

Quest for education creating graying ghost towns at top of the world

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A new study by Dartmouth Professor Sienna Craig and researchers from Case Western Reserve University, Washington University and Oxford University raises the specter of a massive population decline in ethnic Tibetan communities in Nepal's highlands. Credit: Dartmouth College

Ethnic Tibetan communities in Nepal's highlands are rapidly shrinking as more parents send their children away for a better education and modern

careers, a trend that threatens to create a region of graying ghost towns at the top of the world, according to a study that includes Dartmouth College.

The findings, which have major social and demographic implications for the Himalayan region, appear in the journal [*Mountain Research and Development*](#). A PDF of the study is available on request.

Taken together, the outmigration of young people, a low birth rate and population aging raises the specter of a massive [population decline](#) that has already exceeded 30 percent in the past decade in some communities, says study co-author Dartmouth Associate Professor Sienna Craig. The study predicts a further population decline of 50 percent to 60 percent in the next decade, a trend not likely to be slowed by tourism, niche agriculture or other potential economic opportunities that might prompt the "educational migrants" to return to their native homes.

Population decline in poor, rural or mountainous regions of the world isn't new, but this is perhaps the first documented case where large-scale outmigration is driven not by disease, famine, war, colonial policies, forced assimilation and manual labor markets, but by parental quest to improve their very young children's education. That seemingly temporary choice often leads to permanent relocation when those children grow up and – with their parents' support – seek professional careers in urban settings that they have become accustomed to in Nepal, India and further abroad.

The outmigration stems from the 1960s when China's Cultural Revolution closed Tibet's monasteries where many rural children were educated, prompting the monasteries and an estimated 100,000 Tibetans to flee to Nepal and India. Once there, the monastery boarding schools reopened in urban areas along with new secular boarding schools

operated by the exiles. As Buddhists, Tibetans hold low status in the Hindu caste system and are economically and politically marginalized to the point that Nepal's national government has never developed basic services such educational and healthcare systems.

The researchers conducted household demographic and economic surveys in three villages in highland valleys of Nepal along the border of the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. The residents, who descend from ethnic Tibetans who migrated from the Tibetan Plateau at least 700 years ago, are subsistence farmers, herders and traders. The researchers found the religious and secular schools – which now include at least 24 monasteries, 15 convents and 35 boarding schools in Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal and India – are seen by ethnic Tibetan highland parents as a way to give their children a "Tibetan" education that leads to social and economic advancement in urban areas abroad.

Previous studies on Tibetan migration and fertility have focused on migrants in their places of destination, but little research has been done on migration's impact on fertility in the sending areas. In the new study, researchers found that nearly 70 percent of females ages 15-19 live away from their native villages, the vast majority in boarding schools or convents. Among women ages 20-29 (typically the highest fertility group) who are educational migrants, relatively few are married and having children, while many have become nuns. Previous studies have shown that population growth in ethnically Tibetan communities traditionally has been moderated by a high rate of female non-marriage as a result of religious celibacy and fraternal polyandry (the practice in which two or more brothers take a common wife), a moderate level of marital fertility, high non-marital fertility and high infant and childhood mortality.

The outmigration trend runs contrary to previous concerns over population growth in Nepal as a whole, which has remained significant at

a rate of 1.35 percent a year during the last decade. But previous studies show that total population data in the Himalayan region mask considerable local variation in the highest-altitude settlements populated by ethnic Tibetans.

Provided by Dartmouth College

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