



Education Change and Development in Nomadic Communities of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)

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Abstract

This research examines the challenges and accomplishments of popularizing basic education in nomadic regions of Tibetan Autonomous Region. The article provides a background and case study of Nyerong county in northern Tibet. The authors note the rapid progress but also point out that there needs to be more of a focus on improving the learning environment of school life by fostering creativity and the application of relevant knowledge.

Keywords

basic education, nomadic regions, Tibetan Autonomous Region, access, equity, learning environment

In recent years, China has taken more intensified efforts in providing basic education in more remote communities. While rural areas have achieved impressive progress in popularizing basic education, nomadic areas are still more or less lagging behind. Despite less than one fifth of the TAR population being nomads, the provision of education for nomads in Tibet is significant for China's initiatives regarding to Education For All (EFA), inclusive development and national integration.

The major nomadic regions of Tibet are mainly in the west and northwest and account for most of TAR's land. This area includes eastern Ngari and western Nakchu and has one of the lowest population densities in the world, about 0.61 person per square kilometre. Among TAR's 73 counties, 14 are nomadic and 24 semi-nomadic. Unfortunately, TAR's statistics only distinguish between urban and rural areas, and does not further differentiate between farming and nomadic areas. Therefore, when reviewing the available data, we have to consider Nakchu and Ngari Prefectures as approximately equal to nomadic areas, and make other prefectures, except Lhasa, generally equal to rural areas.

Studies have shown that providing educational service for nomads is a huge challenge to the institutionalized state schooling in various contexts, as exemplified in Nigeria, Eritrea, Mongolia and India Studies (Ezeomach 1983; Tahir 1991; Tahir 1998; Woldemichael 1995; Kratli 2000; Westphal-Hellbush & Westphal 1974; Bose 1975; Agrawal 1992; Vira 1993; Hoon 1996; Gooch 1998). Providing education to nomads in TAR is equally challenging and deserves attention. Yet, except Zhu's study (2008) on the impact of the *sanbao* (3 Guarantees: food, clothing, and lodging) policy in nomad areas of TAR, very few research reports pertaining to nomadic education in TAR could be found to date.

What changes and developments have happened in promoting school access to nomadic communities of TAR? What continues to pose challenges to state schooling in these communities? This paper aims to grapple with these questions with a case study in Nyerong, a nomadic county in Nakchu prefecture. We conducted two field visits to Nyerong. The three of us conducted fieldwork in the summer of 2007, and one of us returned to conduct more fieldwork in the fall of 2010. Each time, a few schools were visited, and conversations were conducted with school principals, teachers and students. Also, archival data were collected and meetings were organized with officials from the County Educational Bureau.

As one of the first initiatives in the field, this paper begins with an overview of basic education in two major nomadic prefectures of Nakchu and Ngari. It identifies some perceived obstacles that hinder education provision in these two nomadic prefectures. Finally, it presents a case study of educational developments in Nyerong county. Specifically, it focuses on changes in school access in Nyerong, and provides a further analysis of the challenges that have to be tackled in the near future. This paper argues that educational provision in Tibet's nomadic communities has increased rapidly in the past decade. However, there is a continued need to promote a higher quality of classroom learning styles that foster intellectual innovation and creative thought.

Basic Education in Two Nomadic Prefectures: Nakchu and Ngari

Basic Education in Nakchu

By 1978, Nakchu had increased its provision to 72 public primary schools with 648 teaching and administrative staff and 7,100 students. It also had 1,360 community-run teaching points and schools with 1,359 teachers and 27,424 students. Beyond that, there were two middle schools with 52 teachers and

Table 1: Comparison Table for School-age Enrollment rate in Counties of Nakchu Between the Year of 1995 and 1999 (%)

	1995	1999
Nakchu	19.2	79
Biru	24.6	73
Senja	27.7	61.73
Shuanghu District	19.7	53
Lhari	20.1	51.95
Nyerong	12.5	41
Nyima	29.7	48.97
Amdo	28.9	46.6
Bangoin	26.48	42
Sok	55	61.4
Pachen	26.7	27.7
Prefecture Average	39.2	60

Source: Wang 2000.

887 students, and a trade school with 19 teachers and 127 students (General Office of TAR People's Government 2002). In 1984, Nakchu increased the number of public schools and introduced the *sanbao* (~~Three Guarantees, including food, lodging, clothes~~) policy. The Pachen County Middle School was established in 1984 (The Compiling Committee for The Educational Chorography of TAR 2005) and by 1988, there were 194 schools in total, including 70 public primary schools, 120 private primary schools, three middle schools and one teachers college, with a total enrollment of 9,595 (Tsaidan 1991). The Prefecture Vocational Secondary School was set up in 1997. By the Century's end, 40 townships had achieved the goal of three-year compulsory education (Wang 2000). There were 138 schools in total, including a vocational secondary school, 10 middle schools and 127 primary schools. The total enrollment was 34,300 with 64 percent of school-age children enrolled (General Office of TAR People's Government 2002). However, only 66 percent of teachers in primary schools and 83 percent of those in middle schools were qualified (A Workgroup of TAR Education Ministry 2000).

Basic Education in Ngari

In 1986, barely 16.1 percent of school-age children in Ngari were enrolled (Jiandzan 2001). According to the 1989 TAR Commission of Science and

Technology (CST) statistics, there were 8,624 school-age children between 7 and 11-year-old in Ngari, but only 1,492 were enrolled, a rate of 17.30 percent and a retention rate of 80.6 percent (Tsaidan 1991). In 2001, there were 58 schools, 13 complete primary schools, 25 junior primary schools, 12 teaching centers, three junior middle schools, one complete middle school, and a kindergarten. In contrast to Nakchu, about 90 percent of the teachers in middle schools and 86 percent in primary schools are qualified (Jiandzan 2001).

School Access in Nakchu and Ngari

The enrollment rate for the TAR in 2000 was 85.8 percent. The enrollment rates were 64 percent for Nakchu and 69 percent for Ngari, far behind Lhasa with 97 percent (Tsaidan 1991). In a 2005 article, Wangdui of the TAR Education Ministry stated, "The enrollment rate of school-age children in nomadic areas fell 10 to 20 percent behind the TAR average. Eleven counties which could not achieve the goal of nine-year compulsory education by 2007 were entirely nomadic counties" (Wangdui 2005). Admittedly, four semi-nomadic counties in Nakchu managed to popularize nine-year school access, while two nomadic counties in Shigatse failed to do so in 2005 (The Compiling Committee for The Educational Chorography of TAR 2005).

Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable leap in the figures on school access in both Nakchu and Ngari, especially between 2000 and 2006. These years are marked by a consolidation of resources, increased donations from partner provinces, and the building of new schools. Moreover, the "sanbao" policy that provides free schooling along with food and clothing for boarding school

Table 2: Comparison Table of Enrollment Rate of School-age Children (%)

	Regional Average	Nakchu	Ngari
1989	53.12	17.94	17.30
2000	85.8	64	69
2001	87.2	—	72
2002	—	65	82.9
2003	91.8	73	81
2004	94.7	86	—
2006	96.5	96	89

Sources: Tsaidan 1991; The Compiling Committee for The Educational Chorography of TAR 2005; Jiandzan 2001; Wang 2000; TASS 2004.

students was sustained and improved in recent years. With particular respect to donations and other support from inland provinces, primary school and high school buildings have been newly built or renovated (General Office of TAR People's Government 2002).

In recent years, efforts to promote basic education have been intensified. According to official accounts, all counties in TAR, including those in nomadic areas, have already popularized nine year compulsory education in 2009. The actual situation is still debatable, but it is clear that remarkable steady progress have been made in promoting school access in nomadic communities.

Perspectives in Nakchu and Ngari

There are a number of reasons why the promotion of school access has been a challenge in nomadic regions. First, Nakchu and Ngari are high altitude nomadic areas. Together, Nakchu and Ngari account for 64 percent of TAR. TAR's population in 2004 was 2.59 million, but Nakchu's (387,200) and Ngari's (77,800) population accounted for only 18 percent of that. The population density, respectively, is 0.92 and 0.23 persons per square kilometre, far below TAR's average of 2.16 persons per square kilometre. Needless to say, altitude and population density make for adverse conditions when popularizing basic education. While the service radius for primary schools in rural areas of TAR is 15 to 20 kilometres, it can be 100 to 150 kilometres for primary schools in nomadic areas, and 150 to 200 kilometres for the county junior middle schools. Therefore, over 95 percent of students and teachers need to board at school (TASS 2004: 254). All this makes it difficult to attract good teachers to remote nomadic schools for long periods, and those that do stay on find that the lack of information access and communication takes its toll on the quality of their work (Liu 2007).

Second, labor demands may affect school access. While almost all rural households have livestock, their herds are tiny in comparison with that of nomads. Although the current practice in rural areas is for several families to herd one another's livestock, this is not always feasible in nomadic areas. A year in nomadic areas is generally divided into life in a home base campsite where they spend most of the year and a Fall pasture site where they move with their animals and tents for 3 to 4 months. While at their home base site, they also sometimes move some of their livestock to satellite tent camps to provide better pasture. Per capita livestock can range from 15 to 70 (Wangdui 2005). Throughout the year, school age children would be useful for herding as

nomad families typically divide their livestock into 2 to 4 herding units, for example, their milking sheep/goats, non-milking sheep/goats, female yak, stud sheep/goats.

Third, nomads have traditionally not held a very positive view of the commodity economy and professional businessmen and traders. Traditionally, they did not measure wealth with money or cash, and instead perceived differences between wealth and poverty by their number of livestock and especially women's clothes. They may have had flocks of cattle and sheep, but were not cash rich. In the new China where goods can be bought with money and they can receive cash for their products, they fully understand cash and animals are measures of wealth. If they want to have money in the bank they could simply sell some of their animals. Only some nomadic families live near areas rich in caterpillar fungus and make a fortune selling Cordyceps (a type of fungi). Most nomads seldom migrate to urban areas for work, and those who do are handicapped by language barriers and custom taboos, as well as a lack of start-out cash and of work skills. Sending children away to school can affect household production in the sense that other family members would have more work to do. Despite the "Three Guarantees" policy that provides free schooling, accommodations, and food, parents may have to provide children with some pocket money. As schooling becomes more widespread, nomads calculate the value of school attendance against the probability that schooling will lead their children to become a cadre, county official, or go on to university (Du 2006).

Fourth, it is still difficult for nomads to recognize the long term value of schooling. They send their children to schools with the hope they might become cadres and have stable salaries, rather than with the expectation they will gain useful knowledge that will spur the household economy (Norbu 2005). Albeit, parents do mention that knowledge of basic arithmetic and literacy skills which could be acquired in a few years of schooling. Education officials, school principals, and classroom teachers visit families to persuade them of the value of the new government initiatives in education, usually pointing out the long term benefits to the community as a whole and to their children as part of the next generation. Poorer nomadic families find such notions difficult to understand as they struggle to sustain a basic standard of living. Households that have gained some benefit directly from specific government initiatives for land use, herding rights, flood relief, health care etc., are more likely to adhere to the plea of local leaders to send children to school.

Fifth, the language of instruction in rural and nomadic primary schools is Tibetan. However, it abruptly changes to Chinese in junior middle schools,

despite the fact that there is virtually no Chinese language environment in Tibetan rural and nomadic communities. The capacity for Chinese language teaching in rural and nomadic areas is limited and generally poor (Chen 2006; N.A. 2005). After completing primary school, nomadic students might not even be able to have a simple Chinese conversation, or read basic Chinese sentences. The medium of instruction issue is highly complex and differs across different Tibetan areas (Upton 1999; Postiglione, Ben Jiao, and Manlaji 2007). There are many multilingual places in the world where the medium of instruction becomes an emotive and politicized issue and the same is the case for Tibetan regions (Nyima 1997; Bass 1998; Upton 1999). Few Tibetans advocate not learning any Chinese and most realize that Chinese is needed in a market economy. Dual track education (Tibetan and Chinese) is generally available in the urban areas, but after the primary school grade three, there is a shift toward Chinese as the medium of instruction, with only Tibetan language and literature courses taught in the Tibetan language (Pingcuo 2005). From an educational point of view, unless a student has achieved a threshold level of competency in the second language, its use as a medium of instruction can severely limit the potential for academic success and can lead to other deleterious effects noted by sociologists of education. While many parents may be in favor of Chinese as a medium of instruction due to its currency in the job market, they may not be aware of the countless studies showing that students do not learn well unless they have achieved a level of competency in the second language so as to be able to learn school subjects effectively (Baker 2001; Street 2001). In short, learning should take priority in schooling and while the national language must be studied, it is the responsibility of the school that students learn in the most efficient manner, whether that is in the national language or the language of Tibet (Dai, Teng, Guan and Dong 1997; Zhou 2000). Moreover, students may have a sufficient level of competency in Chinese for effective learning, but unless their teachers are able to teach competently through Chinese, student learning will be affected. In many nomadic counties, there is a shortage of Chinese language specialists, in which case teachers of other subjects who are unqualified as language teachers, will take on the role of teaching Chinese as a subject. In short, the low achievement level in education for Tibetans has a great deal to do with the language policy. China has done a great deal to produce school textbooks in ethnic minority languages, including Tibetan and about 21 other languages. The five province/region Tibetan learning materials leadership group has facilitated the production of Tibetan language learning resources and has visited other countries to learn about how bilingual

education is undertaken elsewhere. However, the Tibetan language school textbooks in mathematics, science and other subjects are often direct translations of Chinese language materials. Moreover, the updating of Tibetan language textbooks is slow and costly. Meanwhile, Tibetan medium of instruction is often viewed as a hindrance to advancement as TAR secondary school graduates soon discover when they have to compete for jobs with the thousands of TAR students returning with a good grasp of Chinese from their years of study at the inland (*neidi*) schools.

Finally, usually only primary and secondary education are available in nomadic areas. Pre-school education, vocational education, and special education are far less developed.

Nyerong: A Case Study

Nyerong, with an average altitude of 4750 meters, is located in the north of Nakchu prefecture and borders Pachen and Biru county on the east, Amdo county on the west, Nakchu county on the south and Qinghai Province on the north. The annual average temperature is -2.1 degrees Celsius, and the lowest point is -38.2 degrees Celsius. Nyerong, with an area of 21,400 square kilometers made up of 10 townships, 158 administrative villages, has only 30,973 residents, and 29,328 of them are nomadic. The population density in Nyerong is as low as 1.44 persons per square kilometer. Nyerong people depend overwhelmingly on animal husbandry, including yaks, sheep, goats and horses, and their product ranges from beef, mutton and butter to wool, hides and cattle cashmere.

Basic Education in Nyerong

Nyerong has made great progress in promoting school access. The primary school enrollment increased from less than half in 2002 to over 95% in 2009. In 2006, Nyerong officially announced to have popularized six-year compulsory education, with an enrolment rate of 98 percent and a stability rate of 97.3 percent. The progress in high school access is not less impressive. The high school enrollment was less than 10 percent in 2002, struggled at similar level between 2003 and 2006, but grew quickly to over two thirds in 2009. In 2010, Nyerong officially announced to have popularized nine-year compulsory education. The table below illustrates detailed information as for school enrollment between 2002 and 2009 in Nyerong.

Table 3: Education Access in Nyerong (2002-2009)

	Primary School			High School		
	School-age Children	Enrolled Students	Enrollment Rate (%)	School-age Children	Enrolled Students	Enrollment Rate (%)
2002	3947	1946	49.3	1877	168	8.95
2003	3152	2010	63.77	1840	117	6.36
2004	4046	3166	78.25	1898	77	4.06
2005	4285	3708	86.53	1978	143	7.23
2006	3861	3519	94.14	2222	150	6.75
2007	3561	3317	93.15	2156	223	10.34
2008	3537	3468	98.05	2031	595	29.30
2009	3632	3463	95.35	1845	1243	67.37

Source: Nyerong County Educational Bureau. We calculated the enrollment rate.

Nyerong County Primary School

Nyerong County primary school was first established as a community-run school in 1962, with two teachers and 23 students, and only Tibetan, Chinese and Mathematics were offered. It became a government-run school in 1965 and renamed as "Nyerong Complete Primary School" in 1989. In 1998, a three-storied teaching building was built, which included 18 classrooms and a multi-purpose cafeteria. In 2003, with an investment of 7.5 million RMB from the Shenhua Group, the paired donor unit, the school was rebuilt, and renamed as "Nyerong County Shenhua Primary School." The new school included a two-floor teaching building, a two-floor office building, two students' dormitory buildings, a cafeteria and five teachers' dormitory buildings. In 2007, there were more than 1000 pupils and 64 teachers, including 16 new teachers. All the teachers have earned qualified credentials.

Township Primary Schools in Nyerong

Nyerong has seven junior primary schools and six complete primary schools located at the township seats. There were two teaching points located closer to the nomadic communities before. However, they were abandoned when the school consolidation policy was enforced in 2003. Our informant from the county educational bureau told us that the policy was introduced to consolidating the financial and teaching resources so that teachers would stay in one school longer, and students could have better teaching facilities. Yet, we doubt such impact of the policy since two teaching points had little resources to be

consolidated into other schools. On the other hand, students who could have been enrolled in the teaching points do have to walk a longer distance to go to school or study at a boarding school instead.

Still, we noted the initiatives to improve school access and teaching facilities in remote nomadic areas. During our field research in August, 2007, we visited two primary schools in Nyima and Seching, and saw the basketball court and distance education equipment in both schools. In the former one, we also visited its mini-library which included only one bookshelf (located in the distance education center of the school). In the latter one, we could not find the principal to talk to us as it happened to be a weekend. An official from the county educational bureau informed us, "As one of the criteria for popularizing six-year compulsory education in 2006, each primary school in Nyerong started to own a reading room or library. It is small and usually located in a small classroom, office, or students' dorm. There are seven distance education centers in total. Aside from the county middle school and county primary school, the other five centers are located in the primary schools of Nyima, Seching, Xachu, Baishong and Sangrong. When the other schools gain stable power supply, they will also have their own distance education centers."

The northern part of Nyerong has worse living conditions than the southern part. The county educational bureau provided facilities, such as greenhouse for growing vegetables, for the teachers working in the ~~southern~~ part of Nyerong.

Secondary Education in Nyerong

Secondary ~~Education~~ was provided in Nyerong very recently. In 1998, Nyerong provided a secondary school education, which was run together with Nyerong Primary School. Separated from the primary school in 2003, Nyerong High School managed to have its own campus from 2004. The school graduated a few dozen students between 2005 and 2007, and ranked among the top in students' academic achievement in Nakchu.

During our first field visit in 2007, the school had 17 teachers, all holding a B.A. degree and with an average age of 30. There were separate physics, biology, and chemistry laboratories, moral education center, library, distance education center and computer center. The computer center has 44 computers, quite sufficient for fewer than 200 students. The slogan "*Bring North Tibet Children into the Information World*" was displayed. The library has a total of 11,246 books. In the distance education center, the slogans used were "*Utilize Remote Resources, Promote Education for All-round Development*" and "*Sharing Information through Remote Resources.*" School activity pictures and role model

portraits were posted in its moral education center. In the president office, we observed the *Eight Requirements for Teachers*, which stressed that teachers should serve as students' models, instruct them and show them how to behave. When we went to visit the school again in 2010, there were 1659 students and 82 teachers.

Pre-school Education and Vocation Education in Nyerong

During our first visit in 2007, there was no pre-school education or vocational education center in Nyerong. Our informant from the county educational bureau stressed that providing pre-school service was certainly under way. Yet, several vocational training programs, such as driving, Tibetan carpentry, painting and masonry, were already provided in Nyerong High School. Another program, motorcycle repairing, would soon be added. Given these programs' relevance to the daily life or cultural tradition of the nomadic community, there was a view that nomads are more likely to become interested in and benefit from vocational education. Yet, the development of vocational education in Nyerong remains hindered by a shortage of teachers, facilities, and funds.

During the 2010 visit to Nyerong, Nyerong High School had begun to place students into two tracks: the academic track and the vocation track. The academic track prepares students to continue to study in senior high education. The vocational track trains students to enter directly into the job market. The vocational track offers programs such as traditional painting, weaving, tailoring, motorcycle repair and greenhouse planting. Nearly half of the students are tracked into the vocational classes.

Further Challenges for Basic Education in Nyerong

Nyerong has made progress in promoting school access. Yet, schools still face challenges, such as high drop-out rates, lack of qualified teachers, instructional language transition, curriculum reform, and parents' support for school education. These factors interweave and make the situation more complicated and formidable.

High Drop-Out Rates

The official data show that the drop-outs rates are below three percent. Another series of data collected from the county educational bureau show a quite different picture. We are more convinced by the latter data since we are able to

see the distribution of students in each school year from 2002 to 2009 (see Tables 4 & 5). In primary schools, 927 children enrolled at grade one in 2002, but only 321 of them were still in grade six in 2007, and the 606 drop-outs accounted for two thirds of this age-group. In the following year, the drop-out rate decreased, but over one third of the first-year students in 2004 dropped out. In high school, the drop-out rates might not seem as striking as in primary schools. There were 99 students admitted to high school, but 77 of them stayed to the grade nine in 2007, with a loss rate of 22 percent. In 2007, there were 126 students in grade seven and 76 students in grade eight, but the number dropped to 95 in grade eight and 64 in grade nine, with a loss rate of 22 percent. Since high school admitted very few promising students before 2007, such drop-out rates could be rather high. From 2008, Nyerong has introduced consolidated efforts to promote high school access. Thus, it is not surprising that the drop-outs decreased significantly in the recent few years. However, the drop-out problem is likely to continue posing a challenge to Nyerong's efforts to promote school access.

Table 4: Demographic Distribution of Primary School Students in Nyerong (2002-2009)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Grade 1	927	910	1035	1123	1308	643	606	817
Grade 2	380	649	1103	1090	1182	1157	643	606
Grade 3	238	275	788	929	745	1141	1118	633
Grade 4	170	99	368	548	520	714	1121	947
Grade 5	65	77	206	291	280	503	653	1001
Grade 6	81	48	147	157	126	321	503	647
Total	1861	2058	3647	4138	4161	4479	4644	4651

Source: Nyerong County Educational Bureau.

Table 5: Demographic Distribution of High School Students in Nyerong (2002-2009)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Grade 7	77	60	51	99	84	126	569	1014
Grade 8	51	74	29	41	77	76	95	550
Grade 9	40	44	59	30	34	77	62	95
Total	168	178	139	170	195	279	726	1659

Source: Nyerong County Educational Bureau.

Lacking Qualified Teachers

Nyerong still faces a big shortage of teachers, especially qualified high school teachers. Noticeably, the teacher-student ratio for primary schools dropped significantly from 1:43.6 in 2005 to 1:14.1 in 2009. However, the ratio for high school changed in a reverse direction, largely due to the rapid promotion of high school access. In 2005, the ratio for high school was 1:9.4, but it increased to 1:20.8 in 2010 when the nine-year compulsory education was popularized. It is not clear whether or not teachers are qualified for teaching a particular subject. Yet, we believe that some of them are teaching a specific subject for which they are not adequately qualified. For example, during our first visit in 2007, there were no qualified Chinese Language and Literature teachers in Nyerong High School.

Parents Lack of Initiatives to Send Children to School

Children are valuable labor for the nomadic families. The labor demand still impacts school attendance. Yet, many parents can hardly realize the significance of education for their children's future. For instance, parents are reluctant to send children to school if they cannot be guaranteed good jobs or

Table 6: Primary School Teachers and Students in Nyerong (2002-2010)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Teachers	68	68	83	95	155	224	214	—	243
Students	1861	2058	3647	4138	4161	4479	4644	4651	—
Teacher-student Ratio	27.4	30.3	44.0	43.6	26.9	20.0	21.7	14.1	—

Source: Nyerong County Educational Bureau. We calculated the teacher-student ratio, except for the year of 2009.

Table 7: Teachers and Students in Nyerong High School (2002-2010)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Teachers	12	16	17	18	15	35	46	83	82
Students	168	178	139	170	195	279	726	1659	1706
Teacher-student Ratio	14	11.1	8.2	9.4	13	8.0	15.8	20.0	20.8

Source: Nyerong County Educational Bureau. We calculated the teacher-student ratio.

become cadres with stable salaries after their graduation. Expostulations from government to parents such as “Knowledge will always be useful” are not understandable or acceptable. In their eyes, it makes no difference for a nomad to acquire knowledge or not. Nomads can still herd cows, milk, and process dairy products even without school knowledge.

It is reasonable to expect that education provides an important intellectual support for the development and progress of Tibetan nomadic communities. Campaigns such as *Science and Education Prosper State* make sense to government cadres but not to many nomadic households. In Nyerong, the low level of basic education hinders economic and societal development in a kind of vicious cycle.

Students' Limited Prospects after Graduation

Few students from junior high school continue to senior high school and beyond. Even though almost half of all students are placed into the vocational training track in Nyerong High School, the future job market is filled with uncertainties for them. The relevance of a skill training course with the local or broader market to a great extent determines their future job opportunities. An education official from the County Education Bureau and a Schoolmaster of Middle School said that graduates failed to find a job or go on to attend university would likely return to their hometown. However, these graduates find few local area opportunities, and some were found to solicit money from parents and return to more urban areas. Such graduates inevitably feel uneasy herding livestock.

Difficulties Accompanying The Transition of Instruction Language

In all nomadic primary schools, Tibetan is the language of instruction. Chinese is taught as a subject in primary schools in Nyerong. At middle school, the language of instruction makes an abrupt switch from Tibetan to Chinese. There is no doubt that students experience an enormous amount of difficulty in making the switch to Chinese medium. There is virtually no Chinese speaking environment in Nyerong country, and there are no teachers adequately trained to teach Chinese. Those teachers that can speak Chinese, teach it. Students who may have done well in primary school find that their academic performance in middle schools suddenly drops and they face great pressures. This often leads to their emotional fear of study and the consequence that they drop-out. For example, there were 92 students attending grade one in the Nyerong Middle

School in 2006; only about 60 of them still came to school after summer break of the first year. More than 20 of them dropped out.

While in Nyerong in 2007, we met two students studying in Grade 4 and 5 of county primary school. When trying to make a simple conversation in Chinese, we found they could not understand us and could only communicate through Tibetan. If this situation exists in the county seat, then the township primary school students' standard of Chinese would not be any better. Students face tremendous pressures from the day they enter schools. We did not expect that a dramatic change would occur in the near future. In fact, little had changed by 2010.

Obstacles Encountered in Curriculum Reform

We were told that the new textbooks are more flexible, and focused on developing students' innovative ability and heuristic thinking styles. Some local Tibetan culture, such as the Shoton Festival and some comparison between Tibetan and Han culture was also added to the new Chinese textbook. Yet modifications of the Tibetan grammar book are not acceptable to local people. "Backbone" teachers from the county have been trained in Lhasa or Nakchu to accommodate the requirements of the new reform, but when promoting the new teaching methods, difficulties arise. Teachers' achievements are largely evaluated on the basis of their students' test results. This cannot demonstrate the advantages of new teaching methods. Moreover, teachers feel that if they fully adopt the new methods, they risk being unable to complete the teaching of the curriculum in preparation for the examinations. They are therefore reluctant to adopt new method of teaching.

Conclusion

National policies, laws, and regulations are guiding the establishment and development of basic education in the TAR. Many households are dealing with the effects of an intensified market economy. As in other parts of rural China, household nutrition and health indicators have a major impact on enrolment and achievement (Yu and Hannum 2006). In many regions, policies such as the Three Guarantees have helped relieved the financial burden on households. In order to improve access and equity in basic education, county education bureaus have experimented with incentive systems aimed at families and teachers. Intensified teacher training, phasing out of community (*minban*)

teachers, recruitment of younger teachers (including *daike* teachers) and graduates of inland (*neidi*) schools accompany the popularization of basic education. However, improving the quality of teacher training remains an urgent need. As access rates increase, dropout rates also increase for a period of time until regular attendance is sustained. At the local level, school planning is not yet a community driven process, though local governments have initiated a number of meetings at the village and township level with families to encourage them to send their children to school and keep them from dropping out. Given the level of resources now available to rural and nomadic schools, and the rising qualifications of teachers, there is a growing potential to experiment with a variety of new methods to improve the quality of teaching and learning in rural and nomadic regions. In short, instructional quality remains far behind the rest of China, though there are signs that given the right conditions, it could catch up quickly.

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