
TIBET'S RELOCATED SCHOOLING

Popularization Reconsidered

Gerard A. Postiglione and Ben Jiao

Abstract

China has popularized relocated boarding schools for Tibetans in China. This paper examines the origin and development of these *neidi* schools, and the perspectives of their graduates. Despite their popularity among Tibetan households, this paper argues that their sustainability over the longer term is less certain.

Keywords: Tibet, relocated boarding schools, China, education, policy

Some countries have removed indigenous children from their native communities and sent them to distant boarding schools. The Carlisle School in the United States is a notable example of a relocated school where Native American children were sent and separated from their cultural heritage.¹ Australia and Canada also established such schools. All three countries have long discontinued this practice, and two (Australia and Canada) have apologized for it. Thirty-five years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, 20% of the children who graduated from primary schools in Tibet were sent to boarding schools in distant

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1. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

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Chinese cities.² This *neidi* (Chinese, inland or interior place) schooling has continued for almost 25 years and remains popular not only with the Chinese government but also with most Tibetan parents and students.³ Yet, little attention has been focused on the resilience of a policy that relocates the education of Tibetans to cities throughout China. The paper begins with a review of the origin, development, and characteristics of *neidi* education for Tibet. It then presents oral history data collected from graduates who experienced up to seven years of *neidi* schooling. The paper concludes with a discussion about why relocated schooling for Tibetans may have limited long term prospects.

Origin of Tibet's Relocated Education

It is generally accepted that *neidi* boarding schools are part of a long term strategy to build national unity and train talent for the economic development of Tibet and Xinjiang Province. In fact, bringing border nationalities closer to the cultural and political center of China for education is not altogether new. In 1907, a Manchu-Mongol high school was established in Beijing, and some children from Tibet were sent to study in the school's Tibetan class.⁴ In 1909, Mongol and Tibetan elites set up a Colony School (Zhibian Xuetang) in Beijing to access modern, rather than traditional, Chinese education for their children. This was a time when education in China became heavily influenced by Western ideas and students were being sent to Japan, America, and Europe. The late Qing era was pluralistic in the sense that the customs, languages, and governing systems of different nationalities were permitted to operate so long as they did not pose a threat to the dynasty. Although the Colony School was closed in 1912, the Nationalist government established a school in Beijing for Mongols and Tibetans in 1914 to "open up knowledge and enhance the culture of the Mongol and Tibetan

2. As used here, Tibet refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People's Republic of China, not the adjacent Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. For a discussion of the reasons for this distinction, see Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall, "China's Birth Control Policy in the Tibet Autonomous Region," *Asian Survey* 31:3 (March 1991), pp. 289–91.

3. *Neidi* (pronounced 'nay' as in 'day' and 'di' as in 'be') is usually rendered as "inland," a term that refers to the Chinese mainland territory from the vantage point of special regions such as Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Tibet. See Wang, Chengzhi, and Quanhe Zhou, "Minority Education in China: From State Preferential Policies to Delocated Tibetan Schools," *Educational Studies* 29:1 (2003), pp. 85–104; Zhiyong Zhu, *State Schooling and Ethnic Identity: The Politics of a Neidi Secondary School in China* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

4. Zhu Jieli, *Zangzu Jinxiandai Jiaoyu Shilüe* [Brief history of modern Tibetan education] (Xining, Qinghai: Qinghai People's Publishing House, 1990), p. 74.

peoples.”⁵ In 1926, the school was closed; it moved to Nanjing the following year.

Development and Characteristics of *Neidi* Schooling

Communist Party Secretary Hu Yaobang visited Tibet with Vice Premier Wan Li in 1980, the year of the First Tibet Work Forum in Beijing, to examine conditions after the Cultural Revolution.⁶ Hu expressed his dismay, noted that education had not progressed well, and associated the previous 20 years of Beijing’s development efforts with throwing money into the Lhasa River. Hu pointed out that the amount of funding allocated to one school in Tibet was enough to establish two in China.⁷ In 1984, the year of the Second Tibet Work Forum in Beijing, Vice Premier Tian Jiyun and Secretary of the Party Secretariat Hu Qili visited Tibet and submitted a report to the State Council that called on mainland provinces and municipalities to establish schools and classes for Tibetans and for the TAR government to “select and recommend primary school graduates from ten to twelve years old.”⁸ Students would begin their *neidi* education with a preparatory year before attending three years of junior secondary schooling. After graduation, they would return to Tibet for the summer and then continue their final three years of *neidi* senior secondary schooling.⁹

In 1985, 1,300 primary school graduates were sent to *neidi* China for junior secondary schooling. They came from the regions of Lhasa (400), Shannan (200), Shigatse (250), Linzhi (100), Chamdo (200), Nakchu (100), and Ali (50). They were recruited to schools in 16 provinces and municipalities, including Chongqing, Shanghai, Shaanxi, Anhui, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, Yunnan, Hubei, Hebei, Jiangxi, Hunan, Tianjin,

5. Siqin Zhaqi, *Bianjiang Jiaoyu* [Frontier education] (Taipei: Mongolian-Tibetan Committee, 1961); June T. Dryer, *China's Forty Millions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

6. The purpose of the First Tibet Work Forum in Beijing was to foster implementation of policies on ethnic and religious affairs and also to introduce some special policies for farmers and herdsmen such as the exemption of agricultural taxes as part of the rehabilitation in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, the work of Tibet would be shifted to its economic development. The visit of Communist Party Secretary Hu Yaobang to Tibet with Vice Premier Wan Li was to inspect work and ensure implementation of the directives of the First Tibet Work Forum.

7. Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 63–66.

8. Liu Yingjie, *Zhongguo Jiaoyu Dashidian* [Major educational events in China] (Hangzhou, Zhejiang: Zhejiang Education Press, 1993), p. 2065.

9. Schooling in China normally includes six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, and three years of senior secondary education.

and Shanxi.¹⁰ The Beijing Tibet School, which became a complete secondary school with both junior and senior secondary levels, established its first class in 1987. In subsequent years, other cities established *neidi* schooling for Tibet.¹¹ In 1990, President Jiang Zemin declared that *neidi* schooling helped Tibetans understand the motherland and broaden their view of the world. Hu Qili had viewed *neidi* schooling as a 10- to 20-year strategy. A 1993 government meeting called for continued long term support. The perceived success of the Tibet *neidi* schooling led to the establishment of similar schools in 2000, primarily for Uyghur students from Xinjiang.¹²

Scale and Segregation

By the end of 2005, students from Tibet had attended *neidi* classes in 22 provinces and municipalities. By official estimates, they numbered 29,000 and would exceed 30,000 by 2008. About one-third of all *neidi* senior secondary school level graduates have been admitted to inland colleges and universities, and the proportion increases each year.¹³

Over a period of more than 20 years, changes have occurred in the levels of education offered. Some schools only offer junior secondary education, some offer both junior and senior secondary education, and others have switched their programs from junior to senior secondary level education. *Neidi* senior secondary level vocational-technical classes are offered in a wider selection of schools.

Some *neidi* schools (in Beijing, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Hebei) catered only to students from Tibet, while others educated host-city students as well as those from Tibet. However, the latter schools conduct ethnically segregated education. Tibetan students study in separate classes, or sections of the campus, and board at the school. There was an effort to integrate a few selected high achieving Tibetan students into schools near their Beijing *neidi* school, but this remained a small scale experimental measure and was never intended to become a main component of the *neidi*

10. Xiangba Pingcuo, *Xizang Zizhiqu Jiaoyu Zhi* [Education annals of the TAR] (Beijing: China Tibetology Press, 2005), p. 354.

11. See Ying Fatang, "Ying Fatang Tongzhi Zai Zhonggong Xizang Zizhiqu Sanjie Erci Quanwei Kuoda Huiyi Shang de Jianghua" [Comrade Ying Fatang's speech at the Second Enlarged Plenary of Members of the Third Tibet Autonomous Region Committee of the CPC], in Guo Fuchang, ed., *Sheng Shi Zizhiqu Shaoshu Minzu Jiaoyu Gongzuo Wenjian Xuanbian, 1977-1990* [Selected documents on ethnic education in provincial, municipal, and autonomous regions, 1977-1990] (Chengdu: Sichuan Nationalities Press, 1984).

12. Often spelled Uighur. Yangbin Chen, *Muslim Uyghur Students in a Chinese Boarding School: Social Recapitalization as a Response to Ethnic Integration* (New York: Lexington, 2008).

13. "China's Tibet: Facts and Figures 2006," <http://en.tibet.cn/newfeature/xzt_2006ssysj/xzt_2006ssysj_whjy/t20061229_194543.htm>, accessed on July 4, 2008.

schooling policy. However, beginning in 1995, ethnic segregation eased slightly as the children of Tibet's long serving Han cadres began to attend *neidi* schools.

Access

Initially, *neidi* schooling was only open to Tibetans from the TAR who scored high enough on entrance examinations. This policy was later revised to mean that most students should be Tibetan, but some Menba, Luoba, and other official TAR minorities could also be recruited. It remained as such until 1995, when the policy was changed to permit recruitment of students from Chinese cadre families in Tibet (*jinzang ganbu zimu*) in which either the father or mother, or in some cases, both parents, have worked in the TAR over a long period of time. In 1995, 120 students were recruited from these cadre families, and in 2000 there were 140. Some are of mixed parental ethnicity, usually with Han fathers and Tibetan mothers. Having attended primary school in Tibet, these mixed heritage children might not adjust as well at a school in their father's original place of residence. Cadre families can take advantage of the no-fee, free-board, superior urban facilities and teachers in the host *neidi* city, especially if they plan to remain in Tibet. Increasing Chinese cadre children in Tibetan primary schools not only changed the learning environment but also increased the possibility that their parents will stay more focused and rooted in Tibet. However, when spread across all of the *neidi* junior secondary schools, the number of Han cadre children from Tibet was almost insignificant. Some classes had one or two such children, but most had none. In some cases, the children of cadre parents may benefit from preferential treatment in admission to *neidi* colleges and universities, for example, if one parent is a Tibetan or other ethnic minority. Han Chinese graduates of *neidi* schools may not experience the same kind of discrimination in landing a *neidi* job after graduation and may be able to take advantage of their parent's *neidi* social networks and cadre capital. The same would not be as easy for the children of rural and nomadic families from the TAR.

Cohorts

Other changes occurred over time in the system of *neidi* education. From a chronological viewpoint, those in the early cohorts began with a preparatory year plus three years of junior secondary schooling. After that, a small number of graduates would be admitted to three years of senior secondary schooling in Beijing, Tianjin, or Chengdu, while most others continued their education in *neidi* vocational-technical classes for teacher training or skills training at 30 or more *neidi* schools. Later cohorts of

neidi junior secondary school graduates were provided with more opportunities to study at *neidi* senior secondary schools from where they could more easily enter college. For example, in 1994, there were 5,081 *neidi* junior secondary students, 2,041 students in *neidi* senior secondary specialized vocational schools, 1,062 students in *neidi* senior secondary teacher training schools, 866 in *neidi* regular senior secondary schools (i.e., Beijing, Tianjin, Chengdu). A total of 563 were at *neidi* colleges and universities, mostly at three-year diploma programs.

More-recent cohorts include more students who skipped the *neidi* junior secondary preparatory year because primary education in Tibet had improved. The latest cohorts also include more students who completed their junior secondary schooling in Tibet and then went directly to *neidi* senior secondary schools. As always, the vast majority of *neidi* graduates of regular secondary schools get preferential admission to colleges and universities. Although many attend three-year tertiary programs (similar to community colleges or polytechnics), an increasing number are admitted to four-year bachelor's degree programs.

Language, Curriculum, and Teachers

When the central government first sent students to China to "cultivate talent for Tibet," it explicitly required that the teaching be mainly in the Tibetan language and that students should learn what is suitable for the economic and cultural development of Tibet. However, as the data in this paper will show, the emphasis on Tibetan has rapidly decreased, even though Tibetan language and literature are still taught as school subjects by teachers brought to *neidi* from Tibet. The medium of instruction for all other subjects is Chinese, with instruction delivered by qualified teachers recruited from the host city, most holding a bachelor's degree or more. Few if any have visited Tibet, though many believe that the government should provide opportunities for them to learn about Tibetan culture so that they can improve their teaching.¹⁴

Because their textbooks generally did not contain knowledge about Tibet, some teachers expressed the hope that briefings could be organized for them. While all *neidi* schools follow the national curriculum, many teachers believe this to be unsuitable for Tibetans, not only in terms of relevance to Tibet but also because of the unrealistically high standard it sets for Tibetan students. This makes teaching and learning difficult in Tibetan *neidi* schools. Teachers cited the weak foundation provided by primary schooling in Tibet as well as Tibetan students' preference to receive knowledge passively rather than actively express and question what they learn. Tibetan students were viewed as good at linear thinking but poor at

14. Interviews with *neidi* school teachers.

reasoning and logic. Tibetan parents were contrasted with Han parents, the former being more concerned with their children's general well-being than just their academic study and achievements. The teachers viewed the Tibetan students as well-behaved and respectful, although lazy and not punctual. Finally, teachers believed that the preferential policy for admission to college and university decreased pressure on Tibetan students to study hard in senior secondary school. Several teachers argued that a lack of scientific research about preferential admission policies continues to fuel the debates.

Campus Environment

Neidi schooling also means a highly disciplined academic environment with heavy stress placed on political socialization and ideology. This includes a high degree of emphasis on (Chinese) patriotism, love of Tibet, Han-Tibetan relations, civilized behavior, and revolutionary traditions. Religious practices are prohibited. However, schools carry representations of Tibetan culture in one or more of the following: architecture, mosaics, sculptures, photos, murals, or ceramics, and there is ample evidence through students' compositions, drawings, and other artistic expressions about traditional Tibetan culture.¹⁵ Tibetan song and dance events with traditional dress are periodically organized. Students consume host-city foods except on Tibetan holidays, which are often marked by visits from TAR leaders. Students remain in *neidi* during the summer, when outings are arranged to national sites. Some interactions occur with other schools in the host city through sports and cultural events. Campuses are self-enclosed, and students seldom leave the grounds. On Sundays, they can sign out for several hours of off-campus activity, usually for escorted shopping using money sent from home. Off-campus interactions with local Chinese appear to intensify the students' sense of their Tibetan identity.

Interpreting *Neidi* Schooling: Before, During, and After

Graduates of the *neidi* schools were interviewed after they returned to Tibet. The oral history questions were divided into three parts, corresponding to life prior to *neidi* schooling, experiences at *neidi* schools, and life in Tibet after graduation. Oral histories, conducted in 2006–07, averaged two to three hours each, usually taking a full morning or afternoon;

15. Jing Nianjun and Nie Gang, *Xizangban Xuesheng Meishu Zuopin, Liaoning Sheng Liaoyang Shi Diyi Zhongxue* [Tibet *Neidi* Students Artwork Collection, Liaoyang Number 1 Middle School, Liaoning Province] (Liaoyang, Liaoning: Liaoning Meishu chubanshe, 2002).

they were conducted in work places, homes, and restaurants. Postiglione conducted workshops on interview techniques, accompanied the interview teams on selected visits, and carried out follow-up interviews on specific points with graduates, parents, and others about *neidi* education. Visits were conducted to *neidi* schools to learn more about the process of education, the learning environment, the instruction provided, and campus life. During visits to *neidi* schools, we interviewed key administrators, plus students and teachers in focus groups.

Most subjects for the oral history interviews were from cohorts that returned to Tibet between 1992 and 1993, which made it possible to explore the long term effects. The oral histories were taken in three major centers: Lhasa, Shigatse, and Nakchu. In the first stage, oral histories were gathered from each urban center (Lhasa [54], Shigatse [58], Nakchu [60]), with a total of 172 graduates of *neidi* schools. Interview data were also gathered from selected leaders of their work units.

The gender breakdown of our subject profile was 54% male and 46% female. According to a 1988 State Education Commission Report, students from peasant or herding families were to occupy over 70% of the school places. However, we found that most were from urban households (62%); the rest were from rural (31%) or nomadic (5%) households, with 2% unclassified.

In the data to be reported below, the emphasis is on the earliest cohorts, the ones that left Tibet between 1985 and 1989. However some graduates from later cohorts were also included. We chose to begin with the earlier cohorts with the aim of finding those with longer oral histories, while expecting eventually to work our way through the remaining cohorts for the years that the *neidi* schools remain in existence.

Before Entering Neidi School

Although urban children still have access to the best primary schools, the majority of Tibetan children attend either a village school close to home or a township school where many children from distant villages will board. Secondary schools are located in the Tibet county seats. These rural or nomadic area primary schools usually offer six years of basic education in Tibetan, with Chinese studied as a subject. The medium of instruction changes to Chinese in secondary schools. The traditional value of deference to parents still weighs heavily on most Tibetan children, and the final decision about attending relocated secondary schools rests with their parents. Nevertheless, the general willingness of children to attend these schools may also have some effect on parents' considerations about sending them.

In terms of lost household labor capacity and the cost for school fees and school accommodations, many family heads see little difference between

sending a child away to board at a distant county school in Tibet or a *neidi* school in China. After some initial apprehension in 1985 when *neidi* schooling began, parents have come to view it as a safer bet than local county seat secondary schools for improving future life options. Moreover, the fact that the best students are sent out of Tibet for junior secondary school certainly lowers the quality of schooling in Tibet.¹⁶

Parents from rural and semi-nomadic areas have become concerned about their child's experience in Tibet's county level junior secondary schools, where dropout rates and opportunities to stray into trouble are higher. Although Tibet's junior secondary schools continue to improve, they are still inferior to *neidi* schooling both in facilities and quality of instruction. *Neidi* schools provide more academic rigor and personal discipline. With the exception of a few excellent schools in Lhasa, Shigatse, Shannan, and perhaps Chamdo and Nackchu, most county schools in Tibet have only recently begun to improve.

Parents were concerned, and rightfully so, that rural schools in Tibet might not provide their children with useful knowledge and skills for non-farm labor jobs, and that their children would end up returning to rural-nomadic life with a condescending attitude and poor labor habits. In short, parents generally believe that *neidi* schools are superior to those in Tibet, the main reason being that they lead to non-farm/non-pastoral jobs and possibly cadre status. The same cannot be said of most secondary schools in Tibet. As interviewed students put it:

I was also willing to (go to *neidi*). At that time we were the second cohort. So (I was) quite envious of the first cohort. Upon returning one could be assigned a good job. . . . it would be great if I could get in. So when we passed the examination, we were all happy to go.¹⁷ . . . the graduates of the past cohorts . . . went to *neidi*, graduated, and all got jobs. If I did not pass the entrance exam for *neidi* (school), I would not continue to study because our secondary school conditions were ordinary and usually graduates find no jobs or anything.¹⁸

This is not to say that parents lacked concerns about *neidi* schooling. Parents of an 11-year-old girl from Shigatse would not allow her to attend a *neidi* school because they feared she was too young to take care of herself.¹⁹ The same was sometimes true for sons, but for a different reason. As one son said, "My mother did not want me to go because I was the

16. Interview with TAR school principal.

17. Interview N1.

18. Interview R39; a similar view was expressed by many others: Interviews N3, N4, N5, R42, etc.

19. Interview R4.

only son. If I went to school, she felt there would be no one to take care of her.”²⁰

For families who knew little about *neidi* schooling, there were many channels of information, including relatives, classmates, and friends who had been to China; returnees from *neidi* schools, their teachers and school principals; letters and photos from *neidi* students; as well as television and print media briefings by local officials—and even DVDs about *neidi* schooling.²¹

Many graduates said their parents had wanted them to attend school in *neidi* because they believed it offered a better education.²² There was a view that the ones who pass the *neidi* school entrance examination are outstanding students. However, some recalled their parents’ lack of information about *neidi* schools. “My parents were herdsman, and they knew nothing at all about *neidi*,” said one interviewee.²³ In such cases, children seemed to wield more influence on the issue of attending:

- My mom said, “What are you going to do there?” I replied, “I want to have fun there.” After that, I nagged everyday about going.²⁴
- I just wanted to go outside (Tibet), to learn something, to see the world.²⁵
- In 1985, two from our town went. They wrote about how good it was in their letters. It was a fresh feeling, (I) wanted to go, in fact, (we) all wanted to go.²⁶
- At that time, (I) was in fifth grade, it was 1985, the year the government started *neidi* Tibetan classes. It was the first cohort, so we just happened to be in that year. At that time the school asked us to go home, and ask our parents’ opinions, and my parents agreed that I could take the exam.²⁷

Many students admitted that the permission of their parents was very important and usually meant that parents believed *neidi* schooling could lead to a better job than graduation from schools in Tibet. There was also a general consensus that the living standard in *neidi* was better, and the learning atmosphere at *neidi* schools was more congenial than in Tibet.²⁸

20. Interview N8.

21. For example, some had seen *neidi* school life through the TV and mass media (L28, L30). Some learned about it from video tapes that introduced previous *neidi* students’ life experiences. Such media influenced decision-making (L51).

22. For example: Interviews R11, R12, R13, R15, R18. L40’s parents also knew little about the schools.

23. Interview R34. This was particularly the case for parents of children from the early cohorts (R5, R10, R11, R18, R19).

24. Interview L32.

25. Interview N10.

26. Interview R40.

27. Interview R18. N4 and N7 stated that their own wish to attend *neidi* school also affected their parent’s decision.

28. For example: Interview R44.

As the *neidi* school policy moved toward its second decade, and the academic reputations of particular *neidi* schools rose in prominence, competition among *neidi* schools for TAR students grew. Exhibitions for parents were arranged in Lhasa. An increasing number of parents tried to gain admission for their children to the more prestigious schools, either through obtaining a higher examination score or via a self-paying arrangement. However, most families could not afford to send their children away to a *neidi* school unless the financial burden was carried by the government.²⁹

At Neidi School

Initial adjustment brought its share of difficulties. Tibetan students were separated from family and friends, in a new climate at a lower altitude, eating certain foods for the first time, and susceptible to illnesses. However, their struggles led to closer relationships among students, with older students counseling younger ones. Food such as cheese brought (or sent by parents) from Tibet was confiscated for fear that it could become rancid. While children adapted readily to local foods, the schools did not provide *tsamba*, a popular Tibetan barley staple, at breakfast or butter tea at lunch.

Neidi school graduates, especially those who attended school in south China, recalled their difficulty in adapting to hotter, more humid regional weather, and some students developed skin problems. Students also noted that the air was cleaner and clearer in Tibet and that the water tasted better in their hometowns. Nevertheless, all agreed that they were able to adjust to their school life after a month or two. Homesickness and emotional struggles sometimes lasted longer and came in bouts. Still, students' adjustment difficulties were somewhat compensated for by the stark contrast in living standards between Tibet and urban China. Tibetan children were often awestruck at the richness of city life in *neidi*. This reaction has decreased somewhat for some of the newer student cohorts, who may have experienced more of a rapidly urbanizing Tibet. Among their comments:

- I cried for two weeks because of homesickness, and even asked to be sent back home to Tibet. But the teachers were very good, like mothers and fathers they helped me overcome my homesickness. I gradually changed and came to feel quite happy, and life became enjoyable.³⁰
- First of all, I was young, and everything before had been taken care of by my parents. All of a sudden, within a month, I had to take care of myself independently. Second, the climate and environment were very different. I was from a small county in Ngari Prefecture and had taken the long route through Xinjiang to get to Beijing. I felt lost at the beginning. I could hardly speak Chinese,

29. Interviews N50, N44, N46, N50, N53, N54, N56, N58, N59.

30. Interview N22.

and the teachers at the inland schools were all Chinese. Students spoke Tibetan with one another if they were from the same dialect area. Otherwise they had to use Chinese to communicate.³¹

Students were usually confined to the school grounds, except for a few hours of chaperoned shopping on Sundays. This practice was supported, even expected, by Tibetan parents, who felt more secure about the safety of their children, as well as keeping shopping costs at a reasonable level. The school compensated for the educational disadvantages of confinement by organized outings to other schools, cultural events in the host city, and, in summer and on holidays, trips to other cities. Life at school was guided by an emphasis on study, order, and discipline. School principals asserted that the school also placed a strong emphasis on patriotism. School administrators conveyed a sense that children from Tibet, with its rugged, remote rural and nomadic life, could benefit greatly from learning the more “civilized” ways and habits of urban China. Hygiene, dress, appearance, and language skills were viewed as indispensable for Tibetan students’ educational development.

This was largely achieved through the art of educational persuasion so common in secondary schooling. Our interview data do not support the assertion that teachers used corporal punishment in *neidi* schools. We have no evidence that any student was beaten. This could easily jeopardize the *neidi* school policy. Although we could not identify any cases of corporal punishment used in the *neidi* schools, students had experienced or at least witnessed it in their previous primary schooling in Tibet, where it was an acceptable form of discipline among the large number of unqualified teachers who staffed village schools in rural and nomadic areas. Many students noted, and some lamented, that discipline eased after the transition to *neidi* senior secondary school, although the pressure of preparing for university entrance exams keeps students focused on academic work.

Although few if any *neidi* teachers had been to Tibet, they were usually viewed by students as being very caring and responsible. Said one: “[A]ll [of my teachers were] excellent and full of a sense of responsibility. They took care of us as if they were our parents, especially when we were ill upon arriving there. They treated us like their own children and taught us carefully in such behavior as bathing and cleaning [ourselves].³² Another commented, “At the time when I was in *neidi* school, I felt that teachers were just like mothers. I turned to them once I came across any problem. We had a good relationship with teachers.”³³

31. Interview L27.

32. Interview S3.

33. Interview S2.

However, language was a major issue and a point of dissatisfaction. One interviewee said that the local Chinese dialect used by teachers in Shanxi Province was hard to follow. Some, especially those with poor Chinese language skills, recalled their frustration in trying to understand their lessons, for example: "During the early period, the biggest difficulty for me was that I listened but could not understand the Chinese that was spoken and did not know how to speak it. It seemed possible that I spent about a half year or so to adapt to it."³⁴

Although each school provided a Tibetan language and literature teacher, the teachers were usually rotated with others from Tibet every few years. These Tibetans were far less integrated into the school staff network than the local instructors. Nevertheless, respondents agreed that if their Tibetan teacher was skillful, they especially enjoyed studying the Tibetan language, hearing stories from Tibetan literature, and learning Tibetan moral lessons. The main dissatisfaction expressed by Tibetan students was that there were not enough lessons on Tibetan language and culture.

On campus, children were reminded of life in Tibet by the presence of photos, sculptures, mosaics, and other representations of life there. Although it was not unusual to see a chalk drawing of the Potala Palace, religious items were not permitted in school. *Neidi* schooling did affect the views of students toward their religion. In particular, *neidi* schools made them highly conscious of superstitions. Yet, students did not look down on their parent's religious views or express a blanket view of religion as something negative. The perspective conveyed at *neidi* schools was one that recognized religion as part of Tibetan cultural tradition but also a potential stumbling block to modernization and development.

During Tibetan holidays, Tibetan leaders visited the *neidi* schools. Schools would prepare special Tibetan foods. Students would wear traditional dress and sing Tibetan songs. During long holidays, field trips around China were arranged. When students traveled in Chinese cities, their non-Han ethnicity was apparent. One commented that on occasion, for example in Shanghai, he felt that the Tibetan students drew negative reactions from local people.

In general, it appears that the wide variety of interactions and experiences that Tibetan students had with their Chinese teachers, canteen workers, off-campus shopkeepers, and people they met on their national tour actually strengthened their identity as Tibetans. Graduates commented on the lack of knowledge about their heritage or expressed the desire to learn more Tibetan literature. Yet, there was never any question of ethnic identity confusion. *Neidi* graduates might comment that they "did not know a great deal

34. Interview L23.

about Tibetan history and culture,” a statement that can also be viewed as a key component of their ethnic consciousness and identity construction.

As a rule, *neidi* schooling did not improve Tibetan language skills. In fact, many graduates felt that their Tibetan language ability had been weakened. In one case, students tried to set up a Tibetan language library on their own. In another, students pressured the school to give more attention to Tibetan language class in their curriculum by allocating more teaching time. As one student recalled,

A strike broke out at school. Two classes joined the strike simultaneously; first the boys complained they did not have sufficient Tibetan lessons. We followed them and made proposals to the school authority. Nonetheless, the teachers did not care about us. Nobody did. As our parents and our Tibetan people gave us to you, at least you should be more responsible to us. Besides, we were still Tibetans at that time. How could we claim ourselves as Tibetans if we don't even know our own names in Tibetan? After the boys went on a strike, we girls acted as spokespersons. We put forward our demands to the teachers. All the boys skipped classes and later on, we even decided that if the school did not increase the number of our Tibetan classes, we would fast.³⁵

In a different sense, *neidi* schooling provided a more liberal environment for teaching and learning than had been the case in Tibet. A graduate commented that the wider exposure given by inland boarding schools made a difference in his learning outcome. This student is now teaching in Tibet and pointed out the difference in the political atmosphere between Tibet and the inland cities:

To be honest, Tibet is a more politically sensitive place. If you were in *neidi*, and you wrote an article, we can say, as long as you did not violate the general political principle, you could bluff as much as you wanted. But if you were here (in Tibet), when you publish an article and slightly express [such a view], even if you didn't mean to, . . . if you had a little problem with your expression, it might become a big problem.³⁶

The experience in China during the years of increasing emphasis on market forces and economic globalization made an impression on students, something that became clear when they were asked to compare themselves with their counterparts who remained in Tibet for secondary schooling:

The biggest difference is perspective, because there was a rise in my knowledge. I was more exposed to the outside world. . . . When in *neidi*, you saw a table, and knowing that at the moment we couldn't even produce a table like that in Tibet, you would think about it. As a teacher, you would compare the teaching methods,

35. Interview L53.

36. Interview N25.

and see how students are taught here in Tibet, and how we are taught there in *neidi*. You saw the difference. Now there is the globalization . . . if a product from Tibet is good enough, the whole world is going to use it. So you'll get accepted if your thing is good.³⁷

It is worth noting that although thousands of Tibetans have graduated from the *neidi* schools since 1985, none have been hired as teachers at those schools. This is understandable to an extent, because the purpose of *neidi* schooling is to prepare talent for Tibet's development. However, one could argue that Tibet's developmental needs include preparing talented Tibetan teachers for *neidi* schools. Teachers sent from Tibet to teach Tibetan language and literature were not *neidi* school graduates and did not excel enough in other subjects to teach them in *neidi*. It places the *neidi* policy in question, if after more than 20 years, it cannot produce even a few Tibetan university graduates qualified to teach science or mathematics in a *neidi* junior secondary school. At the very least, they would be important role models for subsequent *neidi* student cohorts.

Returning to Tibet after Graduation

Many graduates said that they wanted to contribute to the development of Tibet because they were taught by their teachers to study hard now and serve Tibet in the future. Tibetan language teachers talked with students in and outside of class about making a contribution to Tibet after graduation. Visiting Tibetan leaders stressed that the purpose of the *neidi* schools was to train personnel to work for the construction of a new Tibet. One graduate recalled when the Panchen Lama visited his school in Kunming and urged students to study to help uplift Tibet.³⁸ Many talked about their plans to use the knowledge they learned in China for the betterment of Tibet. A number said that the government had paid for their education and they felt obliged to repay it by working in Tibet.³⁹

Some students said that they wanted to go back home to attend to their aging parents; most missed their families a great deal. It was typical to hear a graduate recollect the feeling during *neidi* schooling of belonging to Tibet, and that it would always be a spiritual home. Some said that their long stay in *neidi* made them feel isolated, and never at home: "At that time, I missed Tibet, and would not like to stay there in *neidi*."⁴⁰

37. Interview N33.

38. The Panchen Lama is the second highest figure in Tibetan Buddhism. Historically, the Panchen Lama played the key role in identifying the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

39. Interviews R07, also L21, L30, R11, R12, L22, R40.

40. Interviews about aging parents: L25, L26, R12, R18, R35, R41, R56; about Tibet as a spiritual home: L53; about not feeling at home in *neidi*: R10, R13, R19, R24, R47, R54.

Graduates also mentioned that they would be less competitive if they tried to remain in *neidi* to work. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the environment and the people outside of *neidi* schools, and a feeling of academic inferiority to other Chinese students were reasons they gave for being less competitive in the *neidi* job market.⁴¹

Most *neidi* school graduates wished to return home and live in Tibet, especially those of the earlier cohorts. This may partly explain why no *neidi* school graduates came to be hired as teachers in *neidi* schools. Most said it did not even occur to them or their classmates to stay in *neidi*.⁴² Only five out of the first group of 172 said that they wanted to stay in other parts of China to work. Graduation from a *neidi* school generally provides a path to stable employment in Tibet. However, the *fenpei* (allocation) system in which graduates are allotted a job after graduation has been gradually phased out, except for some professions such as school teaching and public security. In fact, there is growing unemployment among college graduates in Tibet and throughout China. In the summer of 2005, of the 2,730 Tibetan graduates of three-year colleges, about 700 were still looking for work, 356 of them in Lhasa.⁴³ Said one: “. . . most of us were quite ambitious. However, some graduates might get a mismatched job, or not a job they like. So gradually, (they) might dally away the time. Still, we adjusted to the life in Tibet quite well since returning and there was a sense of belonging.”⁴⁴ Also, being away for seven or more years necessitated a period of readjustment. Another graduate noted: “I won’t say it’s difficult for me to adjust, because there isn’t a big change after all. But sometimes, when you think of the fact that you were sent out for study at a young age, not knowing very much, and returned to work here in Tibet, there definitely will be many things that you have missed. We are gradually picking up what we have missed.”⁴⁵

Several said it took three to six months, a few, longer, to adequately adjust. Some said that it took them a month to overcome the discomfort of the high altitude and switching back to regularly eating Tibetan food, which contains more meat and fewer vegetables than standard Chinese fare. But others said that living in Lhasa was not very different from any inland city, especially in terms of food and clothes. The majority said that there was nothing they rejected or disliked upon returning to Tibet. However, some referred to poor hygiene habits and the excessive consumption

41. Interviews R34, R42, L41, R19, R24, R58.

42. Interviews R2, R3, R8, R20, L27, L37, N14, N24.

43. See Xinhua, “Last Guaranteed Jobs Axed in Tibet,” 2006, <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/MATERIAL/190401.htm>>, accessed July 20, 2008.

44. Interview L19.

45. Interview L17.

of alcohol. Others said that the older generation of Tibetans, or those who had never left, were too conservative and not open to new perspectives. While *neidi* graduates thought Tibetan traditions and customs should be preserved, they also believed that “old views” should be changed.⁴⁶ This was especially true with respect to religion. Graduates claimed their attitude toward religious behaviors had become more selective and while many still had religious beliefs, they resisted what they called the superstitions of other Tibetans. As one interviewee stated, “I have a two-sided opinion toward religion . . . to be honest, I’m a Communist Party member, I can’t believe in religion. . . . (but) for us Tibetans, there are 10 cultures . . . which are strongly rooted in Tibetan Buddhism.”⁴⁷

Others who joined the Communist Party also said that they did not believe in religion anymore.⁴⁸ However, this change in belief did not affect their ethnic identity as Tibetans, and they still regarded religion as part of the Tibetan culture. One student from a village near Sangye, the seat of one of the oldest and most influential Tibetan monasteries, did not speak a word of Chinese before *neidi* schooling. He said that his biggest change was that he no longer believed in religion. His family still believed in Buddhism and he felt that this was their choice. But otherwise, his identity was still Tibetan, something he did not want to change.⁴⁹

Generally, the interviewees expressed pride in their cultural heritage. The experience of studying in a *neidi* school and living in a *neidi* city reinforced their Tibetan cultural identity and made them want to work for their homeland. As one put it, “It seems I did not come to reject Tibetan culture . . . especially toward my fellow Tibetan classmates. On the contrary, the longer we are away from home, the more we love Tibetan culture. I feel a strong need to do something for Tibet.”⁵⁰

This response was characteristic of many: being proud of their Tibetan cultural heritage, wanting to learn more about it, but finding that *neidi* education left them with deficient Tibetan language skills and cultural knowledge. In the words of one, “I want to know about Tibetan culture, but in order to have real knowledge, one must read books in Tibetan language, but

46. Interview L07.

47. Interview N27. This refers to the major and minor arts and sciences taxonomy used by Tibetans for centuries, and includes areas such as art, linguistics, astrology, and medicine. Literally, these 10 major and minor sciences are called the “ten cultures.” The five major sciences are: Science of Fine Arts, Science of Medicine, Science of Linguistics, Science of Philosophy, and the Inner Sciences of Buddhism. The five minor sciences are Science of Poetics, Science of Synonymy, Science of Prosody, Science of Drama, and Science of Astrology.

48. Interviews L09, N27.

49. Interview L45.

50. Interview L19.

my Tibetan level is not good.”⁵¹ Another said, “Talking about it in terms of our ethnic group, it was a big loss. The very existence of an ethnic group is because of the uniqueness of one’s own cultural background. As a member of an ethnic group, I think one should inherit the culture of the group. It is right and proper.”⁵²

Neidi graduates talked a great deal about language and culture and most thought it important to study Tibetan well, in order to preserve and develop Tibetan culture. Before they attended *neidi schools*, they recalled that they had very limited knowledge about their culture and religion. It appears that the years of being in urban China only made them more aware of this deficit in comparison to Han Chinese students and teachers they encountered.

The Limits of Sustainability

Relocated schooling for Tibetans in *neidi* China does not share many of the aspects usually associated with relocated schooling of indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Tibetan households are not coerced to subscribe to *neidi* schooling, and some opt to pay an extra fee if their children did not score high enough on the entrance examination. *Neidi* schooling includes classes on Tibetan language and literature, recognizes selected aspects of Tibetan culture through art, photography, architecture, music, and observance of Tibetan holidays. There are also occasions in which students produce expressions of traditional culture through written composition or song. While at school, communication with family in Tibet is not discouraged, and parents are permitted to visit their children at *neidi* schools. Advances in telecommunications have made phone and Internet contact between home and school easier.

Academic discipline and ideological education are major themes in *neidi* schooling, but there seems to be no evidence of corporal punishment and the relationship between Tibetan students and their Han Chinese teachers is quite close. *Neidi* schooling tempers traditional religious beliefs, although students continue to accept Buddhism as a core component of Tibetan culture. Students usually communicate with their fellow students at school in the Tibetan language, even though Chinese is sometimes used to facilitate conversations across Tibetan dialects. Still, students generally express the feeling that *neidi* schooling provides an education that hollows out much historical and cultural content and leaves them with a dearth of understanding about their own language and culture. As students begin to prepare for the national entrance examinations, their focus on Tibetan language and

51. Interview L9.

52. Interview L20.

literature classes also begins to wane. Students construct their ethnic identity both in accordance with and in response to school prescriptions about Chinese culture and national unity, resulting in Tibetan identities that both resonate with and diverge from those prescribed at school. Students remain dissatisfied with the *neidi* schools' lack of determination to broaden the teaching of the Tibetan cultural heritage.

After returning to Tibet, *neidi* graduates' Tibetan language ability levels pale in comparison with graduates of domestic schools. Yet, *neidi* graduates also seem to feel their experience has made them more independent, self-reliant, and adaptable, with a more open mind and broader perspective on the world than graduates of secondary schools in Tibet. In this sense, *neidi* education may also be providing more opportunities for students to think critically. For parents and students, *neidi* schooling still seems superior in educational resources and instructional methods to that offered by most secondary schools in Tibet. More importantly for parents, *neidi* graduates have been able to gain good jobs and relatively high status upon their return.

However, there are indications that this is beginning to change for more-recent cohorts. Will Tibetan families continue to send their children to urban boarding schools across China, or will they begin to prefer schools in Tibet? Will the government continue to expand and support free secondary schooling for Tibetans outside of Tibet, or will it wind down this policy? Even though China has been skillful in popularizing and sustaining these relocated schools for nearly a quarter century, their sustainability remains in question for several reasons.

First, *neidi* schools continue to take the best and brightest away from Tibet's school system. This affects the quality of education in Tibet, despite the fact that a good number of *neidi* graduates return to work as school teachers. Second, as the government continues to project substantial economic growth, one would expect a significant injection of resources to improve education in Tibet. However, the *neidi* school policy hinders some of the initiative because so many of the children of the elite do not attend secondary school in Tibet. The original argument for *neidi* schooling made over 20 years ago about the weakness of schooling in Tibet remains open for more systematic examination.

Third, the belated transition in Tibet from a planned to a market economy, the phasing out of the job allocation system, and the rising educational levels across China have all made finding a job more difficult for the more recently returned cohorts of *neidi* schools and college graduates. It would not be surprising if this contributed to social problems in the TAR, especially because *neidi* schooling has led to a heightened sense of ethnic identity. Finally, notwithstanding the quality of resources and instruction

in *neidi* schools and colleges, they have yet to provide their Tibetan graduates with useful job experience in *neidi* China. Moreover, of the thousands of graduates of *neidi* schools, we could not identify Tibetan graduates who have been hired to teach subjects such as mathematics or science at *neidi* schools. With new opportunities for privatization of schools in China, and the further development of the education system within the TAR, a question remains whether the central government, the TAR government, or other provincial governments can facilitate a concentration of resources, including from non-governmental organizations, to develop more high-quality junior and senior secondary schools within the TAR.