Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the Universal Periodic Review of China Tibetology Research Center

—Boarding Schools in Xizang: An Optimal Approach to Ensuring the Right to Education for Children from Farming and Herding Families

1. Based on our research, we have found that recent Western media coverage of boarding schools in Xizang significantly diverges from the facts. The establishment of boarding schools in Xizang can be attributed to two primary reasons. Firstly, the scattered population in Xizang makes it challenging to provide education in close proximity to students' residences. Secondly, the mountainous terrain in Xizang makes it inconvenient for students to commute to school.

1.1 The Xizang Autonomous Region spans an area of 1.2 million square kilometers with a population of only 3.648 million (as of 2021), resulting in an average population density of 3.04 people per square kilometer. The population density is as low as 0.33 people per square kilometer in the western Ali region, while in the northern city of Naqu, it is 1.36 people per square kilometer. In pastoral areas, where households are widely dispersed, providing education nearby is challenging. Similarly, in agricultural areas, where villages are often small, local schooling would result in small schools with reduced educational quality.

1.2 The geographical environment and transportation conditions in Xizang pose significant challenges for students to commute to school on a daily basis. The southern Himalayan region and the eastern Hengduan Mountains are characterized by high mountains and deep valleys, making travel arduous. In the western and northern grassland areas, marshes

dominate during the summer half of the year, while the winter half is marked by snow, ice, and fierce winds. Despite the construction of 120,000 kilometers of roads in Xizang in recent years, many farming and herding families have recently emerged from poverty and cannot afford cars. Consequently, children from these families have to undertake long daily journeys to school on foot, exposing them to potential dangers and risks along the way.

2. We believe that currently in remote farming and herding areas, boarding schools stand as the epitome of ensuring the right to education for children from farming and herding backgrounds in Xizang. By bringing students together and providing on-campus accommodations, parents feel reassured to enroll their children when these schools enable children to access high-quality education while eliminating the necessity of long daily commutes and mitigating safety risks.

3. We believe that after decades of development, boarding schools in Xizang have developed distinct characteristics:

3.1 Most boarding schools in Xizang operate on a semi-boarding basis, with students staying at school from Monday to Friday and going home over the weekend. Since boarding schools in pastoral areas are far from students' homes, many schools adopt a system of "long weekends," where students attend school for two or four weeks continuously, followed by a 4-day or 8-day break. This system aims to provide extended time for students to spend with their families. Overall, students spend 200 days (40 weeks) in school each year and 165 days at home, allowing them ample time to have home education, including their traditional culture and mother tongue.

3.2 Boarding schools primarily target the children of farmers and herders

who live more than 2 kilometers away from school. However, other students also have the option to board voluntarily.

3.3 The government covers the expenses of boarding school students, including meals, accommodation, and tuition. In 2022, the average subsidy for each student reached RMB 4,000-5,000 yuan, with an average daily meal cost of RMB 21 yuan. This policy significantly reduces the financial burden on Tibetan farming and herding families, motivating parents to send their children to school.

3.4 In Xizang, boarding schools, like other schools in the region, practice bilingual education, teaching both Tibetan and Mandarin Chinese, the national common language. Moreover, most boarding schools offer foreign language courses. This “bilingual education” in Tibetan schools aligns with the language usage in Xizang, as learning and using the national common language, a global practice, fosters communication among different ethnic groups in Xizang, while Tibetan functions as a widely used social language. The bilingual education system encompasses two types of courses: “Type I” and “Type II”. Type I Courses provide Tibetan language instruction equivalent to major subjects such as the national common language and mathematics, with 4 to 5 classes per week. Type II Courses guarantee a minimum of 2 Tibetan language classes per week. Taking the city of Changdu in Eastern Xizang as an example, in the college entrance exams of the past three years, almost 94% of Tibetan students participated in the Tibetan language exam. This high participation rate indicates that the majority of Tibetan students have opted for Type I Courses, signifying their engagement in systematic Tibetan language education. Therefore, it can be confidently asserted that there are currently more individuals in Xizang who have mastered the Tibetan language than at any other point in history.

3.5 Boarding schools in Xizang have management systems with Tibetan characteristics. Each class has a “life teacher” responsible for students’ daily care. The schools prioritize nutritious meals, incorporating traditional Tibetan food such as Zanba and butter tea. Extracurricular activities, including traditional Tibetan songs and dances, during leisure time are provided. If a student gets sick, they can take a sick leave and their parents can freely visit them outside of class hours. Regular meetings between the school and parents are also conducted. The campus provides an ideal atmosphere for students to learn and use ethnic languages, ensuring that students’ proficiency in their mother tongue remains unaffected.

4. Based on our 30 years of observation, we firmly believe that the development of boarding school education in Xizang has significantly promoted high-quality education and cultivated a diverse range of talents for the region.

4.1 Boarding schools have maximized the educational rights of children from remote farming and herding families in Xizang. With boarding school education, rural students share equal high-quality educational resources with their urban peers. This approach has significantly reduced the urban-rural education gap and equipped rural Tibetan youth with the capacity to compete on an equal footing.

4.2 Boarding schools have nurtured a large number of highly qualified talents for the development of Xizang. Each year, nearly 30,000 college graduates emerge from Xizang, providing significant support for the region’s modernization.

4.3 The living and learning environments in boarding schools have had a positive impact on students' personal growth. For example, the provision of nutritious meals has improved students' physical well-being, leading to noticeable increases in their height, weight, and overall health. In boarding schools, students learn to navigate complex relationships and develop self-care skills, which receive positive feedback from parents.

4.4 Boarding schools are one of universally recognized educational models throughout human history, existing in sparsely populated regions worldwide. In China's central and western regions, boarding schools are also widely established. However, these schools have fundamental differences compared to the colonial-style boarding schools found in Canada, Australia, and the United States. In reality, boarding school education in Xizang and other places worldwide is diverse, humane, and vibrant, providing an excellent environment for numerous young people to learn and develop, paving the way for their bright futures.