

CTC Statement:

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Regarding Colonial Boarding Schools

April 21, 2023

Thank you Chair and Committee members – I deeply appreciate this opportunity to speak with you today on the important matter of Tibetan language and education.

The Canada Tibet Committee is an independent and non-partisan association of Tibetans and non-Tibetans from across Canada. Founded in 1987, its mandate is to promote the human rights of Tibetan people living under Chinese rule.

As Committee members will know, the right to education is protected in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [Article 27] and the Convention on the Rights of the Child [Article 29.c and Article 30]. In fact, both of these treaties explicitly guarantee that minority groups must not be denied use of their own language either in community or otherwise. [Although China has not yet ratified the ICCPR, it is required as a signatory to respect the spirit of the treaty]. Further, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ratified by China] states that “all peoples have the right to self-determination” including “social and cultural development” [Article 1].

Here in Canada, the federal government supports efforts by Indigenous Peoples to reclaim and revitalize their linguistic heritage, in part by adopting the Indigenous Languages Act in 2019.ⁱ In the province of Quebec, it has been more than 40 years since provincial legislation required that all children in that province be educated in the French language until the end of their secondary studies.ⁱⁱ

It is also interesting to note that the Government of China has adopted its “Regional National Autonomy Law” [1984]ⁱⁱⁱ which clearly states in Article 37 that, “The organs of self-government of national autonomous areas shall *independently* develop education for the nationalities ... [and] shall, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use their languages as the medium of instruction”.

Despite such guarantees, however, a suite of policies imposed across the whole of China by the central government under the pretext of poverty alleviation or ecological protection, have reinforced the ongoing assault on Tibet’s language and cultural traditions. Such policies include various nomad relocation schemes, the school consolidation policy, and the bilingual education policy. These policies have, in effect, reduced the ability of Tibetan children to access schooling in their own language, as previous witnesses have laid out in stark detail before this committee.

A few years ago, Global Affairs Canada funded a project to support efforts by the Tibetan exile community in India and Nepal to deliver quality education in the Tibetan language. Notwithstanding the many differences in the broader context, the project itself provided valuable lessons about challenges faced when promoting Tibetan language in the face of a different dominant language. For this reason, Canada is well-placed to take the lead on this issue.

Therefore, in conclusion, we wish to make the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

1. Open a dialogue with appropriate counterparts from the National People's Congress on the matter of minority language and education in Tibet;
2. Invite visiting parliamentarians from China to indigenous communities and to Quebec in order to share Canadian experiences regarding the protection and promotion of minority languages;
3. Support academic research aimed at identifying the impacts that resettlement and education policies in Tibet have had, or might have, on the vibrancy of Tibetan language and culture;
4. Encourage the Canadian Embassy in Beijing to develop Canada Fund projects related to Tibetan language education, including support for Tibetan language lending libraries or training of Tibetan language teachers;
5. Advocate on behalf of Tibetan human rights defenders who uphold linguistic rights.

ⁱ See <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-7.85/page-1.html>

ⁱⁱ See <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/c-11>

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/rnal300/>