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Tibetan Writing from the Socio-linguistic Margins of Tibet: Deaf Students, Tibetan Literacy and WeChat at the Lhasa Special School

Theresia Hofer

University of Bristol

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Abstract

Through the writings of Tashi and Yangzom, two young deaf Tibetans, and my narrative of our encounters during ethnographic fieldwork at the Lhasa Special School (LSS) in 2016-2017, this article explores their lives, the role of and their views on the Tibetan language. While their writings reproduce important state-endorsed categories for disabled people in China (Kohrman 2005) and of the state's 'civilizing project' of deaf Tibetans (Hofer and Sagli 2017), they also creatively challenge, critique and ultimately escape those terms and categories through their writings and through the creation of novel, meaningful social networks. Their use of written Tibetan in WeChat posts and their desires expressed therein for strengthening of Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans stand out; they are also in stark contrast to those of most other deaf Tibetans and the trend of literacy in the Tibetan language being increasingly considered "useless", even by educated, urban-based Tibetan parents under duress of coercive state structures (Leibold and Dorjee 2023). I examine and draw on anthropological, analytical concepts of 'margins' and 'marginality' (Das and Poole, 2004; Tsing, 1994) to make sense of this phenomenon and to look at the role of Tibetan language in moving in and out of various positions on the socio-linguistic margins of Tibet and China. By using written Tibetan and asking for support and the strengthening of literacy in written Tibetan for young deaf Tibetans, Tashi and Yangzom are able to join a wider Tibetan language-related activism (Robin 2014a, Roche 2021), can "practice hope" (Mattingly 2010) and experience meaningful senses of belonging beyond those envisioned and created by the Chinese state.

Keywords

Deaf Tibetans; margins and marginalization; Tibetan Sign Language (TSL); Special Education; Lhasa

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Beginnings

In February 2016 and during the first month of fieldwork that year, shortly before Losar (the Tibetan New Year), Yangzom showed me a much debated WeChat post on her phone at a festive dinner one evening. It was written and posted by Tashi, a student at the state-run Lhasa Special School (the LSS, or Miksel Lopdra, དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གྲྭ་), whom I would encounter there later that year.¹ Yangzom and I were at a foreign restaurant near the central Barkhor area of Lhasa and most of the conversations were taking place in signed languages. In TSL (Tibetan Sign Language), in CSL (Chinese Sign Language) and a combination of the two, known also as ‘neither-goat-nor-sheep sign language’ (*ramalug lakda*, ར་མ་ལུག་ལག་བརྒྱུད་). People were also using what they referred to as ‘spontaneous sign’ (*rangchung lakda*, རང་བྱུང་ལག་བརྒྱུད་), a gestural repertoire that developed and is used among deaf Tibetans and between some deaf and hearing Tibetans.² Two of us were hearing among the group of roughly 15 sitting around a large table; one a woman who used to work for an international NGO supporting the Tibet Deaf Association (TDA) and myself. The two of us used mainly TSL and ‘spontaneous sign’ and spoke English and Tibetan with each other, using Tibetan with two hard-of-hearing Tibetans. We celebrated the first steps in developing a TSL Dictionary App, a project led by the TDA and one I had been involved in with content development and filming. The dinner was also a wonderful chance for all of us to see each other before many spent time with their families during the long Losar holidays. Spirits were high and we stayed till the restaurant closed late at night.

While Yangzom showed me Tashi’s message on her phone, she explained that Tashi, although a current student at the LSS, had exceptional written Tibetan language skills. This message’s content turned out to be highly critical and politically-sensitive in a context in which minor comments can be considered very sensitive and all phones, social media and public spaces are carefully monitored and watched by the authorities.

I felt like holding my breath while reading it. Titled ‘Message and Questions to the Teachers of the Lhasa Special School’, I will refer to it as the *Message*. Already that evening it had been a topic of conversation, but I had struggled to follow the fast-paced discussion across the table, much of it in *ramalug* sign. The *Message* started out like this:

In truth it is a shame that this message should be written by someone like me who only knows very little about literary composition. But one cannot remain silent when one has a great love for one’s ethnic group (*mirik*, མི་རིགས།) and language (*kéyik*, མི་ཡིག།). I write this message after having attended this school for over one year. When I first arrived here and tried to connect with a classmate, I did not know any sign language, because I was a newcomer. I wrote a Tibetan message to ask for his name. He wrote back in Chinese: ‘I do not know Tibetan’. At that time, I thought he was Chinese and didn’t ask anything else.

To be honest, at that time, it was the first time for me to share a life with many disabled people (*wang kyön*, དབང་རྒྱུན།) like me, and I felt very happy about that. The reason is that we are all disabled people and it would be impossible to look down upon each other. However, after three weeks, all my joy and happiness vanished. That is because no disabled student knows written Tibetan (*bö yik*, བོད་ཡིག།).

Background to Research and Methods

Since 2007 I have been interested in, and anthropologically researching, the recently formalized Tibetan Sign Language, or TSL for short, locally known as ‘hand signs’ (*lakda*, ལག་བརྒྱུད།). I was interested in the role of the language in the creation of urban-based deaf worldings (Friedner 2015; 2019) and had a growing sense of deaf Tibetans keenly and increasingly turning to each

other using signed languages, rather than primarily aligning themselves and socializing with hearing members of their family and communities.³ Until 2016 I had worked closely with the TDA, the only organization supporting deaf Tibetans, through, for instance, providing spaces for deaf-deaf socializing in Lhasa as well as—often related—working to document and promote TSL.⁴

Lhasa's 'Special School' (LSS) was founded in the year 2000. In 2016 it had over 200 deaf resident students, almost all ethnically Tibetan. The 35 teachers were also almost exclusively of Tibetan ethnicity. The curriculum and textbooks were the same as in regular Lhasa schools, but the contents were taught much more slowly. LSS leadership had been consistently dedicated to Chinese-medium based education, with hearing teachers using written Chinese and sign-supported Chinese, a signing system in which one speaks and signs simultaneously, following the word order and grammar of spoken Chinese.⁵ There were four deaf instructors working at LSS, who all used CSL⁶ as the medium of instruction in the classroom. They were unable to comprehend what was said at staff meetings and hearing colleagues signed with them only occasionally and at a basic, insufficient level.

As an exception to the three kinds of Chinese mediums of instruction, in the daily Tibetan language classes rudimentary TSL, 'spontaneous sign', spoken Tibetan as well as the use of the TSL manual alphabet to spell out words were used (see Figure 2).⁷ In the past, between 2007 and 2014, TDA activists had been teaching TSL as a subject and in conjunction with Tibetan literacy in extra-curricular classes on weekends at the LSS, having even developed a whole TSL and TSL-cum-Tibetan language curriculum (Figure 1). They were heeding a Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Education Law from 2008 that stipulated TSL was to be taught to ethnically deaf Tibetans in Special Schools of the TAR and was a key policy within a CPC TAR Party Committee Opinion paper from 2010 (Hofer 2017: 134).

Once the first graduates from the LSS returned to Lhasa after their intermittent College years in inland China (relying mainly on Chinese and CSL there), they began to mingle with previously TSL-dominant signers in Lhasa (many active in the TDA). This saw the beginnings of CSL use among older deaf signers in Lhasa as the young graduates knew no TSL. In spoken Tibetan the resulting language practices became referred to as *ramalug lakda* 'neither-goat-nor-sheep sign language' and by deaf signers as 'goat-sheep-mixed-sign' and 'Chinese-Tibetan-mixed-sign'.⁸ I could observe shifts towards *ramalug lakda* close-up in everyday signed office chat, for instance, when in early 2016 the TDA, for the first time, employed two graduates from the LSS. The organization's previously TSL-dominant signers adjusted more and more and incorporated CSL signs into their repertoire, while the opposite transfer was less common (Hofer 2020). In addition, 'spontaneous sign', or *rangchung lakda*, also played a role to ease communication as a shared gestural repertoire useful for Tibetans who had otherwise different dominant sign languages.

Yangzom, I learned at our dinner, was from a village not far from Lhasa. She was Tibetan, 26 years old and since the age of 14 had been profoundly deaf, which she told me was due to the physical abuse of a drunken teacher at her school hostel. I read, later, in an account she wrote for a government volume lauding new educational developments (and therefore having to follow the party-line), that her hearing loss was due to an illness and her own *karma*. After becoming deaf she could no longer follow the teaching in her mainstream school and came to LSS, where she eventually graduated as one of the five top students in her year group, an achievement which earned her the chance to go and study in inland China.⁹ She first went to an inclusive high school and thereafter gained a college degree in landscape architecture from Nanjing Institute of Technology, where a handful of courses had CSL interpretation for deaf students. When we met she had already been offered a job as a teacher of

Chinese language at a recently established Special School in a prefectures outside of Lhasa, which is also part of the TAR Special School network now comprising 7 such establishments overall (Huaxia, 2023).¹⁰ Yangzom was dominant in CSL, but due to her experience of becoming deaf later in life, she also had excellent spoken and written Tibetan, something students who became deaf early on struggled with a lot. Because of a recent but close friendship with a TSL-dominant signer and her own interest and socio-economic background, Yangzom began to complement her CSL with TSL. The two of us therefore chatted in TSL, with me also using some spoken Tibetan alongside, which she could lip-read and understand well. She struck me as a very intelligent and curious young woman.

When I set out to translate the *Message* into English with the help of a friend the following day, the content of this message made me nervous given the ongoing political and Tibetan-language related sensitivities. Yet, I had also noted during the evening with Yangzom at the dinner and in line with previous observations, that deaf Tibetans could discuss in public spaces topics otherwise considered highly sensitive and avoided. This was for a range of reasons, the most obvious one being that nobody around them was able to follow their signed conversations (Hofer, 2017). The *Message*, however was written down and posted online, hence highly legible to state authorities, leaving a permanent trace on the Chinese cyberspace, on people's personal online accounts, and probably saved by the authorities even when deleted from people's personal mobile devices. The content, as well as tone and style, was so radically different from everything else I had seen posted thus far by Lhasa-based deaf and hearing friends.

Disability, Tibetan Margins and China's 'Civilizing Project'

This article explores the lives of Tashi and Yangzom on the margins of Tibetan society and specifically how they use and think about Tibetan language. I provide my own narrative of our encounters

during ethnographic fieldwork in Lhasa and at LSS in 2016-2017 and draw on and analyze the *Message* by Tashi as well as Yangzom's approving response to it, which she co-authored in Tibetan with another Tibetan and posted online not long after Tashi's original post. I will thereby engage readers with Tashi and Yangzom's own voices and creative use of written Tibetan in expressing their views, their emotions and hopes for a different future for deaf and disabled people in Tibet, and for Tibetans within China writ large, analyzing these through anthropological theories of 'margins' and 'marginality'.

While our understanding of the positions and lived realities of disabled people in Tibetan societies, past and present, is very limited,¹¹ written accounts and other creative expressions by disabled people in the region are particularly rare. This may be in part due to lack of educational opportunities and societal stigma, as well as no *namthar* (ལྗོན་མཁའ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་) or hagiography, and no *rangnam* (རྩོམ་མཁའ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་) or autobiography of a disabled Tibetan individual discovered so far. By giving voice to at least two young deaf people in Lhasa, who have themselves been able to write about their lives in 2016, even if in shorter formats and largely on WeChat, I aim to complement and counter the general bias in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies as well as among Tibetans themselves towards accounts on and by able-bodied, and most often highly-ranked, 'extra-ordinary' people in society. I also hope to inspire greater curiosity among colleagues, creating intersectional dialogue and understanding about how Tibetans in different marginalized positions experience and reflect a range of Chinese state interventions and socio-cultural discriminations, including through language and education policies and practices as well as disability-related categories and ideas. This article showcases the positions and stances of two deaf Tibetans¹² and their networks in the TAR, and their every-day negotiations and dynamics in the domain of Tibetan language and communication more broadly. It thus underlines core insights from deaf anthropology, on how different forms of

communication and signed languages, social practices and government policies impinge on deaf peoples' lives differently around the globe, how they evolve in particular places and moments in time and are shaped by the socio-political constructions and experiences of ethnicity, gender, and class (Friedner and Kusters, 2020).

This article draws on excellent work on China-wide disability policies and reforms. In particular, the work by Matthew Kohrman on the highly political processes through which the category of “disabled persons” (Ch. *can ji ren*, 残疾人) has been created in reform-era China of the 1980s and 1990s and under a largely medical model of disability, with the China Disabled People's Federation (CDPF) at the helm (Kohrman, 2005).¹³ In previous work, and together with Gry Sagli, I have shown how China-wide disability policies combined with ethnic minority policies in the TAR and in Inner Mongolia, and how they impacted on the doubly-minoritized populations of deaf Tibetans and deaf Mongolians (Hofer and Sagli 2017). To interpret findings from fieldwork and an extensive review of literature and policy documents, we used Harrell's theory of the state ‘civilizing project’ of ethnic minorities in China, which he defines as a means of codifying the relations of power between dominant groups at the ‘centre’ – largely the Han Chinese – and subjugated populations and those classified as minorities on the ‘margins’ (Harrell 1995: 3–36). Both language and education are important components in the ‘civilizing project’ (Hansen 1999, Postiglione 1999, Harrell 1995; 2001). We found that in daily life and in state-run Special Schools (which are separate institutions, mostly boarding schools, where disabled children are taught), the promotion of Chinese (via CSL or sign supported Chinese) was even more pronounced for deaf Tibetans than for hearing members of their ethnic groups. Among those who had gone through special education, their ‘civilizing’ by the state was more effective, leaving them virtually bereft of the written languages of their ethnic groups:

The peoples in the ethnic minority regions, whether hearing or deaf, have their lives and life opportunities shaped by the tension between powerful national policies aimed at unifying the nation and policies intended to preserve only carefully-selected aspects of minority cultures, languages and other so-called ‘ethnic characteristics’. Within the civilizing project the preservation of minority languages and cultures is not a goal in itself. It is perceived merely as a phase in development towards ultimate ‘civilization’. Government incentives in support of more, official *minzu* (ethnic) sign languages are therefore unlikely to be introduced. On the contrary, it is in full compliance with the ‘civilizing’ mission to expect the deaf to learn Chinese and CSL rather than minority (sign) languages. (Hofer and Sagli 2017: 19)

And yet Tashi's *Message*, as we read on, demands that deaf Tibetans learn Tibetan language and do so well. Moreover, Tashi's position receives the support of Yangzom, who goes even further by also addressing the common practice of code-switching (the ‘goat-sheep-mixed-sign’), the lack of professional development for deaf people, and the need for TSL and TSL fingerspelling for effective Tibetan literacy training. Significantly, they put their wishes and hopes out there on highly-surveilled Chinese social media, writing in Tibetan.

To analyze these writings and make sense of the highly complex socio-linguistic positions and experiences of Tashi and Yangzom on the margins of both Tibetan society and of the Chinese state, this article will engage with existing literature on the marginalization of Tibetan languages in China (Roche 2021, Leibold and Dorjee 2023) and Harrell's ‘civilizing project’ (1995). It also engages with anthropological literature on ‘margins’ and ‘marginality’, in line with the overall aim of the volume, such as with Das and Poole's landmark volume *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (2004). This

work's focus on the everyday life on the margins and the engagement with 'state practices' there helps diversify and nuance understandings of the nature and the role of 'states' on the lives on the margins. This approach can show what categories the

state enforces on disabled people, as found in the writings by Tashi and Yangzom, and what ideas the state promotes regarding the use of Tibetan languages in contemporary Tibet by disabled people and deaf people, and in turn what they themselves



Figure 1: TSL fingerspelling chart with Tibetan letters to the right hand side of the manual signs. Below the 30 consonants are the 4 vowels and signs for subscripts and punctuation found in the last row (TDPF and HI 2005: 100).

think about these state-led ideas. How, in particular, does the Chinese state apparatus inscribe itself into the lives of deaf students at LSS? And how is the Chinese state's 'civilizing project' carried out through disabled and deaf people in Lhasa, via language policies and in education? To this will be added perspectives, in particular on Yangzom's writing, by anthropologists Anna Tsing (1994), focusing on the creative responses to such state interventions on the margins, and Cheryl Mattingly (2010) who conceptualizes hope as an everyday practice.

Methods and Place: Fieldwork in Lhasa and at Lhasa Special School (LSS)

Tashi and Yangzom's stories and me encountering them was part of a broader anthropological and linguistic research project I carried out with deaf Tibetans, and in particular with users of TSL between 2007 and 2017. My initial curiosity about

this topic was doubtless influenced by the fact that I grew up with a father who is deaf, but myself only learned to sign as an adult. Serendipity led to my father making connections with deaf Tibetans, when he visited me during my doctoral fieldwork in Lhasa in the summer of 2007. This helped establish my positionality as a 'part insider' and 'part outsider' during subsequent fieldwork with deaf Tibetans (Hofer 2022, Hofer [forthcoming a]). The project's main themes were the emergence and particular features of TSL, affordances the language enabled in combination with, or in contrast to, other forms of communication, such as CSL, deaf people's political discourse and their experience of the overall highly politically-charged social and linguistic space of Lhasa in the decade of 2007-2017. During the latter half of 2016 I began working with younger Tibetans, whose primary sign language was CSL and who had attended



Figure 2: A TDA member teaching Tibetan literacy via TSL and TSL fingerspelling in an extra-curricular Saturday Tibetan language class at LSS in 2007. © Theresia Hofer



Figure 3: Inside the new 'Education District' of Lhasa, where the Lhasa Special School is located, 2016. © Theresia Hofer

the LSS. Both Tashi and Yangzom were from this latter cohort.

I had visited LSS in previous years alongside my deaf Tibetan friends from the Tibetan Deaf Association (TDA) who, up until 2014, helped run an extra-curricular Saturday class teaching TSL and Tibetan literacy via TSL and TSL fingerspelling (Hofer 2017, Figure 1).

Actual access to LSS for prolonged research purposes and official engagement came only slowly, after considerable effort and thanks to the fortuitous support of the relative of a friend who held a leadership position. The school-based ethnography at LSS and my work with younger deaf Tibetans thus complemented participant observation, interviews and conversations with 25, mostly older deaf Tibetans (then above the age of 30) who I had met earlier and whose dominant sign language was

TSL. With them I had carried out interviews and observations in various private and public spaces in Lhasa, including work places, offices, cafes, and homes. The work within a Lhasa school was therefore new for me.

Early in 2016, LSS moved from near the Eastern side of the Barkor (བར་ཤོ་རྩེ།), to a brand new campus (Figures 3, 4). Where previously fields lay and village houses stood, four-lane roads had begun to dominate the landscape in 2015, to build - at approximately 8 kilometres east from the Barkor and to the south of the Kyichu - Lhasa's perhaps most significant social engineering project of the new millennium: the Education District. At the time I was told that a government plan wanted all Lhasa children to be educated and boarding in this Education District, from primary, secondary through to high school levels. Indeed, friends of mine with a daughter in her

second-last year at a central Lhasa primary school were getting prepared for having to send her in the following academic year. They were highly reluctant to do so. By early 2016, several middle schools had moved already, or were in the process of being relocated there from downtown Lhasa. The Education District housed many large school campuses, each a gated cluster of school buildings and high-rise student and teacher residences arranged around sports grounds. At the time of writing this article, the district makes up a very large area on current online maps of Lhasa.

The social and linguistic consequences of creating Lhasa's Education District, concentrating children in a secluded campus and cutting them off from family and Tibetan social life, are highly significant, not least for the future of the Tibetan language and Tibetan ethnic identity. Children are essentially in Chinese-language environments for weeks, if not months, on end (indeed

I was told they cannot return home on weekends, even when their parents are only 8 km away). Leibold and Dorjee argue that Chinese-medium boarding schools in ethnic minority areas of the PRC are “powerful incubators of colonial transformation” (2023: 3). As such, the boarding schools in the Education District are perfectly aligned with a massive shift in ideology at the very top of the party and by Xi Jinping, in which ideas about a multi-ethnically influenced heterogeneous sense of ‘culture’ have, over the past decade, been shifting towards the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) demand for all Chinese citizens, regardless of ethnicity, to embrace and espouse a highly homogenous “Zhonghua culture” (Leibold and Dorjee 2023). The ultimate ideological aim of “Zhonghua culture” is to ensure national unity and national security, with ethnic minorities being considered the main threat (ibid).



Figure 4: Grounds of Lhasa Special School, Education District, Lhasa, 2016. © Theresia Hofer

The establishment of Lhasa’s Education District was also going to change further the ethnic make-up of central Lhasa. It is likely reducing further the proportion of ethnic Tibetans actually living in and around the central Barkor area in particular, where many family members had kept up households and household registrations in order to get kids into schools they had considered “more Tibetan”. It occurred to me that the once common sight in central Lhasa of crowds of loving grandparents and streets filled with cars around school pick-up times, was soon going to be a memory of the past. Property developers were eagerly waiting for the centrally located ex-school plots to become available too.

What I saw in 2016 turned out to be in line with sweeping changes in education policy and practice for Tibetan areas of China under Xi Jinping’s leadership. For lack of alternatives as well as due to the rigor of implementation, the new policies actually realized a much higher than average attendance of Tibetan children in boarding schools than among other ethnic groups (across the Tibetan plateau 3 out of 4 Tibetan children now live and study in a boarding school), even in urban areas and mainstream schools where families lived nearby (Campbell 2023, Jia Luo 2021, TAI 2021, Wright 2022).¹⁴

The then ongoing, slow, but soon-to-be complete, broad shift away from Tibetan-medium instruction in TAR primary schools¹⁵ seemed to progress without public outcry during my fieldwork. While LSS had enforced a Chinese-medium of instruction policy from its very beginnings, the mainstream Lhasa primary schools shifted to Chinese medium between 2010 and 2016 (again excepting Tibetan language classes). Last came all the other schools throughout the TAR, when village-level primary schools were shut and ‘consolidated’ into large township or county-based primary schools where primary school children had to board and which are also now run in Chinese-medium (cf. Jia Luo 2021, Wright 2022, Campbell 2023). Many Tibetan parents and grandparents with children

and grandchildren in Lhasa schools were conscious and unhappy about the loss of the use of Tibetan language as a medium of education—even prior to the boarding school policy for Lhasa-based kids and the realization of the Education District. They could do little else beyond expressing their concerns in personal conversations with friends or family, but that also with restraint and without showing overt disapproval of the government due to a wide network of spies, plain clothes police and digital surveillance. Tibetan language matters certainly fell into the local category of something considered ‘political’ (*chapsi*, ཚམས་སྲིད།) and were hence to be avoided in any public space. All that I could see Tibetan parents do in 2016 in Lhasa (that is prior to their kids being forced into full-time boarding at primary school level), was take their children to out-of-hours private Tibetan language tuition. Private Tibetan language classes have apparently also since been discontinued. Parents tried their best in using Tibetan at home. Given this context, how then can we make sense of such an outspokenly critical message by a young and highly-marginalized individual writing from within a Lhasa-based boarding school?

I was extremely intrigued about the content of Tashi’s *Message*, how it was being received, and very much hoped to be able to meet Tashi one day in person, to find out who had dared to write such a critical message to his own teachers.

Message and Questions to the Teachers of the Lhasa Special School

Following on from the initial happiness experienced by Tashi at being together with other disabled students in class and “no one looking down on each other” (see p. 43), he writes that due to the fact that no student knows Tibetan meant that “all my joy and happiness vanished”. In this section I offer a translation of the remaining text of the *Message*, before analyzing it within the broad theme of margins and marginality.

Thus, I want to ask a few questions to the teachers of the Special School:

1. Is it that you are looking down on the disabled students and it is impossible for them to learn written Tibetan?
2. Or perhaps, in today's society written Tibetan is not necessary?
3. Are you teaching written Tibetan well in class and on a daily basis?
4. Is it that the disabled students' not knowing written Tibetan is because they are not intelligent enough?

What are these? What is the reason for these? I really don't know. In this message (*trin tung*, འཇིག་བྱུང།) I have not made any unjust claim or accusation. All I am doing is to write about the reality found at the Special School.

Actually, I have not forgotten that I have been fed, as well as learned skills in this school during this one year. Just because they have been feeding and clothing me, even so, I do not wish to keep the secret of the more than 300 disabled students' lack of knowing Tibetan.

Why do I write this letter? This is not to fight against you. Rather, I wish to express my hope and kind request for the disabled students to study written Tibetan well.

In reality, I am not brave enough to express such views (lit. speak such words). In a sense I have been waiting for one person among the hundreds and hundreds of thousands, who are attached to and have fondness (*sha zhen*, ཤ་ཞེན།) for the Tibetan language, to come forward and say this. However, you people have kept silent altogether. There is no other option but to say it myself.

Note: The author is a disabled person (*wangpo kyönchen*, དབང་པོ་རྒྱལ་ཅན།).

Contesting and Reproducing the State on the Margins

While we might have expected such a message to emerge in the context of outspoken Tibetan language-related activism and protest that took place in Eastern Tibet in the years 2015 and 2016 (Robin 2014a, Roche 2021, Woesser 2015), such a direct and critical message is unique coming out of Lhasa and the TAR at the time. It is particularly noteworthy for coming from a group of Tibetans who are highly marginalized and of whom only a handful—usually late-deafened people—are literate and can compose such an articulate message. The vast majority, even after graduating from LSS after nine years of education are barely literate enough to write their own names and a simple short message in Tibetan, a state of affairs Tashi's *Message* is all about.

While the *Message* addresses the teachers directly, I think it needs to be read much more broadly as a question posed by this student to the Chinese state, as addressing a much larger situation than one just pertaining to the Special School. As such, Tashi joins the critique of government language policy and practice for Tibetan areas, and shares the anxiety existing among many other Tibetans over the stark decline in Tibetan literacy among ethnic Tibetans and over the very future of the language itself. Given the severe consequence for participation in open protest in Lhasa and in Tibetan areas of China in general, Roche has aptly referred to a 'fragmented civil society' that emerged around language issues, where rather than large-scale, organized mass protests, we find individuals and small, short-lived organizations and initiatives encouraging the study and use of Tibetan language in general, and at Tibetan schools in particular (2021: 70). Requests for genuine bi-lingual education and proper teaching of Tibetan was also found in several of the messages left by Tibetans who self-immolated since

2011. With Tashi asking for a renewed and increased emphasis on Tibetan in school he joined this ‘fragmented civil society’, if only momentarily and through an initially one-off online social media post. He was also seemingly sharing similar motivations, which he says are his “attachment and fondness (*sha zhen*, ཤ་ཞེན།) for one’s ethnic group and language”. The terms in which he expresses his desires differ from the language and terminology used by some of the other language activists, who have since ventured to claim ‘language rights’ for the use of Tibetan in school, at work and in daily life (Roche 2021: 72). Tashi in contrast asks for better instruction in Tibetan at the LSS in less strong terms, using the language of “hope” and making a “kind request for the disabled students to study Tibetan well”.

To be clear, Tashi’s expressed concern is the lack of literacy in Tibetan written language, or *böyik* (བོད་ཡིག།). He is not concerned with spoken Tibetan in this post, unlike others and the movement to incentivize, for instance ‘pure Tibetan’ (*böké tsangma*, བོད་སྐད་གཙང་མ། or *pa ké tsang ma* པ་སྐད་གཙང་མ།) referring to either Tibetan free from code-switching to Chinese or free of influences from other, local Tibetan languages and/or accents (Roche and Bum 2018). Interestingly, Tashi makes also no reference to TSL. This can be explained by the fact that Tashi was not exposed to fluent TSL use at the school as he joined once the TSL-dominant TDA activists no longer taught Tibetan literacy and TSL extra-curricular classes.¹⁶

An important aspect of the Chinese state’s intervention on the margins and in Tibet is a pact struck by many if not most Tibetans and the Chinese state, within which Tibetans have to accept the ‘gift of Chinese development’ (Yeh 2013). According to Yeh this gift is so enormous that it cannot truly be reciprocated by Tibetans, aside from it being for many unwanted. Drawing on the classic work on gift giving in anthropology, Yeh argued that the unreciprocated gift however leaves Tibetans entangled in highly imbalanced power relations and a state of dependency. I saw this play out many times, with Tibetans discussing the

strings attached to the gifts of state-led development and benefits, ranging from education to civil servants’ salaries and the disability allowance. I noticed that complying and not complaining about the diminishing role of Tibetan in education, and in daily life, is—usually—part of this pact on the Tibetan side. Tashi acknowledges the gifts he has received, in that he has “been fed and clothed”, and “has learned skills” in his school during his one year prior to writing the message. Yet he openly states that this will not make him “keep the secret of the more than 300 disabled students’ lack of knowing Tibetan.” Through his strong critique of state language policy and practice at the school, Tashi outrightly rejects the expectation from the pact between the Chinese state and Tibetans. But we also learn that a part of the pact is that a) one must hide the truth when it does not conform to the state’s narrative, in this case, that one is expected to keep the fact that none of the 300+ students are illiterate in Tibetan secret. And, b) that as part of the ‘pact’ too, Tibetans are supposed not to reveal the ‘secrets’ (i.e. ugly truths) about the pact, including the deprivation of their right to learn Tibetan.

On the other hand, we also find instances in the *Message*, in which Tashi uses certain categories the state has assigned to people like him, in particular that of him being a *wangpo kyönchen* (དབང་པོ་སྐྱོན་ཅན།), a “disabled person”. By using this term, he participates in the larger state discourse, mainly propagated by the CDPF, its local branches and special schools, which guide, regulate and control disabled people’s lives in China while simultaneously promoting the vision of an inclusive modern state (cf Kohrman 2005, Friedner 2015). His use also likely aims to posit himself as an insider and give his message more weight.

The Tibetan term *wangpo kyönchen* has been the official translation of the Chinese term *can ji ren* (Ch. 残疾人) for “disabled person” (literally “deformed person”) since the Tibet Disabled People’s Federation (TDPE, *Boe rangkyong jong wangkyön lhentsok* (བོད་རང་སྐྱོང་ལྗོངས་དབང་པོ་སྐྱོན་ལྷན་ཚོགས།) was

founded as a local branch of the CDPF in the TAR in the early 1990s. Despite changes in terminology in Chinese, the term *wangpo kyönchen* remained unchanged in Tibetan.¹⁷ The term *wangpo kyönchen* initially cropped up in official discourse, for instance in the names for the various regional and Lhasa-city branches of the TDPF. From its initially bureaucratic term it then became more widely used. The generic, all-embracing term *wangpo kyönchen* was the common term used by teachers for students of LSS regardless of the fact that over 90% of its student population was deaf and teaching in most classes was effectively aimed at deaf students.¹⁸ Students too at LSS, Tashi included, use the term as they had not (yet) encountered alternative terms and the resistance of older deaf Tibetans in Lhasa against using the term *wangpo kyönchen* (disabled) to refer to deaf people.

Older deaf people did not like to refer to themselves as a *wangpo kyönchen*. They tended to use *wangpo kyönchen* (in written, spoken and signed forms) in the context of

government organizations and structures, such as the TDPF, when dealing with the state-run disability allowances, or when referencing physically disabled people. Indeed, the TSL sign for ‘disabled people’ derives from, and is phonologically close to, the sign for physically disabled people (see Figure 5, Image TDA, 2011: 12, 13).

Instead of *wangpo kyönchen*, older deaf Tibetans and those who had not gone to LSS were using the term *önpa* (འོན་པ།, ‘deaf’) as an emancipatory, colloquial term for deaf people, as I learned during my fieldwork. Through engagement with international deaf and hearing consultants promoting “Deaf culture”, deaf education and sign language research, they also began promoting a new sign for deaf person (Figure 5, Hofer 2022, Hofer [forthcoming a]).¹⁹ In spoken and written Tibetan, *önpa* now meant to replace *wangpo kyönchen* and especially the widespread use of the colloquial term *kukpa* (ལྷག་པ།) for deaf people. *Kukpa* was particularly disliked due to the range of meanings, including ‘mute’, ‘idiot’,

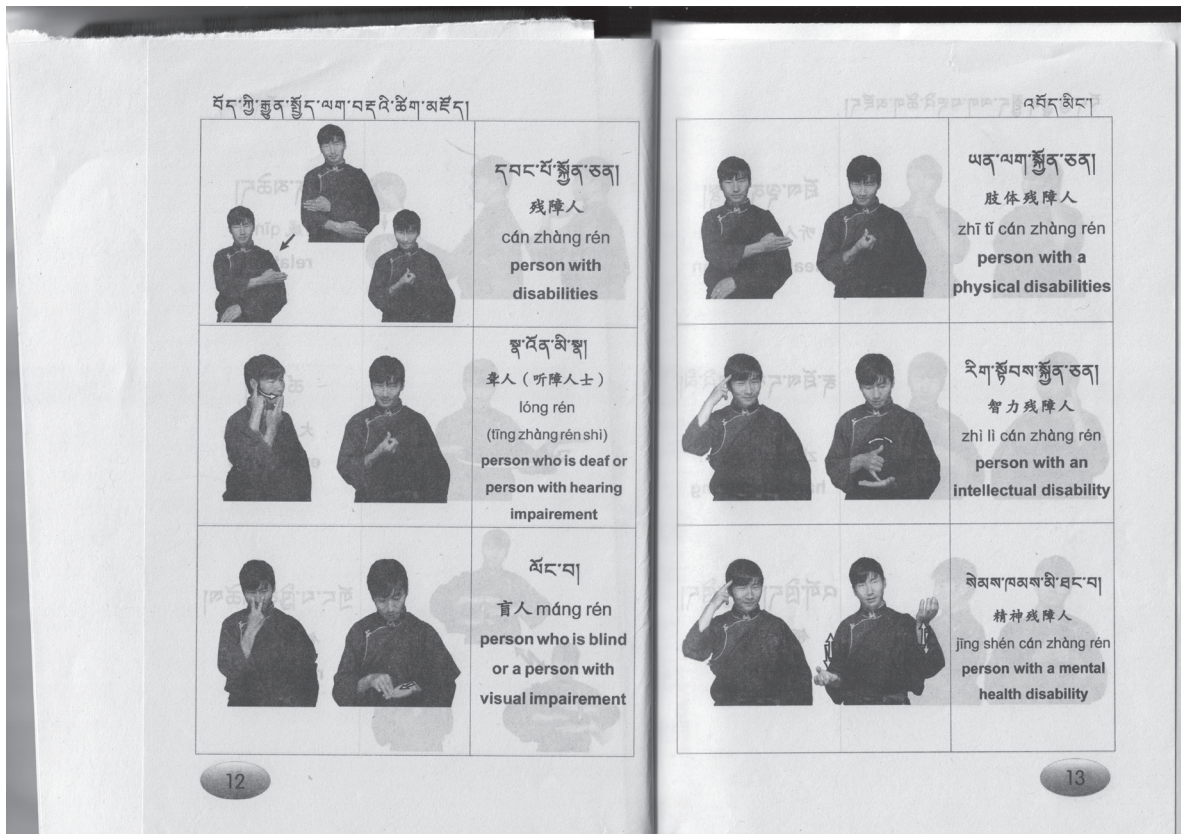


Figure 5: Image of TSL signs with glosses for different types of disability (TDA 2011: 12, 13)



Figure 6: Logos of the only deaf support organization in the TAR in 2004 and in 2011. They reflect changes of symbolism (from a focus on the ear towards the eye and ‘seeing’ sign language, with the five colors reminiscent of prayerflags remaining a constant) and of terminology for deaf persons in the Tibetan language: Tibet Assembly of Deaf-Mutes (བོད་ལྗོངས་འོན་ལྷན་གསལ་ལྷན་ཚོགས།; 西藏聋哑协会 *Xizang Longya Xiehui*), 2004 (upper) to Tibet Deaf Association (བོད་ལྗོངས་འོན་པའི་མཐུན་ཚོགས།; 西藏聋人协会 *Xizang Longren Xiehui*) in 2011 (lower)

‘stupid person’, or it denoting someone as ‘dumb’.²⁰ Deaf advocates abandoned the use of *onkuk* (འོན་ལྷན་གསལ།) (meaning ‘deaf-mute’, or ‘deaf-dumb’), informing their hearing family members and others that the term *önpa* was more correct and welcome. The name for the TDA also changed accordingly (Figure 6) and for ‘sign language’ the spoken

and written Tibetan terms used changed from *kugda* (གུས་ལག་བརྟེན།) ‘mute signs’, or *önkug lagda* (འོན་ལྷན་གསལ་ལག་བརྟེན།) ‘deaf-mute hand signs’ to ‘Tibetan hand sign’ or *bökyi lakda* (བོད་ཀྱི་ལག་བརྟེན།).

At the beginning of the *Message*, Tashi writes of himself as someone who “is attached and fond of their ethnic group and Tibetan language”. At the very end, he explicitly positions himself as a *wangpo kyönchen*, when he states that “the writer is a disabled student”, using the state-endorsed category instead of, for example, *önpa*. This was in January 2016. Soon enough though, Tashi also abandoned *wangpo kyönchen* as a category of self-identification, when he started a Tibetan literary blog a few months later. Yet, he also did not refer to himself as a *önpa* there, suggesting that he chooses to become and be seen mainly as a Tibetan person and one who is not identified as either disabled, or deaf.

Both social categories, “Tibetan ethnicity” and being a “disabled person”—have been important to building the Chinese nation at different points in time. But equally, being Tibetan and feeling fondness, attachment and pride for the Tibetan language are also important Tibetan ‘projects’, stating differences and disagreement with the state-led ‘civilizing project’ which eventually aims to get Tibetans to abandon their ethnic languages and move towards the sole use of Chinese. It helps to think through Tashi’s categories by considering Das and Poole’s formulation of three main concepts of margins and approaches towards margins by states, as outlined in their introduction to *Anthropology on the Margins of the State* (2004).

The first concept of margins they outline gives primacy to the “idea of margins as peripheries seen to form natural containers for people considered insufficiently socialized into the law” (2004: 9), and it is the most relevant for this paper (the other two hinging “around issues of legibility and illegibility” and “margins as a space between bodies, laws and discipline”, *ibid*: 9). The first of these three ways of thinking ethnographically about margins resonates

most closely with the social categories and positions that the state has created for disabled Tibetans: as ethnic Tibetans and as ‘disabled’ people on the margins vis-a-vis the state. How do Tibetans negotiate these categories? Das and Poole encourage ethnographic understandings of the “specific technologies of power through which states attempt to ‘manage’ or ‘pacify’ these populations through both force and a pedagogy of conversion intended to transform ‘unruly subjects’ into lawful subjects of the state.” (Ibid: 9) Policies and practices towards the use of Chinese and CSL, institutions like boarding schools that remove students (including deaf students) from their Tibetan language-based home-environments, and finally giving prized rewards to those further educated in China (Jia Luo 2021), are methods to ‘convert’ unruly ethnic, peripheral and marginal subjects into lawful subjects of the state.

Other contributions in Das and Poole’s volume (including those based on work in Guatemala, Peru and South Africa) highlight the strategic importance of keeping up these practices to create multi-ethnic and benevolent states. They point out how marginal populations are often “formed of ‘indigenous’ or ‘natural’ subjects, who are at once considered to be foundational to particular national identities and excluded from these same identities by the sorts of disciplinary knowledge that marks them as racially or civilizationally ‘other’” (ibid). Tibetans and disabled people like Tashi have been members of groups that have been used at various moments to ‘build’ up the PRC either as a ‘united multinational country’ (Ch. *tongyi de duo minzu guojia*), or ‘othered’ as ‘disabled’, ready to offer fertile grounds for advocacy by the CDPF and the Chinese state (Kohrman 2005). They were thus used at various moments in their positions as marginalized people, seen as quintessential pre-requisites for the foundation for national identities, from which —through lack of opportunities and choices —they are however simultaneously and ultimately excluded. As a ‘disabled’ person they are furthermore made into a category of persons who can be controlled and ‘guided’

through CDPF policies and practices and those of their local branches, such as the TDPF, or local Special Schools, to carry out state-led projects and definitions.

Responses to Tashi’s Message

How then was the *Message* received? The friend from Amdo, who helped me translate it, was in awe of the student daring to write the *Message* and post it online. By all accounts, including Tashi’s own when we eventually met, he did not get into trouble for his message, which meant that neither was he “asked for tea with the Public Security Bureau (PSB)” (a nationally used euphemism for being summoned and interrogated at the police station), nor did he get any request to see the school director. Yet by the same token, he also did not get a response from the school leadership or the teachers and any sense whether they were engaging with his “kind request for the disabled students to study Tibetan well”. Perhaps the timing made it easy. The LSS shut for several weeks for Losar holidays making it perhaps natural and convenient not to respond, or teachers were wise not to draw any attention to it, lest they would have to take the incident further than they wanted. Due to the low level of literacy in Tibetan, the *Message* was largely inconsequential to Tashi’s classmates, who did not comprehend its content. Tashi did, however, get many ‘likes’ and ‘heart’ *emojis* from family members and friends back home.

Deaf Tibetans outside of the school, especially those TDA members who could read Tibetan and understood its content, were very impressed. Many were admiring of Tashi and his courage, some felt vindicated for their earlier efforts to teach TSL and TSL finger spelling at LSS in conjunction with Tibetan literacy, despite often feeling unwelcome by the school leadership.

Yangzom was among two people within my circle of friends and interlocutors, who opted to take a stance and express her feelings and views in response to Tashi’s message. During the following days I saw her and her friend, someone I will call Pema and who happened to be in a leadership

position at the TDA at the time, spending several hours together, discussing and finessing their co-authored response. They explained to me that they did this due to their positions as educated deaf adults and, to some extent, figures of authority and deaf role models. Yangzom was a teacher at a Special School and Pema a TDA leader on a government contract. They felt their positions would lend ‘support’ to the request by their younger fellow deaf Tibetan and hoped also that it would be taken more seriously. A few days after our dinner and still editing their statement when most Tibetans were busy with Losar preparations, they were finally ready and posted their message via WeChat. It was titled: *The Result of Nine Years of Compulsory Education at the Special School*. It turned out to be no less critical or openly political than Tashi’s message. I offer my translation first and will then analyze it in the next section.

། དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གསོའི་ལོ་དགུའི་འགན་བབས་སློབ་གསོའི་
སྐྱད་འབྲས་།

The Results of Nine Years of Compulsory Education at the Special School

ང་རང་སློབ་ཐོན་སློབ་མ་ཡིན་ཟེར་རྗེས་ལྷོག་བྱེད།

They brag about being a graduate from the school.

ལོ་ངོ་བརྒྱུ་ཕྱག་སློབ་གསོའི་སྐྱད་འབྲས་རང་མིང་ཙམ།

Ten years’ education, however, is just for the sake of one’s own glory.

རང་གི་ཕ་སྐད་ལག་བརྗོད་ཡང་ར་མ་ལུག།

Even one’s father-tongue sign language is a neither goat nor sheep.

ད་དུང་བོད་ཡིག་མི་དགའ་ཟེར་ནས་ཁྲེལ་དགོད་བྱེད།

With a deprecating smile, they still add they don’t like Tibetan.

། ཉང་གི་དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གསོའི་ལས་དོན་ལ་དོ་ལྷན་གནང་
བའི་འབྲས་བུ།

The Results of the Communist Party’s Involvement in Special Education

ཉང་གི་སྲིད་ཇུས་བཟང་བས་བོད་ཕྱག་བསོད་ནམས་ཆེ།

Thanks to the good communist policy, Tibetan children are lucky.

ལག་ལེན་བྱེད་མཁན་མེད་པའི་བོད་ཕྱག་བསོད་ནམས་ཟད།

Tibetan children are unlucky, as there is no one to implement the policy.

དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གྲྭ་མང་བས་ང་ཚོར་གོ་སྐབས་བྱུང།

Thanks to the many Special Schools we have obtained opportunities.

དགོ་ཟུན་དམ་པ་མེད་པས་ང་ལ་སེམས་ཡི་རེ་ལུག།

But, how sad, we don’t have great teachers!

། དབང་སྐྱོན་སློབ་མའི་སེམས་གཏིང་གི་སྐད་ཆ།

The Disabled Student’s Words from the Depth of their Mind

ཁ་ཡོད་ལག་ཡོད་ཡིན་པས་མི་གྲུལ་ཚུད།

Since I have a mouth and hands, I am a part of humanity.

དེ་ལ་རུས་པ་མེད་པས་མི་གྲུལ་ཕྱད།

But the mouth and hands have no ability and so fall out of humanity.

འཚོ་བའི་བཟོད་ལམ་ཀྱག་ཀྱོག་ལམ་བུ་དེ།

That tortuous road of livelihood,

བྱ་ངའི་སེམས་ཀྱི་ཚོད་ཚོད་ཞིག་དང་མཚུངས།

is like a life-sized stone in my heart.

། དབང་སྐྱོན་པ་མའི་སྐྱོ་གདུང་།

The Sorrows of the Parents of the Disabled

བྱ་ཕྱག་དབང་སྐྱོན་ཡིན་པས་མདུན་ལམ་མེད།

My child is disabled, so has no future.

དམིགས་བསལ་སློབ་གསོ་ཡོད་པས་རེ་བ་ལྟེན།

Yet, Special Education gives us hope.

མ་འོངས་རེ་བ་ཐམས་ཅད་སློབ་གསོར་བཅོལ།

Our hopes for the future are entrusted to education.

མཐའ་མཇུག་རེ་བ་སྐྱོད་ཟད་སོང་པས་ཡིད་རེ་སྐྱོ།

Our hopes are finally shattered, we are so sad!

། ང་བའ་སྐྱོན་སློབ་མའི་རེ་འདུན། །

The Hopeful Wish of the Disabled Student

ང་ནི་བོད་དུ་སྐྱེ་བས་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I was born in Tibet, I need my mother tongue.

ང་ནི་བོད་རིགས་ཡིན་པས་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I am Tibetan, my mother tongue is needed.

ང་ནི་བོད་པའི་རིགས་རྒྱུད་ཡིན་པས་མ་ཡིག་མཁོ།

I am of Tibetan descent, I need my mother tongue.

མ་ཡིག་དེ་ནི་ང་ལི་སློབ་ཚུ་ཡིན།

My mother tongue is the root of my life.

འདུ་འཛིང་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ཁོད་ཀྱི་འ་བུའི་རེ་སྐྱུག

These are my hopes and expectations in the midst of this complex society.

Expectations, Hopes and Realities

Structured in five sections, the themes and concerns raised in what I, for short, will call the *Results*, are broader than in Tashi’s *Message*. Written in verse and from the personal perspective of an imaginary disabled student and graduate from a Special School, the first section sets them out as the main character and as someone who brags about being a graduate, but is unashamed about their lack of Tibetan and their ‘father-tongue sign language’ (*paké lakda*, པ་སྐད་ལག་བརྟེན།) being neither ‘goat nor sheep’ (*ramaluk*) (we will return to this interesting expression below). In the second section, kudos is given to good government policy and the high hopes placed in government Special Education. Yet the student’s hopes are said to be crushed once they experienced LSS Party education and realize that they have no good teachers. The following, and in my mind particularly strong and poetic third section, expresses the “disabled student’s words from the depth of their mind”: as a person who has been given a mouth and hands they are part of humanity,²¹ yet fall out of humanity because they are ill-prepared by their state education for navigating the “torturous road” of making a living. Livelihood is

experienced as “a life-sized stone in their heart”. The imaginary parents of a disabled student come to speak in section four. They claim “My child is disabled, so has no future” and entrust their only hope in education, which at last is also crushed, the implication here being, for the lack of opportunity to study Tibetan. The piece culminates in the last and fifth section “The Hopeful wish of the disabled student”, making clear the need of a deaf Tibetan for their *ma yik*, or “mother tongue”, here meaning written Tibetan, literally their “mother script”. *Ma yik* is also a new and interesting expression, discussed further below, originally meaning an “original copy or draft”. I translate it instead as “mother tongue” and “mother script”. *Ma yik* is a creative choice by Yangzom and Pema, to refer to written Tibetan as the complementary language of deaf Tibetans, next to their first language and equally novel choice of *paké lakda*, their “father-tongue sign language”. Together, they seem to imply, these two languages are their “parental languages”. The Tibetan child needs both the writing (mother) and the sign language (father).

While Tashi’s *Message* wrote mainly about the low quality of teaching Tibetan, the *Results* put forward a radical critique of Special Education. Yet despite the broader remit of their text and the plethora of issues raised therein, the authors seem to think they can be resolved through realizing the ultimate request and “hopeful wish” of the disabled student, by them becoming literate in the Tibetan language. This hope, however, stands in stark contrast to what can be achieved with the Tibetan language in today’s societies and communities in Tibetan areas of China. There is an ever-diminishing use of Tibetan in educational settings (Leibold and Dorjee 2023)—even in some homes, and its usefulness (or rather lack of usefulness) for making a living was widely acknowledged and discussed, not least by Yangzom and Pema with me during my fieldwork. How shall we make sense of their message then, which asks for something that seems to be disappearing further

and further away, becoming out of sight even?

We can read *Results* as yet another perspective on how deaf Tibetans on the margins of the Chinese state and of Tibetan society use and think about the Tibetan language. How they use, refuse and negotiate state-endorsed categories in their daily lives, and it can give us insight into the role of hope in marginal people's lives. Like Tashi's *Message*, it seems, we see the state inscribing itself into the lives and the categories people use on the margins, for example, in the category of 'disabled'. Yet in *Results* Yangzom and Pema go further and strategically use that category to create an imaginary 'disabled student' and Special School graduate to put forward a radical critique of state-led Special Education. They can thus avoid writing from their own, personal positions, which would have been dangerous. In other words, Yangzom and Pema make a creative intervention and find a way to express their views in the midst of a very sensitive situation and from a very marginalized position.

In her work on 'margins', Anna Tsing highlights such creative expressions by marginal people in marginal places and urges ethnographers to also highlight "the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence" (Tsing 1994: 279). This approach complements Tsing's other articulations of margins as indications of the "constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion" (ibid), not dissimilar to Das and Poole's work introduced earlier, which I have used to analyze how the Chinese state's civilizing project "converts" disabled Tibetans on the margins into lawful subjects of the central state—such as through Chinese language and CSL in the Special Education system as well as through the work of the CDPF and TDPF.

How do Yangzom and Pema in *Results* rearticulate, enliven, and rearrange the "very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence"—in this case, deaf Tibetans? And how do they use the Tibetan language in that process? How even do they

conceive of that 'Tibetan language' or deaf Tibetans? How do they envision its role in the struggle for better education and professional opportunities for disabled people in Tibet?

We see several creative rearticulations of terminologies and categories in *Results*. One of the most striking examples is when Yangzom and Pema literally invent on their smartphones the novel, indigenous categories of "mayik" and "paké lakda": "mother script" and "father tongue sign language". In spoken and written Tibetan languages, father tongue is what English calls a "mother tongue". This association of one's first language being a "father tongue" is not primarily because of the actual language spoken by somebody's father, but mainly because of the association of that language with one's *payul* (ཕ་ཡུལ།) or "father land", the place where one was born, resides virilocally and keeps intimate (often also religious) connections with. By naming a signed language the "father tongue" of deaf Tibetans, the authors thus elevate massively the status of a signed language. Perhaps the first time in Tibetan history two deaf persons have claimed that a sign language is their "father tongue". This emancipatory claim could easily get lost, as it is used to make a point about something else, namely to lament that this signed father tongue is 'mixed' and 'ramaluk' in nature.

Their direct point and the key demand is for written Tibetan as the disabled students *mayik* or "mother script", a term usually understood to refer to an original draft or copy of a written text. I translate *mayik* here as "mother tongue" and "mother script".

Roche has claimed that so far all language activism in support of a singular Tibetan language as the 'soul' of the Tibetan nation has at the same time enforced suppression and erasure of the other roughly 27 "minoritized languages of Tibet" (2021: 73). Users of such smaller languages, including the Ngandehua and Manegacha languages in Rebgong, Eastern Tibet, have often been construed as weakening the unity of Tibetans surrounding the Tibetan language,

or worse, have been considered traitors to that cause.²²

The case that Yangzom and Pema make in *Results* departs from that unitary language activism thus far described in the literature. They diversify claims to ‘Tibetan language’ for disabled students as being not about one, but at least two languages, or types of languages, namely written Tibetan and signed language. They do not make clear that the latter needs to be TSL, yet claiming improved teaching to foster successful literacy in Tibetan for a deaf person cannot be achieved without the use of the appropriate medium of instruction, which is TSL and one that makes use of TSL fingerspelling. It is this lack of an *effective* medium of instruction for learning their *mayik* that lies at the root of the problem at the early stages of learning Tibetan, and it is therefore crucial it should be improved. Yangzom and Pema are not explicit about this in the text, but from their position and

those of other deaf people trying to learn and requesting the ‘proper teaching’ of written Tibetan (and as they also explained to me in person), they are claiming that use of TSL and TSL fingerspelling needs to be improved as the teaching medium at least in the Tibetan language classes and TSL use, ideally expanded to the entire school (Figure 2).²³

Teachers at the LSS who teach Tibetan, in particular one of the most senior teachers are well aware of the necessity of TSL and TSL fingerspelling for successful Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans (Figure 2). While this senior Tibetan language teacher has a good level of TSL and has introduced significant improvements to the teaching of Tibetan grammar by inventing (together with the TDA) specific grammar signs in TSL, others, especially newly-arrived Tibetan language teachers only have very basic knowledge of TSL and TSL fingerspelling.²⁴ Quite apart from that, none of them



Figure 7: Studying written Tibetan at the Lhasa Special School (LSS), 2016. © Theresia Hofer

tend to regularly drill Tibetan spelling via TSL fingerspelling, something that remains crucial to the process of learning to read and write Tibetan, which has complex spelling and morphology.

Tibetan language teachers are not encouraged at all by the school leadership to improve their level of TSL and TSL fingerspelling or improve their methods for teaching Tibetan to deaf students. Surely influencing this is the unwritten premise of LSS leadership and many teachers that literacy in Chinese will be essential for those few deaf Tibetans who proceed to further education in China, or indeed anyone when they leave school and try to find employment. Tibetan teachers at LSS, whether teaching Tibetan or other subjects, are also themselves part of wider Tibetan society and are witnessing first-hand the decline in use of the Tibetan language in many formal domains, including education and professional work domains.

Even Yangzom and Pema on a joint trip in the holidays acknowledged this situation to me when we discussed the realpolitik of Tibetan in contemporary society. They could not see many tangible benefits for deaf Tibetans gaining literacy in Tibetan. A major topic of discussion was the overall decline in use of Tibetan in society, also as a factor in low Tibetan literacy among deaf Tibetans in addition to their experience of poor quality teaching. Pema said: “You see, when they graduate, everything is in Chinese. Their phones are in Chinese. If they go on to university everything is in Chinese. Then from their mouth they don’t speak. They sign, they don’t speak. So really they don’t use Tibetan. They have no use for it and no practice also.” I asked: “Ok, but what about reading a book in Tibetan?” to which Pema replied with slight disbelief “Reading a book? No way. Deaf Tibetans don’t read books, and certainly not a Tibetan book.” I said: “What about reading other things, like say, the newspaper?” I quickly realized that my example of reading a newspaper was a particularly bad one, as many hearing Tibetans I knew considered reading the state-run newspapers, even when written in

Tibetan, a waste of time. Pema and Yangzom laughed and Pema looked intently at me and said: “Look, you need to understand that the situation of deaf people is very different. Come the evening, they have to fill their stomachs. They work in the morning, they work in the afternoon, and they work after dinner to make some money. Then they have family in the countryside, who come and stay with them, their parents get old, and need looking after. So they also have these family responsibilities. There is no time to read a book or the newspaper.”

In comparison to their hearing counterparts, the lived reality of deaf Tibetans demonstrates that reading and writing skills in Tibetan language are often considered even more “useless” and a seeming luxury. The common saying that “Tibetan does not fill the stomach” was oft repeated by hearing friends to me, referencing the fact that hardly any professions were still requiring or rating solid literacy in Tibetan.²⁵

Hearing Tibetans benefit from speaking Tibetan with family. Deaf Tibetans did not use the spoken Tibetan language with family and friends. LSS students and graduates, it turned out, used Chinese in written communications with their parents and siblings, which they found easier than written Tibetan. For Chinese, moreover, excellent language software was available on their phones for correcting mistakes, something not so easily available for Tibetan – and where it was, of much lower quality. As most friends of younger deaf Tibetans came from LSS, they had a strong social network of peers who were also using CSL, with only a few loan signs from TSL for Tibetan food items, clothes and religious figures. This means throughout their years at the school (except for holidays) and then after graduation, these deaf Tibetans had very limited exposure to Tibetan language. Many of my new interlocutors at LSS and the graduates had indeed only installed Tibetan keyboards on their phones when they realized I could only text with them in Tibetan and not in Chinese.

Tashi – The Tibetan Writer

When I finally met Tashi in person he was 20 and in his second and final year at LSS. He was going to graduate from 9th grade the following summer, which was the highest level at that time at the school. As we slowly got to know each other, I discovered he was indeed a lover of all things Tibetan. I often saw him walking around the school compound, ferrying Tibetan books to and from the school library, sitting somewhere reading. The titles of books he carried under his arm changed rapidly. He wore thick glasses, their frames not unlike those of a famous Tibetan Lama living in Exile. He seemed so exceptional to me, having written the *Message* and being able to read and write Tibetan so much better than any other student at the school. I felt a little like I was finally meeting my deaf Tibetan hero. And a deaf Tibetan, who *did* like to read Tibetan books.

Tashi lost his hearing as a late teenager. When his local school on the Plateau could no longer accommodate him, he stayed at home. It took a couple of years before his family found out about the existence of LSS, indicating perhaps that local branches of the TDPF are not very active. When Tashi got to LSS he started in 8th grade. Whenever Tashi and I met in the school compound and once on an outing into town, our communication for some reason remained awkward. My CSL was still not great and he had no friends or acquaintances who were dominant in TSL, only once having met with Tibetans from the TDA. While he was also able to lip-read much of my spoken Tibetan, he seemed most comfortable to operate in the written word. After we exchanged WeChat contacts, we began to write to one another in Tibetan. It turned out that Tashi was regularly writing his own dedicated online blog, under his very own penname. Here he evocatively expressed the joys and suffering in his life, which he allowed me to access. In the string of blogposts from Tashi that I followed during the course of 2016 and 2017, he no longer posited himself as a disabled person at all—the term being entirely absent. This identity no longer existed in his writing.

His posts were about significant figures in his life, such as his mother and father, and extra-ordinary as well as ordinary places and emotions. Tashi expressed his love and admiration for his parents, a strong sense of wonder and delight in his nomadic home land, underlined by beautiful photos of black yak hair tents and the sweeping landscapes of the northern plateau. He was delighted to go back there for holidays and reluctant to leave to come back to Lhasa. Perhaps the strongest impressions were, however, left by Tashi's ability to express a wide range of emotions—including those of longing, of fear, of uselessness, despair, and of love. Not all of Tashi's posts were expressions of his own, particular life, emotions and significant others. For example, eulogies to the black yak hair tent have been featured in a lot of contemporary Tibetan writing due to its rapid disappearance in the aftermath of large state-led settlement projects of Tibetan pastoralists (Robin 2014b). The love he felt for the Dalai Lama as his Root Lama was also one shared by many Tibetans, but—very surprisingly and dangerously for someone living in the TAR—he expressed it quite openly on the highly surveilled WeChat platform.

Tashi's poems were often part of a visual-textual collage, in which a photo might be overlaid with its Tibetan calligraphic title, followed by the text itself. Some of the images he used were photos he had taken himself—such as of his homeland and family members; others were stock images. There was always a fine confluence and complementarity of visuals and text, and Tashi was talented in the graphic presentation of his posts. In some cases, *emoji* and reactions from others were also visible.

The personal and broader themes in Tashi's writings were in stark contrast to the posts by his fellow students at the school around the same time and that I also was party to. Other boys and young men of his age group at LSS tended to post photos of international football stars they admired, and of themselves posing in selfies in physically expressive and significant ways. There was also a large amount of photo traffic in

connection with disabled people's sports competitions that some participated in. LSS actively facilitated students' participation in disabled sports networks, enabling pupils to create wider networks of friends and to gain chances to travel for competitions. The corollary of accepting this gift: the students' entry into a highly political domain. Some of Tashi's peers even re-posted state-media items. I remember a string of five images with short captions being circulated, which showed and lauded party secretary Xi Jinping "supporting disabled people" and demonstrating him learning some simple CSL signs. Most posts of Tashi's fellow students were in Chinese, the ones written in Tibetan tending to be forwarded or re-posted items from family or friends.

In Tashi's blog we can see a powerful rejection of and escape from, at least in writing, any and all state narratives for and about disabled people in Tibet and in China. Tashi is not interested in presenting himself in any way as disabled any longer, nor did he choose to gain an identity as a *önpa*, or deaf person and participate in Lhasa-based *deaf worldings*. He hoped to connect to others as a human being, as a Tibetan and as a lover of the Tibetan language, literature and visual arts. Through his creative use of Tibetan and his posts he thus managed, against all odds, to belong to a section of mainstream Lhasa and Tibetan society that cares for and celebrates the Tibetan language and associated literature and arts. In fleeting moments, he came to participate in Tibet's 'fragmented civil society'.

In summer 2017, following directly on from his graduation from LSS, Tashi became a student and apprentice in a well-known Lhasa-based *thangkha* studio run by a senior Tibetan master. He chose that trajectory over staying at the LSS for vocational training or going to inland China for further studies, an offer open to him as one of the best students in his year— and something seen by others as the pinnacle of achievement in Tibetan Special Education. His aim was to return to his homeland after finishing his training in Lhasa, and to work there as a *thangka* painter and writer.

Endings – Margins, the State and the Work of Hope

The theme of margins is important because it helps us to understand better the roles that Tashi, Yangzom and Pema ascribe to the Tibetan language within ongoing negotiations of the overpowering state-led development and continued nation building—not least through education and language policies—that affect ethnic Tibetans and disabled people in China. The interrelated linguistic and socio-political categories of 'disabled' and 'Tibetan' emerged in the writings and in my ethnography as key sites for negotiating Chinese nation building and civilizing 'disabled' Tibetans. The role of language is of particular importance to deaf Tibetans because communication barriers exist and deaf people struggle to overcome them when attempting to belong and participate in hearing Tibetan society.

While most older, deaf adults outside of LSS networks tended to reject the state-endorsed label for them as 'disabled' (except in gaining or maintaining disability allowances by the state and a reduced bus card), the graduates from LSS, in their writing inhabit these labels. Yangzom and Pema used them strategically to make their claims and to articulate their hopes for increased use of Tibetan in the future of deaf education. They also creatively reformulated the very category of 'Tibetan language' for deaf Tibetans as two-fold: on the one hand pertaining to their written 'mother tongue', and on the other hand to a signed 'father tongue'.

Through their writings and positions on the use of Tibetan, both Tashi and Yangzom were able to go beyond local social networks available to other deaf Tibetans in Lhasa, such as local *deaf worldings* and associated social networks. Many deaf Tibetans began to experience these as a way to feel less marginalized and to expand their social horizons, with Yangzom and Pema for instance, actively participating when free. But Tashi did not. Through his use and defense of the Tibetan language, Tashi actively moved towards mainstream society and participated in its 'fragmented civil

society’ around the study and use of Tibetan languages. This was for him perhaps a way to escape social and linguistic marginalization, if only momentarily so. With his ability in Tibetan and love for the language as expressed in his new blog, he could and did engage meaningfully with hearing Tibetans across the Tibetan areas of China and also in exile. He read a wide range of Tibetan sources online and in print and contributed to them through his own blog and written exchanges on other social media platforms. I would say his ability to do so was really quite unique and exceptional.

The hopes of Yangzom and Pema for the Tibetan written language as the *mayik* of deaf Tibetans, stood in stark contrast to an actual rather hopeless situation. A situation in which domains for the use of Tibetan were shrinking, and the usefulness of Tibetan even doubted by many Tibetan parents, pertaining to education and gaining a job. Several deaf Tibetan men and women who graduated from LSS thrived as *thanka* painters, tailors and as teachers at Special Schools, but none of them needed to know Tibetan to do these jobs. The majority of graduates worked long-hour, low-paid service sector jobs, often changing employers for various reasons, including many having experienced work-related exploitation and discrimination with regard to pay; and for them too Tibetan was not necessary and probably would not change anything in the way they were treated either. The more I spoke with Yangzom and Pema about this broader situation, the more we got to know each other and the more time passed, the more unfulfillable and unrealistic did the stated “hopeful wish of the disabled student” seem to become. What should we then make of their seemingly impossible hopes for the Tibetan language? Their claim to Tibetan as a panacea to heal the many shortcomings of deaf education and societal attitudes towards them?

In her work *The Paradox of Hope* (2010), anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly conceptualizes hope as a form of practice. This rings

true with my experience of Tibetans living in Lhasa, as does Mattingly’s argument that there are social and political hierarchies to how we ‘hope’. Hope appears particularly important for those in marginalized and insecure social positions. As a practice, hope paradoxically conspires with despair. Hope represents things we want. Yet whilst we strive towards it, hope also has an unachievable and unrealistic quality. Hope and hoping, then, may be particularly significant for those Tibetans living lives on the edge and living on multiple margins. Like for young deaf Tibetans. They live at the margins of hearing society, at the margins of education, and at the margins of accepted and understood forms of communicating, in a doubly-minoritized signed language and as explicit targets of an enormously large civilizing machine.

Living in Lhasa, even as a hearing and well-respected member of society is sometimes so desperate one can only live in it through practicing hope, as the famous proverb, attested for many years in Tibetan society in the PRC, goes:

Tibetans are ruined by hope
 (བོད་རི་བས་འབྱུང།)

Chinese are ruined by suspicion
 (བྱུ་དོགས་པས་འབྱུང།)

Tibetans in Lhasa appear to be experts in hoping for a better, more Tibetan future for themselves, in the midst of a climate that marginalizes them ever more. Perhaps deaf Tibetans have to be even better at it?

Theresia Hofer (PhD, UCL) is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol. Her research and teaching spans social, medical and linguistic anthropology and she has long-standing regional focus on the Greater Himalayas, especially Tibetan areas of China, as well as more recently Bhutan and Japan. Hofer's publications include *Bodies in Balance – The Art of Tibetan Medicine* (2014), *Medicine and Memory in Tibet: Amchi Physicians in an Age of Reform* (2018), both with University of Washington Press, as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters. Hofer also curates museum exhibitions and currently works on an ethnography of deaf Tibetans in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, China, for Gallaudet University Press (GUP).

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Endnotes

1. To protect the anonymity of my research participants, all personal names used in this article are pseudonyms, and some place names been changed.
2. The latter is a gestural repertoire shared between deaf Tibetans and between some deaf and hearing Tibetans, see Hofer 2018.
3. I had been acquainted and been friends with deaf Tibetans since 2007, formally starting the project in 2015, after a short pilot study in 2014.
4. On TSL language materials, see Hofer 2017. While the TDA was meant to assist deaf Tibetans across the TAR, their work was mainly limited to Lhasa due to lack of staff, funding and autonomy in decision making. It was one of 3 'DPOs' or 'Disabled People's Organizations', who were all firmly placed under the management and leadership of the Tibet Disabled People's Federation.
5. Worth noting here that word order in Chinese is SVO (subject verb object) and in Tibetan SOV (subject object verb). Grammar and lexicon are also totally different with the two languages being only very remotely related, less close even than Russian and French.
6. On general features and history of CSL, see Yang 2015.
7. The extra-curricular TDA-led Tibetan classes on weekends came to an end in 2014.
8. On codeswitching and mixing of spoken Tibetan and Chinese in Lhasa, the so-called *ramaluk ke*, or neither-goat-nor-sheep language, see Kelsang Yeshe 2008 and Tournadre 2003.
9. When Tibetans speak about the non-Tibetan areas of China, they tend to use the term *Gya* or *Gyanak* (Tibetan for "China"). However, when speaking or writing Chinese, the term *neidi* (Ch. "interior") is commonly used among Tibetans, in many publications translated as "mainland China". I use "inland China" or the "interior"

as translation for *neidi*, but “China” for the Tibetan *Gyanak* so as to preserve the strong sense of many Tibetans that “Tibet” is a categorically different place from “China”, even though it has been politically absorbed into the People’s Republic of China since 1950/51.

10. According to government reports as of 2022 the 7 government Special Schools housed a total of 1,057 “disabled students” while “4,600 disabled students were studying in ordinary schools” (Huaxia 2023).

11. Disabled people only tend to get an occasional mention, such as in well-known ethnographies of Tibetan-speaking Himalayan communities (for example as physically or mentally disabled monks and nuns in Nubri, Childs 2004), in works on education in Tibet with brief reference to ‘special education’ (Bass 1998: 206-209) and in the vast corpus of secular Tibetan literature, for example in medical texts and illustrations (Hofer 2023). In the case of blind and deaf people, there is a tendency for metaphorical references (such as in Kache Palu’s *Advice on the Art of Living*, cf. Bommarito 2017) rather than to blind people as living and breathing personalities and characters. For fuller accounts on the lives of blind people in Lhasa see Tenberken 2003; 2006, Zheng 2011, Walker 2006, and of deaf Tibetans and signed languages, see Hofer 2017; 2018; 2020; 2022; [forthcoming a]. TSL is also increasingly acknowledged in linguistic works on the Tibetan languages (Roche 2021, Hofer [forthcoming b]). On deaf and hard-of-hearing Tibetans in Indian exile, see Langri 2019.

12. In this article I will use ‘deaf’, as translation of Tibetan *önpa* (འཇོན་པ།) for all deaf, hard of hearing and late-deafened Tibetans, as there were no common linguistic markers in either signed, spoken or written Tibetan that mapped onto the ‘d/Deaf’ distinction commonly made in Deaf Studies. Ladd uses ‘deaf’ to refer to people who are audiologically deaf, ‘Deaf’ to those considering themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority, and d/Deaf when indicating the mixed nature of the two (2003). These distinctions are increasingly questioned by anthropologists

(Friedner and Kusters 2020).

13. See also Sagli and Fjeld 2011 and Sagli, Zhang, Ingstad and Fjeld 2012.

14. Reports also confirm that in Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu there are now boarding facilities for pre-school (kindergarten) children (Leibold and Dorjee 2023).

15. Human Rights Watch 2020 reports that in “June 2016, the Lhasa Education Bureau announced that Chinese was being used as the medium of instruction to teach mathematics in a majority of primary schools in the counties around Lhasa, including rural areas outside the region’s capital city. This was the first known direct admission by the government of a shift to Chinese-medium teaching in some classes within rural TAR primary schools.” <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/03/05/chinas-bilingual-education-policy-tibet/tibetan-medium-schooling-under-threat>

16. A 2008 TAR Education Bureau law stated that ethnic deaf Tibetans have a right to learning TSL at Special Schools in the TAR, but this never was enacted. The actual use of CSL, oral Chinese and signed Chinese as the mediums of instruction at LSS has been justified by teachers and LSS leadership, claiming there are not enough signs in TSL to teach course contents fully. This lack of putting the law into practice, aligns well with the larger civilizing project of ethnic minorities by the Chinese state, controlling aspects of ethnic identity on the margins and defining the relationship between central state and marginal people that make up the “multi-ethnic” People’s Republic of China (PRC).

17. Since 2010 the CDPF advocates the use of the term *can zhang* (Ch. 残障) for disability and *can zhang ren* (Ch. 残障人) for a disabled person, literally meaning “incomplete and obstructed”. This new term was chosen with the intention of hinting at society’s role in obstructing ‘disabled people’ and to thereby acknowledge the social model of disability, famously developed in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s with key premise that individuals are not disabled per se, but disabled by society, such as through lack of ramps or sign

language interpretation (cf. Barnes *et al.* 2002). The older term *can ji ren* was still the commonly used Chinese term for disabled person in Lhasa during my fieldwork in 2016-2017.

18. Students with intellectual disabilities or with multiple disabilities were taught in separate classes. Before the Blind School founded by Sabriye Tenberken had to close in 2016, there were only a handful of blind kids at the Special School and were learning in separate classes from the deaf students.

19. The same efforts were made by blind activists in Lhasa, changing for instance the terminology and perception from *shara* (ཞ་ར་) to *long pa* (ལོང་པ།) in Lhasa Tibetan. It is likely that *önpa* was previously a more common term for a deaf person found in literary sources, including in medical works, than in spoken Tibetan.

20. *Kukpa* had also commonly, but perhaps not always derogatively, been used for people with intellectual disabilities.

21. An alternative meaning of *kha yod lag yod* is ‘meaningful’ or ‘whole’, whereas *kha yod lag med*, means ‘absurd’ and ‘devoid of meaning’. So there might be a double meaning here.

22. This is at times enforced due to Tibetan also being the language of Buddhism, and as such backed up by powerful Buddhist institutions and personalities. None of the minoritized languages of Tibet have been able to muster this kind of ideological and practical support from the clergy, least of all, the users of the TSL.

23. It would be impossible for Tibetans who are profoundly deaf to gain Tibetan literacy through the medium of CSL and its pin-yin-based finger alphabet. CSL and its finger spelling system are ideal to develop literacy in Chinese, and worldwide all fingers spelling systems are key for deaf people developing literacy in their regional and/or national written languages (Miller *et al.* 2020). Only an oral/aural approach to deaf education would get around the use of such methods, for instance forcing deaf Tibetans to learn to speak. Such approaches have and by and

large been abandoned in contemporary deaf education, yet are returning somewhat via AVT therapy for Cochlear Implant users (Friedner 2022).

24. Although not a signed version of spoken or written Lhasa Tibetan, TSL does have a number of influences from the spoken and written language environment, including the TSL finger spelling system of the 30 consonants and 4 vowels, use of which is proven as the ‘highway’ for teaching deaf children to acquire literacy in Tibetan (Hofer 2017). The same is done by teachers of Dzongkha to deaf students in Bhutan, which has the same Tibetan script, but where they use a different finger spelling for the same 30 Tibetan consonants and 4 Tibetan vowels.

25. Already in July 1988, this was an issue for debate on Lhasa TV, see Bass 1998: 240.

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