

1



WHY WON'T TALENTS RETURN HOME? A CASE STUDY OF CONTRACT BREACH BY GRADUATES OF THE PROGRAM OF TRAINING HIGH-CALIBER BACKBONE PERSONNEL FROM THE ETHNIC MINORITIES

¿Por qué el talento no vuelve a casa? Un estudio de caso sobre la brecha contractual entre graduados de grupos minoritarios del programa para la formación de alto nivel de personal backbone

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ABSTRACT

In 2004, the Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security jointly released a special document *On Training High-*

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Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities, as a supporting measure for the strategy of human resources in western development of China. The central government takes it as an important force in thriving and developing the western region, especially the region where ethnic minority groups reside in the west. However, more and more graduates through the Program have breached or intend to break the contract of the Program. Why do they not abide by the contract and return to their hometown province for the work after they have enjoyed the preferential Program? This case study focused on three graduates who broke the employment contract through the Program, traced the origin and development of their minds and action, and demonstrated more about what hid behind the phenomenon. According to the deep interaction with these ethnic minority students, the research found that the social background under which high education policies for the ethnic minorities had greatly changed. The changes have challenged the implementation of the Program. Furthermore, under the socialistic market economy system, the employment contract of the Program couldn't be processed and secured as the involved actors have expected. Last but not the least, the graduates benefited from the Program have become more and more individualistic and diversified in their career development due to different micro and macro reasons.

KEY WORDS: Graduate students; Chinese education system; ethnic minorities; migration rates.

RESUMEN

En el año 2004 y de manera conjunta, el Ministerio de Educación, la Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y las Reformas, la Comisión Estatal de Asuntos Étnicos, el Ministerio de Economía, el Ministerio de Recursos Humanos y la Seguridad Social, publicaron una normativa especial para la *Formación de Alto Nivel de Personal Backbone entre las Minorías Étnicas*, como medida de apoyo a la estrategia de recursos humanos para el desarrollo de la zona occidental de China. El gobierno central considera un elemento clave el desarrollo de la región occidental, especialmente allí donde residen los grupos minoritarios. Sin embargo, cada vez más graduados universitarios que pasaron por el Programa han intentado pasar por encima o romper el contrato suscrito en él. ¿Por qué no cumplen con el contrato y regresan a sus provincias de origen para trabajar tras haber disfrutado de los beneficios que les brinda el Programa? Este estudio de casos se centra en tres estudiantes de grado que rompieron el contrato de trabajo suscrito dentro del Programa, se establecen el origen y evolución de sus pensamientos y acciones, y se avanza en el conocimiento de lo que hay detrás de este fenómeno. A través de una interacción profunda con estos estudiantes que pertenecen a alguna minoría étnica, la investigación ha determinado que las motivaciones sociales de las políticas educativas para grupos étnicos

minoritarios han cambiado mucho. Los cambios han desafiado la implementación del Programa. Además, bajo el sistema económico de mercado socialista, el contrato de empleo del Programa no podría desarrollarse ni asegurarse en el sentido en que sus actores lo preveían. Por último, los graduados universitarios que se beneficiaron de este Programa, son cada vez más individualistas y presentan una mayor diversidad en su desarrollo profesional como consecuencia de razones de tipo micro y macro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudiantes de grado; Sistema educativo chino; Minorías étnicas; tasas de migración.

INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of reform and opening up, China is now on its way to becoming a more democratic and prosperous nation. Its overall strength and international status have been significantly raised, and Chinese people's living standards are improving steadily. However, sustainable and harmonious development is affected by such problems as the imbalanced development between east and west regions and the lag of development among ethnic minorities. Due to their own history and poor natural resources, ethnic minorities in the west lag far behind the other regions of China in terms of cultural, economic and political development, which often leads to disadvantages in education, especially higher education. According to government statistics, all professionals in the western region account for only 20.4% of the national total; among them, high-level professionals and technical personnel in the Western region account for only 13.6% of the national total, academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the Chinese Academy of Engineering (CAE) in the Western region constitute only 8.3% (and almost none were born of ethnic minorities) and in terms of technical staff, engineers and scientific researchers in western regions account for only 15.4% and 8.8% of national totals respectively.

In order to reduce developmental gap between the eastern and the western regions where ethnic minority groups reside, the central government of China has implemented different preferential policies for enhancing access to secondary education and higher education for ethnic minorities, such as lowering the score line for ethnic minority student admissions to higher education institutions since 1950s (ZHU, 2010), building Tibetan Neidi Secondary Classes (schools) beyond Tibet from 1980s (ZHU, 2007) and boarding high schools for Uyghur students beyond Xinjiang in 2000 (CHEN, 2008), and so on.

Considering human resources to be crucial in both regional and national development, in July 2004, the Ministry of Education, National Development and Reform Commission, the National Ethnic Affairs Committee, the Ministry of Finance, and the

Ministry of Personnel jointly issued the document on Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities (MOE, et al., [教民Jiaomin No. 5], 2004). The Ministry of Education and the National Ethnic Affairs Committee subsequently issued a detailed Implementation Guideline of the Program of Training high-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities (MOE & NEAC [教民Jiaomin No. 11], 2005), which stipulated “directed enrollment, directed education and directed employment (Dingxiang zhaosheng, dingxiang peiyang, dingxiang jiuye)”, and that state-run colleges and universities should give preferential admission to students of ethnic minorities in M.A. program and Ph.D. program. With this policy, the Chinese government attempted to cultivate a large number of talented ethnic minority students by facilitating access to master’s or doctoral degree program and expected them to go back to contribute to their hometown development. The policy was implemented in 2005. Considering that students selected through this admission policy tended to be underprepared for graduate studies, the Implementation Guideline stipulated the selection of a number of mainland state-run colleges and universities as central training bases, where students would receive one-year of concentrated training, thus raising their “comprehensive educational level to meet or nearly meet the basic requirements for beginning the graduate education for master degree.

It is indubitable that this policy has increased ethnic minority groups’ access and participation in M.A. and Ph.D. programs. However, though a policy should be assessed and amended in accordance with changing factors such as economic, political and social environments and value orientations of policy subjects and objects, for a long time public attention has focused on what policies support ethnic minority education and promote ethnic minority development rather than on how to implement the policies or evaluate the results of implementation. After five years, how is the implementation of the Program of Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities (hereinafter referred to briefly the Program) progressing? How does the policy guarantee that graduates fulfill their corresponding obligations after benefiting from this preferential policy? Have these graduates become the mighty force promoting their hometown’s development as expected by the government?

Since 2006, more than 20,000 students have benefited from this preferential policy, and the first group of them graduated in July 2009. According to the Directed Education Agreement and the Employment Contract between them and the local government, signed before enrollment, they ought to return to their hometowns and work there. But the fact is many graduates have been unwilling to return home, and their breach of contract resulted in the futile efforts of the state government, no achievement in higher education cultivation for ethnic minorities, and a great brain drain of the west (MENG, 2006; LIU, 2009). Questions arise. Why were these talented students unwilling to return? Were they driven to stay in the east by better economic opportunities there? Was the actual employment they were offered

in their hometowns inferior to what had been stipulated in the contract? Can their decisions be explained by the graduates' own value orientations? Or were there any hidden rules in the policies that allowed the students to change their minds and not return? This study employed qualitative research methods to collect data, and explored and identified the reasons that the students who benefited the preferential policy breached the contract with the government.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In China, much attention has been paid to the phenomenon that a large number of graduates from the west flow to the middle and east regions. Relevant studies are abundant. This paper will just present the literature relevant to the following two questions: (1) What is the current employment status of graduates of the Program? (2) Why do ethnic minority graduates flow from the west to the middle and east regions?

1.1. Current employment status of graduates of the Program

Employment of graduates of *the Program* is significant for the graduates themselves as well as the development of ethnic minority communities in the west. Wei (2009) comments that such a program is "a great plan", and he pertinently points out the defects of the policy --- no rational consideration in talent structure and distribution of different majors to be in great need in the ethnic minority regions. Take as an example Liaoning University of Petroleum and Chemical Technology, the northeast training base. Among 134 students enrolled, 107 were liberal arts majors while only 27 were science and engineering majors. Students majoring in liberal arts are abundant in the west, while more high-calibre science and engineering personnel are desperately needed. Inappropriate and imbalanced enrolments in majors will most probably result in new problems. Furthermore, the enrolled group includes not only in-service students but non-in-service students with the latter accounts for the larger part of the group¹. Take Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as an example. In 2007, 190 master degree candidates from Xinjiang enrolled in colleges and universities, 86 more than the total number of 2006. Such a number sets Xinjiang at the top rank of provinces in China benefiting from the Project. However, among them, in-service students are only 38 while non-in-service students are 152, accounting for 20% and 80% of the total respectively. Among the in-service students, 35 are teaching staff of higher educational institutes, accounting for 92.1%. Among these 190 students, 99 are graduating students from other higher educational institutes, accounting for 52.1% of the total².

¹ "In-service students" refers to the ones who have worked in their hometown organizations and will maintain their positions while studying in the enrolled colleges through *the Program*; "non-in-service" refers to the ones who have no formal working experiences before the enrollment.

² Refer to www.xjedu.gov.cn/wjgg/wj/2008/18348.htm, retrieved on 2011-09-05.

During the implementation of this preferential policy, though there is the contract made between students and their hometown government, such a contract has defects in both the form and content. Consequently the contract often becomes a mere formality, and breach of contract becomes popular. Brain drain is serious; students who once benefited from the preferential policy seldom returned to fulfil their contracted obligations to serve the ethnic minority areas (MENG, 2006; LIU, 2009). Some in-service graduates and others who also should return home managed to take every means to get reassigned to another job far away from ethnic minority regions. The reason why such students can succeed in getting reassignment is that relevant rules are not so strict³ (XIONG & LU, 2006). Most students regard this preferential policy as a steppingstone to higher education for masters or doctoral degrees, fulfilling their dream of graduate education to increase their own competitive abilities (AO, 2004; HUANG, 2009). Yang and Meng (2007) interviewed of a university's master's candidates admitted through the Project and showed that the majority's learning objective is to seek a better job outside the ethnic minority areas.

1.2. Reasons graduates flow from the West to the central and Eastern regions

Talented students increasingly flowing from the western ethnic minority areas to other areas constitutes a threat to the economic and social development of the western ethnic minorities. Usually a comparatively developed metropolis is their top choice after graduation (XIONG & LU, 2006). Since the 1980s, the number of college-degree-hold talents flowing out of the west is over twice that of talents flowing into the west (WANG, 2005). Among those flowing out, the majority are young talents. Such a trend has not been checked, although it has slowed down a little in the last three years. Statistics show that, every year, a few of western-origin graduates of central or eastern colleges and universities return to work in western ethnic minority areas. Take Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as an example. Every year, over 4,500 students from this region enrol in higher educational institutes in central and eastern areas, but less than 2,000 return to work in Xinjiang. In other words, the majority of graduates, many with majors that are desperately needed in Xinjiang, choose to work far away from Xinjiang (YANG, 2004). Another example is Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Every year, 2,500 students are sent to central and eastern colleges and universities, and less than a half return. Of those who major in science and engineering less than 40% return home (YANG, 2004).

According to Dou Kailong (2008), the underlying reasons for this brain drain are two. In a narrow sense, this preference is due to changes in individuals' mentalities, value orientations and future expectations; in a broad sense, these changes are the result of

³ According to the agreement established by the Ministry of Education, the persons, who would not serve in the units to be designated in the agreement of the Preferential Program, would be requested to reimburse the fees allocated by the government for their study in the university, and to be fined 50% of the fees (Refer to http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_763/201110/xxgk_125530.html).

economic and social interactions within the market economy. Xiang (2003) argue that it is a natural law of social mobility that highly talented individuals are constantly flowing from place to place. Regional conditions, value shifts and family pressures are leading explanations for brain drain from the western areas, so we turn to these arguments in more detail.

1.2.1. Regional conditions

Brain drain could simply be attributed to the push from the west and the pull from the middle and east (HUANG, 2004). With the widespread economic reforms and opening-up, the gap between the west and the middle-east regions has been further widened, leaving the western ethnic minority areas at an obvious disadvantage in their ability to attract and retain graduates because they offer comparatively lower salaries and limited career development (WANG, 2005; ZHAO, 2007). In addition, local governments as well as educational departments have not made appealing policies to attract graduates back home. Many who have earned a master's degree cannot find a suitable position upon returning to the west area (NIU, YANG, et al, 2009). Since well-educated individuals' material and mental needs for higher salaries and, more importantly, career development cannot be well satisfied, brain drain has every reason to exist.

In addition to limited economic opportunities, administrative and social "push" factors in the west are vital to explain the brain drain issue (Huang, 2004). In order to check the outflow of high-tech personnel, many employers in the west have taken irrational and impractical measures. For instance, the traditional bureaucratic administration is employed to strictly control the mobility of talented individuals, by denying them permission to change their registered permanent residence or organizational affiliation, withholding their personal files, or requiring high reparation (YAO & LI, 2005). These measures to keep people in the west may backfire by causing graduates to try to stay away from this region once they have left for higher education. In the developing western area, relational networks (*guanxi wang*) are important social capital; such networks have great impact on graduates' looking for job, especially for those from disadvantaged families. This constitutes another major reason why graduates are unwilling to go back home (ZHAO, 2007).

1.2.2. Students' value orientation

Another major reason why students do not want to return home is their value orientations toward career and their mental state. Commonly students aspire to better working environment, higher salary and more room for future development, thus vying for employment in metropolises which boast better economies and better cultural environment. Students who are exposed to multicultural urban environments may view the western areas as the mirror image of the metropolis, backward, primitive and traditional (ZHANG, 2006).

Students in higher education view the slow development in the west as limiting their future achievements. This deadens the spirits of those who are qualified to serve their hometowns but not willing to dedicate themselves to the west (ZHAO, 2007). With the market economy widely spreading, students' sense of dedication to serving China is gradually weakening. To them, the slogan "Educated youth ought to work in whatever poor conditions to serve the country," which was popular decades ago, is now impractical (NIU, YANG, et al, 2009).

1.2.3. Family and marriage

Family pressure is another reason why many students choose to stay far away from the west. With heavy economic burdens, the family usually places great hope on the youth and wishes to change their fate through higher education. This expectation leads to students' desire to seek higher salaries so as to grow economically independent and repay the family (ZHAO, 2007).

Many rural parents in the west area believe that the moment their kids get admission to higher educational institutes, they are phoenixes from the tucked-away areas. They hope that their kids fly as high as possible, seek for better living conditions and never return to farm work (ZHANG, 2006). Students are unwilling to return for fear of pressure from their families as well as the society. They are worried that relatives and friends would despise them and think they are too incompetent to find a job outside (ZHAO, 2007).

Graduates from higher educational institutes are almost of the legitimate age of marriage. Once they fall in love or are engaged in marriage, they would prefer culturally and educationally developed areas so that their children would benefit. Large cities, especially Beijing and Shanghai, have made preferential policies for local permanent residents' children to enter local educational institutes. More and more graduates plan to stay in these cities for the sake of their future children's better education. Undoubtedly, poor education in the west affects students' choice of career (ZHANG, 2006).

Although there is a literature on the causes of brain drain, research on this issue in the context of the Project is not abundant. Interpretations and assessments of its implementation are scarce. Most studies account for the outflow of students from the west from a macro perspective, stressing the harsh natural environment, low economic development or backwardness of education and culture.

We narrow down our research to the question "Why do graduates of the Program of Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities breach the contract?" The present study takes a micro perspective to focus on graduates that have

breached or will breach the contract by examining their mentality and behavior before and after breach in order to disclose the underlying reasons.

2. CASE STUDY: EXPERIENCES AND DECISIONS OF THREE PROGRAM GRADUATES

A case study enables researchers to obtain wider range of evidence, and offers researchers chances to enter into these graduates' inner world and listen to them so as to fully discern why they chose or will choose to breach the contract. We contacted the Program participants through the online Forum of High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities and through word of mouth, explaining our research to potential participants. Although many were reluctant to be interviewed for the project, several agreed to be our research subjects.

In addition to graduates who have breached the contracts, we also focus on students who have the intention to breach contracts. Since they are in search of employment and undergoing the transition of stepping into the world from universities, we can trace the whole process from the initial formation of the idea of breach, to hesitation, to final decision, to practice. We made close contacts with 11 ethnic minority students. After deeper communication, we choose three of them for our case study.

2.1. Data collection

At the first stage, we used informal unstructured interview method. After studying the data and narrowing down topics, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Most interviews were face-to-face in Beijing. However, Zhang Yike lives in Shanghai, instead of face-to-face talk, we communicated with her through the internet from the start to the end of the research.

Questions in our interviews mainly focused on individual background information, initial learning motivation, graduate study and life experiences, factors affecting decisions about breach of contract, actual practice of breach, and changes in career planning.

With interviewees' permission, we recorded the interview, and made transcripts immediately after the interviews. We wrote down our reflections on the interviews, our insights from the interviews, and descriptions of language and body language of interviewees. With the research subjects' permission we supplemented the interview material with their own blog postings.

2.2. Research data analysis

In order to facilitate our analysis, we present the information about the three research subjects in the follow table (Table 1). Research subjects' names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Basic Information about Research Subjects⁴

Name	Ethnic Minority	Sex	Location of University	Major	Current State and Future Plan
Xiang Shang	Tu	Male	Beijing	History	Working in Zhongguancun Electronics shopping Mall, Beijing; waiting to start his own business
Zhang Yike	Miao	Female	Shanghai	Music	To work in Shanghai; to marry immediately after graduation
Li Ming	Zhuang	Male	Beijing	Law	To work in Beijing; saving money to buy himself a house in Beijing; never to return hometown

2.3. Reflection: I do not deserve the title “High-Calibre Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities”

Xiang Shang told us in a forthright manner, “The one and only reason why I chose to study History is that History entrance exam is the easiest for me to pass and get enrolled.” He got his bachelor degree of Economics from a third-rate university in Hubei Province. He didn't like Economics but chose the major under his parental pressure.

“I idled away the total four years in the university. Since those courses were too difficult to follow, I gave up the study and spent all the time on computer games. In the 3rd school year, parents forced me to prepare for national postgraduate entrance exam. They thought a master's degree was a must for a better job. So I took the exam but failed. Later, they said Beijing was the top choice for further study and other cities such as Shanghai and Wuhan could not match it. So I chose Beijing. Anyway, I myself didn't want to stay in Hubei any longer. I had stayed there since I was born. I was tired of it” (Interview with Xiang Shang).

Xiang Shang intended to apply for a graduate program in Business Management at a key university in Beijing. Unfortunately, he failed the entrance exam. He said, “At that time, I was poor in major courses, and especially in English. Whenever I took English simulation tests, the grade could only be between 40 and 10. And I got 25 points the first time I took the entrance exam, failing the exam by 30 points...”

⁴ In order to keep research subjects' identities anonymous, time of study, subjects' age and home provinces are not included in the table.

Though his parents urged him to take the exam for a second time, he refused resolutely, totally losing his confidence in English. His parents were ordinary civil servants; his uncle was a bureau director who had a powerful personal network. He promised to find Xiang Shang a decent job, but Xiang Shang refused the offer because he thought he was not fit for a position in an office. His refusal of the offer ignited several severe quarrels between him and his family.

No goal, no business. Xiang Shang could do nothing but wander around his hometown. But wherever he went, friends and acquaintances would always ask him similar questions, such as, "Have you graduated from the university? Where do you work?" Gradually he was reluctant to go out and talk to others. Surfing on the net became his only pastime. He was then at the lowest mood and in black despair. He wrote, "I feel as if a huge stone was pressing on me. I was stifling to death... I am eager to go into the world, but how can I survive?" (from Xiang Shang's blog, July 12, 2005).

Luckily, Xiang Shang saw a ray of hope.

"A friend of my mom's worked in the provincial Education Bureau. One day she told my mom that a preferential policy was just implemented. It was the Program of Training High-Calibre Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities. She suggested that I should have a try since the enrolment requirements were much lower. I immediately found it on the net. Too cool! The English entrance requirement is only 20-30 scores. I couldn't believe my eyes! Is that real? At the moment, I felt my chance had come. Learning from my previous failure, I decided to choose a major such as History, Politics. The fewer students there are to take the entrance exam, the less competitive the exam would be. I couldn't afford a second failure. I needed a 100% assurance. What's more, I had stayed at home too long. I was very eager to change my living environment. So long as I could get a diploma, it would be OK to choose any major. After consulting with my parents, I chose the major of History, and then I got the school admission" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

During the period between his failure and success passing the entrance exam, he underwent depression, self-doubt and uncertainty about the future. Such emotions totally disappeared when he received admission to school. He was longing for life in the metropolis. He wrote, "from now on, a new journey is displayed before me. I am a bit anxious, worried and excited, longing for the new life. Though I could not predict my life in Beijing, I would forever remember my resolution at the moment" (from Xiang Shang's bloc Aug., 20, 2006):

"The moment I got the school admission letter, my parents were so pleased. They told any acquaintance they met that I became a postgraduate funded by the state government. Those who heard about this gave me their hearty congratulations and praises. To me, it was not like that. I was rather clear that I would never become a postgraduate without that Project. But others' praises really made me proud and excited for a while. It proved my wise decision on choosing the major. I felt I didn't prepare very well in the last couple of months, for I had a bad memory, failing to mechanically memorize too much knowledge. But I passed the exam, anyway. So, I sincerely thank the Communist Party and the state government for this preferential policy. In fact, my whole family gives sincere thanks to the Communist Party and the state government" (Interview with Xiang Shang)

Such an expression is rather meaningful. Considering his poor English and his failure in another entrance exam, without such a preferential policy, Xiang Shang would most probably have failed again in the second entrance exam. Needless to say, he felt sincerely thankful to the Program. It enabled him to transfer from a county in Hubei Province to Beijing, the capital of China, and to give credit to his family. More importantly, his whole life was to be changed.

Before 2006, the image of Beijing in Xiang Shang's mind was restricted to his uncle's description and TV programs. Since the university was located downtown with many restaurants, leisure and entertainment places around and its own concentrated training base in the campus, he did not undergo the other research subjects' solitary life. Instead, he spent the first two months of the training year travelling around Beijing.

"Upon arriving, I had passion to walk around the city from time to time. Almost all scenic spots had witnessed my footprints. At that time, I just felt everything was fresh, and was eager to see what the capital was like. I thought then, later when I returned home I could proudly tell others that I had visited all scenic spots in Beijing" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

In this novel and fascinating place, Xiang Shang started his concentrated training.

"Forbidden City, Great Wall, Summer Palace, and Yuanmingyuan Park. To me, they are all alike. So I began to wander about shopping centers like Xidan, Wangfujing, and World Trade Center, but only to find myself bored. You know, generally speaking, shopping is girls' business but not mine. Later when winter came, wind blew heavily and I stopped going outside..." (Interview with Xiang Shang).

As to the concentrated training courses, Xiang Shang said frankly, "I missed most of them."

"The training courses were exclusively College Chinese, Ethnology and the like. I have not the least interest in them. They were of some use to Uighurs, but not me, because I could speak much better Chinese than them. I need not waste time in these courses. Since we could mechanically memorize the textbooks, we could get high scores. And teachers were not strict with us. They were too lazy to call the roll. Haha. Teachers were like hypnotists. In their classes, the absence rate was high, and most of the students present at class fell asleep..." (Interview with Xiang Shang).

From the above we can draw two conclusions. First, he thinks he is totally different from Uighurs. He learned to speak Chinese from the moment he was born and felt it was Uighurs that needed more education about mainstream culture. We will discuss ethnic identity in more depth in the next section. Second, Xiang Shang complained much about the curriculum and poor teaching quality. In fact, students of the Project were constantly making similar complaints in their QQ group. They lost interest in study, and "preferred surfing on the net and lying in bed to going to class". The first year's concentrated training is vital to students' future study, but too much instruction of doctrines as well as ideology contributed to students' negative responses. Their learning motivation was severely

damaged. One person's absence from class sometimes lead to all the roommates skipping too, since the Program participants lived together in dorms on campus.

Feeling bored of the outside world, Xiang Shang began to stay in the dorm playing computer games all day and all night. He commented, "The carefree year soon passed. We all agreed no other period in our life could be so easy and pleasant. Alas, how I miss that time!" After summer, Xiang Shang began his real graduate study. He got rid of the old habit of playing truant. A supervisor was assigned to him but had few contacts with him.

"Two contacts a semester. The first was at the beginning of school year, the second meeting was at the end of the semester. Compared with my high school classmates who did not participated in the Program, I felt I was too lucky. Whenever I asked them to go for an outing, they were busy doing research assigned by their supervisors or were on research fieldwork outside the province with their supervisors."

However, soon Xiang Shang felt tired of such a free and slack life. He said,

"I wanted to go out, but didn't know where to go. All I could do was to surf on the net. Days went by. And one day, it struck me that how meaningless my life was! I resumed the feelings I had when I failed the national graduate entrance exam. I felt depressed. I fell into black despair, not knowing what to do next..." (Interview with Xiang Shang).

His three roommates were from other ethnic minorities, one Tibetan and two Mongolians. The Tibetan usually socialized with the Tibetan students. The two Mongolians stayed together most of the time and talked to each other almost exclusively in Mongolian. Xiang Shang did not understand a word. He said, "Even when they speak ill of me, I could not tell and instead I would give them a big friendly smile." Xiang Shang became a "minority" in his dorm. Sometimes he could not find a person to talk with. He started to reflect on his sense of ethnic identity.

"I wonder why I never thought of finding myself a friend of the same ethnic group ...The key is, even if I had had the idea, no one would have talked to me. You know, the Tujia ethnic minority has been so assimilated into Han culture that we are totally the same as the Han ethnic group in daily life. And we look alike. No one could tell that we are Tujia unless we bore words like "Tujia ethnic" in our face. No wonder we are not aware that we are Tujia. I used to live in Hubei province, never realizing that I am an ethnic minority. When I am in Beijing, I still have no strong feeling that I am an ethnic minority. At least, compared with my 3 roommates, I am not an ethnic minority" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

We then asked, "When did you realize that you are an ethnic minority? Or, when did you associate yourself with the concept of ethnic minority?" He blurted out,

"In my life, only twice. The first time was when I got additional 20 points on my entrance exam scores to higher education. The second was when I got the school admission with the aid of the Program. Without these preferential policies, all I could do was go to a three-year junior college, not to mention the graduate study" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

In terms of his future orientation, he said, although he knew very clearly when he signed the contract that he had to go back to serve his hometown, he did not spend much time thinking about it.

“At the very beginning, I thought about the possibility of returning home, and relatives had promised to find me a decent job. To be frank, I did not care at that time. To me, graduate education was the same as idling away time. All I needed was to wait and see if I could find a good job in Beijing” (Interview with Xiang Shang).

During the first half semester of the 2nd school year, he accompanied a friend of his to Zhongguancun Electronics Shopping Mall to buy a computer. One shop owner found that Xiang Shang had an extensive knowledge of electronics and invited him to help there. Being occupied with nothing, Xiang Shang accepted it, thinking that “it’s better to work in the shop so that at least I could have some guys to talk with. It is much better than staying in the dorm surfing on the net all day long.” So he started his part time job. Initially he just wanted to idle away time, but gradually he learned a lot.

“Though I didn’t do well in Economics studies, I came to realize that I am good at doing business. I made friends with others sharing the same ideals and thoughts, learned more about the business, and learned where to make money... During the second half of 2nd school year, it struck me for the first time that I should breach the contract. I planned to stay in Beijing, to be engaged in something I am really interested in” (Interview with Xiang Shang).

With the approach of graduation, the idea of breaching the contract became much stronger. When he went home for the winter holiday, he seriously raised the issue. His parents strongly opposed it for they had wished him to work near home so that they could take care of each other conveniently. But his uncle supported him and even promised to persuade his parents to accept his decision. He asked Xiang Shang not to worry about any issues at home and to work hard to become a boss himself.

Xiang Shang smiled, “My uncle is a local cadre in the government. Maybe all the cadres yearn for Beijing. He thought, I am able to manage the issue concerning your contract with local government so long as I could stay in Beijing. For all these years, my parents always took his words seriously. So they accepted my decision.” Xiang Shang’s uncle handled everything. Through his powerful personal relational network, he found an organization to employ him. In this way Xiang Shang nominally returned home in accordance with the contract. But in fact he would never appear in that organization. Instead, he is busy working in one Electronics Shopping Mall of Beijing. If this arrangement works out, after a five-year term of “service,” he can “justifiably” obtain his graduate diploma.

In the interviews with other graduates or graduating students, they thought Xiang’s arrangement was perfect and enviable. Obviously, not everyone has such a social capital or autonomy in decisions about their own destiny.

Now, Xiang Shang's salary per month reaches 2000-3500 RMB. The average labour time is about 11-12 hours per day, which makes him feel exhausted. In order to save money, he rents a room in a suburb in Beijing famous for its "ant colony" (where tenants are like ants, living so densely and poorly). One of his colleagues shares the room with him. Each of them has to pay 250 RMB per month. In the room there are only 2 beds. The lavatory is shared by all the tenants on the same floor. When we asked if we could visit his room, he refused with a smile, "That will freak you out. Never go there." Every day, Xiang Shang has to work until about 9 pm. Then he catches the last train of the day back home and falls immediately asleep. At about 7 am the next morning he gets up to catch a bus to work again.

We said, "If you had worked at your hometown, you wouldn't have felt so tired. The tempo of life there is much slower than that in Beijing. Besides, since your family has a strong personal network, you could have had a decent job, not to mention a house or a private car. You must be aware of that. Do you feel regretful for your choice?" He shook his head, saying,

"I cannot and dare not say that I am regretful, because it's my own choice. I won't feel regret unless I see the results...I don't know why once when I got accustomed to life in Beijing, I couldn't accept the tempo of life in my hometown. It is too simple and easy. But here in Beijing, we are struggling for our future. If I returned home without fame or fortune, friends and relatives would believe that I returned home because I failed to survive in Beijing. They all know it is only with my uncle's help that I could stay in Beijing. So I can't disgrace my uncle" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

He told us he was not satisfied with his current state at all. But he needed to accumulate experiences. Once the time is ripe, he plans to open his own business, becoming a boss himself.

Due to dismal employment prospects and ambiguous government policies at all levels, most of Xiang Shang's former classmates were in doubt about employment plans. They were distinctly divided into two groups. Upon graduation, Uighurs and Tibetans chose to return resolutely, while those from other ethnic groups with less ethnic identification hesitated. Eventually, Xiang Shang told us, at least a half of them breached the contract, either going to the developed coastal areas or staying in Beijing. No statistics are available about the number of students breaching contracts in his class. According to him, a classmate from Zhuang ethnic minority hesitated too long. At first he returned hometown to work immediately after graduation; two months later, he went back to Beijing, preparing for an entrance exam for a doctoral degree. And he still resorted to the same Program for doctoral degrees for ethnic minorities. According to his contract, he has to go back to work for at least eight years. But he said, "With a doctoral degree, it's much easier to find a job in Beijing. Once finding a decent job, I will breach the contract. If I can't find a suitable job then, I will return. With a doctor degree, I will be regarded much more highly by leaders." Xiang Shang seemed to despise such a behavior, "Sometimes I

think myself mean, breaching the contract after obtaining the master's degree. But compared with this classmate, I am much nobler. A man like him shouldn't pursue further education if he fails the national entrance exam. Why resort to the preferential Program? It is a shame."

In the end of the interview, Xiang Shang gave us a good suggestion,

"If you intend to make such a research, I think you'd better interview those Tibetans, Uighurs and Hui ethnic minorities who returned home with resolution. Some of them really finished graduate education with aspiration and dedication to their hometown development. And they followed such an aspiration to work in their hometowns. Of course, there are still those who returned home only because they couldn't really adjust themselves to places where the majority is Han ethnic. Haha. They deserve the title High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from Ethnic Minorities Talent more than I do" (Interview with Xiang Shang).

We asked, "Don't you think you deserve the title?" He didn't reply directly, instead, asked us, "What about you? Do you think I deserve it? Hmm, tell me the truth, do you think I deserve it?"

Xiang Shang's suggestion is in fact what we are thinking about doing next. The 56 different designated ethnic groups in China have varying senses of ethnic identity. What impact could such varying degrees of sense impose on High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from Ethnic Minorities? We hope to interview some Uighurs, Tibetans and Hui ethnic students who have strong senses of ethnic identity, further analyzing the underlying reasons why some breached the contract while others did not.

2.4. Struggle: In Shanghai, I am more like a guest

Zhang Yike, a beautiful Miao ethnic girl from Guizhou Province, has devoted herself to vocal music and dance ever since she was less than ten. Through the Program, she was studying in Shanghai, too far away from Beijing. Her communications, via internet, showed she was very homesick.

"At the very moment I got the school admission, I was too excited, too eager to see the splendour of the bustling metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. The first concentrated training year was spent in Beijing where I could not adjust myself. The weather there was too dry; I was a bit under the weather, and there was something wrong with my skin. At that moment, I desired to drop out. Later, when I came to Shanghai, where there is more moisture in the air than in Beijing, I gradually get accustomed. But even now with so many friends here, I still miss home whenever I am alone. I have never been so far away from home. I feel very depressed whenever I meet local Shanghai residents who are arrogant exclusionists. I feel it's not my Shanghai. I want to go back home. Go home" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Her reason for pursuing graduate education was similar to Xiang Shang's.

“I even could not remember why I came for graduate education. Let me think it over. Yea, I remember. My mother urged me to take the entrance exam, and I felt I should visit metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai to enjoy varying cultures, otherwise I would be bound to have regrets when I grew older. The entrance requirements were not high enough. I was too lucky to pass the exam, and so I am here...” (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Her concentrated training courses were offered in Changping Ethnic Minority Educational Base of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. She said, “At the very beginning, I had planned to work hard. But the quality of instruction was so poor. And you could not imagine what courses we took that year! College Chinese, Introduction to Ethnic Minorities, Marxism and so on and so forth... We felt so bored during the classroom instruction... Generally, we had slack discipline. No one cared about the absence rates in the class. No one failed the exam...”

Since the concentrated training base was located in a suburb with few recreational facilities around, students were longing for downtown life. “Gradually, the absence ratio became higher and higher; more students played truant to wander about Beijing city. Later, I joined them, strolling around the city and doing some shopping. Hmm, at the very beginning, I felt guilty about skipping class. But I changed my mind at my classmates’ persuasion that we need not be so diligent since we had to return home. To them, we had little learning pressure. Besides, we stayed in Beijing for only one year; we should lose no time enjoying life in Beijing.” Obviously, influenced by her classmates, Zhang Yike’s motivation for learning gradually decreased.

She went to Shanghai a year later. There she met her current boyfriend, introduced to her by her supervisor. Whenever she talked about him, happiness appeared in her face, “They are not exclusionists. Whenever I go to his home, his grandma will grasp my hand, saying that I should treat the family as my own for I am so far away from home. Meeting with such a nice family, I am really very lucky and happy.”

In Zhang Yike’s class, most students were not working. They suffered a lot from the pressure of employment. The contract had defects in employment and future career development. Some were totally at a loss of what to do next. Others who had strong personal connections and did not want to work in rural areas hoped to breach contracts with the aid of personal network. Others, like Zhang Yike, faced family pressures:

“The idea of going back has been always hovering over my head. But my mom wants me to stay here, for she’s afraid that if I returned home, I would be an ordinary teacher of music for the rest of my life. My mom is a teacher, devoting her whole life to teaching mathematics in an elementary school. She felt it fatiguing to be a teacher; she also had high expectations for me. She wished me to have an easy life in Shanghai. Whenever I mentioned working at home, she would disagree and ask me to wait” (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Zhang Yike initially intended to work in her hometown and was very interested in policies to employ students in the Program.. But much to her disappointment, she could not find any details except in the earliest documents issued by the Ministry of Education. It was not until June 11, 2009, when the first students of the Program were about to graduate, that the Provincial Educational Department, Provincial Human Resources and Social Security Department, and Provincial Ethnic Affairs Committee in Guizhou jointly issued an document On Management of Honoring Contract and Employment of 2009-year Ethnic Minority High-Caliber Backbone Personnel Graduates in Guizhou Province. In it, one item was “to actively encourage and guide High-Caliber Backbone Personnel to work in ethnic minority areas and organizations at the grass roots level, or to take the initiative to start an enterprise. Talents could apply for ‘Student Village Leader Program’, ‘One College Student Serving One Village Program’, ‘Students Voluntarily Serve the West Program’, ‘Special Hillock Plan’ and so on. Those Program graduates who start private enterprise will enjoy preferential treatment such as exemption of administrative fees.”

Zhang Yike still had a vivid memory of the exact day when that document was issued. She said,

“Very soon the document was transmitted from one to another in our QQ group. Almost everyone was mad, discussing what to do next. Some said we were like kids under no custody, and we had to make a living for ourselves. Others said it was a waste of talents if we were to be treated like bachelor degree graduates. I found it both funny and annoying. For one thing, we had never been in such a heated discussion of an issue. Normally we were silent and invisible. Now when it concerned our interests, we could not keep silent any longer. For another, words failed me when I learned what arrangement the provincial government had made for us. I was capable of those things when I graduated with a bachelor degree. If I were to be treated like a bachelor degree graduate, why should I have spent four precious years studying for a master degree? It is totally a waste” (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Quite a few students have placed great expectations on the Project, hoping to return home to get a decent job. But provinces differ greatly from each other in terms of their own conditions; not all provinces could offer satisfactory employment to students and provide sufficient, timely and relevant information. The document issued in Guizhou Province is rather confusing. Does it mean that the state government’s Program is to require students to return home to take the initiative to start their own business? Can we conclude that the local government intended to push students to breach the contract in light of the difficulty in finding a local job? Is it contradictory to the central government’s original plan for the Program? What is the central government’s response to it?

Given the lack of opportunities at home and her relationship in Shanghai, Zhang Yike made a decision:

“Now I have decided not to return, and mom is happier than anyone else. She says I have a better life, and could have a better life. But leaving her alone in my hometown, I am much concerned about

her. I have made the decision that as soon as I get settled in work, I will invite mom to live with me in Shanghai. I'm afraid I have little chance to go back hometown" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

She told us she was not clear what the penalty is for the breach of contract. Her mother inquired of her old colleagues and students and learned that there are two ways the contract may be enforced, charging a fine and withholding the diploma. "My mom learned that it's about 70,000 RMB. Others say, since the rule is slack, I can go as far as I can. They will not 'chase' me in other provinces." The diploma is to be withheld from the graduate and sent to the provincial Educational Department of Guizhou Province, but with a powerful personal network, it could be retrieved. Besides, Zhang Yike does not need such a diploma in Shanghai, for her boyfriend has found her a position in a Cultural Innovation Company. The salary per month is 4,000-5,000RMB. They have decided to get married immediately after her graduation. Once they have a baby, she plans to stay home and perhaps later return to work. When we continued to ask her about how to face, we cannot help wondering why the local government does not use compromise to allow some students to find better jobs at home and others to stay in cities.

Unlike Xiang Shang, Zhang Yike has a strong sense of ethnic identity and desire to safeguard her own ethnic minority. She said,

"I was ambitious at the very beginning of study. Perhaps it's due to my major of arts. I naively believed that I could introduce my ethnic culture to more people in metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

"But what is meant by 'naively'? Did you later find it makes no sense?"

"I didn't mean it made no sense. I learned to dance when I was still young, and strongly believed the saying 'the greater the ethnic characteristic is, the greater the national appeal.' But when I went outside I came to realize, not all people knew much about ethnic minorities. In other words, what they knew was superficial. Sometimes when I wore my ethnic traditional costumes to take part in performances, people would ask me to take photos with them because they thought it beautiful. And they would show sympathy to me, asking me a lot of questions. I wondered why they were so curious about us in terms of what we eat, what we wear, where we live and so on. Strangely enough, to them, we seemed to be savages, living in the caves and eating raw meat..." (Interview with Zhang Yike).

"You didn't like that?"

"Hmm, at the very beginning I used to patiently explain to others, saying that we Miao are living a better life and are not as backward as before. But later I was at a loss about how to answer such frequent questions. For example, one day, when my boyfriend and I passed through a community to dine at my boyfriend's home, I heard several old women gossiping about me. They said I looked beautiful and became a Cinderella by marrying a local Shanghai boy. Upon hearing this, tears came out of my eyes. How could they say so? Then my boyfriend's family consoled me the whole night, swearing that they had never had such an idea and had never cared about it" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Some ethnic minorities are often confronted with such questions due to stereotypes that they are backward, stupid or uncivilized. Such bias affects ethnic minority group members' recognition of themselves and their group and may even affect their enthusiasm about returning to serve their hometown.

It is really a tremendous task to shorten the distance between the western ethnic minority areas and the more developed areas. We have to overcome not only the economic gaps but also bias to promote mutual understanding. As to the World Expo in Shanghai, Zhang Yike didn't feel too excited.

"It means nothing to me. Shanghai residents complain about it in private. Since they are exclusionists, how could they welcome people from other places? Do we live here just because it is more attractive? I don't think so. A little village in Guizhou Province is poorer but much more comforting. There is a saying, 'East or west, home is best'. In Shanghai, I seem to be a stranger" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

We asked her if any idea ever struck her as to what her life would have been if there had not been the Project. After a long while, she said,

"Aha, your question makes me feel it is immoral to breach the contract...if I haven't resorted to the Project, my current life would have never been true. I wouldn't have had any chance to go to Beijing and Shanghai, no chance to be acquainted with my boyfriend, and no time and passion to travel around China. I would have been an ordinary music teacher in the southeast area of Guizhou. Or maybe I would have led a simple but quiet life, living among beautiful scenic places without any competition. But now, I feel so satisfied with everything that I own. All that I love and those who love me. The only difference is that I have little chance to go back" (Interview with Zhang Yike).

Among all the interviewees, Zhang Yike is the most troubled one. Her words reflected her homesickness. She has not found a sense of belonging in the hectic metropolis. Contradictory emotions hovered around her, but in order not to disappoint her mother and boyfriend, she chose not to return although there had been fierce struggles in herself.

2.5. Insistence: no qualms about breaching the contract

Among all the interviewees, Li Ming is the oldest and the only working student. Before his postgraduate education, he had been working in a local court for four years. In accordance with the contract, such in-service graduates should return to their original organizations. Thus they have no need to seek a job upon graduation. Some of them even get a salary as well a stipend for living expenses from their original work unit during their graduate education.

"Due to my poor marks in the national college entrance exam, I studied in a local, obscure university. Upon graduation, I took the local exam for admission to the civil service and got the highest marks. In fact, I ranked at the top in both the written exam and the interview... But the first rank meant nothing. I became a secretary in the local court office. Four years later when I came out for graduate

study, I was still a secretary with only an over 500 RMB increase to the initial salary. My colleagues who went into the court the same year had become leaders one by one. They were good at making personal relational networks; I couldn't and I didn't ... Frankly speaking, I wanted but had no ability to do that. You know, my parents are peasants with a weak personal network. In small places like my hometown, it is impossible for one to get promoted if he has no strong personal network..." (Interview with Li Ming).

"So you decided to change your fate through graduate education?"

"Hmm. I had never expected to work as a secretary for so many years. With high marks I could have chosen to work in more promising organizations. At that time I was too naïve, thinking that so long as I could perform well I could get promoted. In fact, that's not the case. To be on good terms with leaders is the priority. When other colleagues got promotion one by one, I remained a secretary writing articles for leaders and managing daily routines of the office. Didn't I rank the highest in the exam? Then why it was others that got promoted? I couldn't accept it. So I was determined to prepare for the national graduate entrance exam. I wanted to prove that I am abler than others" (Interview with Li Ming).

Then he recalled how he prepared for the entrance exam and how he managed to get involved in this Project.

"At first my leader didn't consent to my graduate education, fearing that no one would like to manage the daily routines of the office. I explained to him patiently that there was a contract between the court and me which stipulates that I should return to the original organization. Upon hearing this, he was more determined not to give consent to me. I wondered if he was afraid that when I returned with a master's degree, I would take revenge on him. At that time, my colleagues all attempted to talk me out of it by jokingly or seriously saying that I was too old to pass the entrance exam, and I shouldn't be so restless. Anyway, I didn't give up. Eventually, so annoyed by my presence in his office every day, he agreed and signed the contract on the precondition that I would get no salary or stipend from the court. I thought the reason why he agreed was that he didn't think I could pass the entrance exam. Alas, to their surprise, I passed the exam and came to Beijing at last" (Interview with Li Ming).

Matchmakers visited him frequently, telling him that the daughter of a wealthy boss or a local high officer would like to make friends with him, but he said, "Ever since I got the school admission, I decided never to return. I shouldn't be tempted at such a crucial moment." The student who introduced him to us said,

"He is much better now. At the very beginning, due to his strong accent, we couldn't catch his words. His roommates seldom talked to him just because they couldn't communicate with him. We could tell that he had a sense of inferiority. Poor Mandarin."

In our second interview with Li Ming, we focused on how and why he breached the contract and his plan for the future. Li Ming was very frank,

"That's the case. Aren't I mad if I go back at the very thought that there will be no change in my work? Then why should I waste four years in pursuing graduate education? Besides, my colleagues don't want me to return. During the Spring Festival, my brother told me, my colleagues said that upon my returning home they would secretly make things difficult for me. Hmm, they must fear that I would be a threat to them. How could I work with them? I am a graduate from such a famous university. How could I endure working with them for the rest of my life? I am determined not to

return unless I am invited to work in the National People's Congress in our county" (Interview with Li Ming).

Obviously he is discontented with the former work unit and the local society and feels Beijing offers more possibilities.

"Beijing is after all the capital of China. Here, of course, there are those who get promotion through nepotism, but there are also some who are appointed on their own merit. At least, here are more chances for me to develop" (Interview with Li Ming).

When we inquired about other working students, Li Ming told us that since they need not worry about employment, all they want is to graduate soon. To them a master's degree will contribute to their professional promotion. Family also plays a crucial role in decisions to return.

"Working students are comparatively older. Some are even much older than me. With a wife and kids at home, they are bound to go back. But I'm different. Having decided not to go back, I didn't make any girl friend at home" (Interview with Li Ming).

In terms of his graduate study, Li Ming first of all mentioned the relationship between him and his supervisor. The first time he met him was when the concentrated training courses were over. The supervisor was not so clear about the preferential Program, believing the students of such a program were rather poor in both knowledge and academic performance. His coldness made Li Ming feel very depressed. He had tried his best to display his ability to his supervisor, but the latter was indifferent to him. Obviously he thought more highly of other students who were not in the Program and always chose them for research trips to conduct research. Gradually, Li Ming stopped to please his supervisor.

Determined to stay in Beijing, Li Ming started to seek employment the moment he began his graduate study in Beijing. He took many part-time jobs, such as proofreader, editor, and trainer in some agencies. He has found a job. "I haven't signed the contract. After graduation all I need is to sign it and then I become a full-time employee there. Graduates like us have no employment agreement and diploma." In other words, graduates of the Program who fail to return to their hometowns do not receive their Master's degree diploma. Nevertheless, "The leader of the current job knows me well... He never cared about the Program. He promised to appoint me on my merit and asked me to work hard." The work Li Ming mentioned is an exam training position in a training agency. The salary is low, about 1,500 RMB per month with a possibility for more based on his performance. These days he is doing odd jobs there. But the more lessons he gives and the higher the praise's trainees give him, the higher his salary is. His poor mandarin could be a disadvantage in this field of training and education, but Li Ming seems to be full of confidence about his future. He said, "I don't go back now, and never will in the future. I will strive to amount to something. I will buy an apartment of my own so that my child will

be able to go to school in Beijing...I won't go back until I become a Beijing permanent resident. I believe all those who once despised me will flatter me.”

We asked, “What special feelings do you have upon your breach of contract?”

“Aha, you just want to see if I feel guilty, don't you? Frankly speaking, I feel nothing at all. I am so indifferent. According to the contract I signed when I initially took the position of secretary in the local court, I ought to work there for five years. In fact, later I worked there for over four years. So I can say I am not breaching the contract. In big words, I can say I have dedicated the prime of my life to my hometown. Now, I leave it. I feel no qualms about it” (Interview with Li Ming).

To conclude, in terms of the breach of contract, Xiang Shang is innovative; Zhang Yike is homesick, while Li Ming is bold. Li Ming has never been content with his life in his hometown. He even thinks the prime of his youth has been dedicated to his hometown, and now it is his right to breach the contract. Similar words and similar mentalities are not uncommon among the students of the Program. The contract itself is concrete, but invisible psychological influences on students are also influential. Due to the mismatch between the ideas and actions of policymakers and students, the contract is sometimes an empty piece of paper.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the above data analysis, we constructed a conceptual framework for understanding a breach of contract (Figure 1).

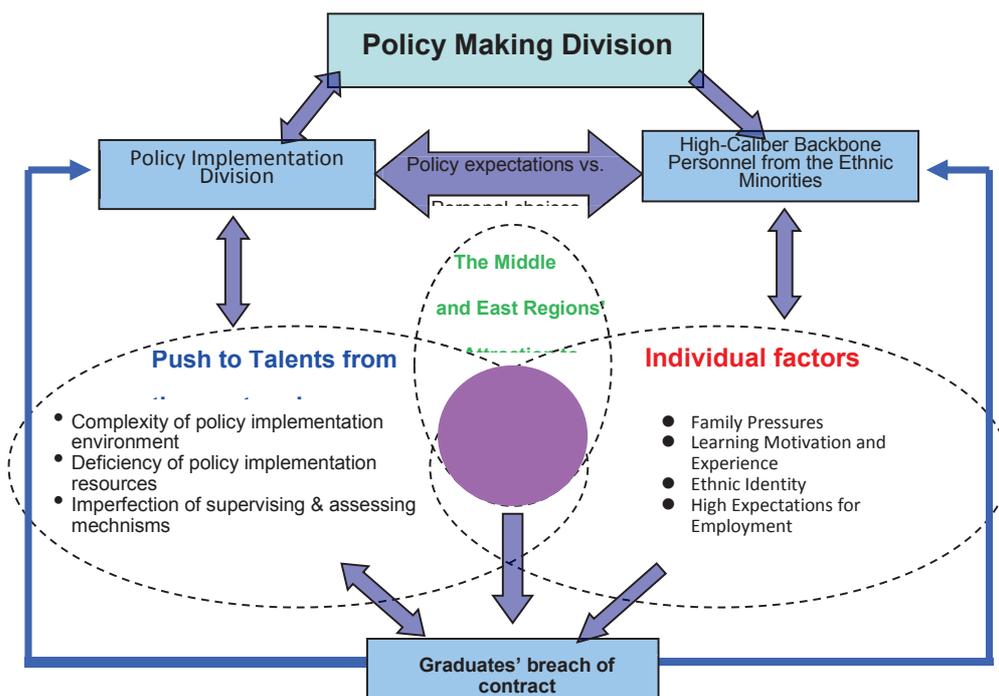
According to Figure 1, graduates' breach of contract is subject to varying social and economic environments and changes of value orientation, which is reflected in their choice of residence and employment after graduation. Political and economic environments and students' value orientations are influential, but the final decision is the result of students balancing all of those factors. For example, the desire to get out of the western region, the longing for metropolises such as Beijing and Shanghai, and the high expectations for employment after obtaining a master degree together constitute major motivations for breach of the contract for some graduates. We now turn to some of these factors in more detail.

3.1. Family pressures

The breach of contract is often related to social pressure mainly due to the high expectations of students and family. Although the three research subjects differ from each other in terms of family background and personal connections, their families have similar, positive attitudes toward their breach of contract. Although his parents were initially reluctant, with his extended family's powerful personal connections, Xiang Shang complied with the contract superficially, but actually took advantage of policy loopholes. Zhang Yike

did not initially intend to breach the contract, but under her family and boyfriend’s influence, she gradually changed her plan. Li Ming’s parents are peasants and know little about the Program’s policies but naively believe their son’s stay in Beijing is a sign of his success and will give credit to their family. There is no denying the fact that such a family belief is common, especially in the western region. The traditional Chinese belief that “with parents still alive, children should not leave home” has gradually faded away. All parents, rich or poor, have high expectations of the next generation, wishing them more chances to develop. In our interviews, we find the wishes of parents in the west region are identical, all expecting their children to leave home as far as possible. The farther they go, the more successful they are. And they believe the destiny of the whole family will be changed. So to speak, in the less developing west, almost every family expects their child to leave home, and waits to see whose child is more successful. With such a family expectation, students who have been raised in the west and accepted higher education in the middle-east China will regard returning home as the last resort.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Breach of Contract



3.2. Imperfect policy implementation leading to low learning motivation or unpleasant experience with the Program

Several students mentioned a negative learning environment in the concentrated training phase prior to graduate study, the unattractive curriculum, limited time, energy and

learning results, slack campus life, and disengaged supervisors. All these factors decreased their enthusiasm and motivation in their studies. The three research subjects have experienced a sluggish first year, with males surfing the net and playing computer games while the female strolled in the city and surfed the net as well.

The Implementation Guideline of the Program of Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities (MOE & NEAC [教民Jiaomin No. 11], 2005) stipulates, "Students enrolled should spend their first year in concentrated training base, learning basic courses such as English, college Chinese, computer technology, and advanced mathematics, together with other professional knowledge, Marxism on ethnicity and Religion. Those who successfully pass the exams of concentrated training courses can further their graduate education as normal graduates." Such a policy might help students improve themselves academically so as to facilitate their graduate education. But in practice, instead of obvious positive results, some students felt bored and disengaged with the program. Students' first year of study in such a program is crucial to their future study. Had there been more reasonable curriculum design and more engaging teaching, had there been more student-teacher communication, had there been more effective management of the concentrated training phase, students would have had much better experiences in their graduate study afterwards as well.

Instead, in their graduate education, students had limited contact with those outside the Program and were estranged from their supervisors. In addition, misunderstandings and prejudice made them gradually lose interest in campus life and academic study. Some even became doubtful about the value of the academic degree program's four years of study and their decision to join the Program. Subsequently, the idea of breaching the contract gradually formed and was reinforced by their uncertainty about work and worries about an unpromising future. Instead of appreciation and high expectations for the Program, they came to resent it and complain that it had wasted four precious years and would even waste more of their future life. Needless to say, unpleasant study experiences directly affected their final decisions to breach the contract.

3.3. Weak sense of ethnic identity

The Program students' view of the world and their own lives becomes destabilized. Their changed social environment and culture shock can weaken their sense of ethnic identity. Students with weak sense of ethnic identity, may find their identity even more subsumed by the mainstream Han Chinese culture once they get to the metropolis. In contrast, Tibetans and Uighurs may be more inclined and committed to returning to their hometowns, because they have a stronger sense of ethnic identity and more psychological and social conflicts in the more mainstream cultural environment of the big cities (CHEN,

2008; ZHU, 2007). They are more willing to become the emerging force to contribute to local development, thus subconsciously complying with the Program's goals.

Then questions arise: why do some ethnic minorities have their features gradually disappear while others stick to strong sense of ethnic identity? With 56 ethnic groups coexisting in China, there are inevitably differences among them. When experiencing tensions within the mainstream culture, some members of ethnic minorities choose to be assimilated while others adopt an exclusive attitude, maintaining strong ethnicity and strong emotional attachment to their group and hometowns, or even ethnically distinctive codes of conduct.

Undoubtedly, it is absolutely inadvisable to blindly accept or strongly attach to mainstream Han Chinese culture while ignore own ethnicity and even negate or abandon own ethnic culture. The employment issue related to the Program has demonstrated its weaknesses. Within a minority that is gradually losing its sense of identity, people are likely to have weaker sense of ethnic solidarity (ZHAO, 2010). Even though they are likely to label themselves ethnic minorities, they have no strong sense of belonging. Hence, it is hard to urge them to return home, to dedicate themselves to local development.

Accordingly, what we really need is to promote students' sense of belonging both in mind and in action rather than to offer education on ethnicity or courses advocating love for one's own ethnic group and national unity of all 56 ethnic minority groups. However, the Program alone cannot achieve student's sense of belonging, which is also formed by students' basic education and the government's ethnic minority policies. In sum, issues of ethnic education and ethnic identity raise many questions for further research.

3.4. High expectations for employment

One crucial factor discouraging students from returning home is their own attitudes toward employment. Students' career choice is partly a rational decision, driven by personal interests. According to Weber (1964), human behaviour is composed of two factors: interests and social relations. We have already discussed social relations in terms of family pressures on students to stay in the metropolis. We now turn to personal interests and practical considerations.

Graduates of the Program, a high-level academic group, have obtained more cultural capital after four years' study in developed areas. Their attitudes toward employment are driven by their changing interests, which in some cases make them reluctant to return home to comply with the Program prescription. Pursuing interests while dodging harms and seeking better material well-being, some seek cushier, promising work in big cities. The decision to breach the contract reflects students' increasing worldliness. After ten odd

years' of education, most of the students are eager to quickly obtain higher incomes, more opportunities to develop, and higher social status.

Students' expectation of social mobility is a crucial factor in their decisions. Those who have breached or are planning to breach the contract believe that a big city is more open, with more opportunities for mobility than the west. Due to varying reasons, they often cannot find the most satisfying work in the big city soon after graduation. However, they still hold the belief that higher-level economic development there could provide them with a better material life, and their working experience there constitutes a basis for social mobility. Li Ming is typical. He strongly believes that so long as one can perform very well, one can get promoted soon. When he lost hope in his former life and work, he placed great expectations on Beijing, strongly believing that Beijing is a place where people are appraised on their own merit, leading to more chances to gain higher social status.

In the early years after the founding of new China, talents of all trades were desperately needed. The state government appropriated special funds to higher education, and students enjoyed free tuition and the work allocated by the government after graduation. The economic as well as political environment at that time almost checked any possibility of showing off. Students obeyed the job allocation system, and this became the mainstream behavior of self-restraint until early 1980s.

Since the implementation of a socialist market economy in the late of 1980s, the job market became increasingly influential in students' work choice. Students' long-restrained individualism gradually grew; realization of their own value and pursuit of their own targets began to dominate graduates' choice of jobs. Individual behavior became more independent, and people became more self-centered (COLEMAN, 1990). All these shifts are obviously demonstrated by students who breached or plan to breach the Project's contract.

Taking into consideration their own needs and expectations of family and friends, graduates or graduating students have their own employment goals and make preparations for their realization. The act of breach is actually a rational process of conscious or subconscious comparison and decision, or even a result of self-protection. Such is well demonstrated in words such as "there are more chances for development in Beijing", "(in a big city) we could live better", and "it's too complicated in a small place." In fact, it is an instinct of all creatures to pursue interests and dodge harms. The breach of contract is such a case. If the hometown does harm to them, graduates will choose not to return even if their decision puts them at risk of facing additional difficulties or responsibilities.

3.5. Policy executers: kindly connivance

Kou Caijia (2010) contacted the Program policy executers at provincial Ethnic Minority Education Departments nationwide and found that provinces varied in their focus on as well as actual implementation of the Program. The measures taken and strength of efforts to govern the Program graduates' employment are different too.

In Oct. 2007, the Government of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region issued the document *On Further Strengthening Ethnic Minority Education*, which explicitly stipulated that "College students and in-service employees bilingual in Mandarin and Mongolian are encouraged to apply for further higher education through the Program, and upon graduation, are given priority for employment over other types of graduates" (GIMAR, 2007). In terms of 2009-year graduates' employment, the interviewee told Kou (2010) that everything went smoothly since all of them were formerly in-service employees.

On Dec. 10, 2008, the Ministry of Education issued a document entitled *On Employment Management of Graduates through the Program of High-Caliber Backbone Personnel Project* (MOE [教民厅Jiaomingting No. 10], 2008), a guideline to nationwide provincial Education Departments on how to settle graduates' problems finding work. It stipulates that provincial Education Departments are "to give guidance to graduates about employment, to widen graduates' employment channels, to improve services related to graduates' employment, to strengthen leadership, and to promote graduates' smooth transition to employment." Later, provincial Education Departments in Guizhou, Hunan and other provinces successively issued documents related to the employment of the Program graduates.

For example, in July, 2009, Guizhou Provincial Education Department, Provincial Human Resources and Social Security Department and others jointly issued a series of documents to lower-level Education Bureaus, Personnel Bureaus, Ethnic Affairs Bureaus, and higher educational institutes on how to ensure graduates of the Program would comply with the Program goals and have a smooth transition to employment. Researchers are not able to find government data on the employment status of Project graduates, however.

Another document issued by regional authorities seemed to deviate from the Program's original goals but also to respond to the situations facing many graduates, such as the ones we interviewed. *On Employment Implementation of Master and Doctoral Graduates through the Program of Nationally Contracted Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities by Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province* (XAPHP, 2007) said, "Considering the limit of specialty and limited jobs available, considering the desperate need for talents outside the local district, and considering individual special conditions, graduates are permitted the right to seek work

outside the local district. Those who need to work outside need to sign an application form entitled Application for Transferring to Work Outside for Master and Doctoral Graduates through the Program of Nationally Contracted Training High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture, and submit it to the Prefecture Education Bureau, Prefecture Personnel Bureau, and Prefecture Institutional Organization Committee for examination and approval.”

However, a graduate from Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture complained to us about changes related to this document. “This document relieved my hesitance to apply to the Program. I felt so excited. Perhaps the Prefecture government doesn’t want us to return. Or it encourages us to work outside. Or such a document was made for some special people. Anyway, I could take advantage of it...” But much to his disappointment, the policy changed. On June 16, 2009, upon graduation, Hunan Provincial Education Department issued to the Education Bureau of Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture a document On Employment Management of Graduates of the Program of High-Caliber Backbone Personnel from the Ethnic Minorities, which explicitly states, “In accordance with the contract, non-in-service students have to return home, and obey the Prefecture government’s employment management. Students have to serve for at least 5 years; those who breach the contract will have to be punished and to pay the penalty” (HPED, 2009).

The graduate who had entered the Program under the impression that employment elsewhere would be allowed commented, “The Provincial Education Department is an official, the Prefecture Education Bureau a footman, and we are victims. I never expected such a result... Policies change quickly. Perhaps one day we will be allowed to work outside the Prefecture again. Who knows?” From his words we could sense his dismay and also the inconsistency of the policies. Until now, we have not discovered the underlying reason for issuing the initial document by the Prefecture Education Bureau, and we are still not clear about the actual implementation of the latter document.

A staff member at a county-level Education Bureau admitted there are some defects in the actual implementation of this preferential policy. “How come they would return home since they have their 4-year graduate education in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai? Even if one is back, we may not offer a suitable position for him. I heard in the neighbouring county, a graduate returned home, but the Education Bureau didn’t manage his work well. Jobs in better places had already been occupied by those who had strong personal connections; those in poorer places were not attractive to him...”

According to Kou (2010), the staff concerned in Education Department of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region said, “It’s better here since high-caliber backbone personnel are desperately needed.” As to the employment of 2009-year graduates, she explained she had no idea. When we asked a staff member from the Education Department of Tibetan

Autonomous Region about the preferential policies of graduates' employment, the staff member replied, "Up to now we have no relevant policies issued." Staff from Education Department of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Education Bureau of Chongqing Municipality told Kou (2010) that graduates are employed on the recommendation of the departments involved. However, a staff member in Guangxi Provincial Education Department said, "In fact, graduates have to find jobs themselves. Nowadays, there is no unified allocation to work."

Due to varying implementation of the Program in different levels, many new students become worried about their future careers. The relevant information on employment prospects is too limited. One student in the Program said, "I only wanted to know what kind of employment the graduates had got, but the staff in our Education Department refused to tell me." According to the Program contract, the relation between students and the education administration is compulsorily administrative. On the one hand, the provincial Education Department is entrusted with the educational administration by the state government and expected to compel students to serve the home region for five to eight years; on the other hand, students are denied their basic right to accurate information about the rules and prospects for their future employment. Under such legal circumstances, rights and power are restricted. Because the students' education tuitions are paid by the central government, to some extent the provincial Education Departments are not so enthusiastic about implementing the Program, have lower sense of responsibility, and even have power rent-seeking behaviours. The seemingly limited enforcement by local Education Departments serves to relieve students of their worries about the results of breaching their contracts.

To conclude, in the face of complicated situations and multiple choices, students make careful considerations of the path that is more beneficial to their own interests. Due to recent economic and social changes, differences between the eastern and western areas, defects of the policy, family pressures and students' own value orientations, the Program has many implementation problems. However, it does not indicate the total failure of the policy making and implementation. According to the theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1991), decision making is determined by objective and subjective factors. No organization can achieve the ideal, optimized policy but rather a satisfactory one, which needs to be successively amended. Undoubtedly, there is much room to improve this policy. Education Departments of the Governments at all levels should do research on the graduates' employment opportunities at home and in the metropolis.

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