

Testimony on the Impact of the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Violations on Children in China

China's Systematic Prohibition of Religious Life and Education Among Tibetan Children

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I offer this testimony based on lived experience, direct observation, and sustained engagement with educational and religious practices in Tibetan regions. What is unfolding is not a series of isolated policies, but a coherent system that violates children in practicing religion, culture, and maintaining Tibetan identity.

Over the past nearly seven decades, Tibetans—both collectively and individually—have continued to struggle for the fundamental right to practice their Buddhist faith. This has not been a single moment of resistance, but a sustained, intergenerational effort to preserve religious identity under mounting pressure.

During the Cultural Revolution, religious institutions across Tibet were forcibly shut down, and religious leaders were imprisoned. Monasteries—once central to education, culture, and spiritual life—were dismantled or completely prohibited. This period marked a profound rupture in the transmission of Tibetan Buddhist knowledge and practice.

Since 1995, the Chinese authorities politicized the recognition of the reincarnation of the Tenth Panchen Lama, one of the highest spiritual figures in Tibetan Buddhism. At just five years old, the child was recognized by H. H. The 14th Dalai Lama was stolen from his community and disappeared from public view. For Tibetans, his absence is not only a personal tragedy, but a profound violation of religious freedom—the denial of a people's right to recognize and be guided by their own spiritual leader.

In 2008, widespread protests erupted across the Tibetan plateau. Tibetans from all walks of life called not only for basic freedoms, but specifically for the return of their spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and for the restoration of genuine religious freedom. These demands were met with force, and the underlying grievances remained unaddressed.

Following the uprising, 159 Tibetans, both inside Tibet and in exile, have self-immolated. These are extreme and tragic expressions of desperation, undertaken with the consistent message of calling for religious freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama. Rather than engaging with these appeals, China has responded with increased restrictions and violations.

Having failed to crush the Tibetan spirit of resistance and their religious faith over three generations, now the Chinese government decided to target the most vulnerable population. Since around 2016, policies expanded to include the large-scale placement of roughly a million Tibetan children into state-run colonial boarding schools and preschools. These institutions systematically distance children from their families, language, and religious traditions at a formative age, raising serious concerns about the long-term survival of Tibetan Buddhist religion, language, and culture.

Despite decades of clear and repeated appeals, Tibetan voices have not been meaningfully acknowledged. Instead of listening, Beijing's response has been to further tighten control. On March 12, 2026, China enacted the "Ethnic Unity and Progress" law, which provides a legal framework that, in practice, facilitates deeper intrusion into Tibetan religious life and other minorities as well. In the name of promoting unity, this law is being used to justify policies that restrict religious expression and fundamentally reshape Tibetan cultural and spiritual institutions.

This testimony reflects not only a history of restriction, but also a persistent and deeply rooted effort by Tibetans to defend their faith, identity, and way of life.

First, legal restrictions now prohibit individuals under the age of 18 from entering monastic life. In Tibetan society, this is not a minor administrative rule—it interrupts a centuries-old pathway through

which children begin religious education, moral training, and cultural learning. Traditionally, many monks entered monasteries as children, where they memorized scriptures, studied philosophy, and cultivated discipline. By banning this entry point, the law effectively reduces the future monastic population. In practice, families who once sent a young son to a monastery now face penalties or surveillance, and monasteries themselves are held accountable for compliance. Over time, this creates a demographic decline within religious institutions and weakens their role as centers of learning.

This legal framework is reinforced by visible public policies. In many areas, signs are posted at the entrances of temples and monasteries explicitly warning that children are not allowed to enter. These signs are not symbolic; they are enforced. Children who approach religious spaces are turned away, often in front of their families, creating an early psychological boundary between youth and religious life.

At the institutional level, monasteries themselves are undergoing transformation. Chinese authority-directed programs require the integration of political ideology—often framed as the “three consciousnesses”—into religious settings. Monks are expected to study these ideas alongside, or sometimes in place of, traditional Buddhist teachings. At the same time, monasteries are increasingly restructured as tourist destinations, where economic extraction and state control take precedence over spiritual education. Surveillance systems—both technological and administrative—are embedded within these spaces, reshaping them from places of faith into monitored environments. The cumulative effect is a redefinition of what a monastery is: no longer primarily a center of learning and practice, but a regulated and surveilled institution.

Children are also directly affected through schooling policies. Schools deliberately structure calendars and rules to restrict religious engagement. Holidays are emphasized in ways that detach them from religious meaning, while explicit notices forbid students from participating in the simplest religious activities during summer and winter breaks—even when they are with their families. At the same time, Chinese national festivals are promoted and normalized, gradually replacing Tibetan religious festivals in children's lived experience. This is not simply cultural shifts; it is a reordering of symbolic importance.

Control extends further into the religious sphere through the regulation of reincarnation practices—a core element of Tibetan Buddhism. The recognition of reincarnated lamas is tightly controlled, and religious leaders face pressure and intimidation to align their teachings with CCP ideology. This intervention reaches into the doctrinal heart of Tibetan Buddhism, altering both authority structures and spiritual continuity.

Within the formal education system, religious content is almost entirely absent. Textbooks and curricula exclude religious knowledge, philosophical traditions, and ethical frameworks derived from Buddhism. In urban areas especially, children are not only denied access to religious activities but are actively encouraged to distance themselves from them. Over time, the opportunities for collective religious practice—so central to Tibetan social life—are minimized in both time and space. This has a profound impact on how children perceive religion: not as a living, communal practice, but as something distant, restricted, or even discouraged.

The long-term consequences are already becoming visible. A growing number of Tibetan youths are being shaped in environments where Buddhism is absent, marginalized, or reframed negatively. This produces not just secularization, but a form of alienation from their own religious tradition. If current trends continue, future generations will lose a coherent religious identity altogether. This is not limited to Tibetans; similar patterns may affect other minority communities in China.

At a broader level, these policies contribute to the expansion of a CCP-centered ideological framework, in which loyalty and identity are increasingly aligned with the ruling political structure. The result is a gradual contraction of the religious knowledge system that has historically coexisted with social life in the region. As religious institutions weaken and intergenerational transmission is disrupted, an alternative worldview—explicitly atheist and politically oriented—fills the space.

In sum, what we are witnessing is a systematic reconfiguration of childhood, education, and religion. It operates through law, policy, institutional transformation, and curriculum design. Its effects are cumulative and intergenerational. And at its core, it raises a fundamental question: what happens to a society when its youngest members are structurally separated from the spiritual and cultural traditions that once defined it?

RECOMMENDATIONS TO U.S. GOVERNMENTS CONCERNED WITH TIBETAN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS:

1. Support independent and unfettered monitoring through mechanisms such as the United Nations Human Rights Council. International experts must be granted real access to Tibetan regions. Without direct observation, these policies will continue without accountability.
2. Treat this as a clear violation of international child rights. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to culture, language, and religion. Systematically denying Tibetan children access to monasteries, religious learning, and community practice is not incidental—it is structural.
3. Where responsibility is identifiable, apply targeted measures, including sanctions, against those implementing these policies. Accountability should be practical, not symbolic.
4. Increase support for Tibetan communities in exile. Language, religious education, and cultural knowledge must be preserved where they still can be freely practiced.
5. Raise these concerns consistently and directly in all engagements with the Chinese Communist Party leadership. Monasteries must remain centers of learning and faith—not instruments of political control.
6. Continue to demand transparency regarding the fate and whereabouts of the Panchen Lama recognized by the 14th Dalai Lama. This is not only an individual case—it represents the denial of a people's right to their own spiritual leadership.
7. Ensure that economic, academic, and technological partnerships do not contribute to systems that erode cultural and religious identity. Human rights must be part of all forms of engagement—not separate from them.
8. Call for the immediate abolition of the colonial boarding school system in all meetings with Chinese government representatives, including during visits by Chinese leaders, visits to the People's Republic of China, and high-level meetings of intergovernmental fora.

Thank You!