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## **Vocational Education for China's Ethnic Minorities**

### **Current Situation, Problems, and Countermeasures**

*Abstract: This article analyzes the current status and problems of vocational education for China's ethnic minorities. It concludes that these problems have both universal areas in common with China's overall education situation and individual characteristics; they also have both extrinsic and intrinsic qualities. The universal areas include the extrinsic problems of education in adapting to social transformation, and the intrinsic overall structural imbalances in education. Individual areas include, extrinsically, the new human and technical requirements of industrial restructuring and, intrinsically, the fact that vocational education specialties are too one-dimensional and lag behind development. This article presents some strategies and approaches to address and respond to these problems.*

Vocational education for China's ethnic minorities falls within the scope of minority education, as well as within the overall national vocational education system. It functions to train vocationally skilled talent for the economic and social development of ethnic minority areas. Vocational education institutions

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exist in each minority area from the middle to high school levels, and even at the postsecondary level. During China's socialist planned economy era, vocational education played a positive role in and made a contribution to local economic and social development. In today's era of social transformation, however, minority vocational education has encountered unprecedented challenges. These include new technology and knowledge requirements for the transition from traditional to modern economic structures; the continual expansion of access to higher education and the trend toward universal education and diverse educational choices; labor market requirements for high education levels and increasing numbers of unemployed people with academic credentials; and more opportunities for working away from home and social mobility. This article examines how minority vocational education is facing such challenges and impacts. What kinds of problems have emerged? How should we consider and formulate effective recommendations and policies in response to these problems?

### **Minority Vocational Education in China's Social Transformation Period**

Minority vocational education is an integral part of minority education. An analysis of minority education in China will help us to understand the situation and problems it faces. China's social transformation has dealt a severe blow and challenge to minority education, but has also presented an opportunity for development. From a general point of view, minority education has indeed seen a great deal of growth during the thirty-year social transformation process since the start of China's reform and opening policy. Such growth is visible in the following areas:

1. As the educated population has grown significantly, a relatively complete minority education system with Chinese characteristics has essentially taken shape that includes early childhood education, basic education, vocational and technical education, adult education, and higher education.
2. Government investment in minority education has increased. During China's Ninth Five-Year Plan period, the central government established the National Compulsory Education Project for Impoverished Regions, earmarking RMB3.9 billion, of which RMB2.2 billion was invested in 12 western provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions where minority populations are concentrated.
3. The government's "Two Basics" program for minority areas (basically

realize nine years of compulsory education and basically wipe out youth illiteracy) achieved significant results; compulsory education has been universalized and the average youth illiteracy rate has dropped to below 15 percent.

4. A stable corps of full-time minority teachers has taken shape. According to 2001 statistics, the number of full-time minority teachers in all types and levels of schools nationwide had reached 950,000 teachers, who fundamentally meet education requirements in terms of both quantity and quality.
5. Bilingual education has received further focus and strengthening. Currently, there are more than 10,000 minority primary and secondary schools using twenty-one nationality languages in bilingual education. Many areas are also experimenting with teaching in three languages: Chinese, a minority language, and a foreign language.
6. A legal system for minority education has made new progress. Some provinces, cities, and autonomous regions have worked to issue laws and regulations for minority education and strengthen the management of minority education in accordance with the law, which has given legal protection to the development of minority education (MOE 2002).

It can be stated unequivocally that minority education has grown more rapidly since the reform and opening of Chinese society. Such growth has not been balanced, however. There are still gaps between urban and rural areas, regions, and different ethnic communities, and some of these gaps have even expanded. In terms of internal structure, there is an increasingly obvious gap between vocational education and basic and higher education for minorities. Resources are increasingly invested in the development of basic education and higher education, resulting in the present structural lack of equilibrium in minority education. There have been calls in the past few years to optimize the structure of minority education, promote minority education in urban and rural areas, and balance development between regions. But the premise and focus of structural optimization has been improving the quality of basic education. The balanced development has likewise consisted of focusing on equalizing basic education resource allocation. In these two areas, minority education is more consistent with national education as a whole in being oriented toward educational promotion. This will certainly result in the loss of the individuality of minority education. Minority vocational education, which is able to demonstrate such individuality, is also experiencing increased gaps due to resource

constraints, lack of high educational outcomes, and difficulties with student employment (Qian 1999).

### **Structural Analysis of Problems in Minority Vocational Education**

Vocational education for ethnic minorities has encountered complex problems in China's social transformation period. The problems are interdependent and interrelated, and together they significantly challenge and impact minority vocational education. Our structural analysis addresses several areas.

#### *Adjusting the Economic Structure of Minority Areas*

China's ethnic minority areas are mostly rural, in remote and mountainous regions, and they have only a few types of economic activities. (1) Farming: Those engaging in this activity include the Zhuang, Dong, Bai, and Dai nationalities. Most of them are in areas with better natural environments, including dam areas, river areas, and plains. They engage in irrigated agriculture, mainly rice cultivation and subtropical crops. They are now beginning to make adjustments to their crop cultivation, selective breeding, deep processing technologies, township and village enterprises, and subtropical resource development. This is changing their long-held, small-scale farming concepts and single-industry structure. (2) Livestock: the Tibetan, Mongolian, and Kazakh nationalities, distributed across the plateaus, grasslands, and deserts are engaged mainly in grassland livestock and semiagricultural economic activities. Such production has a low yield per unit area, nomadic operations, and is a natural and seminatural economy. Current changes are oriented toward highlighting veterinary services, animal by-products processing, grassland improvement, and feed processing and storage. (3) Fishing, hunting, and foraging: The Evenki and Yao nationalities live in forests and highly vegetated mountain areas. They mainly engage in relatively primitive production activities like hunting, foraging, and domesticating and cultivating wild animal and plant resources. The current economic orientation is toward scientific cultivation, breeding, processing, and handicrafts. (4) Commerce: The Hui, Uighur, and Dongxiang nationalities live mainly in arid regions and desert oases and towns. They are engaged in commerce, but also diversify into crop cultivation, handicrafts, and labor services exports. They nevertheless have still not achieved a commodity economy of a certain scale, and have insufficient development capacity. The direction of their economic development therefore includes food processing, foods and beverages, light textiles, commerce, business management, economy

crop cultivation, as well as a larger-scale commerce system (Ha and Teng 2001: 460).

The structural adjustment of ethnic minority economies presents new technological and conceptual requirements to the people engaged in them. But vocational education, tasked with training vocationally skilled talent for minority areas, has not been able to adapt to these changes in the economic structure, resulting in slower economic change in these areas. Industry can only absorb limited manpower, and vocational education graduates have a hard time becoming fully employed or employed at all. The employment problems of minority vocational education have become increasingly serious in the past few years and, for this reason, many schools are facing a student shortage problem.

### ***Problems Brought About by Younger, Clustered, and Long-Term Migrant Workers***

Migrant workers have received special attention in recent years, particularly those going out to work after graduating from primary school. They have not received any special vocational training, and have no opportunity to do so. They engage in manual labor in urban areas, including labor-intensive, heavy physical work. The primary reason that these migrant workers will do such work for a long period is that they can maintain a minimum living standard and, while meeting their basic needs to live, they can also have a little left over. The above scenario was confirmed by an empirical survey about rural migrant workers by a Peking University Department of Sociology research topic group on “The Migrant Population and the Development of Small Cities and Towns.” The survey revealed the belief of most people that migrant workers have more work opportunities and income in their home locations. In terms of access to vocational training, there is a widespread view that school education does not provide people with the skills needed to earn a living, and that even vocational education simply cannot provide the required knowledge and skills. In such a situation, people in many rural and ethnic minority areas go out to work after graduating, and even before graduating, from primary school (Qian 2009). In many such areas, student shortages are a problem not only for vocational education but also for middle and high schools. As a result, frequent adjustments have been made in these areas; some schools in villages, townships, and some towns have been merged into county schools. The result of such actions, however, is that even fewer students are promoted, which makes work more practical and feasible than school.

### ***The Structural Optimization of Minority Education and the “Optimization” of Vocational Education***

The structural optimization of minority education is mainly to promote the balanced development of compulsory education, which reflects equity in compulsory education as the most important public undertaking, and also implements more equality in minority education policy. After several years of effort, particularly the simultaneous adoption of legislative measures for tuition guarantees and quality education, there has been a marked improvement in the compulsory education gap between regions, urban and rural areas, and schools (National Education Development Research Center 2008). But minority vocational education has not received the same attention, and in some ethnic minority areas even the personnel expenses of vocational teachers are not guaranteed. Vocational schools in these circumstances have no choice but to conduct review classes for students taking the high school and college entrance exams, remedial classes, and training courses for a variety of social purposes, in order to passively survive in the market (Ren 2007; Zhai 2009).

These three aspects constitute the crisis and dilemma faced by minority vocational education. The additional factors of limited government investment, limited capacity to adapt to the market, and education development planning constraints have limited the reform and development of minority vocational education. We should therefore carefully analyze these issues and propose appropriate countermeasures and recommendations in the context of the special characteristics and overall social development of minority areas.

#### **Policies and Measures**

1. While ensuring the continued development of basic education for minorities, a certain degree of attention should be given to minority vocational education. Establish multistakeholder investment and channels on the national, local, and community levels, including private capital. Establish and develop a localized vocational education system that meets local economic and social development needs.
2. Have such localized characteristics reflect the economic structures of the minority areas. Create vocational education and technical training models corresponding to the different modes of economic development. For example, with the tourism industry's rapid development over the years, many ethnic minority areas have become tourist destinations. Cultural industries are developing quickly, and this requires vocational

education appropriate for training the specialized personnel required by this market.

3. Talent development for minority vocational education requires effort in three areas: (1) The ethnic nationality's history and culture must permeate the entire vocational education process, resolving the issue of passing down the cultural heritage. (2) The knowledge, skills, and information required for local ethnic industries must be reflected in the vocational curriculum, and must be able to adapt to change. This can effectively address the issue of employment. (3) Gradually build the ranks of both full-time and part-time teachers, so that they can receive improved benefits, social security, opportunities to further their studies, and social respect. This will stabilize faculties and improve education quality.
4. Closely link academic education with vocational education. Since minority vocational education is imbued with both cultural and vocational characteristics, we can consider gradually increasing vocational education content during the basic education stage. The advantage here is the opportunity to move beyond a uniform learning model and increase students' hands-on capacity, while also broadening middle-school graduates' avenues for continued education and laying a vocational education foundation.
5. Establish a vocational education alliance for mutual support and assistance, making full use of external quality resources and factors, so that minority vocational education is truly integrated into the greater social environment and is given priority in development. With such an alliance, minority vocational education development will contribute to the overall structural optimization of minority education and promote the healthy development and transition of local economies. It will also help the surplus labor force to use vocational education to move smoothly into secondary and tertiary industries in both local and nonlocal towns and cities.

To summarize, we know that both the extrinsic and intrinsic problems currently facing minority vocational education must be fully considered. Perhaps only a portion of the problems and potential solutions are discussed here, but many scholars have reached a consensus that, in addition to the continued guarantee and optimization of basic education in minority areas, we need to vigorously develop vocational education options after middle and high school, as well as "short, adaptable, and fast" training for adults in science and technology and for labor export. In short, let us engage in more

multicultural, multiple-channel, and multiple-format vocational education in a multicultural environment. Doing so will help to ensure a rational overall minority education structure, enhance education efficiency, and give full rein to the comparative advantages of local resources and economies, as well as to the complementary strengths of the different ethnic minority areas, to further the development of the entire society.

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