

Building a “Double First-class University” on China’s Qing-Zang Plateau: Opportunities, Strategies and Challenges

Miaoyan Yang*  and James Leibold†

Abstract

Situated in the broader context of educational aid for Tibet and higher education reform in China, this article examines efforts to develop higher education in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Based on document analyses, observations and interviews, we interrogate the thoughts and actions of university officials in the TAR when responding to the state’s call for the creation of “double first-class” (*shuangyiliu* 双一流) universities and disciplines. Our study identifies two main strategies adopted by university officials: capitalizing on the plateau’s unique geography and China’s system of preferential ethnic policies. University administrators hope to use the TAR’s unique and strategic location as a springboard for curriculum and research development, while drawing on aid and assistance from the central government and partner universities. We conclude that the future of higher education in the TAR is highly dependent on external assistance and that the region faces an uphill battle in building a truly world-class university.

Keywords: higher education; minority education; preferential policy; double first-class universities (*shuangyiliu daxue*); Qing-Zang Plateau; educational aid for Tibet

As China seeks to become a superpower, its ambition to influence the world through science, technology and education becomes more determined.¹ In particular, higher education is now critical to China’s efforts to boost its competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, achieve national rejuvenation and expand its international influence.² As such, the last two decades have witnessed impressive levels of investment by the Chinese government in building “world-class universities,” a term which has no clear definition and reflects China’s ambition to

* Xiamen University, Xiamen, China. Email: miaoyanyang@163.com (corresponding author).

† La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Email: j.leibold@latrobe.edu.au.

1 Kurlantzick 2007; Suzuki 2008; Hayhoe and Bastid 2017; Rolland 2017; Chaisse and Matsushita 2018.

2 Postiglione 2015.

follow the leading European and North American universities in curriculum/research innovation, financial growth and new governance structures.³

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long played a key role in the development of higher education in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The “211” project, for example, aimed to develop a network of comprehensive research universities when first announced in 1995.⁴ Approximately 112 out of China’s nearly 3,000 higher education institutes were included in the project, for which they received priority funding for facility and curriculum construction. The “985” project was launched in 1998 following a declaration by the-then Chinese president Jiang Zemin 江泽民 that: “In order to achieve modernization, our nation should build a number of first-class universities at the world’s advanced level.” Only 39 of the original 112 universities were included in the 985 project between 1999 and 2006, with 985 project universities being considered to be more prestigious and superior to 211 project universities.⁵

Although these state-led projects have helped to boost higher education development and elevate the international status of Chinese universities,⁶ they have also been criticized for eroding institutional autonomy and academic freedoms;⁷ creating and expanding inequalities between “priority” and non-priority universities;⁸ and creating inequalities between different subjects and disciplines.⁹ One often overlooked element of the world-class university game is the marginal participation of ethnic minorities and ethnic minority autonomous regions in the process. In response to this lacuna, we set out to explore the opportunities, strategies and challenges faced by universities in ethnic minority regions when responding to state-led efforts to develop higher education in China.

The Chinese government seeks to promote the equal development of all 56 officially recognized ethnic groups (*minzu* 民族) in the PRC. In recognition of the underdeveloped nature of many frontier regions where the ethnic minority groups are concentrated, the CCP provides minorities with a range of preferential policies, such as administrative autonomy, special financial support schemes and exemption from certain state policies, in order to protect, in theory, minority cultures and promote their independent development.¹⁰ In the educational sector, the Chinese government has created a vast network of ethnic minority colleges, schools and institutes as part of a parallel “ethnic or *minzu* education” (*minzu jiaoyu* 民族教育) system, including 15 ethnic minority universities.¹¹ Yet, at present, there are only six 211 universities and no 985 universities in ethnic minority autonomous regions in China. For universities located in remote yet strategic

3 Yang, Rui, and Welch 2012.

4 Ibid.

5 Meng 2010.

6 Huang 2015.

7 Yang, Rui, and Welch 2012.

8 Wang 2017.

9 Song 2018.

10 Leibold 2016.

11 Yang, Miaoyan 2017b, 51.

frontier regions, the issue of how to take advantage of these national-level educational schemes in order to develop world-class institutions is an important agenda item.

Another important opportunity opened for Chinese universities in 2015. In October, the State Council issued an important directive entitled, “The overall construction plan for supervising and promoting world first-class universities and first-class disciplines.” The document pointed out that previous state-led projects led to status solidification while wasting state resources. Therefore, it is imperative for the Chinese government to strengthen the reassignment of resources (*ziyuan zhenghe* 资源整合) and innovate new methods for establishing world first-class universities and disciplines.¹² In response, in 2017, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and the National Development and Reform Commission announced the “Tentative implementation methods for supervising and promoting world first-class universities and first-class disciplines.”¹³ These two documents have served as the guidelines for China’s current “double first-class” strategy (*双一流 shuangyiliu, shuangyiliu* project hereafter).

Unlike the 211 and 985 projects, which were only open to a limited number of already prestigious or key-point universities, the *shuangyiliu* project supports not only “the already established universities” but also universities “with urgent needs, distinctive features, and new disciplines” (*fuyou fuxu fute fuxin* 扶优扶需扶特扶新). These disciplines are likely to include established disciplines that are close to or reach the world’s advanced levels; disciplines related to national security and major national interests; emerging and interdisciplinary areas; urgently needed disciplines related to industrial transformation and regional development; and disciplines with unique Chinese characteristics, features and styles. Therefore, universities in China are now grappling with how to identify and promote the excellence, urgency, distinctiveness and newness of their disciplines in order to cash in on the state money associated with the *shuangyiliu* project.

Over time, the *shuangyiliu* project has the potential to re-shuffle the ecology of higher education in China. In addition to supporting fully some key comprehensive universities, it will also support a number of smaller universities with “superior or preponderant disciplines” (*youshi xueke* 优势学科). At present, there are 42 universities on the “First-class university construction” list (36 Class A universities and six Class B universities) and 95 universities on the “First-class discipline construction” list. Still, not unlike the 211 or 985 projects, the participation of universities in China’s ethnic minority regions remains minimal. So far, only Xinjiang University is on the Class B universities list; and seven universities (including Inner Mongolia University, Yanbian University, Guangxi University,

12 State Council 2015.

13 Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and the National Development and Reform Commission 2017.

Tibet University, Qinghai University, Ningxia University and Shihezi University) are on the “First-class discipline construction” list.¹⁴

Through a case study of Highland University (HU hereafter) on China’s Qing-Zang Plateau, this article sets out to answer four main research questions.¹⁵ First, how do universities located in ethnic minority regions strategize the *shuangyiliu* project? What challenges have they confronted in the process of *shuangyiliu* construction? Will the *shuangyiliu* project diminish and eliminate inequalities between universities in ethnic majority and minority regions, and between those in the geographic centre and the periphery? And, finally, what lessons can we learn about the intertwined nature of higher education and ethnic politics in China?

Highland University on the Roof of the World

The Qing-Zang Plateau, known as the Tibetan Plateau in English, covers most of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Qinghai province in west China as well as the highlands of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu provinces. The difference in nomenclature between Chinese and international scholars reflects to some extent the highly politicized nature of the “Tibet question” (*Xizang wenti* 西藏问题), which has its roots in the 14th Dalai Lama’s exile to India in 1959. The Central Tibetan Administration in exile contends that Tibet is an independent nation,¹⁶ and identifies Tibet as those cultural and spatial regions of China where Tibetan people live, which includes the TAR and parts of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.¹⁷

The Chinese government, in contrast, insists that Tibet has been part of China since ancient times and refers to only the TAR as “Tibet.” Since both parties hold sharply contrasting views on issues of territory, history and autonomy, negotiations and other efforts at rapprochement have failed repeatedly.¹⁸ International attention, imagination and sympathy from India and Western countries have further politicized the “Tibet question” and render it both politically important and sensitive for the CCP.¹⁹ In short, the Chinese government views the TAR as a highly strategic and resource-rich region which is critical for national unity and security.²⁰

At the heart of the Qing-Zang Plateau, which is sometimes called the “the roof of the world,” the TAR is a vast plateau averaging 3,600 metres in altitude and covered with snow-topped mountains, glaciers, grasslands, salt lakes and green

14 “Shuangyiliu jianshe gaoxiao mindan” (List of double first-class universities), Ministry of Education, 6 December 2017, http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A22/A22_zt/zl/ztzl_tjsylpt/sylpt_jsgx/201712/t20171206_320667.html. Accessed 19 November 2018.

15 Highland University is a pseudonym.

16 Goldstein 1998; Sautman 2002; Sperling 2004; Yeh 2013, 1–2.

17 Yang, Miaoyan 2017b, 71.

18 Goldstein 1998; Sautman 2002; Sperling 2004.

19 Yang, Miaoyan 2017b, 73.

20 Yang, Miaoyan 2019.

forest.²¹ With its economic underdevelopment, geographic remoteness, inconvenient transportation, high altitude and lack of oxygen, Tibet holds little attraction for most Han Chinese, especially those from more developed areas in east China. Although the completion of the Qing-Zang Railway in 2006 has accelerated seasonal population flows into this chiefly ethnically homogenous region, few highly educated individuals migrate there. According to the Sixth National Census, the TAR population comprises 245,263 Han (8.17 per cent) and 2,716,388 Tibetans (90.48 per cent).²²

Since the 1980s, the central government has implemented a regional pairing assistance scheme in the TAR (*duikou yuan Zang* 对口援藏) with coordinated developmental aid provided by more developed interior provinces and cities, especially from the eastern part of China.²³ This includes “aid-for-Tibet” cadres (*yuan Zang ganbu* 援藏干部) – highly trained professionals who are dispatched by their home institutions in the east to undertake work in Tibet for periods of between several months and three years.²⁴ Through this scheme, pairing-assistance relationships are formed between one university/college in the TAR and several universities from interior provinces. These relationships have played an important role in the educational ecology of the TAR by emphasizing the role of aid-for-Tibet cadres, who are professors in interior universities and usually work as middle-level or high-level school leaders.

Located in Lhasa, the capital city of the TAR, Highland University was established in the 1950s and was originally a training school for ethnic minority cadres. Renamed in 1985 with the permission of the Ministry of Education, it is regarded as a base for cultivating talent for the socio-economic development of the TAR.²⁵ Included in the final list of the 211 project universities in 2008, HU has experienced rapid development during the last ten years. However, HU was not included in the list of 985 universities, and thus faces an uphill struggle to become a *shuangyiliu* university.

Many graduates consider HU to be a “second tier” or mediocre university and complain about its shabby facilities, lax teaching pedagogy and much stricter political supervision compared to other 211 universities. Some also assert that HU was designated as a 211 university owing to the state’s preferential policies for ethnic minorities. This is similar to the other five 211 universities located in ethnic minority regions, which are widely perceived to have been selected based on political expediency rather than their competitiveness in university rankings. For example, 80 per cent of the 2009 graduating class of Minzu University of China (MUC), the only *minzu* university that is both a 211 and 985 institution,

21 Grunfeld 1996, 7.

22 “Tabulation on the 2010 population census of the People’s Republic of China,” <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>. Accessed 2 November 2018.

23 Xie 2015.

24 Xiao and Xie 2014; Xie, He and Cao 2014; Yang, Miaoyan 2019.

25 Official website of Highland University.

believed its graduates were not competitive in the job market when compared to graduates from other 985 universities.²⁶

Like many other universities not included in the 985 project, HU has missed out on opportunities to be granted a large amount of money by the government and to elevate its status within China’s higher education hierarchy. When HU was surprisingly included in the draft “World first-class discipline” list (*shijie yiliu xueke* 世界一流学科) in 2017 as a part of the *shuangyiliu* project, its leadership perceived a new opportunity to secure the national and local support vital for the university’s development.

The *shuangyiliu* project does provide a degree of institutional autonomy in responding to state-led efforts to accelerate higher education in China. After the release of the *shuangyiliu* shortlist, the state urged universities to draft their own implementation plans based on their unique features. In practice, those disciplines that rank highly in the Ministry of Education’s discipline ranking evaluation (*jiaoyubu xueke pinggu* 教育部学科评估), which is held every four years, have more negotiation clout in the drafting process. After a series of meetings among school and discipline leaders (*xueke daitouren* 学科带头人) to balance interests, HU released its own first-class discipline construction plan (*yiliu xueke jianshe gaoxiao jianshe fang’an* 一流学科建设高校建设方案) on 8 January 2018. The plan called on the university to “take advantage of the Qing-Zang Plateau’s human and natural ecology,” and build a cluster of world-class disciplines along two broad categories: “plateau science and technology” and “outstanding ethnic culture.”²⁷

Two salient characteristics are prominently featured in HU’s *shuangyiliu* plan: capitalizing on the plateau and its unique geological features and, second, capitalizing on China’s ethnic politics. Although HU was only included in the “First-class discipline construction” list, its leadership aspires for more: by 2020, it aims to be one of the top universities in west China; by 2030, it aims to be one of the top-tier universities with several first-class disciplines both in China and in the world; by 2050, it aspires to be a high-level comprehensive university with influence both in China and across the globe.²⁸

The developmental trajectory of HU, as discussed above, is similar to those of other universities located in ethnic minority regions: the majority–minority and centre–periphery binaries have constantly pushed them into a disadvantageous position in terms of development. At the same time, however, China’s ethnic policies also place them in a strategic niche for safeguarding national security and promoting national integration, which allows them to leverage the government’s political priorities. As one of only six 211 universities and one of the only eight *shuangyiliu* universities in ethnic minority regions, HU provides a salient and unique case study of higher education reform in China, especially owing to its

26 Yang, Miaoyan 2017b, 108.

27 Highland University 2018.

28 Ibid, 1.

harsh natural environment and the increased political sensitivity of the region that stems from recent ethnic unrest.²⁹

Building Double First-class Disciplines on the Qing-Zang Plateau

One salient feature of the *shuangyiliu* project is its more expansive yet targeted ambitions. Compared with the 211 and 985 projects, *shuangyiliu* includes more universities and disciplines by earmarking additional resources to 137 universities and 465 first-class disciplines. All the original 211 and 985 universities are included and 25 non-211 universities have also been added. There are 42 universities on the world double first-class university list, and 95 in the world double first-class discipline list. If an institution is included on the double first-class university list, it will gain additional support and is expected to be internationally competitive in terms of its overall ranking or the ranking of a number of its disciplines. Peking University and Tsinghua University, which are widely regarded as China's two best universities, have almost all of their disciplines included in the *shuangyiliu* project.³⁰ If a university is only included on the world double first-class discipline list, it will gain support for the development of only one or two disciplines and is only expected to be internationally competitive in those selected disciplines.

Unlike the 211 or 985 projects, the *shuangyiliu* lists are expected to change every five years based on actual discipline and university performance. Therefore, those included on the list endeavour to remain there and are eager to increase their number of world-class disciplines. Those not included actively push to be added to the list. While many universities rely on already established disciplines in their *shuangyiliu* construction plans, there are many strategic considerations, with administrators seeking to game the system in order to maximize the benefit for their institutions.³¹

In their efforts to build a *shuangyiliu* university, administrators at HU seek to capitalize on the institution's unique and strategic location by emphasizing how the university's development is vital to national security in a number of areas including ecological, informational, ideological, economic and cultural security. The particularity of the university's location on the Qing-Zang Plateau, as claimed in HU official documents, increases its importance as a "national security buffer zone" (*guojia anquan pingzhang* 国家安全屏障). Each area of security is paired with either the plateau science and technology (*gaoyuan kexue yu jishu* 高原科学与技术) cluster of disciplines or the outstanding ethnic culture (*minzu youxiu wenhua* 民族优秀文化) cluster, as outlined in the HU *shuangyiliu* strategic plan.³²

29 Barnett 2009; Odgaard and Nielsen 2014; Hillman 2016.

30 "Shuangyiliu jianshe gaoxiao ji jianshe xueke mingdan gongbu" (The announcement of the list of *shuangyiliu* construction universities and disciplines). *Xinhuanet*, 21 September 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-09/21/c_1121701051.htm. Accessed 8 September 2018.

31 "Xueke pinggu shuangyiliu xueke jinru disilun xueke pinggu A-dang qingkuang" (Discipline evaluation: A-level disciplines of the fourth discipline evaluation into the *shuangyiliu* disciplines). *Blog*, 10 January 2018, <http://blog.sciencenet.cn/blog-2903646-1094182.html>. Accessed 8 September 2018.

32 Highland University 2018, 3.

Three disciplines are identified in the plateau science and technology cluster, with ecology as the core discipline, environmental science and engineering as a foundational discipline, and computer science and technology as a supporting discipline. Here, the ecological and environmental security of the plateau is highlighted as fundamental to China’s national security according to HU’s strategy, as is information security in the battle to promote the correct understanding of the “Tibet question.” Three disciplines are also identified in the outstanding ethnic culture cluster, with ethnology as the core discipline, Chinese language and literature as a foundational discipline, and applied economics as a supporting discipline. The university’s plan identifies ethnology as contributing to ideological security, while the other two disciplines promote cultural and economic security, respectively.³³

This strategy directly engages with the political language in the TAR in recent years, including President Xi Jinping’s 习近平 2013 idea that “in order to govern the state, one must first govern the borderlands; if one wants to govern the borderlands, one must first stabilize Tibet,”³⁴ as well as the CCP’s longstanding focus on “safeguarding the unity of the motherland” and “strengthening ethnic unity.”³⁵ By highlighting the strategic importance of the Qing-Zang plateau to China’s ethnic governance, HU administrators are implicitly asserting that factors other than pure academic rankings must be taken into consideration when building a world-class tertiary sector in China, and preferential ethnic policies are required to develop both the university and the TAR more broadly.

Universities in China compete for a range of esteem indicators including Ministry of Education-funded institutes, the authority to supervise doctoral degree students (*boshixuewei shouquan xueke zhuan ye dian* 博士学位授权学科专业点) and nationally recognized university professors. These same esteem indicators also play an important role in the *shuangyiliu* ranking process. For HU, inclusion in the *shuangyiliu* project provides opportunities as well as risks: if it fails to take advantage of this opportunity and develop several sustainable *shuangyiliu* disciplines, it may be demoted in subsequent rounds of adjustments.

Although it is difficult to evaluate, Chinese language and literature (which includes the Tibetan language) is one of the best humanities disciplines at HU. Along with ecology and ethnology, it is one of only three disciplines at HU that hold first-level doctoral authorization (*boshixuewei shouquan yiji xueke* 博士学位授权一级学科). Four institutes are related to Chinese language and literature at HU: the Tibetan language department, Chinese language department, the Tibetan Studies Centre and the Tibetan Information Technology Research Centre, with the last one being a national–local joint centre supported by the Ministry of Education. Ethnic minority languages and literatures (again, with

33 Ibid.

34 “Zhi guo bizhibian, zhibian xianwen Zang” (In order to govern the state, one must first govern the borderlands; if one wants to govern the borderlands, one must first stabilize Tibet). *CPC News*, 3 September 2018, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0903/c40531-30268917.html>. Accessed 17 November 2018.

35 Leibold 2013.

a particular focus on Tibetan language and literature) is the only national key discipline at HU, an esteem indicator which adds extra points in the university rankings compiled by the Ministry of Education. Of the roughly 2,000 Yangtze River Distinguished Professors nationwide, HU has only three, with two affiliated with the Chinese languages and literatures discipline. One is a full-time professor locally trained at HU and an expert on Tibetan history, and the other is an aid-for-Tibet professor from Fudan University who is an expert on journalism.³⁶

The science disciplines at HU are incomplete and uncompetitive and comprise only of a Faculty of Science, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Medicine. The number and quality of science disciplines and inter-disciplinary centres, departments and schools are not comparable to other, similar level 211 universities, not to mention top-tier universities. There is only one Yangtze River Distinguished Professor in the ecology discipline, who is an aid-for-Tibet professor from Tianjin University.³⁷ Such distinguished titles are mutually beneficial for the individual scholars and the institution, and HU can use their names in university and discipline rankings.

That said, in the 2017 fourth discipline ranking evaluation conducted by the Ministry of Education, none of the three science disciplines at HU were ranked, and Chinese language and literature and ethnology only ranked at a C level, the lowest ranking available. In other words, even the best disciplines at HU are not competitive with those at other universities – for example, Peking University received 57 A+ or A ranked disciplines in comparison, and even other frontier universities like Xinjiang University had seven disciplines ranked at a B level and 16 at a C level. The highest ranked *minzu* university, Minzu University of China, secured two disciplines at A+ or A level, nine at a B level and 19 at a C level.³⁸

Capitalizing on the Plateau

The selection of ecology as the core science discipline in HU's *shuangyiliu* plan is strategic. Over the past 20 years, HU has received a great deal of support from pairing-assistance universities such as Fudan University, Tianjin University and Wuhan University, particularly in ecology-related areas. In addition to helping build research teams, these aid-for-Tibet professors have also assisted HU with grant applications, facility construction (such as research labs) and student training. Some pairing-assistant universities, such as Wuhan University and Fudan University, offer exchange programmes for HU students for one to two years. Professor Zhong Yang 钟扬 from Fudan University, who died in a tragic car accident in 2017, is considered to have been a model aid-for-Tibet teacher. Fellow teachers and administrators praised him for his four “firsts” at HU:

36 Official website of Highland University.

37 Ibid.

38 “Quanguo disilun xueke pinggu jiegou gongbu” (The results of the fourth round of the national discipline evaluation), <http://www.cdgc.edu.cn/xwyyjsjyxx/xkpgj/>. Accessed 8 September 2018.

helping ecology to become the first doctoral degree-offering discipline; training the first Tibetan doctoral graduate in botany; establishing the first innovative team in biology supported by the Ministry of Education; and helping HU to establish ecology as a *shuangyiliu* discipline.³⁹

The state’s emphasis on plateau ecology is another important consideration. At the Sixth Central Tibet Work Conference, held in Beijing in 2015, President Xi Jinping stressed that ecological protection should be prioritized in Tibet work. The conference proposed to “increase the control and management of air pollution sources and desertification on the Qing-Zang Plateau, and increase the protection of grasslands, wetlands and natural forests,” as well as “accelerate the development of key technologies for Tibetan language information and application services; improve overall propaganda and management on the Internet, and coordinate online public opinion emergency controls and public opinion guidance.”⁴⁰

For scientists, the Qing-Zang Plateau is an ideal place to study biodiversity, ecological adaptation and high-altitude medicine. With this consideration, HU’s plateau science and technology discipline cluster focuses its research and teaching on the natural environment, information security and national security on the highlands. In particular, the research foci of the cluster include: (1) the relationship between people and the plateau, especially the negative impacts of plateau life on residents owing to low oxygen, the adaptive patterns of these residents, and the development of new medicines for this special ecological system; (2) the evaluation of ecological risks associated with the natural and human environment of Tibet, the study of ecological effects on human health, the dynamic monitoring of the influence of climate change and human activities on the environment of the Qing-Zang Plateau, and the relationship between major infrastructure projects and the environment; and (3) the development of information technologies related to the Tibetan language, the information security of Tibetan cyberspace, the monitoring of public opinions in and about Tibet, and the presentation and promotion of digital Tibetan cultural resources.⁴¹

The Qing-Zang Plateau is an obvious yet unique laboratory for these research fields and topics. Nevertheless, the extent to which HU can capitalize on the plateau in the *shuangyiliu* race is still undetermined. The strategic location of HU is both an asset and potential liability. Some teachers from relevant disciplines expressed concerns about national security when it came to publishing research, especially in foreign-language journals. Some were worried that their research data might reveal classified secrets about the state’s borderlands, which are vital for China’s national security. Also, the dependency on aid-for-Tibet teachers as leading experts suggests that it will take time for HU to build its own

39 “Yilizhongzi de chuxin yu mengxiang” (The vision and aspiration of a seed). *Renminwang*, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/GB/136058/418723/index.html>. Accessed 17 November 2018.

40 Highland University 2018, 8.

41 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

research capacities and teams. Central Party School sociologist Jin Wei 靳薇, who has studied aid politics in China for many years, expressed her concerns about the aid-for-Tibet projects in general: “the more the interior aids Tibet, the more dependent Tibet is on the interior.”⁴² Does this same logic of dependency apply to the field of higher education?

Capitalizing on Ethnic Politics

Ethnic politics are often exploited in multi-ethnic and multi-racial societies in an attempt to protect interests and gain resources. In China, ethnic minorities and ethnic autonomous regions can access a range of preferential policies, including preferential access to educational resources.⁴³ The particularity of the TAR renders it a highly sensitive region.⁴⁴ In their political rhetoric, TAR officials repeatedly stress the importance of “maintaining stability” (*weiwēn* 维稳), with stability being viewed as the foundation for achieving ethnic unity, national integration and the prevention of ethnic separatism. The *weiwēn* rhetoric is commonly deployed by local TAR officials when lobbying the central government for large amounts of investments and development support. Even if officials have strategically spent the money in other ways, they know they are safe from punishment because “as long as it’s for *weiwēn*, anything goes.”⁴⁵

The *weiwēn* strategy has also been adopted by HU administrators, although in different ways. As an “ideological state apparatus,”⁴⁶ HU seeks to capitalize on ethnic politics in its *shuangyiliu* construction strategy by emphasizing its critical role in producing and promoting the official discourse on ethnic relations not only within China but also across the world. In practice, HU adopts two approaches, stressing its patriotic mission while promoting the CCP’s ethnic policies and propaganda agenda.

The first strategy is to give top priority to “Party work” (*dangjian gongzuo* 党建工作) within HU. In doing so, the university aims to discipline both teachers and students by teaching them how to be ideologically correct individuals. Some teachers and students complained to the first author that HU had too many meetings: every time there was a new guideline delivered from the central government or fresh concerns about “hostile foreign forces” sabotaging the stability of China, meetings would be called to warn students and teachers about the importance of upholding stability and ethnic unity. Those teachers who are also Party members must attend regular meetings to learn the speeches of President Xi Jinping and other top Party leaders. Some teachers commented that “Tibet is a quite red (i.e. obedient to the CCP) place. It reacts promptly to central policies.” This is

42 Jin 2010.

43 Sautman 1998; Leibold 2013.

44 Leibold and Chen 2014; Yang, Miaoyan 2019.

45 Qiu 2016, 145.

46 Althusser 1971, 145.

actually a conscious strategy on the part of HU administrators to highlight their loyalty and ongoing importance to Beijing and the Party’s political agenda.⁴⁷

The second strategy is to establish several world double first-class disciplines related to ethnic culture. The intention is to promote and develop what Party leaders call “outstanding ethnic minority culture,” which involves not only preserving traditional ethnic cultures but also, in the words of Xi Jinping, “discarding the dross and bringing forth the new.”⁴⁸ This cultural mission seeks to provide spiritual and intellectual support for the socio-economic development of the TAR by elevating the status of HU in international Tibetan studies and by strengthening its “discourse power” (*huayuquan* 话语权). It is hoped that this will empower HU to play a leading role in vigorously refuting any “false ideas” (*miulun* 谬论) spread by “the Dalai Lama clique” and “hostile Western forces” about China and its ethnic politics in order to safeguard the cultural security of the nation.⁴⁹ In general, by promoting the Chinese government’s view of Tibetan culture and its intimate links with Chinese culture, the outstanding ethnic culture disciplinary cluster at HU aspires to play a leading role in the domestic and international narrative about the status of Tibet and Tibetan culture.

In fact, HU has long relied on the central government and preferential policies for its development. Special educational aid for HU dates back to 2000, when the-then vice-premier Li Lanqing 李岚清 visited HU and announced the decision to “provide vital support for the construction of HU.” In 2001, at the Fourth Central Tibet Work Conference, the Party Central Committee and the State Council again stressed the need to “consolidate resources to help build HU.”⁵⁰ In 2004, the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with the local TAR government to jointly support the development of HU. According to the agreement, the co-construction would be an important political task and part of the “open up the west” development programme, during which the Ministry of Education would strengthen its guidance and support for teaching, research, discipline construction, lab construction and teacher training at HU.⁵¹

Under the regional pairing-assistance scheme, a range of top universities, including Peking University, Wuhan University, Southwest Jiaotong University, Central University of Finance and Economics, Sichuan University and Central South Normal University, is now partnering with HU in order to strengthen its teaching and research capacity. For example, with the help of Southwest Jiaotong University, HU established four engineering-related majors including transportation, civil engineering, architecture and information

47 Highland University 2018, 1.

48 “Xinshidai Qinghai minzu wenhua ziyuan xueyao chuanzhongxin zhuanhua he chuanxing fazhan” (The need for creative transformation and development in Qinghai’s ethnic cultural resources in the new era). *Qinghai ribao*, 6 August 2018, <http://www.qhnews.com/newscenter/system/2018/08/06/012671112.shtml>. Accessed 19 November 2018.

49 Highland University 2018, 21.

50 News report on the official website of Ministry of Education, 19 November 2018.

51 Ibid.

engineering. Each year, the partner universities send several teachers to work at HU as mid- or high-level school leaders, or to teach majors that lack sufficient teaching staff. One teacher commented that although the quality of the aid-for-Tibet teachers varies, they facilitate institutional changes by bringing in new educational ideals, evaluation methods and technologies while also helping to establish new research teams and projects.

Challenges in *shuangyiliu* Development

The first salient challenge HU faces is to attract high-quality faculty members and leading experts. As more overseas graduate students return to China, the university job market is becoming increasingly competitive and faculty staff have to meet more requirements in order to be hired. It is extremely difficult for fresh doctoral graduates to get an assistant professor position at a 985 university in east China upon graduation. Usually, they have to work as a research associate or a postdoctoral fellow for two to three years before getting a tenure-track position.

Although without substantiation from official data, the first author heard frequently from teachers at HU that the majority of its faculty staff had only a bachelor's or master's degree. Although HU has implemented a policy to import high-level talent (*gaocengci rencai* 高层次人才), few talented individuals are willing to apply to HU because of its harsh environment and the comparatively lower financial enticements it offers. For example, the research funding support and relocation fees for a Yangtze Distinguished Professor at HU is 500,000 yuan and 200,000 yuan, respectively – and there is no mention of other benefits.⁵² In east China, the average annual salary, research funding support and relocation fees for such professors at 211 universities is 520,000–830,000 yuan, 350,000–678,000 yuan and 200,000 yuan, respectively.⁵³

Without the resources to match top universities, HU must rely on the pairing-assistance scheme and the patchy aid provided by universities in China's interior to find faculty members. Many aid teachers only come to work at HU when coerced by their superiors or to boost their promotion prospects, as working in Tibet adds weight to their resumes.⁵⁴ One of the local HU scholars informed the first author: “Those who are capable would definitely not come to work in Tibet; those who are willing to work in Tibet are usually not capable and not welcomed by us.”

The second challenge faced by HU is how to push forward international collaboration, an important criterion in the university ranking process. HU's first-class discipline construction plan stresses that the TAR is at the forefront of the state's anti-separatist campaign.⁵⁵ For school leaders, maintaining stability is the first and foremost task. The fact that research and teaching are highly

52 Highland University, internal document.

53 Guo and Wang 2017.

54 Xie 2015; Yang 2019.

55 Highland University 2018, 8.

politicized at HU has been substantiated by many Tibetan students and graduates. In response to the question, “What does it feel like to study at HU?”, posted on an online bulletin board, current students and graduates highlighted the tense environment. They expressed their disappointment in the strict discipline imposed on the highly politicized campus, and noted how the institution tightly controls their movements and schedules. Many of them complained about not being allowed to leave the campus during certain days – for example, 14th March,⁵⁶ the Tibetan Shoton Festival and the National Holiday.

One teacher said she was asked by university administrators to call frequent class meetings in order to stress the importance of upholding national unity and resisting separatism. This teacher thought her students were already adults and that preaching something repeatedly would have the opposite effect intended. When she intentionally avoided a meeting with students, she was reported by one of her students for being politically incorrect and was criticized by her superior. At HU, students are not permitted to have any contact with exiled Tibetans because school leaders fear that they would pick up some harmful ideas. Given the political sensitivity at HU, administrators and faculty members struggle to establish meaningful international cooperation. Most are fearful that any foreign links could place them and the university in political jeopardy. As there is no clear policy on where the acceptable boundaries lie, most err on the side of caution. How to balance political correctness and international cooperation is an extremely thorny issue at HU.

A third challenge for HU is how to facilitate the professional development of its faculty members. As mentioned above, political correctness is one of the most important issues for the university. Although the location of HU places its faculty members in an advantageous position for research on contemporary Tibetan society and high-altitude environments, political sensitivity often leads to censorship, which undermines innovation and academic freedoms. That said, there are important variations among the disciplines. There is far greater pressure on faculty members from the social sciences and humanities to pay close attention to the correct ideology in both the classroom and in their publications. Nevertheless, censorship is not unique to HU. The recent dismissal of a young assistant professor at one prestigious Chinese university because of his poor ideology has caught the attention of many Chinese professors. Faculty members also complain about the amount of time they must dedicate to political study as it detracts from their research time.

HU must also solve the problem of how to establish a mutually beneficial pairing-assistance relationship with its partner universities, and how to sustain long-term institutional cooperation. At present, HU seems to reap the greater benefit from these partnerships and relies on aid-for-Tibet teachers for funding, teaching, research support and capacity building. While the aid-for-Tibet

56 This is the date of the Lhasa riots in 2008, when monks from monasteries surrounding Lhasa held a protest which quickly escalated into urban unrest and ethnic conflicts (Yang, Miaoyan 2017b, 73).

cadres might gain from their acts of philanthropy in terms of promotion, their affiliated universities often fail to receive any tangible benefits. For these universities, providing aid for HU can be an onerous, political task, which can detract from their own advancement strategies. Finally, while these aid-for-Tibet teachers help to increase research output and funding and can potentially boost the institutional ranking of HU, the importing of faculty members draws resources away from local faculty members, and can lead to tensions between the two groups.

Concluding Remarks

Situated in the context of China's rapidly growing tertiary educational sector and extensive state investment for the construction of world first-class universities, this study examines the opportunities, strategies and challenges faced by universities on the ethnic periphery. Through a case study of a university located on China's Qing-Zang Plateau, this article explores how majority–minority and centre–periphery dynamics are intertwined with China's complex ethnic politics and higher education development.

Like other universities located in ethnic minority regions, HU has sought to capitalize on ethnic politics, or to be more specific, to capitalize on the Chinese government's desire for social stability and ethnic harmony in Tibet, in order to appeal for further state investment in its own efforts to build a first-class university and set of disciplines. Considering HU to be an ideological incubator, the university's leadership is consciously aware of “who, how and what kind of person needs to be cultivated.”⁵⁷ It takes seriously its mission to train a new generation of “socialist constructors” for the TAR who are “reliable, capable and able to work in Tibet” (*kaodezhu, yongdeshang, liudexia* 靠得住, 用得上, 留得下).⁵⁸

In order to achieve this aim, the HU leadership constantly expresses its political loyalty to the state by politicizing school management, imposing strict guidelines on the formal and hidden curricula, monitoring the ideology of both staff and students, and closely supervising the on- and off-campus activities of its students and staff. As a *shuangyiliu* university, HU focuses on strengthening disciplines such as Tibetan studies and Tibetan information technology in order to win the ideological and propaganda battle over the exiled Tibetan community and “hostile Western forces.”⁵⁹ The centrality of ideology on the plateau permeates everyday practices on campus, with HU leaders stressing the significance of holding up national unity and resisting separatism. The institution's habitus emphasizes political correctness; the importance of political and ideological education; the disciplining of staff and students alike; and the centrality of aid

57 Highland University 2018, 1.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 21.

politics. At HU, the ideological envelops the academic – in direct contravention to the advice of Max Weber, who some hundred years ago stressed the importance of separating politics from academia.⁶⁰ The key challenge for HU is how to construct a truly world-class and independent university when politics and ideology always trump academic interests and freedoms.

Capitalizing on the university’s unique geographic location is another key aspect of HU’s strategy for building a world-class institution. It is well placed to become a leader in the sciences of high-altitude environments. Yet, HU’s remote, high-altitude location on the Qing-Zang Plateau is both an asset and a liability for the university. With the assistance of aid-for-Tibet professors, HU aspires to build ecology as a world double first-class discipline. While the Qing-Zang Plateau offers a superb laboratory for scientific research on high-altitude and fragile ecological environments, the harsh conditions, geographic remoteness and economic underdevelopment create their own challenges. At present, HU is struggling to attract high-quality talent to work in this peripheral location, a vital prerequisite for any university’s development. In this regard, other universities located in west China, such as Xinjiang, Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Inner Mongolia, are in a much better position to attract top talent and move up the university rankings ladder.

Since university rankings are closely related to the unequal distribution of funding and resources, the race for world double first-class university status has become a national obsession in China. In order to elevate their rankings, many Chinese universities offer lucrative bids to attract so called “hyphenated-scholars” (*xiegang xuezhe* 斜杠学者) and “hat-scholars” (*maozi xuezhe* 帽子学者) such as Yangtze Distinguished Professors and other high-performing academic stars. Yet, universities located in peripheral regions like the Qing-Zang Plateau lack the resources and reputation to attract the leading academics required to build excellence in teaching and research. In this sense, the *shuangyiliu* process is in danger of perpetuating the inequalities that existed between universities in the 211 or 985 projects. Although aid-for-Tibet professors have assisted in boosting the talent pool, HU still has a long way to go in building its own independent capacity for scientific research.

Finally, the evolving nature of ethnic policies in China renders HU’s *shuangyiliu* construction strategy a risky proposition. The Chinese government has a long tradition of providing preferential treatment to ethnic minorities and ethnic minority regions in order to assist with their development. Yet, these policies are not without their controversy, with a range of senior policy advisors and government officials arguing that they are meant to be temporary in nature and can create dependence and hinder the development of a shared sense of national identity.⁶¹ At the 2014 Central Ethnic Work Conference in Beijing, President Xi Jinping called on officials “to reduce as far as possible differences in common

60 Weber 1958.

61 Ma 2014; Zhu 2012; Leibold 2013.

services between ethnic groups living in the same region.”⁶² This has been used by some local officials to gradually scale back minority preferences such as family planning exceptions and extra points for minority candidates on the university entrance exam. That said, ethnic policy reformers are not calling for a blanket ban on state support for frontier regions but rather a new approach that uses territory rather than ethnic status as the criterion for determining preferential treatment.

As a leading university in the TAR, HU must seek to demonstrate how it is not only providing vital support for the national policy agenda of stability maintenance and national unity but also how it is benefiting all ethnic groups in the region, not just the Tibetan community on the Qing-Zang Plateau. Since its establishment in 1965, the TAR has received more than US\$14 billion in financial subsidies from the central government and wealthier provinces and cities, with around 90 per cent of its annual budget coming from external fiscal transfers.⁶³ The continued development of higher education on the plateau is inextricably linked to continued state aid and assistance for the TAR. On the one hand, HU is likely to retain its double first-class status owing to its strategic importance and the ongoing preferential treatment it receives from the central government and through the regional-pairing scheme. On the other hand, the politicization of ethnicity and the HU’s dependency on external assistance also detracts from its ability to create a sustainable and truly world-class university.

The *shuangyiliu* construction project at HU provides useful insights into majority–minority and central–peripheral dynamics in China today. The dichotomized relationship between the Han majority and China’s ethnic minority groups, in which many minorities are viewed as “peripheral, barbaric, inferior, distinctive, potentially separatist and unsafe” and the majority as “central, civilized, superior, normative, patriotic and safe,” shapes not only the ethnic politics of China but also how universities like HU respond to the altering landscape of higher education reform in China and global efforts to create world-class universities.⁶⁴ The politicization, ethnicization and regionalization of *shuangyiliu* at HU, as discussed above, offers useful lessons about the intertwined relationship between higher education and ethnic politics in China.

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62 “Dang dui minzugongzuo de lingdao xianzhi jiaqiang” (The Party’s leadership on ethnic minority work is strengthening). United Front Work Department, 27 September 2017, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/tzb2010/tzxy/201709/89a5e12788e6434aaa7511cde1e30f9b.shtml>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

63 Leibold 2016, 177.

64 Yang, Miaoyan 2017a, 825.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

Miaoyan YANG is an associate professor at the sociology department, Xiamen University. As a researcher of minority education, she has a particular interest in the Tibetan, Uyghur and Mongolian ethnic minority communities, employing them as case studies of ethnic politics in China with reference to issues such as education, mobility, citizenship, identity and culture. She is author of *Learning to Be Tibetan: The Construction of Ethnic Identity at Minzu University of China* (Lexington, 2017) and has published articles in such journals as the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Asian Studies Review* and *Citizenship Studies*, among others.

James LEIBOLD is an associate professor and head of the department of politics, media and philosophy, La Trobe University. He has research expertise on the politics of ethnicity, race and national identity in modern Chinese history and society, and is currently engaged in research on ethnic policymaking and ethnic conflict in contemporary China with a particular focus on the restive western frontier and its Tibetan and Uyghur ethnic minorities. He is the author and co-editor of four books and over 30 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, and is a frequent contributor to the international media on these topics. Dr Leibold is currently the lead chief investigator on an Australia Research Council-funded project entitled, “Urbanizing western China: nation-building and social mobilization on the Sino-Tibetan frontier.”

摘要: 以教育援藏和中国高等教育改革为大背景, 本文考察了西藏自治区(简称西藏)发展高等教育的努力。基于官方文件、观察以及访谈材料, 我们详细探讨了西藏高校管理者响应国家建设世界一流大学与一流学科(双一流)背后的思考与行动。研究指出了他们的两种策略: 充分利用青藏高原的独特地理优势和充分利用国家的少数民族优惠政策。一方面, 大学管理者希望借助西藏独一无二的地理优势作为课程和研究发展的跳板。另一方面, 他们又依赖中央政府以及对口支援高校的支持与援助。本文认为, 在目前格局下, 西藏高等教育的未来发展依然高度依赖于外部援助; 它走向真正意义上的“世界双一流”是一场艰难之途。

关键词: 高等教育; 少数民族教育; 优惠政策; 双一流大学; 青藏高原; 教育援藏

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