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INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON
HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education of Minority Nationalities in China

Hong Xiang Wang

China is a unified multinational country, with more than fifty minority nationalities. The major nationality is Han. The minority nationalities include Mongol groups in Inner Mongolia, the Tibetans in Tibet, and peoples of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang. The areas where these minority groups are gathered are called autonomous regions. These nationalities cover more than half of the total area of China. According to the Vital Statistics of 1990, the population of the minority nationalities is 91,200,314, or roughly 8.0% of the total population of China. The people of the minority nationalities are an important force in the construction of China's four modernizations: modern agriculture, modern industry, modern defense and technology.

This paper discusses the historical development, progress, and problems of higher education of the minority nationalities in China for the past 40 years.

I. Historical Development

Before 1949, in some of the regions of the minority nationalities, cultural development was in a primitive state. Numerical records, for example, were kept by tying knots and cutting notches in wood. Higher education, as can be understood, was out of the question. There were only colleges and universities for the minority nationalities in one or two regions, and only very few students from the minority nationalities could attend institutions of higher education. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, higher education of the minority nationalities has roughly undergone four stages in its development.

The First Stage: (from 1949 to 1956)

During this period, China witnessed growth in the economic field, and made primary progress in the higher education of the minority nationalities. On November 24, 1950, the sixtieth session of government affairs of the Government Administration Council ratified the Trial Plan of the Training of Administrative Personnel of Minority Nationalities. It was the first, yet, a most important plan that new China promulgated for the development of education of the minority nationalities. It indicated that the Central People's Government, and the proper provinces should, according to the educational principles of new democracy, foster a larger number of cadres of

minority nationalities. These cadres were to meet the demands of the construction of the country, to ensure the regional autonomy of minority nationality, and implement the policies of minority nationalities. The Trial Plan resolved to establish the Central College For Nationalities in Beijing, and its branches in the Northwest, Southwest and Central South of China. In June 1951, the Central College For Nationalities was formally established in Beijing. The Trial Plan required that the province governments increase the higher education levels of minority nationalities.

In September 1951 and in June 1956, the Ministry of Education held the First and Second National Conferences of Education of Minority Nationalities. The two conferences presented efforts on the education of the minority nationalities and deliberated on the program of national education, including the higher education of the minority nationalities. Education of the minority nationalities was discussed and new policies were adopted at the two conferences.

The Second Stage: (from 1957–1966)

The higher education of the national minorities during this decade experienced a great leap forward. The Ministry of Education and the Commission of Minority Nationalities Affairs stressed strengthening of the institutes of nationalities; hence, educational quality was greatly improved. By the end of 1959, there were, in various institutes of nationalities, 21 individual undergraduate courses. Moreover, there were preparatory courses for cadres. There were 14,109 students in cadres at study. There was a teaching and administrative staff of 3,552, among of which 1,407 were teachers. In short, higher education of the minority nationalities developed rapidly in this decade. By the end of 1965, there were ten colleges and universities for nationalities located in other provinces and another twenty common colleges and universities had been set up in the regions of national autonomy. In these two types of colleges, there were 21,870 students of the minority nationalities, 17 times as many as in 1950; there were 3,311 teachers of the minority nationalities, 5.3 times as many as in 1950. But, we should point out, that, owing to the proneness to boasting and exaggeration during the period of 59–62, we took a roundabout course in the higher education of the minority nationalities, which created some bad effects. Otherwise, the higher education of minority nationalities would have developed more rapidly.

The Third Stage: (from 1966–1976)

This was also the decade of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. During this period, the guiding principle of "taking class struggle as the key link" was emphasized throughout the country. It was believed that "the more knowledgeable, the more reactionary." Intellectuals were persecuted. All of these caused a severe destruction to the cultural and educational undertakings of China. The higher education of minority nationalities, of course, was not exempt. It was during this period that the original ten colleges for nationalities were reduced to only two: the Central College for Nationalities and Guang Xi College for Nationalities. The remaining eight either were disbanded or merged into other institutes. The number of teachers of minority nationalities was cut down from 3,331 in 1965 to about 2,600, a reduction of some 21%.

The Fourth Stage (from 1976–now)

In 1976, the Cultural Revolution was over, and in August 1976, the Commission of Minority Nationalities Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly held the First National Conference of Presidents of Colleges for Nationalities. The conference discussed the principles, policies and problems of how the educational work of the colleges served the four modernizations. Thus, it pushed forward the work of those colleges.

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In June 1980, the Ministry of Education issued the Circular of the Full-time Key Institutes Running Experimental Classes of Minority Nationalities. This was a new way to develop (and an effective measurement to reform) the higher education of the minority nationalities in China. In that year, five key institutes subsidiary to the Ministry of Education were the first to run as an experiment class for the students of the minority nationalities. About 150 minority students from nationalities such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, entered the classes. In 1981, another two colleges were organized. Thus, there were seven colleges and universities for the 250 students of the minority nationalities from Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and the other nine provinces of autonomous regions.

II. Progress

From the founding of new China until now, great changes have taken place in minority nationality higher education. The central government and state governments at all levels have attached great importance and special consideration to the higher education of the minority nationalities. Inland provinces and cities have also given enthusiastic support and coordination. According to incomplete statistics, about 1,000 teachers of inland colleges and universities have gone to remote districts to give lectures. There have also been large quantities of educational facilities, books, and reference materials allocated to these regions. Therefore, higher education of the minority nationalities in China has developed greatly and rapidly.

By the end of 1986, there were 106 colleges and universities of minority nationalities, nearly ten times as many as in 1952, and five times as many as in 1975. This was an increase of 42% over 1980. In the past two years, the colleges and universities that have been set up, or are being established, include the Second Northwest Nationalities Institute, Qinghai Tibetan Medical College, Tibet University, Xinjiang Artistic College, and a training center for the teachers of the minority nationalities. Students of the minority nationalities at study amounted to 99,468 or 3,455 times as many as those in 1952. In 1984, teachers in colleges and universities of the minority nationalities amounted to 17,000, some 28 times as many as those in 1953. Moreover, there has been a rapid growth in the numbers of the teachers of the minority nationalities.

With the improvement of conditions of scientific research and educational quality, the colleges and universities of the minority nationalities have trained a large number of students with B.A./B.S. degrees and a number of postgraduates with Master's degree. Beginning in 1984, doctoral students of the minority nationalities were enrolled. (See table below).

Increase in the Higher Education of Minority Nationalities in China from 1951 to 1990

Year	Colleges	Teachers	Student
1951			2,100
1952	11		2,900
1953		600	
1957			16,100
1965	30	3,300	21,900
1975	21		
1978	31	5,900	36,000
1981	42	8,300	51,000
1984	75	17,000	59,600
1986	107		99,498
1990	107		

III. Problems

While the progress of 40 years of higher education of minority nationalities is obvious, there are still problems to be solved. Four main problems of structure, capacity, newness and growth are discussed here.

(1) Unreasonable structure.

The higher education of minority nationalities had developed rapidly, but, unfortunately, the basic educational structure has been neglected. That is, the educational system does not fit the social economic requirement. In looking at professional training, the number of trainees is out of proportion to the jobs available. For quite a long time, more personnel have trained for leadership positions than for jobs in specific fields (i.e. education, teaching, engineers, agriculture specialties, etc.). Emphasis was placed on training undergraduates, but not much has been done in the training of professionals. There are still some unreasonable factors in the structure of specialties and faculties. The disproportion of the ratio of science and liberal arts graduates is a deficiency in the whole Chinese higher educational structure, and this also happens in the higher education of the minority nationalities. In the fields of management, political science and law, finance and economics, and the history of the minority nationalities, we haven't trained enough professional minority nationality personnel to meet the needs. In the point of the relationship between the educational structure and the social economical structure, we have more or less overlooked the institutes and faculties that are closely related with the economy of the regions of the minority nationalities. While the Chinese minority nationalities occupy some 50%-60% of the total area of China, and while most of the regions of national autonomy have rich minerals, these regions have always been short of the professional personnel required to market these resources.

(2) The capacity of colleges is insufficient.

Because the educational and economic basis of the minority nationalities is weak, the capacity of the nationalities colleges and universities is generally small. In 1984, there were 75 colleges and universities of the minority nationalities in China, and 59,600 students in all. According to the figures, we can see that each college only had 784 students. For example, there are less than 500 students in Xinjiang Traditional Chinese Medical College, and Hainan Teachers' Training School for Nationalities had only 22 teachers. All these factors negatively influence education and cause a great waste of facilities and personnel.

(3) Too many newly-set-up colleges.

In China now, there are 107 colleges and universities for minority nationalities, with most of them established after 1976. These colleges and universities are generally lacking in qualified teachers. They have not formed their own cadre of old and new teachers. Some of the colleges have a faculty with more than half young teachers. Most of these are undergraduates with a B. A./B. S. degree and only a few are with the M. A./M.S. degree. There are even fewer with a doctoral degree. Full professors and associate professors are a small percentage of total faculty. Most of the teachers are lecturers or assistant professors. There are some people teaching without degrees and some who have not been teaching sufficiently long to have been given a title.

(4) Uneven growth

Higher education for the minority nationalities has not developed evenly in each region. Because of political and economic reasons, higher education for the minority nationalities in the Southeast has grown more rapidly than in the Western part of China. There is also a disequilibrium between the stan-

dards of new and old schools. Such an uneven distribution of wealth and support has resulted in an uneven growth of educational opportunities and economic development.

The problems above have historic, economical, and ideological causes. Some include:

1. Historic causes: For a long time, regions of the minority nationalities were relatively backward politically, economically, and culturally. Before 1949, some regions of the minority nationalities were still at a primitive stage. Though the higher education for the minority nationalities has developed greatly, it is difficult to overcome quickly the traditions of families.
2. The remote geographical regions with their poor transport services and lack of communication systems have delayed the economic development, which delayed the development of higher education.
3. Ideologically, China has not dramatically changed its understanding of the importance of higher education since liberation. Education has not occupied its proper leadership position in the national economy and cannot gain a stable investment in education for all citizens, particularly higher education for the minority nationalities. Some people even think that it is unnecessary to develop the higher education for the minority nationalities.

Reform and open door policies have given people a chance to think about 40 years progress and the problems of minority higher education in China. There are a lot of things that need to be done urgently. At present, the following prominent problems have to be solved as quickly as possible:

(1) The qualified teachers are the essential prerequisite for the higher education of the minorities. The training of the teachers in nationality formal colleges and universities is of first importance. Since we cannot train qualified teachers without a corps of qualified college teachers, a vicious cycle is occurring in national education, especially for minority nationalities.

(2) A reasonable system of Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral levels, with the required course, for higher education should be built up. This is also required for minority nationalities.

(3) In order to lay a good foundation for the higher education for the minority nationalities, special attention should be paid to basic education. This is required before students enter colleges and universities.

(4) Dimensions of recruiting students to colleges and universities ought to be expanded to make the best use of facilities and teachers. However, the admission standard should not lower just to enlarge enrollments.

(5) The development of higher education for the minority nationalities is closely linked to the development of their economies. Therefore, educational workers and the educational administrative organizations ought to strengthen their study of the economic structure of the minority nationality regions, especially the relationship between the level of educational achievement and the social economic structure.

(6) Governments must take a positive attitude towards the importance of the higher education for the minority nationalities. This will be shown only when China develops and implements an agenda for the study of higher education for all Chinese. This must include both majority and minority nationalities.

It is very important to develop modern higher education for minority nationalities in China in order to keep the country economically stable. This paper expresses some ideas and suggestions based on the country's 40 years of experiences. China cannot waste anymore time; the quality of education for the entire population must be raised, including minorities, in order to build the four modernizations.

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