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## EDUCATION FROM THE PERIPHERY: INTERSECTIONALITY AND RURAL UYGHUR STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

Rebecca Clothey, Arafat Otkur, Jeaná Morrison

Corresponding author: Rebecca.a.Clothey@drexel.edu

### Abstract

This paper examines how rural origin combines with ethnicity as a factor in higher education access among one ethnic group, the Uyghur, a Muslim minority who mostly reside in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. As one of China's 55 officially recognized minority groups, many of whom reside in rural areas, Uyghurs make an interesting case study for equality of higher education access. The paper is based on a review of relevant policies, ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with Uyghur university students, graduates, and the faculty who teach them. The paper uses 'intersectionality' to illustrate that the circumstances of ethnic minorities from some rural areas are unique and distinct from those of ethnic minorities from urban areas, and thus ethnicity and rural origin should not be considered in isolation in policy-making or research endeavors.

**Keywords:** Uyghur; Xinjiang; China; higher education; preferential policies; intersectionality

### Introduction

Despite an increasingly diverse tertiary student body, tertiary participation still tends to be below the national average globally for populations living in remote or rural areas and for indigenous groups (Altbach et al., 2009). Countries worldwide have attempted to address the inaccessibility of higher education for underrepresented groups through various policy measures, and China has been described as offering the world's most expansive preferential policies for ethnic minorities (Sautman, 1999). China has 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, including some 113 million ethnic minority people who speak up to a hundred different mother tongues. Preferential policies have been promoted there as a means of reducing gaps in education and living standards between various minority groups and the majority Han, and to help ease ethnic tensions (Clothey, 2005; Teng and Ma, 2009; Wang, 2009). However, despite these efforts, higher education access and attainment varies across regions (Bickenbach and Liu, 2013), and China's ethnic minority population, particularly those from rural areas, tend to be underrepresented overall in higher education (Liu, J., 2012; Wang, 2011; Yang, 2010). Although the literature on the experience of ethnic minority groups in higher education is increasing (c.f., Clothey, 2005; Grose, 2015; Postiglione, 1999; Zhao, 2010) as are studies on the

experience of rural students entering higher education in China (c.f., Liu, J., 2012; Sheng, 2014; Wang, 2011; Yang, 2010), studies that consider the combined experiences facing ethnic minorities entering higher education from rural areas remain scant. Thus, there is a continued need for further research as to how the preferential policies benefit particular ethnic groups from particular areas.

This paper will examine the ways in which rural origin combines with ethnicity as a factor in higher education access among one ethnic group, Uyghurs, who are one of China's 55 officially recognized minority groups. Most Uyghurs reside in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and most are Muslim. Although Uyghurs comprise a majority within Xinjiang, they are recognized as an ethno-linguistic minority group within the larger population of China, where Han Chinese are the majority.

In addition, although Xinjiang is an ethnically diverse region within China, its population also tends to be ethnically segregated, and there is economic disparity across regions. Uyghurs in Xinjiang are more likely to come from rural areas, and are more likely to be poor, than are Han (Chaudhuri, 2010). Compared with other ethnic groups in Xinjiang there is also a relatively high rate of unemployment among Uyghurs in the formal economy, even among those who are college educated (Grose, 2009; Ma, 2009b).

This case study on Uyghurs entering higher education from rural areas in China seeks to address the existing gap in the literature on the combined experiences of ethnicity, socio-economic background and geographic origin. Based on a review of relevant preferential policies as well as ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted with Uyghur university students, graduates, and faculty who taught them during the period of 2010-2014, this paper will address the question: In what ways does rural origin intersect with ethnicity in higher education access for Uyghur students in China?

The paper considers this question through the lens of intersectionality, which examines how multiple facets of an individual's identity may affect their lived experience and in this case, the impact of a given policy. The paper illustrates that the circumstances of ethnic minorities from some rural areas are unique and distinct from those of ethnic minorities from urban areas, and thus ethnicity and rural origin should not be considered in isolation in policy-making or research endeavors.

### **Background: Education, Ethnic Minorities, and Rural Settings in China**

Despite progress in educational development since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, educational inequity is a continuing challenge in China, and poverty remains a barrier in some areas. For example, due to limited funding, rural areas of China are more likely to have worse infrastructure, substandard schools, and a lack of quality teachers than urban areas. Parents in rural communities also identify the cost of school as an obstacle (Hannum and Adams, 2008).

Within Xinjiang, provenance also relates to educational opportunities. Despite government investment in the economic growth of Xinjiang, there is disparity across regions, and the population tends to be ethnically segregated. Approximately 90 per cent of the rural population and 86 per cent of the rural labor force live in southern Xinjiang, where 73% of Uyghurs in Xinjiang also reside (Chaudhuri, 2010). In fact, the GDP is higher in most districts in

Xinjiang in which the Han population is larger than the Uyghur population (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook, 2010). Therefore, Uyghurs in Xinjiang are more likely to be poor, and more likely to come from rural areas, than are Han Chinese.

Different cultural practices or native languages of ethnic minority groups also present challenges to providing education for ethnic minorities (e.g., Clothey and McKinlay, 2012; Leibold and Chen, 2014; Postiglione, 1999). For example, in culturally diverse Xinjiang, Uyghur and Mandarin<sup>1</sup> languages are from two different language families and are not mutually intelligible. As the national language, most schools throughout China use Mandarin as their primary medium of instruction. However, Xinjiang offers bilingual education programs in some areas. In general, these aim to teach Mandarin to linguistic minority students, while also offering some mother tongue language instruction<sup>2</sup> (Liang and Zhang, 2007; Liu, 2012; Tsung, 2014).

Yet due to the ethnic distribution in Xinjiang, bilingual education programs are more difficult to implement successfully in the south, where there are more Uyghurs than Han. Even if native Mandarin speaking teachers can be employed to work in schools in rural Uyghur areas, Uyghurs in these areas have fewer opportunities to use the language outside of school because fewer native Mandarin speakers live there (Ma, 2009b). Tsung (2014) also points out a disparity in resource allocation between bilingual schools in urban and rural areas in Xinjiang, which also impacts the quality of education to which one has access.

The ‘Xinjiang class’ in inland boarding schools (*neidi Xinjiang gaozhong ban*) is another option for Uyghur students. This is a national boarding school program set up to educate senior secondary ethnic minority students from Xinjiang in cities of inner China. After completing their studies, graduates are expected to return to their region and fill positions of high need. Students may be admitted into the inland boarding school program based upon their performance on a standardized test administered by the Xinjiang Department of Education. The coursework is conducted entirely in Mandarin, which students enrol in after completing one year of preparatory coursework in the boarding school (Grose, 2015).

As this brief discussion reveals, ethnicity, rural origin, and poverty are all complex factors that relate to educational attainment in various ways in China. To date, a growing body of research on schooling of ethnic minorities in China has emerged (c.f., Chen, 2008; Leibold and Chen, 2014; Ma, 2009a; Postiglione, 1999), and the research on education of rural students in China is also growing (e.g., Hannum and Adams, 2008; Yiu and Adams, 2013; Yu and Hannum, 2006). However, studies that explicitly consider how ethnicity, rural residency and poverty intertwine to impact the educational experience of minority students in China are still minimal (Hannum and Wang, 2011). Similarly, studies that consider how the experience of rural minority students may differ from those from urban settings are also limited.

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<sup>1</sup> Mandarin is also referred to as ‘Chinese’, Mandarin Chinese, and *Putonghua* (or, the ‘common’ language). It is the native language of most Han people. See Moser (2016) for the history and politics of China’s ‘common’ language.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the various types of bilingual education programs in Xinjiang, please see Tsung, 2014.

## Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality as a theoretical lens points out that efforts to isolate the influence of any one social identity (e.g., rural origin, or ethnic identity, or gender) fails to capture how membership in multiple identity groups (e.g., Uyghur girls from rural areas) can affect how people are perceived, are treated, and experience their environment (Museus and Griffin, 2011). Yet people can be defined simultaneously based on their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and other aspects of their identities (Museus and Griffin, 2011).

Intersectionality developed as a theoretical lens in response to the fact that research and policy making that focuses on a singular social identity (e.g., “women”) tends to ignore differences of people within the group (e.g., “women of color”), and therefore also fails to understand the various ways in which multiple social identities shape the lives of individuals (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Intersectionality strives to understand the unique ways in which numerous intersecting social identities simultaneously shape one’s experiences, making distinctions in how individuals experience their environments as a result of their unique position at these intersections (Museus and Griffin, 2011).

This paper draws from the theoretical lens of intersectionality to explore and acknowledge how ethnicity and rural origin might overlap to shape and impact one’s experience simultaneously but differently. Intersectionality does not propose that multiple marginalized identities equates to more discrimination or more disadvantage; rather, intersectionality suggests that the confluence of one’s multiple marginalized or privileged identities is an interaction that creates a unique experience, distinctive from those with whom they may share some identities but not others (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013; Museus and Griffin, 2011). Museus and Griffin (2011) particularly emphasize the importance of considering intersectional analysis in higher education research as a way to gain a better understanding of equity issues as they relate to particular groups. As they describe, when researchers focus only on one category of identity, it can perpetuate stereotypes that may further contribute to inequalities.

Leibold and Chen (2014) note that in China, one’s ethnic category can predetermine a range of educational opportunities, including the type of school one attends and chances in the job market after graduation. However, in a country as diverse as China, intersectionality is a useful lens through which to interpret the varied experiences of members within a particular ethnic group, while preventing generalizations about all ethnic minorities, or all people of one ethnic group, based on the situation of one set of people from a particular ethnic group. Thus in this paper, we explore the experiences of Uyghurs of rural origin in higher education to elicit their experience as unique from other Uyghurs who are of urban origin. We focus on the experience of one ethnic group, Uyghurs, specifically so that nuances among members of this particular group can be understood. Exploring the experience of Uyghurs in comparison with other minority ethnic groups is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Higher Education

### *Ethnic minority students in higher education in China*

In addition to the many educational challenges described above, there are also enrolment disparities between ethnic minority students and the Han majority at the tertiary level,

especially at upper tier universities. According to China's 2000 Census data, approximately 12% of Uyghurs have completed tertiary education, as compared with about 20% of Chinese citizens overall. About one-fourth of the ethnic minority students admitted into universities throughout China are accepted into one of China's thirteen colleges or universities specifically dedicated to the education of ethnic minorities, or into a preparatory program (yùkē 预科). Only one of these thirteen minority-serving institutions is considered as among the top ranking universities in China, and even that assessment is qualified with the statement that a "great distance exists between [it] and top research universities" (Rhoads and Chang, 2014, 63).

The proportion of ethnic minority students from Xinjiang in China's most prestigious universities is small. Tsinghua University in Beijing accepted only 8 ethnic minority students from Xinjiang in 2016; all of them were from Xinjiang classes in inland boarding schools and may be of any minority ethnicity. Indeed, the exact number of Uyghurs enrolled is not available. In comparison, there were 34 Han students accepted into Tsinghua University from Xinjiang in the same year (*Xinjiang Zhaosheng Wang*, 2016). Similarly, the percentage of ethnic minority students enrolled at Beijing University, also a top-tier university, is below the national percentage of the ethnic minority population (Zhu, 2010). In 2016 Beijing University accepted 31 ethnic minority students from Xinjiang; 11 of these had studied in Mandarin curriculum schools (i.e., *min kao han*), and 20 were from Xinjiang classes in inland boarding schools. There were no students accepted from bilingual education programs. Again, the accepted students included any minority ethnicity from Xinjiang; they were not necessarily Uyghur. In contrast, 34 Han students were accepted into Beijing University from Xinjiang in 2016 (*Xinjiang Zhaosheng Wang*, 2016). Even in Xinjiang, ethnic minorities comprise only 39 percent of the enrolled higher education student population, although they are almost 60 percent of the total population of that region (Zhu, 2010).

### **Higher Education and Rural Students**

Students from rural areas also face particular challenges that may impede their enrolment in higher education. According to Wang (2011), China's college entrance exam has an urban bias. For example, the exam prioritizes Mandarin language and English skills, but due to poor infrastructure, in rural areas these language classes are more likely to be behind the urban standard, creating a bias against rural residents. This bias is also reflected in the types of majors Chinese citizens select. As China has transitioned to a market economy, so called "hot" college majors (CH: "*re men*") are those which are more likely to result "in better jobs, higher social status, and be subject to higher tuition fees" (Wang, 2011, 236). Urban students are more likely to enroll in "hot" majors such as economics, law and management, whereas "cold" majors (CH: "*leng men*") with low or no tuition, such as agricultural science and education are more likely to enroll rural students. Rural students and their parents may also lack the social capital to understand the implication of their choice of major on their employment prospects (Wang, 2011). Moreover, China's key and elite universities have a higher proportion of urban students from social classes with more cultural, social, and economic capital (Wang, 2011; Liu, J., 2012). Liu (2015) also describes geographical stratification in higher education in China according to province, with candidates from western provinces such as Xinjiang having a lower chance of entry into elite universities. However, his research does not explore stratification by different parts of different provinces, or different ethnicities from the same region.

There also remains a gap in the literature that addresses what proportion of rural student

enrolments are also ethnic minorities, though Ao (2007) reports that sometimes in China regional issues are more of a barrier to education than ethnic issues are. Indeed, one study on an ethnic minority serving institution in Beijing found that after becoming officially recognized as a higher status university in recent years, fewer minority students with agricultural and nomadic backgrounds are able to meet the admissions criteria, and the number of urban students from educated families has increased (Clothey and Hu, 2015).

### ***Preferential Policies and Programs***

In order to address existing inequalities and encourage ethnic minority students to attend college, a number of preferential policies have been implemented in China since the 1950s. Wang (2009) proposes that China's college entrance exam (*gao kao* 高考), which all students hoping to attend college in China must pass, is intended to screen the best talent for universities in China, and also distribute limited educational resources fairly.

However, China's tertiary education system uses Mandarin as a language of instruction. Linguistic minority students who do not speak Mandarin natively may find the entrance exam and the college curriculum particularly challenging, as it requires being academically fluent in a second language. In some cases, therefore, minority students have been able to take the *gao kao* in one of six other ethnic minority languages, including Uyghur (Clothey, 2005). Nonetheless, upon successful completion of the college entrance exam, Mandarin skills are still necessary to handle the university curriculum.

Thus, another way that language and structural barriers have been addressed is through preparatory programs (*yùkē* 预科) offered at some universities. Such preparatory programs are required for ethnic minority students who are deemed not academically prepared for college after completing high school (Clothey and Hu, 2015). *Yuke* is a one to two year program of study that lays a foundation for a four-year college education (Teng and Ma, 2009). The curriculum includes Mandarin classes and may also offer English and other academic subjects. After completion of *yuke*, students matriculate into their four-year college major. Thus, *yuke* necessitates at least one extra year of college, the tuition of which is usually covered by the student.

Because of these factors among others, there may be enrolment policies that differentiate for different students at different universities depending upon their ethnicity, origin, and educational background. As an example, for the entering freshman class at Xinjiang Normal University in 2014, there were several majors available for a particular number of entering minority students, with particular backgrounds, and from particular areas. There were five majors available tuition free *only* for a particular number of students who graduated from minority language schools (i.e., *min kao min*) in particular areas of Xinjiang (e.g., Kashgar, Hotan, Aksu, etc). There were seven majors available tuition free *only* for a particular number of minority students who graduated from bilingual education programs in particular areas of Xinjiang. There were also two majors available tuition free for a particular number of minority students who graduated from Chinese language schools (i.e., *min kao han*) in particular areas of Xinjiang.

Other universities across China also have free tuition majors for students from Xinjiang. These are also allocated according to the student's educational background, and they are open to all



ethnic minority groups from Xinjiang. These National Free-tuition Normal Student programs (*mianfei shifan sheng*) require students to serve at least 5 years in bilingual schools after they graduate, in jobs provided by the Education Bureau of Xinjiang. The full chart of free tuition majors at Xinjiang Normal University for minority students from Xinjiang, and of tuition-free programs in other provinces for students from Xinjiang is available in the appendix.

## Research Methods

It is within this complex institutional and structural context that we sought to understand the ways in which rural origin and ethnicity intersect, through the perceived challenges and opportunities that Uyghur students from rural areas might face in enrolling in universities within China.

This is a case study based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the fall of 2013 within Xinjiang, where one of the authors was a visiting scholar for five months, as well as interviews conducted in Xinjiang and eastern China during multiple visits between the years of 2010-2013. In-depth semi-structured or open-ended interviews were conducted with Uyghur undergraduate students who had attended or were attending a university outside of their hometown, as well as faculty who teach minority students at one of two universities. As rural origin was one of the boundaries for this case study, only college students who identified themselves as being a Uyghur from a rural area were included for interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or Chinese, as per the participants' preference, or in Uyghur with an interpreter when necessary. Students attended universities in one of two cities; in Beijing, eastern China, and in Urumqi, Xinjiang, western China. Students in Beijing were recruited using a snowball sample, as described by Creswell (2009), where the interviewees multiplied through initial acquaintances. Specifically, a Uyghur university student introduced her classmates and friends to one of the authors during multiple trips to China during the 2011-12 academic year. Additionally, during the fall of 2013 when one of the authors was a visiting scholar at a university in Xinjiang, multiple in-depth conversations were held with students there. In total 26 Uyghur college students and 17 faculty (12 Uyghur, 2 Han and 3 of other ethnicities<sup>3</sup>) were participants in this study.

**Table 1. Demographic Table of College Student Participants**

Number of College Student Participants	Age range	University Location	Location of pre-college education (K-12)	Provenance
26 total	19-21	14 in Beijing 12 in Xinjiang	22 in Xinjiang (bilingual education or <i>min kao min</i> ) 4 in inland boarding schools 0 <i>min kao han</i>	6 from rural areas of northern Xinjiang (Altai or Ghuljia Districts) 20 from rural areas of southern Xinjiang (Aksu, Kashgar or Hotan Districts)

<sup>3</sup> The ethnic groups of the faculty interviewees are intentionally not revealed to avoid identification.

Interview questions with students and graduates were designed to elicit their personal backgrounds and any challenges they faced in enrolling in and adapting to college. Interviews with faculty were designed to gain an understanding of their experiences with teaching Uyghur students from various parts of Xinjiang.

### ***Data analysis***

To analyse the data, we reviewed the transcribed data and notes in order to generate a potential set of themes using open coding strategies, guided by our research questions, theoretical framework, and insights from the literature (Bernard and Ryan, 2009). We then developed sub-codes, which culminated in conceptual categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Three broad themes emerged through this process that participants identified experiencing in college enrolment and adaptation. These themes were coded as issues related to “ethnicity,” issues related to “location,” and issues related to “both.” In some cases, issues were raised that were related to “neither” ethnicity nor location. The sub-themes that emerged through focused coding were language issues, distance, culture shock, and decision-making. These are described in more detail below.

## **Barriers to Access**

### ***Language issues***

Language was frequently described as a major challenge among Uyghur students in attending and adjusting to college life, however, only among particular populations of Uyghurs. This was most evident in Beijing, where the lingua franca is Mandarin and there are fewer native speakers of Uyghur. Even in Xinjiang, however, where the college curriculum has been offered in Mandarin since 2004, some students described their Mandarin language ability as inadequate for a college curriculum when they began college.

For Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the language environment and prior Mandarin language learning experience is related to the provenance of the student. As noted, due to the infrastructure in rural parts of southern Xinjiang, schools there are less likely to have the resources available to provide high quality Mandarin language instruction and there are fewer native Mandarin speakers with whom to use the language (Ma, 2009a; Tsung, 2014). Indeed, yuke classes we observed in which Uyghur students learn Mandarin were comprised primarily of students from rural parts of southern Xinjiang—demonstrating the needs of students from those areas due to the local infrastructure. Language is thus more relevant as an issue for students who attend yuke, and thus likely more relevant for Uyghur students from rural areas. Uyghur students from urban areas are more likely to be exposed to Mandarin and have facility in it prior to enrolling in university.

Students from rural areas also frequently mentioned that their Mandarin language teachers prior to college had been Uyghur, with poor Mandarin facility. Indeed, one Uyghur student in Beijing expressed surprise at learning how important tones were when speaking Mandarin, because in her language learning experience in Xinjiang tones had not been emphasized. As a result she was not confident in her ability to be understood. Another student explained that neither of his parents spoke Mandarin, and because there were no Han people in his hometown (in a village outside of Hotan, in southern Xinjiang) there had never been any need



to learn the language, and no one to speak Mandarin with.

Yuke is only required for matriculation into certain college majors. Thus, subjects that do not require yuke for matriculation may not be open to students who did not have the opportunity to learn Mandarin at an early age due to their place of origin or their family circumstances. In this way, rural origin is relevant to Uyghur students' later opportunities for universities and choice of majors.

### **Distance**

The most obvious potential challenge for obtaining higher education for Uyghur students is the location of China's universities. As described by Yang (2010), 1,078 of China's tertiary institutions are located in North Central Plain and South Central China, while only 475 are located in other regions. Xinjiang has a population of 21 million people and has 32 higher education institutions overall. In comparison, Beijing's population is 20 million people, and it has 82 higher education institutions. Furthermore, there is only one university listed in China's top 100 in Xinjiang, as opposed to Beijing, which has 18 tertiary institutions in the top 100 in China and two in the top 100 on world rankings lists (MoE, 2011).

Since the 1990s, China has invested large financial resources to develop the quality of a select number of universities, with the aim of developing a core of first and world-class universities through Projects 211 and 985 (Rhoads and Chang, 2014; Yang and Welch, 2012). Yet the majority of these institutions are situated in the eastern and coastal areas and in large urban centers, such as Beijing and Shanghai (CEC, 2014; Liu, 2015). No universities in Xinjiang were designated for Project 985 funding at all, and only one, Xinjiang University, was selected for Project 211. However, Yang and Welch (2012) state that this designation was more a recognition of Xinjiang University's strategic significance in maintaining solidarity between ethnic groups than its academic achievements. Moreover, although Xinjiang University qualified for additional government funding as part of Project 211 and is thus presumably Xinjiang's best tertiary institution, the institution's resources are still significantly less than those found in more prosperous areas of China (Welch and Yang, 2011).

Additionally, most of the colleges and universities in Xinjiang are in Urumqi, the provincial capital. This means that even for the majority of Uyghur students who wish to remain in Xinjiang for college, they will have to travel to another city. To get to Urumqi from the southernmost parts of Xinjiang is not easy. Kashgar and Urumqi are 1,588 km apart. The fast train between the two cities takes around 25 hours from one city to the other. Hotan, which is even further south, is 2,073 km away from Urumqi, and the train, which goes first through Kashgar, takes about 34-37 hours ("New Railway," 2011). Students from rural areas also have to get to the nearest city in order to travel an even further distance. The portion of the train linking Kashgar and Hotan has been running only since June 2011. As interviews with students started prior to that time, many of the students in our data set from the Hotan area may not have had the possibility even of a train ride for part of their distance. The distance between Beijing and Urumqi is 3,216 kilometers, or 1 day and 16 hours by train ("Urumqi Train Schedule," 2013). Therefore, getting to one of the most prestigious universities located in Beijing from southern Xinjiang requires another long train ride, or a much shorter but more expensive alternative, a five-hour flight from the nearest city. Of all of the students interviewed in Beijing, only one mentioned having flown there for enrolment.

Although physical distance of the university is clearly a potential obstacle, only one interviewee in Beijing specifically mentioned someone who had not attended a Beijing university because it was too far away from her family's home in Xinjiang. In this case, it was explained that the student's father had wanted his daughter to be closer to home. Those students attending university in Beijing had already chosen to and found ways to overcome this obstacle. On the other hand, a common theme among students who attended university in Xinjiang was that they had not wanted to leave Xinjiang for college because they thought they would feel less comfortable farther away. This is consistent with findings by Gibbs (1995) who notes that rural students are less likely to attend universities far from home. Reay et al. (2001) also found in the UK that ethnic minority students select universities closer to home because of a concern that they will not fit in elsewhere.

### **Culture shock**

Even so, distance was discussed as an issue mostly in terms of the potential for culture shock, not because of any physical or financial inability to get far away. Teachers that were interviewed also identified culture shock as a factor impacting minority students' adjustment to higher education, because where students had come from was often so different from where the university was situated. This was particularly true for universities outside of Xinjiang, though within Xinjiang there was also some relevance. One faculty member stated that in some cases, the cultural difference between the college's location and the student's hometown was greater than the difference between the culture of two different countries (Interview 12/27/2011).

One Uyghur student who had never been outside his home village prior to going away to college described his experience adjusting to his university in Beijing:

*On my first day at [this university] I cried. I couldn't understand the language or communicate with anyone. I didn't know my way around, and I didn't know anyone. I wasn't used to this big city... In [home town] I can walk by anyone, even if it is someone I don't know, and greet them. But in [this city], no one greets anyone. Everyone is like a stranger. (Interview 12/16/2010)*

Another Uyghur student in Beijing described her shock at discovering that not all Uyghurs can speak Uyghur. As she described her first day at a university in Beijing:

*When I got to the campus I didn't know how to find my dorm, so I asked one of the Uyghur teachers I saw there. ... I asked him in Uyghur how to find my dorm. The teacher responded to me in Mandarin [Ch: Putonghua]. I asked him, don't you speak Uyghur? He said he understands Uyghur but he can't speak it. This was the first time I ever had the experience of speaking Mandarin with a Uyghur person. (Interview 12/15/2010)*

Some of the potential for culture shock among Uyghur students attending college in Urumqi from other parts of Xinjiang is abated by the fact that 12.8% of the city's 2.4 million population are Uyghur (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook, 2010). In addition, because Xinjiang is a predominantly Muslim region, universities in Xinjiang observe many of the Muslim holidays and traditions, and may close for them as well as for the usual Chinese holidays celebrated across China.

Despite this, our interviewees also expressed having experienced some culture shock when moving to Urumqi. One Uyghur student attending university in Urumqi from a village in Kashgar district observed that where he came from everyone opened their doors to neighbors during Korban (Qurban), a Muslim holiday during which each family traditionally sacrifices a sheep. It is usually customary to visit the houses of other friends and families in the days following the sacrifice to feast together on mutton dishes. However, this student found that in Urumqi, even other Uyghurs were not as hospitable during Korban (Qurban) as they are in his home village. In his words, “here, people do not care as much about others,” a fact he attributed to busy city life. Another student from a village in the Hotan area similarly expressed dismay at the lack of traditional attitudes in Urumqi. She was particularly surprised at having seen some Uyghur girls in Urumqi wearing a more “open” [CH: *kaifang* 开放] form of dress than what she claimed most women wore in her home, where people were more conservative Muslims. It is likely that Uyghurs from rural areas are more religious than those from urban areas, and this may also impact the way they integrate in cities (Zang, 2015), where religious beliefs may be more moderate.

Students who had moved to Urumqi from rural areas also described being overwhelmed with the city’s size. For example, one student described being too anxious to leave campus for the first several months, and being afraid to go shopping by herself for fear of getting lost. Moreover, as discussed above relative to distance, college students in Xinjiang often indicated choosing to stay in Xinjiang for college because of a belief that they would be more comfortable there.

### ***Decision-making***

Reay et al. (2001) discuss how the combination of individual, familial, and institutional factors produces very different opportunity structures within higher education. As they show, class and ethnicity are interwoven in the choice process of individuals selecting higher education institutions, because such choices are made within the confines of different circumstances. This is reflected among some Uyghur college students as well.

Even before the recent policy change that now permits two children for all couples across China, Uyghurs in Xinjiang were generally not as restricted by China’s One Child Policy as Han people were. Urban Uyghurs were usually permitted to have two children. Uyghur families in rural areas sometimes had more (Ma, 2009b). In fact, all of the students interviewed who were majoring in Uyghur language and literature at Minzu University in Beijing were from large families (with five or more siblings), and all of them were the only person in their family to ever have attended college. One likely reason is that the tuition for Uyghur language and literatures at Minzu University in Beijing is free. A description of the particular circumstances of one student majoring in Uyghur language illustrates this decision-making in college major selection.

One student from the countryside outside of Hotan, in southern Xinjiang, had lost his mother suddenly while he was in high school, and his father died shortly after he started college. Neither of his parents had attended college themselves. He was one of seven children, and he selected his major, Uyghur language and literature, specifically because this major is tuition-free at his university. As he described, sending all of the children in the family to college would be a financial burden, but majoring in Uyghur language and literature (being tuition-free) was an affordable option that might also enable some of his other siblings to also attend college.

Despite a possible lack of choices based on family finances, students majoring in Uyghur language and literature also often expressed optimism about their future job prospects. In the words of one: “with a college education, it should be very easy to find a job anywhere” (Interview 12/12/2010). Other students also expressed the sentiment that having a college degree is important, but the major is not. For example, a Uyghur student in Xinjiang claimed to have majored in education only because it was free, but openly expressed a lack of interest in the topic. In contrast, the graduates interviewed from among Uyghur language and literature majors indicated that jobs in their field were scarce. One graduate claimed that after a year more than half of the students from his major (Uyghur) were still unemployed. This may suggest that these students have little realistic knowledge about the job market, and probably selected their majors for reasons other than a consideration for future job prospects. This also supports the literature that suggests rural students may lack information about higher education opportunities, and therefore may not make informed university choices relating to post-graduation employment options (Sheng, 2014; Smith et al., 1995). They may instead make choices about college and majors based on other practical factors, such as finances.

In Xinjiang, students of rural origins make college choices about majors based on free tuition options, which as shown may vary according to one’s ethnicity, educational background, and provenance. A Uyghur student from a rural area in the southern district of Kashgar who might otherwise be unable to afford higher education may yet have access through one of the free majors. However, which major she may select is still dependent upon where she came from and what her educational background is.

To illustrate, at a university in Urumqi, one class of English language education majors (a major which was offered free of charge in one year to those who qualified, but did not require *yuke* for enrolment) had only five (out of 30) Uyghur students. The three who were from southern Xinjiang had all attended inland boarding schools (*neidi Xinjiang gaozhong ban*) during high school, and had learned Mandarin there, since their own parents were not able to speak Mandarin and they had not learned it at their local schools. Thus, their origin mattered, but their educational background had also opened other choices to them. As one of these students put it: “going to boarding school changed my entire future” (Interview 11/17/2014), because he would not have had access to the English language education major had he not gone to boarding school.

This observation is confirmed by Chen (2014), who describes what he terms an educated “Uyghur elite” comprised of students who left Xinjiang in high school to attend inland boarding schools. Chen’s research showed that unlike Uyghur students who may have attended schools in their local areas, a majority of these boarding school graduates are able to gain admission to China’s most prestigious universities, and many of them also major in technical and professional subjects. Indeed, because these students will have a firm grasp of Mandarin, their options for majors may also be wider than other Uyghurs who did not have such an opportunity. However, such an option still requires passing a standardized exam for entrance, and traveling far away from home for a long period of time.

## Discussion

In almost all of the examples discussed about the particular challenges these Uyghur students encountered when entering college, ethnicity was clearly a factor in eastern China in enrolling

in and adjusting to college. Encountering people of different ethnicities for the first time, being required to utilize a less familiar language, and adjusting to a different type of environment are all related to being from a different ethnic background than the dominant majority. This situation may be relevant to someone from any of China's many ethnic minority groups. However, Uyghur students from rural areas also described experiencing culture shock even within Xinjiang, when moving from a rural to an urban area. This suggests that ethnicity and provenance are both relevant in adjusting to a college environment. Furthermore, although rural Han students might also experience culture shock when moving to a big city like Beijing, they would not likely have the additional shock of having to speak a language so different from their home environment, as Uyghurs and other ethno-linguistic minority students do. Additionally, Uyghurs from more rural areas may also be more religious, which may also impact their adjustment to larger cities. At the same time, Uyghurs who grew up in an urban environment with quality bilingual education programs and a multi-ethnic population might be less challenged with Mandarin than rural Uyghurs are, if moving to another city of China.

Moreover, these cases are also spatially and economically dependent. This is particularly evident in the way students make decisions about college, which is often precisely because of factors related to their birth locale. Examples include selecting free majors whether or not they are relevant to future goals, or whether or not students understand the connection between their major and their future employment prospects. Further, students may select colleges closer to home because of their ethnicity, but may still feel some cultural adjustment if coming to college from a more rural location. This is consistent with the literature examining college access for rural students, for ethnic minorities, for students of lower socio-economic status, or a combination of these (Reay et al., 2001; Sheng, 2014).

The intersection of ethnicity and rural origin is also relevant to the pathways open to higher education, considering the location of most universities. Students from Xinjiang wishing to attend one of China's most prestigious universities must travel far away from their home. Those who choose not to travel far away will have more limited choices for attending high-quality and highly ranked institutions, and those from urban centers have more close-to-home options within Xinjiang, whether or not they are Uyghur. Further research is needed to ascertain why some rural Uyghur students choose to attend college in Beijing despite the obvious issue of distance, the cost of travel, and the potential for culture shock.

Students with the most difficulty due to language were from rural areas in southern Xinjiang, where there are fewer native Mandarin language teachers and native speakers with which to use the language as it is being learned. Such students are also limited to majors that offer *yuke* as language support prior to matriculation, unless they were able to attend an inland boarding school (Chen, 2008). Students who attend *yuke* also spend more years in college, and may thus pay more tuition. This may also factor into decision-making. In many cases such students are also limited by family, financial, and/or structural circumstances as to what free majors are available for people from their region. (See Appendix A.) These examples suggest that the intersection of rural origin and ethnic identity create a unique set of experiences than does that of urban and ethnic identity, or ethnic identity alone.

## **Conclusion**

Though the policies described in this paper were put into place to facilitate enrolment of ethnic

minorities into college within an unequal system, the challenges for Uyghur students enrolling in higher education, particularly those from impoverished and/or rural areas, are often more complex than simply a result of being a member of an ethno-linguistic minority group.

Indeed, preferential policies are controversial in China. In the view of some critics, the use of ethnic identity as a sole means for policy-making fails to account for inter and intra-ethnic inequalities and it is thus an ineffective tool for increasing educational equality. Critics also call for reform of the system to account for obvious differences in geography, class, and income levels, thereby (in their view) better reflecting the complexity of educational opportunities in China (Leibold, 2014). Such calls usually advocate for more policy-making measures that target poor Han students from rural areas.

On the one hand a more nuanced approach to policy making—one which accounts for numerous variables that may be relevant to an individual ethnic minority student and the variances between and within ethnic groups—might be a more appropriate way to allocate educational admissions within the higher education system. At the same time, policies such as those available at Xinjiang Normal University and which do consider variables in their enrolment policies provide opportunities that might not otherwise exist for poor or rural minority students (while at the same time paradoxically also limiting such opportunities by designating particular majors to particular kinds of students).

On the other hand, this study also reveals that there are some ethnic minority students who have overcome challenging circumstances, including coming from impoverished rural areas, to attend college as beneficiaries of China's preferential policies in far away cities and in prestigious universities. Thus, a failure in policy-making to account for collective trends of disadvantage among members of a single ethnic group may also miss the goal of increasing participation for ethnic minorities in an unequal higher education system.

China has undertaken to address the challenges to higher education accessibility in a variety of ways, as some of the policies described here reveal. However, the fact remains that Uyghur students from rural Xinjiang face a different set of circumstances and decision-making constraints when entering higher education than their more prosperous ethnic counterparts from urban areas are likely to. While this paper has focused specifically on the circumstances surrounding Uyghur students from rural areas, intersectionality is a useful lens by which to more fully understand the subtleties of multiple vectors of inequality and how these in combination may impact the experiences of individuals from any of China's many ethnic groups. Further research along this vein, both in the Chinese context and elsewhere, is sorely needed.



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## APPENDIX

**Table 1. Free Tuition Majors for Minorities at Xinjiang Normal University in 2014 by Education Background and Locale**

School	Major	Enrolment			Notes
		Min Kao Han	Min	Bilingual	
Politics and Public Administration	Ideological and Political Education		34		Number of minority language students from: Kashgar (6); Aksu, (4); Kezhou, (4); Hotan, (6); Yili (5); Tacheng, (2); Altai, (3); Bazhou, (3); Hami (1) with one year yuke.
Educational Science	Educational Technology			35	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (7); Aksu: (3); Kezhou: (4); Hotan: (6); Yili: (14); Tacheng: (1)
	Early childhood education		30		Number of minority language students from: Kashgar (9); Aksu (3); Kezhou (4); Hotan (8); Yili (2); Tacheng (1); Altai (1); Bazhou (1); Hami: (1); with one year yuke.
History	History		32		Number of minority language students from: Kashgar: (6); Aksu: (6); Kezhou: (9); Hotan: (11), with one year yuke.
Mathematical Sciences	Mathematics and Applied Mathematics			32	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (8); Aksu: (4); Kezhou: (5); Hotan: (9); Yili: (2); Hotan: (2); Tacheng: (2); Altai: (2)
Computer Science and Technology	Computer Science and Technology			29	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (8); Aksu (4); Kezhou: (2); Hotan: (4); Yili: (5); Tacheng: (2); Altai: (2); Bazhou: (2).
Geography and Tourism	Geographic Sciences			30	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (12); Aksu: (3); Kezhou: (3); Hotan: (3); Yili: (5); Tacheng: (1); Altai: (1); Bazhou: (2).
Chemistry and Chemical Engineering	Chemistry			32	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (15); Aksu: (4); Kezhou: (3); Hotan: (10).
Life Sciences	Biological Sciences			30	Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (10); Aksu: (6); Kezhou: (3); Hotan: (5); Yili: (3); Tacheng: (1); Altai: (1); Bazhou: (1).
Music	Music		29		Number of minority language students from: Kashgar: (12); Aksu: (4); Kezhou: (2); Hotan: (5); Yili: (3); Tacheng: (2); Hami: (1), with one year yuke.
Art	Art		28		Number of minority language students from: Kashgar: (14); Aksu: (1); Kezhou: (2); Hotan: (6); Yili: (3); Tacheng: (1), with one year yuke.
Primary Education	Special Education	8		25	Number of min kao han from: Kashgar: (1); Hotan: (2); Yili: (2); Altai: (1); Bazhou: (1); Hami: (1); Number of bilingual education students from Kashgar: (4); Kezhou: (2); Hotan: (5); Yili: (6); Tacheng: (2); Altai: (4); Bazhou: (2); Hami: (2).

Adapted from: <http://zhaosheng.xjnu.edu.cn/s/39/t/46/1a/28/info72232.htm>



<b>Table 2. The Number of Students from Xinjiang in Tuition-free Programs in other Provinces (2016)</b>						
	Min Kao Han	Min Kao Min	Bilingual Student	Xinjiang Boarding Class *	Total	Han
Minzu University of China	10 (Kazakh Literature)	20 (Kazakh students only)	20 (Uyghur students only)	0	50	8
Beijing Normal University	0	0	10	13	23	62
East China Normal University	0	0	0	38	38	17
Shanxi Normal University	0	0	30	33	63	156
Northeast Normal University	0	3	0	37	40	9
Central China Normal University	0	0	26	33	59	11
Southwest University	0	0	35	38	73	31
Total	10	23	121	192	346	294

\*Free tuition programs for Xinjiang Boarding Class (*Nei Gao Ban*) includes all ethnicities (Minzu).

Sources:

Xinjiang College Admission Office's Website (Xinjiang Zhaosheng Wang)

[http://124.117.250.18/ptjh/y\\_jhqr/g\\_index.php](http://124.117.250.18/ptjh/y_jhqr/g_index.php)

[http://124.117.250.25/1001/0201\\_1.html](http://124.117.250.25/1001/0201_1.html)

Xinjiang Boarding Class:

Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China

[http://moe.edu.cn/srcsite/A09/moe\\_751/201603/W020160316505147288281.xlsx](http://moe.edu.cn/srcsite/A09/moe_751/201603/W020160316505147288281.xlsx)

Education Bureau of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

<http://www.xjedu.gov.cn/xjjyt/wjgz/2016/98513.htm>