

---

Volume 30

Number 1 *Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and  
Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition No. 1 &  
2*

Article 17

---

10-1-2011

## Modern Education and Changing Identity Constructions in Amdo

Lilian Iselin

*University of Berne*, [lilian.iselin@relwi.unibe.ch](mailto:lilian.iselin@relwi.unibe.ch)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

---

### Recommended Citation

Iselin, Lilian (2010) "Modern Education and Changing Identity Constructions in Amdo," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/17>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# MODERN EDUCATION AND CHANGING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS IN AMDO

This paper examines identity constructions of young and educated Tibetans from a socio-cultural background of nomadic pastoralism in Amdo. It is based on qualitative research conducted between 2003 and 2008, comparing two generations of educated young people from a township in the Amdo region of Northern Sichuan in the People's Republic of China. It examines developments in education policies and practices as well as economic developments from 2003 to 2008 and argues that identity constructions of school students and graduates need to be analysed against the background of such changes. Conceptualisations of nomad identity are linked to nomadic pastoralism, and when students return to their home communities after graduation or during school vacation, they do not fit easily into categories of being a nomad. This paper argues that in 2003, these graduates, who were a marginal group, underlined the usefulness of education for pastoral production by constructing an identity that showed them to be of use for the pastoral community. In 2008, increased school enrolment, changed attitudes towards education, and the emergence of new and alternative sources of income in pastoral regions alongside pastoralism have widened the context for identity constructions. These new attitudes are less dependent on pastoralism as the basis of identity, as acceptance of new orderings has come into place that see non-educated people as the practising pastoralists while the educated are accessing and expected to access different sources of income while remaining linked to pastoralism by their upbringing, culture, traditions and language.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of a modern education system in the Tibetan regions<sup>1</sup> of the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in the north of Sichuan started after the 'peaceful liberation' and integration of Tibetan-inhabited areas into the newly founded communist People's Republic of China in the 1950s. The purpose of education then was to train members of the ethnic nationalities for work in the government administration. Since then, education and educational policies in Tibet have undergone tremendous change and have impacted Tibetan society in multiple ways.

Scholars of educational policies have focused on the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Their insights are not always transferable to Tibetan regions outside the TAR, as stated by Catriona Bass, who wrote the first comprehensive review on educational policies from 1950 to the 1990s (1998). Ellen Bangsbo has recently provided an admirable literature review on

educational policies and practices and has included research conducted outside the TAR (2004). Martina Wernsdörfer's work on continuity and change in the Tibetan educational system is the most recent, covering the period from 1951 to 2003 (2008). Several scholars conducting research in Tibetan areas in Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan have explored how Tibetan subjects are affected by educational policies and how they have affected Tibetan social spheres. Susan Costello has described the choices that Tibetans make in terms of cultural production (2002). An investigation of bilingual education in the context of cultural survival shows the historical and developmental complexities along Tibet's cultural margins (Kolås & Thowsen 2005). Janet Upton has provided an excellent case study of Tibetan medium education in Songpan County in Aba and its implications for Tibetans (1999a, 1999b). Fischer has outlined the complex relationship between education and economic development in Tibet which results in exclusionary dynamics especially for Tibetans educated in the Tibetan medium (2009). Wang's study adds to this by describing the competitive disadvantages Tibetans face from having to choose between Tibetan and Chinese-medium education (2007).

All of these studies show that education and the

---

1. I will use the terms "Tibetan regions" or "Tibet" interchangeably. It is not a political description of a nation state, but denotes all areas within the People's Republic that have autonomy status as a Tibetan province, prefecture, county or township. This status is conferred on any administrative unit in which a majority of the population belongs to one of the ethnic groups (*shao shu minzu*) in the classificatory system of the PRC.

accompanying choices contingent on education have had multiple effects on the social situation of Tibetans. Costello, who researched in Tongren County in Qinghai, found a prevailing opinion that education is training for one of the many secure positions in the government administration. Additionally, whether or not Tibetan school graduates manage to obtain such a position, a majority of parents from farming or herding backgrounds view their children as no longer suited to work in primary production such as laboring in the fields or herding (2002: 229). Such attitudes were also expressed by parents and students in the prefecture of Aba in Sichuan, where I conducted research from 2003 to 2008, and formed the background against which I formulated my research question in 2003. Education in the modern school system had created certain expectations of Tibetans from nomad areas in Aba prefecture who had continued their education beyond junior middle school.

Until the late 1990s, students who had followed the state-curriculum and graduated from university were automatically assigned a government job. However, the allocation system (Chin.: *fenpei zhidu*<sup>2</sup>) ended in 1998 when new regulations were introduced (see Kolås & Thowsen 2005:129). They took effect in Sichuan from 2000 onwards.<sup>3</sup> University graduates were now required to compete for jobs on the open market. Students of the Tibetan departments at universities were disadvantaged by their linguistic and educational background, which offered only limited employment opportunities (see Wang 2007). Further, there was the perception that job positions that had formerly been assigned by a state bureau could now only be obtained through connections or by investing funds so as to influence the selection of a candidate. An additional factor that limited the employability of some graduates was the lack of a state-approved graduation certificate.

Data from fieldwork conducted in 2003 showed that students who had graduated around the turn of the century had begun their education in the 1980s, at a time when schools in rural Tibetan areas were temporarily closed when the reforms under the Household Responsibility System took effect. The education histories of the graduates I interviewed appeared to indicate that students who had attended school in the 1980s and 1990s had been disadvantaged by poor quality and inconsistent instruction in rural primary schools and junior middle schools. However, others had benefited from educational policies that had set quotas for students from minority backgrounds and had thus been able to enrol in university programs despite very disrupted schooling histories. Thus, in 2003, the number of university graduates or graduates from other institutions of the tertiary sector had increased even as their prospects for employment shrank. This significantly lengthened the time between graduation and employment, a

time that appeared to take on liminal qualities for graduates.

Victor Turner expanded van Gennep's (1960) concept of liminality to wider social phenomena, and stated that liminality can be usefully applied to:

all phases of decisive cultural change, in which previous orderings of thought and behaviour are subject to revision and criticism, when hitherto unprecedented modes of ordering social relations between ideas and people become possible and desirable. (1978:2)

This description seemed to fit the situation that faced young people from nomad background upon returning to their home communities after graduation from a tertiary sector school. I examine this liminality in terms of questions of identity constructions of school graduates who belonged to the socio-cultural sphere of nomadic pastoralism and yet were not expected to resume the life of a pastoralist.

Turner applied the concept of liminality extensively in his later work and focussed on "interstructural situations" of people undergoing a rite of passage (1987: 4). Thereby, he reinterpreted and extended van Gennep's concept which had mainly been applied in the field of religious studies and been out of use by the time Turner applied it to rituals and their symbolic meanings. His theoretical standpoint of structure and antistructure was then adopted by numerous scholars in different fields. In education, Turner's concept of liminality was applied to such diverse aspects as teacher formation (Cook-Sather 2008), curriculum development (McWhinney & L. Markos 2003), analysis of students' developmental and psychological states (Bigger 2010), the Web 0.2 in the classroom (Land 2008), and ritual and performance in the classroom to enable learning through the creation of liminality (Carnes 2004). Pamela Bettis' use of liminality, which links individual experiences to societal and economic changes and sees liminality as a mediating factor for students who seek to make sense of such changes (1996: 108) comes closest to the way I apply liminality in this paper, as will be shown below.

#### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This paper compares research from two periods: 2003 and 2005 - 2008 conducted in Thangkor<sup>4</sup>, a township of about 6000 people in Ruo'ergai county of Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, which forms the southern most corner of Amdo. Amdo is part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and affected by all of its political, economic, historical and social changes. Given rural Tibet's potential for political dissent and unrest, conducting fieldwork there can be difficult (Upton 1999b; Fischer 2008:6). This applies more to some areas of Amdo than to others. Aba prefecture was opened to international travel and tourism in

2. Chinese terms are rendered in the pinyin of the People's Republic of China.

3. At the Southwest University for Nationalities, the graduating class of 1999 was the last one that benefitted from the job allocation system of the state (personal communication, student of the 1999 graduating class).

4. Thangkor: *thang skor* (place name). Apart from Thangkor (ch.: Tang ke), I have used Chinese place names. Where Tibetan terms (geographical or other) occur, they are rendered in Wylie and put in italics.

2004, and INGOs have had trouble obtaining permission for project work. Since 2008 and until the time of writing (2010) this has become virtually impossible. These are indicators of political complexities and sensitivities in Aba and reflect the extreme care that fieldworkers in Aba must take.

I lived, worked and travelled in pastoralist areas of Aba on and off between 1999 and 2008. I collected field data for research projects in 2003 and 2004 and again in 2005 and 2006. I applied the ethnographic tools of participant observation, informal and unstructured interviewing, and conversations in groups and with individuals. Research conducted in 2003 and 2004 included twelve in-depth interviews with graduates from tertiary institutions.<sup>5</sup> I also interviewed five high school students from Thangkor. I talked to unschooled nomads of the same age group, to village leaders, to teachers at the Thangkor primary school and to a retired government official who was to play a pivotal role in the development of education in Thangkor from 2004 to 2010.<sup>6</sup> Between 2005 and 2008 I had numerous informal conversations with middle school, high school and university students and parents from Thangkor and other nomad and farming townships of Aba. I regularly visited the school of Thangkor and conversed with teaching staff as well as the directorate of the school, of which the government official was part. Most of the data collection between 2005 and 2008 was conducted in Tibetan or Chinese, mostly without the aid of a translator.

Since the material available from the research period 2005 to 2008 has been collected in a manner that does not always meet the kind of methodological rigour I normally seek to apply, this is a preliminary study. It contains insights I have gained by having worked there for almost a decade. I remained in friendly contact with some of my interviewees from 2003 and observed the changes in their lives and in their hometown, especially in the field of education. Through my work as program officer for an international NGO I was responsible for educational programs in Thangkor and had access to information concerning developments at the Thangkor school. Information gained that way does not in any way compromise the school or people with whom I interacted, and much of it is publicly available. The findings of this paper are mainly based on data from my field research in 2003, from interviews conducted for research on a different paper in 2005 and 2006, on official government data available publicly, on the internet, and from my qualitative field observations and conversations in a private capacity.

In the following I examine how the liminal experience of being a graduate in the community of Thangkor changed from 2003 to 2007/08. I will set the identity constructions of young and educated nomads, contingent on that sense of liminality,

5. Ten of the twelve students were from Thangkor; nine were male, three female. Five interviews were conducted in English, all others in Tibetan with the aid of a translator, Tibetan from Thangkor. Of the graduates, four were unemployed, two did postgraduate studies, and six were employed or had temporary jobs.

6. Tragically, he lost his life in a traffic accident in the summer of 2010.

in the context of wider socio-economic and educational developments. I will compare the context and experiences of graduates from the beginning of the decade (approx. 1998 to 2003) with those of five years later (2006 – 2008). Graduates from 1998 to 2003 will be referred to as “generation 2003” and graduates and university students from 2006 to 2008 as “generation 2008”. In the first part of the paper I will summarise the socio-economic and educational context of 2003 in Thangkor and elaborate the strategies employed by graduates of that generation to construct an identity within their home communities. In a second part I will trace the educational and socio-economic developments from 2003 onwards and explicate how the context has changed for graduates within five years. In the last part I will compare and contrast identity constructions of the two generations and argue that liminality of “generation 2008” is of another quality and therefore that identity constructions have changed significantly.

## PERFORMING KNOWLEDGE AND CONSTRUCTING NOMAD IDENTITY

In 2003, Thangkor was a fairly unexceptional pastoral township of approximately six thousand people. The grasslands provide good grazing for the nomads’ herds of yak and sheep. Thangkor’s nomads are relatively rich compared to those of some of Amdo’s other pastoral areas. Wealth, however, did not necessarily translate into primary school enrolment or on transferral rates into the junior middle school.<sup>7</sup> Education has come at a cost and became progressively more cost-intensive beyond primary school level. Attitudes towards school education had a stronger effect on enrolment rates than availability of funds. Several educated Tibetans of Thangkor informed me that the knowledge acquired in school was seen by many nomads as irrelevant for the pastoral way of life.

Similar views were reported by Kolås and Thowsen, who researched along the “cultural margins of Tibet”, namely in Ganzi and Aba prefectures in Sichuan, Gannan and Tianzhu in Gansu, and in Guoluo in Qinghai (2005: 104) and by Costello (2002) who researched in Tongren County in Qinghai. According to her, the decision to enrol children was, as a general rule, based upon how much a family was willing to invest in enabling at least some of their offspring to find employment outside the realm of primary production, preferably in the government sector (2002: 229). Until 1999 this was a fairly secure prospect since university graduates were guaranteed a government job through an allocation system administered by a government office. Students who had paid for their own education and had enrolled in programs without passing the requisite entrance exams, however, were ineligible for such positions. Furthermore, the allocation system ended at the turn of the century. Since then, graduates have had to find a job through their own efforts, and, according

7. Enrolment rates in Thangkor were probably higher than average at the beginning of the twenty-first century due to some educational efforts undertaken by a township official who had invested in education, approximately from 1998 to 2002.

to several of my interviews, success was contingent on having the right connections and enough funds (see also Costello 2002: 229). The majority of these graduates faced prolonged unemployment until they managed to pass government exams<sup>8</sup> for positions, most of which were in undesirable rural and remote locations.

The schooling histories of my research group of ten graduates from Thangkor in 2003, who are a representative sample of “generation 2003”, showed a number of characteristics, of which two are noteworthy.

Firstly, more than half had started schooling in the early to mid 1980s. At that time schools were barely functional after a temporary breakdown of education during the implementation of the Household Responsibility System with its distribution of pastures and herds for private use.<sup>9</sup> In addition, in the wake of new directives concerning minority education instituted in 1980, many schools in pastoral areas of Aba started to operate in the Tibetan medium according to Upton (1999a: 137). However, this took some time to develop as there was not enough staff literate in Tibetan and available to provide education in the Tibetan medium (Upton 1999a:138). This was reflected in the schooling histories that I heard from my interlocutors<sup>10</sup>:

A. He went to Hongxing Vocational School for two years, then to Hongxing Tibetan Middle School for two and a half years. After that he attended the adult education program at the Northwest College for Nationalities in Lanzhou for two years. He graduated in 1999 and returned to Thangkor. He wanted to continue his studies, but the family situation did not allow for it.

B. She started school at the age of thirteen. She attended the Thangkor Primary School for two years followed by two years at the vocational school in Hongxing and three years of middle school education in Hongxing. She then attended the middle school in Hongyuan for one year before going to Lanzhou to join the adult education program at the Northwest College for Nationalities in Lanzhou for two years, followed by a two year senior course at the same institution.

C. He attended the Thangkor Primary School until grade three. Then, along with other students he took an examination and then was transferred to Ruoergai Tibetan Primary School

8. Chin: *gong wu yuan*

9. According to information obtained from teachers in Thangkor, teaching staff left their posts to be included in the distribution of herds and pastures for their family units. In addition, children were required to help with labor as labor division was now located in family units and no longer in work units.

10. Edited from interview notes from December 2003.

where he studied for three years. Then he was sent to the Hongyuan Tibetan Middle School for three years. Afterwards he attended the Maerkang Teacher Training School for three years.

Students of the 1980s seemed to change schools at whim, probably because of these developments. An additional factor was the lack of finances and support. Many of my interviewees maintained that they had pursued education out of their own wishes and that at times they were at pains to convince their parents and relatives to provide the necessary funds. Erratic schooling histories, in addition to a lack of finance or connections prevented some from obtaining a regular graduation certificate from an institution at the tertiary level – a prerequisite for a government position. As an alternative to the state-curriculum, some students enrolled into a university program by paying an entrance fee. Although these students attended the same classes as those who had passed the entrance exams for a bachelor's course, they did not obtain the same kind of graduation certificates. They lacked an essential document to be able to apply for a government job.

Secondly, the allocation of government jobs ceased to be automatic in the Tibetan Autonomous prefectures of Ganzi and Aba in Sichuan from 1999. There was a period of uncertainty as to how government jobs were to be attained. By 2003 new routines had been established. As these came into place, graduates and their parents realised that those who could not fall back on family relations or funds to manipulate the job application processes might be unemployed for a long time. Pressure to secure a job was intense and as graduates returned to their home communities all this weighed on them and on their negotiations for a place in their society, as they had to construct a new identity in pastoralist society.

As graduates of “generation 2003” returned to their home communities, they often did so with the awareness that they might be unable to secure a job that would fulfil their own as well as their community's expectations. Waiting for employment seemed to place them in a kind of liminal state that Turner describes as “ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (1974: 237). Graduates were faced with expectations from those who had financed their education and from the community to which they belonged and into which they no longer fit comfortably. They spent time in their home community without returning to pastoral activities, or only to a limited extent.<sup>11</sup> Their inability to secure a salaried position with a government office seemed to confirm assumptions that education was indeed a waste of time and money.

Against the background of such experiences, graduates of “generation 2003” who I interviewed sought to show performatively and discursively the usefulness of their education. Significantly, they linked education to the social and econom-

11. Male graduates generally did not or did only occasionally participate in pastoral production, while female graduates were more likely to go out to the pasturage with their family tent to help.

ic context of their pastoral community. In analysing the discourses and performative practices<sup>12</sup> of graduates of “generation 2003” I searched for commonalities, recurring themes, and explanations. Those seemed to emerge most often in contrast to what the graduates themselves perceived as the prevailing attitude towards education among nomads. They seemed to take up opinions of people in their home communities that education was leading away from pastoralism and was therefore irrelevant to it, only to project themselves and their experience of being educated as indispensable to the socio-economic context of pastoralists.

My interpretation of their discourses was that they positioned themselves as a first generation of school graduates and the pioneers of a pastoral “modernity” and thereby constructed an identity that did not separate them from their home communities but rather linked them and their kind of knowledge to the needs and requirements of their homes. Although their acquired knowledge had created shifts and disjunctures for the graduates regarding their role within the context of the nomad community, it was clear from many of my interviews that they were aware that pastoralism had been, and continued to be, transformed by development and modernisation. The graduates used these changes to negotiate and construct an identity. According to one interlocutor:

What we want is to become a modern animal husbandry economy. One has to learn and know scientific knowledge, scientific and modern skills and knowledge of how to take care of livestock. So, when people go to school, it doesn't mean that they go away from home. What they should do is to [facilitate] change in order to make a better living [for their home community].

The graduates of “generation 2003” had appropriated a discursive field that used education to assume for themselves a role in their communities. Thus, they placed themselves between a “backward” past and a “modern” future, conceptualising themselves and their experiences as the creative and innovative locus for defining what it meant to be a nomad in the contemporary world. A smart nomad is an educated nomad, one who re-evaluates practices of Tibetan pastoralists from the perspective of modern, scientific knowledge<sup>13</sup>.

This “generation 2003” of graduates has moved on. Even those who were without employment and exhibited at times even stronger accentuations of those performative tactics and discourses that I examined eventually found an occupation.

12. I am following a theoretical approach suggested by Johannes Fabian, arguing that ethnography is always informative as well as performative and that both interlocutors and ethnographers are implicated (1990: 9-12). See also Iselin 2004: 30-36.

13. I have elaborated on and analysed identity constructions of “generation 2003” far more exhaustively in Iselin (2004). In 2011, this research was re-edited and published in a collection of papers on schooling and Tibetan culture (Phundsog, 2011).

Many got married and started a family. Some moved to urban places. In short, their lives followed the usual trajectories. It is likely that, if asked, their discourses would still be comparable to those of 2003. However, the setting has changed and the need to show and perform the relevance of education in a pastoral setting has decreased. Some of the arguments which they sought to underline by performative acts they put forward and discussed then— especially when gathering together during vacations— either do not need to be argued anymore or are not argued in the terms that they were in 2003. The next part will trace educational developments in Thangkor since 2003 in order to elucidate how liminality may have changed for “generation 2008”— students and graduates of five years later.

### Educational developments in Thangkor from 2003 to 2008

Education in Thangkor had already received some attention from a township cadre between 1998 and 2001. A young, enthusiastic man whose origins are in Thangkor acted as vice-township leader for some years and became committed to improving the primary school and increasing school attendance. In 2003, therefore, Thangkor had a functioning primary school with up to fifty percent of school children proceeding to junior middle school after completion of six years of primary education. In 2001, when this young man moved on to a new job, Thangkor primary school counted about 380 students and taught the standard curriculum for primary schools in mathematics, Tibetan, Chinese and natural science<sup>14</sup> from first to sixth grade.

In 2003, a cadre of the prefectural government, the father of this young man, retired at the age of sixty-two. He had, however, no intention to enjoy his “well-deserved rest after many years of service to the government and people and retire to a city at lower altitude as is common among other cadres,” as he often reminded me. Instead, he took education in Thangkor under his wing. In summer 2003 he founded an Education Association. One point on its agenda was to advance education in Thangkor and to ensure that education became available not only to school age children, but also to those who had dropped out or never attended primary school. A host of activities started through this Education Association, made possible by its founder who had political clout and the support of the prefectural government.

By the time the new school semester started in August 2003, a class for twenty students aged thirteen or above started to operate. A two-year curriculum of Tibetan, mathematics and Chinese was designed by teachers of the Thangkor School to prepare students who had never gone to school or who had not completed primary education to take the test for admission to junior middle school. Under the lead of this retired government official, the township government and village leaders were tasked to ensure that all children of school

14. Tib.: *rang byongs*

age would be enrolled in school. Additionally, he initiated a literacy program and provided winter courses in basic Chinese and arithmetic for illiterate or semi-literate nomads.

Student enrolments started to rise in 2003 and kept rising at a fast rate. By 2004 there were about 600 students. In 2007 the number was 1200, counting not only primary school students, but also two classes of the two-year curriculum and a first class in a newly established vocational junior middle school. The infrastructure had to be modified to accommodate the rising number of students as well as the additional teaching programs; from 2005 onwards new classrooms and dorm buildings were constructed: a spacious library, a modern scientific laboratory, and a dining-cum-meeting hall. By summer 2007 the number of students had tripled, and the number of buildings on campus had increased accordingly. To compensate for the lack of teachers with teaching diplomas, university graduates without permanent jobs were recruited as temporary teachers. For some years the school resembled a construction site in more than one sense.

Due to the mediation of this retired government cadre, who had access to the prefectural governmental network, funds distributed by the central government to the prefecture and from there to counties and down to townships for educational purposes—teachers' salaries, infrastructure, teaching materials—did in fact reach Thangkor in a timelier manner. In addition to the government structure, this cadre had also access to a network of Tibetan and Chinese businesspeople, to local and international NGOs, and to foundations. His fundraising efforts were instrumental in making numerous infrastructural and educational projects possible.

The developments in Thangkor were very much in line with and even anticipated the policies that would be implemented all over the prefecture in 2006 and 2007, which came to be known under the shorthand “pu jiu”<sup>15</sup> – “standard nine” (my translation). This was a government-ordered program to implement nine years of compulsory education as had been stipulated in 1986 under the “Educational law for compulsory education” (Chin.: *Zhonghua gongheguo yiwu jiaoyufa*; see Wernsdörfer 2008: 253). As with economic development policies, its implementation was depended on local considerations.

The implementation of “pu jiu” in Thangkor and in other parts of the prefecture brought renewed dissemination of the idea propagated by the government that education is of relevance and indispensable for the development of a modern society. The ability of government programs to change popular attitudes and opinions about education is difficult to measure. However, “pu jiu” and accompanying activities would have signalled even to the most remote families that education was no longer a matter of personal preference.

Student enrolments were on the rise in most townships of Aha as a result of the renewed efforts of the education bureaus, the township government and accompanying gov-

ernment laws that made nine-year education affordable. The developments in Thangkor are, in that sense, not unique. However, I would argue, it happened at an accelerated rate and has changed the ratio between school attendees and the total township population to a remarkable degree in a relatively short time. Thangkor was also exceptional in that the effort was sustained and carried out by people from the area; the population was therefore more receptive to their efforts and more willing to implement educational policies.

Other parallel developments in the economic field need to be taken into consideration. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the state development program “Developing the Western Regions” (Chin: *Xibu Dakaiifa*) was taking effect and affecting developments in education. Their interrelation is crucial to understand dynamics that came to bear on Tibetan graduates. According to Fischer (2009), the implementation of competitive labor market reforms and educational campaigns accentuated ethnic exclusion in a context of underlying educational inequalities and political and economic subordination.

On a more tangible level, the “Developing the Western Regions” program brought infrastructure development in the form of new roads, a larger telecommunication network, the promotion of second and third sector industries, and other measures. Thangkor benefitted significantly from road construction. Infrastructure was improved to open the area to mass tourism. The buildings along the main street were renovated to be more attractive and to create new space for businesses, hotels and restaurants. Additionally, new housing was constructed to encourage sedentarisation, to facilitate market exchange and pastoral production for the market, and urbanisation. Due to these developments, rising numbers of nomad families acquired residential space in town. Some of them opened small private businesses such as shops, restaurants or guest houses. Policies intended to settle the nomads in towns and to turn pasturelands into nature parks (Chin: *tuimu huancao*), already implemented in pastoral areas in the neighbouring province of Qinghai, were only in the discussion phase in Thangkor in 2007.

These developments have, I suggest, impacted school attendance. Not only did urban development make it easy to send children to school since they could live with grandparents or relatives in town, but some of the developments may also have raised the awareness that the economic base of pastoralism was changing and that it may be a good survival strategy to invest in education to create access to other sources of income. Ellen Bangsbo, who researched community schools in Ganzi prefecture in Sichuan, and in Zeku in Qinghai, also found that nomads' attitudes towards education and sending their children to school seemed to be gaining in popularity, if only to accommodate government requirements and to acknowledge that literacy and mathematical skills had become essential (2008).

In 2008, then, we find a substantially changed environment in terms of modern education in Thangkor in compari-

15. Abbreviation of (Chin.) *pu ji jiunian yiwu jiaoyu* (nine year compulsory education).

son to 2003. Nearly a hundred percent of school-aged children are attending school. This change is most visible on a normal weekday during the school term in the administrative center of Thangkor, where the school is located. The following is an edited description from my field notes made in June 2007:

At around noon at the main crossroad of Thangkor. Motorbikes are parked in front of teahouses, shops and repair shops. Cars and minivans are parked along the road. Motorbikes go up and down the streets. People are sitting in teahouses, men and women on their way to complete their shopping. Shopkeepers sit outside in the sun waiting for customers. I sit in a teahouse and observe the street scene.

In the background the school bell is going to announce the lunch break. In no time the streets are being crowded by students. Groups of children of all ages walk by the teahouse in which I am sitting. Some stick their heads through the door to have a peek at the film that is shown on TV. As I step out of the teahouse, I see another group of children led out of the school by their teacher in columns of two, followed by yet another group, and another group. The younger students are brought up to the crossroad, whence some turn right, others left and others go straight. The smaller children keep on walking in columns; the elder ones seemingly are allowed to walk as they please. Within minutes the streets are crowded with school children. They play games and tease one another as they go home. They greet uncles and aunts as they walk past. For a time the rhythm of the town has altered.

The last sentence summarised the change that has happened since 2003. Even back then school children would walk past teahouses on their way home during lunch break or in the evening, and the school bells or the sound of children chanting the Tibetan alphabet could be heard. However, the sheer increase in numbers from 380 in 2003 to 1200 in 2008 means that one does not simply see a few schoolchildren; the streets are momentarily filled with schoolchildren and the dynamics—‘the rhythm of the town’—alters perceptibly. This is also apparent in remarks of the elder generation and in some of my former interlocutors. An educated young Tibetan in my first research group remarked: “I never knew that Thangkor had that many children of school age. It took me totally by surprise.”

What does this changed context do to the identity constructions of university students and graduates from Thangkor in 2008? Is their experience of returning to their home community after graduation still a liminal one? The next part

will attempt an analysis.

## SHIFTS IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS FOR THE EDUCATED OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Developments in Thangkor have given school education and students center stage at least in the dynamics at work in the administrative town where the school is located. “Generation 2003”—my research group from 2003—has been followed by graduates who started schooling in the 1990s. This “generation 2008” is made up of educated young people who return to their home communities during school vacations and after graduation. They either graduated between 2005 and 2008 or are still attending university or senior high schools. Their numbers are comparatively small in contrast to the hundreds of primary and junior middle school students who crowd the streets in Thangkor on a typical school day.

“Generation 2008” is not the result of the educational development that started under the guidance of the retired government official in 2003. Rather, they had started their schooling before the year 2000, at around the time when some members of “generation 2003” had finished their education and had begun to return to Thangkor or had gone elsewhere in search of or waiting for a job. When “generation 2008” entered school in the mid to late 1990s, school enrolment was far from a hundred percent and drop-out rates were high<sup>16</sup>. Primary school was more or less free, apart from fees for textbooks and a contribution for food and accommodation and miscellaneous expenses<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, there was an exponential rise in cost between primary and secondary school education that made it prohibitive for many families. Attitudes among nomads who did not see education as a useful economic investment for the future were prevalent. In that sense, the background of schooling for this group of students and graduates is comparable to that of “generation 2003”.

However, the school curriculum had by the time of their school entrance taken on some consistency. A schooling system that ensured six years of primary school education with a basic curriculum was in place in the late 1990s after which students whose families were willing and who could afford to do so, could go on to junior middle school, senior high school, and university. Schooling histories of individuals of “generation 2008” therefore, have become more stable than that of “generation 2003”. Students who passed the entrance exams were able to follow the state curriculum that would eventually provide them with graduation certificates and the papers that were required to apply for jobs in government or the private sector, even after the abolition of the job allocation system.

“Generation 2008” is gaining a different kind of visibility from the graduates from “generation 2003”. As before, they are most visible in their home communities during school vacation. During the school term they study at institutions

16. Personal communication, former township official, 2001.

17. Although school fees were not exorbitant, families with no or little ready cash could not readily afford sending a child to school.

that are some hundreds of kilometres away. When students and graduates from “generation 2008” return to their pastoral home during vacation or after graduation, they have to fit into a very different scene. They are now part of a group that has started to shift the ratio of student population to the total population of the township. In 2007 there were, according to the Thangkor school, 1200 students enrolled. Those who study at the secondary level away from home and university students may add an additional two to three hundred to this number<sup>18</sup>. In total, I estimate the student population at over twenty percent of the total population of Thangkor, a figure that will need to be substantiated by more detailed fieldwork.

Graduating students of “generation 2008” are part of a quite large group of students from educational institutions of the secondary and tertiary level on one hand, and of an even larger student population of the primary and junior middle school in their township, on the other. They are the seniors of this new, substantial segment of society. With this, the context for identity constructions has shifted. Liminality as a state in betwixt and between, in which all normal ordering is suspended and the person or group of people has to go through a process to make sense of who they are and how they relate to their community, seem to be far less pronounced. The discourses and performative practices of graduates have shifted. There is no longer a need to show and perform the importance of education and its relevance for a pastoral community. The education of school-aged children has become the norm within only a few years and the number of students and graduates who find employment even after a wait of several years is growing<sup>19</sup>. Within current development policies, nomad families may sense the need and even the urgency to prepare for a future in which pastoralism has become only one, and possibly a minor, source of income. Against such a changed background, the discourses and social practices of graduates and students to negotiate an identity have altered.

In earlier research I examined some incidents and events

---

18. This is a very rough estimate. Although I interacted on a regular basis with a number of middle school and university student and I also visited the Tibetan Junior Middle School and Senior High school attended by most students from Thangkor, I never sought to obtain exact figures of how many students from Thangkor were actually in junior middle school, senior high or universities. With a total of 200 primary school students in 1998, 380 in 2003, and 1200 in 2007 graduation classes would have grown accordingly. Moreover, since the implementation of “pu jiu” junior middle school education became more affordable and presumably the percentage of students to proceed to junior middle school would have exceeded the previous rate of 50 percent. However, this may only have delayed drop-outs for financial reasons for three years until senior high school. The estimate of two to three hundred students is based on qualitative field observation and estimations of transferral rates to high school and university.

19. Of the 14 graduates that I interviewed in 2003, a majority had a job either in the educational sector, in the government administration, or in the private sector. Graduates of the following years were either employed on a temporary basis or, if they had graduated from a teachers’ college, through a fixed employment absorbed into the growing teaching body of the Thangkor primary school. Others found employment by passing the exam for government officials (*gong wu yuan*). Yet others (and this is a trend that needs scholarly attention) proceeded to postgraduate studies to postpone the painful search for employment.

in relation to “generation 2003” which I analysed as performative acts. I argued that the graduates used them to negotiate their identity and to prove the validity of their knowledge for the nomad society. Applying the same kind of approach within the contexts of 2007 and 2008, I cannot but observe a shift in such performances. It appears that to establish a link to the pastoral has decreased in importance. Students are no longer a marginal group and do not need to defend their place in society in the same way. However, new dynamics have evolved that find expression in different kinds of performances. One event may serve as an example:

It occurred in the winter vacation in January and February of 2006. University students arranged a New Year performance.<sup>20</sup>

Students are the hope and future of their hometown. To serve our township and give something back we organised a cultural performance. (...) This cultural performance was for the people of our community, for our families and friends and had as its aim to maintain local traditions and restore such cultural customs that had gotten distorted.<sup>21</sup>

For this purpose they set up a “student association” led by three male and three female students. Under their guidance, students of secondary and tertiary level discussed, planned and staged a New Year performance. This performance for the benefit of the community created a platform on which the students could exhibit skills they had acquired through their schooling. The New Year programme they prepared is an extension of what students learn to do in school—to stage performances for parents and teachers on special occasions. The program may not have been that surprising. However, I interpret the organising of an association—with a structure and with members, with rights and duties, the discussions that had to take place to negotiate a program and what can be considered as “local culture” or “restoring local customs”—a performance of “knowledge”. This performing of “knowledge” occupies a space different from that of the earlier generation. “Generation 2008” presents something that can be enjoyed by the home community, but does not necessarily have a direct benefit or carry some usefulness for pastoral production.<sup>22</sup> It indicates a shift that knowledge attained through education does not need to be shown to be fitting into nomad categories. Instead, they seem to be at liberty to show this knowledge as different, as differentiating them from

---

20. The staging of a New Year performance was repeated in 2007 and possibly in 2008. The information I have from one of the students involved does not make it explicit.

21. Personal communication, university student, female, December 2009.

22. The space that these students access is one that fits into the broader cultural categories of Tibet. They perform “traditional culture” and I heard that this category led to discussions among students from several schools and with different understandings of its meaning.

the pastoral field.

In comparison, “generation 2003” also performed during the New Year season, but the knowledge they performed was more practical, showing the relevance of education in practical dealings with the modern market in which nomads found themselves. In 2003 a group of male graduates hired a truck and went to Chengdu or a nearby place to buy vegetables, fruits and other foods that are in high demand just before New Year celebrations, to sell them at fair prices in their home communities. Due to the market demand the regular (mostly Han) vendors sold their wares at inflated prices in Thangkor. The graduates therefore outwitted the local vendors and successfully completed a market transaction that benefitted their community and brought themselves some financial profit. This underlined what they argued discursively in conversations among themselves, with other nomads in their home community or with me as the ethnographer that education was a prerequisite to be able to live successfully as nomads in a modernising world.

## CONCLUSION

The shift in the liminal experience of graduates does, I would argue, indicate that the socio-economic changes in the pastoral society of Thangkor have resulted in new orderings of social roles. Bettis, who researched the liminal experiences of students in a postindustrial urban setting in North America, explained them by the uncertainties and the shifts that were happening in a society that was economically in a liminal state between deindustrialisation and the transition to a service-oriented economy (1996: 106).

The concept of liminality addresses the uncertainties in which these students exist, both in their daily lives and in the economic and social context of the city and society in which they reside. The old rules of the industrial order now longer apply, but the new rules of a postindustrial society, if there are any, are not yet in place. (1996: 11)

Tibetan pastoralist societies are far from being industrial, much less postindustrial. However, the economic changes they are undergoing are similarly significant, resulting in uncertainties and requiring new social orderings. Arguably, similar processes can be observed in Han Chinese communities or in that of other ethnic groups in China. Liminality in this sense may be a universal experience that can be equally applied to urban North American communities, to rural and remote areas as in the case of Tibetan pastoralists, to urban contexts along the east coast of China, to rural Han communities in the hinterland of China, or to any other context of a society undergoing transformation. How this liminal experience is played out, however, is likely to differ by their socio-cultural and geographical contexts.

In the pastoral community of Thangkor, education and the possibilities of education were not yet, or else very narrowly defined in 2003. This created or increased the experience of liminality for graduates at the beginning of the decade and led to identity construction that sought to establish a link to

the pastoral—to the existing social order with its established rules. Towards the end of the decade not only has education developed significantly, but also economic changes, though ongoing, seem to be more consolidated and new orderings are gradually developing. Shifts in the socio-economic context in which pastoralists live have therefore resulted in shifts of identity constructions of school graduates in their home context. Education has become less contested and school attendance is now the norm, not the exception. To graduate and to return home after graduation (or during school vacation) in 2008 seemingly does not involve a liminal experience, or not in the same sense as in 2003. Turner states that the liminal allows for a new ordering of roles and relations in an intensive field of change. It seems that in Thangkor, at least to some degree, this reordering has happened. Educational developments in Thangkor—which were exceptional in comparison to other townships, because they happened at an accelerated rate and were carried by the energetic lobbying by a local person—changed the context within which graduates as well as pastoralists situate education and its role in society. Economic developments have geared pastoral communities increasingly towards market-based production, towards urbanisation and diversification of income. Animal husbandry, as the primary means of production for pastoralists, is still the main occupation of a majority of the population. However, by accommodating education and its attendant expectations of alternative income generation to pastoralism, the pastoral community of Thangkor is gradually moving toward a more diversified society in which new orderings have become possible. The non-educated are the practising pastoralists, while the educated are accessing and expected to access different sources of income while remaining linked to their pastoral home community by upbringing, culture, traditions and language. A reordering of understandings of social roles that allows for diversity is creating a wider space for identity constructions within the closely-knit web of a society that identifies itself mainly through its economic base of pastoralism. The need for graduates to negotiate a role and identity that shows a link and relevance for the pastoral economy is becoming obsolete. As this pastoral community is changing and adjusting to new development in the educational, economic and political sphere new spaces and opportunities open up for the educated and their constructions of identity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research paper was presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Association of Tibetan Studies, 15 – 20 August 2010, Vancouver. I wish to thank first and foremost my assistants, informants and friends from Thangkor for their trust and willingness to share their experiences with me. Furthermore, I wish to thank Andrew Fischer for his helpful insights and comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and also my anonymous reviewer of a later draft. All remaining mistakes and inconsistencies are mine. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Danzin, who played an outstanding part in the development of education in Thangkor.

## REFERENCES

- Bangsbo, E. 2004. *Teaching and Learning in Tibet: A Review of Research and Policy Publications*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. "Schooling for knowledge and cultural survival: Tibetan community schools in nomadic herding areas." *Educational Review*, 60/1
- Bass, C. 1998. *Education in Tibet: Policy and Practice since 1950*. London & New York: ZED Books.
- Betties, P.J. 1996. "Urban students, liminality, and the postindustrial context." *Sociology of Education* 69 (2): 105-125.
- Bigger, S. 2010. "Threshold, liminality and fruitful chaos: revolutionary change in education." <<http://eprints.worc.ac.uk/834/>> (Accessed 20 December 2010).
- Carnes, M.C. 2004. "The liminal classroom." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51 (7).
- Cook-Sather, A. 2008: "Newly betwixt and between: Revising liminality in the context of a teacher preparation program." *Anthropology and Education* 37 (2): 110-127..
- Costello, S. E. 2002. "The economics of cultural production in contemporary Amdo." In T. Huber, ed., *Amdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fabian, J. 1990. *Power and performance: Ethnographical explorations through proverbial wisdom and theatre in Shaba, Zaire*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Fischer, A. M. 2008. "Subsistence and rural livelihood strategies in Tibet under rapid economic and social transition." *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 4: 1-49. Available at <<http://www.thlib.org?tid=T5569>> (accessed 23 September 2010).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. "Educating for exclusion in Western China: Structural and institutional dimensions of conflict in the Tibetan areas of Qinghai and Tibet." *CRISE Working Paper No. 69*.
- Harell, S. 1996. "The nationalities question and the primi prblem." In M. J. Brown, ed., *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- Iselin, L. 2004. "Smart Nomads? Modern education and the construction of *Drokwa* identity on the Tibetan plateau." MA thesis, London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Kolås, Å., and M. P. Thowsen 2005. *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Border*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.
- Land, R. 2008. "Social technologies in higher education: Authorship, subjectivity and temporality." Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning. Available at [http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Land\\_675-681.pdf](http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2008/abstracts/PDFs/Land_675-681.pdf) > (Accessed 20 December 2010)
- McWhinney W. and L. Markos, 2003. "Transformative education: Across the threshold". *Journal of Transformative Education* 1 (1): 16-37.
- Miller, D. 2000: "Tough times for Tibetan nomads in Western China: Snowstorms, settling down, fences and the demise of traditional nomadic pastoralism." *Nomadic Peoples* 4: 83-109.
- Phundsog, N.B. 2011. *Schooling and Tibetan Culture in Transnational Context*. Irvine, CA>: University of California.
- Turner, V. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. "Betwixt and Between: The liminal period in rites of passage." in L. C. Mahdi, S. Foster and M. Little, eds, *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of masculine and feminine Initiation*. Open Court Publications.
- Turner, V. and E. Turner, 1978. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Upton, J. 1999a. *Schooling Shar-khog: Time, Space and the Place of Pedagogy in the Making of the Tibetan Modern*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Washington.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999b. "The development of modern school-based Tibetan language education in the PRC." In G.A. Postiglione, ed., *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling and Development*. London: Falmer Press.
- Van Gennep, A. 1960. *The Rites of Passage.*, London: Routledge & Keagan Paul
- Wermsdörfer, M. 2008. *Experiment Tibet: Felder und Akteure auf dem Schachbrett der Bildung*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.