

Chapter 15

Wu Qiong (吴琼)—Educated to Serve Tibet



In the US, youths who served for four years in the military were then given four years of college tuition free. China has similar programs, though with more peaceable goals—free college tuition, as well as a living allowance, in return for moving to Tibet and working to lift the “Roof of the World” from poverty. And I was delighted to meet Wu Qiong, an alumnus of Xiamen University (XMU) who is part of this program.

A native of Xiayi County, Shangqiu, Henan Province. Wu Qiong has worked in Tibet since graduating from the Department of Finance of XMU in 2008. His first position was in the Finance Bureau of Bianba County in Qamdo Prefecture, Tibet. After working for four years, he passed the public recruitment examination and entered the Department of Finance in Lhasa where he now works in the Economic Construction Division (Fig. 15.1).

Wu explained how he was exempted from tuition and given a monthly living allowance if he agreed to serve in Tibet after graduation. “In our year, over 20 people came, but maybe only four people are left.”

“Why didn’t they stay on?” I asked.

“Life was very difficult when we first came,” he said. “We had water for only two hours each day. In the winter, we had to fetch our water from the river.”

I had to laugh. “In the late 1980s, even in Xiamen we had daily water and power outages, with water off sometimes for days, and we had hot water for only one hour each night—though often not even then. Now the entire country has reliable water and power supply!”

“We had electricity for only a short time at night,” he continued. “In homes, it was for alternate nights—one night here, one night there. There was no natural gas or coal, and we had to chop wood for cooking. And roads were bad. It took a day and half by bus, climbing nine mountains, to travel the 498 km from Qamdo to Bianba County.”

“Is it better today?” I asked.

“Yes, water and electricity are as good as anywhere, and roads are very good. The 498-km drive to the district is only six to eight hours—twice as fast as before.



Fig. 15.1 Prof. William Brown interviewing Tibet assistance official Wu Qiong in Lhasa, Tibet on July 21, 2019

But many graduates left Tibet because it was much harder than life in the rest of China. The land is vast, but a county 10 times the size of Xiamen may have only 30,000 people, and the natural conditions are bad. Many suffered badly from altitude sickness. I was able to stick it out because I was transferred to Lhasa where the living conditions are better.”

“How are the living conditions in those remote areas now?” I asked.

“Very good now!” he said. “Thanks to years of development, they now have telecom, mobile, 4G network, and the transportation, water and electricity are all good.”

“How many years have you lived in Lhasa?”

“I came here in 2012, seven years now. Lhasa has also changed greatly. It used to take two hours to drive to the airport but since the ring road and airport highway were built around 2012, it is now only one hour. And Lhasa has very good hotels and guesthouses now. It seems like Lhasa improves with each passing day.”

“How is transportation in and out of Tibet now?” I asked. “When I drove to Lhasa in 1994, roads outside of the city were very poor.”

“Tourism is booming now,” he said, “because we now have good roads and train service, and many flights in and out. It used to be very hard to buy tickets to Zhengzhou, my hometown, and there were no direct flights, so we had to fly via Chengdu. Now I can get home in less than one day. We can also take a train to Qinghai

Province, and trains will soon connect to Chengdu and also Nyingchi, near Yunnan Province. And with fast Internet I can talk to family anytime with WeChat video.”

“Ordinary people’s lives have improved?” I asked.

“Yes, especially after China started the precision poverty alleviation program. Tibet had 74 impoverished counties, but they are much better, now that the government has a ‘stationed-in-villages-to-help’ policy. In addition to good policies, we have policy alleviation industries to help people shake off poverty and prosper. We give subsidies and support for people to develop aquaculture, raise cattle and sheep, and produce Tibetan handicrafts such as blankets. We also have a rural e-commerce project, so that ordinary people can easily sell their products online through Taobao—and buy things as well.”

Rural Tibetans, like Chinese I met in Ningxia, Gansu, Guizhou and other remote areas, have the world at their fingertips thanks to hi-speed Internet, and programs such as “Buy from the world, sell to the world.”

“It took 15 days to receive a package from outside of Tibet when I first came here,” Wu Qiong said. “But today, it only takes about seven days. And a package to Lhasa takes only two to three days [about the same as the rest of China] with express logistics such as SF Express, Zhongtong or Yunda.”

E-commerce has even improved people’s diet. “Tibet is so vast that in grasslands of northern Tibet, you can drive a whole day without seeing one person. Villages are so far apart that people could not buy fresh fruits and vegetables, but thanks to better roads, we now cooperate with an e-commerce company on a pilot program to regularly deliver fresh produce to even remote areas.”

“Education used to be a problem,” I said. “Has that improved as well?”

“Yes, big changes,” Wu said. “The ‘Three Guarantees’ assure all rural children of free elementary, junior high and high school education. We even guarantee free food, clothes and lodging. When I first came, many rural children didn’t speak Chinese and had to show the numbers on a calculator to buy things. Now, many have no problem speaking Chinese.”

“It must be easier now for Tibetan youths to enter university? I was surprised at how many ways the government works to help minorities enter college. Our School of Management has more than 50 minority students from all over China, where I met XMU’s first Tibetan student, who is now a professor at Tibet University.”

“Yes, we give free tuition and preferential enrolment to Tibetan children, especially those from rural areas.”

“So much has changed since I drove to Tibet in 1994,” I said. “Even since you moved here. What do you see for Tibet’s future?”

“It will only keep getting better and better,” he said. “The Sichuan-Tibet Railway is under construction, and until only recently there were no roads from Lhasa to different counties and townships, but now it is easy to travel in Tibet. Some regional governments and enterprises engaged in aid-Tibet projects are helping me build factories to improve local Tibetans’ incomes and lives, and the central government is investing big in Tibet’s environmental protection. So Tibet is improving in many ways.”

“But regardless of improvements, the reality is that life is hard at such an altitude, why do you stay on?”

Wu laughed. “I also wanted to leave when I first came! The conditions here were so bad, and my 90-year-old grandfather had no one to care for him. Our son was less than one year old, so he stayed home in Zhengzhou with family. I really wanted to go home, but after working here for a long time, I gradually adapted to life in Tibet. And I feel that we should do something valuable and meaningful in life. So I chose to stay. Life of course would be easier back home, but I will stay here until retirement. Quite often, Chinese will work in Tibet for decades but they will return to their hometowns after retirement—many of them to Chengdu. We dedicated our youths to Tibet, but when we get older and our health is not so good, then we will go home.”

“You don’t think you’ll stay here after retirement?” I asked him.

Wu Qiong shook his head. “Tibet is still not suitable for long-term living because of the altitude and lack of oxygen. Not only will the heart suffer but there are other problems such as what we call plateau depression, as well as memory loss. Even now, I sometimes want to say something but then don’t remember what I was about to say.”

“I can see why you would want to return home. I would guess your hometown is well off now because I have seen for myself that all of China has improved, but what was it like during your childhood?”

“My family had three children, and when I was born in 1983 the conditions were still very poor, with no electricity supply at night. But now the countryside has transformed. We have beautiful homes, and every village has roads and buses to the county seat. Local education has also improved, even with kindergartens. My younger brother and sister both went to college, and my family now lives in the county seat. My mom has medical insurance now. We have community hospitals where it costs her very little to see a doctor and she is reimbursed 70 percent of her total medical expense. In the past, we were afraid of spending money on medical care, so if we were sick, we just endured it. Today, my home is called the ‘hometown of longevity,’ and the elderly live longer than before.”

I admire Wu Qiong and his wife for committing to serve in Tibet until retirement. Contrary to popular misconceptions, even Tibetans and Peruvians suffer from the high altitude, and have shorter life spans than those in other parts of China. The human body is simply not suited for long-term oxygen deprivation. I’ve talked with many Chinese working in Tibet, and have heard so many stories of Chinese who persisted until, without warning, they dropped dead on their doorsteps. It’s a difficult life—and yet Wu and his wife, and many others like them stick it out because, as he said, “I want to do something meaningful with my life.”

It is people like Wu Qiong, coupled with good leadership and wise and compassionate policies, that have allowed China to actually achieve what no other large nations have ever attempted—to eliminate absolute poverty.

I’m proud that our XMU has alumni like Wu. I can’t move to Tibet myself, but I hope to learn from his example to find other ways to help the peoples of not only Tibet but other remote areas in China. Thank you, Wu Qiong.

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