Educational Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cedr20

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**To cite this article:** Ji Ying (2023): Education for development: professional commitments and practices among Tibetan teachers in Northwest China, Educational Review, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2023.2170331

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2170331



Published online: 31 Mar 2023.

EDUCATIONAL REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2170331



# Education for development: professional commitments and practices among Tibetan teachers in Northwest China

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on semi-structured interviews with Tibetan teachers in Qinghai Province in Northwest China, this article explores how the teachers, who hold subject positions as pedagogical professionals and local intellectual elites, understand the value and implications of education for Tibetan people, and how they navigate their profession in the local education system. Findings show that the teachers demonstrate strong professional commitments towards the development of Tibetan society, which embodies an entanglement of knowledge and skills acquisition, Tibetan cultural and language preservation, and selective transformation of value and behaviourial orientations among students as well as parents. Firstly, the teachers are committed to students' acquisition of school knowledge and skills which they believe would lead to better socio-economic outcomes for individuals and their families. Secondly, the teachers, especially the Tibetan language teachers, elaborated on the importance of education and their professional roles in transmitting Tibetan culture and language. Finally, the teachers attempt to make students motivated and competent to cope with rising educational and social competition, and make parents more supportive of and involved in school education. These findings show that the Tibetan teachers play crucial roles in the socio-economic and cultural transformations and development of Tibetan society in China, and shed light on their active engagement with modernisation discourses and projects. The paper also contributes to domestic and international scholarly discussions on teachers' work and professional roles, education for ethnic minorities, education in developing contexts, and ethnic minorities' engagement with modernisation (or similar processes such as globalisation).

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 30 October 2021
Accepted 12 January 2023

**KEYWORDS**
Education; modernisation; Tibetan teachers; China

## Introduction

Education for ethnic minorities in China is strongly shaped by the nation's modernisation (Ch. *xiandaihua*) discourses and agendas.[1] It is embraced by the state and local authorities

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as a key to preparing ethnic minorities to participate in China's socio-economic development, and a channel to integrate them into mainstream society (Harwood, 2014; Wu, 2016). In this context, many studies have explored Tibetan people's changing understandings of the value and implications of formal schooling for their children and families.[2] For instance, studies conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s observed a lack of aspiration for school education among some Tibetan parents (Bangsbo, 2008; Postiglione et al., 2006; Zhu, 2008), but more recent studies suggest that Tibetans increasingly aspire for educational success for their children for its promises of a better life and social mobility (Gyal, 2019; Yang et al., 2021; Ying, 2021).

Nevertheless, little is known about how Tibetan teachers in China perceive of the value and implications of formal schooling for Tibetans, and how they navigate their profession in the local education system. Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with Tibetan teachers in Qinghai Province in Northwest China, this article explores the following two questions: (1) *How do Tibetan teachers in pre-tertiary schools understand the value and implications of education for Tibetan people in China*? and (2) *How do they navigate their profession?*

With their subject positions as pedagogical professionals and local intellectual elites, Tibetan teachers are at the heart of Tibetan people's understandings and experiences of formal education and modernisation and development discourses and projects. Thus, understanding the teachers' perceptions of their professional roles and the education system, and their everyday experiences of navigating their profession in the formal education system can shed light on the nuances of Tibetan people's dynamic interactions with the education system, and modernisation and development discourses and agendas. In broader terms, this study will also contribute to domestic and international scholarly discussions about teachers' professional roles, education for ethnic minorities, education in developing contexts and ethnic minorities' engagement with formal schooling, modernisation and similar processes such as globalisation.

## Research background

Since the open and reform era after 1978, national modernisation in China has been vastly promoted for its promises of material wealth, a higher *quality* population, and a strong nation (Harwood, 2014; Wu, 2016). Under the national modernisation agenda, rural regions in China, including ethnic minority areas, have undergone rapid social transformations, including urbanisation, marketisation, change of livelihoods and expansion of educational access (Wu, 2016; Yeh & Makley, 2018).[3] Apart from the process of socio-economic development, a "human modernisation" (Ch. *ren de xiandaihua*) process, which urges all citizens to make "an effort to transform their personal values and beliefs", is also regarded as fundamental to the realisation of China's modernisation (Barabantseva, 2009, p. 227; Yi, 2011).

Since the 1950s, the Chinese government officially classifies its people into 56 ethnic groups, including the majority Han ethnic group who constitutes 91.11 per cent of the nation's population, and 55 ethnic minority groups which form the other 8.89 per cent (NBS, 2021). Largely inhabiting the rural regions in western China and possessing distinctive cultural traditions, many ethnic minorities in China are inextricably implicated in the national and local debates and efforts to develop socio-economically while preserving or transforming cultural traditions in the modernisation process. Grounded in the stadial

theory of historical materialism which proposes that societies evolve across five stages of development in order, from being primitive, slavery, feudal, capital, to socialist in their modes of production, ethnic minority societies, seen to be on different but earlier "rungs of this ladder of human progress", were urged to develop (or modernise) and "move quickly forward in history" (Harrell, 2001, p. 31). In this context, school education is embraced by the state and local authorities as a key to achieving the nation's modernisation agendas for its promises to unlock ethnic minority people's potential and prepare them for participation in China's industrialising economy and national development (Harwood, 2014; Wu, 2018). Meanwhile, it is also an important space for ethnic minorities to encounter and make meanings of the nation's modernisation discourses and agendas (Harwood, 2014; Wu, 2018).

Largely established after the 1950s and universalised relatively recently, formal schooling is the most important channel through which contemporary Tibetans in Western China experience modernisation discourses and projects. Currently, in most Tibetan regions, there is a bifurcated education system with two types of schools: ethnic minority schools (Ch. *minzu xuexiao*) for Tibetans (referred to as *Tibetan schools* hereinafter) and regular or mainstream schools for non-Tibetan children, which are also attended by some Tibetans. The Tibetan schools further operate with great variance in terms of instructional languages: the Tibetan-medium mode in which the instructional language for all the school subjects, except for the Chinese language course, is Tibetan, and the Chinese-medium mode in which the instructional language for all the school subjects, except for the Tibetan language course, is Chinese (Lhagyal, 2019; Postiglione et al., 2007; Upton, 1999; Wright, 2019).

Many scholars have discussed the implications of school education for Tibetans and how Tibetans perceive of and navigate school education in the context of rapidly changing social, cultural and economic dynamics. Literature suggests that Tibetan parents' and students' attitudes toward schooling are mostly shaped by local educational policies, and complicated deliberations made in association with various elements such as educational quality, availability of different types of education in terms of instructional language (Tibetan versus Chinese), and prospects of social mobility (Wright, 2019; Yang et al., 2021; Yi, 2008; Ying, 2021). For instance, prior studies conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s observed that some Tibetans were not enthusiastic about formal education due to various reasons such as low quality and high costs of schooling, high unemployment rates of school graduates, cost of household economic opportunities, or curriculum irrelevancy to daily life (Badeng, 2000; Bangsbo, 2008; Postiglione et al., 2006; Zhu, 2008). However, in recent years, Tibetans have started to increasingly aspire for formal schooling as they recognise the importance of formal education for achieving social mobility and the improved school conditions (Ying, 2021). The unprecedented expansion of educational access and changing social dynamics particularly empowered Tibetan girls who were previously excluded from male-dominated monastic education in Tibetan society (Li, 2015; Seeberg, 2008; Yang & Xu, 2022). However, Tibetans, including parents, students and teachers, still need to make complicated navigations of school education for its association with personal aspirations to succeed socio-economically and to articulate a modern Tibetan identity (Postiglione, 2008).

These shifts in attitudes and complicated navigations of the education system are also embedded in wider debates and practices among Tibetan intellectuals to find possible

ways for Tibetans to move forward and develop under the state-led modernisation discourses and projects. Based on Tibetan intellectuals' debates about dichotomously positioned Tibetan traditions and modernisation in the post-reform China, Hartley (2002) categorised Tibetan intellectuals into conservatist modernists, selective modernists and radical modernists. Among these categories, selective modernists were predominant as they envisaged an ideal way forward for Tibetans to develop socio-economically while selectively preserving their culture. They proposed for Tibetans to "keep what is good from tradition as a base and adopt what is useful from 'modern world culture'" to develop as an ethnic group (p. 10). Badeng Nima (2000), a well-known Tibetan scholar in China, holds a similar view in arguing that while parts of Tibetan culture should be preserved, they also need transformation by absorbing better elements of other cultures. Apart from secular intellectuals, leading Tibetan Buddhist intellectual figures, such as Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, the founder of Larung Buddhist Academy,[4] and his successors such as Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö, who has a large number of religious followers among Tibetans as well as Han Chinese, have advocated for "a synthesis of the ancient and modern" to preserve Tibetan ancestral traditions while learning modern forms of knowledge, skills and ideas (Gayley, 2013, p. 254). It is seen as an "ethical reform" under modernisation (Gayley, 2013).

Whereas the education system in Tibetan regions operates largely under the modern, centralised national education system in China, Jikar puts forward the possibility and value of syncretising the tradition and modernity in Tibetan education in his case study of a private Tibetan vocational high school in Qinghai Province (Jikar, 2022). Established by Jigmed Gyaltsan, a famous Tibetan monk-educator and entrepreneur, the Tibetan vocational school was regarded as a successful case of incorporating traditional Tibetan educational philosophy and practices with those of the national education system, and preparing graduates for more community-based employment (Jikar, 2022).

With their subject positions as pedagogical professionals and local secular intellectual elites, Tibetan teachers in the state schools are a particularly important group who are at the centre of Tibetan people's perceptions and experiences of school education and modernisation discourses and projects. As early as in the 1990s, Upton (1996) observed that Tibetan teachers were to be greatly influential in the future development of Tibetan culture as they are active players in the reproduction and transformation of Tibetan culture. For instance, in the context of a great variety of Tibetan languages, teachers play a crucial role in debates about and promotion of Tibetan language standardisation to vitalise it and increase its intelligibility among Tibetans (Gelek, 2017; Jikar, 2021).[5] Upton (1996, p. 100) noted that Tibetan teachers in secular schools were seeking "to produce a new generation of literate Tibetans within the Chinese nation" and "negotiate between a literary history steeped in religious doctrine and the requirements of a modern national education system". Therefore, as a crucial interface between the formal schooling system and Tibetan society, Tibetan pre-tertiary teachers play and will continuously play crucial roles in shaping the development of Tibetan society in China.

However, thus far, little is known about how Tibetan school teachers in China understand the value and implications of school education and navigate their profession in the local education system. This article explores these questions based on semi-structured interviews with Tibetan teachers in Tibetan schools in Qinghai Province in Northwestern China. Focusing on Tibetan teachers' professional perceptions and experiences, this

article will shed light on the nuances of their meaning-making and practices in an educational field shaped by national modernisation projects and ethnic minorities' navigation of these projects.

## Methods

### Research sites

My research was conducted in two adjacent counties in Qinghai Province, Trika (Ch. *Guide*) County and Rebgong (Ch. *Tongren*) County, in 2016 and 2018, respectively. As the main geographical component of the historical Amdo region, Qinghai has a large Tibetan population. According to the 2020 Qinghai Provincial Statistical Yearbook, with a population of approximately 1.53 million, Tibetans in Qinghai constituted 25.23 per cent of the provincial population (QSB, 2020), consisting of the largest ethnic minority group in the province and inhabiting its large but sparsely populated areas outside Xining, the provincial capital city. In Trika County, which is 90 km away from Xining, Tibetans constitute nearly 37.8 per cent of the population (108,800) (Guide County Government, 2016). In Rebgong, 160 km away from Xining, Tibetans consist of 72.52 per cent of the county population (94,000) (Tongren County Government, 2018). Both counties are also home to other ethnic groups such as Han Chinese, Hui Muslims and Salar Muslims.

### Data collection: semi-structured interviews

This article draws on findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with five Tibetan teachers in Trika in 2016 and eight Tibetan teachers in Rebgong in 2018, all based in local Tibetan pre-tertiary boarding schools (Table 1). Interviews allowed me to probe deeper into teachers' perceptions and insights about school education and its value and implications for Tibetan individuals, and their professional experiences. Conducting semi-structured interviews also helped me strike a balance between gaining data relevant to my prepared questions and allowing participants enough space to share their observations

**Table 1.** Participant profiles.

| Name | Age | Teaching subjects | Education degree | Research site | Interview date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tsering | Early 40s | Tibetan | BA | Trika | March 2016 |
| Lugyal | Late 40s | Tibetan<br>Geography | Vocational college | Trika | March 2016 |
| Zhayang | Early 40s | Maths | Vocational college | Trika | March 2016 |
| Jamtso | Late 40s | Tibetan<br>English | MA | Trika | April 2016 |
| Dawa | Early 50s | Maths | Vocational college | Trika | March 2016 |
| Huamo | Early 30s | Tibetan<br>English | MA | Rebgong | May 2018 |
| Yangtso | Late 20s | Maths | BA | Rebgong | May 2018 |
| Rinchen | Early 30s | Tibetan<br>History | MA | Rebgong | August 2018 |
| Namgyal | Late 30s | Tibetan<br>Thoughts and Politics | MA | Rebgong | August 2018 |
| Yangmo | Early 30s | English | BA | Rebgong | June 2018 |
| Drumo | Late 30s | Chinese | Vocational college | Rebgong | June 2018 |
| Dorje | Late 40s | Tibetan | MA | Rebgong | June 2018 |
| Tsejyi | Early 50s | Maths | Vocational college | Rebgong | September 2018 |

and perspectives (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). All the interviews were conducted mainly in Amdo Tibetan, which was helpful for smooth communication and building rapport with the participants. All interviews, ranging from one hour to two hours and forty-five minutes, were audio-recorded upon the participants' oral consent. I also took field notes to keep records of my observations and reflections during the interviews and my visits to the two sites.

I began my interviews with personal acquaintances on both sites and adopted a snowball sampling method to recruit more participants. All participants were educated in pretertiary Tibetan schools in Qinghai and attended colleges or universities in Xining. A written consent form in Tibetan was prepared, but I presented and explained it to the participants and asked for their oral consent instead of written signatures to avoid discomfort among the participants, as a request for people to sign a printed document would only occur in very formal, often official and legalistic, settings in the local society.

My study has its limitations in terms of methodology. Firstly, data for this research was collected in 2016 and 2018 and the landscape of Tibetan education has been evolving since then. Secondly, this research is only based on interviews with a small group of Tibetan teachers and findings might not be generalisable. But still, as an exploratory research based on Tibetan teachers' voices, the research provides important insights to understand the nuances of their perceptions and experiences in navigating the education system.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis is a recursive process. It started when all the original interview recordings were being simultaneously translated and transcribed from Amdo Tibetan into English, laying the foundation for further analyses and interpretations (Hammersley, 2010). Translation was cautiously conducted to minimise potential cultural loss, but I deem there is still some unavoidable translation loss (Robinson-Pant, 2005). Following the transcription process, a thematic analysis method was used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning, or themes, in the transcripts (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I conducted the "thematic analysis within a constructionist framework" to identify, interpret and theorise teachers' experiences and perspectives in association with the local socio-cultural contexts and relevant literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following the proposed thematic analysis guidelines (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006), I put forth three major themes, teaching for knowledge acquisition and socio-economic success, teaching for language and cultural transmission, and teaching for selective transformations of values and habits, under the mega theme – education for development – to embody the overarching argument of this article. As my research focuses on and prioritises teachers' experiences, observations and perspectives, I have included many translated quotations from the interviews to illustrate and corroborate my analysis.

## Findings: education for development[6]

Teaching in state schools is now a highly aspired profession among Tibetans in Trika and Rebgong as it promises professional stability, decent income and social status. As in other places around China, it requires an individual to obtain college qualifications and pass

competitive job recruitment examinations to become a full-time teacher in a Tibetan school. Also similar to most pre-tertiary schools in and outside China, teaching in local schools is a job that comes with long working hours and heavy workloads. Most teachers follow a highly rigorous work routine from 8am to 6pm, whereas the headteachers[7] and school leaders work even longer and those on weekly rotating shifts patrol the dorms and the campus after evening classes that end around 9pm. Thus, during interviews, all the participating teachers complained about long working hours and professional burnouts, echoing the scholarly observations about similar professional challenges faced by teachers around China (Sargent & Hannum, 2005; Wang, 2013).

Nevertheless, unlike teachers' demoralisation observed elsewhere (Wang, 2013), most teachers in my study expressed their strong commitments and optimism about their job and its significance as a vocation. They believed that it allows them to make contributions to the development of Tibetan society, which embodies a complex entanglement of knowledge and skills acquisitions of Tibetan students, cultural and socio-economic development of the Tibetan society, and selective value and behaviourial transformations for Tibetan individuals to become more competent to cope with changing social and educational dynamics. Several of them stressed that more than just a job or a source of income, teaching carries deeper meanings for them. According to Jamtso,

> Teaching is more than just a job for me. Being a teacher doesn't make me rich or famous, but I am very happy because I am making contributions to my ethnic group. (*Interview, March 2016*)

This narrative demonstrates that the teachers' understandings of their profession and their professional practices are deeply embedded in their sense of connectedness with students and parents, and a strong moral commitment to the development of local Tibetan society. In the following sections, I present my findings about the teachers' perceptions and navigations of their profession based on three major themes: teaching for knowledge acquisition and socio-economic success, teaching for language and cultural transmission, and teaching for selective transformations of values and habits. I also discuss how they are all embodied in their understandings of the development of local Tibetan society and implicated in national modernisation discourses and projects.

## Teaching for knowledge acquisition and socio-economic success

First and foremost, as pedagogical professionals and local intellectual elites, the teachers' sense of devotion to the development of Tibetan society was manifest in their strong moral commitment to help Tibetan children in their pursuit of academic and socio-economic success. Due to marketisation and increasing dependence upon a cash-centred economy, aspiration to pursue and succeed in formal schooling is paramount among Tibetans in both Trika and Rebgong. Many teachers depicted education as the most important means for their students to achieve social mobility in a society where "knowledge is more important than anything else" (*Dorje, interview, June 2018*).

Similar to pre-tertiary schools around China, school education in both Rebgong and Trika was highly exam-oriented; school schedules were rigid and long, and various small tests and examinations were held to prepare students for the high-stakes entrance examinations for senior secondary schools and universities. Contrasting this to their observations of a lack of enthusiasm for schooling among Tibetan people in the past,

some teachers approvingly construed the contemporary educational landscape and Tibetan people's rising aspiration for educational success as signs of the "awakening of Tibetan people" (Dorje). For example, Rinchen, a teacher in his 30s with a Master's degree, shared his own story: more than twenty years ago, he was sent to school to meet the compulsory school enrolment quota of his village. Born into a nomadic family in Rebgong, he had been chosen through a lot drawn among the households to fulfil the quota requirement of the compulsory education law, according to which, his village had to send one child to school or be fined one sheep. Rinchen joked: "I was sent to school to save a sheep. But now parents are willing to sacrifice whatever they have to send a child to school" (*Interview, August 2018*).

Meanwhile, several teachers expressed their concerns that Tibetan students, mostly from rural areas, were, in general, less likely to succeed educationally due to the lower quality of rural education and rural parents' lack of capacity to support learning at home. Yangmo said that rural Tibetan students in her class "had already lost at the starting line (Ch. *shu zai le qipaoxian shang*)" because rural areas are relatively lacking in necessary educational resources and their parents, mostly uneducated, were incapable of helping with their studies. "Losing at the starting line" is a common expression in the Chinese language to compare situations in which a student has had a disadvantaged start in education, or life in general. The metaphor of life or education as a race shows that teachers, parents and students are faced with rising competition for educational success as Tibetans increasingly aspire for and compete for educational success.

In this context, most teachers believed that, highly respected and trusted by local Tibetan parents who were predominantly rural-based with little education, they held the responsibility to teach well and urge Tibetan students to learn well to become competent and skilled. For instance, Yangtso stated,

> Tibetan parents count on teachers to educate their children. So as a teacher, I must try my best to teach my students. I can't make sure all the students will learn well, but I have to make sure that I tried my best. (*Interview, May 2018*)

In a broader sense, it is believed that students' academic success would entail knowledge and skill accumulation, better socio-economic outcomes, and social mobility for Tibetan individuals and the Tibetan ethnic group as a collective.

## Teaching for language and cultural transmission

Secondly, whereas academic success in learning different school subjects were emphasised by the teachers, the teachers of Tibetan language and other humanity or social study subjects in certain contexts particularly emphasised the importance of education and their professional roles in transmitting Tibetan culture and language. Rinchen, a Tibetan language teacher, emphasised,

> We have to try to inherit our traditional culture through education.

Teachers, particularly those who teach the Tibetan language, also take certain initiatives to transmit Tibetan traditional culture in their teachings. For instance, to teach Tibetan poetry, Huamo asked her students to collect lyrics of Tibetan traditional songs from their parents.

According to Huamo, the activity successfully demonstrated the abundance and richness of Tibetan culture to her students and taught them more about the Tibetan traditional culture.

Alongside the main official Tibetan language textbooks, Tibetan language teachers in Rebgong were also using a supplementary book which was mainly a collection of traditional Tibetan grammatical texts and poems. Around 2016, the supplementary book was produced and distributed among Tibetan pre-tertiary schools under the initiative of the local Education Bureau. Tibetan language teachers were responsible for teaching the book and guiding students to recite certain texts periodically as part of their professional performance assessment. Recitation competitions were held for each term across schools in the county under the initiation of the local Education Bureau. Dorje stated that Tibetan teachers in Rebgong welcomed the book as it would help children improve their Tibetan language competence. He further commented:

> we are doing something really … important [by using the supplementary book]. We have these precious cultural teachings left by our ancestors. We have to inherit them. It is important for not only our ethnic group but also the whole Chinese nation. … For the local economy to develop, it is important to foster talents equipped with local language and culture. It is not only good for our local society and ethnic group, but also for the whole Chinese nation.

Dorje interpreted and emphasised the importance of the book as an effort of preserving Tibetan culture as part of the cultural traditions of the whole Chinese nation and in association with socio-economic development highly promoted by the state. In some schools where the instructional language is Tibetan, teachers in other subjects also play an important role in teaching Tibetan language. For instance, Yangmo, an English teacher, mostly taught English using Tibetan which was the official instructional language of her senior secondary school, but, sometimes, she also used Chinese as some students failed to comprehend certain neologisms in Tibetan.

## Teaching for selective transformations of values and habits

Finally, the teachers saw education as important for the development of Tibetan society as it selectively transforms certain personal values and habits. Despite being proud of their ethnic identity, many teachers were convinced that Tibetan students and parents needed to become more competent and responsible individuals to succeed in education and life in general as "other people" do. Thus, they actively took it as their responsibility to push not only Tibetan students, but also their parents to become so. The following quote from Tsering, a teacher in Trika, illustrates this:

> Tibetan students … are constantly told [by teachers] to behave well, protect things around them, and wear clean clothes. We Tibetans have good and pure hearts, which other people appreciate … We teachers also tell parents to teach their children to behave [study] well. Other people around the world can do so. Why can't we do that? (*Interview, March 2016*)

Firstly, Tsering's portrayal of Tibetan children vividly manifests his strong commitment to educate and transform Tibetan children to be well-behaved, motivated, protective of "things around them", and attentive to personal hygiene. Secondly, his descriptions of Tibetans as having pure hearts might also echo and reinforce people's mystified or romaticised imaginations about Tibetans as spiritual and unworldly (Hladíková, 2013; Lin, 2018). More importantly, the quote shows the teacher's selective modernist stance to

teach children to acquire certain "modern" values and habits, reinforce certain traditional ones, *and* discard some others through their professional practices.

Furthermore, Tsering's position as a pedagogical professional and an intellectual elite extends beyond teacher-student relations and the school campus to the wider Tibetan community as he tells parents to be more attentive to and responsible for their children's education. While many teachers appreciated Tibetan parents' increasing aspirations for school education and the trust vested in them, they were also critical of rural Tibetan parents' perceived lack of responsibility and competency, and dependency upon schools and teachers for children's education, as Huamo said,

> Although parents nowadays know education is important for their children, very few parents know how to educate their children. They don't communicate with teachers and can't really discipline their children [to study]. There are many nomadic children in our school and most of the parents think that as long as they know when school starts and send them to school on time, their responsibility is completed. They don't know about other things [about school], nor do they care. They believe education is something to be done in school by the teachers. (*Interview, May 2018*)

Huamo's critiques and expectations of Tibetan parents were resonant with the mainstream domestic and global middle-class parenting notions of "concerted cultivation", "intensive parenting" or "home-school cooperation" that expect parents to be responsible, well-informed, and intensively involved in children's education and overall development (e.g. Epstein, 2011; Kuan, 2015; Lareau, 2003). Echoing Huamo's critique, Rinchen insisted that "Tibetan parents were in need of improving their mindset (Tib. *bsam'blo*) and take more responsibilities for their children". On occasions, teachers' critiques of parents translated into what can be called pedagogical moments as they explicitly comment on parents' parenting practices and teach them to be more involved in children's education. Namgyal's recollection of a parental meeting for his senior secondary school class was one of such pedagogical moments:

> Nearly 70 per cent of the parents never called me for three years! So at the last parental meeting, I told the parents: 'In developed places, people are even talking about prenatal education. They have developed to such a stage! For us, we don't even have any family education'.[8] I told the parents: 'How many of you have called me even once to ask about your children in the past three years? Even if you had asked someone to take care of your animals for several years, you would definitely ask about them at least once or twice a year, right?'[9] … I was joking, but what I said was also true, right? So, they were very embarrassed! (*Interview, August 2018*)

During this parental meeting, Namgyal jokingly reprimanded parents for their lack of communication with him to remind them of their lack of attention to and support of children's learning. He highlighted their perceived unreasonableness through his hyperbolic comparison between their perceived lack of attention to their children's education and the greater attention they paid to their livestock. It was a pedagogical moment in which he educated the parents about their perceived shortcomings and irresponsibility, as well as concepts such as prenatal education which is popular nationally and globally among middle-class parents to "educate" unborn babies through practices such as playing music, reading books, or practicing yoga. Namgyal's use of the concept of prenatal education also shows that this child-rearing notion has now entered the Tibetan language as a neologism. Alongside phrases like "losing the race at the start", these neologisms shape the local discursive field through which Tibetans navigate education and social changes.

Meanwhile, despite teachers' convictions about Tibetans in need of modernisation, like Tsering, teachers also expressed a strong sense of pride in certain traditional moral values such as kindness and compassion. Namgyal expressed his deep pride in Tibetans' compassionate and peaceful nature, and highlighted the cultural influence of Tibetans on others:

> Tibetan people are great people who believe in karmic law and have compassion … People around the world admire Tibetans for being compassionate and peaceful. They are learning our culture, religion, and language.

Jamtso also emphasised the importance of traditional culture:

> traditional culture … fosters people's basic human characteristics, mind, behavior, and emotion.

Some teachers also expressed concerns about certain changing preferences and moral values not only among Tibetans but people around China and the world, with reference to the popular discourses of "*two civilisations*". For instance, as Namgyal said,

> If one of the two civilisations [spiritual civilisation and material civilisation] is absent, it is not true development. Modern society is money-oriented and anything is fine as long as there is money. Everyone [around the world] is like that now. If we don't pay attention to this problem, there will be many other problems. (*Interview, August 2018*)

Although market-driven modernisation in the post-reform China embodies hope in economic terms, excessive pursuit of wealth has been viewed by many, including the state government leaders, as embodying threat (Bakken, 2000). As a result, state campaigns have been initiated to construct the notions of two "*wenming*" or civilisations, namely *spiritual civilisation (Ch. jingshen wenming)* and *material civilisation (Ch. wuzhi wenming)*, which, in broad terms, represent cultural and economic development respectively. Both notions were included in the Chinese official lexicon in the 1980s and were increasingly emphasised from the 1990s onward to ensure that the nation would reap the benefits of economic development of the reform and opening up, and avoid the potential harms brought about by modernisation and globalisation (Liu, 2011). With reference to the discourses of *material civilisation* and *spiritual civilisation,* Namgyal interpreted the rising or excessive aspiration for material wealth among people around the world, including Tibetans, as an erosion of traditional moral values. This echoes not only the state vigilance against excessive pursuit of material wealth and compromised development of the nation's cultural traditions but also, to some extent, the global debates around materialism, capitalism and neoliberalism.

The findings in this section vividly illustrate the teachers' complicated, "selective modernist" perceptions and practices with regard to the development of the Tibetan society in China: they selectively reinforce certain neologisms, values and habits upheld by the modern society in and outside China, while also yearning for or reinforcing certain traditional moral values in their everyday professional practices.

## Conclusion

Globally, teachers are valued, assessed and regulated for their professional roles in teaching school-based knowledge and improving students' academic outcomes based on largely functionalist views (Wu, 2018). But studies have also shown that the teachers'

work and teachers' roles are far more complex and multifaceted because they are deeply embedded in complex social dynamics (Gu, 2015; Tsang, 2019; Wu, 2018). The findings in this article echo these observations by demonstrating how Tibetan teachers in China perceive of the value and implications of formal schooling and navigate their profession in an education system shaped by modernisation discourses and projects, and by showing that they play crucial roles in socio-economic and cultural development of Tibetan society in China.

Overall, the teachers' understanding of education as a means of development resonates with the state advocacy in the post-reform era "to rejuvenate the country through science and education" (Ch. *kejiao xingguo*), where education is positioned to be crucial for China's national development through knowledge and human capital accumulation. Meanwhile, the Tibetan teachers' engagement with education for the development of Tibetan society is filled with its own features. In Thurston's (2018) study with a group of Tibetan cultural intellectuals born in Amdo and their cultural products such as comedies, poems and films, he argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, Tibetan intellectuals were more inclined towards the secularisation of Tibetan culture, but in the twenty-first century, they were more occupied promoting Tibetan traditional culture. However, my analysis showed that the teachers' professional commitments and practices demonstrate a more selective modernist stance as they highlight the importance of retaining certain traditional cultural values and knowledge while also acquiring new ideas, values, knowledge and skills for the Tibetan society to develop and modernise. This configuration of "education for development" by the teachers strongly echoes the vision of selective modernists among Tibetans who envisaged a way forward for Tibetans to develop socio-economically as an ethnic group with a modern Tibetan identity (Hartley, 2002). This also demonstrates that the Tibetan teachers' subject positions as pedagogical professionals and Tibetan intellectual elites are deeply embedded in their navigation of the education system as they make efforts to contribute to the development of Tibetan society in China, and sheds light on local Tibetan teachers' active engagement with modernisation discourses and projects.

Overall, this exploratory study sheds light on the nuances of the Tibetan teachers' perceptions of schooling, and professional commitments and practices to navigate the local education system. It contributes to domestic and international scholarly debates about teachers' work and professional roles, education for ethnic minorities, education in developing contexts, and ethnic minorities' engagement with formal education systems, modernisation and similar processes such as globalisation. Future studies based upon more diverse research approaches, such as classroom observations and interviews with educational leaders, students and parents, would provide richer insights into these topics in an era of rapid social transformations in China and globally.

## Notes

1. For Chinese key terms, *pinyin* is provided directly or in brackets.
2. Tibetan people in China mainly live in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and four other provinces, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan.
3. In 2011, the Ministry of Education declared that China had universalised nine-year basic education nationwide.

4. It is one of the largest and most influential Buddhist institutions in Tibetan areas in China (Gayley, 2013).
5. It is estimated that Tibetan language consists of numerous varieties, including tens of Tibetic languages and more than 200 dialects (Gelek, 2017; Tournadre, 2014). However, in general, it is divided into three dialects which are Amdo, Khams and Ü-Tsang Tibetan languages, with a largely unified written system (Gelek, 2017). There are also other non-Tibetan languages spoken by several culturally Tibetan groups (Lawa, 2021). Amdo Tibetan was used for interviews in this study, and the written Tibetan was referred to for transliterating key terms.
6. For participants' pseudonyms, common Tibetan names are used in their conventional Romanised forms. Wylie transliterations of written forms of key Tibetan terms are provided directly or in brackets.
7. A headteacher in a Chinese public school is in charge of the daily operations of a class and teaches certain subject(s) for the class.
8. "Family education" here refers broadly to parents' and other guardians' practices to support their children's development and education (Ying, 2022).
9. It was traditionally a common practice in nomadic and mountain villages in Rebgong to pay a person, in cash or in kind, to take care of the livestock of several families.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their time and constructive feedback. Special thanks go to the teachers who spared their time and shared their perceptions and stories with me.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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