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## Academic Papers

# “I would love to work in tourism, but ...”: Exploring the outcomes of an ethnic tourism education initiative



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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on an ethnic tourism education initiative featuring Tibetan undergraduates in a coastal Chinese university. The employment intentions of the undergraduates and alumni were compared. The undergraduates were interested in hospitality and tourism jobs, while the alumni took stable government jobs. Using secondary data and focus groups, it was found that the Tibetan undergraduates “would love to work in tourism,” but strong barriers existed: namely personal pursuits, family and social pressures, educational factors, the nature of tourism jobs, and the benefits of working in the government. The wider implications of the study for tourism education programs were presented.

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## 1. Introduction

Tibet, located in Southwest China, is well known as the “roof of the world” and the center of Tibetan Buddhism. The growth of tourism to Tibet has been shaped by several forces including increasingly relaxed policies on visiting (Fu, 2010) and the region’s renowned world heritage sites, culture and distinctive plateau environment. The new policies and destination’s features appeal to the growing number of affluent middle class in China (Murakami, 2008), and their pursuit of ‘the other’ (Moscardo & Pearce, 1999; Smith & Brent, 2001; van den Berghe, 1994; Yang, Wall, & Smith, 2008). There has been rapid tourism growth in Tibet since 2000, and an extraordinary rise in number since the opening of the railway connecting inland China with Lhasa in 2006 (Wu & Pearce, 2012). In 2011, Tibet received 8.50 million tourists.

Unlike inland China, where tourism higher education has a history over the last three decades (Du, 2003), tourism higher education in Tibet was not developed until 2000 (Shi et al., 2006). The training options available for tourism industry employment focus on diploma education of tour guides, especially foreign language tour guides (Tibet University, 2010). This emphasis produces a structural shortage in undergraduate education and there is no postgraduate tourism education in Tibet.

It has been argued that tourism education holds the potential to enhance customer satisfaction and also improve the competitiveness of tourism businesses and regions (Fayos Sola’, 1997). The importance of education has been acknowledged by the Chinese government. It has even been asserted that the education of qualified tourism professionals should come first among all factors affecting the development of the tourism industry (Du, 2003). With the rapid development of tourism in Tibet, and limited education facilities, the process of sending local Tibetan youth to inland China, where tourism higher education began in 1980 (Zhang & Fan, 2006), is an alternative. Indeed, sending Tibetans and other ethnic

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minorities to inland China to study has been a common approach adopted by the central Chinese government as early as 1985 (CTRC, 2009). Under this scenario, a special Hospitality and Tourism program targeting at the Tibetan youth at the undergraduate level was formed in a coastal university.

This study considers this special group of undergraduates as research respondents and aims to better understand their career preferences. Expectations and preferences for a career are concerned with contextual support and barriers (Lent & Brown, 2006). As a broader aim of this study an investigation of the Tibetan undergraduates' career preferences may act as a mirror, reflecting how the economic, cultural, political and other broader issues operate on and through them.

A pivotal consideration of this kind of study in politically sensitive context lies in revealing the position and identity of the researcher in relation to these issues (Maier, 2012; Tribe, 2004). The researcher is a Han Chinese female scholar based in an Australian university. She built her positive links to Tibetan youth in general through previous joint study in common courses at a coastal Chinese University and through her four and a half months field work in Lhasa, Tibet. The work was conducted under the auspices and ethics procedures of an Australian University with no political links or affiliations to power and political bases in China. The intent of the work is to provide a rich description and overview of how Tibetan youth view tourism as a career choice. It does this without prejudging the value of tourism to the Tibetan youth or presupposing that tourism will be a good option for them or their community.

## 2. Literature review

There are a number of studies, exploring the career goals, expectations or preferences of college students. These studies reveal several continuing themes, including perceptions of future success, work-related expectations, and knowledge and skills that have or have not been gained at college (Lu & Adler, 2009; Ng & Burke, 2006).

Studies in the hospitality and tourism area (hereafter H&T) have revealed that students tend to have a negative image of the industry (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Walmsley, 2004), and a high percentage choose to work in other industries. With the development of tourism in China, emerging studies have been conducted there, exploring HTM students' career goals, expectations and choices. In Jiang and Tribe's (2009) study, the core representation of tourism jobs is as 'short-lived professionals'. They further identified five contributing factors, including personal reasons, the nature of tourism jobs, human factors, educational factors, and management factors which explained the short-lived views of working in H&T. Gu, Kavanaugh, and Cong (2007) found that students were pessimistic about tourism careers, especially when they compared the salary between H&T jobs and others. Similar views were raised in some Chinese publications (Li, 2007; Zhang & Gu, 2000; Zou, Chen, & Liao, 2002). There are, however, some different voices. For example, Lu and Adler's (2009) study in South China found that the majority of the undergraduates they studied were interested in pursuing a career in the H&T industry and expressed a desire for an advanced degree.

In the review of previous studies, several issues are worth reconsidering. It is problematic to use a sample of students to represent the general situation in China. Tourism across China develops at very different levels. Thus, H&T students in different locations embrace different degrees of opportunities and competitiveness (Zhang & Fan, 2006). Further, tourism higher education in China features a pyramid structure, with the diploma program at the bottom, undergraduate programs in the middle, postgraduate and doctoral programs at the top (Zhang & Fan, 2006). Different levels of education hold distinctive objectives, as well as varying program structures and goals. Even at the undergraduate education level, which is the interest of this article, different universities have different orientations (Du, 2003; Wang, Huyton, Gao, & Ayres, 2010). Some focus on vocational education, while others are more interested in comprehensive education. Inui, Wheeler and Lankford (2006) observed that the diploma students and vocational oriented undergraduates are more employable, and possibly, more positive towards working in H&T industry upon graduation. Taking these complex issues into consideration, it is argued that the context of the research respondents should be clearly stated, otherwise, the research results will not contribute to a nuanced understanding of tourism education and career choice issues.

## 3. Profiles of Tibetan undergraduates in a coastal university

In 2004, more than one million tourists visited Tibet. Both the central Chinese government and the local Tibetan government had a very positive view of tourism's future and its role in Tibet's development, especially when they contemplated the roles of the newly expanded airport and the then under construction Qinghai–Tibet railway. However, a tough challenge emerged. Tibet was seriously short of tourism professionals, especially tour guides and administrative personnel (Shi, et al., 2006).

Realizing the importance of endogenous forces in future development, the Tibetan local government successfully gained some support from the central government. A special program on H&T education was constructed. In 2004, Zhejiang University (ZJU), one of the first universities which offered tourism higher education in China in 1980, received a commission from the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) and the Ministry of Education (CMoE). The university was entrusted to set up a special 4-year H&T undergraduate program for Tibetan youth from year 2004–2012 (Personal interview with director of tourism department, ZJU, 2009). Both the CNTA and CMoE believed that tourism higher education would prepare the Tibetan youth to be qualified employees and executives for the H&T industry in Tibetan regions, and thus accelerate tourism development.

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