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Cultural Tensions and Social Mobility in Educational Migration: An Ethnographic Study of the "Inland Tibet Class" Program

Sonam Gyatso

College of Quality and Standardization, China Jiliang University, Hangzhou, China
18108980093@163.com

Abstract. In order to alleviate the problems of uneven distribution of educational resources and limited social mobility in the Tibet region, the state has implemented the "Inland Tibet Class" policy since 1984, aiming to promote the social mobility and cultural adaptation of Tibetan students through access to quality educational opportunities. Drawing on the theories of cultural practice and social mobility, and in combination with the research method of case ethnography, this paper delves into the neighborhood effects, educational tracking, cultural tensions, as well as the mobility opportunities emerging during the implementation of this policy. The research finds that although the "Inland Tibet Class" provides a pathway for some students to cross social strata, it also brings structural problems such as identity conflict, cultural adaptation pressure, and further weakening of local educational resources. Educational mobility is not only a process of input and output of resources, but also a complex mechanism of cultural negotiation, social relationship reconstruction, and institutional transformation. This paper contends that, in order to promote educational equity, it is essential to begin with respecting the subjective experiences of students, attach importance to the interaction between local culture and the education system, and promote the design of more inclusive educational policies.

Keywords: Cultural Tension, Educational Migration, China, Inland Tibet Class

1. Introduction

Tibet, as the westernmost region of China, experiences limited social mobility due to multiple factors such as geographical environment, uneven distribution of educational resources, and cultural barriers. In order to break the regional development imbalance and enhance the educational quality of ethnic minority students, the Chinese government introduced the "Inland Tibet Class" policy in 1984, selecting outstanding students to study in key schools in inland regions [1]. Up to now, this program has been established in 75 schools across 20 provinces and cities nationwide, enrolling a total of 154,200 students, and has played an important role in promoting educational equity and talent cultivation. However, while enhancing students' social mobility, this policy has also sparked discussions on cultural adaptation, identity recognition, and resource redistribution. Especially for students from remote rural areas, they not only face challenges in language and curriculum content

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but also need to negotiate identity and adapt socially within the mainstream cultural system. This paper, by combining ethnographic methods and the theory of cultural practice, attempts to present the profound cultural and social mechanisms behind this policy through the subjective experiences of students. Although the "Inland Tibet Class" policy provides better educational opportunities for Tibetan students, it also raises a series of discussions on social mobility and neighborhood effects [2]. This paper will analyze the impact of this policy through specific case studies and explore its long-term influence on social mobility in Tibet, and present students' experiences and voices through an ethnographic perspective. The following discussion will focus on two aspects: the social mobility of Tibetan students under the "Inland Tibet Class," and the cultural tension and identity marginalization faced by students during the process of educational migration.

2. The impact of neighborhood effect on social mobility

2.1. Regional disparities in educational resources

According to the 2018 statistics from the Ministry of Education of China, the college entrance examination admission rate of students in the Inland Tibet Class is significantly higher than that of ordinary high school students in Tibet. This data reflects that the regional distribution of educational resources has a severe impact on students' social mobility. Due to the limited educational resources in Tibet, many outstanding students are encouraged to leave their hometowns to study in inland areas as early as the junior high school stage. This phenomenon has, to a certain extent, led to the differentiation of educational paths: students who remain in Tibet and those who study inland experience different growth trajectories in terms of access to educational resources, curriculum design, and further education opportunities. The development opportunities for some students are therefore restricted, which poses new challenges to educational equity. For example, the admission systems and support policies implemented in different regions may inadvertently reinforce existing regional disparities [3].

2.2. The role of social capital

In studies of social mobility, social capital refers to the ability of individuals to acquire resources through social networks and relationships. Family structures and social networks in Tibet are relatively closed, while students in inland schools can access broader social networks and more employment and development opportunities. "According to the White Paper The Practice and Historic Achievements of the Party's Strategy for Governing Tibet in the New Era, Tibet has preliminarily established a modern education system covering all levels and types of education. The retention rate of compulsory education has reached 97.73%, and the gross enrollment rate at the high school level has reached 91.07%. However, the establishment of the Inland Tibet Class has provided Tibetan students with more diverse educational paths. Some students, by studying in inland areas, have gained access to broader educational resources and development opportunities, reflecting the state's efforts to promote educational equity." [4]

2.3. Employment opportunities

The establishment of the Inland Tibet Class has not only improved students' educational levels but also provided them with broader employment platforms. According to reports from the Ministry of Education, graduates from the Inland Tibet Class have become backbone forces in the leapfrog development and long-term stability of Tibet. This reflects the effectiveness of national policies in

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cultivating high-quality talents and promoting coordinated regional development. The Inland Tibet Class not only provides educational resources but also brings students more economic development opportunities. "Graduates of the Inland Tibet Class play a key role in various sectors. For example, Pubu Zhaxi, Party Secretary of Taje Township, Dazi County, said that his learning experience inland made him realize the importance of continuously updating knowledge and providing new ideas for grassroots governance. This shows that the inland education experience helps students broaden their horizons and enhance their social adaptability." The establishment of the Inland Tibet Class has not only improved students' educational levels but also provided them with broader employment platforms [5].

3. Cultural tensions

The "Inland Tibet Class" is not only about providing quality educational content to promote social mobility, but also a cross-cultural educational migration process. Students from Tibet move geographically from remote areas to inland cities, shift linguistically from being native Tibetan speakers to a full Mandarin instruction environment, culturally transition from a family-centered lifestyle to a Han-school system centered on grades and discipline, and socially move from a familiar society to unfamiliar peers and teacher-student relationships. In this process, they experience identity recognition and mainstream adaptation, family expectations and personal choices, cultural and linguistic loss and upward social mobility. Because an individual's educational trajectory is the most realistic embodiment of the policy's effect [6].

From the perspective of "rural students," the educated individuals not only see the macro-level achievements of the policy, but also see that education is not simply a process of "resource input = successful output," but a complex process of cultural collision, identity negotiation, and transformation of social resources [7].

4. Case descriptions

4.1. Case one: educational choice and regional development

After the implementation of the "Inland Tibet Class" policy, some Tibetan families, out of concern for the quality of their children's education, chose to send their children to inland schools as early as the primary or junior high school stages. This trend of educational migration has, to a certain extent, diverted high-quality students from the local education system in Tibet. Taking some middle schools in Lhasa as examples, teachers report that a considerable proportion of junior high school graduates choose to enter the "Inland Tibet Class," while those who remain locally for further study face problems such as teacher shortages and limited curriculum offerings. Although the college entrance examination offers policy advantages to students in the Tibet region, the spatial flow of educational opportunities still affects the confidence and atmosphere among students and schools in ordinary local high schools.

4.2. Case two: migration opportunities and individual growth

For some students from farming and pastoral areas, the "Inland Tibet Class" provides them with opportunities to access quality educational resources and expand their personal development paths. Some students stated that the experience significantly improved their academic performance and self-confidence. However, other students pointed out that after entering inland schools, they encountered difficulties in language expression, cultural understanding, and social adaptation.

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Especially in situations lacking familiar support systems, they experienced emotional anxiety, self-doubt, and other issues, revealing the need for cultural adaptation and psychological support.

5. Case analysis and discussion: structural tensions and cultural adaptation in educational migration

5.1. Coordination challenges in educational mobility and regional development

From the perspective of educational and social development, the cross-regional flow of educational opportunities provides some students with broader development platforms, while also posing new challenges for the coordinated allocation of educational resources among regions. Under the guidance of the "Inland Tibet Class" policy, some students have entered inland schools with richer educational resources, expanding their academic abilities and overall competence, which reflects a certain form of achieving educational equity. In the future, while continuously promoting the rational flow of educational resources, more efforts can be made to improve the internal construction of the local education system. For example, by strengthening teacher training, enriching curriculum content, and expanding inter-school cooperation, the attractiveness and comprehensive support capacity of local education can be enhanced, promoting positive interaction between regional and external educational resources.

5.2. Cultural adaptation and identity growth in the process of educational migration

In the process of educational migration, students must face not only changes in academic environments but also multiple adaptations in culture, lifestyle, and interpersonal relationships. Some students demonstrate good learning abilities and positive attitudes in the new educational environment, but others undergo varying degrees of adjustment in terms of language expression, social interaction, and cultural identity.

This adaptation process is not simply about "integration" but rather resembles a gradual construction of new identities and the reshaping of self-understanding. Especially for students from ethnic minority backgrounds, educational migration may be accompanied by multicultural contact and reconstruction of identity understanding. It is both an opportunity for growth and a possible source of emotional fluctuations or psychological challenges [8].

In the future, more supportive mechanisms can be introduced at the policy design level, such as offering cultural adaptation courses, establishing psychological support service points, and encouraging peer support and inter-school cultural exchanges. By creating an inclusive and friendly educational environment, students can be assisted to transition more smoothly into new learning and living situations and be supported in achieving both academic and psychological growth [9].

5.3. Dual impacts of educational migration: development opportunities and institutional considerations

Under the support of existing educational policies, some students have achieved leaps in ability and self-expansion through the "Inland Tibet Class," successfully entering higher levels of the educational system, reflecting the positive role of educational migration in promoting individual development. Such experiences have also brought hope and confidence to families and communities.

However, it is necessary to recognize that differences exist among students in resource acquisition, cultural adaptation, and support systems. While individual success is important,

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attention should also be paid to how institutional construction can enable more students to have equal conditions and opportunities to participate. For example, how to enhance local development support for students who fail to enter cross-regional educational systems is also a topic that requires ongoing advancement.

In the future, education support strategies can be further optimized by improving the quality of local educational resources, enriching developmental pathways (such as arts, sports, and skills-based courses), and expanding the multi-dimensional growth space for students, thereby reducing the pressure brought by single-path educational migration. Meanwhile, educational practices and community development should be encouraged to operate synergistically to build a more inclusive, diverse, and sustainable development environment for students from different backgrounds.

Overall, the "Inland Tibet Class" policy, while broadening educational opportunities for some students, is also continuously promoting regional educational coordination and the deepening of cultural exchanges. The process of educational migration has both commendable positive outcomes and areas requiring further optimization. By strengthening institutional support, cultural understanding, and local support system construction, a more effective balance between educational equity and individual growth can be achieved in the future, promoting the sustainable development of a diverse educational system [10].

6. Conclusion and outlook: seeking balance between hope and challenges

This study takes the "Inland Tibet Class" as the research object, exploring the practical forms of educational equity and cultural adaptation in the national minority education policy through conversations and field observations with students from a key high school Tibet class in a certain province. From the perspective of cultural practice theory, the article points out that the "Inland Tibet Class" is not a unidimensional "educational poverty alleviation" project, but a social field dynamically constructed under the tension between the state’s unified discourse, local school practices, and students’ personal experiences.

At the level of educational equity, this paper analyzes the original intention of the state to achieve equal educational opportunities through institutional resource allocation and the complexity of resource redistribution in reality, pointing out that although Tibet class students gain formal educational opportunities, they face structural challenges such as language barriers, teacher quality differences, and curriculum adaptation. In terms of cultural adaptation, the article emphasizes students as active agents selectively absorbing Han Chinese culture, and how the process of being "adapted" within school institutional arrangements affects their self-identity, cultural belonging, and future planning. Furthermore, the paper points out that educational mobility does not necessarily bring sustainable social mobility, but may instead cause students to form a "suspended" identity state between Tibet and the inland.

The limitations of this study are mainly reflected in the following aspects: first, constrained by time and resources, it could not form systematic quantitative analyses, making it difficult to fully present the differences in adaptation processes among students of different genders, grades, and family backgrounds. Second, this study mainly focuses on the student perspective, and interviews and analyses of multiple stakeholders such as policymakers, teachers, and parents remain insufficient; future research could build a more complete picture of policy practice through multiple stakeholder perspectives. Finally, although this study preliminarily explores the practical tensions of "cultural adaptation" in ethnic education, deeper theoretical reflections are still needed on whether "adaptation" itself is an implicit cultural integration or cultural disciplinary mechanism.

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Looking ahead, research can be further expanded to the implementation of the "Tibet Class" policy in different provinces, comparing local practice differences and exploring the specific mechanisms of educational policy under multi-ethnic backgrounds. Meanwhile, attention can also be paid to students' social trajectories and identity transformations after graduation, tracking the long-term impact of the "Tibet Class" project on their development. More importantly, students' own voices should be introduced in policy discussions to promote a new paradigm of "ethnic minority education" from "designed for them" to "built with them," thus truly realizing educational fairness, subjectivity, and cultural diversity.

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