CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS: MARKETISATION AND THE ‘END-OF-TIBETANNESS’?

*Education, Career, and Minority School Success*

Throughout this book, I have examined the threat to the survival of ‘Tibetanness’ through state minority policies and their (non-)implementation, the minority education system, and especially the post-socialist marketisation of graduate employment. My argument has been that even though the Harmonious Society initiative reinforces neo-integrationist trends, tibetanisation processes demonstrate that there is creative space within the minority education system to promote the Tibetan language and culture. The rise of pure Tibetan-track education together with the expansion of Tibetan majors at minority departments means that a genuine Tibetan-medium education from primary schooling through to college has, at least in parts, finally become a reality. Consequently, the Tibetan community strongly views the minority education system as their primary—and perhaps only—vehicle for their ethnocultural ‘survival’.

However, positive educational developments are being endangered by marketisation dynamics that marginalise the significance of Tibetan in contemporary society. Fischer (2013, chapter 6) argues with respect to the TAR that the “educational divide rather than the spatial divide is much more relevant in determining the exclusionary nature of development”. While this view represents a significant step in the right direction, the arguably even more significant divide is not educational but, as Fischer himself suggests, employment-related. Government positions, the most significant and realistic form of ‘adequate’ work for Tibetan tertiary graduates, are often awarded based on rent-seeking (corruption). The ability to buy on such jobs is heavily dependent on one’s financial resources, and therefore one’s family background. This effectively means that Qinghai’s cross-ethnic community is being divided not just by on-going cultural and language barriers or unequal access to education, but even more so by self-reinforcing socio-economic class structures. Additionally, provincial data shows that the issue is not so much a shrinking general availability of public sector employment, whose share in the overall job market has not actually experienced much of a decline. Rather, the core problem is its distribution and actual availability for Tibetan-medium graduates:
distribution in terms of formal government posts being provided evenly and appropriately throughout Tibetan regions in order to meet educational and other needs; and actual availability in regard to a fair and equal selection process based on academic merit and minority language skills. My analysis of civil servant and tegang teaching staff allocations in Qinghai’s Tibetan regions reveals a strong bias against Tibetan (and other minority) language skills—and especially against a knowledge of written Tibetan. Overall, the main predicament of the Tibetan community is therefore not just marketisation as reflected in informalisation. It is even more so the commodification of formal government employment, which gives rise to rampant rent-seeking, as well as a general de-emphasising of minority language abilities in the wake of a ‘development’-driven neo-integrationism.

At the same time, the marketisation/employment threat is deeply dividing the Tibetan community. It compels traditionalist groups to advocate various degrees of ethnocultural isolationism, seeking to maintain ethnic authenticity through non-mixing, and ostracising those who pragmatically engage with mainstream society. At the same time, the impact of marketisation/employment dynamics is somewhat relativised by the fact that graduates from both systems struggle to obtain adequate employment. The common perception that a Chinese-medium education represents a profitable (albeit traitorous) career strategy is significantly complicated by the stiffer competition that its graduates often face.

The implications of the Tibetan education-employment nexus for theories of education are not straightforward. Like the Miao students studied by Trueba and Zou (1994), the majority of Tibetan students are united by a motivation to succeed in education—a motivation that is fuelled by a sense of belonging to a larger ethnic community. But in contrast to the Miao context, where (Chinese-medium) education is pursued despite the inevitable cultural-linguistic integration that it entails, the ‘educated Tibetan community’ is divided by a diverse range of ambitions, goals and motivations. Here, non-participation in education is the least acceptable strategy, frowned upon by traditionalists, modernists and many (albeit not all) pragmatists alike. Instead, both Tibetan and Chinese education systems (and creative combinations of the two) are used to pursue a range of both individualist and collectivist strategies. Often, both preservationist and pragmatist educational strategies are equally used to promote ethnocultural preservationist aims.

The Tibetan education and career scenario confounds current theories in educational anthropology through its complexity. Tibetan