, it has a rainy summer and 491 millimeters annual rainfall. Lhundrup County, known in Tibetan as a naturally formed place, was established in 1857. In 1959, it was combined with Banduo to form Lhundrup County.

12. Xizang zizhixu cehujiu, Xizang zizhiqu ditu, p. 22.

13. On a field visit in September 2002, over 100 families from four villages of Mag xiang were called to the school to explain to visiting county education officials why at least one of their children was not being sent to school. Officials contend that because households do not have to pay school fees, all children should attend.


16. There were about 4,000 schools, 820 primary and secondary schools, 3,033 teaching points, 110 regular and vocational secondary schools, and 4 institutions of
higher education. There are 360,000 TAR students in all forms and levels of education and 19,000 teachers.

17. By 1998, the percentages of qualified teachers at different levels were: 63 percent in upper secondary, 72 percent in lower secondary, and 59 percent in primary school. In the meantime, 1,377 minban teachers would receive training, and some were converted to gongban (regular public teachers). A limit of 2,000 daike (substitute teachers) was set in 2000. There were plans to improve the teaching force so that between 1995 and 2003, 10,000 teachers would be trained. This included 559 in higher education, 400 in middle-level specialized schools, 750 in senior secondary schools, 2,600 in junior secondary schools, and 5,700 in primary schools. "Xizang zizhiqiu minzu jiaoyu 50 nian" (50 years of ethnic education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region) in Xia Zhu, Ha Jinxiong, and Abadu Wushouer, Zhongguo minzu jiaoyu 50 nian (Fifty years of ethnic education in China) (Beijing: Hongqi chubanshe [Red Flag Press], 1999). The rate of qualified teachers at the primary, middle, and upper secondary schools was 67 percent, 77 percent, and 75 percent, respectively.

18. Field notes from interviews of county officials.


20. Only 359 if those with disabilities were not counted. Many children with only slight disabilities were kept out of school.

21. The principal said he was twenty-seven years old and had attended the Lhasa Number 1 Middle School.

22. The sanbao policy was canceled in 1997 and then reinstated in 2002.

23. Footnotes. Only one person out of the 1990 population of 4,136 had a senior secondary school level specialized education. Eight had a junior secondary education, and 463 had some primary schooling.


25. Sukang School was the night school for adult literacy classes. Staffed by minban teachers, it was supported by the Xiang Women's Federation and the Village Committee. Newspaper reading was the primary method used. A fine of 5 mao was levied for homework not done. This money was used to keep the school open. In 1985, there were penalties of 15 yuan for missing the first semester of Primary One and 20 yuan for missing the second semester.

26. Primary school age is usually six to twelve in China. However, children in rural Tibet started later, and a graduate of primary school could be as old as seventeen years of age.

27. Initiated by Xizang zizhiqiu renmin zhengfu yinfa (The People's Government of the Tibetan Autonomous Region), Guanyu woqu zhongxiaoxuesheng xiangshou "sanbao" he zhuowujing de xianting guiding de tongzhi-zangzhengfa (Approved regulations concerning our region's primary and secondary school students receiving the three guarantees and scholarships), Document no. 30, 1994.

28. The other major policy with significant implications for rural education in the TAR is the neidi Xizang ban (inland Tibet secondary school), which provides for sending primary school graduates to inland secondary schools across China. The TAR government selects and recommends primary school graduates of ten to twelve years old for these inland schools. The majority of the students attend segregated classes in urban secondary schools. However, at least eighteen of the schools are only for Tibetan students. Reports say 1,300 primary graduates from the seven TAR prefectures were sent to sixteen classes or schools in inland cities in September of 1985. Ten times as many are sent now. These figures do not include all TAR students enrolled outside the TAR.

29. In the four xiang schools, a total of 2,610 yuan was collected.

30. Dzo is a yak-cow cross.

31. Oxen amounted to 70 percent in Khartse xiang and 32 percent in Mag xiang. Chicken amounted to 17 percent in Khartse xiang and 59 percent in Mag xiang.

32. Field notes from June 11, 1999.


