

# **Education Reform in China**

Changing concepts, contexts and  
practices

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## 5 Education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region: policies and practices in rural and nomadic communities

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This chapter takes an overview of educational progress in China's Tibetan Autonomous Region. It notes a rapid expansion of access to basic education, despite the harsh climate, rugged geography, dispersed population, and scarcity of resources. This has been achieved by an increase in qualified teachers, boarding schools, and improved classroom resources. Case studies of rural and nomadic regions reveal that two TAR educational policies – the 'three guarantees' and 'inland schools', provided households with an incentive to support compulsory schooling. The chapter argues that while the TAR is fast approaching full access to nine-year basic education for all, it lags far behind urban China in the level of instructional quality.

How does one of the world's most recognised centres of cultural heritage adapt and capitalise upon schools for the economic and social development of its rural and nomadic communities? Contemporary Tibet's main educational policies are set by the Beijing Central Government within the context of a socialist state adapting to market economics, while legislating a special status for education in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). This chapter provides a description and analysis of selected aspects of educational development in the TAR. It aims to identify the major successes and ongoing challenges. It begins with an outline of the context within which the education system is situated, followed by a general account of educational progress and problems, and a review of related measures to improve access to education for students from rural and nomadic communities.

### The context of TAR education

#### *Population and geography*

The TAR faces an educational challenge. How can its schools become vibrant community-based institutions that transmit the core values of the society, yet contribute to household economy and a rise in living standards? The TAR is populated by Tibetans who live at altitudes averaging 3,600 meters

above sea level, and possess a distinctive culture that has remained intact for over a thousand years, with a complex religious tradition and sophisticated writing system (Goldstein 1989, Goldstein and Beall 1990). At 1.2 million square kilometers, the TAR comprises 12.5 per cent of China's area. Although this chapter focuses on the education system of the TAR, Tibetans are also dispersed across a region of 3.8 million square kilometers that stretch beyond the TAR and into the surrounding regions of Kham and Amdo in the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan.<sup>1</sup> When established, the TAR was about 99 per cent Tibetan. It is still far more ethnically homogenous than any other provincial-level ethnic autonomous region in China. Although the capital city of Lhasa has universalised access to basic education and has the best schools, less than half of the capital city is populated by its TAR Tibetans. About 82 per cent of TAR Tibetans live in rural and nomadic regions where both access to schooling and quality education vary across the vast expanse of the TAR.

#### *Historical background: society*

After the Chinese People's Liberation Army entered Tibet in 1951, the traditional theocratic structure of government, the organisation of monasteries, and traditional forms of landholding remained somewhat unchanged for a time (Goldstein 2007). About nine years later the Dalai Lama fled to India where he remains in residence a half century later. After his departure in 1959, land was redistributed from the upper elite to landless peasants. In 1966, all private land was taken into the commune system and communal production began. The TAR was officially established in 1965 (Grunfeld 1996). The Cultural Revolution, a 10-year political campaign aimed at rekindling revolutionary fervour and purifying the Chinese Communist Party, soon followed and tore into the fabric of Tibetan life with devastating results, including a massive destruction of temples. Class struggle became the order of the day, and the quality of teaching and learning in schools worsened. Where they remained open, schools became predominantly an ideological arena for propaganda and self-criticism. Class warfare took precedence over academic affairs, and any mention of cultural heritage became associated with feudalism and was severely criticised. The People's Communes were not abandoned until 1981, after which rural reforms, specifically the household responsibility system, put the focus back on the family as the unit of production. This led to a drop in school participation rates as the need for children to labour at home became more important.

#### *Historical background: education*

The first 'modern' school in Lhasa was established in 1952 (Zhou 2002). The Seventeen Point Agreement signed in 1951 stated that: 'the spoken and written language and the school education of the Tibetan nationality shall

be developed step by step in accordance with the actual conditions of Tibet' (Sino-Tibetan Agreement 1951). This agreement permitted monasteries to continue operating. Though they were never educational institutions for the masses, they continue to transmit the religious culture of Tibetans to the next generation of monks. Before 1959, there were also some small private schools for children in towns of Lhasa, Shigatse, and Gyantse. Like elsewhere in China, the masses had little access to schools, and for those that did attend, the focus was on basic literacy. The newly established government schools in towns like Lhasa drew some of these students away from these private schools. Some elite families agreed to allow a son to go for education in Beijing but others continued to send children to India for education (Mackerras 1994, 1995). Nevertheless, by 1959 the educational system was brought more into line with the rest of China. While most children did not attend monasteries, research confirms that the traditional emphasis on recitation of the scriptures still exerts an influence on teaching methods in schools, in the same way that Confucianism still exerts an influence on teaching and learning in most parts of China (Mackerras 1999, Palden Nyima 1997, 2000, Zhang, Jiao and Postiglione 2006).

The Preparatory Committee for the Establishment of the TAR in 1956 eventually came to emphasise the rapid expansion of community (*minban*) schools, many of which closed later due to poor quality (Xia, Ha and Abadu 1999). China's gradualist approach to ethnic minority education was abandoned during the Great Leap period. Expansion leveled off by 1978. According to Bass, reforms after the Cultural Revolution initially led more children to attend monasteries (Bass 1998: 215, Geng and Wang 1989). However, the dissolution of the communes in 1981<sup>2</sup> also saw more parents withdraw their children from school to labour at home under the new household responsibility system.

China launched its economic reform and opening to the outside world in December 1978. In 1979, Tibet had about 6,266 primary schools, 55 middle schools, 22 technical secondary schools, eight worker schools, and four colleges (Wu 1995: 81). Due to the severe lack of qualified teachers and administrators, as well as buildings, equipment, and textbooks, schooling was chaotic at best, and instructional quality was minimal (Zhou 2002: 84). Between 1978 and 1985, a consolidation of schools took place that more than halved the number of students enrolled in primary schools from 262,611 to 119,939. It became possible to see a slow recovery between 1985 and 1994 with enrolments growing steadily back toward the 1978 level in 1994 when the total number of primary schools, including teaching points,<sup>3</sup> was about 3,300 (Wu 1995: 94–95).

By 1990, less than 20 per cent of the TAR Tibetans had completed a primary school education; few had much more, and the number that had joined monasteries was only a few thousand. Rapid progress followed so that by the end of the century, illiteracy and semi-literacy stood slightly above 50 per cent, and enrolment in junior secondary school stood near 25 per cent.

Urban school enrolment was high, but some remote regions only had universalised 3-year compulsory education (N.A. 2001). By 2000, the TAR had more than 4,000 schools: 820 primary and secondary schools, 3,033 teaching points (or incomplete primary schools), 110 regular and vocational secondary schools, and 4 institutions of higher education. These schools served about 360,000 TAR students in all forms and levels of education, and were staffed by about 19,000 teachers.

While official figures indicate that only 6 per cent of the region's population had achieved nine-years of basic education in 2000, 70 per cent had achieved 6-years of basic education. The remaining 22 per cent had achieved or nearly achieved 3-years of basic education (N.A. 2001). Although the TAR still had the lowest education levels of any provincial level entity in China, by 1999, the enrolment rate for all school-aged children in basic education increased to 83.4 per cent, surpassing the 80 per cent target set for 2000.

By September of 2006, the reform and consolidation of schools had produced a system with 890 primary schools, 118 middle schools, and a large dispersed system of 1,568 primary school level teaching points throughout its remote rural and nomadic areas (*Tibet Daily* 4 September 2006: 1). The total enrolment, while open to debate, was proclaimed to be 530,000, which encompassed 96.5 per cent of the school-age children. (*Tibet Daily* 30 January 2007: 1).

In 2008, the enrolment rate for school-age children in the TAR reached 98.5 per cent in 884 primary schools, and 70 of the 73 counties had popularised nine-year basic education, a figure that our research found impressive though somewhat doubtful since rural and nomadic areas are notorious for their inaccurate reporting of enrolment and attendance figures (*China Tibet News* 2009). Nevertheless, the increase in access to basic education in the TAR during the past ten years has been impressive.

#### *From quantity to quality*

Enrolment rates tell part of the story because as these rates rise, the work needed to sustain and retain students increases. In general, the early phase of popularisation of basic education sees a rise in both access rates and dropout rates. In cases when learning conditions provided by rural schools are still poor, then spending on teacher training is one of the most cost effective measures to sustain enrolment rates.

In the 1990s it was not unusual to see poorly constructed and maintained rural schools, dormitories with leaky ceilings and cracked walls, classrooms without light, students without dictionaries, and some classrooms without teacher desks or even chalk and blackboards. With much support from the Central Government, the financial burden of capital expenditures is still significant for the TAR government. However, substantial financial support for school construction also came from other provinces. There was also some minor support from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) such

as Save the Children and Hong Kong donors.<sup>4</sup> By 2001, it was possible to see a rapid improvement in physical facilities, including primary schools at the township level with modified Tibetan style architecture, standard classrooms with attractive facilities, and reliable supply of electricity. By 2007 two of the authors visited remote nomadic areas where townships schools were equipped with modern facilities, trained teachers, a standard basketball court, and an internet dish on the school roof to provide access to cyberspace.

Such rapid progress in providing high quality facilities and popularising basic education in remote regions is notable and deserves recognition. Yet, school facilities and trained teachers do not automatically equate with quality instruction and meaningful learning. This is also the case in some of the most developed regions of the country. That is no reason to expect less from education in the TAR. Education specialists from China and around the world would assert that quality also refers to an education that is student-centred and driven by the needs of the local community, school based curriculum that is relevant to the immediate community, a learning environment that is stimulating and attractive to students, classroom learning activities that are problem based and interactive, teaching methods that promote critical thinking skills, creativity, and innovative approaches to assessment and evaluation, and school based management that is responsive to social development needs.

#### *Educational policies in rural nomadic communities*

Making schools function as vital institutions for Tibetan households aspiring to a higher standard of living should be a basic aim of rural and nomadic education programmes. The establishment of literacy and basic education is guided by a framework of national policies, and there are additional policies designed for implementation in ethnic minority regions. These include provisions for boarding schools, ethnic teacher training, bilingual education, and preferential admission (Ha and Teng 2001). The Education Bureau of the TAR has also promulgated specific educational measures to suit the TAR's special circumstances. Two examples are the three guarantees (*sanbao*) and Inland Tibet Schools (*neidiban*). Moreover, the education departments of prefectures or counties may also have their own special measures, including incentive arrangements for households or teachers, as described below.

#### *The sanbao (three guarantees policy)*

In theory, the compulsory education law of China requires that all children attend nine years of compulsory education. This also applies to the TAR; in fact, fines have been levied for non-attendance. However, such fines are generally ineffective as most poor households have no way of the paying the

finer. In many cases a household would lose less money by paying the fines so their children could continue to herd sheep or goats instead of attending school. A number of measures are used to encourage children to attend school in poor rural areas. Groups of households sometimes pool their livestock and share the herding duties so children can attend school. One of the most well known measures aimed at raising attendance rates in rural and nomadic regions has been the *sanbao* or three-guarantees policy (Tongzhi 1994, Wu 1995). This includes measures designed to relieve families of the financial burden associated with schooling. It includes a guarantee to provide food. This usually means providing butter tea for children who live beyond two kilometres from school during the daytime and meals for those students who board at school. It also includes a guarantee to provide clothing. This can include school wear and a set of bedding for boarding school children. Finally, it guarantees accommodation, which means living accommodation for boarding school children.

#### *The neidi xizang ban policy*

Another major policy with implications for rural education is the *neidi xizang ban* (inland Tibet secondary schools and classes), which provides for sending primary school graduates to inland secondary schools across China (Wang and Zhou 2003, Postiglione and Jiao 2010). The TAR government selects and recommends primary school graduates of 12 to 13 years old for these inland schools. The majority of the students attend segregated classes in urban secondary schools. The policy began in 1985 when Beijing, Lanzhou, and Chengdu established *neidi* schools, and by the end of 1986 there were 16 such schools. A 1993 working group on Tibet called for long-term support for *neidi* boarding school education. The perceived success of the *neidi* schools led to the establishment of similar schools for students from the Xinjiang Uyghur Nationality Autonomous Region in 2000 (Chen 2008). In 1985, about 20 per cent of Tibet's elementary school graduates were dislocated for junior secondary education. As the secondary school enrolment rates of the TAR continued to grow, the proportion but not the number being dislocated to China decreased. From 1985 to 2005, 25,000 students went to 89 *neidi* schools in 20 provinces and municipalities (Xiangba Pingcuo 2005). Most of the students came from urban cadre families. In 1992, Beijing's *neidi* school set an 80 per cent quota for rural and nomadic region students from all parts of Tibet. While the early cohorts were dominated by urban children of cadre families, the aim was to shift enrolments in favor of children from rural and nomadic regions. Although there are no reliable figures to assess the outcome of the policy favouring children of families from rural and nomadic regions, research indicates that at least half of the students were from cadre households (Postiglione and Jiao 2010). The boarding schools are clearly preparing an elite stratum, with about half of the children already from elite households and the rest aspiring to that category.

**Continuing challenges**

School attendance inevitably involves opportunity costs for rural households since most rural and nomadic children will have to leave their villages and live in school dormitories away from home. Village parents sometimes express concern about the value of schooling at county secondary schools because of the risk to youth caused by urbanisation and leading to value separation from home farming communities. Completion of county level junior secondary school has not provided youth with knowledge and skills that open doors in the non-farm labour market, leaving many of them between the status of urban unemployed and dislocated rural returnee.

Although opportunities for vocational education have been increasing, there is still a critical need for vocational skills training, a need identified by long-standing NGOs in the TAR, such as the Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund. While this need is more for training (i.e. repair of transport vehicles, restaurant and hotel work, etc.), than for education, this kind of training is closely linked to basic education because such training is most effective for Tibetans who have already attained literacy through basic schooling. Although vocational training programmes help Tibetans compete with newcomers from other parts of China for non-farm labour jobs, these programmes are far from reaching their full potential (Wang/Gyamtsso 2009). With the move away from a planned economy, the senior secondary specialised schools (*zhongzhuān*), which were run under the authority of particular ministries and which led to stable jobs under ministries, have been reduced in scope (except in teacher training and policing). At the same time, opportunities for regular senior secondary vocational education under the authority of the TAR education commission has improved but are still far from adequate. Given the probability that there will be continued changes in the skills required for the TAR economy, a senior secondary vocational education also needs to emphasise adaptability of skills for a changing labour market.

At the tertiary level, enrolment rates of Tibetans at TAR universities have not reached parity with their proportion of the general population. Moreover, the shift from guaranteed job allocation to market forces has been especially hard on college and university graduates who are from rural and nomadic areas. In 2005, for example, about 2,730 Tibetan graduates of three-year colleges faced the job market and about 700 were still looking for work. In Lhasa, 356 graduates, about one-third of that year's total, were still looking for jobs (*China Daily/Xinhua* 2006; *Xinhua* 2006). Since that time, new measures have been introduced for unemployed college graduates. The Tibet Branch of Bank of China introduced loans for unemployed college graduates in Lhasa, Shigatse, Nyingchi and Lhoka. The loans are to be used to start businesses, but are only available to college degree holders who had not found jobs within five years, a fact that indicates the depth of the problem. The Education Bureau of the TAR in 2009 cited the number of college graduates last year as 11,118, with 88.95 per cent having found jobs.

Among the new measures said to be responsible for the decrease in the unemployment rate are: services for job-hunting college graduates, including free consultation on employment regulations, guidance on recommendations for top students; launching non-profit, large-scale and diversified job fairs; and encouraging graduates to go online for recruitment opportunities. Colleges and universities in the TAR also established an intern system for graduates (*Xinhuanet* 2009). The main problem confronting tertiary education is also one of quality and external efficiency – increasing the relevance of tertiary education for finding a job in Tibetan society.

Overall, education in the TAR followed a pattern of zigzag development since 1950, with major progress in access rates and impressive improvements in facilities and teacher qualifications over the past ten years. Educational development remains behind the rest of the country, but the provision of good facilities and trained teachers has now placed TAR schools with the capacity and potential to conduct more experimental programmes and implement innovations to improve the quality of the learning environment.

**Case studies of educational practices in rural/nomadic communities**

The TAR is the most sparsely populated region in China, with 2.26 people per square kilometre and a total population of about 2.6 million, of which only about 20 per cent reside in urban areas. The other 80 per cent live in both rural and nomadic livestock breeding areas. Most of the population is concentrated in the southern and eastern parts. The rest of this chapter will cite selected aspects of case studies in two rural counties (Benam and Lhundrup) in 1998 to 2002 and two nomadic prefectures (Nackchu and Ngari) in 2007 so as to highlight policies, practices, challenges and possibilities.

**Rural areas**

Rural and nomadic families are larger on average, and it is not always the case that every child in a family will stay in school for the full six years (Lu 2007). In areas such as Penam and Lhundrup counties, school attendance rates are a key concern of the county governments (Postiglione, Jiao and Gyatso 2005, 2006). In the villages of these rural areas, fees have been eliminated, including the cost of books. Accommodation in boarding schools are provided, along with some food and clothing, if the school is far from home. For some families, opportunity costs associated with school are still steep, in particular, the loss of household labour. Some communities have tried to pool household labour, for example, by combining herds for grazing to free-up children to attend school.

As the TAR moves to increase enrolments in secondary schools, county leaders visit township schools to encourage parents to send their children on to junior secondary school. Household that have two to four or more

children sometimes feel the need to keep at least one of their children at or close to home. However, this is no longer considered acceptable for exempting attendance in secondary school.

Students who attend schools in the countryside have Tibetan language textbooks for all subjects except Chinese and English which are taught as separate subjects. Most rural community (*minban*) school teachers who cannot speak Chinese have been phased out or replaced by regular (*gongban*) or substitute (*daike*) teachers. Interestingly, about half of those returning from the secondary schools for Tibetans that are located in Chinese cities [inland schools (*neidi ban*)] become school teachers. Of these, some are placed in township primary schools. These teachers usually have a good knowledge of Chinese language, though school principals sometimes comment about their inadequate level of Tibetan which is needed in rural settings where little Chinese is spoken.

#### *Local incentives*

In the early 1990s, the Penam county had many village schools in Sogang and Mag that were in many ways like their counterparts in other parts of rural China during the 1980s. Village schools were run down buildings without lights or electricity. Of the seven schools in Mag township, for example, five were the poorest buildings in the villages. The fortunate schools had chairs, desks and blackboards. Chalk, pens, papers and dictionaries were another matter, and these were often difficult to acquire. Many village schools had no library or sports equipment at the time. Although the qualification of teachers gradually improved, teachers seldom developed school based curriculum, used discovery methods or problem based learning, or stressed critical thinking skills in their teaching. However, the Sokang village school taught Tibetan, Chinese and Mathematics. Village teachers in the 1990s typically organised instruction for a non-age graded one room school house. Some rural areas like Mag township have begun to close the many small village schools and consolidate them all in the township central school. This can have the effect of improving costs and efficiency, but it also means that many children will have to board at school beginning at a much younger age.

When there was a need to raise access rates, innovative incentives were introduced. In the case of Penam county, a certain portion of village school teachers' salary was withheld by the county education authorities each year, and that portion was awarded back to teachers based upon attendance rates and students passing examinations for promotion to the next level of school.

In general, there is a continuing need to strengthen the capacity of teachers, provide better working conditions, and more in-service teacher training focused on problems specific to particular regions and school communities. Much of such training for village teachers is organised at the township central school where top teachers are identified and used to promote better teaching performance.

In the late 1990s, almost two-thirds of the parents we surveyed believed that Tibetan was the most useful subject, which was two to three times the proportion who believed it was Chinese. Nevertheless, households with at least one member who migrated for work to an urban area were aware of the importance of being able to speak Chinese, though this in itself did not guarantee urban job acquisition.

Measures to improve access and equity in primary schools remain a concern and education officials mobilise resources and parents to improve school attendance. It is notable that the proportion of girls to boys is higher than in many other parts of rural China.

#### *Building parental support*

Education officials stressed the importance of convincing parents of the benefits brought by schooling. Attendance rates were low in the early 1990s when some poor households even ignored fines levied for non-attendance at school. The government had in fact discontinued the three guarantees (*sanbao*) policy and only reinstated it in 1999. When we revisited in 2002, families had less reason not to send their children to school (Shao 2004).

In September of 2002, parents with one child not attending school were called to the school grounds to meet with a delegation of county education leaders. Parents could plead their case for keeping one or more of their children at home. A villager with four children, three of whom were in school, wanted an exemption for his oldest son who had just graduated from the township primary school but was scheduled to attend the far off county boarding school. If this son was away at school, he asked, who would tend the livestock, and keep it from grazing in other fields? Exemptions were rare, however, and usually only granted for children with disabilities.

#### *Village households*

Most rural villagers have few skills outside of basic farming and animal husbandry. A small number have skills in carpentry, weaving, masonry, and painting. Some areas had farm tractors that could be used in an educational sense to provide teachers with simple but practical examples of benefits from science and agricultural technology. Most parents recognised the benefit of their children learning to read and write Tibetan and do simple mathematical calculations to maintain records and accounts, for example when selling their products or taking loans. Some associated schooling with having a better life and as a path to becoming a local government official.

To improve school attendance in the late 1990s, Penam county had established a point system for rewarding school attendance and penalising truancy. Each awarded point was worth two mao (20 cents) and households could actually earn money for their children's school attendance. This measure was instituted as an interim measure when the attendance rates were extremely low.

Other measures included the three guarantees and adjusting the school calendar to agricultural work. In the busy spring and fall seasons, when children's help is urgently needed for planting and harvesting, schools have instituted a system whereby students can be sent home for up to seven days.

These point measures for teachers and households, including the three guarantees policy, coupled with improved school resources and more qualified teachers resulted in a significant improvement in school enrolment rates. With the approach of 2010, rural counties like Penam and Lhundrop have schools facilities and resources that are compatible with those in many comparable rural regions of China. The provision of basic conditions means that the opportunities have been increased for more innovative approaches to improve classroom learning.

Rural families increasingly recognise the relevance of schooling to an improved standard of living. Tibetan teachers are able to better articulate the link between schooling, cultural values, improved standards of living, and community development. Preparing Tibetan children to compete with the increasing number of TAR outsiders puts schooling in a different light. Young men returning to their villages shared their experiences about urban Tibet and reported that speaking Chinese could increase job opportunities, even if discrimination toward workers from rural and nomadic areas still existed. It is increasingly apparent that school represents a path to non-farm jobs. Rural Tibetans would probably look more positively upon schooling if they could see a more direct economic return in the non-farm labour market.

### **Nomadic areas**

The major nomadic regions are mainly in the west and northwest and account for most of Tibet's land area. This area includes eastern Ngari and western Nakchu and has one of the lowest population densities in the world, about 0.23 person per square kilometre. Among Tibet's 73 counties, 14 are nomadic and 24 semi-nomadic. Unfortunately, Tibet's statistics only distinguish between urban and rural areas and do not further differentiate between farming and nomadic areas. Therefore, when doing a survey of 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. The following provides a brief comparison of basic education in the two major nomadic prefectures of Nakchu and Ngari.

### **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 887 students, and a trade school with 19 teachers and 127 students. In 1984, Nakchu increased the number of public schools and introduced the three guarantees (food, lodging, clothes) policy mentioned above. The Pachen County Middle School was established in 1984 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 enrolment of 9,595. 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 enrolment was 34,300 with 64 per cent of school-age children enrolled. However, only 66 per cent of teachers in primary schools and 83 per cent of those in middle schools were qualified.

#### *Basic education in Ngari*

In 1986, barely 16.1 per cent of school-age children in Ngari were enrolled. According to the 1989 Tibet 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 per cent and a retention rate of 80.6 per cent. In 2001, there were 58 schools, 13 complete primary schools, 25 junior primary schools, 12 teaching centres, three junior middle schools, one complete middle school, and a kindergarten. In contrast to Nakchu, about 90 per cent of the teachers in middle schools and 86 per cent in primary schools are qualified (Geju Jiandzan 2001).

#### *Comparing school access in Nakchu and Ngari*

The enrolment rate for the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in 2000 was 85.8 per cent. The enrolment rates were 64 per cent for Nakchu and Ngari, far behind Lhasa with 97 per cent. In a 2005 article, Wangdui of the Tibet Education Ministry stated, 'The enrolment rate of school-age children in nomadic areas fell 10 to 20 per cent behind the TAR average . . . Eleven counties which could not achieve the goal of nine-year compulsory education by 2007 were entirely nomadic counties' (Wang 2005).

#### *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, the nomadic areas of Nakchu and Ngari are all above 4,500 metres. Together, Nakchu with 420,000 square kilometres and Ngari with 345,000 square kilometres account for 64 per cent of Tibet. Tibet's population in 2004 was 2.59 million, but Nakchu's (387,200)

and Ngari's (77,800) population accounted for only 18 per cent of that. The population density, respectively, is 0.92 and 0.23 persons per square kilometre, far below Tibet's average of 2.16 persons per square kilometre. Needless to say, altitude and population density make for adverse conditions when popularising basic education. While the service radius for primary schools in rural areas of Tibet is 15 to 20 kilometres, it can be 100 to 150 kilometres in nomadic areas, and 150 to 200 kilometres for the county junior middle schools. Therefore, over 95 per cent 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, labour 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 three to four 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 (Wang 2005). Throughout the year, school age children would be useful for herding as nomad families typically divide their livestock into two to four herding units, for example, their milking sheep/goats, non-milking sheep/goats, female yaks, and stud sheep/goats.

Third, nomads have traditionally not held a very positive view of the commodity economy and professional businessmen and traders. They generally 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. 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, accommodation, 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 or county official, or go on to university (Du 2006).

Fourth, it is still difficult for nomads to recognise 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 (Tenzin Norbu 2005). Albeit, parents do mention that knowledge of basic arithmetic and literacy skills which could be acquired in a few years of schooling is an advantage. 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, Jiao and Manlaji 2007). There are many multilingual places in the world where the medium of instruction becomes an emotive and politicised 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 realise 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 language and literature courses taught in the Tibetan language (Xiangba 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 favour 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 education and secondary education are available in nomadic areas. Pre-school education, vocational education, and special education are far less developed.

### Conclusion

Impressive advances have been made in expanding access to basic schooling. 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 relieve 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 popularisation 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 with families at the village and township level 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.

### Notes

- 1 The education focus of this chapter will be largely on the TAR, although similar developmental challenges may exist in other Tibetan areas as well.
- 2 To this day, one commune still exists in the TAR.
- 3 Teaching points are usually located in remote villages where one or two teachers will provide primary school age children with instruction.
- 4 One of us facilitated two donations from the Hong Kong Save the Children fund for dictionaries, school library, and a generator for dormitory lights.

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