

Ethnicization through Schooling: The Mainstream Discursive Repertoires of Ethnic Minorities*

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ABSTRACT This article looks into the process through which minority cultures and subjects are interpreted and defined by the cultural mainstream as inferior and less valuable for the modernization of China, and in consequent need of transformation, particularly through education. In dichotomizing advanced cultures vis-à-vis backward ones, this process has ethnicized minorities' differences. However, within the process itself are internal contradictions that render any attempt at actual education self-contradictory and ultimately unproductive. Using three sources of data – government policy, academic discourse and ethnographic fieldwork – the article provides corroborative evidence relating to the creation of particular images of minority cultures and subjects by the mainstream Han.

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The main analytical tool used in the article is the framework of discursive (or interpretative) repertoires that draws upon a lexicon, or register, of terms and metaphors to characterize and evaluate actions or events. This approach allows us to uncover the implementation of discourses that work together *and* against one another in actual settings.¹ “Mainstream” in this article refers generally to political or cultural dominance rather than a certain ethnic group. Yet the term

* I am grateful to Tim Murphy, Glyn Everett and Karen Morgan for their help in editing my work.

¹ Jonathan Potter and Margie Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior* (London: Sage, 1987), p. 138; Margie Wetherell and Jonathan Potter, *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 90.

is derived from and principally connected with the Han, although “Han” is a problematic category in itself.²

Fieldwork

My intensive fieldwork lasted for four months (February to June) in 2003 mainly in an ordinary school and a minority school in the Longwu township (Longwu zhen 隆务镇), the seat of the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Huangnan zangzu zizhizhou 黄南藏族自治州) in Qinghai province, bordering Gansu province. The region was historically a hub of communication between various ethnic groups who have lived side by side, and identified respectively with Tibetan Buddhism (the Tibetan (藏族), Mongolian (蒙古族) and Tu (土族)), Islam (the Hui (回族), Salar (撒拉族), Bonan (保安族) and Dongxiang (东乡族)), or atheism and/or Confucianism (mainly the Han).³ Furthermore, Huangnan is an area of agricultural, pastoral and urban populations. These features of the fieldwork site enabled me to consider the educational experiences of minority communities from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The main source materials for this article were government documents, academic articles and interviews with students and teachers from an ordinary (or mainstream) school. I interviewed 51 students in person; of these interviewees, 19 were Han (ten girls) and the rest Muslim or Tibetan. I also interviewed eight teachers from this school.

Government Concerns and Objectives Shaping Minority Education Policy

Of the 55 officially identified minority groups in China, most inhabit the Chinese border areas, and over 50 per cent of the minority population is concentrated in western regions.⁴ There are political tensions between these regions and China proper, based on territorial disputes as well as on cultural differences. One of the major distinctive features of minority cultures (MCs) is the diversity of their languages, which between them belong to five of the world’s language families. Another is their commitment to religious beliefs, which is in sharp contrast with the largely, though arguably, secular Han culture.⁵ In terms of scale, Buddhism

2 Fei Xiaotong, “Zhonghua minzu de duoyuan yiti geju” (“Configuration of plurality and unity of the Chinese nation”), in Fei Xiaotong, Chen Liankai, Jia Jingyan and Gu Bao (eds.), *Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju (Configuration of Plurality and Unity of the Chinese Nation)* (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu xueyuan chubanshe, 1989), pp.1–36; Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

3 However, the distinctiveness of the Hui as an ethnic group is very different from that of the other *minzu*. Gladney talks about this in detail in his *Dislocating China*.

4 Guojia tongji ju renkou he shehui keji tongjisi and Guoji minzu shiwu weiyuanhui jingji fazhansi, *Tabulation on Nationalities of 2000 Population Census of China* (Beijing: Miznu chubanshe, 2003), pp. 2–3.

5 For political purposes peculiar to itself, the Chinese government classifies people as “believers” by very superficial criteria that have little to do with whether or what people “believe.”

and Islam are the most important faiths for Tibetans and some other communities in western China, and for ten Muslim communities in north-west Xinjiang and the Gansu-Qinghai-Ningxia regions (甘青宁地区),⁶ where my fieldwork was conducted.

The modern education of ethnic minorities (*minzu jiaoyu* 民族教育) has long been recognized as different from ordinary education in Han-dominated regions. In recognition of this difference, the particularities of minority education (ME) are deemed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to be embodied in some “special difficulties and problems” such as a high illiteracy rate, high dropout rate and poor school performance.⁷ These difficulties and problems are alleged to be principally connected to the backwardness of minority groups in productivity, cultural development and living standards (*sange luohou* 三个落后).⁸ The party-state is therefore increasingly placing its hope in education to play a key role in “developing” the west and integrating it with the rest of China. Much of this policy invokes the developmental discourse of “catch up”; it is assumed that minorities will continue to be backward if they enclose and isolate themselves from “advanced” groups or regions.

Ongoing changes in the government policy of bilingual education over the past 50 years reflect the long course of this ideology’s development. In spite of periodically encouraging bilingual education, the CCP still holds firmly to the belief that the backwardness of ethnic minorities can be overcome by stressing the importance of the Chinese language as the means to gain access to Han culture.⁹ Government policy concerning bilingual education is the epitome of the

6 Also see Colin Mackerras, “Religion and the education of China’s minorities,” in Gerard A. Postiglione (ed.), *China’s National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling, and Development* (New York and London: Falmer Press, 1999), p. 23.

7 Guowuyuan, “Guanyu shenhua gaige jiakuai fazhan minzu jiaoyu de jue ding” (“Resolution of deepening reform and speeding up development of minority education”), *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 20 August 2002; Ai Yiping, Meng Hongwei and Gerard A. Postiglione, “Zhongguo bufen bianjiang minzu diqu chuoxue qingkuang diaocha” (“An investigation of dropout in some frontier minority areas”), *Jiaoyu yanjiu* (*Educational Research*), No. 1 (1995), pp. 60–66; Minzu jiaoyu si, “Woguo minzu diqu jiaoyu fazhan de xianzhuang yu weilai” (“Present situation and future of education development in minority areas in our country”), in Tie Mu’er and Liu Wanqing (eds.), *Minzu zhengce yanjiu (1)* (*Studies of Minority Policies (1)*) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2002), pp. 204–12; Teng Xing, “Zhongguo bianjiang minzu diqu de jichu jiaoyu yu chuoxue wenti yanjiu” (“A study of basic education and dropout in minority areas of Chinese frontiers”), in his *Zuqun, wenhua yu jiaoyu* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2002), pp. 231–247.

8 Li Dezhui, “Zai quanguo diwuci minzu jiaoyu gongzuo huiyi shang zongjie de jianghua” (“A summary speech in the fifth National Minority Education Working Conference”), 2002, available online at <http://www.moe.edu.cn/edoas/website18/info12112.htm>, re-accessed 21 May 2006.

9 Teng Xing and Wang Jun (eds.), *20 Shiji Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yu jiaoyu: lilun, zhengce yu shijian* (*Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Education in the 20th Century: Theory, Policy and Practice*) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 292–315. In addition to advocacy of the importance of acquiring the Chinese language or Han culture, policy makers also stress access to modernity and science, neither of which is particularly Han. Nevertheless, more often than not, Han culture involves a symbolic association with one’s “cultural level” (*wenhua shuiping* or *wenhua chengdu*), i.e. educational level, which is closely connected to modernity and science. Put differently, mastery of the kind of cultures wrapped in languages other than Chinese is probably not regarded as “having culture” or will be regarded as “having no culture” (*mei wenhua* 没文化). Also see Dru C. Gladney, “Making Muslims in China: education, Islamicization and representation,” in Postiglione, *China’s National Minority Education*, pp. 55–94.

civilizing missions of the party-state, and is also the result of concern about a possible political threat to ethnic unity and state stability. However, cultural-political concerns are more directed at the issue of religion. Religion is often under suspicion for being responsible for political or ideological wars between religious communities and the (Marxist-Leninist orientated) CCP. This has resulted in the strict exclusion of religion from the public domain. Religious elements have not been permitted in state education since the religious reform (*zongjiao gaige* 宗教改革) of the late 1950s, unless they are inextricably linked to aspects of a bilingual education, or are deployed as a target of criticism in textbooks, as I argue elsewhere.¹⁰ Consequently, MCs as a whole do not have their proportionate space in the curriculum; the limited coverage that they do have is primarily aimed at inculcating patriotism and locating MCs as being in a historically retarded or static stage, so as to manifest the necessity of their “transformation.”

The Academic Discourse of Minority Education

Government discourse reveals an unoptimistic view of ME, particularly in many western regions, and researchers of ME and my mainstream respondents share a similar standpoint. The following two sections examine how Chinese academics assess and diagnose poor minority educational performance in their research articles, and further, how my Han interviewees (teachers and students) perceive the minority population in educational terms. The focal question is: which is (more) responsible for (poor) minority performance, community forces or the social system?¹¹

Community forces

Among a wide range of factors, many academics highlight a backwardness in the thinking modes of minority people as the fundamental element that is responsible for their poor educational achievement and persistent poverty. It is claimed that minorities’ low view of education (apparent in their lack of enthusiasm and motivation for education) lies at the centre of these modes of thinking. Inadequate evaluation of education is believed to be embedded in minorities’ isolated physical and cultural environments, which are causatively intertwined.

Commentators have said that ethnic minorities usually live in isolated (nomadic or agricultural) areas and thus are unfamiliar with modernization, in

10 Lin Yi, “Choosing between ethnic and chinese citizenship: The educational trajectories of Tibetan minority children in Northwestern China,” in Vanessa Fong and Rachel Murphy (eds.), *Chinese Citizenship: Views from the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 41–67.

11 This pair of terms is borrowed from John Ogbu. See his “Variability in minority school performance: a problem in search of an explanation,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, No. 18 (1987), pp. 313–34; John Ogbu and Herbert D. Simons, “Voluntary and involuntary minorities: a cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1998), pp. 155–88.

which education plays an important part.¹² Meanwhile, the sluggish local economy has forced them to prioritize their needs for (more) labour, which inevitably leads to a high birth-rate and so aggravates their poverty. All these elements, according to commentators, form a vicious circle centring around poverty, limited education and large families. In light of the conceptual framework of social evolution, such disadvantaged status is largely traced back by academics to the backward socioeconomic patterns of the minority population (ranging from primitive to feudal societies) before the CCP brought them into advanced socialist society.¹³

The isolation of minorities is also thought to be a result of their cultural and, in particular, religious tradition, which, it is argued, discourages their engagement in education and reinforces their insularity. Minority communities invest considerable amounts of money and time into religion whilst school-aged children are sent to religious institutions. At a more fundamental level, religion is seen as encouraging believers to obey and preserve tradition, leading them to resist other cultures or cultural innovations.¹⁴

Minorities' intelligence in schooling is also called into question, despite the contrasting claim that their intelligence can be improved through appropriate training.¹⁵ Minority students are presumed to encounter obstacles in the development of their mental ability in comparison with their Han peers.¹⁶ These obstacles could be caused by adverse physical environments resulting in malnutrition. They could also be caused by human or cultural environments, ranging from lifestyle (their closed, isolated life coupled with interbreeding) to their ways of parenting, child-rearing and pre-school preparation (which are usually unlikely to nurture an aptitude for schooling).¹⁷ As a result, minority

12 Li Dingren, Cai Baolai, Li Jinyu and Wang Jian, "Xibei shaoshu minzu jichu jiaoyu fazhan duice yanjiu" ("A study of development strategies for minority basic education in the north-west"), *Sheke zongheng (Social Sciences Review)*, No. 6 (1995), pp. 17–28; Lin Yaohua, *Minzuxue tonglun (Introduction to Ethnology)* (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu xueyuan chubanshe, 1990), pp. 528–31; Liu Xudong, "Qinghai minzu diqu jichu jiaoyu fazhan yanjiu" ("A study of basic education development in Qinghai minority areas"), *Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu (Journal of Research of Minority Education)*, No. 1 (1994), pp. 7–15; Ma Chengjun *et al.*, "Chenzhong de chibang – guanyu xunhua Salazu nütong jiaoyu de diaocha baogao (1, 2)" ("Heavy wings – an investigation report of the education of xunhua Salar girls"), *Qinghai minzu yanjiu (Nationalities Research in Qinghai)*, No. 1 (1996), pp. 16–25, No. 2 (1996), pp. 18–26; Wang Kewen and Liu Junju, "Zhongguo shaoshu minzu jiaoyu shijian yu guojia jiaoyu fangzhen" ("Chinese minority education practice and state education principles"), *Gansu gaoshi xuebao (Journal of Gansu Normal College)*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2002), pp. 99–101; Yuan Xiaowen, Yang Jianwu and Li Jin (eds.), *Sichuan minzu diqu jichu jiaoyu xianzhuang diaocha fenxi yu duice yanjiu (An Investigation and Analysis of the Present Situation of Basic Education in Sichuan Minority Areas and a Study of Solutions to It)* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 2003).

13 See the references in n. 12.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Meng Liang, "Dui Meng, Hanzu xuesheng de zhili yu qi chengjiu de kua wenhua bijiao yanjiu" ("A cross-culturally comparative study on intelligence and achievement of Mongolian and Han students"), *Nei Menggu shida xuebao (Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University)*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2002), pp. 30–33.

16 Ding Yueya, "Zhongguo shaoshu minzu ertong xinli yu jiaoyu yanjiu zongshu" ("A summary of the studies of psychology and education of minority children in China"), *Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu*, No. 2 (1997), pp. 50–63.

17 *Ibid.*; Chen Xinyu, "Fazhan Miaozu jiaoyu"; Zhang Chuansui and Huang Lizhi, "Xi'nan shaoshu minzu"; Zhang Yi, "Zhongguo shaoshu minzu shenti wenhua suzhi fenxi" ("An analysis of minority

children tend to be sluggish in developing academic ability.¹⁸ Further, their background is also said to affect their personality, resulting in them being more likely to suffer from low self-esteem or passivity in modes of thinking.¹⁹ The implication is that the lack of intelligence caused by physical and cultural environments is significantly responsible for poor minority school performance.

The social system

However, not all commentators agree with these arguments. Other academics suggest that minorities' disengagement from education or ineffective academic outcomes are largely a result of their lack of access to education, or of the irrelevance of education to their local socioeconomic situation or cultural values. For these academics, the national curriculum has an immediate effect on the failure of ME because of its lack of responsiveness to locality and ethnicity in minority areas, in two basic ways. First, it is not designed to accord with the present physical or socioeconomic conditions of minority areas, and therefore confidence in school education among minority communities has significantly declined.²⁰ Secondly, the curriculum is not relevant to the historical socioeconomic patterns of minorities. That is, minority communities are thought not to be fully in concert with the presumably advanced socialist system in either social or economic terms, though they supposedly are in political terms.²¹

The failure to respond to minority needs stems primarily from the Chinese Han tradition of an elitist approach to education that focuses narrowly upon college entrance examinations (*gaokao* 高考); this is largely the legacy of the civil service examinations of imperial China.²² Indeed, where education is managed

footnote continued

- physical and cultural quality in China"), *Renkou xuekan* (*Population Journal*), No. 5 (1994), pp. 38–42. On the issues concerning relationships between physical environment, cultural differences and mental ability, see, among numerous others, Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); J. Philippe Rushton and Arthur R. Jensen, "Thirty years research on race differences in cognitive ability," *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2005), pp. 235–94; R. J. Herrnstein and C. Murphy, *The Bell Curve* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Claude S. Fischer *et al.*, *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 18 Deng Shengli, "Shenru yanjiu shaoshu minzu xuesheng gexing shi shishi shaoshu minzu suzhi jiaoyu de zhongyao qianti" ("To deeply study the personality of minority students is the important prerequisite for practising quality education of minorities"), *Zhongguo minzu jiaoyu* (*Education of Ethnic Minorities in China*), No. 1 (1997), pp. 33–35; Ding Yueya, "Studies of psychology and education of minority children"; Meng Liang, "A cross-culturally comparative study."
- 19 See the references in n. 18.
- 20 Badengnima, "Zangzu jiaoyu zhilu tansuo" ("Exploration of ways of the education of Tibetans"), *Jiaoyu yanjiu*, No. 10 (1998), pp. 50–54; Guo Ya, "Minzu jiaoyu tuoli shiji, tuoli shehui de zhengjie tanwei" ("Brief diagnosis of sticking point causing minority education to be divorced from reality and society"), *Xi'nan minzu xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Southwest College for Nationalities*), Vol. 24, No. 1 (2003), pp. 15–17; Li Xi, Li Yingzhou, Zheng Yiyun and Yang Hua, "Pinkun diqu minzu jiaoyu de fazhan silu" ("Thinking of minority education development in impoverished areas"), *Minzu yanjiu* (*Ethno-National Studies*), No. 3 (1994), pp. 14–24.
- 21 Badengnima, "Exploration of ways of the education of Tibetans."
- 22 Miyazaki Ichisada, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

to meet the requirements of the masses rather than those of the elite, ordinary people are reportedly far more enthusiastic about schooling.²³ Taking children's life experiences and other factors which may have affected their patterns of cognitive development into consideration would significantly facilitate their learning in schools. More importantly, if this were done, the view that minority children are intellectually inferior would largely be corrected in both majority and minority communities.²⁴

To pay close attention to local situations also requires considering various MCs in the curriculum, to make it interrelated and overlap with local socioeconomic needs.²⁵ The curriculum not only serves as an instrument to help create human capital, but also as a tool that guarantees and enhances the cultural wellbeing of minority groups. For commentators, this is associated with whether or not, or to what extent, minority languages (not necessarily religions) are provided in the curriculum. Despite substantial bilingual education initiatives across the country, this is regarded as a far from perfect system, and there is a need to resolve several crucial tensions. The fundamental tension is that between the efficiency and effectiveness in learning brought about by employing bilingual education for minority students, and the decreasing opportunities of using minority languages in the wider world.²⁶ However, bilingual education is considered to be important in providing minorities with more confidence in valuing their own cultures and their intellectual quality.²⁷

Ignorance of the locality and ethnicity of minority areas also means that ME often has little to do with minority communities. Schools are not keen to get minority communities involved in education, and if they do their attempts are very narrowly directed, such as to certain religious leaders. These leaders are encouraged to help with ME in raising funds, persuading parents to send their

23 Cairangcuo, Chen Aimin and Liu Haiying, "Zangzu jiating jiaoyu fangshi yu ertong zhili shuiping xiangguanxing yanjiu" ("A study of relativity between Tibetan family education methods and children's intelligence level"), *Qinghai shifan daxue xuebao (Journal of Qinghai Normal University)*, No. 1 (1997), pp. 111–15; Meng Xianfan, Qi Shujuan and Kan Ben, "Qinghai Zangzu de jiaoyu xuqiu" ("Educational needs of the Tibetans in Qinghai"), *Zhongguo shehui kexue (Social Sciences of China)*, No. 3 (1998), pp. 122–36; Meng Liang, "A cross-culturally comparative study."

24 Badengnima, "Exploration of ways of the education of Tibetans"; Cui Yanhu, "Wenhua ruhua yu minzu jiaoyu yanjiu" ("A study of enculturation and minority education"), *Xinjiang shida xuebao (Journal of Xinjiang Normal University)*, No. 4 (1995), pp. 78–84.

25 For a recent discussion of the integral relationships between MCs and socioeconomic patterns, see Liu Yuan, "Baohu minzu wenhua de zhutixing diwei" ("To protect the main body status of ethnic (minority) cultures"), *Zhongguo minzu bao (China Nation Newspaper)*, 9 December 2005.

26 Teng Xing, *Zuqun, wenhua yu jiaoyu (Ethnicity, Culture and Education)* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2002); Teng Xing and Wang Jun, *Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Education in the 20th Century*; Teng Xing *et al.*, "Zai jing zhongqingnian xuezhe tan minzu jiaoyu" ("Middle-aged and young scholars in Beijing talking about minority education"), *Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu*, No. 1 (1997), pp. 5–17.

27 Ma Qian and Xiao Liangzhong, "Wenhua zhongduan yu shaoshu minzu jiaoyu" ("Cultural discontinuity and minority education"), *Shaanxi shida xuebao (Journal of Shaanxi Normal University)*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2002), pp. 119–24; Teng Xing *et al.*, "Middle-aged and young scholars in Beijing." There is another problem, which is how to render concepts from science, philosophy, etc. into the vocabularies of minority languages. This is something that has been faced by the Chinese from the late 19th century, but is of course largely resolved now. Even so, due to the dominance of integrative programmes with regard to ME, minority languages still face the question of how to survive more effectively as a living language, as one of my Tibetan cadre respondents pointed out.

children to school or becoming teachers themselves of the minority language in some understaffed schools.²⁸ This is why commentators criticize the limited textbooks dealing with ethnic minorities as merely providing skin-deep knowledge about MCs, and tending to confuse students by inappropriately presenting information.²⁹

Evaluation

Insofar as community forces and the system are concerned, however, commentators from both sides are equally shocked by some reports with regard to ME. Some minorities are said to be unwilling to send their children to school even when the government or school rewards them in material form if they do so. Other minority parents even “employ” people to go to school instead of their own children by paying these people money.³⁰ In sharp contrast to this, it is widely reported (usually as a subject of criticism) that some minority families would rather make a donation to their religious institutions from their limited budget. The conclusion drawn by academics is that minorities are reluctant or even resistant to engage in education.³¹ Therefore, whilst a number of mainstream academics acknowledge that the physical or socioeconomic situation and the school curriculum all need to be changed, essentially it is minorities’ backward modes of thinking that are seen as being in urgent need of transformation.

Concern about the backwardness of minority modes of thinking is typically reflected in the mainstream discourse of *suzhi* (素质), or quality (literally “essential character”).³² Low quality is not only the cause of poverty, but “also affects the potential for capital to grow.”³³ And at the very centre of this *suzhi* improvement is located consciousness, or the subject’s “intendedness” towards

28 Liu Xudong, “A study of basic education development in Qinghai minority areas”; Ningxia jiaowei (jijiaochu), “Ningxia Huizu zizhi qu minzu jiaoyu fazhan de jiben qingkuang” (“Basic situation of minority education development in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region”), *Zhongguo minzu jiaoyu*, No. 5 (1998), pp. 5–7; Teng Xing, *Ethnicity, Culture and Education*, p. 269.

29 Jin Dongping, “Jiaoliang minzu zhishi jiaoyu, shuli zhanxin minzu xingxiang” (“Enhance education of ethnicity, set up new ethnic image”), *Zhongguo minzu jiaoyu*, No. 1 (1998), p. 38.

30 Yuan Xiaowen *et al.*, *Investigation and Analysis of the Present Situation*, p. 45.

31 These, in John Ogbu’s terms, are the community forces of involuntary minorities. However, in explaining minority performance, Ogbu’s concept of voluntary and involuntary minorities is in many cases misleading, including some of his own cases, as other scholars have criticized. Hence this is not a valuable, though heuristic, distinction and is not employed in this article. See Ogbu, “Variability in minority school performance”; Ogbu and Simons, “Voluntary and involuntary minorities”; Margaret A. Gibson *et al.*, “Ethnicity and school performance: complicating the immigrant/involuntary minority typology,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1997), pp. 315–462.

32 To name a few, Fei Xiaotong *et al.*, “*Configuration of Plurality and Unity of the Chinese Nation*,” pp. 34–35; Lin Yaohua, *Introduction to Ethnology*, p. 531; Teng Xing, *Ethnicity, Culture and Education*, p. 263.

33 Yan Hairong, “Neo-liberal governmentality and neo-humanism: organizing value flow through labor recruitment agencies,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2003), p. 494. For more critiques of the concept of *suzhi* and its place in current Chinese developmental discourse, also see Ann Anagnost, “The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*),” *Public Culture*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004), pp. 189–208; Andrew Kipnis, “The disturbing educational discipline of ‘peasants,’” *The China Journal*, No. 46 (2001), pp. 1–24; Rachel Murphy, “Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: ‘population quality,’ demographic transition, and primary schools,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 177 (2004), pp. 1–20.

the object (such as development), which is supposedly the key for the (cultural) poverty relief of ethnic minorities.³⁴ It is fashionable for both critics and supporters of the minority population to label minorities as a people or labour force of low quality. This fashion is derived from the ways in which the mainstream has viewed minorities, and is fundamentally rooted in their conceptual framework, shaped in line with the social evolution ideology of the party-state. Academics (including supporters of the minority population) take the evolutionary framework so comfortably for granted that no research bothers to question its validity or applicability to widely varying contexts.

The resulting convenience for discursive construction is that the backwardness of the minority peoples can be easily located in terms of their history, so as to primordialize this backwardness. Therefore the minority population is essentially in need of being enlightened, not only in the field of knowledge or skills transmission, but also, more fundamentally, in the field of the cultural transmission of advanced modes of thinking and moral standards. And enlightenment should be conducted in Chinese, in which advanced culture is presumably grounded, and by which science and technological knowledge are conveyed.³⁵ In a nutshell, this enlightenment is believed to serve as a tool to transform the minority population, and so their intellectual quality and socioeconomic situation, in the long term. This echoes the discourse of “cultivation” used by my informants (see below).

Stevan Harrell shows how the mainstream discourse regards the peripheral as childlike and historically static in its metaphors of education and history.³⁶ In this discourse, minority peoples are assumed to be primitive and so civilizable on the one hand, and historically innately backward and hence uncivilizable on the other hand. It is this very paradox that provides civilizers with the eternal reason for carrying out their civilizing missions and also gives them some chance of success. This discourse construction is particularly useful when the above-mentioned two fields are difficult to reconcile with each other. So whilst Tibetans are criticized as being so deeply poisoned by religion that they are passive in participating in the market economy, Muslims are rebuked for favouring material benefits by prioritizing commerce at the expense of their children’s education. In this context, Tibetans are thought to be unaware of the importance of education for commercial and economic development; and Muslims, despite their active economic performance, are denounced as short-sighted profiteers and in need of education to enhance moral standards. A

34 Gayatri Spivak, “Scattered speculations on the question of value,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (1985), p. 73; Yan Hairong, “Neo-liberal governmentality,” p. 500.

35 See e.g. Halike Niyazi and Muhabaiti Hasimu, “Zhangwo hanyu ying chengwei shaoshu minzu daxuesheng bibeisuzhi zhuyi” (“Mastery of Chinese should be one of the necessary qualities of minority college students”), *Xinjiang daxue xuebao (Journal of Xinjiang University)*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1997), pp. 90–92.

36 Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: civilizing projects and the reaction to them,” in Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 3–36.

similar view regarding Tibetans and Muslims was expressed in more detail by my mainstream interviewees as shown below.

In this discursive construction, it is also true that scholars would rather avoid a direct clash with the political mainstream by keeping silent if they consider that their discussions do not comply with the conventions set out by the party-state. One salient example is the mainstream attitude towards religion in education. Academics are most likely either to parrot the party-state's policy (such as insisting on the negative character of religion which is believed to be distracting minorities from the importance of schooling) or to evade the issue. Correspondingly, only limited research has seriously posed questions about why schools have failed to win students in this "culture war" with ethno-religious communities. In the end, in examining responsibility for poor minority performance, the mainstream discourse has, at best, largely reduced the social system to the curriculum by merely seeking "school-based solutions to school-based problems" and ignoring "structural and historic relations of domination."³⁷ This ignorance or reductionism has significantly singled out the system that has primarily shaped education policies and practices.

The Mainstream Narratives of Ethnic Minorities

As with governmental officials and academic commentators, the mainstream teachers and students that I interviewed, all of whom had immediate and intimate contact with minorities, also considered their minority fellow students to be largely poor school performers. While attributing poor minority performance to a variety of elements, the dominant view among these interviewees was that it depends decisively on community forces – the educational level and/or the attitude of families or communities. This section looks at how this view takes shape through everyday discursive formation.

In/dispensable minority cultures

For both teachers and students, religion-centred MCs are not as negative as school policy, a reflection of government policy, implies. Most respondents believed that religion, the core of a meaningful life for both Tibetans and Muslims, cannot be seen simply as an entirely useless or even negative component within education. This view first emphasizes the benefit gained from learning about different cultures for mutual understanding and respect. Secondly, it considers that inclusion of religion in public institutions is positive because minority students can thereby foster and promote self-esteem in their ethnic identity. A large number of mainstream members also treated MCs as a

37 David Gillborn, "Education policy as an act of white supremacy: whiteness, critical race theory and education reform," *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2005), p. 487. For empirical evidence of the issue, see Lin Yi, "Muslim narratives of schooling, social mobility and cultural difference: a case study in multiethnic Northwest China," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2005), pp. 1–28; and Yi, "Choosing between ethnic and Chinese citizenship."

means of entertainment, equating them with beautiful dancing, colourful dress or mysterious legends. In this fashion, one student (S) illustrated his interest in MCs to me (M) as follows (emphasis added):

S: I like history, so I like to learn histories of other *races* (*zhongzu* 种族). [As for] other things, I am not interested.

M: So [you mean you] are interested in this subject [history] rather than ethnic minorities [of the history]?

S: Yes. ... The Han does not seem to have its own history; the Hui, if they are minorities, they have their own ethnic history ...

M: What did you mean that the Han does not have its history?

S: I meant, from my point of view, the Han, seems, it is not like ethnic minorities who have something like legends, such as an ethnic [minority] group, when did it come to being, what was its source?

This entertainment idea about MCs inevitably recalls Pākehā positions in relation to Māori in New Zealand, in which the image of the former is seen to be mundane and therefore invisible whereas that of the latter is visibly exotic.³⁸ The mainstream civilizing projects proposed by Harrell and the “in-museum” characteristic of MCs depicted by Gladney also reflect this ethnicization of minority differences.³⁹ Thus it is not surprising that the appeal of MCs for the mainstream group does not really lead to a substantive knowledge of them. This is a result of the lack of opportunity to learn offered in institutions, specifically in schools, and also reflects their deep-down attitude that MCs are largely a kind of decoration in mainstream daily life. Meanwhile, the awareness of the importance of learning about MCs for a better mutual understanding largely stopped at the level of theory alone (partially connected with the idea of political correctness). This is mainly because for my interviewees, religion-centred MCs cannot bring any tangible benefit. “These things [in religion] are a little bit too illusory, no realistic meaning,” “no scientific grounds,” “superstitions.”⁴⁰ A teacher explained this view as follows:

If a student is too pious with regard to religion, it will certainly invite a clash with our moral education ... especially in such an era and environment [in which society is becoming more secular and science-driven] ... for instance Islam ... ultimately aims to ... enable [its disciples] to enter heaven. We now advocate atheism ... there is no such things as ghosts or gods. Our ultimate goal is to realize communism.

Holding such a view of MCs, it is no surprise that the majority of the mainstream is far from enthusiastic to learn about them. They do not consider it to be a serious problem that there is limited space for MCs in public institutions, or they even believe it is right to exclude them from the public sphere. So what about minorities’ self-esteem and cultural identity, things that are supposedly fostered and promoted by an inclusive curriculum? As I present it here and

38 Wetherell and Potter, *Mapping the Language*.

39 Harrell, “Introduction”; Gladney, *Dislocating China*.

40 Interview with three students.

elsewhere,⁴¹ MCs are largely politicized in the way in which they are treated in the curriculum, in line with state policies. In everyday life, MCs are simply tokenized in the way in which the mainstream members “appreciate” them. It is thus that they remain on the periphery of the public and private life of the cultural mainstream.

Discursive repertoires about Muslims

There is an apparent contradiction in the mainstream narratives of MCs. This can be illustrated in two cases respectively concerning Muslims and Tibetans in which the mainstream ethnicizes the minorities’ differences. While in theory affirming the positive role of religion as a whole, some of the mainstream respondents showed scepticism about religion as discussed earlier. Even so, when asked which religion they would tend to believe in, if they had to choose, all the interviewees pointed to Buddhism rather than Islam.⁴² They reasoned that Islam is not the religion of the Han, but of “those Hui,” so they know little about it and have no interest in it; Islamic doctrines were also considered to be too stern. Hence they concluded that Muslim students, regardless of their academic achievement, are all very pious and Muslims are “inborn disciples.” While they believed that to be pious is a good thing for self-discipline, they also associated this “Muslim character” with conservatism or self-enclosedness. This is supposedly strengthened by the Muslim tendency towards living together in a compact community, “which is simply a Muslim village,” as one schoolteacher commented.⁴³ For the mainstream, this isolated nature of the Muslim community sustains and reinforces their “feudal customs” like patriarchy.

At the same time, Muslims were without exception labelled “innate merchants.” This characteristic determines that they are not willing to invest in education that cannot create immediate profit, so they are short-sighted. When this view of Muslims is mixed with the Chinese traditional view of trade that believes that all merchants are unscrupulous, and that one cannot be a merchant if one is not unscrupulous, Muslims are profiteers, and so untrustworthy.⁴⁴ In this sense, the Han actually perceived that Muslims are

41 Yi, “Muslim narratives of schooling” and “Choosing between ethnic and Chinese citizenship.”

42 The view of Muslims in this section is not merely held by my respondents living in this Tibetan-dominated area, but also by those in Han-dominated regions elsewhere and even in Muslim-dominated regions nearby. This was revealed in many informal conversations I had with Han across the country and at various times. Academic accounts mentioned elsewhere expressed a similar opinion.

43 Also see Yi, “Muslim narratives of schooling.”

44 Indebted to the era of the global knowledge economy, Chinese society no longer belittles commerce. Yet mainly self-employed Muslims are evaluated within the traditional frame. However, there are contradictions here, too. All over South-East Asia, the Chinese (Han) are thought of as “innate merchants,” whose mode of organization is described by Hill Gates as petty capitalist (*China’s Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996)). A comparable phenomenon is that of the so-called Chinese Han from south-eastern China, who constitute the majority of the overseas Chinese in South-East Asia, who are widely viewed by the rest of China as innate merchants. It is also worth noting the striking disparity of educational performance between Han and Muslims in this region despite the fact that these days, both similarly value commercial attainments. See Yi, “Muslim narratives of schooling.”

smart and therefore could have achieved highly at school. Unfortunately, I was told, Muslims are not keen to use their intelligence for schooling or enhancing their cultural quality (*wenhua suzhi* 文化素质), but for commercial business instead. This is why their smartness was believed to have reduced to cunning and calculation.⁴⁵ By this my informants were trying to prove that Muslims are culturally foreign and morally evil, by the criterion of Chinese cultural tradition. Since these characteristics of Muslims are inherent, as perceived by the Han, Muslims are hence uneducable and untransformable, as well as being unapproachable and untrustworthy.

Discursive repertoires about Tibetans

Having thus criticized Islam and Muslims, more than 90 per cent of interviewees claimed that Buddhism and its believers are relatively “approachable” and thus “trustworthy.” Beyond the fact that Buddhism is one of the sources of Chinese culture, the very important implication here is that Buddhism is far from conservatively strict or feudal in comparison with Islam. This can also be translated into the idea that Tibetans are not cultivated as strictly as Muslims because they do not appear to be as self-enclosed. Nevertheless, this is not the whole story; in fact, this view laid the ground for my respondents to comment negatively on Tibetans. They explained that Tibetans are usually much less restrained by their families or community, and so they are quite uncultivated as an ethnic group. They therefore tend to be much less self-disciplined, but disruptive or violent instead. A lack of cultivation and discipline also presumably results in their limited intellectual merit.

In the attempt to prove this “Tibetan character,” many respondents provided examples by comparing the differences between Tibetan students who are being educated in mainstream schools and those in minority schools – the latter seen as “more” or “typically” Tibetan. They considered that the former were less hard to communicate with because they had a good command of Chinese and were generally somehow of a higher “quality” (obedient, self-disciplined and understanding). By contrast, it was seen as being impossible to reason with the disruptive and violent Tibetans from minority schools.⁴⁶ In terms of academic achievement, several teachers also suggested that top Tibetan students in minority schools were only capable of reaching the average level of mainstream schools.⁴⁷ Hence, when they asserted that Tibetan students in minority schools tend to work harder, the comment – and tone – in fact highlighted their perception of Tibetan intellectual inferiority. In short, morally poorly disciplined and intellectually inferior, “typical” Tibetans were considered unable to fit in easily with an increasingly modernized society.

45 This is exactly what many other minorities say about the Han. See e.g. Lin, “Choosing between ethnic and Chinese citizenship.”

46 Interview with two students.

47 In theory, this could be the case with Han students who studied in a minority school in the minority language, as some of my minority respondents pointed out.

As with some academic commentators, many of my interviewees did not regard the idea of separate minority schools and corresponding preferential policies as very effective.⁴⁸ They thought that the practice of concentrating minority students in separate schools had actually isolated Tibetan students from mainstream schools and interaction with high quality (Han) students. In minority schools, students were seen as being of low quality, and were being educated in separate low quality environments. They were thus deprived of the opportunity to improve in quality and language, and these elements had formed a “vicious circle” among minority school students.⁴⁹

On the contrary, several teachers judged that parents who sent their children to mainstream schools have foresight, which they owe to their experience in Chinese Han education and/or in public sectors as a cadre (*ganbu* 干部).⁵⁰ This is because they “clearly know that [minority schools] are not good,” “know that they lack quality [for study].”⁵¹ Teachers explained that an educational experience in a mainstream school makes Tibetan parents aware of the importance of such an education for gaining high cultural quality and social status, exemplified by the ideal end-result of becoming a cadre. This in turn shapes a “virtuous circle.” Cultivation of Tibetan students in mainstream schools was argued to be capable of eventually enabling the Tibetan community as a whole to transform the quality of its population (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质).

To justify their viewpoint of the cultural and educational superiority of mainstream schools, all teachers and students agreed that it is mainstream schooling that functions as an institution for cultivating useful people of a higher academic standard. Apart from the convenience for both daily life and a future career, a good command of Chinese would gain them mainstream cultural citizenship; it was a signal of high cultural quality, and “would win the respect of society, and further, could boost their cultural confidence,” as two students commented. Moreover, several students also claimed that Chinese is more profound than other languages, because it offers a broader cultural horizon – Han culture – which they did not believe to be offered in similar depth in minority schools.

These mainstream discursive repertoires about Muslims and Tibetans exactly parallel the academic idea of enlightenment, as discussed earlier. They were typically reflected in the discourse of “cultivation,” when my interviewees evaluated and judged different minorities by the degree to which they sought to adapt themselves to Han Chinese culture in general, and mainstream education in particular. Cultivation is a good thing when it works along the lines of Chinese culture. In this light, my respondents praised the Tibetan community,

48 For academic comments, see Tang Duoxian, “Lun woguo minzu jiaoyu de youhui zhengce” (“On preferential policies for minority education in our country”), *Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu*, Vol. 13, No. 50 (2002), pp. 42–47. Li Xi *et al.*, “Thinking of minority education development in impoverished areas.”

49 Interview with a teacher.

50 Cadre here refers to anyone working in the public sector regardless of his or her status, and so includes governmental officials or manual workers, who are traditionally entitled to full state welfare package.

51 Interview with a teacher.

which in general has been making an effort to approach this benchmark, such as by voluntarily sending children to mainstream schools.⁵² One teacher declared that because some Tibetans have improved themselves significantly in this direction, they could hardly be distinguished, even physically, from the Han. This is evidence of the educability of Tibetans.

Meanwhile, cultivation can also play a retrogressive role when it is adopted as a tool to reinforce ethno-religious tradition, as has occurred in the Muslim case. Unlike Tibetans, Muslims in the Han's eyes still appear to be very nationalistic: "If you say something about Muslims, they resist very acutely."⁵³ This led the mainstream to the view that the way in which Muslims are cultivated within their ethno-religious tradition has in fact resulted in their resistance to Han culture within, as well as outside, school. Thus they are uneducable within the framework of supposedly advanced Chinese culture, which is coupled with the fact that they still look distinctive in their features from the Han, as a teacher put it. Therefore, "uneducable" Muslims are seen as being more in need of education. Having ethnicized Tibetans and Muslims in this way, Chinese Han practise a "racial nationalism," in Sautman's words, towards minorities.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Through this investigation into the mainstream discourse at the macro (governmental), mezzo (academic) and micro (individual) levels of the minority population in particularly educational terms, some general conclusions can be drawn.

This discourse construction reveals a shifting discursive repertoire. On one level, in the mainstream diagnosis and evaluation of minorities, one principal feature lies in many on-the-surface competing arguments regarding such issues as separate schools, bilingual education, religion and education, and community forces. A major consequence is that it is hard to establish convincing causal relationships between numerous symptoms – physical environment, cultural differences, mental ability and socio-political concern – that are diagnosed by the mainstream as affecting ME. Put differently, in explanations of poor minority performance, arbitrariness makes up a striking feature of the mainstream discourse. On another level, in doing so, the symptoms are also very likely to be used arbitrarily to form more "vicious circles" for the minority population in the mainstream discursive formation. This in fact leads to the implication that the poverty or "stupidity" of the minority population is their "habitus," that is, "a system of durable and transposable dispositions" that is shared by its members.⁵⁵

52 Also see Yi, "Choosing between ethnic and Chinese citizenship."

53 Interview with a student.

54 Barry Sautman, "Racial nationalism and China's external behavior," *World Affairs*, Autumn 1997.

55 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 72.

Indeed, as seen throughout the article, even contradictory accounts from different individuals echo each other ideologically, proving and reinforcing the underlying view of minorities' presumed retardation for the modernization of China. The mainstream discourse has proceeded mainly in the manner of "blaming victims," and this has fulfilled its ethnicization of minority cultures and subjects. This has, first, justified and legitimized the way in which the cultural-political mainstream continues to carry out its mission of civilizing these culturally alien minorities through its ongoing integrative agenda. Secondly, it has also justified the (fashionable) practice of putting a neoliberal governmentality in place in order to devolve responsibility to the largely rural-based minorities. That is, minorities are encouraged to raise their *suzhi* themselves and so to prosper at little cost to the state, as both Murphy and Yan observe in their studies of rural migrants.⁵⁶ The neoliberal way is seen to push MCs to the peripheries of the market economy to a significant extent, whereas the civilizing mission has been excluding them from public institutions. Both ways together have intensified the marginalization of MCs in the wider society.

Concomitantly, this mainstream approach also uncovers the ambivalence and ambiguity of the state agenda of modernization. The agenda strives to integrate the hard-to-compromise ideas of political loyalty, economic development and cultural diversity into a coherent whole. This is particularly embodied in the gap between the formal level of laws and the informal level of public discourse and attitudes, as Kymlicka presents in his case studies.⁵⁷ In other words, even though the Constitution guarantees citizens' freedom of religion, the societal culture that the party-state offers to Chinese citizens tends to exert control over a wide range of aspects, including language, religion and recreation. This has resulted in ambivalence or ambiguity, not only in government policies but also among both the majority and minorities, towards MCs, as I argue in this article and elsewhere.⁵⁸

Yet, when these aspects appear to be in conflict, the priority of the party-state is usually to justify and legitimize its regime by focusing upon and fostering political loyalty in the masses, centring on economic development, at the expense of second-rate MCs. This is effectively delineated by Heberer as the "borderline integration" (compared to assimilation) of the minority policy in China.⁵⁹ In this way, the discourse of culture often serves as a tool to draw symbolic boundaries for the cultural-political mainstream to retain its privileges and power – and correspondingly for minorities to avoid further marginalization in the larger society, where education, the cultural battlefield, is grounded.

56 Murphy, "Turning peasants"; Yan, "Neo-liberal governmentality."

57 Will Kymlicka, "Western political theory and ethnic relations in Eastern Europe," in Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski (eds.), *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported? Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 13–105.

58 Yi, "Muslim narratives of schooling" and "Choosing between ethnic and Chinese citizenship."

59 Thomas Heberer, *China and Its National Minorities* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1990).