

# **Educational Issues Facing Tibetans Today**

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## **Contents**

- 3. Acknowledgments
- 4. Introduction
- 5. Education within the Tibetan Autonomous Region
  - Tibetan Language
  - History/Ideology in Schools
  - Employment Problems
- 11. Introduction to Education in India
  - Department of Education
  - Tibetan Children's Village
  - Career Counseling and Choosing Educational Focus
  - Scholarships and Assistance Programs
  - Vision of Education as Espoused by the Exile Community
  - Why Tibetans Come to India for Education
  - Opinions of Sarah Campus Students
  - Why Tibetan Students Return to TAR
- 22. Problems with Unemployment in the Exile Community
  - Concerns in Career Counseling
  - Sarah Students and Prospective Jobs
  - Representations of Tibetans in a World and Their Self-View
- 31. Conclusion
- 32. Bibliography
- 35. Interviews
- 37. Appendix A
- 38. Appendix B

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## **\* \* Introduction \* \***

Education is a tool of empowerment that facilitates productivity and encourages an individual to interact meaningfully with his or her community. Articulate and broad ranging education is something almost every country strives for in order to enable its people to compete both locally and globally. The future of any people/culture depends upon its youth and how they are indoctrinated within social and educational structures. The Tibetan exile community is especially tuned in to its upcoming generation's educational enculturation because of the Tibetan people's constant fight for cultural survival.

Since the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet in 1959, the Tibetan educational system has had to be thoroughly reconstructed to accommodate a life in exile. After many trials and tribulations, with the help of countless people – both Tibetan and non-Tibetan – the education of Tibetan children in exile has been extraordinarily successful. Today, Tibetan refugees are attending prestigious universities worldwide and participate in a wide range of professions. As the exile community has grown, so has the scope of future prospects. With advancement comes new obstacles; a main point of contention presently is the high rate of unemployment facing those Tibetan students in exile who are graduating from universities.

Tackling the problem of unemployment, specifically for those who are well-educated, is not as simple as participating in a job application process. The difficulties are both straight-forward and subtle. For one, Tibetans need to fill in the training/experience step between graduation and employment. Career counselors must be more abundant and have more individual time with high school and college students. Also, the Tibetan

image, as static as it may be, must be evaluated for its role in education. Students will be looked at not only as individuals, but also as players in their respective culture.

I have been exploring what is holding back the young, educated Tibetan community, that in whom I saw so much passion, from getting jobs. I have conducted many interviews investigating occupational fears, opinions on what improvements need to be made in the educational/career counseling system, and how students' self-perception of being Tibetan is integral. However, I sometimes felt, as many anthropologists have, like I was trapped in a hall of mirrors with reflection after reflection and everyone trying to rescue meaning. I don't pretend to have the answers to unemployment, but hopefully the ideas presented herein/in this paper can help shed some light on the problem.

**\* \* Education within the Tibetan Autonomous Region \* \***

*Education in Tibet is so inadequate that the "rooftop of the world" lacks specialists in fields vital to its development – and illiteracy is rampant, official Chinese media said Tuesday. "Tibet's present educational situation falls far short of the demands," Dainzin, a senior leader, told China's Tibet Magazine. Forty-four percent of Tibetans above the age of 15 are either illiterate or semi-illiterate, compared with the national average of 15 percent ("Tibetan Illiteracy Blamed on Poor Education" A12).*

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, visited China in 2003. In her following report she remarked harshly on the Chinese education system for denying religious and linguistic identity to minorities and for its schooling fees, which she believes are pushing many families into debt. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Tomasevski said, "Even Uganda, a poor country, is doing better than China in guaranteeing the right to education" (Tomasevski A5). Within China's thirty-two provinces it is the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) that ranks last in overall educational systems, gross enrolment, and adult literacy rate according to a

report released in 2002 by the United Nations Development Program (*Annual Report 2002*).

Schools in the countryside of TAR face the most severe fiscal, developmental, and resource related challenges within the region. For example, the people of Nyarong County wrote a request letter to the Karze Prefecture authorities stating, “There are 324 teachers in the county. Only 26 of them graduated from a college or university. 216 graduated from normal school, 82 have no training in education and their knowledge level is quite low” (Education: Culture vs. Work 84). Rural education in TAR is severely under-funded, claims The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), and elementary education is compulsory but not free. Therefore, high school dropout rates and low initial enrollment go in tandem. For example, the average income for Lithang County, as reported by Logan in 2001, is 590 yuan per year, and for primary school in particular the tuition is 600 yuan per year. This makes it impossible for many families to support their children’s education and makes them unable to pay teachers’ salaries. Also, the nomadic lifestyle of many Tibetans prohibits children from even being within a reasonable distance to a government school. There are only 2,800 out of 4,950 school-age children who are actually in school in Lithang County. This is not unique to this county; in the rural areas of Hongyaun County in Amdo Qinghai Province, the percentage of children attending school is between 14.7% and 39.6%<sup>1</sup>.

Urban residents constitute 23.7 percent of the population in TAR, and because less than 5 percent of Tibetans live in urban settings it is mostly they who suffer from inadequate schooling. The discrepancies between urban and rural standards of living are

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Erickson, *Tibet: Abode of the Gods, Pearl of the Motherland*, as reported in TCHRD’s Annual Report 2003

large; the urban dwellers receive 29 times more than rural residents in terms of government spending. The urban residents had a “250% annual income increase compared to the rural increase of 50% between 1991 and 1996” (*Economic Status of Tibetans in Tibet* 205). Even so, urban residents do not escape the burden of schooling costs. A PRC newspaper referred to a survey conducted in 2000 saying that the expenditure on education within Lhasa has accounted for more than 20 percent of a local family's total income (*People's Daily* B7).

China does claim that over the past fifty years the state has allocated a grand total of 10 billion yuan to education in TAR. From 1979 to 2000 the region was given 5.87 billion yuan towards its education fund (Yan). Even with such large expenditures TAR is not excused from its litany of educational embarrassments. Dainzin, while speaking to China's Tibet Magazine, said that “out of 1,000 Tibetans, 2.9 are college graduates, 12.3 have a high school education, 247 a junior high education and 185 a primary school education” (Youngblood 94). The numbers given here suggest that there is still much work to be done to even get Tibetan children into primary schools, much less graduate them from universities.

### **Tibetan Language**

Chinese is the dominant language taught within schools in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Tibetan language is believed by most Tibetans in exile to be a cornerstone of Tibetan culture. The TCHRD has conveyed their distress in their recent Annual reports that Tibetans under Chinese jurisdiction are forced to choose between their native cultural system and financial independence within an economy dominated by Chinese language. Although article 121 of the PRC's 1982 Constitution allows “minority

nationalities to employ the written and spoken language in common use,” Tibetans entering India claim that the Tibetan language is anything but common in TAR. One cannot even buy a bus ticket or speak to a doctor in Tibetan (as reported in *Annual Report 2003* 81).

In 1987 there was a regulation in the “Provisions on the Use of Tibetan” that made proficiency in the Tibetan language required for placement and promotions within government jobs. Also, legislation constructed a plan to set up Tibetan-medium secondary schools and have most university courses offered in Tibetan by the year 2000. Despite these promises, however, TCHRD claims that at present, higher education is conducted entirely in Chinese (as reported in *Annual Report 2003* 81). According to an article written by Agence France-Presse in 1997, Tibetan students switch to Chinese-only instruction at the age of nine. The shift has led to widespread underachievement by Tibetans in secondary and higher education.

At Lhasa First Secondary School, one-half to two-thirds of the students in Chinese classes may be native Tibetans. Some parents see no economical advantage in them becoming literate in their native tongue. “It is only a burden, many say, to study both Tibetan and Chinese, and university entrance exams require Chinese and English, not Tibetan” (Nima). The introduction of an English language requirement for entrance to universities within China has increased the difficulty of learning Tibetan, even as a second language. If students opt for Chinese and Tibetan language studies they miss out on years of English training, leaving students who choose Chinese and English with an advantage.



Article 12 of the PRC's 1995 Education Law grants minorities permission within schools and other educational institutions to speak and write within their native dialect. Likewise, in 2002 the TAR People's Congress enacted regulations encouraging the use of the Tibetan language within most sectors of official work (as reported in *Annual Report 2003* 81). However, the majority of workers are Chinese. Since the government has control over many schools within Tibetan areas, and most of the employees within these schools are Chinese, it is only logical that despite said encouragement the Tibetan language is marginalized (Saunders A3).

### **History/Ideology in Schools**

China's Communist Party proclaimed in September of 1994 that it would be launching a three-year "colorful patriotic education" drive in Tibet to quash "youthful visions of independence, a return of the Dalai Lama or a divided China" (Youngblood 94). This project has been predicted to have a large effect on middle and primary school students. Kurtenbach, a member of the Associated Press, quoted Raidi, chairman of Tibet's regional congress and a senior Communist Party official, as saying, "It is totally necessary to launch patriotic education among the citizens and in the monasteries. This is designed to maintain the unity of the motherland and to help people to love the motherland" (A7). However much the Tibetan language may have been neglected within schools, a push for patriotic education becomes synonymous with cultural whitewashing for Tibetan parents. Many Tibetans in interviews with TCHRD and the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) have expressed fear that their children may have never fully known about their heritage and culture because of the historical and political indoctrination in the Chinese schooling system.

Forced ideological studies have been recognized by the United Nations. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, expressed concern about the “strong emphasis on ideology in the educational system as a whole in China.”

Tomasevski recommends that China's law be reviewed through the lens of international human rights obligations. She says that human and minority rights must be integrated into the education policy, law and practice (Saunders A3).

One TCV student who left TAR to be schooled within the Tibetan exile community in India has anonymously reflected on his experiences in an interview with TCV saying, "I could not go to school in Tibet for the first ten years because I was denied admission on one pretext or another. Somehow, I could get admission later. But it was an all-Chinese version of education, where my Tibetan schoolmates were told by their Chinese teachers that the Dalai Lama was bad. Many times the photos of the Dalai Lama were put into our shoes just to indicate that He was considered nothing more than dirt to the Chinese. If any student dared defy the dictates of the Chinese teachers, he and his parents were put through great mental and physical torture"

<http://www.khamaid.org/programs/education/litangeducation.htm>).

The patriotic education and communist ideology is not easily avoided. The more Tibetan culturally-oriented schools have trouble staying open within TAR. In 2002 and 2003 two privately-funded schools, Ngaba Kirti Monastic School and Tsa-Sur School, were closed by Chinese authorities because they were allegedly teaching “splittist” ideologies. Moreover, in a TCHRD interview with a parent it was remarked that studying Tibetan culture at one of these institutions inhibited survival within the society. This parent said that after graduation there was no work for these students (*Annual Report*

2002 57). Many other Tibetans share the sentiment of this one. They wonder what use it is to send their children for Tibetan education within China's borders. Parents worry that their children's pronounced ethnicity will disable them within a Chinese-controlled society.

### **Employment Problems**

A survey done in 2000 in TAR reveals that competition for an educated workforce in the future society of China is a main factor that stimulates Lhasa residents to invest so much money in the education of their children (People's Daily, Dec. 21, 2000). With the population being so large in China there is fierce rivalry for jobs. As has been previously discussed, the Tibetan population within TAR is at a disadvantage because of its limited access to schooling. Subsequently, many educated and non-educated Tibetans go unemployed. As a result TAR places third from last in GDP according to the UN's Human Development Index and Tibetans only account for 5-10% of the labor force in Chinese controlled projects and industry (*Economic Status of Tibetans in Tibet*). In an interview Lhamo Kyi, a student in exile, says that it is extremely difficult for Tibetans to get jobs in TAR both because many cannot complete their education, and because Tibetans are not favored in Chinese government-run projects and positions.

### **\* \* Introduction to Education in India \* \***

Approximately 80,000 Tibetans fled Chinese occupation in 1959, and now there are approximately 140,000 Tibetans living in exile. Education was a top priority to His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he moved to India. Being without resources in a new land, he immediately appealed to the Government of India for assistance. Prime Minister

Pandit Nehru, with great hospitality, acquiesced to the Dalai Lama's requests and separate schools for Tibetan refugee children were set up. The first graduating class was in 1960 with approximately fifty students. By 1961 there were 800 Tibetan students enrolled in Mussorie, Simla, and Darjeeling schools (*Education in Exile*).

In 1977 more than 8,000 students had been or were currently being educated in the system being developed by the Central Tibetan Schools Administration (an institution created after only a year in exile). This was the first time in the Tibetan community's history that such educational opportunities were offered to so many regardless of social class (Nowak 57). "Commercialization and elitism in education will not be permitted. There will be universalisation of education at the basic level... Entire expenditure on basic school education, including the cost of textbooks, will be borne by the State" (*The Next Generation* 27). This philosophy, although inspiring, caused problems within the first Tibetan schools in India because of the influx of students and their financial deprivation. The group as a whole was quite unfamiliar with the formal secular education in India, many parents were absent, and the majority of the teaching body at first was non-Tibetan. Even so, there weren't any monumental changes in the students' enculturation. This can be attributed mainly to the first schools being mostly residential where the students lived under the care of Tibetan house-parents or guardians (Nowak 57).

### **Department of Education**

At present the Department of Education (DOE), a branch of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala, India, cares for more than 28,000 students in 87 schools in Nepal, Bhutan, and India. Thirty-three schools are run directly by the DOE, 31

are overseen jointly with the Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA)<sup>2</sup>, and the remaining 23 are autonomously funded and administered by the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF), and other charitable organizations. These schools range from pre-primary to senior secondary; they follow the required curriculum of the country in which they are located and also integrate Tibetan language and culture. The DOE also extends their services to provide education to older youth who have recently arrived from Tibet in order to ease transition into India and encourage self-reliance. After only four decades in exile, the Tibetan community has achieved a 93% literacy rate. "Literacy is not the end of education, we must encourage the best in all by touching the heart of each individual to be a good human being, who are loving, caring and contributing members of the world community" (*Education in Exile* 98).

The CTA strives, as it has from the beginning, to give all Tibetan children living in exile the opportunity to attend school. However, the concerns of the past are still present. For example, monetary issues still impede many families from being able to educate their children. For fifteen years many families relied on the kindness of the Government of India and the general community. Thankfully, in 1975 the DOE set up a sponsorship program that encourages outside individuals and agencies to participate in supporting Tibetan children's education. This sponsorship enables poor children not only to attend school, but also provides the children with adequate food, clothing, a school uniform, and necessary books and stationary. In addition, approximately one third of the graduating youth are provided with scholarships for higher education and vocational training through the DOE, TCV, THF, and others (*Education In Exile* 98).

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<sup>2</sup> CTSA is an autonomous body of the Government of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development.

In addition to facilities and family-style support, progressive teacher education is a priority of the DOE. In March of 1964 the Teachers Training Centre was started to train thirty teachers, all monks, in modern teaching methods. Now that the system has been expanded and refined it gives in-service trainings, resource materials, and support to all existing training centers. Developing existing teachers' skills is crucial because there are periodic shortages of schoolteachers for pre-primary education and for rural locations.

### **Tibetan Children's Village: "Others Before Self"**

The Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) was founded in 1960 in Dharamsala, India by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the late Tsering Dolma Takla to provide for and educate the Tibetan refugee children. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 1960, 51 children arrived from road construction camps in Jammu. As soon as the nursery was officially established, children began pouring in from road workers' camps in northern India, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan.

Originally the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children could provide only basic care. At the age of eight, the children were sent to other residential schools established by the Indian government. Jetsun Pema-la, who took over the position of director after her sister Tsering Dolma Takla passed away, was soon plagued with the problem of overcrowding. She quickly organized and reorganized to expand the facilities. Everything was in short supply: food; clothing; staff; and medicine. However, there was a group of tenacious individuals who dedicated themselves to the care of these children, and with the support of international and Indian aid, TCV has become the most impressive educational and social service in exile. In 1972 the Nursery was formally registered as the Tibetan Children's Village under the Societies Act. Today TCV has established branches

extending from Bylakuppe in South India to Ladakh in the North and has over 14,000 children in its care. The student body is comprised of both destitute children living in exile and those recently arrived from TAR.

TCV provides for its students completely. Children are raised as brothers and sisters, with everything from foster parents to household chores. “The mission of TCV is to provide a holding environment in which children are nurtured so that they may realize their full potential as human beings” (*Tibetan Children’s Villages* 16). Responsibility does not end when children complete or leave school. TCV continues their support by guiding them into higher academic studies or vocational work. To facilitate guidance they have set up a Scholarship Policy Committee and a Career Resource Center. Although TCV has many productive programs and is intimately linked with the DOE, TCV’s most renowned feat within the Tibetan education system in India is that it provides a safe haven for Tibetan refugees who have recently fled TAR.

### **Career Counseling and Choosing Educational Focus**

Out of 18 TCV schools only three -- Bylakuppe, Upper TCV Dharamsala, and Gopalpur-- contain upper level 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard classes. At class 10, students must think carefully about what field of study they wish to specialize in, and based upon the decision made, they are assigned one of the three aforementioned schools. Students who wish to pursue commerce go to Bylakuppe, those oriented towards science go to Dharamsala, and those who are interested in art go to Gopalpur. It is especially important that the science students find their focus early because of the competitiveness of science/technology seats within Indian and foreign universities.

Foreseeing one's future interest in study is challenging for many students in the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. Most students in TCV do choose an academic focus after 10<sup>th</sup> standard (see Appendix A), and statistically more students enter art and commerce than science (see Appendix B). According to Choezom Tsering, the career counselor at Upper TCV, it is common for an art student to later pursue commerce and vice versa (interview). In order to minimize this confusion the DOE sends out two career counselors to all the middle schools within India, Nepal, and Bhutan to give speeches and conduct workshops. TCV also keeps three career counselors directly integrated into their schools, one at Upper TCV Dharamsala, one at Bylakuppe, and one at Gopalpur.

Choezom Tsering has her BA in psychology and her master's degree in psychology and the council of education and research training. She has been a career counselor for the past four years. She starts working with the children during classes seven and eight through once a week group guidance sessions. They discuss basic planning, decision making, goal setting, and also explore their individual abilities and interests. The ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> standard students also get group guidance once a week, only the topics of conversation are more job and college specific. From ninth standard onwards the students are encouraged to ask questions and schedule individual appointments. There are no more meetings for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard science students. Choezom Tsering tries to schedule some time after classes finish, but she says that they are very busy with their studies. However, she estimates that nearly 80% of the 12<sup>th</sup> standard students apply for higher studies.

The Tibetan Children's Village has had a Career Resource Center at Upper TCV since 1992. It is a library collection of materials ranging from self-development books to



catalogs of universities all over the world. Choezom says that in her classes she explains how to use the facilities and that it has proven to be useful to future career and educational decision-making.

The DOE also does its part in outreach programs and counselors. Donkar Wangmo, one of two career counselors at the Department of Education, has her undergraduate and masters degrees in English. In 1999, she received a Fulbright Scholarship and attended the University of Iowa to study counseling. She has been working as a full time counselor for the past two years. She and the other counselor travel through India, Nepal, and Bhutan with the goal of visiting every Tibetan school once a year. She says she stays for 7-10 days, and in that time, she instructs classes 6-12 on issues of self-esteem, time management, goal setting, problem solving, and so on. She also meets with the teachers and the principal and gets assessments of overall performance and personality issues that may inhibit the students from reaching their goals, i.e. shyness. In addition, Donkar Wangmo is also available at her office during school vacations and is open to any student who may stop by with questions or is in need of advice (Interview).

### **Scholarships and Assistance Programs**

An average of 900 students graduate from schools each year. About 40% of these receive scholarships for further education through DOE, CTSA, TCV, THF and others. Studies done in 1998 report that out of those students receiving scholarships for further studies, 29% were in art and social sciences, 13% in education, 28.3% in legal and business, and 13.8% in science and technology. By 1988 the USIA Fulbright Scholarship program had afforded 259 Tibetan students the opportunity to undertake both degree and

non-degree courses in various universities in the United States (Choephel 8). Also, since 1982 there have been 101 scholarships from various other countries awarded to Tibetan students.

At present there are 328 male students and 274 female students under the care of the TCV Scholarship Program Office (SPO) (Basic Education Policy for Tibetans in Exile). In the past year alone the Program has directly assisted 265 TCV students with scholarships, and has given guidance to a number of Tibetan students from other schools. Tsering Chomphel, the Field Officer of SPO, says that the students to whom the scholarships are offered are ultimately decided upon by the villages. Then college admission planning begins. Suitable colleges must be identified, support is organized for enlisting those students who are interested in summer jobs, temporary housing is acquired, and there is orientation for policies and admission strategies. After they are admitted to a college, there are support groups set up where senior students help freshmen fill out their forms and give them advice. The SPO's responsibility does not end here, however. They are occupied year round with evaluating relationships with Indian universities (Interview).

### **Vision of Education as Espoused by the Exile Community**

*No matter how long we will need to remain in exile, the preservation of our language, religion, culture and traditions is extremely necessary. Providing modern education alone is not adequate. Formulation of an education policy suitable to our fundamental need and situation is therefore necessary and important as required by our Charter (Kalon Thupten Lungrig B1).*

In the second draft of the Basic Education Policy for Tibetans in Exile there is a section on the “special purpose of education for Tibetan people.” It discusses the responsibility of the Tibetan people to promote and preserve their culture through

education (2.4). Education stretches far beyond academics within the Tibetan community in exile, it is an acculturation of tradition and, as the Dalai Lama has said many times, an instrument of developing Tibetan/human values. “There is too much stress on developing the mind and too little on developing a warm heart...Education should be used to bring more happiness and meaning into life, to narrow the gap between perception and reality. Education with basic human values will be constructive and beneficial for society”, said the Dalai Lama (“With Education Must Come meaning to Life” B1). The Dalai Lama believes that the most important aspect of Tibetan culture is the strong sense of values among the people. He envisions the education system as a place of developing both knowledge and wisdom. The twin objectives of the Central Schools for Tibetans are therefore to provide a modern/advanced system of education and to preserve Tibetan cultural and social identity (Bhutia 78).

### **Why Tibetans come to India for Education**

Crossing the Himalayas by foot, often in fear of being caught by the Chinese and sent to prison, is no easy task. Why, then, were there “officially” 25,000 Tibetans who took refuge in India between 1986 and 1996<sup>3</sup>? The Tibetan Reception Center in Dharamsala, India claims that more than half of the Tibetans annually seeking asylum in India are below eighteen years of age. While some of these children come with their families, many come for schooling within the exile community. Approximately 30,000 people of the total refugee population in India, Nepal, and Bhutan are of school age, between six and 17. Seventy five percent of those receive education within the Tibetan school network (Choephel 7).

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<sup>3</sup> A vast proportion of refugees go undocumented.

So why do Tibetan parents feel so strongly about educating their children in exile in light of the deathly journey over the mountains and the many years of separation that are sure to follow? Donnet harshly says that “an honest appraisal of the situation in Tibet today will reveal nothing beyond the tenacious but discreet campaign to transform every inch of Tibet into a piece of China” (151). Many Tibetan parents agree with her and are disturbed by the wide reaching and effective methods being used within Chinese education to Sinocize TAR via ideology/history and language. Knowledge of Chinese has become indispensable in markets, hospitals, bus stations, etc. If the trend continues unchecked, the Tibetan language will be used only by grandparents and Tibetans in exile. One of the main reasons families send their children into exile to be educated is to preserve the Tibetan language, which is often felt to be part of the soul of the Tibetan culture.

As was discussed earlier, the history and communist ideology taught in schools within TAR neglects and changes what many Tibetans consider their true heritage. Almost any Tibetan who experienced part of their education in TAR and part in exile will tell you that they knew close to nothing about their land’s cultural development prior to exile. Many say the elder generations are afraid to talk about “Tibet” before 1949. In addition, love of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is extremely important to the majority of Tibetans, and the Buddhist faith are discouraged by the Chinese. Buddhism is allowed, but only marginally. Therefore a second major reason students are sent from their homes into exile is to learn about their cultural traditions and their religion. Elderly people will make the trek to see His Holiness only to say afterwards that they can die happily because they are fulfilled.

Tibetans within Lhasa are exposed to both a favorable and unfavorable side of modernization. The more seedy side is the exposure to prostitution and cheap alcohol. It is easy for unemployed youth anywhere to slide into an unhealthy relationship with these, and as was earlier stated, the percentage of uneducated and unemployed Tibetans within TAR is exceptionally high in comparison with the whole of China. Even rural families worry about a move from religion to a fondness of instant gratification and sensationalism. One parent, when dropping his child off in Dharamsala to be educated, told the Associated Press that, "Without Buddhism and without the Dalai Lama, we have no spirit. My children might drift to the towns and lose their direction" (Tibetans Bring Children for Education). A third major reason for sending Tibetan children to exile for education is to decrease exposure to unfavorable lifestyles.

### **Opinions of Sarah Campus Students**

Interviews with students from the Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies-Sarah revealed strong trends explaining not only why Tibetan youth wish to go to school in exile, but also why they further choose to continue their education in a Tibetan-oriented university. For example, Kalsang Lhamo went to Sarah even after graduating from college in Mysore because she wanted to improve her Tibetan language and history. Pema Lhamo expanded on that in our interview by putting importance on Tibetan cultural classes and Buddhist studies. In fact, all 22 students interviewed reiterated similar sentiments. They are all motivated to learn in-depth about their culture; they want to serve the community to the best of their abilities; they feel fortunate to have access to Tibetan studies taught by well-educated Tibetan teachers; and they want to be able to pass on what they have learned to the generations that follow them.

## **Why Tibetan Students Return to TAR**

Tibetan students return to the Tibetan Autonomous Region for three reasons. The first is simply that they miss their families. The second is that their education has been completed to a satisfactory level and the students wish to return to their land and family to get a job, as difficult as that may prove to be. The third reason is because of pressure placed on Tibetan families to bring their children back to TAR. According to an article published on the TCV website from 1997 to 1998, approximately 40 TCV students, whose parents have governmental jobs in TAR, were removed from their schooling in India because of pressure from the Chinese government. These parents were afraid of losing their jobs and possible imprisonment if they did not comply. Three of the 40 students had parents who worked at the Lhasa Middle School and were identified as having defied Chinese orders. These parents confided in TCV authorities “that almost all the Tibetan employees were harassed and even suspended from jobs for not bringing their children back from Dharamsala for schooling in the proper Chinese 'atmosphere'” (<http://www.khamaid.org/programs/education/litangeducation.htm>).

### **\* \* Problems with Unemployment in the Exile Community \* \***

*Today we are faced with a different set of challenges. The greatest of these is the increasing number of our young people who are passing beyond school age and are confronted with demands of adult life in exile. Lack of diverse futures. The unemployment problem is slowly raising its ugly head everywhere in the Tibetan community; our youth are not spared its effects (Tibetan Children's Villages 47).*

The challenges faced by graduating students in the Tibetan exile community in India have evolved over time. Students are looking past mere survival and asking themselves questions about who and what they want to be in the future. As mentioned earlier, living in exile was the first time so many children had the opportunity to go to

school regardless of location or class. Now, after 45 years, the majority of school-going Tibetans pass on to higher academic studies or vocational training. The community has been very supportive, but the education systems are running to keep up. Scholarships and assistance programs are being constantly revised to accommodate the increasing number of students. Much effort is being made to get students into higher education, but not enough has gone to directing youths as to future goals. As a result, India has many well-educated unemployed Tibetans.

### **Concerns in Career Counseling**

Career counseling has only been instituted in the past 10 years. For a fairly new system within the Tibetan community, it is doing remarkably well. However, it needs to be refined and branched out. First, there simply need to be more counselors in both the DOE and TCV. Choezom-la says that it is difficult to be one counselor among 2,000 students. She feels she doesn't get enough individual time with them and in addition to her counseling duties has to act as the librarian to the Career Resource Center (Interview). Donkar Wangmo says that the DOE is planning on getting at least one more counselor, but her hope is for them to be in every school.

Choezom says that too many youngsters are anxious to stay within the immediate community. She tells students that if they do not get jobs within the Tibetan community, they must not be afraid to look elsewhere. They must be willing to adjust to new environments. Donkar adds that if the Tibetan youth focuses on physically working within the Tibetan community their options will be narrow. She encourages students to branch out by saying they should instead focus on the idea of a free Tibet where all kinds of professionals will be needed. Both women are concerned with the cultural dependency

of the youth. Of course they are delighted that the students feel comfortable and loyal enough to their people that they want to stay immersed, but they worry about the self-limiting side effects. They want to express that leaving the community for work and college is beneficial to their professional population.

Donkar Wangmo is concerned about shyness. “Extreme shyness is not natural and it is getting in the way of their studies” (interview). Students are not freely talking in class by 11<sup>th</sup> standard; how can they be expected to hold discussions then in 12<sup>th</sup>, she asked in our interview. Questions need to be encouraged and the degrading verbal humiliation that sometimes takes place that causes students to be less confident and reserved should be dissuaded. In addition, she feels that there is a lot of pressure, as there is everywhere, to get the top scores. Unfortunately, when low scores are coupled with a lack of money, and many times a lack of immediate family support, students become prevented from making decisions. She says they feel hopeless. “Students only think big when they get high scores and are also financially supported.” Donkar Wangmo thinks that the low esteem learned in classes, and the lack of confidence inspired by not having the top grades, stops many Tibetans from putting themselves out in the job market. However, she says that it is not only students that need to be inspired to be more outgoing, but also teachers need some guidance as to how to promote their students to promote themselves. Without being about to market one’s self and think beyond average expectations, students will continue to find refuge in trade below their abilities, or none at all.



## **Sarah Students and Prospective Jobs**

In my interviews, there was an almost even distribution of Sarah students who had studied arts, commerce, and science for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> standard. Yet, when I asked them what they wanted to do after they graduated, 13 students said they wanted to be teachers, five said they want to work for CTA, and four wanted research/library jobs. All 22 strongly expressed the wish to be work directly within the Tibetan community. Kalsang Lhamo said she is indebted to the CTA and she therefore wishes to repay the kindness of His Holiness the Dalai Lama by working in the Tibetan governing system. Pema Lhamo also wants to repay the community's kindness, and said that it is so important to her that she does not want to work in an Indian community at all. Lhamo Kyi wants to teach tradition to children; she thinks it is very important at this time in exile to inspire children in the way of their culture. The words "to repay their kindness," "duty," "obligation," and "cultural preservation" occurred frequently in Sarah students' reasons for wanting to work in the Tibetan community. This was especially true of the students who went to TCV schools. It was inspiring how much they appreciated what had been sacrificed so that they could go to school. They did not take their positions for granted.

If a Tibetan student with higher education wants to work within their community, they really only have the three job options listed above; government, teacher, and research, with the addition of those in the medical field. In all of my focus groups, Sarah students agreed that the range of employment was narrow. Fifteen out of the 22 students are worried about competition in the job market, especially in governmental jobs. Spots are limited, and applications are numerous. The students said they know many graduated Tibetans who are having trouble at present finding jobs.

All the students said there was nothing wrong with going into an Indian community for college or employment. Some even thought that it was a good idea to broaden one's scope and experience. Many felt that in business and sciences, it was much easier to get a job in an Indian community if the student had graduated from an Indian university. However, when asked if in the case they did not get jobs within Tibetan schools and so forth if they would consider looking within the Indian community, they replied, "No." They explained this by saying that they did not have the needed training, and in many cases that they simply didn't want to. It was difficult for them to imagine what they might do if they could do anything, Indian community or not. They reiterated teacher and government, and in some cases would say police officer, and then get shy and start laughing. The concept of constructing a profession, dreaming something up, that American children will give answers of president and astronaut in first grade seemed like a very strange question to my interviewees.

Nearly 80 percent of the students had some, even if minimal, contact with career counselors before they made their decisions about college. Many were vague when I asked if the counsel was helpful. Most told me that the counselors were not that helpful because they did not get much time to speak with them; some only saw a counselor once for a few hours of speech. Phurbu Dhondup explained that Tibetans are different than Americans. At that age they didn't put much emphasis on careers. He thinks that not having career counselors is dangerous for youth. It is so easy to miss opportunities, to find yourself out of 12<sup>th</sup> standard with no idea what to do. He, and many others, would like to see more counseling. All the students in fact would be grateful for a guidance counselor within Sarah itself to advise them on how to pursue their future careers. Eight

or so also said that it would be very useful to have an outlet to provide or instruct on the training needed for employment.

### **Representations of Tibetans in the World and Their Self-View**

According to Barnett, there are two competing representations of Tibetans in the world. The view most commonly held by Westerners is one of “violated specialness.” This representation was promulgated by the exiled Tibetan leadership in the late 1980s. “Since that time the dominant form in which Tibet has been put forward in Western and exile political discussions has involved the image of a zone of specialness, uniqueness, distinctiveness, or excellence that has been threatened, violated or abused” (Barnett 173). The Chinese favor the perspective of a metaphorical marriage between the dominant Chinese culture and the Tibetan specialness. They relate the tale of a marriage between a Tibetan king and a Chinese princess in the seventh century. The Princess brought with her “ink, music, agriculture,” etc., thereby improving Tibetan culture. The Chinese see themselves in the present as doing very much the same thing. Their conception of Tibetan culture is that it is backwards and needs to be “advanced or educated through the process of social evolution” (Barnett 277). The Western conception imagines Tibetan culture to be quaint or special, and in a nostalgic, anthropological way, assumes that it needs to be preserved or returned to an earlier condition.

These varying representations have profound political ramifications. The “violated specialness” perspective has resulted in considerable support from the West. It holds a particular appeal for “New Age” groups. It has engendered funds from a variety of organizations and events. The monies collected during fund-raising events worldwide

have been used in part to promote the education of Tibetan students in the diaspora, as well as many other worthy causes.

There are serious limitations inherent in the conceptualization of the Tibetan people as former members of a Shangri-la. This image could politically be counter-productive. “It carries within it a pervasive implication of Tibetan innocence and victimhood, suggesting that Tibetans are incapable of effective action or decision-making” (Barnett 274). In addition to potentially causing Tibetans to appear impotent, the representation of “violated specialness” has a distinctly historical construct. To return the Tibetans to an earlier condition is to prevent them from moving forward as a modern people. It also implies a type of Tibetan homogeneity. “There is no allowance in this image for the existence of multiple voices, or for the mechanisms by which the Dalai Lama (as the Tibetan leader) distills disparate interests and views, processes that are central to the modern concept of a representative leader” (Barnett 301). Additionally, there is the risk that if the Tibetan people were imagined as a powerful, autonomous group that they would lose the outpouring of funds that they enjoy as a beleaguered people. This effectively leaves the Tibetans in a precarious position with regards to their funding for education and many other things.

Both perceptions, that of the stagnant, victimized culture and of an underdeveloped, backward people, hold their own portions of distorted truth. Cultural preservation is a key issue within the exile community. However, self-definition has no constant; it is not clearly bounded by defined states of being. Tibetans in exile find themselves in a perpetual liminal state of existence. They have no reassurance of reintegration into Tibet, especially in the ideal sense of self-rule. They are constantly in

the process of exploring who they are as Tibetans in exile. Some exploration is natural, but for many refugees it “is not a free gift of the moment, but a necessity brought on by circumstances beyond their control” (Nowak 45). The side effects have been both beneficial, in that Tibetans have done a great job in maintaining tradition, and stifling, because of a fear of change.

The intense dedication to cultural preservation are a reaction to both Chinese occupation and the state of being a refugee. Tibetans, whether in TAR or exile, are in a constant state of negotiation between their tradition and another country’s surrounding cultures. “Whether the two poles of the dialectic be we/they or the familiar/the alien, ‘collision with the other’s horizons makes us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed’” (Nowak 50-51). This is a time when Tibetans get to see themselves in the mirror of other cultures and make decisions about how much assimilation is acceptable. There is also a defensive drive for protection, a feeling of cultural superiority and uniqueness that causes a refusal to accept change.

Tibetans’ hyper-extended sense of cultural preservation, coupled with the need for self-sustainability, motivates the push for education. In this way the Tibetan community promotes the learning of Tibetan culture by the younger generations. “In ambiguous social states, symbols and metaphors are especially likely to proliferate” (Nowak 46). The Tibetans in exile have numerous symbols for what might be called Tibetan-ness, language, religion, performing arts, and so on. Traditional schooling is one major avenue for the enculturation of these symbols.

In many ways, adherence to traditional studies and cultural norms can make one feel safe, but it can also cause clinginess to society, a fear to leave. Tenzin Woezer, the

Undersecretary at the Department of Home Affairs, explained in an interview that this is one of the reasons for unemployment among the younger generations. He said it was good for Tibetan youth to want to be immersed within the community, but it was unhealthy to limit one's career options because of it. It is of no help to the Tibetan people to be educated and wandering. Working within the CTA himself, he understands that there is often a feeling of guilt around leaving intimate Tibetan society (interview). Almost all Tibetans feel obligations towards their people that they wish to fulfill.

“Traditional education is a continuous process, but then what?” Tenzin Woezer asks. Education used to be mainly monastic, where one spent their entire life studying without emphasis on financially supporting oneself, and some of that mentality has flowed over into Tibetan secular education. No one really stresses the post-education phase. Students study and study and wake up one day to know they have to find a job with no idea how to go about that, Tenzin Woezer says. This is another reason that career counselors should be in greater abundance.

Without adequate counseling students do not know what options they have and are often unaware of what it takes to pursue their desired futures. There have been multiple organizations set up to facilitate employment; Tibetan Youth Empowerment Initiative, Promotional Agency for Development of Micro Enterprises, and Youth Empowerment Support are just a few. They are currently working to give Tibetans employment opportunities, networking skills, and needed training for more sophisticated professions.

## **\* \* Conclusions \* \***

The Tibetan community in exile in India is generously supportive of its children and their education. It provides a welcoming space for many unsatisfied students within TAR. The influx of Tibetan school aged children over the past 50 years is a tribute to the exile community's success. So many came, in fact, that the education system has had to expand and restructure itself to accommodate all its students. Over the years the bar has been raised in educational standards and the expectations for students to pursue higher education has become much more common. These advancements have brought with them a fresh set of difficulties. Traditional agricultural and craft-based occupations are no longer satisfying this newly educated generation. The community is working now in various ways to accommodate its youth; the aforementioned organizations have been set up, counselors have been put into schools, and research is being done in the way of employment placement. However, the problem of unemployment could be reduced if the career counseling system was expanded, job-training programs were set up or encouraged after graduation, and students felt confident enough in themselves and their abilities that they were motivated to put themselves out there. The idea of helping the community must be expanded to include a variety of occupations beyond administrative, education, and research. If Tibetan students develop themselves occupationally, self-sustainability will increase for the community as a whole.

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### Tibetan Children's Village

Choezom Tsering, Career Counselor at Upper TCV. Interview at Upper TCV Dharamsala. 24<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Nawang Dorjee, TCV Education Director. Interview at Upper TCV Dharamsala. 29<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Tsering Chomphel, Field Officer for TCV in the Delhi Youth Hostel. Interview at Upper TCV Dharamsala. 7<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

Tsewang Yeshe, Director of TCV Head Office. Interview at Upper TCV Dharamsala. 29<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

### Students from The Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies-Sarah

Kalsang Lhamo, student at Sarah College. Interview at Sarah. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Lhamo Kyi, student at Sarah College. Interview at Sarah. 8<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

Pema Lhamo, student at Sarah College. Interview at Sarah. 26<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Focus Group #1 with Sarah Students on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2004

Lobsang Gyatso  
Lobsang Tsering  
Nawang Kunchuk  
Norbu Dolma  
Tenzin Dolma  
Tenzin Gyaltzen  
Tsetan Norzom  
Tsetan Yangzom

Focus Group #2 with Sarah Students on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004.

Galtsen Madhon  
Gedhon Dhondue  
Paljor Jigmey  
Phurbu Dolma  
Phurbu Dhondup  
Sangay Tsamchoe  
Ugen Tsemphel

Focus Group #3 with Sarah Students on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

Sonam Yangkyi  
Tamdin Wangyal  
Tenzin Norzom  
Tsewang Lhamo

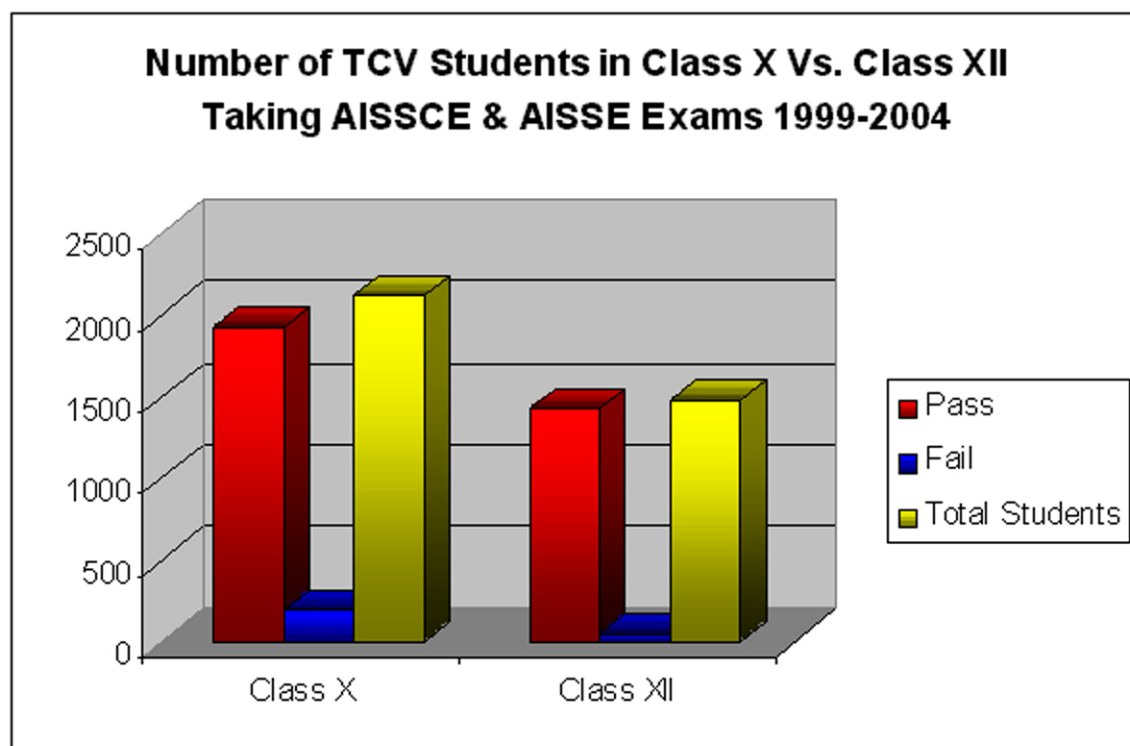
### Others

Dawa Tsering, Founder of Yongling Kindergarten and Creche and Board Member of the Tibetan youth Empowerment Initiative. Interview at Yongling McLeod Ganj. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2004.

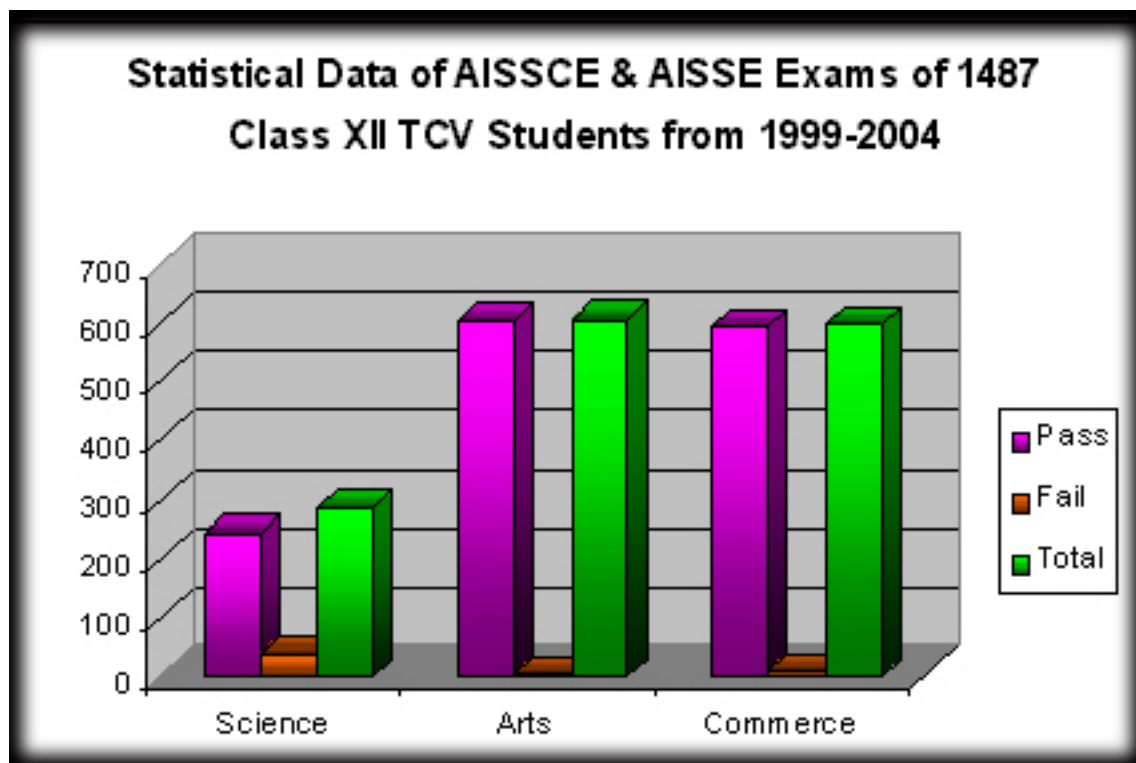
Donkar Wangmo, Career Counselor at the Department of Education. Interview at the Central Tibetan Administration's Education Office. 4<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

Tenzin Woezer, Undersecretary at the Dept. of Home Affairs (DHA). Interview at the Central Tibetan Administration's DHA Office, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

**\*\*Appendix A\*\***



**\*\*Appendix B\*\***



## **\*\*Contacts\*\***

### **Lakpa**

Librarian and English TA at IHTS Sarah Campus.  
Office number 201333  
Lakpa-la helped me organizing focus groups of students on Sarah Campus.

### **Pasang**

Co-coordinator of Emory Study Abroad Program at Sarah Campus.  
Office number 201333    Cell 98160-88834  
Pasang-la does no one thing. He helped me with contacts, directions, and organization throughout my entire project.

### **Choezom Tsering**

Career Counselor at Upper TCV Dharamsala.  
Home number 220360  
Choezom-la is intimately involved with the student body at Upper TCV. She can answer most questions about them personality, motivation, and career-wise.

### **Dawa Tsering**

Founder of Yongling Kindergarten and Creche  
Can be found at Yongling in Mcleod Ganj  
Dawa Tsering-la has been on a committee or board for numerous organizations and schools in exile. He is broadly experienced, an activist, and extremely knowledgeable.

### **Tsering Chomphel**

Field Officer for TCV in the Delhi Youth Hostel.  
Office number 011-27862652  
Tsering-la spends most of the year in Delhi at the Tibetan youth hostel and he is a great resource for getting in touch with college students all over India.