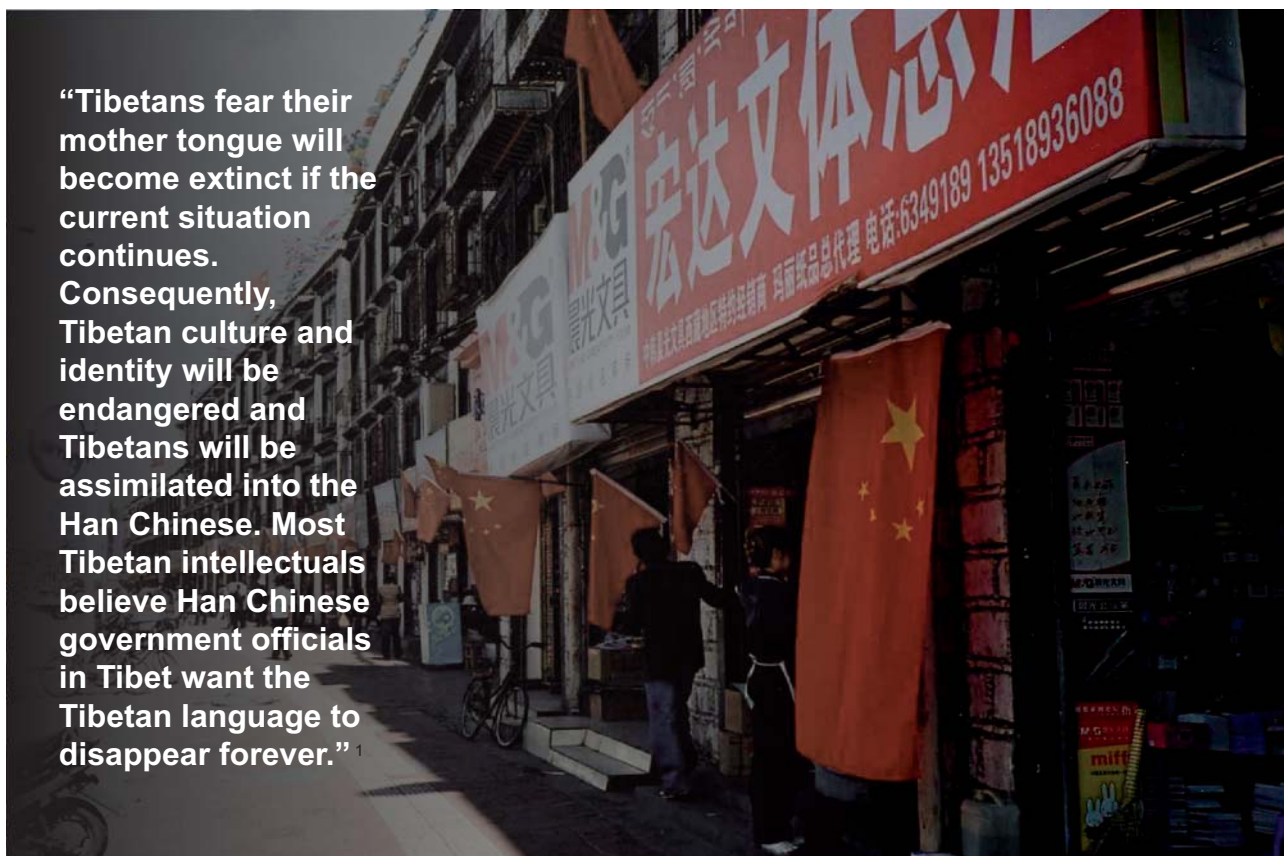


# Forked tongue: Tibetan language under attack

**“Tibetans fear their mother tongue will become extinct if the current situation continues. Consequently, Tibetan culture and identity will be endangered and Tibetans will be assimilated into the Han Chinese. Most Tibetan intellectuals believe Han Chinese government officials in Tibet want the Tibetan language to disappear forever.”<sup>1</sup>**



TIBET WATCH/ANDERS ANDERSEN

A Free Tibet Campaign briefing for International Mother Language Day

21 February 2008

This briefing details the steps the Chinese government has taken to undermine the Tibetan language. What this means to Tibetans themselves is illustrated with testimonies from refugees recently arrived in exile in Dharamsala, India (home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile). The testimonies were recorded and corroborated by Tibet Watch researchers whose work was commissioned by Free Tibet Campaign.

# International Mother Language Day

At the first annual celebration of International Mother Language Day on 21 February 2000, Koïchiro Matsuura, Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) stressed that "by deciding to celebrate mother tongues, UNESCO's Member States wished to recall that languages are not only an essential part of humanity's cultural heritage, but the irreducible expression of human creativity and of its great diversity". He added that languages are the "mirror of the souls of the societies in which they are born and they reflect the history of their contacts."<sup>2</sup>

Article 5 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states:

**"All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and *particularly in their mother tongue*; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices."**

*Forked tongue: Tibetan language under attack* illustrates clearly that, whilst playing lip service to this noble goal, the Chinese government, far from protecting the Tibetan language, is intent on subverting and eventually eliminating the use of the Tibetan mother tongue.

According to UNESCO there are between 6,000 and 7,000 spoken languages in the world today. Ironically, for the purposes of this briefing, Tibetan is not listed on the UNESCO website as either an independent or a Chinese language.<sup>3</sup>

As this briefing makes clear:

- The Chinese authorities occupying Tibet are making life impossible for Tibetans who are not fluent in Mandarin Chinese by passing laws to minimise teaching of Tibetan in schools and by replacing Tibetan language with Chinese language in many spheres of public life.
- To further its goal of making Mandarin the lingua franca of Tibet, the authorities are encouraging mass migration by Han Chinese who have no need or desire to learn Tibetan.
- Tibetan parents must choose between their unique culture and their children's future.

It is hardly, therefore, surprising that Tsering Dorje, a former Tibetan schoolteacher from Amdo now living in India (whose story appears on page5), should conclude:

**"It is all very well for UNESCO to have a Mother Language Day every February, but how can this protect the Tibetan language?"**

**"A law must be passed – and enforced – making Tibetan the official language of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. This is the only way to protect the Tibetan language and to provide equality of opportunities for Tibetans in their own country."**

Free Tibet Campaign supports this call.

# China pays lip service to Tibetan language rights

**“I heard that there are regulations in the Chinese constitution that says that in [Tibetan] autonomous regions minority languages have the priority to be the first language. I think the government just superficially draws up a minority language policy. These policies and regulations are only written on paper and are never put into practice.”<sup>4</sup>**

By failing to enact laws which adequately protect both minority languages and the rights of its ethnic minority peoples to be educated in their own mother tongues, China has ignored some of its most basic obligations as a member of the United Nations and signatory of numerous international conventions.

In claiming Tibet as part of its legitimate territory, China is obliged to respect and uphold the cultural and linguistic rights of the Tibetan people. Under Article 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities:

**“States shall take measures to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs ... States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.”<sup>5</sup>**

China has blatantly failed to “take appropriate measures” to ensure that “minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue”. Instead, it has worked since the early 1990s to water down its own regulations, originally intended to protect the Tibetan language.

During the period of relative liberalism under Chinese Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang in the 1980s, policies were initiated to recognise the need to protect Tibetan culture in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).

At the inauguration of Tibet University in Lhasa in 1985, the 10th Panchen Lama optimistically predicted: “Besides teaching our own language and culture, the university should aim to be able to teach all modern sciences such as maths, physics, chemistry and biology by translating them and teaching them through the medium of Tibetan.”<sup>6</sup>(Today, and for many years now, the only subject taught in Tibetan at the university in Lhasa is Tibetan language. All other subjects are taught in Mandarin.)

In 1987 the People’s Congress of the TAR passed “Preliminary Regulations on the Study, Use and Development of the Tibetan Language”. That year, when mother tongue teaching was introduced at primary and lower middle schools in the Lhasa, Lhokha and Shigatse areas, the average examination scores of the Tibetan children taught in the mother tongue ranged between 65% and 70%, whereas Tibetan children taught in Mandarin averaged scores of between 45% and 50%.<sup>7</sup>

As originally written, the Act stipulated that by 1993 all junior middle schools were to teach in Tibetan and that by 1997 most subjects in senior middle school were also to be taught in Tibetan. However, following the pro-independence demonstrations in Tibet in 1987 and 1988 (and the broader crackdowns following Tiananmen Square), the law was shelved. When it was finally formally enacted in 2002, the Tibetan language education rights listed above had been completely excised.

The official Chinese explanation for forcing Tibetan students to be educated in Mandarin is that Tibetan is the ‘language of lamas’ or the ‘language for religion’, claiming its vocabulary is too limited for it to be suitable for teaching sciences which must, therefore, be taught in Mandarin.<sup>8</sup>

This increasingly rigid education policy was revealed at The Third Tibet Work Forum in 1994. The Forum promulgated the theory of “patriotic education” designed to create loyal Tibetans. This clearly left little room for extending Tibetan medium education for Tibetans.

The hard-line Party Secretary in Tibet, Chen Kuiyuan, said during the Fifth Tibetan Conference on Education in Tibet in 1994: “The success of our education ... lies, in the final analysis, in whether our graduating students are opposed to or turn their hearts to the Dalai clique and in whether they are loyal to or do not care about our great motherland”.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese leadership’s concern from the 1990s onwards in preserving national unity, stability and China’s territorial integrity required increasingly monolingual policies aimed at the assimilation of ethnic minorities into a strong centralised state.

The marginalisation of minorities’ rights and increasing Han dominance was realised in 2001 when the standardised language, Mandarin, was directed to be taught even in the earliest years of primary school (previously Mandarin had been taught in the later years of primary education). The new directive was formalised in an amendment to the Regional National Autonomy Law.<sup>10</sup>

The new law’s promotion of a monolingual China indicates clearly the Chinese government’s efforts to undermine Tibetan culture and language in the TAR and in the Tibetan provinces of Amdo and Kham (absorbed into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan). The government’s determination to curtail education for Tibetans in their mother tongue was articulated by Zhou Yong-kang, Party Secretary in Sichuan, who complained to a session of the National People’s Congress in 2000 that Tibetan language education was “a drain on government resources”.<sup>11</sup>

A 37-year-old Tibetan from Amdo who attended a local government conference on the future of the Tibetan language told Tibet Watch researchers in Dharamsala: **“It was said that it is useless to learn Tibetan language in schools. There is no future for the students in learning Tibetan as Chinese language is overwhelming modern society. Some said that Tibetan could only be a language for the study of Buddhism in the monasteries.”**



Tibetan students exercise under the Chinese flag at the County Primary Middle School, Malho County.

# One teacher's tale

Tsering Dorje, a Tibetan now living in exile in India, taught English in primary and middle schools in Tibet for many years.

“The first school where I was assigned to teach English was a Chinese middle school. At first I thought the students were all Han Chinese, but I soon realised a third of them were Tibetan. There were no Tibetan language classes at the school. The students all spoke to me in Chinese in class and during recess. I found out many Tibetan students also spoke Chinese to their parents at home, even though their parents were Tibetans.



“In another assignment I taught English to four classes, two of which were Tibetan students, two Chinese. Many of the Tibetan students mixed Chinese words in their daily speech. Although I was assigned to teach English, I attempted to create a stronger awareness of Tibetan language. When my students used a Chinese word, I corrected them, translating it into Tibetan. Their Tibetan language skills improved and my students no longer mixed Chinese words into their speech – at least not in my class.

“In the Chinese classes nearly half of the children were Tibetan. They received no education in Tibetan language, mixed with Han Chinese pupils and learnt every subject in Chinese.

“When I talked to some of the Tibetan parents, they said they wanted their children to be fluent in Chinese because this would give them a better future. Even some Tibetan language teachers sent their children to Chinese schools. In order to create a Chinese-speaking environment, these parents would demand their children speak Chinese at home. Other parents were trying to improve their own Chinese language skills by speaking it with their children.

“For many parents the attitude was: ‘What do I care for generations far in the future? My concern is getting the best opportunities possible for my children now.’

“Are these parents being selfish or merely pragmatic?

“Certainly there are few lucrative job prospects for Tibetans who have not been educated in Chinese. Nor is it possible for a student educated in Tibetan to acquire professional qualifications at college or university. There are no relevant courses taught in Tibetan.

“At Tibet University in Lhasa the only courses taught in Tibetan are in the Tibetan language department. All other courses at the university are taught in Chinese. Yes, it is possible that a student who takes a degree in Tibetan language could get a job as a teacher of Tibetan language, but he or she would have no prospects of advancement against Chinese-educated rivals. And when all parents have chosen to educate their children in Chinese from primary school, what need will there be for Tibetan language teachers?

“Sometimes I tried to point out to Tibetan parents who sent their children to Chinese language classes that there was a growing imbalance between the number of local Tibetan teachers and non-Tibetan teachers. If all parents gave up on Tibetan-language teaching and sent their children to Chinese schools, I told them, we would risk losing our mother tongue forever.

**“This would be a terrible tragedy. Not only would an ancient language vanish, so too would the obligation of the Chinese authorities to protect the minority rights of the Tibetan people. What limited autonomy we had as Tibetans would be written out of the constitution.**

**“Put simply: we would no longer be Tibetans.”**



Panam Middle School, near Shigatse, Tibetan Autonomous Region.

## Education in Tibet – marginalising the mother tongue

Although there are occasional exceptions to this rule in rural areas, in urban centres Tibetan children are only allowed three years of primary education in Tibetan, before they are forced to switch to instruction of all subjects – except Tibetan language – in Chinese. After completing their elementary education, Tibetans must pass an examination in Chinese language because all education beyond the primary level is conducted in Chinese.

The switch from education in their mother tongue to attempting to learn in Chinese has two effects:

1. Tibetan children often fail to reach a crucial level of literacy in their first language before they switch to Chinese language.
2. Having failed to reach basic literacy levels, many Tibetan children are unable to cope with the standardised subjects being taught in the Chinese language, resulting in a relatively low attendance rate in Tibetan primary schools. In fact, many Tibetans do not complete their primary education which forms the first six years of the compulsory nine years education.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of this 14-year-old Tibetan boy is common:

**“There were no Chinese students or teachers in my primary school. It was a village school and no Chinese would come to a village school. At the village primary school we were taught Tibetan language, Maths, English and Chinese. All subjects were taught in Tibetan except the Chinese language class. The other children were Tibetan children from the village and the teachers were Tibetan.**

**“This changed when I attended the County Middle School where all the subjects were taught in Chinese except Tibetan language. Even though there were no Chinese students at the middle school, there were Chinese teachers. It was a problem for me to follow the subjects that were taught in Chinese.**

**“All of us who had been taught in Tibetan at the village school were not good at Chinese and found it hard to understand subjects like Maths and Physics. Because I was not being taught in Tibetan, my school performance was not as good as it was at village school. “After Middle School I chose to go to a vocational training school but I failed the exam and had to go home where I worked doing housework.”<sup>13</sup>**

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Report on Human Development in 2005 looked at school attendance rates in different Chinese provinces. It found that all Chinese provinces boasted primary school attendance rates of over 95%, except in the TAR where the average was 70%.

The Government prioritises the Chinese language over Tibetan, insisting on a standardised curriculum taught in Chinese and which has no relevance to Tibetan children's culture or identity. These policies have produced a crisis in Tibetan literacy levels and schooling. Tibetans on average complete only 2.2 years of schooling (Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang) compared to a rate of 7.3 years for rural Chinese and 10.2 years for urban Chinese, according to the 2000 Chinese census.<sup>14</sup> The failure in state education of Tibetans is having profound implications for the survival of the Tibetan mother tongue.

## A choice no parent should have to make

For most of its nearly 60 years of occupying in Tibet, much of Chinese government policy has been aimed – directly or indirectly – at the forced assimilation of the Tibetan people into the 'motherland'. The Chinese-dominated education system in Tibet, offers young Tibetans little, if any, opportunity to learn about their country's ancient history or unique culture.

Tibetan parents face a Hobson's choice: China's way or the highway.

Parents who want their children to have any chance of competing against Han Chinese migrants for educational and employment opportunities know that they must become fluent in Chinese. This means that any delay in starting their children's Chinese language education will hold them back in later years. If you can only speak Tibetan in Tibet, you have no future.

For those parents who desperately want their children to grow up proud of their own identity, the 'highway' is the only option – going with or sending their children on the dangerous journey into exile to India where they can be educated in Tibetan and allowed to practise their religion without restriction. The journey, over the Himalayas, takes many weeks with the constant threat of capture by or injury from Chinese border guards.<sup>15</sup>

Eleven-year-old Guru Kyab (right) describes the dangers of the journey, made in October 2007:

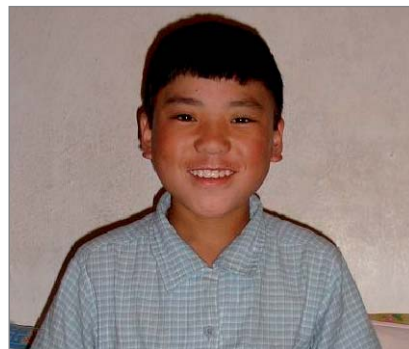
**“When we heard the shots, most people tried to run up the mountain. Three monks ran up to the left side. The guide and some others ran up on the right side. We heard Chinese voices yelling at us to ‘lie down’. There was the sound of bullets hissing over our heads.**

**“We ran for our lives. I thought it would be impossible to outrun the army and thought I should stop, so maybe I could find my parents. I could hear my heart pounding. After we stopped at a safe point, I could taste blood in my mouth. Later we found out eight of us were arrested: four monks, my parents, my sister and a little girl. They are still in prison.**

**“I miss them very much. I remember the words of my father before we went on this journey: ‘You must go on with the group if mother, sister and I are arrested or are unable to go with you. Follow His Holiness the Dalai Lama and listen to his words. Study well in school and be a useful person in the future. Do things that benefit others, and especially help poor people.’”**

Guru Kyab will grow up Tibetan, but not in his own country. Although in prison, his parents know their son will be able to pursue any profession he wants. Young Tibetans living in Tibet – and their parents – know there is no such access to opportunity – unless they give up their own language.

These are choices no parent should ever have to make.





TIBET WATCH/ANDERS ANDERSEN

Chinese language billboards dominates main Lhasa thoroughfare.

## The emergence of ‘Chibetan’

It starts in the classroom and continues relentlessly – the introduction of Chinese words and phrases into everyday spoken Tibetan. This trend is exacerbated by the ever increasing numbers of Han Chinese migrants flocking to Tibet on the recently opened Gormo-Lhasa Railway. The newcomers, lured by the promise of higher wages, come with no desire or need to ever learn a word of Tibetan.

**“In the schools the Tibetan spoken by Tibetan students is getting worse. There are now about three Chinese words in every five Tibetan sentences. So Tibetans are concerned about the situation of the Tibetan language in schools.**

**“The teachers are the same as their students. In fact students copy the bad example of teachers. Some teachers actually speak in both languages at the same time. When they are speaking Tibetan, their language shifts towards Chinese.**

**“Tibetans unnecessarily mix Chinese words into Tibetan when there is a Tibetan equivalent for the Chinese word. It is mainly Tibetan students and workers in government institutions that are mixing Chinese words into Tibetan, especially in cities and towns.”<sup>16</sup>**

Many Tibetans understand the dangers of the pervasive influence of the Chinese language on the long-term survival prospects of their mother tongue. But, as more and more Chinese move on to the Tibetan Plateau as part of the government’s deliberate policy to achieve a Han Chinese majority in Tibet, Tibetans feel powerless to protect their own language.

**“In the villages Tibetans mix more Chinese words into Tibetan than they did in the past. We frequently have to contact Chinese who do not speak Tibetan in the local area. So we have to depend on Chinese language for a better service. For example, if we go to the bank or for shopping there is no chance to use Tibetan.”<sup>17</sup>**

Just as spoken Tibetan is under threat, so, too, is the written language, which is becoming increasingly irrelevant in public life.



Letters addressed in Tibetan script have no chance of being delivered and Tibetans attempting to travel round their own country without Chinese language skills will be unable to read bus timetables or even their own tickets.

**“When they write reports to the relevant institutions, the monasteries must write in Chinese. It’s the same in the village. We have to hire someone to write Chinese or to translate the reports that we receive. One third only of the total volume of books in bookstores are in Tibetan. The rest is in Chinese.**

**“On signboards for non-governmental institutions the majority are bi-lingual. In the past Tibetan was written larger than Chinese. Now Chinese is larger than Tibetan. In governmental institutions some signboards are only in Chinese. Road signs and warning signs are only written in Chinese. Some warning signs have illustrations so that people can guess their meaning but sometimes accidents occur due to the ignorance of Tibetan people of warning signs.**

**“In hospitals the signs are bilingual, but the patients’ history, the diagnosis and test results are in Chinese. Medicine names are in Chinese and doctors speak Chinese. We have to ask someone to interpret between patient and doctors.”<sup>18</sup>**

**“If Tibetans continually blend more Chinese words into Tibetan the problems for the mother tongue will be terrible. If the current situation goes on, Tibetans will lose their unique identity. Tibetan will not be recognisable in the future. As many Tibetan lamas, scholars and those Tibetans who are concerned for the future of Tibet say: language and culture are the core support poles of Tibetan identity. Tibetan language will be extinct if we unnecessarily mix more foreign words in Tibetan.”**

Tenzin, monk from Amdo  
(Ch: Qinghai)

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