

Economic Development, Labor Transference, and Minority Education in the West of China¹

Since China formulated and implemented “the strategy of developing the West”, as well as the relevant preferential policies in 1999, investment from the central government, the coastal area, and abroad has been flowing into the western provinces and autonomous regions of China². Many major projects are currently being planned and promoted. It is hoped that “development of the West” will serve as a new stage on which the economy of China can maintain growth in the 21st century. Therefore, “development of the West” has become the focus of enterprises and the media, both internationally and domestically.

The western region of China covers a vast, but sparsely-populated area³. In general, this area is characterized by fragile ecological environments, undeveloped infrastructures, weak industrial foundations, engagement in agricultural activities, and a shortage of skilled labor (in both technical and management fields). It is also the major area where the ethnic minorities of China live⁴. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to promote the process of modernization based on local human resources and industrial foundation. These characteristics determine that any rapid economic development in this area in the 21st century will be associated with changes of social structure, transformation of economic structure, East-west labor transfer, and the adjustment of ethnical relations.

In the wake of significant investments in the infrastructures of transportation, communication, irrigation, energy sources and environment, as well as in processing new projects to develop manufacturing, commerce and service industries in the West, the movement of a floating population from the East to West will need to be addressed. The labor market in the West will not only expand in size, but will also have to transform its inner structure. As the western provinces are the regions where several important ethnic minorities in China live, migration and labor floating will bring the Han majority and these local ethnic minorities together for communication and interactions to an

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² For example, 16.3 billion, 5.8 billion, and 15 billion U.S. dollars have been invested in transportation, communication, and irrigation projects respectively in the West during 2000-2001 (“Focus” Program of CCTV, April 2, 2002).

³ “The West” in China is a term referring the western regions, which include Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, Gansu Province, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Yunnan Province, Sichuan Province, Guizhou Province, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and western part of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The more developed Shaanxi Province and Chongqing Municipality are sometimes also included in the “Strategic Development Plans of the West” as the regional motors for the area development. The total area of the “West” of China is about 5.8 million square meters.

⁴ Over 80% of the ethnic minority population (e.g. Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak, Hui, Zhuang, Mongolian, Yi, Miao, etc.) live in this area.

unprecedented extent. Under the circumstances of new economic development, there is not only a broad space for the cooperation among different ethnic groups, but also an inevitable competition among them for individual opportunities and group interests. The ethnic relations in the West of China therefore will enter a new phase.

National unity and social stability are the most basic prerequisites for the successful implementation of “the strategy of developing the West”. Close attention needs to be paid to labor transference from the East to the West, and its impact on the ethnic relations during the process of economic development in the West. The changes of supply-and-demand relationship in labor markets in the West should be systematically analyzed. If disadvantages to ethnic minorities in local labor markets are discovered, attention should be given to measures to promote education and skill-training of local ethnic minorities. This article attempts to analyze the structure of labor markets in the West, and to compare the structural differences between the Han labor force and the labor force of local ethnic minorities. Based on the analysis, the possibility of improving the competitiveness of the minority people by means of educational measures will also be explored.

1. The Major Characteristics of the Labor Force in the West

Based on macro-structural perspective analyses of the official statistics, the labor force in the western part of China has the following major characteristics:

(1) The labor force in the western provinces and autonomous regions is mainly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Based on the statistics from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses of China, Table 1 indicates the occupational structure of several ethnic minorities in western provinces in comparison with the nationwide statistics of the Han and the Hui. In order to get a better understanding of the labor force distribution in the western provinces, we use Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XAR) as an example (see Table 2).

Table 1. Occupational structure of the major ethnic groups in western area (%)

Ethnic group	Professionals		Leaders of government institution & enterprise		Office staff		Labor in commerce and services		Labor in agriculture **		Workers in manufacture & transport		Others	Total
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990/2000	1990/2000
Uyghur	4.1	5.7	0.9	0.8	1.1	1.9	3.6	5.5	84.1	80.4	6.2	5.9	0.0	100.0
Kazak	8.8	9.7	1.8	1.9	1.8	3.2	2.9	3.4	80.3	77.1	4.4	4.8	0.0	100.0
Tibetan	6.2	5.3	1.3	1.0	1.1	1.8	1.5	2.5	86.2	86.7	3.6	2.6	0.0	100.0
Mongol	9.4	8.3	2.7	2.2	2.9	3.7	5.0	6.8	70.3	70.8	9.6	8.3	0.1	100.0
Khalkhas	6.7	8.0	1.6	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.6	85.4	84.2	2.7	2.0	0.0	100.0
Hui*	6.1	6.3	2.2	2.2	2.3	3.9	9.2	13.8	61.7	59.6	18.4	14.1	0.1	100.0
Han*	5.4	5.8	1.8	1.7	1.8	3.2	5.6	9.5	69.6	63.1	15.8	16.6	0.0	100.0

* All the statistics in this table are nationwide statistics. The first five ethnic groups mainly live in the West. The statistics about the Han and the Hui are data for entire China, not only covering Han and Hui in the West.

** “Agriculture” includes farming, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery.

Source: Bureau of the National Census, 1993:764-769; 2002: 821-824.

Table 2. Occupational structure of the major ethnic groups in XAR (%)

Ethnic group	Professionals		Leaders of government institution & enterprise		Office staff		Labor in commerce and services		Labor in agriculture**		Workers in manufacture & transport		Others	Total
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990/2000	1990/2000
Uyгур	4.1	5.7	0.9	0.8	1.1	1.9	3.6	5.5	84.1	80.4	6.2	5.9	0.0	100.0
Kazak	8.8	9.7	1.8	1.9	1.8	3.2	2.9	3.4	80.3	77.1	4.4	4.8	0.0	100.0
Mongol	14.0	14.8	2.9	2.9	3.2	6.2	3.8	6.1	67.6	61.5	8.1	8.5	0.2	100.0
Khalkhas	6.7	8.0	1.6	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.6	85.4	84.2	2.7	2.0	0.0	100.0
Hui	5.3	5.5	1.8	2.1	2.0	3.5	8.7	15.4	66.9	60.7	15.1	12.7	0.1	100.0
Han	12.4	11.1	4.5	4.0	4.5	6.1	9.1	17.2	38.1	36.8	31.2	24.7	0.2	100.0

* "Agriculture" includes farming, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery.

Source: The Census Office of Xinjiang Autonomous Region, 1992: 532-535; 2002: 572-579.

Comparing the data in Table 2 with those in Table 1, the occupational structure of the labor forces of Uyгур, Kazak and Khalkhas⁵—three ethnic minorities that mainly inhabit in Xinjiang — remained the same. A significant portion of the Han population in Xinjiang moved there in response to the governmental policy of “assisting the borderland” in the 1950s, after the establishment of the PRC. Only 38% of the Han went in for farming. In contrast, the local ethnic minorities, especially the Uyгур, the Khalkhas, and the Kazak, were mostly engaged in agriculture and livestock husbandry (around 80%). The situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province and Gansu Province is roughly the same. In Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the percentage of Mongolian technical staff topped that of all other ethnic groups, while the percentage of production workers for the Hui group was only less than that of the Han. Also, the percentage of the Han in the second, third, fifth and seventh columns were higher than that of other ethnic groups. Thus, compared with other ethnic groups who are chiefly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, Han, Hui and Mongolians would have relatively more opportunities to join those non-agricultural development projects in Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

Comparing the data of the 1990 and 2000 censuses shows that the percentage of all ethnic groups engaged in agriculture reduced during 1990-2000. Some groups increased the percentage of professionals and commerce and services in the total labor force. These changes indicate the structural trends in the local economy in the West follow the system reform of ownership.

(2) The non-agricultural labor force in western provinces is chiefly engaged in state-owned enterprises.

The western part of China covers several provinces and autonomous regions. We use the Xinjiang Autonomous Region as an example of the distribution of the non-agricultural labor force by ownership structure (Table 3). In 1998, almost all those who were engaged in agriculture industry, but fell into the category of “workers” instead of “farmers”, worked in state farms, including state livestock farms and forestry bureaus (99.9%). For those working in non-agricultural industries, the workers under state-owned

⁵ The group is called “Kirghiz” in Central Asia.

enterprises were 83%. Nearly 90% of the minority manpower worked for state-owned organizations.

Table 3: the distribution of the working labor force by ownership in XAR (1999)

	XAR		Han		Ethnic minorities	
	10,000	%	10,000	%	10,000	%
All those working labor	270.93	100.00	190.34	100.00	80.59	100.00
State organizations	238.43	88.00	166.14	87.29	72.29	89.70
Collective enterprises	18.63	6.88	12.86	6.75	5.77	7.16
Others (private, foreign, etc)	13.87	5.12	11.34	5.96	2.53	3.14
All those in agriculture	77.57	100.00	60.09	-	19.05	-
State organizations	77.46	99.86	-	-	-	-
Collective enterprises	0.06	0.08	-	-	-	-
Others (private, foreign, etc)	0.05	0.06	-	-	-	-
All those in non-agri. industries	193.36	100.00	138.65	-	61.54	-
State organizations	160.97	83.25	-	-	-	-
Collective enterprises	18.57	9.60	-	-	-	-
Others (private, foreign, etc)	13.82	7.15	-	-	-	-
All those who work for the central-government-affiliated organizations in Xinjiang	107.39	100.00	95.56	100.00	11.83	100.00
Agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery	51.83	48.26	47.21	49.40	4.62	39.05
Non-agricultural industries	55.56	51.74	48.35	50.60	7.21	60.95

Source: the Statistics Bureau of XAR, 2000: 118-119, 124.

Based on the data for Xinjiang, most of those who are currently engaged in non-agricultural industries in the West still work for the traditional state-owned economic sector (87%). Both their method of employment and the current management mechanism belong to the traditional planned economic system. However, among the various economic organizations that will spring up with the development of the West, stock enterprises, joint ventures, foreign companies and private enterprises will assume a large percentage. Also, the infrastructure construction projects invested by the state will be mainly carried out in the process of competitive “bidding”. At present, many construction enterprises based in coastal areas have already rearranged their human resources, upgraded their equipment, and have been reformed their employment and distribution mechanisms according to market principles. Although the state-owned construction companies in the West enjoy geographical advantages, they do not really have any superiority over those coming from coastal areas in the future competition. The existing state-owned enterprises are confronted with the reform of their ownership and employment mechanism. Therefore, those laborers in the West who have been working for the state-owned enterprises under the planned economic system over a half-century have to adjust according to market competition.

(3) The educational achievement of the ethnic minorities in the West is uneven.

From the census statistics, there is not much difference between the educational achievement of the labor force in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, and that of the labor force in coastal areas. However, in other western provinces, the illiteracy percentage is comparatively high, while the proportion of those with college education to the population is relatively low. In Qinghai Province, the situation is mixed — 0.4% of the labor force has received college education, but the illiteracy percentage there is also quite

high (61%) (see Table 4). Although the educational foundation in the western part of China was very weak before 1949, there is still a percentage of highly educated individuals in the West in the 1990s. This is closely related to several immigration waves resulting from governmental policies of “assisting the borderland” and “building the three fronts” after the establishment of the People’s Republic.

Table 4. The educational achievement of the population aged 6 or above in western and coastal provinces (1990) (%)

	4-year university or college graduates	2-3 year university or college graduates	Professional school graduates	Senior mid-sch graduates	Junior mid-sch graduates	Primary school graduates	Illiterate or half-illiterate	Total
Minority population in western provinces:								
Inner Mongolia	0.8	1.3	2.8	10.0	26.1	41.2	17.8	100.0
Xinjiang	0.5	0.6	2.3	4.8	16.2	51.9	23.7	100.0
Qinghai	0.4	0.4	1.4	2.1	9.3	25.5	60.9	100.0
Ningxia	0.3	0.6	1.1	3.3	14.0	33.0	47.7	100.0
Guangxi	0.2	0.4	1.3	5.2	19.5	53.0	20.4	100.0
Yunnan	0.2	0.3	1.0	2.0	11.5	42.4	42.6	100.0
Guizhou	0.2	0.3	1.1	2.2	13.4	42.2	40.6	100.0
Tibet	0.0	0.3	1.0	0.5	3.0	21.9	73.3	100.0
The population in coastal provinces (including minorities):								
Jiangsu	0.6	1.0	1.5	8.2	29.5	38.9	20.3	100.0
Fujian	0.6	0.8	1.6	6.5	19.5	50.0	21.0	100.0
Zhejiang	0.5	0.8	1.4	6.4	26.1	43.6	21.2	100.0
Guangdong	0.5	1.0	1.6	8.7	26.6	46.6	15.0	100.0
Shandong	0.4	0.7	1.6	6.5	28.7	41.2	20.9	100.0

* The 2000 provincial census data on education for minority groups as a whole are not available.

** Sichuan Province is not included in this table because Chongqing that became a municipality later still belonged to Sichuan in 1990.

Source: Census Bureau, 1993: 700-703, 30-32.

From the census statistics, it can hardly be said that the educational achievement of most of the minority labor forces in the western areas is strikingly inferior to that of the Han nationally (Table 5). However, comparing the quality of the labor forces of different ethnic groups in a western region, the gap is still evident (Table 6). For instance, in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, 9.3% of the Han received university or college education (2- 4 years or more in universities), and junior and senior middle school graduates together constitute 49.8% of the Han population. In contrast, the corresponding percentages of the Uygur, which is the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, are 2.7% and 28.9% respectively.

The Han and Hui population in Xinjiang have a higher education as compared with these two groups at the national level. The percentage of Han college graduates was only 3.9% in whole China, much lower than the percentage of 9.3% in Xinjiang. This also indicates that a certain number of the Han population in the West were those sent to the area by the government in the “Assistance Programs” in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, in Table 2, changes in the occupational structure explore the new migration trends since the release of migration control and system reform began in the late 1970s. The percentage of the Han engaged in professional and government jobs reduced (from 12.4% and 4.5% to 11.1% and 4.0% respectively) while the Han percentage engaged in commerce and services increased significantly (from 9.1% to 17.2%). Low quality Han

labor from other provinces replaced the better-educated Han in the two-direction labor transference in the 1990s.

Table 5. Educational achievement of the minorities mainly living in the West (2000) (%)

	Graduates with MA or Ph.D	University graduates	Professional school graduates	Senior middle school graduates	Junior middle school graduates	Primary school graduates	Never in school	Total %
Mongolian	0.1	5.1	4.6	10.2	34.1	37.3	7.9	100.0
Kazak	0.0	4.1	5.6	7.5	30.4	48.4	3.9	100.0
Uygur	0.0	2.7	3.6	4.3	24.6	53.1	11.6	100.0
Kirgiz	0.0	3.2	5.2	4.7	19.7	56.9	10.4	100.0
Tibetan	0.0	1.3	2.5	1.7	7.7	35.2	51.6	100.0
Hui*	0.1	4.0	3.5	8.3	29.0	36.8	18.3	100.0
Han*	0.1	3.8	3.4	8.8	37.3	37.6	9.0	100.0

* All the statistics in the above table are nationwide statistics. The Han and Hui covered in this table refer to not only those Han and Hui living in the West.

* This table is calculated for the population at age 6 and above.

* The "univ. graduates" include those with 2-4 year study in colleges and universities.

Source: National Census Bureau, 2002: 563-567.

Table 6. The educational achievement of the ethnic groups in Xinjiang (2000)

	Graduates with MA or Ph.D	University graduates	Professional school graduates	Senior middle school graduates	Junior middle school graduates	Primary school graduates	Never in school	Total %
Mongolian	0.0	8.3	8.8	11.3	30.1	36.6	4.9	100.0
Kazak	0.0	4.1	5.6	7.5	30.4	48.4	3.9	100.0
Uygur	0.0	2.7	3.6	4.3	24.6	53.1	11.6	100.0
Kirgiz	0.0	3.2	5.2	4.7	19.7	56.9	10.4	100.0
Hui*	0.0	3.2	3.7	6.4	31.0	42.6	13.1	100.0
Han*	0.1	9.2	6.4	13.2	36.6	27.8	6.8	100.0

* This table is calculated for the population at age 6 and above.

* The "univ. graduates" include those with 2-4 year study in colleges and universities.

Source: Census Bureau of XAR, 2002: 312-319.

The recent "development strategy of the West" initiated a new stage of migration to the West. When the new economy occupies a leading position in the future economic development of the West, higher education will become a key factor in the competition in labor markets. Some migration streams might be reversed, and better-educated labor will move into the West again, as the 1950s, although the incentives has completely switched from supporting political movement to searching personal economic opportunities.

(4) A disparity of knowledge level and factual working ability underlies educational achievement in statistical records

When analyzing official statistics of the educational level of the population in the western area, attention needs to be paid to the fact that a large percentage of the local minority population received their education at minority schools, where their minority language was the teaching tool. This fact has two ramifications: first, there is a striking gap between the proficiency in Chinese and other subjects of these students and those who graduated from Han schools or received their education where the Chinese was the teaching language. Second, their minority language proficiency will be useful when

customers they encounter in their work are local minorities who do not have a good mastery of Chinese.

At primary and high schools for ethnic minorities, the starting point of students is relatively low, and their Chinese proficiency is poor. Since these schools use the minority languages as the teaching tool, the academic achievement of the students is usually unsatisfactory. It restricts further education and employment; and results in difficulties for those admitted to universities. Comparatively speaking, those members of ethnic minorities who use Mandarin Chinese as their oral language (such as Hui and Manzu) find themselves in a favorable position in their study and employment.

A current phenomenon in the higher education of ethnic minorities is that in their pursuit of quantity or “standard-line”, some areas lowered their grade requirement for minority students, and thus worsened the quality of their education. Two problems exist with this practice. First, under the preferential policies for minority students, the university admission standard is lowered, which results in a poor foundation for students. Second, both examination scores and the working ability of students are low, because many courses are instructed in minority language. This is primarily due to the poor quality of textbooks, and less experienced teachers using minority languages, largely due to historical reasons.

Further, there are no strict requirements in colleges and universities towards minority students. Their examinations are simpler and their course requirements are looser. These factors collectively result in general low academic achievement and employment difficulties for some minority students after their graduation. Proceeding from their professional needs, some employers require applicants to have not only a good mastery of Chinese language, but also a certain grasp of English. In addition, they also consider the academic achievement of the students in their major subjects, and accept only those with outstanding scores. Therefore, the minority students may sometimes find themselves less competitive.

Comparatively speaking, employment opportunities where some advantages of minority students can be utilized (e.g. salesman in rural area, business liaison with the Central Asian countries, etc.) will take up only a small percentage of all employment opportunities provided by the development of the society and the economy. Attention has to be paid to this quantitative limitation when examining the transformation of the employment structure in the West of China.

2. The traditional planned economy and the employment of minority students

Under the system of planned economy, preferential treatment was given to the minority students at schools at different levels, from entrance to graduation. The government at all levels formulated policies in favor of minority students, such as increasing the scores of all minority candidates at the National University Entrance Examination. In some areas, such as the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, a certain percentage of those admitted into universities have to be minority students, regardless of their entrance examinations scores. Generally, school records for minority students, especially those educated where their minority language is the teaching language, are comparatively low. However, under the employment system of the planned economy, minority graduates from universities and professional schools were guaranteed positions

by the government, despite low academic performance. As most of these minority students majored in liberal arts (especially their native languages, history, Chinese and philosophy, etc.), they usually became executive officers in government organizations or other state-owned institutions. Those who majored in other specialties were usually sent to the subsidiary enterprises of the government. Most of them joined the management, and only a few became technical workers. In the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, all the institutions of higher education combined had an enrollment of 47,464 students (20,941 of them were minority students) and all the professional schools combined had an enrollment of 82,242 students (41,617 of them were minority students) in 1998. The minority student percentages were 44.1% and 50.6% respectively (The Statistics Bureau of XAR, 1999: 608, 615). There are about 5,000 minority students graduating from universities or colleges and about 10,000 graduating from professional schools annually.

Under the planned economic system, the graduates from university and professional school who are from ethnic minorities were guaranteed employment by the government. Under that economic accounting system, these state-owned institutions did not need to be concerned with the working efficiency of their staff members, nor did they need to consider labor cost. When these minority graduates were assigned to factories, the funds to cover their salary, subsidies, housing and health care were sent to this factory monthly from the government. Sometimes, the job assignment of minority graduates was performed as a political task—the implementation of the government policies towards ethnic minorities.

Under the market economic system, the enterprises recruit and dismiss their employees at their own discretion, and the labor force will inevitably move from enterprise to enterprise. Enterprises will hire or discharge employees according to their own needs and the performance of their employees, regardless of whether they are from minority groups or the Han. Minority students who entered universities under the preferential policy of the government are likely to be confronted with employment difficulties if they are not professionally competitive. Although they have been recruited, the possibility exists for them to get fired under the competitive mechanism of evaluation. Therefore, the competition in the labor market of the non-state-owned economic sector that minority students majoring in science, engineering, medicine and agriculture will be intense, due to their poor professional foundation, working ability and language barrier.

Generally, the minority students prefer employment in government institutions. However, along with the deepening of the system reform, the function of government institutions is being transformed, the number of government officers is being reduced, and the demand for the professional capacity of government officers is being heightened. As a result, the number of those recruited into government institutions will be limited in the future, and those already employed will be under pressure of “employment via competition”—some of them will inevitably be laid off⁶. Therefore, new graduates will be faced with diverse unfavorable conditions when they seek employment, while current employees of state-owned enterprises will possibly find themselves in danger of being

⁶ In 1999, the total number of employees working in government institutions were 0.245 million, the total number of employees working in government managed institutions were 0.571 million. The two together consists of 4.6% of the total population of XAR (Statistical Bureau of XAR, 2000:123-124). The percentage in China as a whole was only 2.8%. Therefore, it is very unlikely for government institutions to increase the size of their employees.

laid off during the transformation of personnel system. When minority graduates find themselves in sharp contrast with Han graduates in terms of getting employed or getting laid off, the difficulties and pressure that they face may arouse ethnical resentment. Moreover, external enterprises may discriminate against minority people for lack of knowledge about the traditional cultures and religions of the minorities in western China. For example, some may worry that the religious activities of Muslims during work such as daily praying or fasting will affect their work efficiency. This problem can be avoided to some extent if the government enhances the publicity of its minority policies and the introduction of the minority cultures. The disparity in knowledge level and language barrier will remain a more important, more profound, more common and more lasting factor that affects the employment of the minority people.

During the process of labor force marketization in the West of China, if new graduates encounter a large number of former graduates in seeking for employment, the social stability and ethnical relations in that region will be negatively affected. An accidental incident would be likely to cause extensive reaction.

3. Economic structural adjustment and the question of human resources in the development of the West of China

The development of the West of China in the 21st century does not address quantitative growth in the productive values of traditional agricultural, animal husbandry and processing industrial output. Instead, it focuses on the readjustment of economic structure (i.e. introducing new economy into the West) and of the ownership structure (diversifying the ownership system and promoting private enterprises) during the continuous process of reform and opening-up. Modernization and industrialization are usually accompanied by the transference of the labor force from the primary industry to the secondary industry, then to the tertiary industry successively⁷. Experience drawn from the economic development of the coastal areas shows that not only a large number of rural laborers moved into the non-agricultural sector in cities and towns, but also major changes have occurred in the ownership structure. Newly employed young people did not enter the state-owned enterprises through the employment channels of the traditional planned economy. On the other hand, some staff members of the state-owned enterprises were either laid off or re-employed in the non-state-owned economic sector. During the marketization process of the labor force, they have to learn new skills, and also how to adjust to new management rules and interpersonal relations. Along with the smash of the “iron rice bowl” (lifelong job), the old codes of conduct and ways of life formed under the old economic system have to be changed.

At the initial stage of the reform and opening-up, special economic zones in the coastal areas provided investors from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and overseas with the most convenient infrastructure conditions, and with a relatively high quality labor force. Currently, twenty years after China adopted the reform and opening-up policy, those foreign investors and joint ventures that wish to start their undertakings in the West of China can choose their employees from not only the local labor, but also the working force of the coastal areas. Since those from the East have been better adjusted to the market mechanism of employment in the non-state-owned sector in terms of skills and

⁷ Refer to “Clark-Fisher hypothesis (United Nations, 1980: 61).

work attitude, the local labor force (Han or ethnic minorities) will have to bear great competitive pressure.

The development of the West requires capital, but it needs qualified personnel even more. In the western part of China, talented individuals are the most wanted resource. Along with the continuous development of the reform and opening-up in the past twenty years, talented individuals from the West, especially some Han intellectuals and technical and management staff, have been moving in a steady stream to the East, attracted by better opportunities provided by the coastal areas, and driven by the complicated ethnic tensions in the West. Among these people are the old generation of intellectuals who moved to the West under the arrangements of the government to “assist the borderland”, as well as those Han who were born and trained in the West. Reasons that caused “the flying of the peacocks from the northwest to the southeast” (and sometimes “the flying of the sparrows from the northwest to the southeast”) are varied. The growing disparity between the payment of intellectuals in the West and their counterparts in the East is one reason. The ethnic tension, the Muslim separatist movement in the West, and the feeling of being unable to find fair and equal opportunities in the West are also forces that drove many Han intellectuals and technical talents out from the West.

The shortage of qualified personnel for the development of the West will trigger a series of questions in respect to ethnic relations. The recruitment of Han from the East into the new projects will lead to the discontent among ethnic minorities, who think that the introduction of those more competent Han is to the detriment of their obtaining opportunities in those projects. However, as the core of the development of the West is to develop commodity economy and to import competitive mechanism for the labor market, the transformation of systems has to be carried out progressively, in terms of production and labor force, and the standards of recruiting employees from labor markets and promoting staff members should be based on ability, efficiency and achievement.

The current employment policy of the government for university and college graduates is “mutual selection”. Employers enjoy full discretion and people move in the labor markets in response to requirement for different posts, and the relation between supply and demand. Under the market mechanism, some minority graduates may be faced with employment difficulties.

In areas of the western region, minority graduates’ employment problems have already been revealed. The employment difficulties that face the new graduates indicate that already employed minority graduates may experience future unemployment. The “iron rice bowl” no longer exists. Those jobs given by the government under the old employment system, whether in enterprises or government organizations, are currently confronted with the general trend of the personnel system towards the market mechanism of “professional ability evaluation, employment via competition, and elimination transference”. The system of personnel transference will be established step by step. Unqualified staff members will be regularly shifted out, and young members will be hired to promote the development of the enterprises. The promotion of staff members will also focus on the evaluation of the ability and the achievement. Doubtlessly, the minority members in these organizations will be under greater pressure than Hans.

Such being the case, the local government and minority staff members have two ways to deal with this situation. The first is a shortsighted emergency measure that will probably work immediately. This is the use, in accordance with the ethnic minority

policies promulgated previously by the government, of executive methods to exclude the Han, and secure the employment and promotion of minority members. Although this method might temporarily mitigate the sentiments of minority employees and students, it works at the cost of decreasing working efficiency, the decline in the achievement of the unit, and the brain drain of the Hans. This, in turn, will hinder the development of the local economy, enlarge the gap between the West and the coastal area, and thus further upset the equilibrium of the minorities. Moreover, executive interference in the employment system will destroy the normal operations of the mechanism of the labor market, and cause the withdrawal of external capitals. As a result, the strategy of developing the West will suffer setbacks, and the economic development of the western part of China will be delayed.

The second method will affect a more permanent cure. Practical measures should be taken to improve the quality of the courses in the minority primary and middle schools. The teaching of Mandarin Chinese language should be adjusted and strengthened in response to the actual demand of the labor market. University admission standards should also be strictly followed. To guarantee the enrollment of a certain number of minority students at universities without lowering the admission standards, the government can organize universities to offer “preparatory programs”, or even establish “preparatory schools”, which will provide minority students who fail to meet admissions standards with an opportunity for reeducation before they retake the University Entrance Examination. The academic foundation and the starting point of the minority students can be improved only when all the enrollees meet admissions standards.

The teaching quality of different courses at universities should be improved. The quality of courses instructed in minority languages should be improved in terms of the quality of both the textbooks and teachers. Also, the usage of Mandarin as the teaching language in some courses will help students in their future occupation. Mandarin will be used in teaching more courses, especially science and technology courses. It will take time for the adjustment to take effect. The ultimate object of these measures is very clear—to considerably improve the quality and ability of minority students, and to help them compete by virtue of their own strength, instead of the government’s preferential policies. Some foreign scholars argue that one of the purposes of teaching bilingually is to “provide the students with good language skills that can help them to find a good job”(Ha Jinxeng and Teng Xing, 2001:196). “Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth.” The sole criterion for testing the quality of minority education is the performance of the minority graduates in the labor market.

Employment difficulties faced by minority graduates may have already become a social problem, before the second method mentioned above becomes effective. Therefore, the government may want to take some transitional measures to regulate and promote the employment of minorities, and to narrow the gaps between different ethnic groups in terms of employment, such as issuing via the government temporary local laws and regulations, which give the enterprises a tax reduction if they recruit a certain percent of local minorities. At the same time, government organizations may come forward to make arrangements for both employed and unemployed minorities to receive professional training at the expense of the government, and thus improve the competitiveness of the minority people in the labor market. Therefore, by means of other favorable policies, the

employment of minorities is promoted, without disrupting the operation of the labor market.

4. The education of the minorities should fit in with the development of the West

Under the new circumstances resulted from the development of the West, the educational undertaking of ethnic minorities should also be reformed and adjusted, in accordance with the development of the economy and the transformation of the employment mechanism.

1. Teaching bilingually and the teaching of Mandarin Chinese

Under the new circumstances of economic development and labor force transference, the enhancement of the bilingual teaching and the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at minority schools seems to be more important than ever before. Science, engineering, medical, agronomic and social sciences departments at universities need to consider offering all students (including the minority students) courses instructed in both Chinese and the local minority language. Minority students should have the right to choose the teaching language. The Constitution of China stipulated that all the languages of different groups enjoy legitimate and equal status. In many autonomous regions, the government has insisted that all minority students must get their education in their own language in order to preserve their traditional cultures. This restrictive policy has been strengthened during the past two decades because of criticism from the western societies. "Equal rights" issue certainly should be taking into account, but after the political settlement of this issue, analysis should be made from a practical and realistic perspective on what teaching language can best benefit the students⁸. If the policy can be adequately loosened, then students will choose the teaching language according to their own needs.

At present, the use of languages in China follows a pattern of "pluralist unity". All the different ethnic groups have the right to maintain and develop their own language. This is the "pluralism" at the basic level. Meanwhile, to encourage communication among different groups, promote the development of the economy, science, technology and culture nationwide, to develop the domestic material and labor force markets and modernize the country as early as possible, it will be convenient for all the Chinese people to share one "common language", which can be used efficiently throughout the country. From the size of the populations of the different groups, and the historical development and the present use of different languages in China, Mandarin Chinese will perform this role.

When judging whether the implementation of bilingual teaching in some districts or among some ethnic minorities accords with the demands of the local social, economic and cultural development, the wish of the masses should be taken into consideration. It is the right of every citizen to choose the language he would like to receive his education in. The request of the majority should be respected. In a normal political and social environment, the request of the majority is usually the expression of the applicability of

⁸ One point is that the terms students learn from course offered in minority language cannot be used for communication with other ethnic groups in learning and work. That will become a barrier for these minority students in their future careers.

the language and their employment considerations. The government and school authorities should investigate the changes of the supply-and-demand relations in the labor market, and the wish of students and their parents, and make timely adjustments according to the factors.

2. Enhancing the teaching of applied disciplines and specialties that are closely related to the economic development of the society.

The adjustment of subjects, specialties and courses at colleges and universities is to some extent in accordance with demands of the labor market. It is the response to those demands. The “products” of schools are their students. The employment of students is more or less the same as the acceptance of products by the market, while the rejection of students by the labor market is similar to the rejection of products that results in overstocking. If the latter occurs, the schools need to adjust the types of products and improve the quality of their “products”. Under the previous planned economy system in China, course offerings and course content could remain unchanged for many years by lack of information about the demand of the “consumers”. Students were guaranteed employment by the government, and the schools were free from care about the overstocking of “products”. In the 21st century, the management system of the labor force in China has changed, and the rapid development of the production force and science and technology requires updated knowledge and skills. Therefore, schools have to adjust and update timely their teaching content in response to the development of the times and the new demands of the labor market.

Currently, the demand of the labor market for individuals majoring in applied specialties, such as enterprise management, accounting, finance, law, executive management, social work, environment protection, media, folklore culture, tourism, advertisement and communication, is growing rapidly. Along with the overall development of the society, the demands of teaching, research and other institutions for students majoring in basic specialties, such as economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science, will also increase. Schools need to adjust their structures of specialty course offerings, and faculty enrollment, according to the development of the society and the changes of the supply-and-demand in the labor market.

3. Improvement of the quality of the education of minority students at universities and colleges.

To guarantee the quality of university and college education received by minority graduates, the quality of the standards of admission and graduation need to be guaranteed. To secure the admission standard for minority students, high schools, especially those for minority students, may offer “preparatory classes” or establish special “preparatory schools” for the minority students who cannot reach the standard by graduation from high school. Minority students who narrowly fail to meet the university admissions standards at the University Entrance Examination could be provided with an opportunity to restudy the courses. After one or two years of restudy, they can retake the University Entrance Examination and enter universities or colleges after they meet the admissions standards. In this way, the starting point of minority students at universities and colleges will be improved.

Course grades are criteria for students' academic achievement. Comparison can be made among all the students only when they take the same examinations. The comparison between the academic achievement of minority and Han students will have practical significance only when they study at the same school or in the same class. Currently, the bottom scores for admission to minority colleges are usually one hundred points lower than those of the local comprehensive universities. Also, the ability of instructors at minority colleges, except those teaching subjects such as minority languages and history, are generally lower than the ability of those teaching at comprehensive universities. This situation is harmful to the study of minority students and their future competition with Han students in the employment market. To guarantee the quality of education received by minority students, and promote communication and exchanges among students from different groups, the majority of students from ethnic minorities should enter comprehensive universities instead of minority ones⁹. Minority universities and colleges can maintain their tradition of "focusing on humanities and ethnic culture," and become special teaching institutions of subjects related to ethnic minorities. If the performance of some minority students at universities is not satisfactory enough, their duration of study may be prolonged by one or half a year to help them meet the requirement of the university. Foundations may be established to aid these students financially.

4. Employment guidance for minority graduates

A large number of minority students come from rural area. Although they may have gained some knowledge about the social and economic life in cities during their schooldays, there is still a gap between them and those who were born and brought up in cities, in terms of social experience, social networks and access to employment information. At the time when they are faced with employment competition before graduation, these students usually have special needs for the school and government organizations to provide them with necessary information and guidance, and to help them establish contact with the recruiters. For example, the school officials can introduce minority language speakers to those who need them. If former graduates are not satisfied with their job and wish to take professional courses needed to find the job they want, universities and colleges should offer training programs at a moderate charge. By doing this, the universities can serve not only those new minority graduates, but also those laid-off (reemployment training). The schools should improve their "customer service" and help their "products" to work satisfactorily over a long period of time, by "repairing" and "updating" them with new knowledge and skills.

It usually takes several years or even longer to adjust the educational system and the teaching content, from investigation, planning and implementation to the production of effects. Therefore, we should seize the opportunity at the time when the development of the West has been newly initiated, and make arrangements as early as possible.

5. Summary

⁹ To have students from different ethnic groups study in the same school and same class will not only improve their quality of learning, but benefit interaction and integration as well. Many western countries such as the U.S. have abandoned the racial segregation in schools, and encourage students from different groups to study together.

Along with the implementation of “the strategy of developing the West”, investment from and the different kinds of economic activities by the central government, the coastal area, and the overseas enterprises will increase rapidly. As a result, individuals who can meet the demands of modern economic activities will be needed. This will lead to labor transference from one region to another. Meanwhile, the employment situation in the West will change from the traditional planned job-assignment system to the new market-adjusted employment system, in pace with the transformation of the ownership structure. Under the preferential policies of the government, most minority students go to minority schools. Their starting point is relatively low and their Mandarin Chinese proficiency is relatively poor. As minority schools usually use minority languages as teaching tools, minority students usually lag behind the Han and the Hui in their academic achievement. Under the traditional planned job-assignment system, their employment is guaranteed. However, under the new market mechanism, the minority labor force and graduates in the West will be confronted with intense employment competition.

If minority graduates find themselves in striking contrast with Han graduates in terms of getting employed and getting laid off, the difficulties and pressure that they face could arouse their ethnic resentment, which would possibly have negative influences on the social stability and ethnic tension in that area.

In order to improve the competitiveness of minority students in the employment market, necessary adjustments need to be made to minority education in accordance with the idea of “market economy”. Courses at minority primary schools and high schools need to be revised, and teaching of the Chinese language should be strengthened appropriately. In the meantime, preparatory classes should be offered to minority students who fail to meet the university admissions standards. The quality of the courses and the academic performance of minority students should be strictly guaranteed after they enroll. Employment information and guidance should be given to them at their graduation. If these tasks can be performed, the development of the West and competition in labor market will not arouse conflict among different ethnic groups, nor any social disturbances. On the contrary, they will serve as driving forces in promoting communication and exchanges among the groups.

This article covered some questions that may arise in the adjustment of the social structure and the ethnic relations during the process of the development of the western part of China. Ideas were put forward for the readers’ reference.

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