

**Paper Title:**

Structures of feeling in language policy: The case of Tibetan in China

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**Conflict of Interest:**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Abstract:**

This article examines the case of minority language education in China, an area of enquiry that has received increasing attention as new studies report on how the lack of institutional recognition that minority languages receive erodes ethnic minority identities and disempowers social actors living in minority areas. Drawing on Williams' (1977) notion of "structures of feeling", as well as on Woolard's (1985) critical take on the concepts of integrated linguistic market and culture hegemony, we empirically analyse individuals' engagement with normative meanings and values linked to language policies. In particular, we focus on situated practices at a secondary school located in an ethnically diverse city in southwestern China in which Tibetans constitute the largest ethnic minority group. Our data show emergent communicative forms, or "structures of feeling", through which school actors enact, challenge and shape an institutional logic that marginalizes the Tibetan section within the school while constructing Tibetan language education as a pedagogical space with no room for Tibetan religious content. In so doing, our analysis sheds light on complex on-the-ground dynamics, with focus on shifting values on what constitutes appropriate knowledge and a "good" minority language school vis-à-vis wider socio-institutional processes of transformation.

**Keywords:**

Language policy, minority language education, structures of feeling, Tibetan, China

## 1. Introduction

Ethnography has gained momentum relatively late in language policy and planning research, particularly if compared to the social sciences more widely. Yet, and with the 1990s and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the key turning points, there is a well-established consensus today on the contributions of ethnographic approaches to understanding the ways in which policies are interpreted and appropriated by social actors, and the consequences of these local processes for participants and institutions involved (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans 2018). However, there are still challenges ahead. On the one hand, research on language policy continues to put ethnography aside in many national regions and academic traditions. On the other, ethnographically-oriented investigations often rely on very holistic approaches to meaning and context, this leaving us with broad-brush portrayals in which language policy issues are detached from the situated dynamics of meaning-making out of which wider structural constraints get re-contextualized and re-configured under changing socioeconomic and political conditions (see Pérez-Milans 2018).

This is particularly evident in the case of research on minority languages in China. In the last decade, the blooming of critical approaches in this context has contributed to unmasking the process whereby Mandarin Chinese, also known as Putonghua, is gradually taking over as the main language of instruction, even in those regions where officially categorized “minority languages” have been protected and institutionalized in primary and secondary schools (Feng and Adamson 2015; Wan and Zhang 2007; Wang 2016; Tsung 2014; Zhao 2014; Zhou 2004). In this strand of research, the marginalization of these

minority languages is seen as potentially eroding ethnic minority identities and leaving affected social actors with a sense of frustration, displacement and disempowerment (see Beckett and Postiglione 2012; Hansen 1999; MacPherson and Beckett 2008; Schluessel 2007; Wang 2016). Though it has been key in the building of a critical momentum in the field of language policy in China, we believe that this tradition has not yet shed enough light on the institutional and interpersonal dynamics through which social actors construct, make sense of, play out, negotiate and/or shape language policies on the ground.

Far from being an aesthetic claim, the exploration of these dynamics provides, in our view, a platform to better understand: a) how social actors engage with conventionalized models about institutional actors and forms of knowledge upon which social life is arranged in institutions; and b) how new conventional ways of social relation might historically emerge and consolidate out of such forms of situated engagement. Williams (1977:128) referred to the importance of these dynamics in his call for a closer study of “structures of feeling”, in contrast to a tendency to drive analytical attention, from the start, to fixed social products and formations of the past:

If the social is always past, in the sense that is always formed, we have indeed to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products. And then if the social is the fixed and explicit – the known relations, institutions, formations, positions – all that is present and moving, all that escapes

or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active ‘subjective’.

Williams adds:

The methodological consequence ... is that the specific qualitative changes are not *assumed* to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time, they are from the beginning taken as *social* experience, rather than as ‘personal’ experience or as the merely superficial or incidental ‘small change’ of society. They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence*... second, in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action (pp. 131-132).

In his discussion of social experiences, Williams highlighted the need to go beyond the tendency to conceptualize the social as finished products. He argued that relationships, institutions and formations should be considered as forming and formative processes instead of merely as formed wholes, and more emphasis needed to be put on relevant meanings and values as they are lived and felt. This analytical focus was termed by Williams as “structures of feeling”, referring to the seemingly nuanced everyday

experiences that are actively forming and also contesting interlocking relations. Such a focus demands close attention to two key aspects, namely: the undeniable experience of the immediate being; and the *longue durée* of social relations that get (re)constituted within these seemingly private and idiosyncratic present experiences, which have their emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics.

In the similar vein, we argue that instead of taking language policies as finished products, they could be better understood as processes that are lived and felt by individuals, and that inevitably involve complexities, tensions and uncertainties. Thus, this requires giving analytical importance to individuals' situated engagement with the normative conventions about appropriate forms of knowledge and participation that are brought about by specific language policies. It also entails tracing the links between these situated practices across space-time in order to further explore the extent to which such practices contribute to articulate and redefine the meanings associated with these language policies and the ways in which social actors negotiate social relations.

In line with the above, this article focuses on Tibetan language policies as a set of normative frameworks that are enacted and made sense of in the institutional space of a secondary school located in southwestern China. Our investigation is driven by the following questions: What social/moral categories and meanings about language, culture and identity are (re)produced, circulated and valued in the institutional space of minority language education? How do students and teachers position themselves and others with respect to such categories and meanings in situated practices? What consequences do they have for the teaching and learning of so-called "minority languages"?

In what follows, we provide a brief review of the implementation of minority language policies in China, in order to situate the current discussions in broader political and social contexts (Section 2). After this, we outline the main epistemological perspectives adopted in this study, and draw attention to Woolard's (1985) critique of the concepts of integrated linguistic market and culture hegemony (Section 3). Later, we will present the story of Snowland Tibetan School, our focal institution, with a focus on the contradictions, opportunities and dilemmas that teachers and students in this school faced in the teaching and learning of Tibetan (Section 4). Based on our findings, we discuss in the last section the wider implications of our study (Section 5).

## **2. Minority Language Policy in China**

Many scholars in China consider the period that followed the initiation of the modernization reforms by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s as a pluralist stage in the management of minority languages (Lin 1997; Zhou 2001). Ethnic minority groups' rights to use and develop what regarded as "their languages", originally laid out in the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of China, were fully re-enshrined in the 1982 Constitution after being reduced in the 1975 Constitution and 1978 Constitution, recognizing minority groups' rights to use and develop their languages (Article 4), to use the languages in local administrative occasions (Article 121), and to use the languages in court proceedings (Article 134). This gradually led to further regulations and guidelines that recognize the right to use minority languages across institutional settings at national, regional and local levels. However, despite being supported by national legislation, the

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efforts to promote minority languages have largely depended on the stances taken by local authorities (Lam 2007).

Among the factors limiting the implementation of minority language policies, the powerful status of Putonghua has been regarded as a key factor (Adamson and Feng 2014; Zhou 2004, 2012). Along with the recognition of minority language rights in the 1982 *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, Putonghua has been prominently promoted over the years as the “national commonly used language” (国家通用语言). This position has been recently strengthened by the *Law of the National Commonly Used Language and Written Script of the PRC* passed by The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China in 2000.

The wide range of official domains in which Putonghua prevails as the only legitimate language is also reinforced by a predominant frame that, while linking this language to national efforts to promote ethnic unity (民族团结) through “strong promotion and standardization”, it characterizes minority languages as requiring “scientific protection” (see, for instance, the guidelines introduced in the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Reform and Development of Language Works 2012-2020* (Ministry of Education and National Language Commission, 2012)).

As the continuous emphasis placed on ethnic unity has led to an official push toward strengthening minority groups' identification with a united Chinese nation, the ideological weight of Putonghua as the common language that brings people from different ethnic background together gains strength. This discourse is indeed explicitly articulated in the *Thirteenth Five Year Development Plan of National Language Works* published by the Ministry of Education and National Language Commission (2016):

The important fundamental role played by the national commonly used language in safeguarding national unity and promoting ethnic solidarity and social development needs to be further strengthened. In accordance with national plans and strategies for taking targeted measures towards poverty alleviation, the popularization of national commonly used language and written script in minority regions needs to be accelerated, focusing on improving the language proficiency of teachers, local cadres and young farmers and herdsmen. The teaching of national commonly used language and written script needs to be strengthened to ensure that minority students can master and use national commonly used language and written script (translation ours).

These efforts to promote Putonghua have led to the growing of great concern over the lack of institutional status for minority languages in China (Beckett and Postiglione 2012; Dwyer 2005). One institutional setting that bears witness to the perceived marginalization of minority languages is education. Ma (2014), for example, reports a decline of Tibetan as the language of instruction in Tibet Autonomous Region. In his research of bilingual education in this region he points out that, while 95 percent of primary students were taught in the medium of Tibetan in 2000, only 5 percent of primary schools adopted the language in 2007. This pattern also applies to other areas of the country such as Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where local governments call for an increasing percentage of educational spaces adopting Putonghua as the language of instruction (Schluessel 2007; Tsung and Cruichshank 2009). Generally speaking, schools in China at which minority

languages have traditionally been taught as an academic subject are now described as facing new challenges deriving from shortages of teaching material and qualified teachers (Gao 2010; Lin 1997; Ma 2007).

Apart from the central government's focus on unity, other local factors have been argued to contribute to this lack of institutional support in the promotion of minority languages in schools, the most recursive one being the persistent view among parents and local stakeholders involved in the decision-making processes that Putonghua is associated with higher prestige and fewer bureaucratic constraints. Parents, on the one hand, tend to send their children to Chinese-medium schools as they consider that minority languages have lower status and cultural capital (Postiglione, Ben and Manlaji 2007; Wang 2016). Local officials and administrators, on the other, often quote economic benefits, examination pressure, and job prospects, as the rationale for the preferential attention given to Putonghua in education (Adamson and Feng 2014; Tsung and Cruichshank 2009; Zhou 2001).

In addition, officials also claim that guidelines from the state regarding minority languages are too broad to be instructive and operational, thus requiring in their view considerable efforts for their interpretation before any decision can be made (Blachford 2004; Schnack 2016; Tsung, Wang and Zhang 2012). This sense of inconvenience may also be exacerbated by the large portion of administrative positions occupied by Han officials, many of whom are not familiar with regulations regarding minority language rights (Zhou 2004) – i.e. under these conditions, officials are often reported as making the easiest choice of aligning with the eloquently pushed national agenda of promoting Putonghua.

Research on minority language programs has now begun to cast important light on this process of marginalization of minority languages in educational settings, and on the different interests involved in the implementation process. Yet, current discussions do not seem to provide a clear picture of students' and teacher's situated engagement with school policies and institutional practices. Following the call for a detailed investigation of the situated implementation of minority language policies in the Chinese context that goes beyond the documents and their general outcome (Adamson and Feng 2014; Feng and Sunuodula 2009), we propose in this article a research approach that draws from (socio)linguistic ethnography. We detail such an approach below, with reference to our research site.

### **3. Site, approach and data collection**

Our research was conducted at an institution we call “Snowland Tibetan Secondary School”<sup>1</sup>, a secondary school in southwestern China. At the time of the study, the school adopted Putonghua as the language of instruction, and Tibetan was taught as a language subject. The fieldwork was carried out by the first author between September and November, 2016. Data collection includes in and out-of-classroom observation (20h), interviews with teachers (6h) and students (3h), questionnaires completed by students in senior grade three (45), fieldnotes (95 pages), photos (160), and textbooks and institutional documents (145 pages).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the city where the school is located, the school, students and teachers are all referred to by pseudonyms.

In our efforts to understand the dynamics of the Tibetan program at our focal school, we draw on Woolard's (1985) critical take on the concepts of the integrated linguistic market, institutional domination, and culture hegemony. In her investigation of the local sociolinguistic market of Catalonia in post-Franco Spain, Woolard observed that the dominant institutional representation of Castilian did not translate into a corresponding local sociolinguistic order, which instead favoured the use of Catalan. In this way, she highlighted that the institutional domination of Castilian did not result in the conformation of an integrated linguistic market, this being more an imagination than a realistic account of different forms of legitimate knowledge that were at play or the affective standards held by individuals. In other words, culture hegemony could not be fully established as a result. In this regard, Woolard asked for further attention to those "alternative practices and perceptions in immediate human relationships" (745) that, while making room for creative responses to the authoritative knowledge, could also serve to produce competing sets of values.

Building on this argument, this study does not consider institutional structure as an end product in which dissonances are swept away, nor as a bounded and coherent entity where dominant discourse is reproduced in a top-down fashion, as this would assume that individual could only comply or resist. Instead, we aim to shed light on the contact zones where dominant discourses interact with situated practices, allowing space for the analysis of social actors' "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977). That is to say, we are interested in those zones "where cultural coherence, patterns and regularity are continually unsettled by - often even at war with - the idiosyncrasies and unspoken needs and desires of situated individuals" (Rampton 2013: 9). Thus, the implementation of language policy is not

conceived of as a linear order-giving activity based on a finished product, instead, it is considered as a process of ongoing interpretation and negotiation that is embedded in individuals' lived experience. Local particularities across time and space are being constructed into a web of meaningful social relations, reflecting individuals' flexible positioning as they are shaped by institutional logic, which they also help to reproduce.

In particular, we approach institutions as “discursive spaces” (Heller 2007) where actors engage in a great deal of discursive and ideological production to (de)legitimise the very existence of the organisation, its mission and social goals, as well as the identities, and social and moral categories that are constructed and emerge from such discursive and ideological processes. Therefore, our investigation of social actors' situated practices is driven by an interest in the ways in which normative forms of knowledge (i.e. what counts as appropriate forms of contribution) and moral categorization process (i.e. how participants position themselves and others as “good” or “bad” with reference to which types of persona) get constructed and negotiated in daily communicative arrangements discursively, in intersection with institutionalized organisational logic. With these as our main ontological and epistemological positions, we now turn to the case of Snowland Tibetan Secondary School.

#### **4. Snowland Tibetan Secondary School**

The Snowland Tibetan Secondary School (hereafter STS) was established in 1994 in Snowland Prefecture, which is one of the ten Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in China. According to the sixth national census conducted in 2010, the population officially

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classified as Tibetan constitute around thirty percent of the local population, making Tibetan the largest officially recognized ethnic group in Snowland. In comparison to other places in the Tibetan regions of China, Snowland had a late start in incorporating Tibetan language education into the public-school system. Until 1973, Snowland was under the jurisdiction of a neighbouring city, where Tibetan was not the largest ethnic group, being later taken under the direct jurisdiction of the provincial government. Thus, this gave the Tibetan population a bigger say in the management of local affairs, and after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the local government started to incorporate Tibetan language education into public schools.

In addition to the change of jurisdiction, Tibetan language education also gained institutional momentum when the right for minority groups to develop “their own languages” was inscribed in the 1982 *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China* as well as in the 1984 *Law of People’s Republic of China Regional National Autonomy*. Even so, the effective institutionalization of the Tibetan language in Snowland has taken a slow pace, with Tibetan language programs running sporadically in a few primary schools, and only at STS at the secondary level after 1994.

At STS, the institutionalization of Tibetan was enacted in the form of narratives that placed the foundation of STS as iconic of a turning point, away from the previous period in which the Chinese-centred government had not supported Tibetan cultural and linguistic heritage in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. This is shown in Extract 1, taken from an interview with Kelsang, a junior teacher of Tibetan who was also a graduate of STS. In this interview on the development of STS, Kelsang links the setting up of STS with the visit,

in 1986, of the Tenth Panchen Lama, one of the most influential Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leaders of the time (see transcription conventions in Appendix)<sup>2</sup>.

### Extract 1. “He said that there must be a Tibetan school”

(Interview with Kelsang, a Tibetan teacher at STS)

**Jing:** 十世班禅他过来是什么一个过程 /

(what happened when the Tenth Panchen Lama visited here /)

**Kelsang:** 是这样 / 班禅大师 / 他是全国人大副委员长嘛 / 他在中央嘛 / 然后国家领导就邀请他 / 住在北京 / 他就安在那里 / 班禅大师一直有个心愿嘛 / 他要想回到藏区来看一下 / 是不是↑ //

(it was like this / the Tenth Panchen Lama / he was the Vice-chairperson of The National People's Congress / he was part of the central government / and state leaders invited him / to live in Beijing / and he settled there / the Master Panchen always had a wish / he wanted to go back and visit the Tibetan regions / right↑ //)

**Jing:** 嗯嗯 /

(uh huh /)

**Kelsang:** 因为活佛他慈悲心太大了 / 当时 / 藏区还是很贫苦 / 因为他看到北京那些生活 / 他可以对比嘛 / 然后他一直有个心愿就是来 / 全藏区来看一下 / 这么多年没回去了 / 到底藏区发展到一个什么程度 / 因为中央承诺过 / 当时是因为西藏自治区 / 什么什么待遇要给 / 但是文革的时候毁了很多 / 他就这样想 / 然后他就来了 / 从北京来了 / 然后他来到这的时候 / 他就说 / 这是西藏自治区 / 为什么没有藏文学校 // 连街上写的那些牌子都是汉语写的 / 班禅非常生气 / 他就说必须成立一个藏文学校 / 然后就这样就慢慢地就建立起来了

(because as a living Buddha his kindness and his sympathy for others was boundless / at that time / the Tibetan region was still very impoverished / because he saw what life was like in Beijing / he could compare them / so he always had this wish to / visit the whole Tibetan region / for all those years he was not there / he wondered what was the development in the Tibetan region like / because the central government had made promises / at that time because as Tibetan autonomous prefectures / a series of subsidies will be provided to them / but a lot of those were disrupted during Cultural Revolution / that was what he thought / so he came here / from Beijing / when he was here / he said / *this is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture / why there is no Tibetan school* //

<sup>2</sup> All interviews presented in this paper were conducted in a local variety of Mandarin Chinese.

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*why all those signs on the street are written in Chinese / Panchen was very angry / and he said that there must be a Tibetan school / and just like this the school was slowly established*

In the course of an interview focused on the origins of STS, Jing's question follows up on a previous comment by Kelsang in which the Tenth Panchen Lama's visit is brought up for the first time. Thus, and in response to Jing's clarification question, Kelsang introduces a story-like frame ("it is like this"). In this story, STS's foundation is portrayed as resulting from the complaints of Tenth Panchen Lama. Although he was a member of the Chinese National People's Congress and based in Beijing, the religious leader is described as a living Buddha who was fully committed to the Tibetan regions of China and wanted to return to Tibetan lands in order to ensure that the promises made by the central government to develop the Tibetan autonomous prefectures after the Cultural Revolution were being carried out. Thus, the central government's neglect is conveyed by Kelsang through animating (Goffman 1981) the Tenth Panchen Lama's words ("*this is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture / why there is no Tibetan school // why all those signs on the street are written in Chinese*") which are then explicitly framed as the origin of STS ("and just like this the school was slowly established").

The emplacement of STS at the core of the institutionalization of Tibetan in Snowland was not only performed by STS teachers in the course of research interviews; it also emerged in institutional documents that recounted the school's historical development. Such documents reported on, for example, how the Tenth Panchen Lama's concern about the lack of a school dedicated to the teaching of Tibetan in a state-designated Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture led to further local institutional support for the Tibetan language that, ultimately, would be finally backed by a local governmental decree passed in 1989 by

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the prefectural government which required schools with minority students constituting the majority of the population to provide bilingual education.

In this context, STS was established and Tibetan was introduced as an academic subject, meaning that it would be tested along with other subjects in both high school and college entrance examinations. At the time of the fieldwork, there were 24 teachers in the Tibetan division, making it the third largest division in the school, following Chinese and English. Because of the provision of Tibetan language education, STS has always had a much higher percentage of Tibetan students than other secondary schools in Snowland. At the time of the study, for instance, around 50 percent of students in the junior secondary section, and 80 percent of students in the senior secondary section, were institutionally labelled as “Tibetan”. In addition, besides being the only school that provided Tibetan language education at the senior secondary level in Snowland, its junior secondary section has also enjoyed the reputation as the best among Tibetan language programs in junior secondary schools in the city, in terms of students’ examination performance.

It is precisely this combination of values attached to academic competition, on the one hand, and cultural distinctiveness, on the other, that have strongly shaped the institutional profile of STS as a “good school” since its origins. But this apparently well-defined profile emerging from foundational narratives and the school’s official documents proved difficult to be sustained in daily life, under the institutional conditions of the wider system that STS belongs to. Contradictions and dilemmas soon appeared in the ways in which the above-mentioned values were played out (and made sense of) by the school’s actors, in connection with key institutional categories upon which activity and social relations are regulated in the school context. These tensions along with their immediate and potential long-term

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consequences will be examined in the following three subsections, illuminating the structures of feeling involved in the implementation and interpretation of Tibetan language policies.

#### **4.1. Academic competition, and the “good Tibetan school”**

Hosting the only Tibetan language education program at the senior secondary level, in Snowland, provided STS with generous enrolment quotas from minzu universities, which are universities that mainly serve ethnic minority students<sup>3</sup>, and universities in the Tibetan regions of China. Although the school was not the best senior secondary institution in the region, in terms of academic performance in the college entrance examination, 96 percent of the STS students who graduated in 2016 were reported to be admitted into university. Thus, this institution was at the time of data collection ranked first in the university entrance ratio, making it highly attractive to parents and students in the area. However, these accomplishments in university enrolment co-existed with major tensions faced by STS teachers, in their attempts to accommodate the logic of Tibetan language education in Snowland to the demands of a nation-wide exam-oriented education system.

These difficulties of accommodation were concerned with the compartmentalization of the Tibetan program at three major levels, namely: curriculum, inter-school academic competitions, and weighting of scores in the Tibetan language for university admission. With regard to curriculum, the teaching of Tibetan did not follow the same standards as the

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<sup>3</sup> Minzu universities (民族大学) are universities in China that mainly target ethnic minority students through preferential admission policies. Besides providing courses that are commonly found in other universities, minzu universities are also specialized in ethnic studies.

rest of the academic subjects at STS: in contrast to these other subjects, which are expected to align with the centralized curriculum applicable to other public schools in China, the Tibetan program had to conform to the curriculum designed by The Leadership Group for the Coordination of Tibetan Education in Five Provinces and Regions (hereafter LGCTE)<sup>4</sup>. In relation to inter-school academic competitions, the Tibetan language education at STS was most of the times excluded from these events in Snowland, as Tibetan was only offered at a few of the junior secondary schools and at none of the senior secondary schools in the region. As for the weighting of scores, academic grades in Tibetan were only taken into consideration for students in university admission if they applied to some of the universities in Tibetan regions in China, or if they took their majors in Tibetan studies at any other universities in the country. Extract 2 shows the paradoxes that these conditions bring about when Kelsang and Geleg, another teacher of Tibetan at STS, collaboratively construct a joint stance towards the school's institutional arrangements and their impact on students' performance:

### **Extract 2. "Our school did not pay enough attention"**

(Interview with Geleg and Kelsang, two teachers of Tibetan at STS)

- 1 **Jing:** 你们说今年这届藏文成绩不是特别理想 /  
 2 (you mentioned that students' performance in Tibetan this year was not as  
 3 good as expected /)

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<sup>4</sup> The Leadership Group for the Coordination of Tibetan Education in Five Provinces and Regions (五省区藏族教育协作领导小组) is an organisation supervised by the Ministry of Education and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. The five provinces and regions include Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan, all of them have a large number of Tibetan population. This organisation is in charge of the coordination of Tibetan education in these regions, including teacher training, textbook compilation, policy research, and education reform. It has a central office located in the city of Xining (Qinghai).

- 4 **Geleg:** 对对对  
5 (yes yes yes)
- 6 **Jing:** 有些什么原因呢↑ / 跟以前比起来  
7 (what are some of the reasons↑ / compared to students' previous performance  
8 /)
- 9 **Geleg:** 这个是那个 // 我们学校 / 不怎么重视 / 因为不重视的原因是 / 他们要看  
10 其他分嘛跟其他学校比 / 其他成绩是考得好 / 这个是说实话的 / 今年我  
11 们 / 是最好的[一次 ] /  
12 (it is that / our school / did not pay enough attention / the reason for the lack  
13 of attention was that / they relied on students' score in other subjects to  
14 compete with other schools / they had very good performance in other subjects  
15 / this is the truth / this year we / had the best [result ])
- 16 **Kelsang:** [突破记录]  
17 ([ it broke previous record])
- 18 **Geleg:** 突破历史 / 然后那边抓得好藏文这边就落了嘛 /  
19 (it was a historic breakthrough / and as the school paid more attention to other  
20 subjects the score in Tibetan naturally got worse/
- 21 **Jing:** 你说不重视是哪些方面啊  
22 (what did you mean when you said that school did not pay enough attention
- 23 **Geleg:** 就是-考试啊--那个--  
24 (it is- examinations-- the--)
- 25 **Kelsang:** 课程啊 / 最主要是课程量 / 是不是 / 然后 / 班主任 / 藏文 / 藏文不怎么说  
26 嘛 / 就算考不好也不对学生进行批评教育 / 不让他从内心里面觉得藏文  
27 很重要 // 那你说学生 / 很大一部分学生就说 / 班主任都说不重要 / 那我  
28 就 / [是不是↑]  
29 (the course / mainly the course load / right / and / the head teachers / Tibetan /  
30 Tibetan was rarely emphasized / even when students did bad in Tibetan tests  
31 the teacher did not criticize students / they did not ask students to seriously  
32 consider Tibetan as important // then you can tell that students / most of the  
33 students will say / *since the head teacher said that it was not important / then*  
34 *I will* / [right↑ ])
- 35 **Geleg:** [特别是初]中生 / 不懂事嘛 / 班主任说好就好 / 说不好就不好 / 他不在  
36 意这些事情嘛 /  
37 ([especially for junior] secondary students / they are immature / it is good if  
38 the head teacher says it is good / and it is bad if the head teacher says it is bad  
39 / they do not care about these /)
- 40 **Kelsang:** 如果 / 一个学生从内心就是这样的话 / 老师我们藏文老师再怎么努力 / 都  
41 是没有用的 / 就是这个情况=  
42 (if / a student believes in this from the bottom of his or her heart / teacher  
43 regardless how much efforts we Tibetan teachers make / it is all useless / this  
44 is what happened=)
- 45 **Geleg:** =今年出现这个问题是比较好的 / 学校领导 / 一出这个藏文成绩他们也讨  
46 论过好几次 / 今年 / 开了好几次会 /

- 47 (=it is nice this happened this year / school officials / when the Tibetan scores  
 48 were announced they had several discussions / this year / they had several  
 49 meetings /)
- 50 **Kelsang:** 然后就说 / 我们的期中成绩里面藏文成绩也没有 / 然↑后学生就觉得 / 本  
 51 来是藏文考得好 / 但是他们不加 / 成绩单里面没有把藏文打出来嘛 / 他  
 52 们就觉得 / 我藏文学那么好有什么意思对不对=  
 53 (and / Tibetan scores were neither counted in the score report in our mid-term  
 54 examinations / and↑ students felt that / originally they got good results in  
 55 Tibetan exam / but these scores were not counted / the score report did not  
 56 include Tibetan score / students will think / *what is the purpose for me to work*  
 57 *hard in Tibetan right*=
- 58 **Jing:** =现在还是这样子 /  
 59 (=it still happens now /)
- 60 **Geleg:** 现在慢慢好一点 / 我们已经反映了 / 领导也重视起来 /  
 61 (it is slowly getting better / we have reported / and school officials are paying  
 62 more attention /)
- 63 **Kelsang:** 我们已经反映了 / 不然社会上也有人说 / 藏文中学没有把藏文重视起来  
 64 (we have reported this situation / otherwise people outside the school will say  
 65 / *the Tibetan school is not paying enough attention to Tibetan*

In Extract 2, Jing, Geleg and Kelsang work towards achieving a common understanding of the issues that, in Geleg and Kelsang's views, affect students' performance in Tibetan. As Jing drives Geleg and Kelsang's attention to a previous comment by Geleg in which the academic performance of students in Tibetan was presented as lower than expected (lines 1-5), the two teachers jointly build a portrayal in which their students' demotivation and unsatisfactory performance in high stake examinations is linked to an institutional logic that excludes the Tibetan subject from the inter-school academic competitions. This joint stance involves substantial discursive collaboration whereby Geleg and Kelsang expand on each other's contributions, in response to Jing's clarification questions, as they account for the lack of equity in terms of whose grades get to be counted in the school (lines 6-20), the demoralizing effect that this has on students, in terms of lack of investment in Tibetan language learning (lines 21-57), and their subsequent complaints to the school officials to

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change this policy (lines 58-65).

Most importantly, such a collaborative stance against the institutional arrangements at STS foregrounds an ongoing struggle over the social/moral definition of what counts as a “good Tibetan school”. On the one hand, this struggle reinforces the logic of academic competition that has been described elsewhere as a major driving force in the Chinese education system (see Dello-Iacovo 2009; Pérez-Milans 2013; Yu and Suen 2005). The unequal weighting of scores across subjects is officially rationalized at STS which prioritizes subjects that are included in local academic competition, which, according to the Tibetan teachers, sacrifices students’ motivation and grades in Tibetan.

On the other hand, Geleg and Kelsang’s joint discursive positioning of de-alignment with respect to the standard policies at STS is further strengthened by highlighting a Tibetan distinctiveness, an identity feature enacted through the end of the extract by means of another instance of animation through which Kelsang brings in the voice of the “people outside the school” (line 63). This Tibetan distinctiveness was indeed closely connected with academic competition at STS. Although the Tibetan language program was excluded from general inter-school competitions, it needed to compete with other Tibetan schools under the supervision of LGCTE. Thus, the Tibetan teachers believed that students’ unsatisfactory performance in examinations could harm not only the reputation of the Tibetan language program at STS, but also that of the school as a whole. It is precisely this Tibetan’ embeddedness in the discourse of academic competition that prompted the promotion of the so-called “Tibetan culture” in the school, and this is the target of our attention below.

## 4.2. Promotion of Tibetan culture, and “appropriate” forms of knowledge

Pressures for examination apart, the promotion of “Tibetan culture” became highly featured at STS, this coming with remarkable responsibility for the Tibetan language program in the school. In fact, this distinctive feature has in the last few years attracted important media coverage and funding opportunities for the school<sup>5</sup>. At the time of data collection, ethnic tourism already constituted a very influential economic industry in China (see Doorne, Ateljevic and Bai 2003; Hillman 2003; Mackerras 2013). This was also the case in Snowland where the promotion of Tibetan culture became a common trope in the strategic plans for the city’s socioeconomic development. This is illustrated in Extract 3, from the annual Government Work Report delivered by the governor of Snowland in the People’s Congress of Snowland in 2016, introducing the focus of government work in the following year.

### Extract 3. “The development of key industries”

(2016 Government Work Report)

着力培育重点产业，夯实经济增长基础。一是要大力发展旅游文化产业... 努力强化文化与旅游结合，依托我州丰富独特的藏族文化资源，包装打造文化精品工程，积极开发文化演艺项目和民族文化产品。

Focus on stimulating the development of key industries and consolidating the foundation for economic development. Firstly, (the prefecture) needs to strongly promote the development of tourism and culture industries ... to greatly strengthen the integration of culture and tourism. By drawing on the unique and rich Tibetan

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<sup>5</sup> Besides funding from local government, STS is also eligible for funding opportunities provided by local, provincial and national Ethnic Affairs Commissions, in the fields of infrastructure improvement, and teaching training. In addition, a series of scholarship for students have been established over the years, using donations from Tibetan entrepreneurs.

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cultural resources in our prefecture, (we will) package and construct excellent cultural projects, and actively develop cultural performance and ethnic cultural products (translation ours).

At STS, teachers generally agreed that the school benefited from this frame provided at a wider municipal level. For example, in 2010, amid local educational reform to merge county senior secondary schools with city ones, STS moved to a new campus that was the largest in space compared to other local secondary schools, this being considered by many as a governmental effort to acknowledge the symbolic importance of STS. This close association between Tibetan language education and the promotion of culture was indeed echoed in students' perception of their learning, as it emerged from the questionnaires conducted among a group of 45 students aged 17-19, in senior grade 3. When asked if they would like to continue studying Tibetan after high school, three quarters of the students responded affirmatively, detailing that they would like to continue learning Tibetan because it was their responsibility to promote Tibetan culture and language.

Despite the institutional support and individual enthusiasm, the promotion of Tibetan culture constituted another discursive space in which social actors negotiated tensions, in daily school activities, over what gets to count as appropriate forms of knowledge. These tensions are particularly evident in Extract 4 in which Lhakpa, the head teacher of the Tibetan language program, recounts his failed attempt to organize a cultural activity led by a prominent religious figure in China.

**Extract 4. “It was inappropriate for a monk to appear in the school”**

(Interview with Lhakpa, the head teacher of the Tibetan language program)

- 1 **Lhakpa:** 在那个世界上最出名的色达五明佛学院 / 里面有个 // 教授嘛 / 我们查他 /  
 2 很多大学里面演讲过 / 而且是国外国内 / 我们最出名的那些北大 / 还有  
 3 那个清华那些 / 我自己个人也有点关系 / 然后就 // 打电话 / 能不能来我  
 4 们这边 / 来讲座一下 / 我邀请他 / 他说 可以 // 完全可以 / 但是你必须  
 5 按照正规的那种 / 手续来嘛 / 然后全部办好以后 / 他抽出时间 / 来 // 讲座  
 6 / 然后我就写个报告 / 学校办公室通过了 / 然后 / 然后交到校长 / 校长那  
 7 边通过了 / 他说 // 非常好的一个事情 / 对 / 学生来讲的话 / 他们的民族文  
 8 化是什么样的 / 题目就是民族文化与科学之间的 / 交流 / 与科学之间的  
 9 共同点 / 不同点 / 题目就是这个 / 也没什么 / 佛教那些 / 然后这边也通过  
 10 了 / 然后交到州教育局 / 局长也是非常欣赏 // 也说完全支持 // 这个我也  
 11 放心了 / 可以了 / 然后 / 结果还要去州统战部那边签 //
- 12 (in the most famous Larung Gar Buddhist Academy / there is a // professor /  
 13 and we checked / he has given lectures in a lot of universities / abroad and  
 14 domestic / in some of our most famous universities such as Peking University  
 15 / and also universities like Tsinghua University / I also have some personal  
 16 connection with him / and / I made a phone call / asking whether he could  
 17 come here / and give a lecture / I invited him / and he said no problem /  
 18 absolutely no problem / but you must follow the official / protocol for this /  
 19 after everything was arranged / he would take time out / and come here / to  
 20 give a lecture / and I wrote a report / and the school office approved it / then /  
 21 it was further sent to the school principal / the school principal approved it / he  
 22 said // *it was a very good thing / for- / the students / what their ethnic culture*  
 23 *was like / the topic of the lecture was between ethnic culture and science / the*  
 24 *communication / the similarity with science / and difference / this was the*  
 25 *topic / nothing / related to Buddhism / and it was approved here / and we sent*  
 26 *it to the Education Bureau / the chief of the bureau was also very appreciative*  
 27 */ and he said that he was fully supportive / I also felt a sense of relief / I thought*  
 28 *it could work / then / as a result that the application needed to be sent to the*  
 29 *prefectural United Front Work Department<sup>6</sup> (UFWD) for approval //*
- 30 **Jing:** 就是说学校不管组织什么活动都↑要经过这种程序 / 还是说就是只有跟  
 31 [藏文 ]
- 32 (so all activities held in the school need↑ to go through similar procedure / or  
 33 only those related to [Tibetan])
- 34 **Lhakpa:** [藏藏文]藏文化 / 其他的没有 / 没有这样的 // 然后州统战部 / 开了个会议  
 35 / 非常重视这个事情 / 为什么呢↑ / 因为他是一个穿着袍子 / 是个和尚 //  
 36 所以就是 // 人数要限制 / 内容要定好 / 不能讲不健康 / 的东西了嘛 // 然后  
 37 10 多天吧 / 然后州统战部通过了 / 我认为可以办了 / 其实不是这样 / 必  
 38 须要通过省统战部 /

<sup>6</sup> The United Front Work Department (统战部) is an agency under the leadership of the central committee of China's Communist Party. Its main function is to coordinate the non-communist party groups, such as ethnic minorities, religious groups, intellectuals, commercial interest groups, and overseas Chinese, in support of the rule of the communist party

- 39 ([only Tibet Tibetan] and Tibetan culture / others not / not like this // and  
 40 prefectural United Front Work Department / had a meeting / they paid a lot of  
 41 attention / why was that ↑ / because he wore a robe / he was a monk / so / the  
 42 number of participants needed to be limited / the topic of the lecture needed to  
 43 be closely checked / he could not talk about anything / that was considered as  
 44 inappropriate / and more than ten days later / the prefectural United Front Work  
 45 Department approved it / I thought everything was settled / actually it was not  
 46 like this / the application must- be approved by the provincial United Front  
 47 Work Department /
- 48 **Jing:** 省↑统战部  
 49 (the provincial↑ United Front Work Department)
- 50 **Lhakpa:** 对 /  
 51 (yes /)
- 52 **Jing:** 这么复杂 /  
 53 (so complicated /)
- 54 **Lhakpa:** 州统战部交到省统战部 / 最后就没有批 / 不可以 /  
 55 (the prefectural United Front Work Department sent it to the provincial unit /  
 56 and in the end they did not approve it / it could not be organized /
- 57 **Jing:** 他们没有说什么具体的原因吗↑ /  
 58 (did they provide any justification for this↑ /)
- 59 **Lhakpa:** 原因就是那个一个和尚 / 学校里面不好 / 因为我们有 / 初中嘛 / 学生比较  
 60 小  
 61 (the reason was that a monk / it was inappropriate for a school / because we  
 62 have / junior secondary section / students are relatively young)

Lhakpa's description of the application procedure required for the organisation of a lecture featuring a prominent religious figure reveals the intricacies of the institutional layers involved in the process of arranging activities associated with "Tibetan culture", particularly when these are likely to be associated with Tibetan ethnonationalism. These institutional intricacies, however, are not reported by Lhakpa plainly and in one go. Rather, he does so by conveying his sense of frustration and enlisting Jing in the development of the account, towards an agreement on the characterization of the process as unnecessarily complex.

Lhakpa positions himself as navigating different interpersonal and bureaucratic levels (line 1-29). Starting with his personal connection with the religious leader, who is linked

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to a world-renowned Buddhist academy and gives lectures at prestigious higher education institutions in China (Peking University and Tsinghua University), Lhakpa depicts himself as working his way through a set of hierarchically-ordered stages that require official approval (i.e. the school office, the school principal, the chief of the Education Bureau, and the prefectural United Front Work Department). In doing so, he describes his journey through these levels by introducing the voice of most of these actors, which allows him to enact their support and qualify the proposal as beneficial to the students due to its scientific approach to ethnic culture. He also accompanies this description of the journey with emotionally charged statements that highlight his sense of relief when the first hurdles are overcome (e.g. when the Education Bureau gives the green light).

Most importantly, his management of stress and the tempo of the story as he works his way through the recount of unexpected levels of approval helps frame the process as uncertain, long and complex (“then / the result was that the application needed to be sent to the prefectural United Front Work Department (UFWD) for approval”; “but later I found out it was not like this / the application must- be approved by the provincial United Front Work Department”), this reading being ratified by Jing who follows Lhakpa with further questions on the extent to which all activities in the school require such a procedure (lines 30-31) as well as with an instance of explicit labelling of the described process as “so complicated” (line 52).

The extract ends with a final exchange in which the rejection and the official rationale for it become the centre of attention of Lhakpa and Jing (lines 57-62). Lhakpa highlights that the identity of the lecturer as a monk is at the core of the issue, which in his view makes it inappropriate in the eyes of the government. According to the Tibetan teachers at STS,

this is a highly sensitive topic for China's Communist Party authorities, given the historical struggles over political legitimacy in the Tibetan regions. As a result, these teachers reported, daily engagement with the promotion of Tibetan culture, in the form of specific activities, was not free from dilemmas. In the administrative building of STS, for instance, there was a floor dedicated to the Tibetan language teaching program, which included an office for the school-based Tibetan Culture Research Centre, a Tibetan library, and several display rooms for Tibetan culture and history. However, these rooms were all empty at the time of the fieldwork. Lhakpa explained that even though such spaces were designed right after the school moved to this new campus, the Tibetan division has experienced difficulties in obtaining funding for decorating the rooms and arranging displays for cultural events.

The contradictions documented so far, with regard to the combination of values of academic completion and cultural promotion were not only enacted by teachers and heads of departments in the context of research interviews; they were also negotiated and made sense of by students and teachers in the course of situated practices in the Tibetan classroom, at STS.

### **4.3. The Tibetan classroom**

STS provided five to seven Tibetan class sessions per week for each grade, similar to the time allocated for the Chinese and English subjects. Daily activities in the Tibetan classrooms also followed a similar pattern to those in other classrooms. The language of instruction in the Tibetan classrooms was a combination of Tibetan and Putonghua. Because of students' varied proficiency in spoken Tibetan, a majority of classroom

instruction and interaction in junior grade one and senior grade one was conducted in Putonghua. However, use of Tibetan often increased as students gained confidence with the language<sup>7</sup>.

During data collection, a typical Tibetan class comprised long periods of time devoted to students' choral recitation of alphabet, vocabulary and texts, in a pedagogical style that allowed teachers of Tibetan to drive their students' attention to the core aspects of the curriculum that would be tested in termly academic exams (see Table 1, for the recurrent sequential organisation of a typical Tibetan lesson in junior grade one). Indeed, this strategy was perceived as highly effective in the Tibetan classes as it allowed teachers to cope with the difficulty of teaching large groups of students with relatively low familiarity with Tibetan literacy.

**Table 1. Sequential organisation of a typical Tibetan lesson in junior grade one**

Phase	Educational activity	Sequence of coordinated actions
1	Choral reading	The students are expected to read the alphabets and vocabularies they have learned in previous lessons collectively once the class bell rings.
2	Choral reciting	The students are expected to recite the alphabets and vocabularies they have just read collectively.
3	Learning new alphabets	The teacher demonstrates how to write the alphabet stroke by stroke on the blackboard → the students are expected to practice on their exercise book while the teacher walks around to provide feedback to individual students → the teacher emphasizes on

<sup>7</sup> The first author was not a speaker of any variety of Tibetan, thus a majority of classroom observations were conducted in junior grade one, when Putonghua was the main language of instruction. As a result, a limitation of this study was that classroom dynamics in other grades could not be fully captured.

		avoiding common errors in writing the alphabet (this circle is repeated for each new alphabet)
4	Learning new vocabularies	The teacher reads each vocabulary once. The students are expected to follow the teacher and read each new vocabulary collectively three times → the teacher explains the vocabularies and the students take notes → the teacher elicits students' comprehension of the vocabularies → the students read each vocabulary collectively three times → the teacher corrects the students' pronunciation

But these interactional dynamics did not yet capture the distinctive nature of the Tibetan classes. Apart from this activity arrangement, which was expected to help students orient towards key curriculum knowledge, these classes did also devote time to stories on famous religious figures associated with Tibetan traditions. These instances were very often subject to ambivalence, since they were institutionally conceived of as linked to the promotion of Tibetan religion and, as such, likely to be associated with inappropriate forms of knowledge. Extract 5 provides a glimpse of these moments of classroom activity, and reveals the most recurrent meaning-making strategies that teachers and students drew from when dealing with this ambivalence.

#### Extract 5. “It is also mentioned in science”

(Classroom interaction in Kelsang's Tibetan class, in junior grade one)

- 1 **Kelsang:** 无肉不欢 / 你们是这样吗↑ // 一天三顿就要吃肉吗↑ //
- 2 (no meat no joy / do you feel this way↑ // do you eat meat all three meals in a
- 3 day↑ //)
- 4 {many students shout yes and no at the same time}
- 5 **Kelsang:** 为什么 / 我们说不杀生↑ / 科学里面也说的 / 为↑什么知道吗 /
- 6 (why / we talk about Ahimsa↑ / it is also mentioned in science / do you know

- 7 why↑ /)
- 8 **Some:** 不知道 //
- 9 (no //)
- 10 **Kelsang:** 大↑家想一想 / 你们 / 在逢年过节的时候家里面会杀猪杀鸡的是不是↑ / 尤  
11 其是杀猪的时候它会惨叫嘛 /
- 12 (you↑ guys think about it / you / our families will butcher pigs and chickens  
13 during the new year or holidays right / especially when a pig is butchered it  
14 will always scream /
- 15 **Students:** {齐声回答} 对 /
- 16 ({in unison} yes /)
- 17 **Kelsang:** 为什么它会惨叫↑ /
- 18 (why does it scream↑ /)
- 19 **Tashi:** 他要死了 /
- 20 (it is going to die /)
- 21 **Dakpa:** 他感受到了死亡的痛苦 /
- 22 (it feels the pain of death /)
- 23 **Kelsang:** 好-- / 它害怕 / 恐-惧 / 害怕 / 是不是↑ / 然后呢 / 他科学研究表明他说是 /  
24 动↑物在 // 在在被宰杀的过程当中 / 他会非常地害怕 / 他害怕然后就是 /  
25 他会激发释放很多的毒素 / 是不是 / 然后到血液肉里面去 / 然后人一旦 /  
26 食肉 / 就会中毒 / 明白了吗↑ / 明↑白了没有↑ /
- 27 (right- / it is scared / terri- fied / scared / right↑ / and / the scientific research  
28 demonstrates that / when an ani↑mal is / being butchered / it will get extremely  
29 scared / it is scared and / it will be stimulated and secrete poison / right / it will  
30 go into their own flesh and blood / and once humans / eat meat / they will get  
31 poisoned / do you understand↑ / do you under↑stand↑ /
- 32 **Students:** (( ))
- 33 **Kelsang:** 想一下 / 是不是↑ / 不要说是怎么 / 一根针戳在你身上你就觉得非常疼是  
34 不是 / 更何况是用 / 刀子砍 / 是不是↑ / 是这样吗 /
- 35 (think about it / right ↑ / it does not need to be / it will hurt a lot if your body  
36 is stuck with a needle is it correct / let alone be cut by a knife / right ↑ / is  
37 this so /
- 38 **Students:** {齐声回答} 是 /
- 39 ({in unison} yes /)
- 40 **Kelsang:** 你们家里面在杀猪的时候是不是↑ / 你你的感觉怎么样↑ / 你的感觉/  
41 (when your family butchers a pig right↑ / what do you you feel↑ / your feeling  
42 /)
- 43 **Some:** 很残忍 /
- 44 (it is cruel)
- 45 **Dekyi:** 很可怜 / 想快点结束 /
- 46 (it is pitiful / I want it to be over soon /)
- 47 **Kelsang:** 你看 / 他很好 / 想让猪快点死去 / 因为它太可怜了太难受了 /  
48 (look / he is very nice / he wants the pig to die soon / because it is so pitiful  
49 and it is suffering /)

- 50 **Tashi:** 老师 / 他说太好了可以吃猪肉了 /  
 51 (teacher / he said that it was wonderful because he could have some pork)  
 52 {Kelsang and students laugh}  
 53 **Kelsang:** 小心猪说我变成厉鬼也不放过你 //  
 54 (be careful as the pig will say *I will haunt you when I become a malicious*  
 55 *ghost* //)  
 56 {Kelsang and students laugh}  
 57 **Kelsang:** 好了好了 / 开个玩笑啊 / 现在看黑板  
 58 (ok ok / it is just a joke / now look at the blackboard)

In Extract 5, Kelsang is teaching one of the Tibetan alphabets that also has the meaning of “meat”. While students are practicing the writing of this alphabet on their practice books, Kelsang brings up the topic of Ahimsa, a Buddhist concept that refers to the act of refraining from hurting and killing any living beings. He does so by presenting it as a concept supported by scientific evidence, an action carried out through topicalisation of the scientific claim (line 5) followed up by an instructional sequence whereby Kelsang requests students to draw from their families’ daily experiences with butchering pigs and chickens, before explaining the process of the biological secretion of toxins and their negative effect on humans (lines 10-56).

In line with Kelsang’s emphasis on the importance of linking religion to science, as seen in Extract 4 further above, this instructional sequence may be seen as an effective pedagogical strategy for the teacher to engage students in the academic transmission of sensitive religious knowledge. Indeed, the course of the action suggests that Kelsang’s attempt to tone down these potentially sensitive moment of instruction is successful, as evidenced by the students’ light-hearted attitude toward the topic of Ahimsa. This is seen in the playful exchanges that emerge in the process of building a joint stance in favour of Ahimsa. After all participants align with the understanding of butchering as a cruel practice (lines 10-44), a position that is ratified by a subsequent exchange between Dekyi and

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Kelsang (lines 45-49), Tashi playfully reframes this position by pointing out that the real reason behind Dekyi's wish to speed up the butchering is that he is eager for the pork, this leading to laughter among the students and Kelsang (lines 50-52). In this regard, the ensuing laughter lightens up the seemingly serious discussion on Ahimsa, an ambivalent tone that is further reinforced by Kelsang's joke about "bad karma" that is once again followed by joint laughter (lines 53-58).

Further to this point, these interactional spaces illustrated that, although students considered the learning of Tibetan as a process of identity articulation when asked to reflect on it, as illustrated in our questionnaire findings, situated practices such as these shown in Extract 5 demonstrated both the students' and the teacher's flexible forms of positioning regarding sensitive religious concepts. The teaching and learning of Tibetan were indeed embedded in the here-and-now of situated academic practices, which involved a series of creative meaning-making that were shaped by broader social conceptualizations of culture and language as well as by the dynamic relationship between teacher and students in the classroom.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

We began this article by aligning ourselves with Williams' (1977) call to move away from the conceptualization of social experiences as finished products. Instead, he argued for more attention to the "forming and formative processes" of relationships, institutions and formations, investigating what he called "structures of feeling", instead of producing 'formed wholes' (128). Woolard's (1985) critical take on the perceived linguistic and

cultural hegemony follows a similar vein in highlighting the importance of shedding more light on the immediate human relations in the exploration of local forms of valuation.

Such arguments have important implications for the examination of language policy implementation in specific contexts, as they call for language policies to be approached as lived realities that are composed of ambiguities and contradictions. Our data, however, do more than merely pointing out the fragmentation of unified linguistic markets or hegemonic orders. Nor do we focus simply on lived experiences and situated practices of sense-making for the sake of privileging actors' practices. Our interest in looking into the interpersonal and institutional dynamics that we describe in the article lies in Williams' (1977) point that "the idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions... which... are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming" (133). This means that the implementation of language policy requires detailed substantiation, and particular attention should be paid to individuals' reflexive positioning toward conventional expectations and institutional norms, a process that also contributes to sustaining and reshaping these very expectations and norms.

Through applying these perspectives to our research site, a secondary school in southwestern China that provides Tibetan language education, our exploration of participants' daily actions and forms of positioning indeed reveals a process of institutionalization of policies whereby the emerging social or moral categories about actors, divisions and forms of knowledge at the school marginalize the Tibetan section within the school and also construct the Tibetan classes as pedagogical spaces with no room for Tibetan religious content. This echoes existing literature on minority language

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education in China that points to the predicament of minority language programs (Beckett and Postiglione 2012; Dwyer 2005; Wang 2016). However, the marginalization is not solely the result of political sensitivity over ethnonationalism. Our study also highlights the prevalence of the logic of academic competition in Chinese education system as a key factor that leads to the unequal weighting of academic subjects in schools. Such a competitive orientation is not a distinctive characteristic of today's education in China, but it has certainly featured in the last decades, in the context of widespread neoliberal reforms in the country that force schools to apply centralized policies and standardized practices of institutional evaluation within a deregulated economic/bureaucratic system in which flexibility and competition for scarce resources ensures an efficient implementation of the official guidelines at all levels – school management, teachers, and students (Pérez-Milans, 2013).

By closely following situated practices in the school, our study also reveals Tibetan teachers' reflexive positioning in their communicative activities, which are reshaping the logic of valuation of language and culture in the school and beyond. On the one hand, they challenge the hierarchical order of academic subjects in the school by enacting frustration, enlisting others and building joint situated stances against the existing logic in the school, which relies on the very competitive logic that drives the Chinese educational system (therefore reproducing it), resulting in school paying more attention to the Tibetan language program; on the other hand, they construct safe interactional spaces in daily classroom activities which allow teachers and students to deal with perceived sensitive Tibetan religious content through light-hearted and playful negotiation, at the same time highlighting the prominence of relevant content in the teaching and learning of Tibetan and

contributing to their high valuation. These instances that emerged in our data are far from being one-off spectacular local displays: instead, they play important roles in defining and contesting what constitutes appropriate knowledge and a good minority language school.

These very practices and emerging processes also reveal that local interactions are indeed linked to major institutional, economic and sociocultural discourses. Therefore, we hold that language policy research could be further enriched by researchers carefully acknowledging the lived realities of social actors, paying particular attention to their manipulation of communicative practices, i.e. the articulation of the “structures of feeling”. The full complexity of language policy-making and implementation could be better captured by closely exploring the ways through which local actors exert influence over policies and practices, highlighting the dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities involved in individuals’ engagement with language policies across contexts.

### **Appendix: Transcription conventions**

<b>Kelsang</b>	interview participant
<i>Italics</i>	reported speech
<u>Underlined</u>	loud talking
/	short pause (0.5 seconds)
//	long pause (0.5-1.5 seconds)
[ ]	turn overlapping with similarly marked turn

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---	prolongation of the immediately prior sound
↑	rising intonation
=	two utterances closely connected
{xxx}	researcher's comment
(xxx)	English translation of the interview
(( ))	Non-understandable fragment

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