



# Patriotic Education in China's Ethnic Minority Areas: A Case Study of Primary School Textbooks in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province

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**Abstract.** This article explores the implementation of patriotic education in China's ethnic minority regions, with a particular focus on primary school textbooks used in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province. Through detailed qualitative textual analyses, the research examines how current textbooks promote Tibetan students' loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), national solidarity, and integration into a broader national identity. The study identifies some key themes such as the existing patriotic education in China, national unity, cultural integration, and the dominance of Han narratives over minority cultures such as Tibetans. The study analyses the contradiction between state efforts to facilitate patriotic education and the preservation of local Tibetan cultural identity. Eventually, this article shows that while patriotic education aims to develop national cohesion and loyalty, it may inadvertently marginalise minority cultures, encourage cultural assimilation, and raise serious questions about the long-term implications for China's ethnic identity and cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** Education; Patriotic Education; Ethnic Minority

## 1 Introduction

Implementation of patriotic education on a region-wide basis has always been an important part of China's strategy to promote national stability and ethnic solidarity [1, 2]. The Chinese government has long fostered a strong sense of national identity and loyalty to the state among citizens across ethnic regions, usually through the perspective of education. In regions with a high degree of autonomy of national identity and cultural traditions, such as Tibet, the Chinese government has confronted the dual challenge of fostering a cohesive national identity while balancing the need to consider cultural identity sentiments that may not be fully aligned with the dominant culture of the country [3]. Consequently, the confluence of patriotic education and minority culture education is particularly evident in Tibetan areas.

This article explores how China delivers patriotic education in Tibetan areas by analysing the content of primary school textbooks used in the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous

Region in Qinghai Province. Furthermore, by critically examining the narratives, themes, and cultural representations in these textbooks, this study aims to capture the ways in which patriotic values are communicated to Tibetan students, as well as their broader implications for ethnic relations and national integration in China.

## 2 Literature Review

Patriotism is a multifaceted concept that embodies deep loyalty, love and devotion to one's country. In terms of emotional and instrumental attachment dimensions, patriotism often involves a strong identification with and support for the country's values, culture, history and political system [4]. In China, as Fairbrother (2004) notes, patriotism is explicitly pointed out as shaping citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards historical knowledge of the society, the nation and the state through education [5]. The main aims are to foster a strong sense of national identity and solidarity, as well as to promote citizens' loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their country.

The intense development of patriotic education began in the 1980s when the masses had a crisis of faith in the state, which, as Chen (1995) argues, indirectly led to the Tiananmen Incident [6]. Furthermore, with the collapse of communist ideology itself internationally, the three major crises of faith - those in socialism, Marxism and the Communist Party - became more evident [7]. The outbreak of the Tiananmen Incident made the CCP leaders realise the urgency of consolidating the national ideology as well as responding to threats to national unity. With the release of the "Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education" in 1994, the patriotic education programme was formally incorporated into the education system. The document clearly stated that the main goals of patriotic education were to enhance national pride and national unity and to build up citizens' patriotic fervour so that they could commit themselves to establishing the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics [8]. The policy penetrated all areas, especially schools, to ensure comprehensive coverage. The patriotic education policy has always been closely related to the political context, with its aim of increasing the sense of identity and cohesion of people towards the nation through education.

China is a multi-ethnic country comprising 56 ethnic groups, each with a distinctive culture, with the Han as the dominant ethnic group [9]. Patriotic education is implemented with the purpose of national stability and unity; therefore, it is essential that all ethnic groups identify with China's plurality and unity. From the beginning of its formulation, the education policy for ethnic minorities was different from that of the Han. While the Han people are educated to provide skilled personnel for economic development, ethnic minority education is designed to cultivate students' loyalty to China, thus ensuring the stability of the country, especially in the border areas [10].

Learning the official language is an important part of patriotic education in China's ethnic minority areas. There have been nearly 300 distinct national languages in different ethnic groups and regions of China [11]. Giles and others (cited by Gao and Ren, 2019) identified that language can strongly represent the uniqueness of a nation [12], therefore a unified language can serve as a symbol of national identity and cultural

cohesion. Despite the fact that bilingual teaching in ethnic minority areas and the guarantee of the freedom to use their own languages are included as part of the constitution, the language of instruction in ethnic minority areas has gradually become the official language, Mandarin, over the past few decades [13, 14].

Leibold and Dorjee (2024) note that this shift reflects a push towards the importance and dominance of Mandarin which represents the Han language [15]. This is illustrated by the fact that the importance of the Gaokao as the main criterion for Chinese students to progress to higher education is still dominant [16]. However, the official language used in the Gaokao is Mandarin; consequently, if ethnic minority students want to enter higher education, they have to embrace the dominant standardised knowledge rather than their own traditional culture. Overall, for ethnic minority students, patriotic education is a Han-centred process indoctrinating a love for the nation, which to some extent forces students to integrate into the dominant Han culture.

### 3 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research methodology with a focus on textual research methods to investigate patriotic education in primary school textbooks in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. It aims to observe and analyse how the policy of patriotic education is implemented and how it affects the patriotic values of local ethnic minority students in the Tibetan area in China through Tibetan language textbooks and teaching materials.

The study will focus on an examination of the textbooks of the Tibetan language curriculum used by primary school students in the region. Data collection consisted of collecting these textbooks from various local schools in the area and reviewing educational policy documents related to patriotism education in local ethnic minority areas. In Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, the six-year primary school has a total of 12 Tibetan language curriculum textbooks currently distributed by the People's Education Publishing House, and students study two of these per year. In addition, to facilitate cross-referencing of translations and a deeper understanding of the content of the Tibetan language, the study simultaneously examined 12 Chinese-language curricula.

The core method of the research is textual analysis, which involves a detailed examination of the content, language, themes and narratives in the textbooks to identify and explain the pedagogical content of patriotism education embedded in ethnic minority areas. A thematic analysis framework was used in this research to categorise and interpret the data, focusing on the themes of national unity, cultural integration, loyalty to the state and representation of Tibetan culture. By comparing textbook content with policy documents, triangulation was used to ensure reliability and validity. However, this research approach may not be applicable to other ethnic minority regions in China, where future research could expand the scope to include multiple regions for comparative analyses.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 State Ideology in Textbooks

As Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) argued, the textbook, as an official instrument for transmitting a certain ideology and legitimising the established historical and social order, is an essential part of the construction and reproduction of the dominant narratives of the state [17]. In this process, by incorporating these stories into textbooks, the state ensures that students not only learn about history but also develop a sense of national pride, solidarity and loyalty to the CCP. This ideology permeates their daily lives through official textbooks, thus students become participants in the future of an ideologically coherent nation. The articles in the 12 textbook curriculum are set up in two categories. The first is non-political in nature and aims to cultivate various qualities in students, including scientific truths, stories of Tibetan and Chinese culture, and plain prose. The other category is stories with an emphasis on state ideology that are deeply rooted in the principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The narratives of the second category of textbook stories are carefully designed to emphasise the importance of loyalty to the state, the CCP and political leaders, with the aim of fostering students' national pride and sense of belonging. This is achieved by describing historical events, national symbols and the importance of the CCP in the development of the country.

Such stories feature prominently in textbooks; for example, the first semester of Year 6 textbooks includes a unit theme on revisiting the historical era of the communist revolution, with a strong emphasis on historical narratives related to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the Chinese Communist Revolution. This includes the study of Mao Zedong's poetry and his ideology, the history of the Anti-Japanese War, descriptions of the founding of the People's Republic of China and biographies of Communist Party heroes. One of the powerful stories that conveys the ideology of the state is *The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain*. Set during the Second Sino-Japanese War, this story follows five Chinese soldiers who chose to sacrifice their lives rather than surrender in the face of an overwhelming Japanese army. The final lines of the story are full of emotional and ideological significance:

*With their arms and chests held aloft, the soldiers jumped down from the cliffs immediately after their bandmates. Their valiant and majestic cries rang out over Langya Mountain: 'Defeat Japanese imperialism!' 'Long live the Communist Party of China!' This is the strong and unyielding voice of the heroic Chinese people! This voice shakes the world, magnificent and majestic!* (Sixth Grade Chinese Curriculum Textbook, Book 1)

'Defeat Japanese imperialism!' and 'Long live the Communist Party of China!' chants are particularly important. These slogans connect the historical narrative to national humiliation and heroism. In conjunction with a later article on the story of the National Founding Ceremony, the concepts of national humiliation and the winner's narrative serve as cornerstones of Chinese patriotism education, alerting students to the past persecution of the country and its heroes by foreign powers and the importance of

national unity in overcoming these defeats [8]. Therefore, the story is not only a historical narrative but also a vehicle for promoting patriotic education, including heroism, the spirit of sacrifice and steadfast loyalty to the state and the CCP.

## 4.2 Mainstream Culture Vs Marginalised Culture

In the first category of textbooks, stories that develop characters and qualities in students, this paper found a high percentage of Chinese culture in the curriculum, which is reflected in the large amount of Chinese literature and cultural content included. When comparing the current Tibetan textbook with the Chinese textbook for the same grade, it is evident that 90% of the texts in each book originate from the Chinese textbook originally written in Mandarin for the same grade; thus culture, history and customs related to the Han Chinese people will be taught as a priority. For example, classical Han Chinese poetry, prose about culturally significant customs of the South China region and signature Han Chinese art forms such as Peking Opera are highlighted and treated as academic priorities that students need to learn and internalise.

However, since the content of current Tibetan language textbooks reflects exclusively Chinese culture, for Tibetan children, the content of such instructional materials is intrinsically divorced from their own Tibetan cultural context. For example, the textbooks describe many stories and traditions of Chinese culture that are unfamiliar to Tibetan students. An example of this is ‘Laba Porridge’, a short prose story describing the celebration of the Laba Festival in the southern Han Chinese region. The story emphasises traditional Han Chinese ingredients such as millet, dates and chestnuts. The writing subjectively stresses students’ familiarity with the Laba Festival:

*When talking about Laba porridge, who doesn’t feel a sweet and cloying sensation in the mouth right away? Combine millet, rice beans, dates, chestnuts, sugar, and peanut kernels, and mush them into a pot... (Sixth Grade Chinese Curriculum Textbook, Book 2)*

For Tibetan students, such a story may evoke a sense of strangeness, as the ingredients, customs and even the festival itself are not part of their cultural experience. This would make it difficult for them to identify with such content on a cultural or emotional level. The inclusion of these materials in the Tibetan language curriculum helps to reinforce the cultural dominance of Han traditions and subtly encourages Tibetan students to see these Han practices as central to their Chinese identity. Similarly, the textbook adopts and translates ‘Spring Festival in Beijing,’ an article describing the tradition of celebrating the Han Chinese New Year among the people of northern China, into the Tibetan language class, which differs significantly from the New Year celebrations of Tibetan students in terms of customs, timing, and cultural significance. In addition, the requirement for students to recite classical Han Chinese poems such as *The Star of the Weaving Maiden* further emphasises the curriculum’s focus on Han Chinese culture, which is usually not relevant to Tibetan students’ cultural experiences or linguistic background.

In contrast to the extensive coverage of Chinese culture, there is a distinct lack of representation of Tibetan culture in textbooks. Even when Tibetan culture is covered, it is frequently presented in a simplified manner as stories of myth or folklore, lacking

depth or context and enabling students to fully understand their cultural significance. For example, 'The Bird of God' and 'The Story of King Gesar' are included in the curriculum as traditional folktales but only as supplementary material and are rarely given the same attention or analysed as Chinese cultural content.

### 4.3 Depiction of History

It can also be found that there is a remarkable piece of storytelling from an unorthodox history called 'Princess Wencheng's Entry into Tibet', which praises the love story between the Tang princess and Songtsen Gampo, the king of Tibet, and ends by stating that:

*From that time onwards, Tibet and the mainland came closer together! It was from that time when Tibet had the five grains and the common people were taught to learn farming and other skills by Princess Wencheng* (Fourth Grade Tibetan Language Curriculum Textbook, Book 2)

As Borchigud (1994) argued, searching for the historical origins of ethnic minorities and Han Chinese is an important part of the work of the CCP, and ethnic integration and unification have always been an important development trend in China [18]. However, the writers of the textbook did not study the history of the various Tibetan regions in depth, for example, Songtsen Gampo was the head of Tibet rather than Qinghai. The superficial writing of Tibetan culture in the textbooks reflects the trend of cultural assimilation, whereby the unique identity of ethnic minorities is increasingly masked by the dominant Han culture, which may lead to a sense of cultural dislocation among Tibetan students. It also results in a gradual weakening of their cultural identity due to the fact that they are taught to view their own culture and even the wrong history through the lens of the mainstream Han Chinese narrative.

Although China's current patriotic education approach in the 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development is aimed at integrating minority cultures into a unified cultural identity framework dominated by Han culture. However, the impact of educational decisions, including the production of curricula and textbook materials, may sometimes extend considerably beyond the original purpose of endeavouring to improve students' linguistic competence. These decisions involve the allocation of linguistic resources and the value ascribed to different linguistic forms and practices are closely linked to dominant ideologies and national politics; therefore, they have a significant impact on the life chances of individuals as well as on the construction of social categories and power relations [19].

As a result, brief translations of Chinese-centred curricula into Tibetan-language materials often mean that the original cultural and linguistic context may be lost. Not only does content that was originally intended to reflect Chinese cultural norms and values not necessarily resonate with Tibetan students but it may also lead to a distancing and disconnection between the curriculum and students' life experiences and cultural backgrounds.

## 5 Conclusion

This study explores one of the perspectives on the provision of patriotic education in Tibetan areas in China by analysing primary school textbooks used in the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Region. The findings illustrate that these textbooks are designed to strongly promote the meaning and importance of national solidarity and loyalty to the Chinese state, often at the expense of local Tibetan culture and identity. This reflects a broader trend in Chinese patriotic education policy whereby the emphasis on national solidarity and unity sometimes takes precedence over the necessity of respecting and preserving the cultural distinctiveness of ethnic minorities.

However, when interpreting the findings of this article, one main limitation should be noted: this study mainly relies on secondary sources and does not involve the collection and analysis of primary data such as interviews or direct observation. Therefore, this study may not adequately capture the Tibetan students' and local educators' real-life educational sentiments and life experiences. Future research should seek to address this gap by conducting fieldwork in Tibetan schools, for example, through direct interviews with students and teachers, which may allow for a more detailed understanding of the practical impact of patriotic education in these areas.

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