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ABSTRACT

Like other Indigenous populations worldwide, China's ethnic minorities have faced considerable obstacles to acquiring education. At higher levels of education, minority students have far lower enrollment rates and far higher dropout rates than Han majority students. This is particularly true at the point of college admittance, since only 2 percent of all Chinese college-age youth can be enrolled in universities. Nevertheless, some ethnic minority students beat the odds and win college admittance. Primarily rural Yunnan Province has the highest proportion of minority population of any province. Interviews with 32 ethnic minority students who attended Yunnan Normal University focused on how these students constructed identities that led to educational success. In addition, observations were carried out in minority villages, schools, and households to learn about identity construction by minority students. Findings focused on how families helped students succeed in school, students' perceptions of family help and their obligations to repay such help, how students were defined by their family and village, importance of role models and significant others, and how teachers and peers helped students construct achievement-oriented selves. Also discussed are the school system in Yunnan Province; difficulties in recruiting, training, and retaining teachers; financial support for minority education in China; and issues related to the national examination system. Lessons that can be applied to minority education in the United States are pointed out. (Contains 46 references) (SV)

How Successful Ethnic Minority Students Construct Identities:

Observations from Yunnan Province, PRC

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INTRODUCTION

Research and practice in the field of education abound with deficit models. What does not work and why it does not work have been well documented. Nevertheless, during the last 25 years, ethnic groups across cultures have made significant accomplishments in educational access and achievement. All groups have contributed to, and thus enriched, the societies of which they are a part. As a result the spectrum of educational realities has been broadened considerably. Yet rarely are such accomplishments by ethnic groups recognized and celebrated .

This conference's theme is "A Conversation on Educational Achievements Globally," and the paragraph above is the call to action issued by the conference organizers. This paper addresses the conference theme as it relates to the People's Republic of China and the education of the PRC's ethnic minorities.

Like other indigenous populations worldwide, China's ethnic minorities have experienced significant amounts of discrimination and have faced considerable obstacles to acquiring education. Chinese educators measure success, or the lack thereof, by "the three rates" (Trueba and Zou 1994, p. 78). Ethnic minority students have far lower enrollment rates and far higher drop-out rates than Han majority students (Kwong and Hong 1989, p. 237). Within China's three-tiered national examination system, minority students pass and advance to higher levels of schooling at consistently lower rates than do Han students (Kwong and Hong 1989, p. 237). The problem becomes particularly acute at the point of college admittance because China's universities are accessible to just a tiny segment of the population. Only about two percent of all college-age youth can be enrolled in universities (Hayhoe 1996, p. 251), so the odds against being admitted are great for the average Han Chinese. If the figures for Han and non-Han students are compared, the odds against minorities being accepted into college are staggering.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Nevertheless, a tiny percentage of ethnic minority students do beat the odds and win college admittance. These students find ways to function effectively in a second culture, using a language other than their native one. In many cases, they overcome almost insurmountable obstacles in order to achieve educational and professional goals. How do certain ethnic minority students manage to succeed in school?

To repeat, ample research has been done in many setting on underachievement among minority students. This project takes a different tack by focusing on a small group of ethnic minority students in Yunnan Province who do well in school.

OVERALL PLAN FOR THE PAPER

First, the methods of data collection will be discussed. Then a brief review of the literature that guided the study will follow. Next a theoretical model will be introduced. The theoretical model will explain how ethnic minority students construct identities that help them succeed in school. The model will be used as a framework to present the findings that answer the research question: How do ethnic minority students in Yunnan Province succeed in school?

The answer, presented in the findings, is: By constructing achievement-oriented selves. This identity construction process occurs in two ways:

1. Through interpersonal interactions that occur at the micro level during the course of the students' "definitional careers." These micro-interactions happen:
   –In families;
   –In villages; and
   –In schools (primary school, secondary school and university).

2. Through structural supports that occur at the macro level. These supports, built into the educational system, are called "preferential policies" in China. They operate much like affirmative action in the United States. These preferential policies include:
   –Special schools and classes for ethnic students;
   –Training teachers for minority nationality areas;
   –Financial support for minority education; and
   –Additional points on national examinations.

A concluding section of the paper will suggest what minority education in China can teach us about minority education in the United States.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

The research setting was Yunnan Province, in the far southwestern corner of the PRC. Twenty-five of China's 55 minority nationality groups live in Yunnan Province, giving Yunnan the highest concentration of ethnic people of any province in the country. Thirty-three percent of Yunnan's population is comprised of minorities, compared with a nine percent minority population for China as a whole.

The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical model. The model attempts to explain how ethnic students create identities that lead to educational success. To this end, the education of minority students attending Yunnan Normal (Teachers) University (YNU) was examined for about three months during the summer of 1997. Almost 20 percent of the students who attend YNU are members of ethnic minority groups. These students come from 23 different groups. YNU is located in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province.

Two qualitative techniques were used to gather data. The first was intensive interviewing. Thirty-two ethnic minority students at YNU were interviewed. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes and was conducted in a university seminar room. The author's research assistant was present to help with translation. Topics covered with the interviewees were personal/ethnic identity, reference groups (at the family, village, school and university levels), academic achievement and empowerment. Eighteen of the interviewees were female, and fourteen were male. Interviewees were drawn from the four undergraduate class years and from 13 different minority groups. The interviewees were from all areas of Yunnan Province. Ten of YNU's 70 majors were represented among the interviewees.

The second qualitative technique used to gather data was field observation. The author visited minority families, villages and schools to learn about identity construction by ethnic students. The author lived, worked and observed at Yunnan Normal University for 10 weeks. During that time the author talked at length with key informants–with researchers at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, with scholars at the Yunnan Institute for the Nationalities and with officials in the People's Government of Yunnan.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

To develop a model to explain how ethnic students create identities that lead to educational success, the "grounded theory" strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used. Grounded theory is developed from close observation of the world. Grounded theory contrasts with formal theory, which is developed by deducing hypotheses that are then tested against observations (Marshall 1998, p. 265).

One way to generate grounded theory is by starting with a review of existing literature. A literature review can uncover "sensitizing concepts" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 39), which in turn, alert the researcher to new directions for data collection.

Several key concepts relating to ethnicity, education and empowerment emerged from an early review of the literature and formed the foundation for the present study:

1. Some ethnic minority students are able to construct personal identities that allow them to do well in school. In essence, these students learn "strategies to attain achievement-related possible selves" (Oyserman, Gant and Ager 1995, p. 1216).

2. These socially constructed selves rely heavily on the backing of reference groups at the family, village, primary/secondary school and university levels. Personal definitions of self by ethnic students are combined with social definitions by reference groups (Heiss 1981). The result is a constructed self, personally empowered to overcome academic obstacles and to achieve in school.

3. Self-conceptions at the individual level are influenced by social structures at the societal level (Stryker 1989). The structural context of interaction sometimes constrains and sometimes supports the construction of achievement-oriented selves by ethnic students. Discriminatory practices would be an example of a structural constraint. Preferential government policies, which give advantages to minority students in China would be an example of a structural support.

4. Reference groups play an important role in how ethnic students view themselves, and self-concept is among the most powerful predictors of academic achievement (Brookover and Erickson 1975, p. 281).

5. The process of empowerment among ethnic students in China is rooted in their commitment to help their families and their villages. The logical way to do this is by acquiring education for themselves. Through this education, the students also acquire the "prestige, status, honor and power to make changes" that benefit their ethnic groups (Trueba and Zou 1994, p. 147).

The present study is an extension of the work of Henry T. Trueba and Yali Zou (1994) just cited. In their book, *Power in Education: The Case of Miao University Students and its Significance for American Culture*, Trueba and Zou look at the construction of ethnic identity by Chinese minority students at two nationalities institutes. (These institutes, two of 13 such schools scattered across China, are colleges that train technical specialists and political leaders from among minority nationality groups.) Trueba and Zou look particularly at students from the Miao nationality, one of the largest minority groups in southwest China.

Trueba and Zou asked: What role does ethnicity play in educational achievement and ultimately in empowerment? The answer: The students' strong sense of belonging to a minority nationality group, together with the social support they received from teachers, administrators and peers, allowed them to surmount considerable obstacles and succeed in school. Trueba and Zou (1994, p. 83) summarize their theory this way: "The argument in its simplest form is that being a Miao student means belonging to a Miao community and a Miao family, and that success at the university is the most logical means to show gratitude to one's own family and community."

THEORETICAL MODEL

A strong sense of ethnic identity seems to correlate with a high level of educational achievement. But why does this occur? To answer this question, a model was developed to illustrate how ethnic students construct personal identities that help them achieve academically. The theoretical building blocks upon which this model rests were supplied by earlier work done by Daphna Oyserman and others (1995), Jerold Heiss (1981) and Jacqueline P. Wiseman (1991). The contributions of each of these three authors is explained below.

The model illustrates how ethnic students, over time, work with reference groups to construct personal identities. These identities then help the students achieve academically. Although this is discussed chronologically (as indicated by the time arrows, T_1-T_4), identity construction is actually a recursive process which repeats itself indefinitely.

Personal Identity

At the center of the model is the individual ethnic student constructing "personal identity." (Scholars often use the terms "personal identity," "identity," and "self" interchangeably. See for example Stefanie J. Field 1994, pp. 431-432 on personal identity and self, and David and Julia Jary 1991, p. 226 on identity and self.)

Identity construction is a process of negotiation. As David A. Snow and Leon Anderson (1987, p. 1348) write, "We conceptualize identity construction and assertion as variants of the generic process we call *identity work*, by which we refer to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept."

Reference Groups

Reference groups play an important role in how the ethnic student views himself or herself, and self-concept is among the most powerful predictors of academic achievement (Brookover and Erickson 1975, p. 281). The model depicts the ethnic student actively constructing and negotiating personal identity while interacting with an ever-widening circle of reference groups. This is a dialectical process, as indicated in the model by the two-way arrows, T_1-T_4.

A person's sense of self as a meaningful object arises from first taking the role of a few significant others and then from taking the role of the generalized other (Mead 1934). Reference groups are "social groups that provide generalized others to whom the individual refers" (Hewitt 1994, p. 90). It is important to note that reference groups are groups to which an individual orients himself or herself, regardless of actual membership. Reference groups shape an individual's evaluations, attitudes and behavior (Singer 1981, p. 66).

Four Contexts of Interaction

So who are the reference groups with whom the ethnic student interacts? Family, neighborhood, school, and peer group, is the answer given by Daphna Oyserman, Larry Gant and Joel Ager. Oyserman and others (1995, p. 1216), examined strategies used by White and Black minority university students to attain "achievement-related possible selves." Oyserman and others write:

> Adolescence has sometimes been conceptualized as a time of unfettered identity negotiation. Youths are said to "try on" various identities, convey various self-conceptions to others, and receive moderating feedback on these conceptions ... In this way youths synthesize childhood identities with what they know of their skills and abilities and construct adult selves that are at once plausible and at least reasonably satisfying ... These socially constructed selves rely heavily on the backing of important others in the social environment.

The "important others" with whom the ethnic students in the present study interact are found in the family, village, primary/secondary schools and university. These four contexts of interaction are incorporated in the model.

Constructed Self

Oyserman and others (1995, p. 1216) suggest that minority students who manage to do well in school do so by constructing "achievement-related possible selves." These students are well aware of the structural limitations imposed upon them because of their ethnicity. Nevertheless, with the backing of important others, these students are able to develop perspectives of themselves as "successes." The students' "constructed selves" make academic achievement possible.

The process of identity construction, as performed by the individual minority student, has three distinct steps. First, the student starts with a tentative personal definition of self. The student develops this definition by comparing herself or himself with internalized standards acquired through socialization (Heiss 1981, pp. 120-122). Next, the student examines herself or himself against perceived social definitions of self (Heiss 1981, pp. 137-138). Perceived social definitions are evaluations of the student by reference groups. Finally, by combining personal definition of self with social definitions of self, the student arrives at a "constructed self." Major disagreement exists on what to call this end result, but for the purposes of this study, "self" is the "totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to herself or himself."

Obviously, the answer to the question "Who am I?" is arrived at jointly. Sometimes a minority student may be defined by others as an "underachiever" and then act according to this definition. This is an example of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton 1968, p. 477). Others may also influence the actions of a minority youth by casting her or him into a positive role, that of "successful student," causing the student to behave in that manner. This is an example of "altercasting" (Charon 1998, p. 164). In either case, the minority student negotiates an identity.

The student, together with others, defines a situation and acts according to that definition. The next situation and any subsequent action is then influenced by the defining process that occurred previously. Thus the individual fits together innumerable "lines of action" into a continuous "stream of action" (Charon 1998, p. 131). Jacqueline P. Wiseman (1991, p. 5) captures the essence of this process with her concept of the "definitional career," which will be discussed in more detail later.

Structural Context

The theoretical orientation presented thus far suggests that individuals construct selves via interaction with others in a relatively free manner. But as Sheldon Stryker (1980, p. 53) explains:

> A satisfactory theoretical framework must bridge social structure and person, must be able to move from the level of the person to that of large-scale social structure and back again ... There must exist a conceptual framework facilitating movement across the levels of organization and person.

Social structures influence self-conceptions. Certain structural factors such as class, status and power may constrain interaction. As Stryker (1989, p. 53) writes, "Constraints ... may exist within situations with respect to the behavioral expression of given identities ... One cannot be a swimmer in the absence of a pool."

Anthony Giddens (1984) notes that social structures are both constraining and enabling. Structures often provide individuals with opportunities to do things they would not otherwise be able to do. For example, in China:

- Under national policy, schools lower their passing scores on the entrance examinations for students who have at least one minority parent.
- Students from poor and remote villages are recruited to attend minority nationality boarding schools, and the government pays for tuition, room and board.
- Since a large percentage of the nationality population cannot understand Mandarin Chinese, bilingual teaching has been introduced in primary and secondary schools.
- Special preparatory classes are offered at the university level for minority students who would not otherwise qualify for admission.

The structural context of identity construction is shown in the model by the shading of the four outermost circles, those denoting family, village, primary/secondary schools and university.

Outcomes: Academic Achievement and Empowerment

By virtue of the fact that they have been admitted to the university, all the ethnic minority students involved in this project are considered to have reached a high level of academic achievement. The gap between Han and minority achievement is especially apparent in higher education (Postiglione 1999, p. 11). Minority students constitute just 5.7 percent of all Chinese university students, despite the fact that minority people constitute nine percent of the PRC's total population (Sautman 1999, p. 180). In Yunnan Province where this study was conducted, minorities make up 22 percent of all university students, but 33 percent of the total population (Shi 2000). In short, the percentage of minority students in higher education still lags significantly behind that of minority people in the population (Sautman 1999, p. 178).

This paper presents findings from a larger research project on the education of minorities in Yunnan Province. Empowerment, which is an outgrowth of academic achievement, is part of the larger study (Lee 2001, pp. 201-214), but will not be discussed in detail here.

Definitional Career

The term "definitional career" was coined by Wiseman (1991, p. 5) in her study of the wives of alcoholics and how they learn to cope with their husbands' drinking. The concept of a "definitional career" is useful for the present study as well. As Wiseman (1991, p. 3) explains:

> Symbolic interactionist theory posits that people confront and define situations within which they find themselves and then, in keeping with these definitions, select, construct, and execute, as best they can, what they believe to be the most appropriate action. This theory is especially effective for understanding motivation in problematic situations.

The problem for ethnic students in China (and elsewhere) is this: the odds against doing well in school are overwhelming. Ethnic students are often labeled as academic failures before they have a chance to demonstrate otherwise.

Yet for the ethnic students involved in this study, the opposite has been the case. They have developed coping strategies that ultimately lead to academic success. Through a series of definitions and redefinitions they have constructed images of themselves as achievers. The interviewees tell of numerous defining encounters, pivotal points where academic failure seemed certain. These have occurred at various moments during their lives–as young children in their families, as youth in their villages, as students in primary and middle school. Again and again these minority students, together with significant others, have socially constructed a new reality and have redefined what is possible. All are now successful students, part of the elite two percent of college-age youth admitted into Chinese universities.

How and why that is possible is told in the following sections by the interviewees themselves. They explain the identity work in which they have engaged–in their families, in their villages and in their schools–before entering university.

Following each interviewee quote is the name of the speaker's minority nationality group, for example, Bai. "OMN" stands for "other minority nationality," and is used to ensure confidentiality. Quotes so labeled are by students from the Bulang, Jingpo, Lisu, Hui, Wa and Buyi nationalities–groups from which only one student interviewee was drawn.

Generally, the minority interviewees were far less privileged than their Han counterparts at Yunnan Normal University. The minority students usually came from large families. Parents had limited amounts of education. There were far more interviewees with parents in China's lowest class, the farmer/peasant class, than there were with parents in either of the two upper classes, the worker class or the cadre class.

The following sections of this paper examine the "definitional careers" of successful ethnic students at YNU.

FINDINGS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION WITHIN FAMILIES

Status attainment in China operates much as it does in the West. Those parents with more education and better jobs are usually those most able to secure these rewards for their children.

Family members–parents, siblings and others–must make enormous sacrifices on behalf of the minority students who succeed in school. Considerable money, time, effort and skill are invested to ensure that successful minority students continue to achieve academically. These resources are in short supply in many minority families.

How Families Help Students Succeed in School

Financial backing Most of the students interviewed mentioned the financial help they received that allowed them to continue on with their education:

> My family gives me much help. Every month they give me 200 or 300 yuan (between $25 and $40). They are farmers and not very rich, but they support me. (Bai)

Family funds paid for students' clothing, food, books, school supplies and other necessities. In addition, several interviewees mentioned their parents' willingness to financially support extracurricular enrichment activities:

> When I was younger, I was interested in drawing. My parents bought art supplies for me. Then I chose this major (pre-school education). They supported this, too. They gave me money for the university. (Yi)

Free time. Families of successful students not only provided money to further the children's education. These families also made sure that their children had sufficient time to concentrate on their studies. This often meant financial sacrifice for the entire family, since one member was not earning money for the household.

Many of the interviewees' families were poor. They had developed innovative coping strategies that allowed the family to remain financially solvent while still supporting one child's study:

> In my village there are 30 families ... The other families let their children do farm work, but my parents seldom let me do farm work. They give me a lot of time to study. My father lets me shepherd the cows in the mountains, so I stay under a tree to read a book. My father doesn't use up my study time ... My family members, they are very unified. They have a big desire for me to get a high education. I also have big desire to study. I have strong feelings for my family and my hometown. (Zhuang)

Another student reported on how her family dealt with the costs associated with her being away at school:

> In senior middle school, my parents took care of my life very carefully. Then it was hard to study. It took 30 minutes to go home, so I stayed at school. My mother took dinner to me every day. My parents brought a lot of good food for me. (Yi)

Emotional /academic support. The student interviewees emphasized that, while the financial aid they received from their families was a significant factor in their academic success, this was not nearly as important as the other kinds of support they received:

> In my family, because my father didn't get (any formal) education, my mother was very strict with the children. She got her education before 1949. She was a student. My mother thinks if a person doesn't have knowledge, he is no good. Every day she checks our homework. After every exam, she goes to the school to ask about her children. Whether the school is near or far, once a month my mother goes to the school. (OMN)

Many students talked about the stress connected with examinations and about their reliance on family support before and after these tests.

> My mother usually tutored me with my homework in junior middle school ... In senior middle school there were many exams. When I failed, my parents comforted me. They said that next time I would do better. They encouraged me to study. (Yi)

Teacher contact. One important way that the parents of minority students involved in this study supported their children was by frequent contact with teachers. The parents of these students were involved in their children's academic work both in and out of school:

> My father (who never attended school) was very strict with me. During primary school, my teacher lived in the same village. My father was the head of the village. My father often went to this teacher's home to ask about my situation. In junior middle school, I went to another place. I lived in the school. The school was 35 kilometers (22 miles) from my home, a seven-hour walk over mountain roads. My father came to the school to visit ... My parents always hoped I could go to university. (OMN)

Students' Perception of Family Help

Considerable money, time, effort and skill were invested in students' education by their families. The students interviewed realized how much their families had sacrificed in order to ensure their academic success. These sacrifices were made largely by parents who were themselves poorly educated and materially impoverished. In short, these were sacrifices that such parents could ill afford to make. This was clearly understood by most of the student interviewees:

> My parents do not have enough knowledge. They didn't get any education. They know that a person who has knowledge is important. In finances and in spirit, they support me to study very much. They encourage me to study well. (Dai)

The parents, for their part, recognized that many of their thwarted educational aspirations might be realized by their children. Parents used this to encourage their children on to greater achievement:

> My father put his hope in me. My parents supported me to go to school. My father said, "I am a farmer. I hope you will not be a farmer. You must become an intelligent person and go to university." (OMN)

> Sometimes I thought studying was too difficult. I told my mother, "I won't go to school." She didn't say anything. She took me to the farm. I worked two days. I couldn't stand it. I

went back to school. She said, "If you don't study, you will work at the farm." So I have to study. (Yi)

Students' Sense of Filial Obligation

The students' attitude toward family sacrifice made on their behalf has, in large part, been shaped by Confucianism. The student interviewees used the words "obligation" and "responsibility" repeatedly as they reflected on their response to family assistance:

> I feel I have an obligation because it is my nationality's tradition. Chinese people have an ancient tradition. People must respect the older generation and love the younger generation. According to this, in my family my parents brought up their children. They sacrificed their life to bring up their children. When they are old and they can't work, we children will be grown up. We should respect, help and love our parents. (OMN)

The sense of "obligation" and "responsibility" felt by the students was accompanied by a feeling of "owing" family members for all they had given:

> I feel I owe much to them. They work very hard at farming, particularly my mother. They wouldn't let me help them ... My mother says when I grow up I will leave her, but I won't. I'll stay with her. (Yi)

Confucian values also seemed to suggest to the students that, in the short term, the best way to repay the sacrifices made by family members was by achieving academic success:

> Because my parents supported me to study and taught me how to deal with different things in different areas, so I should work hard and study. I should master skills and technology. I should study well. This is the best repayment. (Tibetan)

Of course, academic success in China ultimately brings honor and wealth to one's entire family. Graduating from college means a better job, a higher salary and an increased ability to provide for family members. This point was made time and time again by the students interviewed:

> At present I want to work hard at studying so I can get a high score. This is a good way to repay my parents. Now I try my best to get excellent achievement. In the future, I will get a job and work hard. I will try my best to love my parents in spirit and in life and to take care of them. (Yi)

How Students Define "Family"–

The students said they felt a strong sense of "responsibility" and "obligation" to their families that, in turn, motivated them to do well in school. These students understood "family" to mean the traditional Chinese extended family, which includes children, spouse, in-laws, grandparents, uncles and aunts:

> A person must have a sense of responsibility to the family. For example, I have a big responsibility for my family–for my child, my husband, my parents, my parents-in-law. I come here to study to improve my educational level, to learn how to teach students and my child ... My family thinks that after working (for 15 years as a primary school teacher) my knowledge is becoming old. They think I must get new knowledge. They support me very much. After graduation, I will go back to my hometown to work in my school. This will be very good. I will help my family. To my parents-in-law, I will be a good daughter-in-law. I will be a good mother to my child. I will be a good wife to my husband. (OMN)

Obviously, the help that students received from members of their extended and nuclear families was more than just financial. The students reported that their siblings wrote letters of encouragement, helped with homework assignments, and assisted in other ways:

> In my family, all the people support me to study. They give me enough money to study ... They encourage me ... In the countryside it is not easy to support children to study. My parents have many children. It's difficult. According to Chinese tradition, we must repay our parents ... Because my mother has died, only my father is alive ... My (three) sisters give me a lot of help, especially my second sister. I should help my three sisters help their children. I will return to my hometown and do teaching work. I will give money to my nieces and nephews and teach them. (Yi)

The students interviewed were quite aware of the price of their educational achievement–siblings who dropped out of school so that the most academically promising child could advance. The interviewees indicated that, over time, more and more of their families' resources were channeled into the construction of an achievement-oriented self for the one child in each family who proved herself or himself most likely to succeed:

> Because I am the first child in my family, it is not easy to support me to come here to study, so I feel I have a responsibility to my family. In the future I will support my brother and sister to study. (OMN)

Several female interviewees said that gender did not prevent their parents from supporting their education instead of the education of their brothers:

> My grandmother ... said it is not easy to support a girl student in the countryside to go to school, so you must do well in your studies. Work hard. You can bring honor to our family. She saved money to support my studies. Each time I returned home, we had long talks. In the village she told me many things. When the vacation was over she sent me off. She is very old (76). Still she walked a long distance with me to school. (Tibetan)

–And How Students Are Defined by Family

An achievement-oriented self is of mutual benefit to the minority student and to his or her family members. Consequently, all engage together in identity work, actively striving to create such a self for the student.

Minority nationality students attending Yunnan Normal University in Kunming are geographically (and technologically) far away from their families living in villages scattered throughout the province. Under such conditions, identity work could easily be hampered by communication and transportation problems, but this did not appear to be the case. On the contrary, the student interviewees reported close contact with their extended families. Interviewees said that, on the average, they made a call home about once a week (when their families had telephones), they wrote a letter home about once a month, and they visited their families about twice a year (during school holidays).

The interviewees were asked two questions in particular about identity work within the family. The first question concerned their families' social definitions: "If members of your family were asked to describe you, what do you think they would say?" Then the students were asked a second question concerning their own personal definitions: "Does the way your family sees you differ from the way you see yourself?" In the overwhelming majority of cases, the family's social definition of the student as an academic success aligned quite precisely with the student's personal definition:

> Social definition: I am the only university student in my family ... My family members say I am a good child ... I work hard at my studies.
> Personal definition: I think the same way. (Lahu)

Most of the students reported that they were regarded as exemplars by other family members and that they saw themselves the same way:

> My parents are very proud of me. They tell every family member, "We have a very good daughter ... " Recently I wrote a long letter to celebrate my father's birthday. He was so moved by it that he cried. He read it to everyone. He said it was the best gift he ever received. I am a perfect daughter in their eyes. They say to my younger sister, "Learn from her. She is the most important person in our family." (Zhuang)

FINDINGS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION WITHIN VILLAGES

The family is the fundamental unit of Chinese society; it is natural then that most of the identity construction work engaged in by students is done within the family. The students involved in this study, however, also constructed identities within their villages. Identity construction within families and identity construction within villages, as they were described by the interviewees, were intertwined. As C. K. Yang (1966, p. 11) explained, the Chinese village is "the product of a centuries-old process of marriage and reproduction on the same plot of land, and the foundation of the community organization rest(s) on the tightly knit kinship group." Clearly, for the students involved in this study, reference groups at the family and village levels overlapped.

Social Definitions by Villagers and Personal Definitions by Students

Most of the interviewees reported that social definitions supplied by members of their families were almost identical to social definitions supplied by residents of their villages:

> Most children when they finish junior middle school return to my hometown. Only I came to university. So people say to my parents, "You have a good son. You are very lucky. He is gifted. He is a well-behaved son ... " My parents trust me, so I have confidence. I know I can develop myself and work hard at studying. (Naxi)

Many of the students interviewed were the only people from their villages to attend senior middle school or university. This fact was mentioned repeatedly in the social definitions of the students supplied by the villagers. Again, just as at the family level discussed earlier, social definitions aligned very precisely with personal definitions:

> Social definition: People think I am an excellent boy. In that area, not many students go to senior middle school. If they can go to secondary school, it is very good. I am one of just one or two to come to university to study.
> Personal definition: Almost the same. (Yi)

Neighbors and friends, when supplying social definitions, often associated the concept of honor with the accomplishments of the students:

> People say (about me), "This child is a diligent student. She works hard at studying. She brings honor to her family." (OMN)

Native sons and daughters who achieve academic excellence are often honored by their villages. During field observation, the author heard about a Lisu girl who had attended the Minority Middle School of the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County. She was later accepted into the Yunnan Institute for the Nationalities. The people in her village organized a three-day celebration in her honor.

Challenges to the Construction of Achievement-Oriented Selves

Successful students were accorded high honors, in part, because of the obstacles against academic achievement they had to overcome in their villages:

> In recent years ... I was the only university student in my village. Some ... are proud of me. Some are jealous because their children ... only get four or five years of education .... In a year I will graduate. But some of the sons and daughters of the villagers, they can't. What they will be is farmers. This is a serious problem. Our village is not very big. More and more people live there. They can only farm such little fields. I should tell you that my village is between two big mountains. (Bai)

Role Taking

The ethnic students who did manage to overcome the odds and attain academic success were adept at observing achievement-oriented individuals in their communities. Role taking, or role modeling as it is called by Heiss (1981, p. 157), was a key part of identity construction for successful ethnic students at the village level. The ethnic students involved in this study

generally said they admired people from their villages and looked upon them as models when pursuing higher education:

> People there (in my village) are very diligent. But maybe their situation is not good, so they have no chance to get education. But they have a strong ability to learn. They have a good manner. They get along with each other. They have strong confidence in their life. They are not afraid of difficulties. They conquer the difficulties. I think when I was a child, they were good models. (Dai)

Several interviewees said that others from their towns who had become university students were models for them:

> There are many university students in my hometown. They give me confidence, motivation and good models. In my hometown these university students come from poor, not good, families. I think, "If they can go to college, I must go, too." (Naxi)

Certain significant others, encountered through village contacts, exerted a particularly strong influence on the interviewees as they sought out models for achievement-oriented selves:

> When I was in senior middle school ... a college student ... visited my neighbor. He talked about life and education. He talked ... about college life (in Kunming). So I thought in the future I want to be a college student. I tried my best to study. I wanted to know more about college life and education. If I could go to another place to study, I would know more about society. (Naxi)

Practicing Success

In all of the examples discussed in the previous section, students were observing others playing roles. But, in fact, in many instances "roles cannot truly become a part of actor's repertoire without practice" (Heiss 1981, p. 163). In their villages, the minority interviewees mastered the role of successful scholar first by observation and then by practice. And as the interviewees practiced the role of "good student," they were simultaneously teaching that role to younger people in their villages:

> In my hometown we have a tradition. When children come back from other places, old people come to the family to visit. Every time I go back to my family, old people come to see me ... Young people like me very much. In my village, we don't have electricity. Only recently did we get a road. The condition is very poor. People don't have the opportunities to go to other places. People hope I can come back and talk wonderful information to them, help them study and write Chinese characters, speak Mandarin and take part in art activities ... In my hometown they have a custom. They think if a person leaves his hometown and goes to another place to work, he must help his hometown. He must help others study ... The people in my hometown hope the younger generation can bring a lot of help to them ... I want to go back to my hometown. Before coming to university, I worked at the primary school there and taught Wa children. After graduation I want to teach Wa children. (OMN)

In summary, villagers played an important part in the construction of the student's achievement-oriented self. They supplied a social definition of "outstanding scholar" which in most cases aligned perfectly with the personal definition of the student.

FINDINGS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION WITHIN SCHOOLS

Reference groups in primary and secondary school also play an important part in the construction of achievement-oriented selves by minority students. The minority students involved in this study, most of whom spoke nationality languages at home, faced tremendous obstacles to academic success as they progressed through schooling, which was conducted primarily in Mandarin Chinese.

Redefinition by Significant Others

Most of the interviewees recalled crucial points during school where their identity was on the line. At these defining moments, failure seemed imminent until a significant other, usually a teacher, intervened. This intervention took the form of a new or "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The previously "failing" student (personal definition of the student by the student) was redefined as a "successful" student (social definition of the student first by the teacher and then by other reference groups). The following story, told by a female student, illustrates just how this occurred:

> When I was five-years-old, there was an accident in the factory where my father worked. My father died. It was hard for my mother to look after me. (Three years later my mother remarried.) ... I had a Chinese teacher in senior middle school. She was 26, very young. She taught students a lot of knowledge, but also how to be a good person. For example, at that time, I was stubborn. My younger brother is my half-brother, and there was a psychological distance between us. I had been an only child. I didn't know how to share. I was a little selfish. I never confessed when I did wrong. My teacher noticed this problem. She talked with me. She said, "When you go to college, in your dormitory, you will have roommates. You must get along well with them. A girl should be gentle and tender. She must have enough confidence to confess when she has done wrong. You have a special situation in your family. You must try to love your parents and your younger brother and change your situation." After that, I tried to do all that that teacher said. My situation got better and better. The neighbors began saying, "She is a very good girl." I needed this teacher very much. I want to be a very good teacher like her. (OMN)

The Importance of Attending the Right School

Contact with good teachers and significant others often resulted from students being accepted into the right school:

> I can go to university because I didn't study in our county senior middle school. I graduated from Dali High School for Nationalities in Xiaguan. I can go to university because I got much good education there ... It is a very good school. (Bai)

Sometimes leaving one's village to advance to a better school meant the withdrawal of reference group support at a critical time:

> Only seven or eight girl students went on to junior middle school. All went home except me. My parents thought I was weak and not suitable for work on the farm. They supported me (to stay in school). I felt lonely. I was the only girl to go to school. I cried every time I left home ... I came home twice a month ... (Now) most of my friends are already married ... I'm the first girl college student. (Yi)

How Teachers Help Students Construct Achievement-Oriented Selves

A teacher has multiple identities which come into play as he or she interacts with students. Teachers were viewed by students involved in this project as being parents, "enablers" and role models. Students clearly took the role of the other–or in this case, their teachers–during interaction. Students looked at self and situation from the teachers' vantage point in order to engage in role making (Hewitt 1994, p. 87). The minority youth interviewed made for themselves the role of successful student largely in response to their treatment by teachers.

Teachers as parents. Many of the students interviewed had left their homes at an early age to attend boarding schools. As young children, they seem to have looked on their teachers as parents–and responded to them as children. Interviewees were asked about teachers who had exerted a particularly strong positive influence on them as they struggled to become successful scholars. In answering, the students repeatedly talked about teachers who were like parents. Students reported that these teachers cared about them and their success almost like parents would care about their own children:

> My teachers were a big influence ... My primary school, middle school, secondary normal school teachers gave me special care and help. They provided a single office for me to study and review my lessons. When I was sick, I went to their homes. They cared for me like their own child. They gave me medicine and food. Because I could work hard at studying, I had very good marks...My teachers liked me very much. (Zhuang)

Teachers as "enablers." According to the interviewees, influential teachers were the ones who saw students as having the ability to progress onward into university. These teachers not only viewed the students as academically successful; they also did all they could to ensure that students did not drop out, but instead advanced through school:

> In my secondary normal school, my physics teacher was the dean of the school. Because my physics score was very good, this teacher liked me very much. Some people think children should go to secondary normal school and get a job. (Secondary normal school is similar to a senior high school which trains teachers.) This teacher encouraged me to be #1 in the school. If so, then the school would send me to university. One day this teacher asked me, "Do you want to go to university?" I said, "Yes!" "Then you can go to university," he said. From then on, I worked hard, became #1 and was sent here to study. (Lahu)

Teachers' actions, as well as their words, certainly aided in the construction of achievement-oriented selves for minority students. Several students mentioned teachers, like this one, who found money for those who could not otherwise afford to stay in school:

> He helped students solve their problems. For example, there were a few poor students. The school gives them extra money, but this was limited. He always tried to gain more opportunities for poor students. He asked the leaders to help them. He said, "These students need extra help." (Bai)

Teachers as role models. All the interviewees were students at Yunnan Normal (Teachers) University, and preparing for careers in education. Many students mentioned teachers who helped them construct achievement-oriented selves by serving as professional role models:

> In first grade, I had a very young teacher. He taught all the subjects. Once I was very naughty. I didn't pay attention to the teacher. I looked out the window. This teacher was angry. He broke my textbook in half. For two weeks, I didn't go to school. My parents persuaded me. They said that the teacher did this to help me study well. I returned to school. Then the teacher took care of me very well. From then to now, I have wanted to say "thank you" to this teacher. He was a big influence. (Yi)

How Students Help Each Other Construct Achievement-Oriented Selves

The minority students, many of whom had left home at an early age to attend boarding school, formed close bonds with classmates. With these significant others and reference groups the students engaged in identity work. According to the students interviewed, the construction of achievement-oriented selves in schools involved much team work. This was not surprising since Chinese students have a particularly strong sense of belonging to a group. (This is another outgrowth of Confucianism.)

Academic help. Roommates, classmates and schoolmates all provided academic help for the successful minority students. In some cases, these significant others may have made the difference between passing and failing in school. Being regarded by peers as someone worthy of help, that is, as someone who could succeed in school with the necessary assistance, certainly was an important part of the identity construction process:

> My classmates influenced me. After every exam, they were at the top ... Every time I found out my score, I had a sense of losing ... They helped me study math and English. They helped me study actively. I asked them questions. (Yi)

Definitional help. It is well known that ethnic students drop out of school at higher rates than do Han students. In fact, there is an upward trend in this direction from primary school to university. In other words, at each level Han students advance onward in proportionately higher numbers than do minority students. Consequently, many minority students involved in this project were labeled early on as "academic failures" by reference groups in schools. The "labeling of an individual will have at least the effect of generating doubt where previously there was an

unproblematic conception of self," John P. Hewitt (1994, p. 257) explained. The following incident, related by a computer-based education major, shows the importance of changing one's label from "academic failure" to "academic success." In this case, a significant other (the teacher) did the re-labeling before the eyes of a reference group (classmates):

> In first grade (of senior middle school) I was not interested in math. I failed the first exam. I was very sad and lost confidence. This teacher talked with me, comforted me and asked me to correct all my errors. The next day she said, "I'll correct your homework." If I had a little success, she encouraged me in class. She let everyone in the class know that I had made progress. From that time on my score in math went from low to high. (Yi)

In such incidents, as they were related by the interviewees, a change in the student's social definition preceded a change in the student's personal definition. This resulted in behavioral change, as the students worked harder in math and saw their grades improve. Just as a negative label can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, so too, can a positive label. Once the students were recognized as–and saw themselves as–good scholars, they began performing in ways that ensured this would continue.

MICRO-MACRO LINKAGES IN ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENT SUCCESS

The major argument of this paper thus far, an argument growing out of the microinteractionist perspective, is that those minority students who do well in school are those who manage to construct achievement-oriented selves. This construction process–which happens one-on-one between minority students and their relatives, neighbors and teachers as they advance toward university–is discussed in the preceding sections. (Identity construction at the university level was ongoing with the students interviewed, all of whom were enrolled in Yunnan Normal University at the time of the project. This phase of the identity construction process is not covered in this paper, but was part of the larger project, i.e., Lee 2001, pp. 189-215).

It is important to remember, however, that the identity construction process just described occurs within a larger structural, or macro, context. Larger social entities like schools, villages and families–and the cultures, norms and values that grow out of them–have a profound effect on individual people's lives. For minority students, the larger structural context at some times constrains and at other times enables them to construct "achievement-oriented selves. At all times the structural context influences the ability of minority students to succeed in school and ultimately to qualify for university.

Sociologists have long sought a compromise between the micro and the macro, between theories of meaning and theories of structure. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's dialectical theory of the "social construction of reality" does as good a job as any of striking a middle ground. "Social structure is not characterizable as a thing able to stand on its own, apart from the human activity that produced it," write Berger and Pullberg (1966, pp. 62-63). Social structure, once created by humans, "is encountered by the individual (both) as an external facticity (and) ... as a coercive instrumentality." Indeed, social structure is often perceived as having been constructed by some external, nonhuman force.

To accurately describe the success of the minority students at Yunnan Normal, attention must be paid to both the small-scale human interactions already discussed and to the large-scale social arrangements.

Many of the large-scale structural supports that help minority students do well in school were introduced starting in 1978. At that time the government announced a 10-year plan for the Four Modernizations. The Four Modernizations–in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense–were undertaken with the idea that China would become an advanced industrialized nation by the year 2000. Education was promoted as the foundation of the Four Modernizations (Perkins 1999, p. 168). Because the minorities lagged significantly behind the Han in educational attainment, a series of preferential policies were implemented expressly to address this concern.

In the following sections, preferential policies to improve the education of ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province will be discussed. These preferential policies are special schools and classes for ethnic students, training teachers for minority nationality areas, financial support for minority education and additional points on national examinations.

FINDINGS: SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND CLASSES FOR ETHNIC STUDENTS

In the past, schools in minority areas were few and far between. Those that did exist were poor. Minority families, if they wanted to educate their children, often had to send them a considerable distance away to school. This required great financial sacrifice, in terms of extra money spent on schooling outside the local village as well as income lost due to having one less family laborer.

Primary Schools (Grades One to Six)

Starting in the 1980s, there has been a dramatic increase in primary schools built expressly for minority students. By using provincial and prefectural funds, 321 nationality primary schools have been built in Yunnan Province so far, accommodating 43,000 students (Zhao and Xu 1995, p. 10). Keep in mind that Yunnan Province is similar in geographical size to California. Yunnan has a population of about 40 million people, while California has about 33 million people.

Junior and Senior Middle Schools

These are equivalent to American junior and senior high schools, respectively, grades seven to nine, and grades nine through 12. Throughout Yunnan Province 56 minority nationality boarding schools have been established. About 30,000 middle school students attend these schools (Zhao and Xu 1995, p. 16). Because the students there receive food and housing, paid for with provincial or prefectural moneys, the schools are called "full accommodation schools."

The author visited two full accommodation schools, the Minority Middle School of the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and the Minority Middle School of the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County. The teachers and administrators interviewed there agreed that living at school is of great benefit to minority students. "The key factor in the students' success is the good study environment," says Headmaster Zhang Chonggon (1997) of the Lijiang school.

Zhang's students often come from poor homes and remote villages. Living conditions there are harsh and not conducive to studying. By contrast, the full accommodation schools the author visited have modern classrooms, libraries and laboratories. While the dormitories are not elaborate, they are warm and secure. Dining halls serve three meals a day, usually with many dishes per meal, to ensure that the dietary restrictions of all minority groups can be respected.

A typical day at a full accommodation school seems highly structured by Western standards, with many hours spent in class and doing homework. Many of the students, were they living at home with their parents, would be spending considerable time helping with farming or herding.

Half Accommodation Schools

The Yunnan provincial government also supports 3,000 "half accommodation schools" for minority nationality students. At these schools, students go back and forth to their homes each day, but lunch is provided for students by the government. Because schools are frequently located far from students' homes, previously those who left for lunch often did not return for afternoon classes.

Vocational Schools

Minority parents sometimes resist sending their children to school because the academic subjects taught are not relevant to their daily lives or to earning a salary. The 95 vocational middle schools established in nationality areas in Yunnan Province address this issue. (These schools make up about half of all vocational schools in the province.) Subjects offered at the vocational schools range from sewing, woodworking and jade-working to agriculture, tourism and finance (Zhao and Xu 1995, p. 22). Vocational school students learn occupations and assume jobs directly upon graduation.

Nationality Sections

Starting in 1988, Yunnan Province began allocating funds for "nationality sections," to be established in the first middle schools of 33 counties classified as poverty-stricken. Minority students, from poor families and remote villages, are selected for the nationality sections. Preference is given to students from 12 of the province's minority groups, those groups that are the smallest and the most disadvantaged.

The nationality section is, in essence, an extra class in the school, solely for minority students. Students in the rest of the school are Han. Students in the nationality section live at school, and their tuition, room and board are paid by the provincial government.

The nationality sections have been placed in the first middle schools of each county because these schools have the best teachers and facilities. The first middle schools are "key schools." Key schools are centers of excellence that operate at all levels of the Chinese education system. The government concentrates its limited resources upon these key schools and the pupils enrolled there.

Students in the nationality sections are chosen on the basis of their scores on the national examination (the middle school entrance exam taken at the end of primary school.) Primary school peers, who have not scored as high, remain behind to continue on in local schools.

Nationality sections run by the province have become recognized as an effective way to provide high quality education for minority nationality youth. Recently, local governments have begun to establish similar nationality sections. At the time of the study, there were 72 nationality sections with 10,000 students throughout Yunnan Province.

Preliminary Classes

Most of the higher education institutions in Yunnan Province, including Yunnan Normal University, have preliminary classes for minority students. The "preparatory students," as those in the preliminary classes are called, have completed senior middle school and have taken the college entrance examination, but have not scored high enough to be admitted to the university.

Preparatory students spend one year taking courses like Chinese, math and physics, in essence, brushing up on basic skills. Then the students retake the college entrance examination. If they pass, they can immediately advance into the university.

Each year, as many as 1,000 preparatory students are enrolled in universities through Yunnan Province. The officials interviewed said that this program allows many minority students to qualify for university who would otherwise be excluded.

Institutes for the Nationalities

Starting in 1950, China began creating a network of 13 national minority institutes at key points throughout the country. These institutes were designed to bring higher education into minority areas for the first time in China's history. The Yunnan Institute for the Nationalities, located in Kunming, is one example. The institutes for nationalities have been hailed as "the most significant and unique creations of the Communist regime for minority education" (Hu 1970, p. 13).

Ninety-five percent of the students in the institutes come from minority groups. The institutes were founded with three goals: To train political activists, to preserve ethnic cultures and to prepare minority professionals to enter fields such as economics, agriculture, communication, transportation and teaching.

FINDINGS: TRAINING TEACHERS FOR MINORITY NATIONALITY AREAS

"The hope for vitalizing our nation lies in education," write Zhao Zhiguo and Xu Zhongxiang (1995, p. 34). "The hope for vitalizing education lies in teachers." Training–and retaining–qualified primary and middle school teachers for minority nationality areas were key concerns of all the officials interviewed during the field observation.

Education of Teachers

In keeping with this goal, 11 old secondary normal schools for the nationalities have been restored in Yunnan Province. Secondary normal schools are the equivalent of Chinese senior middle schools or American senior high schools. Students who attend secondary normal schools ordinarily become primary teachers directly after graduation. ("Normal school" means "teachers school.")

At all levels, minority students preparing to be teachers have most of their tuition, room and board paid for by the government. In exchange, they are required to return to their own hometowns or to other minority areas to teach after graduation. This provides an excellent source of well-qualified educators for minority areas, which have traditionally been plagued by huge teacher shortages.

In recent years, six three-year teachers colleges have been built in minority nationality areas of Yunnan Province (Zhao and Xu 1995, p. 35). Graduates of these three-year programs generally teach in junior middle schools attended by minorities.

Finally, Yunnan Normal University is a four-year key university located in the capital of Kunming. It has a 20 percent minority enrollment made up of students from 23 nationality groups. Yunnan Normal graduates are qualified to teach in senior middle schools and are strongly encouraged to accept jobs in minority areas.

Retention of Teachers

Simply training an adequate supply of qualified teachers is not enough. A long-standing problem has been encouraging teachers to stay at their posts in minority schools. The pay has always been low, and life has always been hard for school teachers in nationality areas.

Several government initiatives, aimed at improving teachers' housing and salaries, are underway to address this problem. In addition, Yunnan Province has developed a wide range of innovative incentives to get qualified teachers, minority and Han, back into nationality areas:

- Yunnan Normal University graduates willing to teach in the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County and the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture get free transportation back and forth to Kunming (Yu 1997).

- YNU students from Kunming receive an extra 2,000 or 3,000 yuan (about $250 to $375) if they will teach in the Tibet Autonomous Region for five or 10 years (Yu 1997).

- Furthermore, students who agree to accept such teaching posts are promised major promotions–and the privilege of moving to an urban area–after a given period at the remote location (Yu 1997).

- The Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture offers higher salaries, sometimes with no probationary period, to graduates who will teach there (Chen 1997).

Directive to Teachers

The provincial government has issued a special directive to all those involved with the teaching of ethnic students. The government has made clear, in word and in action, the high priority placed on minority education. As Professor Wu Baozhang (1997), the head of the School of Foreign Languages at Yunnan Normal University, explains:

> There is a special requirement for teachers...They should be more patient with and look after (minority) students. There is a special teaching method in colleges like Yunnan University and Yunnan Normal University. The provincial government asks the principal and teachers to concentrate more on minority students. Teachers should pay attention to minority students after they enter. First teachers should care about the students' problems in daily life. Their living conditions have changed ... Teachers should give minority students more time ... We often help them after class. If they need help, we help them first. We should be more patient with them.

During the field observation at Yunnan Normal, it was apparent that the directive of the provincial government was being taken seriously. A teacher in the Education Department told of a Wa nationality student who was attending the university with the financial support of the school where he had formerly taught. Some months the school did not send money for the student, so he had to borrow from other students to make ends meet. The Yunnan Normal teacher brought clothes from her family for the Wa student to wear. The teacher also made sure that the Wa student had school supplies, like notebooks and pens.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR MINORITY EDUCATION

In China, going to school costs money (Mackerras 1995, p. 138). Since the mid-1980s, tuition has been introduced. Various other additional costs may include texts, papers, pencils and food. The cost of primary school is small, but this rises first at the junior middle school and then again at the senior middle school levels.

It is important to remember that in minority areas, poverty is widespread. Because most minorities are not subject to the same stringent birth-control policies as the Han, minority families are generally larger. This means that more family members may need to be supported on what is often a limited income.

Obviously, given the limited income of minorities and the rising cost of schooling, financial support for minority education is critical. Numerous preferential policies benefiting minority nationalities have been discussed in the previous sections. The Chinese officials interviewed all noted that implementing such policies in minority areas requires a "huge sum of money" (Xu 1997). As Xu Zhongxiang, deputy chief of the Ethnic Minority Education Division of the Yunnan Education Commission, explains, "We invest a big sum of money in minority nationality areas now so that in the future we'll invest nothing. We must invest more now. Later if the degree of development equals that of the Han, then equality will be reached."

Chen Kai (1997), director of the Cultural and Educational Office of the Yunnan Nationalities Affairs Commission, notes that Yunnan concentrates a far greater proportion of its resources on education than do other provinces, "Yunnan Province has done particularly well with minority education," he says. "It has been praised highly by our (central) government. Because in Yunnan Province we have a long frontier, the unity of nationalities and the improvement of education are important to economic development." As mentioned earlier, educational and economic development for the minorities living on international borders is seen as contributing to China's political stability.

Many of the financial supports for minority education in Yunnan have been discussed, or at least alluded to, earlier. None of the programs discussed thus far could operate without substantial government funding. Building more schools, improving existing facilities, adding nationality classes and upgrading teacher quality in minority areas all require money.

In addition, the government invests heavily in the education of individual minority students. The amount of support available varies greatly, in different locations throughout Yunnan Province and at different times in students' academic careers. The brief remarks below are intended to give an overall idea of the kind of help a minority student attending school in Yunnan might receive.

Generally speaking, because of stipends granted by the provincial and central governments, minority nationality students do not have to pay for tuition, room and board. With few exceptions, this is true for students in primary schools, middle schools and in the two universities where field observation was done (Yunnan Normal University and the Yunnan Institute for the Nationalities).

At secondary normal schools, teachers colleges and Yunnan Normal University, students receive free tuition in exchange for agreeing to return to their home areas and to work as teachers. If the students do not, then they are expected to pay back the money the government has invested in their education.

The amount spent per year by Yunnan Province on education has increased substantially, from 1.97 billion yuan (about $246 million) in 1992 to 4.66 billion yuan (about $582 million) in 1997. (The total budget of Yunnan Province for 1997 was 31.3 billion yuan, about $3.91 billion).

Financial support for minority education comes from all levels of government–central, provincial, prefectural and county. This support then goes to all levels of schools–primary, secondary and tertiary. In addition, individual ethnic students receive regular stipends throughout their academic careers–stipends that cover everything from room and board to tuition and books–to prevent dropping out for financial reasons. The comprehensiveness and coordination of such efforts is truly remarkable.

ADDITIONAL POINTS ON NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

In China passage from one level of schooling to the next (primary school to junior middle school, junior middle school to senior middle school, and senior middle school to university)

depends on national examination scores. The better the school, the higher the score required to be admitted.

Minority students are awarded additional points, points that are added on to the actual marks they receive on the tests. In other words, minority students are allowed to enter schools with lower scores than would be needed by Han students.

"Because the development of minority nationality people is slow, to take care of them now helps them catch up in the future," said Xu of the Yunnan Education Commission's Ethnic Minority Education Division.

Precisely how the assignment of extra points to minority students works is open to some debate. Different informants had different explanations of how this immensely complex system operates. The information presented here represents a merging of several viewpoints.

In general, the scores needed for admission are reduced on the basis of where the student is from and to which group he or she belongs. Students in remote frontier regions far from cities get more additional points than do those in cosmopolitan urban areas. Students from the smallest minority groups, classified by the government as "the least developed economically and socially" (Lei, Luo and Tao 1997), also receive more points than do others.

The policy of awarding extra points to minority student applicants is an immensely important step toward educational equity in China. Minority students are at a huge disadvantage in the examination system as it presently exists for three reasons:

- First, and most importantly, many ethnic students grow up in homes where minority languages are spoken. The national curriculum, as well as the examinations, are administered in Mandarin Chinese.

- Second, ethnic students often do not enter the examination system with the same amount of cultural capital as Han students (Kwong 1983, p. 103). Comments like this one, by a Wa nationality student at Yunnan Normal University, were frequently heard during interviews: "In my village, we don't have electricity. Only recently did we get a road. The condition is very poor. People don't have the opportunity to go to other places." Clearly, growing up in such environments places ethnic students at a distinct disadvantage on the all important examinations that determine progress from one school to the next.

- Third, educated parents in China spend hundreds of hours tutoring children at home in order to ensure success on the national exams. Minority parents, who may themselves have limited education, are less likely to be able to provide this kind of tutoring necessary to earn high examination scores.

The policy of awarding additional points on national examinations, like China's other preferential policies for minority students, is targeted toward those ethnic groups with the greatest needs. In other words, it is the least privileged students who receive the most help.

CONCLUSION: WHAT MINORITY EDUCATION IN CHINA CAN TEACH US ABOUT MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Robert Merton, one of the most influential American sociologists of the 20th century, has written: "More is learned from the single success than from the multiple failures. A single success proves it can be done, Thereafter, it is necessary only to learn what made it work" (Merton 1968, p. 490). Observing ethnic minority students who succeed and the school systems that enable their success has great value. Such observation provides models for others, worldwide, who work toward educational access for all people.

Overwhelming historical and political differences exist between China and the United States. It would be foolish to suggest that American education should mirror exactly what exists in China. Nevertheless, this paper will conclude with three key lessons learned from the Chinese study that have important implications for American education.

Lesson #1: Ethnicity

A strong ethnic identity empowers students to succeed in school.

Chinese culture acknowledges and values the connectedness of all things. A tight web of micro-interactions links ethnic students to their families, communities and minority groups. This web has a tremendous ability to help ethnic students overcome obstacles and succeed in school. Minority students in China succeed in large part because of the tremendous sacrifices made by their families to ensure their success. Minority students chosen to attend university are regularly honored for their achievement by their villages.

The standard approach of American educators is quite different from the Chinese example. In the United States many programs aimed at helping ethnic youth get into college are focused on the individual (Tierney 2002, pp. 213-256). The families and communities where ethnic students are raised are often excluded from minority college recruitment and retention programs. The minority student's immediate family and home neighborhood are regarded as factors that must be left behind if the student is going to succeed in school. The goal of many minority college retention programs is to convert the students involved into individuals who can survive in the existing, predominantly white educational system.

Clearly, at present in the U.S, the emphasis is on minority student assimilation into mainstream culture as the path to academic success. Far more attention needs to be paid to the empowering role that ethnicity plays in the academic success of minority students.

Lesson #2: Expectation

Minority students do well in school when they are expected to do well in school.

"If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). William Thomas' much quoted adage well explains the behavior of social actors in

China's minority education system. Minority students, repeatedly defined as achievers by significant others, begin to see themselves that way. Parents, neighbors and teachers of successful minority students expect them to excel in school and go to university. They reiterate this message to the students in the repeated micro-interactions that are part of the identity construction process.

In addition, at the macro level, many large-scale government programs exist that allow this expectation to become a reality. Chinese policy-makers expect their huge investment in minority education to make a difference. During interviews, Chinese leaders said that preferential policies, in education and employment, are necessary in order to level the playing field for minority nationalities. The PRC truly expects its minority nationalities to achieve full equality with the Han majority–and it has come a long way toward accomplishing this goal. Preferential policies are significantly increasing the number of ethnic people who graduate from the university and return to minority areas with the skills and the power to improve the quality of life there.

Trueba and Zou (1994, p. 211) explain this well:

> Ideas are powerful and universities generate many of them. Mao knew this, and he wanted to change the intellectual climate of universities by exposing them to the life of the peasantry, and consequently, breaking the elitist and exclusivist life of many higher education institutions in China. The reality that has followed Mao's Revolution is modern China, not far from what he envisioned; a country in which peasants could have access to education and thus are capable of moving up the ladder.

The concept of expectation operates far differently for ethnic students in the U.S. There is a culture of schooling that is pervasive in American classrooms. It is a culture that exists through mechanisms like academic tracking and differential treatment for students from various ethnic groups. The culture of schooling is based on negative expectations for some students and positive expectations for others. (This argument grows directly out of the writings of William Tierney 2002, pp. 214-218). These expectations are communicated daily to students by people with authority over them–teachers, counselors and principals. The culture of schooling in the United States is based on strong definitions, definitions that empower some students to succeed and disable other students who fail. Many minority students come to view failure as the norm. The notion of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" at work in American classrooms has been well documented over the past thirty years. Examples range from *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal and Jacobson1968) to *Constructing School Success* (Mehan and others 1996).

American educators should learn from their Chinese counterparts. Educators need to work constantly to create a definition of the situation that assumes success for minority students. Teachers and administrators must expect minority students to complete high school and to graduate from college–and they must communicate these expectations to the students clearly and repeatedly. This important identity work must be ongoing every day in every school, if more minority students are to succeed academically.

But doing this one-on-one identity work, identity work that allows minority students to succeed in the system as it presently exists, is not enough. That observation leads to the third and final lesson to be learned from Chinese minority education.

Lesson #3: "Swimming Pools"

"One cannot be a swimmer in the absence of a pool" (Stryker 1989, p. 53). Educators, policy-makers and citizens must become builders of "swimming pools." They must work to build and defend those large-scale support structures proven to help minority students succeed in school.

China's system of preferential policies, roughly akin to affirmative action in the United States, is highly effective and worth emulating. As Mary Berry (1979, p. 158) notes, "The Chinese (are) moving rationally and realistically in a field that led to confusion and near-hysteria in the United States." Nearly every ethnic student interviewed for this project attributed some of his or her success in school to the government's preferential policies. The students seem to have a sense of efficacy due to the existence of preferential policies. ("Efficacy," as it is used here, means the power to influence one's environment and to control one's destiny.) These students, who face tremendous economic and cultural barriers to academic success, see preferential policies as a fundamental step taken by the government on their behalf to level the playing field. These students respond to the government's help, with a Confucian sense of obligation and responsibility. Most of the ethnic students interviewed see themselves becoming teachers, returning to minority areas and repaying the investment the government has made in their education.

It is interesting to compare the province of Yunnan to the state of California in regard to government support. (Yunnan and California are similar in area and have highly diverse populations.) During the past decade Yunnan has been implementing numerous preferential policies benefiting minority nationality groups. In contrast, California has been voting to end bilingual education, affirmative action and other initiatives that help ethnic students. As Trueba and Zou (1994, p. 23) explain, "While China has taken drastic measures and used enforcement methods disliked in Western societies to assure equality of groups since 1949 ... , Western societies have maintained institutional inequalities and the mistreatment of minorities in ways that would not happen in China."

Minority students in the United States begin to underachieve during early adolescence, at an age when they start to realize the limitations of their environment and social position. As these students become more aware of the world around them and their chances for success in it, they start lowering their educational aspirations. (See Maynard and Twiss 1969, pp. 94-99 for an example of work in this area.) Would minority students in the U.S. feel more empowered to succeed in school if vigorous affirmative action policies supported their efforts? The answer, based on this research, is a resounding "yes."

For the successful ethnic students involved in this project, two factors allowed them to achieve academically–a sense of self and a sense of efficacy. The sense of self grows out of the identity construction process undertaken by the students with significant others at the micro level. Self-

conceptions are strongly influenced by social structures. The existence of preferential policies, created by the government at the macro level, leads to a sense of efficacy by individual students.

How does one explain academic success where failure is expected? This paper is one attempt. In many ways it raises more questions than answers. It is clear, however, that attending to both micro- and macro-level concerns is critical. How persons affect collectivities and how collectivities affect persons over time is a key concern of all social scientists (Huber 1991, p. 11). The micro-macro linkages explored in this study are just one part of a much larger question to be addressed by future research.

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