

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, LABOR TRANSFERENCE, AND MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE WEST OF CHINA

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*In order to achieve a balance of socioeconomic development between the East and West in the new century, the Chinese government launched "the national strategy of developing the West" in 1999. This strategy is also a part of the governmental plan to promote "domestic needs" as a motor to continual economic growth by huge investment in infrastructure in the West. However, because of the impact of a traditional planning economy and the low quality of the local labor force, this strategy also leads to competition between local laborers and in-migrants. The indigenous ethnic minorities in the West will have to face serious challenges due to their disadvantages in education. Ethnic tension, that might be associated with religious and political separatism, will be a fatal threat to the success of the strategy. Based on the analysis of census and statistical data of occupation and education, this article identifies the major social problem and discusses the possibilities to improve minority education and raise their opportunities in the labor market.*

### INTRODUCTION

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 China.<sup>1</sup> 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 area.<sup>2</sup> In general, this area is characterized by fragile ecological environments,

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> "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

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 live.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is extremely difficult to promote the process of modernization based on local human resources and the industrial foundation. These characteristics determine that any rapid economic development in this area in the 21st century will be associated with changes of the social structure, transformation of the economic structure, East-west labor transfer, and the adjustment of ethnic relations.

In the wake of significant investments in the infrastructures of transportation, communication, irrigation, energy sources and the 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 unprecedented extent. Under the circumstances of new economic development, there is not only broad space for 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 ethnic relations during the process of economic development in the West. The changes of supply-and-demand relationships 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 minority people by means of educational measures will also be explored.

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.

<sup>3</sup> Over 80% of the ethnic minority population (e.g., Tibetans, Uygur, Kazak, Hui, Zhuang, Mongolian, Yi, Miao, etc.) live in this area.

## THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LABOR FORCE IN THE WEST

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

*The Labor Force in the Western Provinces and Autonomous Regions Is Mainly Engaged in Agriculture and Animal Husbandry*

Based on statistics from the 1990 and 2000 Census 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 Uygur Autonomous Region (XAR) as an example (see Table 2).

Comparing the data in Table 2 with that in Table 1, the occupational structure of the labor forces of Uygur, Kazak and Khalkhas<sup>4</sup> — three ethnic minorities that mainly inhabit Xinjiang — remained the same. A significant

**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 & 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
Uygur	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 statistics in this table are national statistics. The first five ethnic groups mainly live in the West. Statistics for the Han and the Hui are data for the 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).

<sup>4</sup> The group is called “Kirghiz” in Central Asia.

**TABLE 2.** OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS IN XAR (%)

Ethnic group	Professionals		Leaders of government institution & enterprise		Office staff		Labor in commerce & 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
Uygur	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 XAR (1992: 532-535; 2002: 572-579).

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 Uygur, 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 percentages 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 from 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 in commerce and services in the total labor force. These changes indicate that structural trends in the local economy in the West follow the system of reforming ownership.

*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 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 the agriculture industry, but fell into the category of “workers” instead of “farmers,” worked on state farms, including state livestock farms and forestry bureaus (99.9%). For those working in non-agricultural industries, the workers under state-owned enterprises were 83%. Nearly 90% of the minority manpower worked for state-owned organizations.

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

**TABLE 3. THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORKING LABOR FORCE BY OWNERSHIP IN XAR (1999)**

	XAR		Hans		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-agricultural 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 Statistical Bureau of XAR (2000: 118-119, 124).

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 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 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 mechanisms. 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.

#### *The Educational Achievement of the Ethnic Minorities in the West Is Unequal*

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 liberation in the 1990s, there is still a percentage of highly educated individuals in the West. 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.

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), and junior and senior middle school graduates

**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	Profes- sional school graduates	Senior mid- school graduates	Junior mid- school 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

\*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, which later became a municipality, still belonged to Sichuan in 1990.

Source: The Bureau of the National Census (1993: 700-703, 30-32).

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 higher education as compared with these two groups at the national level. The percentage of Han college graduates was only 3.9% in the entire 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)

**TABLE 5.** EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MINORITIES MAINLY LIVING IN THE WEST (2000) (%)

	Graduates with MA or PhD	University graduates	Profes- sional 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
KhalKhas	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

1. All statistics in the above table are national statistics. The Han and Hui covered in this table do not only refer to those Han and Hui living in the West.
2. This table is calculated for the population at age 6 and above.
3. The "university graduates" include those with 2-4 year study in colleges and universities.

Source: The Bureau of the National Census (2002: 563-567).

**TABLE 6.** THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS IN XINJIANG (2000)

	Graduates with MA or PhD	University graduates	Profes- sional school graduates	Senior middle school graduates	Junior mmiddle 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
KhalKhas	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

1. This table is calculated for the population at age 6 and above.
2. The "university graduates" include those with 2-4 year study in colleges and universities.

Source: Census Office of XAR (2002: 312-319).

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 better-educated Han in the two-direction labor transference in the 1990s.



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 the labor market. Some migration streams might be reversed, and better-educated labor will move into the West again, as in the 1950s, although the incentives have completely switched from supporting the political movement to searching for personal economic opportunities.

*A Disparity of Knowledge Level and 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 proficiency in Chinese and other subjects among these students and those who graduated from Han schools or received their education where 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 for students is relatively low, and their Chinese proficiency is poor. Since these schools use the minority language 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 studies and employment.

A current phenomenon in the higher education of ethnic minorities is that in their pursuit of quantity or “standard-ling,” 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 admissions 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 the 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 generally 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 the Chinese language, but also a certain grasp of English. In addition, they also consider the academic achievement of students in their major subjects, and accept only those with outstanding scores. Therefore, 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.

#### THE TRADITIONAL PLANNED ECONOMY AND THE EMPLOYMENT OF MINORITY STUDENTS

Under the system of the planned economy, preferential treatment was given to 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 for 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 Xinjiang Autonomous Region, all the institutions of higher education com-

bined 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 students 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 universities and professional schools 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 costs. When these minority graduates were assigned to factories, the funds to cover their salary, subsidies, housing and health care were sent to the factory monthly from the government. Sometimes, the job assignment of minority graduates was performed as a political task-the implementation of 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, competition in the labor market of the non-state-owned economic sector that minority students majoring in science, engineering, medicine and agriculture will experience will be intense, due to their poor professional foundation, working ability and language barrier.

Generally, 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 will inevitably be laid off.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, new graduates will be

<sup>5</sup> In 1999, the total number of employees working in government institutions were 0.245

faced with diverse unfavorable conditions when they seek employment, while current employees of state-owned enterprises will possibly find themselves in danger of being laid off during the transformation of personnel systems. When minority graduates find themselves in sharp contrast with Han graduates in terms of getting employed or getting laid off, the difficulties and pressures that they face may arouse ethnic 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 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 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 employment, the social stability and ethnic relations in that region will be negatively affected. An accidental incident would be likely to cause extensive reaction.

#### ECONOMIC AND STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS 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 the economic structure (i.e. introducing the 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 successively.<sup>6</sup> Experience drawn from the economic development of the coastal

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.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to "Clark-Fisher hypothesis (United Nations, 1980: 61).

area shows that not only a large number of rural labor 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 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 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 requires 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 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 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. 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 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 discontent among ethnic minorities, who think that the introduction of those more competent Han is to the detriment of their obtaining opportunities in these projects. However, as the core of the development of the West is to develop a commodity economy and to import a competition 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 market in response to requirements for different posts, and the relations 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 ability and achievement.

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 work 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 areas, and thus further upset the equilibrium of the

minorities. Moreover, executive interference in the employment system will destroy the normal operations of the mechanisms of the labor market, and cause the withdrawal of external capital. 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 minority primary and middle schools. The teaching of Mandarin Chinese should be adjusted and strengthened in response to the actual demand of the labor market. University admissions standards should also be strictly followed. To guarantee the enrollment of a certain number of minority students at universities without lowering the admissions 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 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 use of Mandarin as the teaching language in some courses will help students in their future occupations. 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 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 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 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.

#### THE EDUCATION OF THE MINORITIES SHOULD FIT IN WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST

Under the new circumstances resulting 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.

##### *Teaching Bilingually and the Teaching of Mandarin Chinese*

Under the new circumstances of economic development and labor force transference, the enhancement of bilingual teaching and the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at minority schools seem to be more important than ever before. Science, engineering, medical, agronomic and social sciences departments at universities need to consider offering all students (including 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 stipulates 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 languages in order to preserve their traditional cultures. This restrictive policy has been strengthened during the past two decades because of criticism from western societies. "Equal rights" issues certainly should be taken into account, but after the political settlement of these issues, analysis should be made from a practical and realistic perspective on what teaching language can best benefit students.<sup>7</sup> 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 devel-

<sup>7</sup> One point is that the terms students learn from courses offered in minority languages 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.



op their own language. This is “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 to 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 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 these factors.

*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 their teaching content in response to the develop-

ment 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 politics, will also increase. Schools need to adjust their structures of specialty and course offerings, and faculty enrollment, according to the development of the society and the changes of supply-and-demand in the labor market.

### *Improvement of the Quality of 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 admissions standards for minority students, high schools, especially those for minority students, may offer "preparatory classes" or establish special "preparatory schools" for minority students who cannot reach the standard by graduation from high school. Minority students who narrowly fail to meet the university admissions standard 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 standard. In this way, the starting point of minority students at universities and colleges will be improved.

Course grades are criteria for students' academic achievement. Comparisons can be made among 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 to promote communication and exchanges

among students from different groups, the majority of students from ethnic minorities should enter comprehensive universities instead of minority ones.<sup>8</sup> 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.

### *Employment Guidance for Minority Graduates*

A large number of minority students come from rural areas. Although they may have gained some knowledge about 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 recruiters. For example, the school officials can introduce minority language speakers to those who need them. If former graduates are not satisfied with their jobs 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 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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 racial segregation in schools, and encourage students from different groups to study together.

## SUMMARY

Along with the implementation of "the strategy of developing the West," investment from and economic activities by the central government, the coastal area, and 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 pressures that they face could arouse ethnic resentment, which would possibly have negative influences on the social stability 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 the labor market will not arouse conflict among different ethnic groups, nor social disturbances. On the contrary, they will serve as driving forces in promoting communication and exchanges among the groups.

This article covered questions that may arise in the adjustment of the social structure and 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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