

# Getting Ahead While Retaining Ethnic Salience: Educational Mobilities, Class, and Empowerment of a Tibetan Student in China

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#### Grant

This work is supported by the National Social Science Foundation (15CSH039).

Adopting empowerment as a theoretical lens, this paper examines how a combination of structural (particularly class background) and individual factors (particularly empowering agents and a strong personal will to achieve) have contributed to school success and ethnic identity formation of minority students in China. Our longitudinal study on a Tibetan student (Dolma) from middle-class background who completed seven-year dislocated secondary schooling and four-year undergraduate studies in China's interior (*Neidi*) suggests the complexity and lack of institutional empowerment in every-day schooling. Although the implementation of preferential policies has expanded educational opportunities for ethnic minorities, the systemic failure to acknowledge the ethnic capital of minority groups at large accounts for the struggles along Dolma's educational mobilities. Thanks to two teachers who acted as empowering agents, Dolma's school adaptation in *neidi* was made less bumpy. While parental involvement was largely missing during the dislocated secondary schooling, her middle-class background greatly facilitated Dolma's social adaptation and educational success in undergraduate and postgraduate studies. With a strong will to represent Tibetan culture appropriately to the mainstream society, Dolma gradually learned to get ahead while retaining her ethnic salience. This study calls for more culturally reflexive policy changes to achieve institutional empowerment of ethnic minority students.

Keywords: ethnicity, class, empowerment, Tibetan, educational mobility

## **Introduction**

Existing literature has noted the pervasive disempowerment of Chinese ethnic minority students along their educational trajectories (Hansen, 1999; Lee, 2001; Ma & Yuan, 2016; Trueba & Zou, 1994; Wang, Zhao and Sun, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2019; Yang, 2017a, 2017b; Yi, 2008; Zuliyati, 2008). Minority individuals are observed to have learned/developed senses of “worthlessness” (Yi & Wang, 2012), “backwardness” (Hansen, 1999), “inferiority” (Yang, 2017a, 2017b) and “marginalisation” (Wang, Zhao and Sun, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2019) at school. Minority identities become a disadvantage along ethnic minority students’ educational trajectories because the educational system favours the dominant culture (Yi, 2008).

In recent years, scholars seem to hint superior class status as an empowering factor for ethnic minority students by exploring middle- and upper-class minority students’ navigational strategies toward academic success (Calarco, 2018; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Carter, 2012). Yet, the intersectional role of class and ethnicity has not been examined in Chinese contexts. Moreover, in most cases, since researchers fixate their studies in one or certain schools/localities, the role of educational mobilities in educational empowerment has not received much attention. Educational mobilities, defined as “educationally motivated geographic movements of students from their home region to another” (Xu and Yang, 2019, p. 631), have significantly influenced the ethnic identity constructions of Chinese minority students by exposing them to different temporal situations of ethnic interactions and individual

efforts towards self-achievement. Although Xu and Yang (2019) have not explicitly discussed the concept of empowerment, their comparative study of educational mobilities experiences of a Mongolian and a Tibetan student finds that educational mobilities disempower these minority students by exposing them to constant pressure of the gaze of the dominant others. A focus on educational mobilities also leads researchers to a longitudinal exploration of minority students, perceiving their academic achievement and ethnic identities as changing and fluid, depending on contexts and temporalities, rather than static as documented in many previous studies. This study, situated in the current research gap, seeks to explore how a combination of structural and individual factors have influenced the school success and ethnic identities of ethnic minority students within their educational mobilities. Based on a longitudinal study on a Tibetan student, this study aims to unpack how class, educational mobilities, and teachers might work as (dis)empowering factors/agents and discuss policy implications towards the educational empowerment of ethnic minority students in Chinese and international contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Empowerment became a theme in educational studies between the 1980s and 1990s. In his influential work “Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention,” Jim Cummins proposes an empowerment framework to solve the issue of pervasive school failure of minority students. He conceives of students’ empowerment “as both a mediating construct influencing academic performance and as an outcome variable

itself” (Cummins, 1986, p. 22). Students who are empowered by their school experiences, Cummins argues, “develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. They participate completely in instruction as a result of having developed a confident cultural identity as well as appropriate school-based knowledge and interaction structures” (p. 22). Contrarily, students who are disempowered by their school experiences “do not develop this type of cognitive/academic and social/emotional foundation” (ibid.). Cummins therefore calls for educators to be reflexive of three sets of relationships in their teaching practices: intergroup power relations (majority/minority society group relations), school/minority community relations, and educator/minority student relations (Cummins, 1986, 2001). It therefore seems apparent from Cummins’ arguments that educators/teachers are important empowering agents for students.

While Cummins has not provided a precise definition of empowerment, recent years have witnessed increasing applications of the empowerment concept/theory in the social sciences (Akchurin and Lee, 2013; Chiapperino and Testa, 2016; Cila and Lalonde, 2015; Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014; Helve and Wallace, 2018; Jiang, Yu and Yang, 2020; Purdue and Howe, 2012; Yang, 2018; Yu and Kuo, 2017). Yet, the concept of empowerment is still an ambiguous and confusing one (Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014; Drydyk, 2013). A dominant conceptualization of empowerment defines it as a motivational process that leads to enhanced competence, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem, and well-being (Cummins, 1986; Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014). Power is considered to be a central tenet of empowerment (Ashcroft, 1987;

Gore, 1993; Hodkinson, 19994; Lee, 2001; Trueba and Zou, 1994). Such power can be unpacked in two ways: first, it relates to the sense of “taking control” from individuals who are empowered. Second, it predicts “a transition from a subordinate position of oppression and lack of control of one’s destiny to a position of conscious decision-making to demand respect for one’s right and to control one’s destiny” (Trueba and Zou, 1994, p. 192). Empowerment, therefore, can be described “metaphorically as becoming better able to shape one’s life for the better” (Drydyk, 2013, p.250).

Applying empowerment as a theoretical framework, Trueba and Zou (1994) and Lee (2001) examined how a group of Miao minority students in China achieved school success. Both studies found that although Miao identity brought about disadvantages in education, a strong sense of obligation and responsibility for the family and ethnic community motivated them to perform well in school (Lee, 2001; Trueba & Zou, 1994). Nevertheless, their studies seemed to attribute school success essentially to individual efforts and failed to explain how structural factors particularly schools failed to be empowering agents. They also failed to explain why a large proportion of Miao minority students did not perform well in school. More recently, Yang (2018b) investigated how preferential policies in education empower Tibetan students toward school success. Yet, Yang only narrowly defined institutional empowerment as a way to help minority students gain school admissions through preferential policies and ignored the school struggles and cultural exclusion of minority students (Yang, 2018b; Yi, 2008). Jiang, Yang, and Yu (2020) discussed how

ethnic minority students could be empowered in English classrooms through culturally sustaining technologies.

These studies have narrowly attributed school success to personal efforts or tentatively defined minority students as preferentially treated subjects; they thus largely ignore the role of institutional empowerment in school success and positive identity construction of minority students. Also, these studies have not identified the intersectional roles of class and educational mobilities. Moreover, the representation of minority identity in existing literature is taken for granted to be externally assigned rather than self-asserted. In this paper, we set out to explore the processes of empowerment for a Tibetan student and search for explanations of her academic successes and failures, especially academic transformations that took place during her educational trajectory. We look at both the assigned and asserted ethnic identities of this minority student and examine how they might influence the student's (dis)empowering experiences.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on empirical data from longitudinal studies of a Tibetan student Dolma (a pseudonym), conducted by the first author between 2014 and 2019. Dolma was a key informant of the first author's project on the educational experiences and ethnic identities of Tibetan university students. She was also one of the 40 Tibetan informants with *Neidiban* (which is also known as the interior Tibet class) schooling, a special educational program established in 1985 and offered to students with Tibet

Household Registration to receive purported better secondary education in China's developed cities (Postiglione, 2008, 2009; Zhu, 2007; Yang, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). All these informants were asked questions about their educational mobility experiences, academic achievements and aspirations, and ethnic identities to understand the intersections of ethnicity, class, educational mobilities, and empowerment.

Born to a middle-class family<sup>1</sup> in the Tibet Autonomous Region (hereafter Tibet), Dolma speaks fluent Tibetan and experienced constant mobilities along her educational pathways. She received most of her education in segregated settings—the *Neidiban* schooling which hosts Tibetan students in segregated schools or segregated school buildings. After completing junior secondary education in an east coast city, she left for senior secondary education in Chongqing Municipality, near Tibet. She

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<sup>1</sup> The measurement of the middle-class status in China, according to eminent sociologist Qiang Li, should include income, occupation and education levels. The Chinese middle class should have middle-level income and is mainly composed of brainworkers, including national and state leaders, managers, professionals, officials, and private entrepreneurs. A typical middle-class person should also have a college degree (Li, 2011; Li and Wang, 2017). Dolma's parents were both public servants. Her mother received a college degree and her father had an associate degree. Their salaries were much higher than the national medium income. During interviews, Dolma jokingly referred to herself as "the rich second generation" (*fuerdai* 富二代). She subjectively identified herself to be from a middle-class family.



then attended an elite university in the east coast. One year after she completed her undergraduate studies, she was successfully admitted by a postgraduate program at the same university.

Like other *Neidiban* graduates, Dolma had lived in three different *Neidi* cities over the past 13 years, with living experience in both China's eastern and western parts. Furthermore, Dolma was among the few Tibetan informants who had been successfully admitted by a postgraduate program at an elite university (she was the only Tibetan student admitted that year). Therefore, exploration on Dolma's educational mobilities and experiences will reveal not only the common struggles Tibetan students face along their educational trajectories, but it will also shed light on what it means to be an academically successful minority individual in a society where minority cultures are secondary to the dominant.

In addition to two formal interviews, Dolma was asked to write five reflections on her educational experiences and ethnic identities over time and was informally consulted on over 50 occasions about her recent encounters. The first author talked with four of Dolma's former classmates, one of her formal teachers, participated in some of the Tibetan student activities Dolma attended, and paid one visit to Dolma's home in Tibet. All these provided important supplementary data for triangulation.

Three research questions are addressed: How is Dolma empowered/disempowered along her educational mobilities? How does class influence the educational experiences of Dolma? What is the mediating role of

empowering agents and educational mobilities in the educational achievement and ethnic identity constructions of Dolma? Although we make no claim to generalise the findings through this single case study, we hope that Dolma's personal encounters manifested through her multiple identities, as a minority, as a middle-class individual, as a female, and as a mobile person, can stimulate further debates and theoretical reflections on the intersections of ethnicity, class, educational mobilities and empowerment in China and abroad.

### ***“Neidiban was My Dream”***

According to Dolma, *Neidiban* was her dream when she was a primary school student. As a state-run program that recruits top students from Tibet to receive secondary education in China's more developed *Neidi* cities, the junior secondary *Neidiban* admits less than 2,000 students, and the senior secondary *Neidiban* recruits about 3,000 students every year (approximately 5%-10% of the whole graduating student body in Tibet). Therefore, only the highest scoring students can be admitted. An early official document on the establishment of *Neidiban* states:

There are many advantages of establishing *Neidiban* to help cultivate talents for Tibet. First, *Neidi* schools are more experienced, the quality of teachers is better, the facilities are better, and the educational quality is guaranteed... Third, the environmental conditions in *Neidi* are better for study. The students have broader views.

Similar statements were repeatedly stressed in later official documents, in which a

dichotomy between *Neidi* and Tibet was established and promoted. In these descriptions, *Neidi* is considered to be superior, advanced, more open-minded, and a better place for student learning; and Tibet is depicted as otherwise. These binaries resonate with the dichotomies created between the Han and ethnic minorities emphasised in the work of Gladney (1994), Litzinger (2000), and Yang (2017a, 2017b, 2018). These ideologies are pervasively visible in official documents and are uncritically transmitted to Tibetan students.

Over the past 35 years of practice, *Neidiban* has successfully earned a reputation of providing a superior educational setting to the schools in Tibet. Tibetan teachers encouraged their best students to attend *Neidiban* and Tibetan parents were willingly sending their children for a better educational future. Tibetan children aspired to study in *Neidiban*. Dolma said,

If a person was admitted by *Neidiban*, both his/her parents and others around would consider him/her to be a good student. It is just like children in *Neidi* being admitted by a prestigious university. Parents would usually have small talks about whose children were at *Neidiban*. They would highly praise these children for having promising futures.

Reflecting on her educational experiences, Dolma admitted the positive influence of her elder sister. Dolma's elder sister was a straight-A student in primary school and successfully made her way to *Neidiban*. When the first author met Dolma's sister in Tibet, she was working as a national public servant nearby Lhasa, a competitive position that many Tibetans longed for. Dolma was proud of her sister and considered

her to be a role model. Dolma said:

When she [elder sister] was studying in *Neidiban*, she often called me to share her many first experiences: going to the cinema, visiting the amusement park, and living in a dormitory, etc. Sister often urged me to study hard and earn an opportunity to study at *Neidiban*. Ever since that time, my goal of learning is Tibet class [in *Neidi* cities].

Notably, the influences of governmental, local, and familial discourses surrounding *Neidiban* had created an impeccable myth of the value of attending *Neidiban*.

Together they shaped Dolma's educational goals and desires. Attending *Neidiban* and embarking on a journey of educational mobilities could be likened to a destined fate for Dolma, which only served to prove her worth and recognise her achievement.

### **Gains and Pains at *Neidiban***

For Dolma, *Neidiban* plays both empowering and disempowering roles along her educational mobilities, although on different terms. Dolma was grateful to the *Neidiban* policy, which afforded her the opportunity to study in *Neidi* schools with better facilities and teaching quality. She also gained more knowledge about *Neidi* cities through arranged trips by her *Neidi* schools. Moreover, since *Neidiban* enjoys a separate quota in university admissions, *Neidiban* graduates face less competition in the *Gaokao*, the competitive National College Entrance Exam. For many of them, a *Neidiban* acceptance letter means a conditional offer to a university or even a key university in China (Yang, 2017b). Reflecting on her *Neidiban* experiences, Dolma commented:

Luckily we had opportunities to travel during summer holidays. That was what I loved the most. It was also the best opportunity to communicate with the outside world...During junior secondary school, the first year we went to Xiamen city, the second year we visited Meizhou Island, and the third year we went to Zhejiang Province...During the new year, [teachers] also took us to visit karst caves in Jiangle city.

With these trips, Dolma gradually understood the natural and cultural landscapes in *Neidi*. She found that *Neidi* was not a homogeneous place as she had imagined. Dolma commented further, “When I compared myself with Tibetans who were educated within Tibet, I find myself more tolerant, more open-minded. I think these characteristics were cultivated through my educational mobilities. These characteristics will be the biggest assets in my life.” When compared with her Tibetan peers educated in Tibet, Dolma clearly exuded relative social confidence (Cummins, 1986) as well as beliefs in herself and future capability (Ashcroft, 1987), which were arguably cultivated through her *Neidiban* schooling experience. Dolma’s educational mobilities were manifested through her initial move from Tibet to *Neidi* for school, as well as through the subsequent, ample opportunities to travel facilitated by her *Neidiban* education. As these experiences played a pivotal role in fostering her social and self-confidence, it could be argued that she was empowered as a result of her educational mobilities.

However, such educational empowerment should be considered in relativity. Although Dolma was selected to attend *Neidiban* as one of the top Tibetan students, she expressed a severe lack of confidence and self-worth when compared with her

Han peers in *Neidi*.

I was extremely lacking in confidence [during the early period of junior secondary education in *Neidi*]. Maybe it was because of my [faulty] study method. I studied very hard but there was no significant improvement. I was under great pressure. [I always had the concern that] If I failed in the entrance examination of the senior secondary *Neidiban*, I would feel very embarrassed. Later there was a change in my personal character. I became silent and introverted.

Although Dolma first blamed her inadequate study method for her educational struggles, her later narratives revealed other structural factors. Being removed from local communities to receive dislocated schooling at *Neidi* schools means parental involvement was minimal and education was essentially handed over to *Neidi* teachers. Although Dolma's parents were well educated compared to those of many of her ethnic peers, the amount of parental guidance was limited. Dolma said:

It was impossible for my parents to guide my study. But I would call my parents to inform them of my scores and rankings after every exam. For a time, my result was among the bottom in class. I felt extremely stressed...Actually during the time I was at *Neidi*, I rarely had deep conversations with my parents over the phone. What we shared most was the daily trivial, like what classes I attended, what we ate, what we bought, etc. Things that might influence our emotions, such as a quarrels with friends and punishments from teachers, would never be mentioned...At that time, if our academic performance was not outstanding, teachers would also spend little time on communicating with our parents. I felt like that all my parents wanted to make sure was my safety and health.

Dolma's communication pattern with her parents resonates a Chinese saying

that is used to depict how physically dispersed family members safeguard each other's emotional wellbeing, "only reporting good news, but never the worrying news" (*baoxi bu baoyou*). Dolma's physical distance from her parents had created two layers of complication in the role that her parents could play within her educational pursuits. Firstly, despite the availability of telephone communication, their physical distance necessitated the brevity (as opposed to "deep" conversations) of such daily communication. This inevitably reduced her parents' potential involvement in guiding and supporting, or indeed, intervening her studies when necessary, as other middle-class parents would have done (Lareau, 2003; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara, 2016). Secondly, aligned with the aforementioned principle of "only reporting good news," and due to *Neidi* teachers' lack of communication with Tibetan parents, Dolma's parents had notably fewer opportunities to grasp Dolma's academic performance and struggles. This meant that they were kept wilfully in the dark and reduced in their caring capacity to concerns about Dolma's health and safety. As Dolma's parents recalled, when Dolma and her sister were in *Neidiban*, they were worried about everything but could do nothing except visiting them occasionally during work leave. Such an incapacitation of her parents' potentially powerful role in shaping Dolma's educational pursuits could therefore be argued as a main contributing factor to Dolma's disempowerment.

According to Dolma, *Neidi* teachers generally lacked cultural sensitivity toward their Tibetan students. She recalled:

When teachers got angry, they would hit on the head of my male classmates. But

in Tibetan customs, this is impolite and forbidden. Consequently, the disputes and tensions (among students and teachers) would become more severe.

Dolma never expected the tensions. For her, at that critical stage of personal development when parental involvement was largely absent, she had anticipated teachers to play the pastoral role of understanding and guiding her.

Teachers would forbid us from speaking Tibetan in front of them, because they don't understand [Tibetan] and it would bring some misunderstandings and suspicions. I remembered that most of the disputes between the boys and teachers started from a small problem, and the misunderstandings due to language issues would turn the dispute into a bigger conflict. For example, one classmate got punished in the morning exercise. He uttered a few complaints in Tibetan. However, the teacher thought he was saying something bad about the teacher and started reprimanding him. The student felt wronged and was outraged. Even though other classmates explained to the teacher [what that student had said in Chinese], the teacher still did not buy it. All classmates thought the teacher was making a fuss.

The language barriers and subsequent misunderstandings between students and teachers became rampant amid the daily lives of Tibetan students in the *Neidiban*. Such misunderstandings and the concomitant conflicts further engendered animosity that was detrimental for an empowering schooling and social environment. Instead, the essential “social/emotional foundation” that Cummins (1986, p. 22) depicted for educational empowerment was rarely present. Likewise, what Cummins called for in regard to teachers’ reflexivity in the “educator/minority student relations” (ibid.) was much to be desired.



Despite the troubled relations between teachers and Han students, Dolma confided that she was lucky to have met head teacher Wang after her first year of senior secondary school.

My entrance score was just so-so [compared with other high-scoring Tibetan students], but my arts subjects were fine...Teacher Wang assigned me to be a subject representative. I was extremely flattered. The appointment gave me great confidence. Later she often encouraged me to answer questions in front of other classmates. Gradually I became confident. My study was getting better and better.

With the encouragement of Teacher Wang, Dolma was fortunate to improve her study habits in the final stretch of her senior secondary school. She was later successfully admitted by an elite university on the east coast. Examining Dolma's trajectory, Teacher Wang played the role of an 'empowerment agent' (Gore, 1993, p. 73) who entrusted Dolma with the responsibility (or indeed, honour) of acting as a subject representative in the first place. This act of "doing the empowering" (ibid.) conferred power to Dolma. When coupled with Teacher Wang's subsequent encouragement for Dolma to answer questions in class, such empowerment propelled Dolma further to a "desired end state" (ibid.), in which her boosted confidence led to substantial academic improvements, enabling her to receive an offer from an elite university. As such, an individual teacher made a huge difference in empowering Dolma. However, we want to highlight that when structural issues are not addressed, the roles of such individual "empowerment agents" can still be limited.

For instance, Dolma's daily interactions with Han students and other local

people in *Neidi* cities continuously informed a salient Tibetan identity which was inferior to that of the dominant Han group. When she first arrived at the *Neidi* city, she was eager to represent her Tibetan identity: she would intentionally speak Tibetan with friends in order to attract the attention and curiosity of local Han students. However, interactions with Han individuals mostly revealed to her how Tibet was biasedly imagined as barbaric, primitive, and underdeveloped. During our informal conversations, she confided her strong disappointment when she was asked “stupid questions” by Han individuals, such as “Do you live in a tent? Do you ride a horse to school? Do Tibetan people bathe only three times in life?” (also see Xu and Yang, 2019, p. 636). These questions, while reflecting the Han individuals’ sense of superiority and stereotypes towards ethnic minorities, also confirmed their ignorance of Dolma’s middle-class identity. While such ignorance could be attributed to the structural lack of proper representation of ethnic minorities in the national curriculum of China (Chu, 2015), it continued to underline Dolma’s subordinate ethnic position, which was antithetical to reaching empowerment, according to Trueba and Zou (1994).

Subsequently, when such ethnic ignorance of Han peers became mobilised to demarcate the Han’s ethnic superiority through relegating the Tibetan’s status, conflicts abounded.

During junior secondary school, our Tibetan classmates often had fights with students in Han classes. I still remembered the pronoun they [Han students] used to describe us: gutter oil [地沟油, *digouyou*, meaning they were dirty and dark]...Once a Han student put a series of posts on our schoolboard, complaining

how evil Tibetan students were. Many Tibetan students were provoked by the posts and had a big group fight with Han students.

These incidents, according to Dolma, “strengthened our identity. They dragged us away from the Han students, therefore creating a clear boundary between us. Meanwhile, the Tibetan students become more united.” The Tibetan students, including Dolma, were pushed to engage in “fights” to “demand respect for [their] rights” (Trueba and Zou, 1994, p. 192). Their strengthened and reinforced Tibetan identity could be considered as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this heightened ethnic identity allowed the students to act as a collective to consciously demand rights, which could be interpreted as a form of empowerment. On the other hand, this Tibetan ethnic identity is delineated as a result of ethnic divide and conflicts with Han peers. The social and cultural environment in *Neidiban* schools is far from conducive to fostering an empowering context.

### **Struggles and Hopes at University**

For Dolma, attending university in *Neidi* was the first time she lived and studied with students from other ethnic groups. Although she completed her seven-year secondary education at *Neidiban*, the classrooms, canteens, and dormitories were all separately designated for Tibetan students. At university, her daily interactions with Han students constantly reminded Dolma of the disparity between her and Han classmates. Dolma reported how devastated she felt when her academic struggles did not receive any empathy from her Han classmates:

During the freshman year, I felt there was nothing I could catch up with my dorm-mates. The academic pressure was getting heavier every day. Some subjects, such as Advanced Mathematics and Statistics were too difficult. I got easily angry. I even doubted my IQ. I found it difficult to learn everything. I revealed my feelings to my dorm-mates, but none showed any empathy. Later I complained with my ethnic peers and they all empathised with me. I felt I found some comfort from them. I decided to hang out mostly with them.

For a long time, Dolma believed that she was academically less capable than her Han peers. This mentality remained until she led a research project on bilingual education in Tibet under the supervision of Teacher Nan (a pseudonym) during the summer before her sophomore year. The research report was awarded the third prize at the university's research competition and the second prize at the provincial annual conference. Dolma felt extremely empowered by this experience, because it was the first time she learned she could excel at something if she worked hard. Teacher Nan, according to Dolma, was different from her other university professors because she understood Tibetan culture. Dolma took a class with Teacher Nan during her third year. During class, Teacher Nan challenged the taken-for-granted Han Chinese culturalism. She taught students how being a Han majority would bring a series of benefits in the system where Han Chinese culturalism is dominant. She also reminded Han students to be culturally sensitive and to appreciate cultural diversity. Dolma felt empowered in Nan's class because her mostly invisible ethnicity was heard and appreciated. She was later confident in expressing herself. Here, again, we witness the transformative effect that an "empowerment agent" (Gore, 1993, p. 73) like Teacher

Nan can exert in a higher education setting. Teacher Nan's empathy for and knowledge of Tibetan culture thus served as a necessary emotional bridge and foundation for Dolma to connect and prosper. In the third year of undergraduate studies, Dolma made a decision to pursue postgraduate studies at her university. Yet, this decision was not easily made.

Actually, I had the thought of pursuing a Master's Degree [after *Gaokao*] when I selected this social science major. At that time, my parents thought this major was too abstract. The best way out for me in the future should be a teacher. They thought the ideal situation was that I continued to study. [Therefore I will] have a good educational background. Before entering university, I thought doing a Master's Degree was not that difficult, and I seriously took it into consideration. However, I found at university that none of the Tibetan friends I knew had thought of pursuing postgraduate studies. Few of the senior Tibetan students did so. In my first year, the study load was so stressful that I completely gave up the thought. Every time my parents brought up this topic, I would decline it immediately. I asked them not to even think about it. Later, during the sophomore year, I started to reconsider it because I gained more confidence through Teacher Nan.

Dolma was aware of the cost — Pursuing postgraduate studies means postponing the job search for three years, which might mean a more uncertain future. Over the past years, Tibetan graduates seem to have greatly benefited from the state-instituted preferential policies in job assignment. Between 2010 and 2016, the full-employment policy has guaranteed many Tibetan graduates stable jobs in government sectors, state-owned companies, or banks in Tibet upon graduation. Since

2013, an employment aid for Tibet policy was issued to offer Tibetan students job opportunities in *Neidi* cities with lower admission requirements. Motivated by such immediate and stable employment upon graduation, few graduates from Tibet would pursue postgraduate studies immediately after undergraduate studies.

Despite such appealing policies, Dolma was determined to pursue a postgraduate degree, because she believed a master's degree would enable her voice about Tibetan culture and Tibetan people to be heard. However, to attempt the postgraduate entrance exams, there were major obstacles for Dolma to overcome.

Among the four compulsory subjects in the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, English was her biggest challenge. As her third language, English had been her nightmare since secondary school. She used to blame herself for not being able to chat with Han classmates in English. She later realised through her educational mobilities that her trilingual language ability was rarely appreciated in mainstream society. The imposition of linguistic hierarchies resonates with the linguistic imperialism which subordinates minority languages in Chinese society (He, 2015, p.174). This linguistic imperialism is accountable for the disempowering experiences of ethnic minority students at school, especially in second or third language learning.

Unsurprisingly, Dolma failed in her first National Postgraduate Entrance Examination because her English result was not high enough to reach the threshold. She was devastated. She felt ashamed because her other ethnic peers had already found jobs, and she was unsettled. However, after only a short break, she was determined to try a second time and this time she succeeded. When she learned that

her entrance score was even higher than some Han students', she was thrilled.

Dolma attributed her success to her hard work and the continuous support of her parents. She admitted that without her parents' financial and emotional support after her first failure, she would have never achieved thus far. Yet, the decision to support Dolma's second try in the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination was not easily made. When the first author talked with Dolma's parents in the summer of 2018 during a home visit, Dolma's mother expressed that she did not expect her daughter to suffer from such pressures. She had earlier advised her daughter that if Dolma insisted on pursuing postgraduate studies, she could choose Sichuan University, which was closer to Tibet and was with lower admission requirements. Dolma did not take her mother's advice because she aimed higher and she believed that her cultural bridge role could exert more influence in an eastern province. Dolma's vision and mission won her parents' support. Dolma's father prepared a separate study room for her to study without interruptions. Her mother cooked for her every day to make sure there were no worries behind.

It is apparent that Dolma's middle-class background was influential for her academic studies during tertiary education.

I think the role of class [on my study] was very small during primary and secondary education. At that time, everyone was leading the same lifestyle. What we ate, wore, and used were all the same. However, things have changed after entering university. At university, there were more social gatherings. Things like gatherings and travelling all needed certain financial backup. It was also the same for personal development. Whether we chose to enter the job market

immediately upon university graduation was also closely connected with family background. For me, the influence of family background on my personal development was positive. I can decide to take a second chance with ease because I know there was nothing to worry about at home.

The sense of surety and ease as underpinned by Dolma's familial financial security and parents' support resonates with Maxwell and Aggleton's (2013) study of English girls in elite schools, who exuded considerable confidence about the future thanks to secure financial and social supports from their families. Compared with other ethnic Tibetan peers who were from impoverished families in rural Tibet, Dolma's economic position enabled her to cultivate friendships with more Han peers. For instance, thanks to her parents' financial support, in the last two years of her undergraduate studies, Dolma made several trips to Thailand, Hong Kong, Macau, and other cities in China together with her Han friends. Such increased cultural exposure, together with her expanded social network including Han peers, contributed positively to her sense of empowerment.

For Dolma, admission to the postgraduate program of her undergraduate university marked a milestone for her ethnic aspiration. With the interviews about her academic achievement widely shared among Tibetan university students, she became a role model for the new Tibetan generation. Empowered by her educational success, she was determined to speak out for Tibetans. During her postgraduate studies, she was planning to conduct a research project on personal development of Tibetan students, which aims to help them find self-worth and build confidence in mainstream



society. She was also determined to enliven the new Tibetan generation to be critical and culturally reflexive, calling them on a mission as cultural brokers bridging Tibetan, Han, and other ethnic groups in China, and elsewhere. Dolma's agency and noted transformation in this process could be easily discerned. Dolma's academic success accorded her with social recognition from her ethnic peers. This new position has then enabled her to "take control" and "become better able to shape her life for the better," thus becoming empowered. Importantly, she has aspired to take on the position of an "empowerment agent" herself, through her intended postgraduate research and activism ethnic work. In this sense, educational empowerment could have a positive ripple effect, allowing individuals like Dolma to effect potentially broader and more systemic changes on the horizon.

### **Empowerment and Disempowerment along Educational Mobilities**

Analyses on Dolma's educational experiences point to the complexity of institutional empowerment in China's ethnic minority education. On the one hand, a series of preferential policies were institutionalised to expand educational opportunities and improve educational quality for ethnic minority students. As in this case, because of the *Neidiban* policy, Dolma enjoyed better educational facilities and improved educational quality, which later paved her way towards an elite university. According to Dolma, her *Gaokao* score was only around 440 points, almost 150-200 points lower than most of her dorm-mates and classmates. If not for *Neidiban*'s separate admission policy, she would have never been sitting in the same classroom as those elite students.

While feeling grateful for these preferential policies, Dolma also pointed out the negative consequences. Without further contextualising such achievement gaps between majority and minority groups, the preferential policies have brought resentment among many Han peers. As we learned from Dolma's Han classmates at the elite university, minority students like Dolma were considered inferior, less academically competitive, and lazier. What was largely overlooked by Han students and teachers was the widely practised Han Chinese culturalism in state schooling (Yi, 2008), which has constantly marginalised and devoiced minority cultures. Therefore, on many occasions, ethnic minority students failed to capitalise on their ethnic culture, while members of the majority automatically enjoy a system of benefits (Tatum, 2017).

On the other hand, the empowerment and disempowerment experiences along Dolma's educational mobilities seem to pinpoint the essential lack of institutional empowerment in every-day schooling. The imbalanced majority-minority power relations and the general lack of cultural sensitivity among teachers and Han students constantly disempowered minority students, who were largely incapacitated, such that they were unable to develop a confident cultural identity and appropriate school-based knowledge and communication structures. These educational struggles of minority students further convinced Han students of their inability to compete. As we observed, many of Dolma's Tibetan friends from rural regions formed closed friendships within the Tibetan group. They also struggled academically at university. Feeling incapable of competing with Han students, many Tibetan students turn to ethnic particularism

(Yi and Wang, 2012). Notably, the *neidiban* as a form of dislocated schooling also impedes the potential empowering role of family in students' development. As in Dolma's case, her parents' social and cultural capital largely failed to empower her during *neidiban* schooling.

Nevertheless, despite the essential lack of institutional empowerment, there did exist some empowering teachers who were culturally reflexive and tolerant. If not for the encouragement, support, and recognition of Teacher Wang and Teacher Nan, Dolma would not have been able to reach such achievements. However, as highlighted earlier, individual empowerment agents' valuable work cannot compensate for the systemic and structural factors that continue to perpetuate the subordinate positions of ethnic minority students. Moreover, by valorising the achievement of individual success stories of 'outliers' such as Dolma, institutions may evade their responsibilities of directly addressing such critical issues as providing mechanisms to empower their ethnic minority students.

From Dolma's perspective, she was "lucky" as her middle-class family background shielded her from many financial and emotional burdens at the later stages of her education (e.g. university). Because of her parents' financial and emotional support, she was capable of making decisions at will. When she was preparing for the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, she took several online tutoring courses. After she failed at the first try, she took more online tutoring courses on IELTS. Her alternative plan was that if she failed the second time, she would apply for postgraduate programmes at Hong Kong universities. In that case, the

annual cost including tuition and maintenance would be around 200,000 RMB. The capacity to purchase online tutoring and plan for cross-border education was supported by her parents' financial power. However, many of her ethnic peers who were from rural and nomadic regions of Tibet did not even think of the possibility of pursuing postgraduate studies upon university graduation. Dolma's familial economic power has played a fundamental role in assuring her academic endeavours and has had notable concomitant enabling effects on fostering her academic aspirations, which distinguishes her from her Tibetan peers from less-advantaged backgrounds. This evokes Bourdieu's (1977) argument that the objective structures, such as the field rules and the individual's relative social position, can be internalised in such a way that the individual is oriented to perceive certain things as probable and reject others as unthinkable. In Dolma's case, her middle-class background substantially underpinned her educational aspirations for higher achievements and for further potential educational mobilities (e.g. cross-border educational pursuits).

Dolma's middle-class position closely interplayed with her educational mobilities and ethnic identity development through intricate and complex processes of empowerment and disempowerment. While eventually feeling empowered and transformed, Dolma's reflection encapsulates the non-linear, ruptured nature of such empowerment processes. She had to overcome barriers along different stages of her own educational mobilities journey and turned some such barriers into pivotal occasions for learning and transformation (such as learning how to survive through difference). Importantly, this process was imbued with emotional struggles,

engendering self-doubt, and a sense of guilt and loss (for not learning enough about her own ethnic culture). It was through constant adjustment and re-positioning of herself that she was able to achieve her current academic success. Her middle-class background, while crucial for her development in the later stages of her education journey (i.e. undergraduate and postgraduate studies), was cancelled out or played down in her secondary schooling, due to the unique *Neidiban* schooling environment. Her parents' middle-class resources could not play as substantial a role during her secondary schooling stage as in other contexts (Lareau, 2003; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara, 2016) due to the physical distance and communication limitations. Therefore, we argue that it is important to bring out such nuances when assessing the roles of class positions across educationally mobile ethnic minority students' life trajectories.

### **Getting Ahead While Retaining Ethnic Salience**

For Dolma, educational mobilities crystalised her ethnic identity. "When I was a primary school student, I only knew that *Neidi* is a place where top students will go. At that time, I have no sense of my minority identity." For a long time, Dolma even considered Han as the minority because Tibetan was the majority group in Tibet. It was not until junior secondary education at *Neidiban* that Dolma realised her minority identity.

During junior secondary education, I felt strong identification with Tibetan. This was due to the same religious and linguistic backgrounds of mine and my classmates, and our same response to the prejudices of Han students. Later, we

made a distinction between “we” and “they.”

While interactions with Han people in *Neidi* informed her religious, linguistic, and ethnic difference, the stigmatisation, prejudices, and discrimination Dolma experienced during her *Neidiban* period gradually promoted a distinctive Tibetan identity. Dolma came to know through her educational experiences that her ethnic identity was “destined and required,” in sharp contrast to other Tibetans educated in the mainstream education.

I feel like, compared with ethnic Mongolian students, or those Tibetan students from the mainstream educational pathway, ethnic identity was optional. You could gradually add it as your ethnic symbol. However, for me, ethnic identity is destined, and required. Because this identity is the capital you enjoyed the convenience and preferential policies. Therefore you are asked to be “special” (*you tese*). However, during our educational mobilities, [schools] did not teach us how to develop our “ethnic characteristics.” That is why as an individual I struggled a lot. Should I adapt to the mainstream culture or keep my “ethnic characteristics?” It seems that I could do neither.

Dolma’s reflection seems to suggest a paradox inherent in China’s ethnic minority education. While on the one hand minority students are involved in a dynamic process of assimilation, on the other hand, the differences of minority culture are established, essentialised, and staticised by state powers (Zhao, 2010). This paradox contributes to the assimilation dilemma that minority individuals constantly encounter during their education. As Dolma pointed out:

How [should I] achieve self-worth? Whose affirmation do I want to acquire? [I

feel like] being heavily dragged down. [The textbooks] told me to be more tolerant and open-minded. However, in reality I felt the constant exclusion and segregation. I was worried that people give me praise because of my ethnic identity. It was really hard to prove myself.

Dolma was confounded by the paralleled and yet contradicting discourses and practices within her education institutions. On the one hand, her institutions (including *Neidiban* and university) promoted ethnic harmony between different groups and advocated greater tolerance on all parties; and yet on the other, ethnic conflicts and relegations of the minority groups perpetuated in daily encounters. Such conflicting messages and practices placed her in a state of ethnic limbo, which negatively impacted her self-identification as she had an added layer of concern, i.e. whether or not she was truly meritocratic due to the ethnic suspicion that could “taint” her “true” merits. Intriguingly, Dolma gradually developed her strategy of getting ahead while retaining ethnic salience.

At university, I learned the concept of ethnic identity from a more theoretical perspective...I think my ethnic identity was the strongest at university. Because at that time I started to learn about my ethnic culture, and I was keen to learn about my ethnic history. I often felt proud of our ethnic culture. When others misunderstood us, I will stand out to explain and argue with them. My ethnic identity has become stronger.

Equipped with more tools, such as theoretical understanding of her ethnic identity, culture, and history, Dolma was now able to establish a more “ontologically secured” (Yi and Wang, 2012) ethnic identity, which was no longer easily swayed by

the confusing and contradictory ethnic conflicts and inequalities apparent on her university campus. Instead, she was in a more powerful/empowered position to confidently articulate her point of view in the face of ethnic misunderstanding or potential conflicts. Therefore, Dolma could be argued to have achieved a real sense of empowerment (Ashcroft, 1987; Cummins, 1986; Gore, 1993; Trueba and Zou, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

Adopting empowerment as a theoretical lens, this paper set out to unpack the conditions in which class, teachers and educational mobilities work as (dis)empowering factors/agents for school success and ethnic identity formation of Dolma, a Tibetan student from a middle-class family, and has completed seven-year dislocated secondary schooling and four-year undergraduate studies in *Neidi*, China. We suggest the complexity and lack of institutional empowerment in every-day schooling, despite isolated success of individual empowerment agents' (e.g. teachers) work. Although the implementation of preferential policies has expanded the educational opportunities of ethnic minority students, the systemic failure to acknowledge the ethnic capital of minority groups at large accounts for the struggles along this Tibetan student's educational mobilities. While parental involvement was largely missing during the dislocated secondary schooling, her middle-class background greatly facilitated the social adaptation and educational success of Dolma at university. Dolma gradually learned to get ahead while retaining her ethnic salience. This study argues that the assimilation dilemma experienced by ethnic minority



students in China might be the joint effect of a combination of structural (such as middle-class backgrounds) and individual factors, particularly access to empowering agents and possession of a strong personal will to achieve. As such, this study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the (dis)empowering role of class, teachers and educational mobilities for ethnic minority students in school success. It also calls for a more culturally reflexive policy change to achieve institutional empowerment of ethnic minority students.

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Word Count: 7,997