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Alienation of Tibetan Adolescents in Rural Boarding Schools

Abstract Adolescent alienation is a symptom of problems in relations among the individual, school, community, and family. Based on a research conducted with a sample of 897 Tibetan adolescent students in Grades 7 to 12, this study reveals that over one third of subjects experience high levels of alienation. Questionnaire data and field work show possible sources of this alienation in contemporary rural Tibetan society in China, factors that may reduce alienation, and explanations for low levels of alienation among some students. The paper concludes with an argument for researchers and policy makers to pay greater attention to the issue of alienation among minority boarding school students.

Keywords alienation, boarding school, parental mobility, social change, Tibetan adolescents

Introduction

Tibetan society is being transformed under the twin influences of modernization and globalization. School, community, and family, the main arenas of adolescent life, are undergoing fragmentation due to rapid social and economic change. Alienation, as a weakened form of the relationship between the individual and his or her environment, has made an impact on Tibetan adolescents and is increasingly becoming a serious problem for students, families, communities, and boarding schools.

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Literature

Alienation is an ambiguous term that defines a form of relationship between the individual and his or her environment. According to Brown, Higgins, and Paulsen (2003), adolescent alienation “signifies a separation or distance among two or more entities and involves a sense of anguish or loss, resulting in a student viewing life and school as fragmentary and incomplete” (p. 4). Adolescent alienation describes a teenager’s inability to connect meaningfully with other people. At the heart of alienation are powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation/estrangement (Dean, 1961). Alienation has a dramatic impact on levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-direction. High level alienation among adolescents has been found to be associated with alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, behavioral problems, and sexual promiscuity (Calabrese, 1987b).

Alienation reflects a passive relation between an adolescent and his or her environment. Many researchers found that adolescent alienation is caused by parents, schools, and association with alienated peers (Calabrese, 1987b). School factors that have been linked with increased student alienation include student vs. school culture, staff control, school size, curriculum relevancy, student-teacher relations, student relations, value placed on schoolwork, teacher expectation, social acceptance, and student autonomy (Brown et al., 2003). Negative behavior of students with a high level of alienation comes in many forms: some disrupt class, verbally abuse other students or teachers, or fight to resolve problems. Others sit in class quietly but do not focus on their lessons, and when it gets to be too much, some temporarily drop out; others leave forever. Family factors related to adolescent alienation include parental divorce rates, separation from parents, low level care, or excessive parental concern with their economic situation (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Family mobility (Calabrese, 1989) can also result in alienation. The peer group is an important subculture for teenagers, influencing everything from their behavior, to their dress and attitudes. Whether or not an adolescent is accepted by their peer group may even affect the relationship between the adolescent and his or her family or school (Calabrese, 1987a). Parental mobility leaves many adolescents feeling powerless and isolated as they travel from school to school in search of continual peer acceptance (Calabrese, 1989). Besides family, school and peers, school bureaucracy (Anderson, 1973),

personal modernity (Armer & Schnaiberg, 1975), and economic exploitation (Calabrese, 1987b) have also been found to be causes of alienation.

For adolescents in boarding school, environmental factors have become more complicated. Besides the above causes, policies regarding boarding schools have in the past led to adolescent alienation. In the 1970s, when girls were first sent to boys' boarding schools in the UK, thus beginning mixed boarding schools, the girls initially suffered dramatic alienation, sometimes affecting their self-esteem for their whole life (Schaverien, 2004). In American boarding schools tasked with assimilating Native Americans, students were instructed in the industrial and domestic skills appropriate to European American culture by putting down indigenous culture. For many Native American children, this cultural assault led to alienation, homesickness, and resentment (Davis, 2001). Native American boarding schools also existed in Australia and Canada in the last century. Since boarding schools cut off transmission of nationalities' language and culture, leading to significant levels of alienation, mental health problems and even psychological trauma that lasted for several generations, both countries had to apologize for their boarding school history.

Boarding school has been one of the main school models in Tibetan areas of China since the 1950s (Lhundrup, 2012). It was argued that this model was necessary because it rationalized costs and concentrated resources, and was suitable for scarcely populated areas like nomadic Tibet (Zhu, 1988; Liu, 1995; Lhundrup, 2012). Thus, children have been sent to boarding schools because their hometowns and villages do not offer adequate educational opportunities. Research on Tibetan boarding schools mainly focuses on the influence of state schooling on Tibetan students' ethnic identity (Zhu, 2007), contradictions and mismatches between state policies and implementation (Wang & Zhou, 2003), the Tibetanisation process in Tibetan schools (Zenz, 2010), and identity construction (Qian, 2007), especially in dislocated boarding schools (*xizang neidi ban*; Postiglione, 2009; Postiglione & Jiao, 2009; Zhu & Deng, 2015). Studies on Tibetan adolescent alienation at boarding school are quite rare.

Background Introduction

In this study, the two schools investigated are located in Guide. Guide, known as Khrika in Tibetan, is one of counties of the Hainan Tibetan Autonomous

Prefecture located in the east of Qinghai province, an area of 3,504 km² with a population of 108,800. The main ethnic groups are Han, Tibetan, and Hui, among which Tibetans account for 37.8 % (Guide Government, 2016). Distributed among the villages in Guide are Tibetan inhabitants who live on farms, as well as those who live as nomads, and some who have a semi farming-semi nomadic lifestyle. With the new highway, Guide is now just 114 km from Qinghai's capital city Xining and 158 km from Chabcha, the prefectural center. Guide is an important county featuring in the economic strategy of the Qinghai government.

In 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched the Construction of Boarding Schools in Rural Areas project in order to eliminate village schools, and replace them with newly built and expanded boarding schools. The societal reason for this project is Chinese population mobility, which has resulted in many empty villages in rural China known as *kong chao* (empty nests), where only children and old people remain. Up until 2009, the number of elementary and secondary schools in Qinghai decreased from 3,887 to 2,496 (Lhundrup, 2012). In 2010, the number in Hainan prefecture dropped sharply from 372 to 66, and average school enrollment expanded from 205 to 1,200. As for Hainan prefecture, at the end of 2011 there were 38,000 students involved in this boarding school construction. Guide Minority Boarding School (GMBS) was one of the newly built schools in this project, merging 18 schools and combining another 44 schools. It is a nine-year educational establishment and comprises elementary and secondary levels of education. At the time of this research, the school had 198 full-time teachers and its student population was 2,749, comprised of 1,482 elementary students and 1,167 secondary students, reaching a peak of over 3,000 students. This made GMBS numerically the largest school in Qinghai.

Another school investigated is called Hainan Prefecture No. 2 Minority Senior High School and is a boarding school. In 2015, it had 2,100 enrolled students, and 230 full-time teachers. The schools are both located on the outskirts of Guide close to each other and all students enrolled in the two schools are Tibetan.

Method and Data

The questionnaire of Adolescent Students' Alienation Scale (ASAS) investigated a sample of 897 randomly selected adolescent students between Grades 7 and 12

at the two boarding schools. This study also conducted constructive interviews with 30 students and deep interviews with three teachers and schoolmasters at GMBS.

ASAS was compiled by Yang, Zhang, and Huang (2002). During questionnaire compilation, Jessor and Jessor Social Alienation Scale and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) were used alongside ASAS. The results show it has better reliability and validity. ASAS has been used in many studies on alienation among China adolescents (Qiu & An, 2012). ASAS comprises 52 Likert-type items. The response alternatives are “fully compliant,” “partly compliant,” “not sure,” “basically non-compliant,” and “fully non-compliant.” Social alienation, interpersonal alienation, and environmental alienation are the three dimensions of ASAS. Social alienation consists of four variables which are meaninglessness, self-alienation, oppressive alienation, and uncontrollable alienation. Interpersonal alienation comprises aloneness, relative alienation, and social isolation. Environmental alienation comprises natural alienation and life environmental alienation. In total, ASAS consists of nine variables.

Except for ASAS, the questionnaire also contained three basic questions on grade, origin, and parental mobility frequency.

The translation of ASAS involved three steps. Firstly, ASAS was translated into Tibetan and edited by a Tibetan linguist as well as a professor of education science. Then a pilot test was given to 25 Tibetan secondary school students. Finally the revised ASAS Tibetan version was published. Results from the pilot test showed that the scales and the items were clear and that adolescents faced no difficulties in understanding the text.

According to the data, Tibetan adolescent students' alienation scored an average of 2.78 (range 1 to 5, ≥ 3 means high level of alienation). Of nine variables, social isolation and life environmental alienation received scores of 3.27 and 3.31 respectively (see Table 1).

A total of 33.8 % of participants had an alienation score of over three, meaning more than one third of subjects showed high levels of alienation (see Table 2).

From Grade 7 to 12, 20.9 % to 44.3 % students experienced high levels of alienation. Apart from Grades 8 and 9, all other grades experienced high levels of alienation for more than 39 % of students (see Table 3).

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Nine Variables of Tibetan Adolescents' Alienation Among 897 Subjects

Nine Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Total
Meaninglessness	2.9448	.74941	897
Self-alienation	2.4917	.64741	897
Oppressive alienation	3.2704	.78698	897
Powerlessness	2.9537	.83256	897
Aloneness	2.5960	.70529	897
Relative alienation	2.2946	.89779	897
Social isolation	2.6050	.81424	897
Natural alienation	2.7052	.93257	897
Life environmental alienation	3.3098	.89249	897

Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviation of Nine Variables of Tibetan Adolescent Alienation (Overall Average ≥ 3)

Nine Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Total
Meaninglessness	3.5847	.55633	303
Self-alienation	2.8261	.62238	303
Oppressive alienation	3.6329	.64052	303
Powerlessness	3.1033	.74050	303
Aloneness	3.1291	.56444	303
Relative alienation	2.8628	.83589	303
Social isolation	3.8809	.61166	303
Natural alienation	3.3942	.74798	303
Life environmental alienation	3.7337	.76692	303

Table 3 Grade Student Proportions of High Levels of Alienation

Grade	Total	Alienation Overall Average ≥ 3	
		<i>N</i>	%
7	198	79	39.9 %
8	153	32	20.9 %
9	199	50	25.1 %
10	79	35	44.3 %
11	172	67	39.0 %
12	96	40	41.7 %

Tibetan inhabitants in Guide were distributed among nomadic, farming, and semi farming-semi nomadic villages. From the perspective of the family locus,

about one third of students in each locus were found to experience high levels of alienation (see Table 4).

Table 4 Family Locus of Tibetan Adolescents with High Levels of Alienation

Family Locus	Total	Alienation Overall Average ≥ 3	
		<i>N</i>	%
Nomadic villages	363	126	34.7 %
Farming villages	176	70	40 %
Half farming-half nomadic villages	315	88	28.0 %
County	43	19	44.2 %

Parental mobility means one or both parents work away from home long-term (more than a month at a time). From Table 5, it shows that the frequency of parental mobility has an effect on Tibetan adolescents’ levels of alienation.

Table 5 Frequency of Parental Mobility of Tibetan Adolescents with High Levels of Alienation

Frequency of Parental Mobility	Total	Alienation Overall Average ≥ 3	
		<i>N</i>	%
Never	232	73	31.5 %
Sometimes	127	44	34.6 %
Often	250	83	33.2 %
Usually	156	52	33.3 %
Always	132	51	38.6 %

Possible Sources of Tibetan Adolescents’ Levels of Alienation

Based on the data results and the author’s fieldwork, this section discusses possible sources of alienation in contemporary rural Tibetan society in China.

Weakened Connection between Adolescents and Family

Boarding School

GMBS set one parental visiting day every two weeks, cut back from the original once a week. Parents may pay their children a visit and provide clothes and food,

as well as help their children clean themselves and their dormitories. Not all parents are present on that day, and in most cases fewer than half can attend, because many are migrant workers living away from their hometowns. In consideration of the feelings of students whose parents cannot visit, the school decided to cut visiting times.

Previously I set every Sunday as parent-visiting-day, it would have good benefit for boarding students. But this also had some problems. Some parents had to come on visiting day because neighbors were going to visit. Even so, there were still more parents not visiting children on that day. Children with no family member visiting would feel sad and hopelessly watch other children and their parents with delicious food, which is really bad for these children's mind, so I since changed visiting day from every Sunday to once every two weeks. Actually another reason is parents' attention to visiting costs. Many parents from rural area spend 200 to 300 yuan in travel expenses and buying food for their children. If visiting is permitted every week, family members cannot afford to pay these expenses. At first some parents were against the change to the visiting schedule. They asked why they were not allowed to visit their children. Lately they themselves found this much better, and now nobody is against it. (Administrator 1, personal communication, December 3, 2013)

Besides visiting day, another way to distance family members from students exists at GMBS. On campus, students are prohibited from using cellphones. The class teacher keeps his/her students' cellphones from one holiday period to the next. From the statement of the school, prohibiting cellphone use on campus is to prevent students from playing mobile games.

Public telephones beside the school gate are the only way for students to contact their parents regarding daily life at school, but there are very few users according to the author's observation. Most of them only phone their parents when they are sick or need living necessities. Less contact with parents becomes one of the main factors for Tibetan adolescents' alienation.

It is generally recognized by teachers that Tibetan parents rarely ask about their children's studies or boarding life. The fact is there is no space and opportunity for parents to participate in school teaching, administration, and policy decisions. GMBS allows parents to visit students once every two weeks, and at parents' meeting of each semester, the dormitory, dining hall, and

classrooms are all open for parents to visit as a supervisory act of parents. This single and passive relation between family and school influences Tibetan adolescents' alienation.

Parental Mobility

Since the unified purchasing policy for agricultural products ended in 1985, population mobility began in Chinese rural areas, freeing peasants from toiling in the fields (Xie & Jiang, 2011). Substantial population mobility began however after Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992 and the subsequent rapid economic growth period in China. For Qinghai province, large scale population mobility started with China's western development policy in 2001. Modern city and county construction attracted rural Tibetans who had been left to tend fields and livestock for generations to opportunities such as paving roads and constructing buildings as migrant workers. According to the Sixth Chinese National Census, the Qinghai transient population reached 993,000 in 2010 with almost no county unaffected by population mobility (Li & Wang, 2012). Tibetan migrant workers mostly came from multi-ethnic agricultural areas where social change spread rapidly and widely. Most Tibetan farmers become urban construction workers especially in Xining and other counties in Qinghai because of the shorter distances, lower risks, and lower costs. Some ventured further into other provinces of China.

When population mobility originally started, Tibetan men were the most mobile, and women were responsible for staying in the villages to care for their families. However, with the rocketing market price of the plant *cordyceps sinensis*,¹ female Tibetans could easily earn money by digging for it and with this, it became more common and accepted for women to leave home for migrant work. According to Winkler (2010), *cordyceps sinensis* accounts for up to 40 % of Tibetan region incomes and 70 %–90 % of a family's annual cash income in areas where it grows. Although there are no gender restrictions in digging for the plant, female diggers have tended to find it easier to work patiently and carefully through thick grass. Along with the soaring prices and its short lifecycle, Tibetan

¹ *Cordyceps sinensis*—*yarsa gunbu* in Tibetan and *dongchongxiacao* in Chinese, literally “summer grass winter insect”—is a prized fungus parasite of the Thitarodes (Hepialus) moth larvae that inhabits the alpine grasslands of the Tibetan plateau.

women stay close to their hometowns and families for generations, participating in the widespread mobility of this group. As for a Tibetan family, population mobility means absent parents. In the Qinghai Tibetan area, parental mobility is a common phenomenon for Tibetan adolescents throughout their compulsory education period.

As for Tibetan farmers and nomads in Guide county, most adult men and women leave their hometowns to go to far away Yushu to dig for *cordyceps sinensis* from May to July every year. Afterwards they tend to find odd jobs to make money until winter then go back to their hometowns, with some not going back until the eve of Spring Festival. Because mobility as a migrant worker can bring a better family income, to some extent parental mobility is advantageous for their children's education.

Now the parents... sometimes in the month's vacation, you go to the village and some parents ask you "when will be schools open? This time is 10 days too long so I can't go outside to make money. I have to keep looking after these children again." These parents give the responsibility, the care of children, to the school. While at school, as the teachers' main duty is education, most teachers pay more attention on teaching, and have no time and energy to care about students' other affairs. Attention to students' psychological development is not enough. (Teacher 2, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Every month GMBS students have eight to 10 days of vacation after 22 or 23 days of school. As a social micro-system, the family serves as an emotional harbor for the attention of the adolescents during their socialization. Comparatively for non-boarding students, going home every day can supply them an emotional buffer between family and school. While for boarding students, this kind of buffer was only possible several days a month, and more importantly when they go home they are likely to confront an empty house and village resulting from parental mobility. As a result, the family function of mediating, soothing, and releasing emotions is hardly implemented.

Before, when I went to school, we took food to school, ate lunch at school and went back home in the late afternoon. At that time, students seemed more pure. Nowadays students have nobody to talk to. Back then, if they were criticized by teachers, on going home,

students could talk with parents or grandparents, and their unhappiness and pressure would disappear, since the day after would be a new day. But now for boarding students, without having the family home as a place for releasing negativity, they keep it bottled up and go crazy over time. (Teacher 3, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Especially during summer and summer holidays, the village only has old people and children in it. Home without parents and villages without playmates cannot function as safe harbors for mediating children's emotions. Most students eagerly want to go back to school after the initial stage of the holidays, and their reason is that only at school do they have companionship.

Mobile parents, left-behind children and old people become the biggest players in rural Chinese life. Because population mobility is a reality that Chinese society is experiencing, modern Tibet also cannot escape from it in its current developmental path. In Guide county and other places inhabited by Han, Hui, and Tibetan people in Qinghai, this phenomenon has been sustained over the long term and is extending to nomadic areas. Even if primary schools and teaching points (*jiaoxue dian*) in the village are brought back, enabling students to go to school near home, parental mobility will still not be reduced. Mobility is a common fact motivated by economic profit and a typical feature of social change. This common social status ensures that children seeing parents doing migrant work is a near certainty.

Parental mobility influences the stability of the structure of the traditional family, increases divorce rates. More importantly, family education can not play a normal role in adolescents' development. Mobility, just like a voiceless river, gradually erodes the traditional family function, therefore impacts the psychological development and socialization of Tibetan adolescents.

Disconnect between Education Experience and Community

Owing to population mobility, the geographic limits on Tibetan traditional tribal organization and village organization have decomposed and fragmented.

The tradition of staying-in-the-homeland has been corroded gradually by the mobility of people who used to adhere to their farmland for generations, and

leaving the homeland has become a trend that is now common. Because people choose to work outside instead of in farming, the land soon stops being cultivated. When some people start living in the area where they work, the traditional village home quickly becomes dilapidated. Most adults work outside from the end of one festival to the beginning of the next. Especially in summer, there are only children and old men in the village. Traditional local community reappears briefly only around the Spring Festival. Spring Festival becomes a brief holiday in which the energy of the village reappears. The change of community, especially mode of production and lifestyle, transforms the traditional relationship structure so that adolescents' social relations face transiency, discontinuity and instability. This kind of decay of traditional community incurs identity formation problems during Tibetan children's critical self and group identity development period. As a result, alienation emerges when appeals for social relations from the community are not fulfilled.

Disconnect between Educational Experience and Tibetan Culture

The current courses installed in middle and primary schools in the Tibetan region are based on the "Teaching Plan for Full-Time Primary and Junior Secondary Compulsory Education" with the addition or removal of certain disciplines as circumstances require ment (Baden, 1997). All textbooks, except those for the Tibetan language, consist of national unified teaching materials. Tibetan language textbooks are mostly translated from Chinese language textbooks, with little content about Tibetan culture.

At GMBS, there is no single school-based curriculum that exists in students' class schedules. Most school-based topics are open for one semester and then closed again. The main reason given is that school-based curriculum is not included in the evaluation system and the state curriculum has to occupy almost all of the class time. Furthermore, schools and local educational authorities pay most attention to the hard topics or exam-related topics (*yingshi jiaoyu*) in order to get better scores for their students in the college entrance exams (*gaokao*) or senior high school entrance exams (*zhongkao*). A school-based curriculum is compelled to give way to the state curriculum and in this way Tibetan culture has little chance to enter the classroom curriculum.

Possible Factors that Mitigate against Alienation

The average score of Tibetan adolescent students' alienation is 2.78 in this study. Although 33.8 % have an alienation score of over 3, those with a low level of alienation (< 3) are still in the majority.

Family and peers are the two most important micro-systems during a child's development. In this study, owing to parental mobility, the family's emotional function is less significant and often compensated by peers. According to the questionnaire results, the general level of Tibetan adolescent students' alienation is not high (average score is 2.78). Peer replacement can be one explanation for this total. At boarding school, Tibetan adolescents can achieve peer support, and good peer relationships contribute to lower levels of alienation. Moreover, adolescents with high levels of alienation can be relieved of intensity anxiety and tension via peer interaction at boarding school. This study finds that peers play an important role in the school life of boarding students. Whether in the classroom, school buildings, playground, or dining hall, most students are with their peers or peer group.

At GMBS, there are many different students' associations, making campus life fruitful and interesting. For example, there are the Mother Language Association (*pha skad*) for practicing students' speaking skill, Tibetan Poem Association, group for comic Tibetan dialogue, etc. Students at school actively participate in these associations. Zenz (2010) found that since 2000, minority education in Qinghai Tibetan area has formed a bottom-up Tibetanisation process which differs from the past. Through utilizing Tibetan textbooks, cultivating Tibetan teachers, and speaking pure Tibetan, Tibetan schools enable the reconstruction of ethnic identity in the educational space. The Tibetan association of students at GMBS essentially constructs group identity and ethnic identity, which can to some extent relieve students' alienation.

As a result of parental mobility, most interviewed adolescents are brought up by an alternate generation and their sentimentality toward home projects onto grandparents. This study shows that culture is inherited by an alternate-generation in some Tibetan families with high frequency of parental mobility. Students' constructive interview details signify that daily religious rituals of the traditional Tibetan family such as offering clean water in the

morning, offering butter lamp in the evening and chanting are taught by grandparents. The role of grandparents in family education can ease and reduce Tibetan adolescents' sense of alienation: both social and environmental alienation.

Implications for Policy Practice of Reducing Alienation

There appears to be no clear-cut solution to adolescent alienation. Depending on the culture of the Tibetan boarding school and the students involved, the following are recommendations offered as suggestions for decreasing the feeling of Tibetan adolescent alienation. Firstly, more school activities and student associations should be developed to promote the effect of peer replacement for decreasing adolescent alienation. Secondly, schools should give more opportunity for students to participate in decision-making and teach them to understand the culture of their school's administration and instruction. Thirdly, active relations between family and school can effectively relieve feelings of adolescent alienation (Brown et al., 2003). As for mobile parent, new media can be used to increase contact between family and school, student and family. Instant message services such as QQ and WeChat can be used as communication spaces for parents to know about their children's recent news. Finally, schools should allow parents to participate in decision-making and activities. In addition, during parents' meeting day, schools should give lectures to parents about education to promote their educational consciousness.

Parents and school officials must recognize the impact of Tibetan adolescent alienation. It seems to be an obligation for parents to understand the turmoil that their mobility brings to the adolescent. School districts, school administrators, and educators can begin to design and implement strategies, plans, and programs to make school more attractive to students who are experiencing feelings of alienation.

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