Muslim Narratives of Schooling, Social Mobility and Cultural Difference: A Case Study in Multi-ethnic Northwest China

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Abstract
This paper draws upon fieldwork among a Muslim community in the Qinghai-Gansu borderland areas to explore how the desire of Muslims to achieve social mobility through education is blocked by the larger society which regards them as ‘familiar strangers’. This can be understood as a tension between their desire for full social citizenship in the form of rights to employment and education and the limited social and cultural capital they possess that prevents them from achieving the former. This tension is primarily caused by the party-state’s ambivalence over the project of state nation building and minority rights. By focusing on Muslim narratives of their experiences in the cultural exclusion, this case study attempts to scrutinize how the cultural exclusion affects the engagement of ethnic minorities in education as well as the larger society, although it has been recognized that the experience of exclusion varies between minority groups.

This paper draws upon fieldwork among a Muslim community to explore how the desire of Muslims to achieve social mobility through education is blocked by the larger society which regards them as ‘familiar strangers’ (Lipman, 1997). This can be understood as a tension between their desire for full social citizenship in the form of rights to employment and education, and the decrease of the limited social and cultural capital they possess that prevents them from achieving the former. This tension is primarily caused by the party-state’s ambivalence over the project of state nation building and minority rights. By focusing on Muslim narratives of their experiences in the cultural exclusion, this case study attempts to scrutinize how the cultural exclusion affects the engagement of ethnic minorities in education as well as the larger society, although it has been recognized that the experience of exclusion varies between minority groups.

There are ten officially recognized ethnic minority groups committed to Islam in China, who can be basically divided into two blocs, those mainly residing in Xinjiang (Kazak, Kirgiz, Tajik, Tatar, Uygur and Uzbek) and those across all China but especially in the Gansu-Ningxia-Qinghai (GNQ) borderland areas (Bonan, Dongxiang, Hui and Salar). Unlike the former, who are indigenous to Xinjiang, the latter are mainly the descendants of local people and of Muslims who migrated to China from the Middle East or Central Asia between the seventh and fourteenth centuries for business reasons or in the wake of war. This difference helps foster different ethnic identifications among, for instance, Uygur and Hui, respectively the largest groups in the two blocs. Academically, Muslims in the Xinjiang are labeled Turкic and Indo-European Muslim, while the Hui is Chinese Muslim. In this paper, ‘Muslim’ refers particularly to the Gansu-Ningxia-Qinghai bloc.
cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) they originally had due to their growing marginalization in society. This tension is primarily caused by the ambiguity of the state policy that on the one hand guarantees citizens rights to cultural freedom and on the other hand keeps sanctioning these rights, which are embedded in the party-state’s ambivalence over the package of state nation building and minority rights. The first three sections will depict the educational setting, educational level and school performance of Muslims. Sections 4 and 5 reveal Muslims’ disengagement from mainstream schools, which are caused by their diminishing cultural and social capital. Section 6 argues that the reluctant attitude among both Muslim parents and children towards school education is hard to overcome if they cannot see the social system delivering significant improvement with regard to the social and cultural rights of their community as a whole. This case study reflects a general pattern across the country in the way that the state policy exercises exclusion of minority cultures in comparison with what it entitles the Han majority to, and how this cultural exclusion affects the engagement of ethnic minorities in education as well as in the larger society, although it has been recognized that the experience of exclusion varies between minority groups.

**Fieldwork**

I carried out my fieldwork among Han, Muslim and Tibetan communities in Huangnan Prefecture in Qinghai province, bordering Gansu province. Qinghai province has the third highest proportion of minorities (45.97%) among over 30 provinces and regions in China (PBRSKT, 2002). For several centuries, the east of Qinghai and the neighboring parts in Gansu have been inhabited by several different ethnic groups. The region has therefore historically been a hub of communication between various ethnic groups who are respectively identified with Tibetan Buddhism (the Tibetan, Mongolian and Tu), Islam (the Hui, Salar, Bonan and Dongxiang) and Confucianism/atheism (mainly the Han). So for minorities, this area is a frontier where

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2 Social capital has three forms, bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam, 2000: 22–23; Woolcock, 2001: 13). Bridging social capital refers to a form of social networking that includes people across diverse social cleavages, while bonding social capital means a social connection that tends to stress the identity of a group which is constituted in an inward and homogeneous way, and potentially excludes others who are external to it. ’Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity’ (Putnam, 2000: 23), whereas bonding social capital bolsters narrower selves and in-groups loyalty, and may also create out-group antagonism. Linking social capital, unlike bridging capital that functions horizontally, connects groups or individuals to others in different social positions, e.g. more powerful or socially advantaged, and hence refers to a vertical network. It is a linkage to formal institutions from which resources, ideas and information can be leveraged (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001; NESF, 2003). In this paper, linking social capital will be paid most attention for the reasons that it is directly associated with power relations, the departure point of my research, and it is largely ignored by many (positivistic) social capital theorists. For detailed discussion, see the theoretical chapter of my Ph.D. thesis.

3 As a comparative case study, see my paper on Tibetans: Choosing between Ethnic and Chinese Citizenships: The Educational Trajectories of Tibetan Minority Children in Northwestern China (2005).
they encounter mainstream culture as well as other minority cultures. Furthermore, this is also an area of agricultural, pastoral and urban populations. This allows for the consideration of the educational experiences and choices of students from both rural and urban backgrounds.

Formal fieldwork for this project was conducted between February and June 2003. The main source materials for this paper are government documents, questionnaires and interviews with school people (secondary school students, teachers, etc.) and parents. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the parents include government officials, public servants, manual workers, self-employed business people or farmers. Interviews were conducted respectively in schools, offices or private houses. Data collection activities involved 19 semi-structured interviews with Muslim students of Hui, Salar, Bonan or their mixture, most were interviewed in pairs, some individually; a few were interviewed together with their fellow students from other ethnic backgrounds. Among the nine Muslim parents I interviewed, six (three couples) were interviewed in pairs, and three were interviewed individually. All the parents were interviewed with questions that were loosely structured around the themes of education, society and ethnic minority cultures. This was complemented by intensive observation in two classrooms for one week each.

**State education for Muslims***

My field site is Longwu Township, the seat of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Longwu can be divided into two parts, the old town and the new town. In 2002–03, there were three primary and four secondary schools in the town. Among them, the First and Third Primary, and the Prefecture Secondary are mainstream schools with Chinese as the medium of instruction; the Second Primary and the other three secondary schools adopt Tibetan as the medium of instruction. Hence the three mainstreams are the schools for Muslims, who are Chinese speakers.

The Muslims arrived in the area in response to a call from the reincarnation of Buddha in the Longwu monastery. The call was made for business people from Muslim areas nearby at the end of the nineteenth century. This led to the emergence of a market town with Muslims as the major residents in the area. After the prefectural government was established in Longwu in 1953, it quickly became apparent that the district where the old market town is located was too narrow and small for the rapidly growing seat of the prefectural government. Under these circumstances, a new town was built and

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4 Most figures or numbers in this section are extracted from HZZBW (1999) and TXBW (2001).

5 This is also a reflection of a province-wide informal consensus that ethnic minority education (minzu jiaoyu) prioritizes Tibetans or Tibetan speakers over Muslims. Also see Ma Mingliang (1999).

6 This is a simplified categorization. Actually among four Muslim groups (see note 1), the first language of the three non-Hui groups is not Chinese. I have defined all of them as Chinese speakers because these three Muslim groups are very small in numbers, and have largely mastered Chinese. Also see Gladney (2003).
developed to the west of the old town between 1954 and the middle of the 1970s. From 1984, a town reconstruction project was embarked upon. Over the past five decades of the town construction, most state-run businesses in the old town were gradually either closed down or moved to the new town. This led a number of mainly Han residents who were working in the state system to move from the old town to the new one. Meeting the requirements of these people for the education of their children, for whom it was hard to continue attending the First Primary in the old town, the Third Primary was established in the early 1970s in the new town. The percentage of Muslim students in the First Primary thus rose compared to the Han population, which largely vacated it. This change eventually turned the Third Primary into the most prestigious school of its kind in the area despite a shorter history than the First Primary, and this was cultivated by the government officials whose children were studying in the Third Primary.

This demographic move also means that better-off customers (state employees) were drawn away to the new town. Gradually, a growing number of Muslim families had to close down their small stores or restaurants in the old town and open businesses in the new town. After this ‘upward’ mobility of residents from the old town, particularly in the past one or two decades, the traditionally market area came to mainly function as a ‘self-contained’ residential area of the Muslim community, which was characterized by a declining economy and with daily life based around the Mosque.

This demographic change also impacted on local secondary education. Originally there were two mainstream secondary schools in the Longwu area, the Tongren County Secondary in the old town with Muslims as the largest group, and the Prefecture Secondary in the new town. After moving their businesses to the new town, some Muslim families also transferred their children to the Prefecture Secondary. This mobility was also propelled by the priority policy of the government towards the Prefecture Secondary through, for instance, selecting students with higher achievement for the Prefecture Secondary (with the result that less able students went to the County Secondary).

Meanwhile, over the past decade or so, students in the Prefecture Secondary have kept moving out to the schools in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province, and the vicinities, to pursue a higher level of education. In other words, while the County Secondary has declined substantially in the past decade, the Prefecture Secondary has also been experiencing a certain decrease in student numbers. As a result, the County Secondary was annexed to the Prefecture Secondary in 2002.

7 New cadres from outside the town were also an important source of the growing number of Han households in the new town.

8 A similar residential segregation of Muslims from other ethnic groups can also be seen elsewhere. See, for example, Liu (1997).

9 Tongren is one of four counties under the administration of Huangnan Prefecture, where the prefectural government is located.
The educational level of Muslims

One Muslim community and three Tibetan villages

The normative criterion in China to assess the educational level is called the cultural level (wenhua chengdu) or level of received education (shou jiaoyu chengdu). This is measured by looking at the number of years of education received or completed in the state educational system. The different levels are labeled illiterate (wenmang), semi-illiterate (ban wenmang), primary level (xiaoxue), junior secondary level (chuzhong), senior secondary or secondary technical level (gaozhong, zhongzhuan), college or university (dazhuan, benke), postgraduate at masters level (shuoshi yanjiusheng) and at doctorate level (boshi yanjiusheng). The compulsory stage from primary to junior secondary lasts nine years (jiunian yiwu jiaoyu).

Longwu Township administers all three Muslim administrative communities in the Longwu area, and several Tibetan villages surrounding Longwu Township. Among these Tibetan villages, those closest to Longwu Township tend to have a higher educational level than those further away. The data in Table 1 in the Appendix is the educational level of one Muslim community and the three closest Tibetan villages, from which some trends can be seen.

- Traditionally Muslims in the Longwu area had a much lower illiteracy rate compared to Tibetans. The rate of the Muslims born before the 1970s is 24.70%. By contrast, the Tibetans in three villages have an illiteracy rate of 44.58% on average.

- The illiteracy rate of Muslims has not been reduced as much as that of Tibetans over the past two decades (see D1 and D2). Even in absolute terms, among the Muslim population who are born after the 1970s, there are still eleven people who are illiterate. Whilst among the Tibetans, the corresponding number is thirty for three villages, i.e. ten for each on average. Among those born after the 1980s, the corresponding number for the Muslim community is three (2.17% out of the cohort) and for the three Tibetan villages is two (0.59% out of the cohort).

- At the other end of the spectrum, the rate of Muslim population at college level is the second lowest as a whole. Nevertheless, this rate is not significantly higher than the lowest rate of a Tibetan group (T3), whereas it is significantly lower than the highest rate possessed by another Tibetan group (T1). In other words, the Muslim community does not appear to be in an advanced position in comparison with three Tibetan villages at college level.

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10 ‘Level of received education’, a more neutral term, replaced ‘cultural level’, a term underpinned by China’s ‘civilizing mission’ (Gladney, 1999: 58) in the Fifth Census in 2000 (PBRSKT, 2002). However, ‘cultural level’ is still the preferred vernacular expression. For a concise and persuasive discussion of the constellation of culture-related terms in the educational context, see Gladney (1999: 58–62). A relevant discussion can also be found in Harrell (1995).

11 Extracted from the local government documents.
In short, both from a developmental perspective and in absolute terms, Muslims as a whole in the Longwu area have lagged behind in education over the past one or two decades. This is particularly striking when taking into consideration the fact that the Muslims are urban dwellers, whereas the Tibetans are rural residents.

Parents of students in the mainstream school and the Tibetan minority school

Table 2 in the Appendix is the illiteracy rate and average years of schooling of the parents of my respondents in both the mainstream school (MS) and a Tibetan minority school (TMS). The information here echoes the educational trend of the Muslim community.

In MS, the parents of Tibetans and of students from other ethnic backgrounds constitute one end of the spectrum, characterized by lower illiteracy rates (0 and 3.85% respectively regardless of difference caused by gender, the same hereafter) and longer schooling years (11.46 and 10.06). At the other end are Muslim parents with higher illiteracy rates (28.33%) and shorter schooling years (5.54). As urban dwellers, the educational level of Muslim parents of children in MS is just slightly higher than that of Tibetan parents of children in TMS, the vast majority of whom are rural dwellers. Therefore, in the mainstream school, where the students are from the urban areas, Muslim students possess the poorest educational capital.12

The school performance of Muslim students

There are no local official statistics available that set out the academic achievement of students along the lines of ethnicity. As the Prefecture Secondary became the only choice for the Muslims in Longwu, Muslim students make up the second largest part of the student body (31.63%) after the Han (34.79%). The following three sets of data in Table 3 were collected in the mainstream secondary. The first set (EJ) is the outcome of the end-of-year examinations of junior third year students in 2002. The second (ES) is that of the senior first year students in 2002. The junior third year is the final year of compulsory education, while the senior first year is the first year of post-compulsory education. The third set (EE) is the outcome of the senior secondary entrance examinations of students in the Tongren area in 2002.13 Table 4 is the ethnic population in the mainstream school in 2002–03 and in Tongren County in 2002.

Some conclusions can be drawn from the data in Tables 3 and 4:

1. As a whole, Muslim students perform poorly when compared to students from other ethnic backgrounds. This can be seen in Table 3.

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12 This also echoes a widely reported lower educational level of Muslims in the GNQ borderlands. See, e.g. Liu (1997) and Ma Mingliang (1999).

13 In order to enter the post-compulsory level, students are required to sit senior secondary entrance examinations (zhongkao) and must meet a certain standard. However, due to a decline in student numbers, in the past few years the school tended to take in all examinees, as I was told by one of the school officials.
2. Although the percentage of the Muslim students in the ordinary class was only 1.5 times that in the key class, while this discrepancy among the Tibetan students was four times, this did not necessarily lead to a better outcome for the Muslim students for the year as a whole (see ES in Table 3 and SF in Table 4 both in the Appendix).  

3. The percentage of Muslim students in post-compulsory education was significantly reduced. By contrast, the other three groups turned out to have a higher percentage at the post-compulsory stage (see JT and SF in Table 4). 

4. In the senior secondary entrance examinations in 2002, the number of Han examinees was nearly 2.5 times that of Muslim examinees (see EE in Table 3). On the other hand, the Han population in 2002 was below two times the Muslim population (see EP Table 4). This demonstrates the lower proportion of Muslim students entered for the examinations. 

In short, in terms of school performance, Muslim students tend to have a lower record in academic achievement and fewer will continue to study at the post-compulsory stage. In addition, in an interview with a Muslim community leader, I was also told that there were over ten Muslim students who dropped out in this academic year, a dropout rate of about 7 or 8%. This is a high figure compared to what I was told in interviews with schoolteachers, administrators or parents – that dropouts were rare in the School. 

**Pessimistic views of Muslim parents: a key force**

*An overview of Muslims and school education*

As expected, no Muslim parents told me that it is useless to send children to school. Meanwhile, there were two shared ideas regarding school education among them. One is that, historically speaking, Muslims did not particularly invest in school education, and such a neglect of school education meant that they lagged behind Han, and more recently (over the past one or two decades) also lagged behind Tibetans because of this continuing neglect (Interview 030201, -02, -05). Second, there exists a disparity

14 The distinction between the two classes is determined by students’ senior secondary entrance examinations grades. The top half of the students was allocated to the key class and the poorer half to the ordinary one. This streaming of students by academic achievement has been abolished officially on the principle of non-discrimination. This was also the reason why the school officials denied that they were still streaming students in this way when asked. Nonetheless, both the students and teachers in the senior first year told me that the students in this year were streamed though this was not a school-wide policy. 

15 It is inappropriate to include Tibetan students in this comparison because the majority of Tibetans are rural. According to my observation, almost all the Tibetan students from the Longwu urban area continued into senior secondary study. This can also be seen from the percentages of Tibetan students in junior third and senior first year, 8.72 and 9.60. 

16 Again, poor school performance is a widespread phenomenon in GNQ borderlands. See, for instance, Liu (1997) and Ma Mingliang (1999).
between cadres (ganbu) and ordinary people (qunzhong)\textsuperscript{17} in the degree of enthusiasm for sending their children to school. While cadres tend to encourage their children to study hard in order to eventually go to university, what ordinary Muslim parents expect their children to do with education is confined to achieving two primary goals: to receive some basic education in relation to literacy and numeracy in order to be able to deal with (mostly family-run) business and daily life; and to obtain a graduation certificate (biyezheng), an essential qualification for the labour market. In addition, the school can also keep their children from hanging around with dubious characters in society who they would encounter if they were not sent to school.

Nevertheless, their children can or are expected to stop studying when mature enough to help the family in business or with earnings, or to prepare for marriage. This usually occurs when the children are 15 years old or so, at the age when they just finish their studies at the junior secondary phase, i.e. having completed the nine years’ compulsory education required by the state. Therefore, this age is regarded by some parents as a turning point in their children’s life in many respects.

On the whole, the historical ‘tradition’ of neglecting school education among the Muslims does not seem to have significantly reduced. This lack of enthusiasm for school study of their children is reflected in the poverty of their response to my question as to whether or not it is useful to send children to school. Instead, Muslim parents from both cadre and ordinary backgrounds spent much more time speaking about the barriers they have encountered in the larger society that are directly or indirectly associated with the school education of their children, and the resulting hopelessness.

**Barriers from the larger society**

There are mainly three outlets (chulu) for Muslim children that are envisaged by their parents: to study in the Mosque or Arab countries with the aim of becoming a Mullah; to be engaged in family business or any other business outside the state system, i.e. irregular jobs such as temporary waiters, shop assistants, or drivers; or to become a cadre working in a state work unit. Among the three choices, there is very limited demand for more Mullahs in mosques, and to go to Arab countries to study is not a better alternative when they cannot afford to send their children to study abroad. Last, but not insignificantly, the change towards a knowledge economy also makes the idea of ending up in a Mosque much less desirable. They do not consider that they can learn

\textsuperscript{17} People working in state work units are traditionally called ganbu (cadre), and are distinguished from qunzhong (ordinary people) – rural people (e.g. numerous Tibetans, Mongolians and Tu) and self-employed urban dwellers (mainly Muslims). Ganbu have tiefanwan (iron rice bowl, i.e. a secure job), which entitles them to full state welfare services ranging from health care and education to an urban residence permit (chengzheng hukou). In this sense, ganbu can also be used to refer to working class people in state work units, despite the fact that their socioeconomic status is far lower than those non-working class ganbu. Recently the line between ganbu and qunzhong is tending to become blurred as a result of privatization and marketization, but the labels are still popular because of tradition and the fact that nowadays in China, especially in remote areas like Huangnan, the disparity between ganbu and the masses is still conspicuous. Therefore the term ‘cadre’ in this paper will be applied in this sense, unless indicated otherwise.
the kind of useful knowledge, such as sciences or English, which will prepare them for a growing standardized labour market, both nationally and globally, in mosques.

As for engagement in non-state business, given the hardship of this kind of job and the sluggishness of the local economy, this did not appear to be a more attractive choice to them. Moreover, the locally dominant Tibetans have, over the past decade, started to take over quite a number of businesses from Muslims after realizing how much they had ‘lost’ economically, as they have not in the past engaged in commerce, a field that was traditionally dominated or ‘occupied’ by Muslims. For instance, in the main commercial streets of the new town, half of the enterprises are now run by Tibetans, while only a few Tibetan but more Muslim enterprises could be found several years ago.

The last outlet for Muslim graduates is to become a cadre. This, compared to the other two outlets, is even more difficult, though it may be more attractive to those Muslims who feel strongly in need of a better socioeconomic status. This has several different causes. In the first place, this is a Tibetan autonomous region, and therefore has a Tibetan-priority policy. Among current local government officials, Muslims are under-represented, particularly at the highest rank – namely, at prefectural level (see Table 5 Appendix). Because Tibetans are in the majority, it has also been difficult for Muslim candidates to be elected to government positions.

This disproportionateness of Muslims among top cadres has meant that the Muslim community as a whole lacks social capital in relation to the state system. This directly affects the number of Muslims who are recruited by state work units as a cadre. The perception that it is difficult for Muslims to enter the state system is also informed by the under-representation of Muslims in top leadership positions in both the central and provincial governments. Top leaders of the prefecture or province seemed indifferent to this situation. Another practical obstacle preventing some Muslims from becoming a cadre is that the state in effect discourages public servants from going on a pilgrimage to Mecca by making it difficult for them to get a passport until they are over 50 years old, when they are unlikely to take the opportunity to stay on abroad (Interview 030202).

Muslims who work in state units also have less opportunity for promotion. I was told that this was because they did not like to have social intercourse (yingchou) with their Han colleagues because they would have to smoke, drink, play mahjong or go to Karaoke as their Han colleagues normally do. Being able to do these things is regarded as very important for a public servant. More than this, some Muslim cadres who wear their caps or veils are disgusted by some of their superiors or colleagues because these superiors or colleagues ‘wanted everyone to look like Han’, and ‘they would not feel comfortable until they could not distinguish on the basis of their appearance those who are Muslim from those who are Han’ (Interview 030202). Under such pressure, some Muslims give way to these unofficial requirements made by officials, though they then face pressure from their family or community (Interview 030203). Those who

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18 On the situation in Qinghai, see Ma Mingliang (1999).
keep practicing their customs would be ‘kindly’ reminded by their leaders from time to time that they had better not do so, or simply had their names removed from the list of any promotion or award opportunity, which is directly linked to their salary and cadre welfare benefits (Interview 030202).

Some respondents also talked about the possibility of working in Han-dominated neidi (the interior, i.e. ‘China proper’). But in their mind this was even more difficult if not impossible because of a lack of the necessary cultural level or social circles for competing with Han there, and a likely gap in daily life that is caused by their religious customs. In comparison, in Huangnan, in spite of the domination of Tibetans, there is still some historically formed space in business for Muslims, though this is also threatened today.

In this light, while tuition fees steadily go up, to send children to school is not a more persuasive option. This is not to say that there is not a reasonable number of Muslims who would like to provide their children with a school education. On an individual level, cadre parents insisted on the necessity of education as mentioned earlier; on a community level, Muslim elites have realized the importance of encouraging their younger generations to receive a reasonable level of education to enhance the public profile and status of the community, which will in return create the opportunities to promote their economic performance. Nevertheless, due to significant barriers ahead of them, some of them, while expressing their definite willingness to give their offspring a school education, and also encouraging other Muslim parents to do so, presented their uncertainty and confusion about whether or not keep their children in schools or to what extent they are able to manage this (Interview 030202). These barriers become more serious when Muslim parents are ordinary people, i.e. without any relations with the state system.

All in all, Muslim parents generally felt marginalized in society, and particularly in recruitment to and promotion in state work units. This has caused the limited social capital they originally had to decrease. It seriously cast a pessimistic shadow on their motivation to send their children to school. In turn, their social and political status has kept dropping as their political and social awareness of participation becomes weaker.

**Barriers from the school**

The enthusiasm of Muslim families for sending children to school is also affected by the school curriculum. This is reflected in their dissatisfaction about the school culture and what is being taught in school, and also in their desire for a Muslim minority school.

In schools, Muslim-related practice, such as praying, wearing caps/veils or leaving for holidays, is discouraged.19 Concern with this among Muslim parents is common.

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19 Contrary to my expectations, few Muslim parents addressed the issue of a mixed gender school, which seemed to be a major concern of the Muslims Gladney observed (1999). This seems to be associated with the distinction between rural and urban areas.
As most of them put it, even if Muslim children are required to stay in school during the holidays such as Muharram, they cannot really concentrate on studying. By contrast, if they are allowed to go home for the holiday, parents and children will be grateful, and in return they will support the school more actively. Nonetheless, Muslims, including Muslim teachers, are subjected to this form of ethnic penalty. In the County Secondary, a Muslim teacher decided to put on his white cap because he wanted to influence his Muslim students positively by publicly offering a model of disciplining himself in this way. As an unexpected result, one of the deputy head-teachers, who had trusted and respected this teacher, stopped speaking to him for a week (Interview 030202).

The more serious concern is that the curriculum excludes Islamic knowledge. One community leader traced this back to 1958, when the Democratic Reform and Religious Reform terminated the course of Islamic knowledge that the school offered students. He insisted that introducing a course of Islamic knowledge, even if only for one or two hours a week, would be politically significant, because it would embody the equality policy of the state in the sense that this would promote the status of the Muslim community and their religion (Interview 030205). Given the fact of the low socio-political status of Muslims, it is not surprising that this was a wide consensus among my respondents (Interview 030202, -03, -05, -06).

In terms of knowledge itself, most parents also expressed the importance for their children and for themselves of having the opportunity to be educated in Islamic knowledge. They would otherwise become ‘false Hui’ (jia Hui). In other words, what concerned many parents is the potential sinicization of their children, which is informed by the fact that some Muslim children and parents resisted Islamic knowledge due to an atheistic education in school, which ‘has already been branded (into their mindset)’ (Interview 030203). This tendency is undermining the basis of their community in the sense that they are worried that the Muslim, as an ethno-religious community, will eventually be silenced or sinicized.

**A call for Muslim minority school(s)**

Muslim parents wish for a Muslim minority school that provides students with Islamic content rather than one which merely offers a Halal canteen, as can be found nationwide. In their mind, establishing a minority school with a relevant curriculum

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20 The relevant information can be obtained from HZZBW (1999: 1430); Teng (2002: 297); Teng and Wang (2001: 197–198).

21 Based on John Bowen’s model generated from a Muslim Malay community, Gladney proposed a similar suggestion of two disparate streams in the transmission of Islamic knowledge – the Muslim community and the state education. These two streams are respectively characterized by those educated in Islamic knowledge and those in the Marxist-Leninist view of Islam and religion. ‘This two track system has led to increasingly distinct public and private spheres among Muslims in China’ (Gladney, 1999: 85).

22 Gladney (1999) observed that Arabic language study is much more advanced in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region due to the influence of the Arabic script in Uygur and the proximity to Pakistan from the Region.
for Muslims would enhance enrolment rates of Muslim students. Further, they mentioned that across the whole country, there are few institutions where people can learn Arabic, and, if this was introduced into the curriculum of Muslim minority schools, this would benefit both the community and country rather than do harm to the state. In other words, the country will benefit through cultivating personnel specializing in Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language, which is appropriate for an increasing development of the relationship between China and the Arab countries.

A desire for a Muslim minority school also reveals a concern about a safe space for the well being of their children in schooling. Muslims are generally perceived not to be interested in or good at schooling. According to some parents, since teachers hold such views about Muslims, they will be very likely to stereotype Muslim students: do you want to learn culture (knowledge)? Isn’t it true that (Muslim) girls will get married and boys will run a restaurant when they are 18 years old (Interview 030203)? Even Muslim parents themselves also encounter such prejudice. When some teachers reject views or suggestions about school education from Muslim parents, they will say: why do you have so much to say? You have just got such a (poor) child (Interview 030205)? It is even difficult for Muslim students with high academic achievement to avoid such a label from teachers: yes you are capable (of study), this is not easy for you (as a Muslim) (Interview 030203). Another reason for Muslims to call for a minority school is driven by the severe problem of bullying of Muslim children both in and out of schools, which is likely to end up with their dropping out of school.

A call for a state-run Muslim minority school is reflected in the Muslim community’s lack of confidence in the Islamic knowledge imparted in their community-based education. In their words, religious education offered by their community is neither systematic nor deep enough (Interview 030202, -03). Some parents even said that they preferred not to send their children to the Mosque to study because of a concern with sectarianism. In the same vein, they would also not send their children to study in Arab countries. Interestingly enough, both parents who either emphasized religious education or put school education in the first place shared the view that the state should support and organize religious education for Muslims, since this would make the education of Muslim students formal and systematic, and would also avoid the clashes that may be caused by Muslims who are running religious education themselves.

Nevertheless, their arguments usually ended up in pessimism. It would be extremely difficult if not entirely impossible to establish such a school in Longwu for two reasons: this is a Tibetan-dominated region, i.e. Muslims do not have voice; the Muslim population is not large enough for a Muslim minority school.

Unfortunately, a higher enrolment rate does not necessarily lead to a better school performance according to some of my respondents who are from those Muslim autonomous regions in the GNQ borderlands. The main reason to appear in their descriptions is that (most) Muslims in these regions are rural. Relatedly, these Muslims appear to be more religious (Interview 030109, 010306, -07). For similar findings of poor performance of Muslims, see Gladney (1999), Liu (1997) and Ma Mingliang (1999).
To sum up, on the one hand, it is hard for Muslim parents to see the benefits that accrue to them by sending their children to school, and this has reduced their enthusiasm for doing so. At the same time, encountering physical or symbolic hostility from the national mainstream cultural group, the Han, or locally dominant group, the Tibetan, in the process of schooling or the larger society, also negatively affect the school performance of their children. On the other hand, they were well aware that their public profile and social status would be even lower and finally result in less opportunity for them to prosper if their offspring did not receive school education as Tibetans and Han are doing. Nonetheless, they feel confused about and hence struggle over how (and how far) to reconcile the two contested sides.

Students’ struggle between different ‘cultures’

As indicated earlier, Muslim students on the whole have lower achievement than average. The most salient phenomenon relating to their school performance is that there is a reluctant attitude to schooling that permeates them. This can even be the case among the best Muslim students. Two of the high achievers, when asked if they would like to consider studying in the Mosque instead of the state school, clearly said they would. Their explanation is that to study the Koran would probably not be as difficult or tiring as studying the school subjects (Interview 010307, 010308). Nonetheless, most Muslim students wanted to study in a Muslim minority school when compared to either a mainstream school or the Mosque. For them, to study in a Mosque was not realistic because they would not be able to access ‘useful’ knowledge, which would equip them for the labour market and a reasonably good life in the future. On the other hand, compared to mainstream schools, in a Muslim minority school they could study both ‘ordinary’ knowledge, as they were doing in the mainstream school, and their ethnic and religious culture. In addition, to study and stay with their Muslim peers would also make the study more effective and school life more relaxing. This would also comfort their parents in terms of the curriculum and tuition fees. ‘My parents are always complaining about high tuition. If there was a Muslim minority school (though asking for the same tuition), they will definitely support me. Because this is good for both ourselves and our ethnic group’ (Interview 010305). However, one out of six respondents expressed a preference for studying in mainstream schools, because there would be more opportunities to study something different or more time to study useful knowledge, and to benefit their social life rather than to only stay with the Muslims, a conservative and narrow-minded community in their words. They did not explicitly deny the need to study Islamic culture, but said that they had already been taught it at a very young age or they could teach themselves in the future. For the moment, ‘to study (scientific and cultural) knowledge is the most important thing’ (Interview 010303, 010306, 010307).

On the whole, for students who would either like to stay in the mainstream school or prefer a minority school, the fundamental obstacle they faced in their study and life in the mainstream school was caused by a feeling of discomfort. This discomfort
was constituted by pressure from their community and family, and their school and the larger society, and was reflected in their confusion about and struggle for where to locate themselves in society with regard to their school study, cultural identity and future socioeconomic status. In other words, they always found that any attempt to integrate these contested facets into a coherent whole resulted in a tiring failure. A prosperous socioeconomic future requires a relatively high educational level. In attempting to achieve a good school performance, they confront severe barriers caused by the prejudice and hostility towards the Islamic cultural tradition of their community.

Factors from outside the school

Although the abolition of assigning jobs to graduates in 1996\(^{24}\) may have affected the motivation of Muslims to study hard in order to enter a university or college, the job ceiling Muslim students are facing is nevertheless a significant obstacle to sustaining their motivation to aim for high school performance. Two respondents complained to me that political leaders, from the president of the country to provincial governors or mayors, are non-Muslim. In this region it is particularly the case that there is a very limited chance for Muslim graduates to find a job in the state system, while this is relatively easy for both Han and Tibetans. They considered that this is caused by the ethnic difference between Han, Tibetans and Muslims, ‘that is to say, people tend to look down upon Hui (Muslim)’ (Interview 010304-09).

The most direct factors that have reduced the motivation of Muslim students in the mainstream school are those from family and school. Although many student informants thought that their parents were concerned about their study, few of them considered that their parents would be effectively helpful, because they themselves had a very limited cultural level. At the same time, they felt that their parents kept putting pressure on them by requiring them to work harder or complaining that they worked or consumed too much in schooling but without benefiting the family.

Factors from inside the school

Low perceptions of Muslim students. The school, where students spend most of their time, has played the key role in shaping its students’ attitude towards and performance in schooling. Why did Muslim students on the whole perform poorly in school? While other people gave a number of explanations, I heard little from Muslim students themselves. However, this does not necessarily mean that among Muslims, nobody shared the views of Han or other ethnic groups to some extent about their school performance. Indeed, comments from non-Muslims are actually a key element shaping both non-Muslim perceptions and treatment of Muslims and Muslims’ self-perceptions and have therefore significantly influenced their school performance. A

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\(^{24}\) This is a system in which the government institutionally rather than individually contracts with university/college/school students to assign them to a job in a state work unit when they graduate.
Muslim girl (M) explained when I (I) asked about Muslim academic achievement (Interview 010304):

M: I feel that usually Muslims, anyway in my class, according to my observation, apart from X (a boy’s name), all Hui students do not perform well. Normally it is Han students who perform well.
I: Then why is this so?
M: Everyone has said this that Hui are people born for trading business, but culture, that is studied by Han. All have said so.

... I: So what do you yourself think about this?
M: I think, Han and Hui both are the same. Mainly because we Hui students, after hearing these (comments), do not seem to have confidence (in study, thus we do not perform well).

This is particularly relevant to secondary school students who, compared to their primary counterparts, are much more aware of the image that is generated from other’s perceptions and comments. Therefore, almost without exception, the Muslim low achievers I interviewed told me that they had performed very well or not badly at primary level, and did not know why they could not do the same after entering the secondary school.25 What has in particular drawn my attention is the association of Han but not Hui with schooling (culture-studying), as in the quote from the Muslim girl above. On the part of Muslims, this has two implications: (1) if a Muslim performs well it would be regarded as acting Han; (2) if a Muslim cannot perform well it would be natural, i.e. not a problem because she or he is not supposed to have the obligation to do well.

Thus, Muslim students are perceived not to be able to perform well, and, as a fact, they have largely performed poorly. This in turn has cultivated a negative attitude or treatment among non-Muslim teachers or students of Muslim students. Although most of my respondents did not reckon that teachers were treating students differently because of the difference in ethnicity, but because of their school performance, some stories have obviously reflected the prejudice towards Muslims from teachers. When asked whether or not his teachers’ view of him is different from his own, a boy who was the only Muslim student with high achievement in a class told me of a conversation which happened between him and the most understanding and open-minded teacher in his mind (Interview 010303):

I think there is some difference (between my view and that of my teacher of me). When I transferred (from the County Secondary to the Prefecture

25 Some teachers claimed that Muslim students tend to perform poorly from the very beginning when they start to go to primary school due to the poor educational capital they can get from their family. In my informal observations, this is not the case, or at least not a phenomenon particularly associated with Muslims at primary level. This no doubt needs to be explored further.
Secondary) in the second semester, I was registering with teacher X... She asked me which nationality I belong to, I said ‘Salar (Muslim)’, then she sighed. I was feeling (at that moment), this might be generated from the ethnic difference, (this) seems (to generate from) some sort of barrier (between different ethnic groups). Yes, it is.

In my observation inside classrooms, one of the common scenes is that Muslim students were mainly concentrated at the back of classrooms. ‘The teacher arranges seats in the order of academic achievement. Higher achievers are arranged to sit in front of the classroom and lower achievers are behind.’ ‘We Hui usually sit behind... Han and Tibetans sit at the front... because we do not perform well’ (Interview 010304). The main reason teachers make such an arrangement is that ‘teachers do not want to take care of poor performers any more, and only hope that they would allow other students to study by disciplining themselves (in the classroom)’ (Interview 010308). ‘The teacher said to the poor performers: since you do not want to study hard, please just discipline yourselves, be a good person, so that you can receive a certificate (when graduating)’ (Interview 010304).

In this low view of poor students, these students are much less likely to be asked to answer questions in classrooms, and more unlikely to be believed when they have given a correct answer. Meanwhile, teachers tend to criticize them more often and cruelly (scolding or beating), and are more likely to ask them to send messages to their parents for a meeting with teachers at which the students are complained about to their parents. This treatment aroused complaints, reactions or rebellions among the students. They believed that it would help them with their confidence, motivation and performance if they sat at the front and were asked to answer questions more often; they also did not agree that all the students sitting behind were poor or bad. Some more radical actions were always taken by a few ‘brave’ girls and many boys, ranging from making trouble in classrooms, playing truant to dropping out. This is why most official punishments I could find on the public notice board of the school had something to do with Muslim students. Sometimes there were Muslim students who were trying to make progress by disciplining and behaving themselves but who were still likely to be driven back to the ‘bad group’ by teachers’ careless punishment based on prejudice. A girl told me such a story about one of her fellow male students (Interview 010304):

He is unlucky. He is recently trying to change himself, and making an effort to behave properly, but was asked again by the teacher to send his parents a message for a meeting with the teacher. He thus once again did not come to school recently. (Question: why did the teacher ask him to send the message to his parents if he was trying to change himself?) Before he started to try to behave properly, he was always playing, chatting, eating (in the classroom) with those (Muslim) boys, and was discovered by the teacher. But he was making an effort after these things, but he was still asked to go to see the
teacher for what happened in the past, and was asked to send a message to his parents.

Cultural customs and the curriculum. Religious practices of Muslims are also informally monitored by the school. Muslim boys are usually discouraged from wearing their religious caps. Teachers would ask them not to bring their Islamic things to school, or would say that they do not look like a (serious) student in a Muslim cap, or would simply scold them for making trouble (shiduo). One boy described what he encountered on registration day when he came to the school in his Muslim cap (Interview 010306).

When I went to the school for registration, I was wearing a (Muslim) cap, and then it seemed that one of the teachers (after seeing me in the cap) said: ‘the students (i.e. the Muslim students) from the street district (i.e. the old town of Longwu Township) usually do not study hard. Do not register him!’ Then I took off the cap, and was registered . . . (Question: so why did you put on your cap when going to register?) At that time I did not know (that it was discouraged to put on Muslim caps in this school). When I was studying in the First Primary, because the school is in the old town, I had been used to wearing (the cap). All (Muslim) students wore (their caps there), so I also did the same. I did not know (about capping) when I came to the new town (where the secondary school he was studying in is located) . . . However now nobody wears his cap, there are 23 Muslim students in my class (about half of the class), none of us wears it.26

Another clash that occurred between Muslim students and the school was about Muslim holidays. Muslim students said it was unfair that, whilst the school had holidays for the Han and Tibetan new years, it required them to go to school in Muharram. As Muslim parents also tended to support children asking for leave in Muharram, students then took a more open and collective action against the school policy when told by teachers that they must stay in school. They collectively played truant that day. As expected, they were punished by their teachers when coming back to school. They were asked either to stand outside the classroom for several hours, or to write a self-criticism letter.27

I noticed that there were some Muslim boys wearing caps when I arrived in the school on my first day. Interestingly enough, most Muslim boys I interviewed in the junior third year or senior first year were unaware of this phenomenon when I pointed it out to them. After close observation in the following several months, I found that the boys in caps were largely from the first two years, i.e. the junior first or second year. One explanation is that the older Muslim boys prefer fashion to ‘conservative’ customs of their community; another is that students in the more senior stage are disciplined more strictly, which it is believed could help them better concentrate on study.

After this ‘accident’, the school official introduced a policy that Muslim students will be allowed to leave for half a day for Muharram in the future.
They also felt uncomfortable about the curriculum. They complained that there was little content concerning their ethnic religion or culture. Many of them were also not satisfied with the content because it was too simple and boring for the students who were interested in their ethnic culture, and false and a waste of time for the students who were not keen on religious issues. Due to the irrelevance of the curriculum to their culture, some of them would show enthusiasm, motivation and confidence when coming across such content in textbooks. ‘Last semester we touched upon the Koran in a history lesson...I usually do not understand history well, when talking about that (the Koran), because I myself knew it, and then it seemed that I suddenly became confident, that kind of feeling’ (Interview 010302). At the same time, some other students would rather invest most of their time and energy in science subjects, although this may not be an ideal option.28 One of the students, when explaining the reason why the school curriculum incorporated little Islamic culture, said (Interview 010308):

The School does not promote these (Muslim culture and customs). Teachers, they do not have this habit... They consider that these things of ours, for instance, Buddhism or Islam of Tibetans or Muslims, all are superstitious. Although (they know) they are religious beliefs, (they think) they are still a bit superstitious.

The linguistic issue also precludes them from full engagement in school study. They claimed that the local dialect they speak is ‘gaidao hua’ (street language), which is different from putong hua (common language, i.e. standard or Mandarin Chinese). In the school all the students are required to speak the standard language, especially in class. They described their embarrassment when they had to answer questions in standard Chinese in class, because some of them feel this is acting Han, while others feel unconfident and worried about the possibility of being teased by fellow students or criticized by teachers. This is particularly difficult for those who previously were students in the County Secondary, where they were allowed to answer questions in class or communicate with teachers in the local dialect, because a high proportion of students as well as teachers in the school were Muslim.

The relationships between Muslim and other students. Another important reason why they felt uncomfortable in school was the relationships between themselves and the students from other ethnic backgrounds. Most of them told me that they tended to make friends with their Muslim fellows rather than Han or others. Some thought that some Han students were too self-confident about their assumed high quality. They therefore would not like to make contact with Muslim students, although some Muslims said that they were willing to make friends with Han if Han accepted them. However the reality seems quite the reverse. ‘(I think) sometimes they look down upon us’ (Interview 010307).

28 Some Muslims discourage their offspring from studying sciences which they reckon are ‘wrapped’ in Chinese. See Ma Mingliang (1999).
This lack of understanding of Muslim students among non-Muslims can also be seen in some verbal insults, or, more seriously, in bullying towards them, particularly that from Tibetans to Muslim boys. The bullying usually would develop into physical violence between Tibetan and Muslim boys, within and without school. A girl said this was because that: ‘some Muslims are very pious about their religion, and very honest. Some Tibetans or Han do not like these customs of Muslims . . . They are only used to their own lifestyle, belief or religion, and thus do not like ours, just (because they) are not accustomed (to ours)’ (Interview 010311).

Conversely, Muslim students prefer to spend time with their Muslim fellow students. Some explained that they had stayed with their Muslim fellow students from a very young age, because their families lived in the same district, the old town, and also because they shared the same language and religious customs. All these factors would make it easier for them to understand each other and more congenial for them to spend time together. I pointed out that the ‘language’ they speak is one of many Chinese dialects, which is also spoken by the local Han. They still emphasized that all the Han people, both teachers and students, tended to adopt standard Mandarin Chinese over the local dialect wherever this was possible. Hence, they concluded that Mandarin was the language of Han and the local dialect was that of Muslims. They then told me that they usually speak the local dialect because ‘anyway we spend time with Muslims . . . and usually do not speak Mandarin. If (we) speak to strangers or teachers, (we) will definitely use Mandarin’ (Interview 010304).

To sum up, Muslim students feel uncomfortable in the school system. This is because they are perceived to be poor academic performers and trouble-makers, who are believed to tend to flout the regulations and rules of the school. The school also restricts them in religious practice and in the use of dialect, and provides little Islamic knowledge in the curriculum. The discrimination or bullying from students of other ethnic groups makes their stay in the school unsafe, which further exacerbates their negative situation in the school.30

**Muslim girls**

Muslim students were also inevitably influenced by the epidemic which is modern cultural values. They were keen on music, painting, sports, fashion, internet, studying abroad, individual development, or even shouting, smoking, drinking or sex, though

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29 Given the high social status of Mandarin in China and the Han’s overly high perception of themselves, Han’s preference for Mandarin Chinese is not difficult to understand.

30 Gladney (1999) attributed the reluctance of Muslims in schooling primarily to the exclusive and negative curriculum of Islamic knowledge and the mixed sex school environment. This seems to be a more complicated issue to me, as can be seen from the arguments presented here.

31 When explaining why Muslim parents were not keen to keep their children in school after compulsory education, a boy offered this analysis: to go to school for some basic knowledge will benefit the family in business. More knowledge is not necessary for family business but good for the individual development of students in the future. So parents will not encourage them to study further even if they themselves might like to (Interview 010306).
to a lesser extent. Correspondingly, they revealed less interest and knowledge in their
religion-centred ethnic culture, while all parents, as I was told, were concerned that
their children study Islamic culture, although some of them did not feel it was so
important or urgent to familiarize their children with the ethnic culture. These choices
in modern cultural values, as they put it, were always discouraged or strongly criticized
and opposed by either their parents or teachers, or both. However, they usually did not
share the same opinion with either their teachers or their parents. They said that they
are in the twenty-first century, they like being pretty or fashionable. They rebuked their
parents as feudalistic, their teachers as too strict controllers. This is particularly salient
in the case of Muslim girls. Beside the viewpoints mentioned above shared by both
girls and boys, when talking about family or community life, some girls were unhappy
with the lower level of attention their parents paid to them than that to their male
siblings regarding schooling, and with stricter control over their freedom. They said
that because their parents considered that boys will have a promising future, and girls
are not as good as boys; a girl should not go out, particularly in the evening. Rather, she
should stay at home helping the family with housework (Interview 010301, 09). They
also did not feel contented about the very limited opportunity for them to become
a Mullah in mosques, which they considered to have reduced their career chances,
although few of them showed interest in attending religious activities in the Mosque.
‘Girls over thirteen years old are not allowed to appear in Mosques unless they are in a
headscarf.’ They all attributed their absence from the Mosque to Muslim customs.32

In school, in sharp contrast to Muslim boys’ attitude towards caps, none of
them showed willingness to wear a headscarf. While they laid the blame on school
discouragement of ethno-religious practice, they also explicitly expressed their disgust
at wearing headscarves. Two girls explained:

If you are a Muslim, you come to school in a headscarf . . . everyone wil . . . tease
you by saying ‘disgusting, in a headscarf!’ . . . So nobody (wears it), all of us care
for face (ai mianzi) . . . Muslims themselves will also certainly say so: ‘what?
Wearing a headscarf in the school, in the classroom? Are you mad?’ (Interview
010304)

(That is) normal (for boys to wear) Muslim caps. (Fellow students) will not
laugh at this . . . That is just a cap. If girls come along in headscarves, they
will definitely laugh . . . When a girl is wearing a headscarf, what (we) will feel
about it is: oh, a nanny is coming in! (Interview 010308)

32 One student respondent told me that in his hometown in Gansu province, quite a number of female
Muslims went to study in some mosques in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, the traditionally
cultural centre of Muslims in the GNQ borderlands, or Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu. A few of them,
usually those who started to study earlier, became Mullahs; most of them went back home to play the
same role of mother, wife or daughter in their family. The only difference before and after their study
in mosques is that they may start to instruct their children or husband in the Islamic knowledge they
acquired (Interview 010306).
Some girls admitted that this keenness on modern values particularly among girls has distracted them from school study. When I asked why they were more attracted by these things, they tended to say ‘I do not know’ or ‘the study in the school is too much and too boring’, without particular reference to girls. However, when speaking about the reason why they did not perform well in schools, a girl told me: ‘anyway people all are saying this that after entering secondary school, boys perform well but all the girls have slowed down, fallen behind’ (Interview 010304)33.

**Conclusion**

Muslims living in this region lack social capital in relation to the state system or formal institutions, which is the preferred choice in terms of career for its power to guarantee a high socioeconomic status and financially secured life. Meanwhile, they also possess very limited cultural capital that will provide their children studying in mainstream schools with strong foundations. Therefore, education, the major way to achieve upward social mobility, becomes irrelevant to Muslims to a large extent, which has led to their reluctance in education. Community forces (Ogbu and Simons, 1998)34 have played the role of an initial dynamic that does not make school education a priority while this is the absolute priority nationwide, both at the governmental and the individual levels. The experiences of Muslim students in the mainstream school have exacerbated their negative attitude to schooling. The fundamental cause of the marginalized status of Muslims is that Muslims are still regarded as ‘other’ both institutionally and individually in many ways, although they have been settled in China, particularly in the northwest, for several centuries. One of my respondents evaluated the situation Chinese Muslims are in as follows (Interview 030203):

(For Chinese), Islam is an imported religion, (Muslims) are not Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu) . . . (The state) speaks ‘we descendents of Yan and Huang emperors (Yan Huang zisun) . . .’35 which is implying that you (i.e. Muslims) are not Yan Huang zisun. It reveals a tone of discrimination . . . (The state) has brought (some preferential) policies to you, provided your children with education, and let you have plenty to eat and drink, but still regards you as outsiders (haishi ba ni dang wairen).36

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33 As a whole, female Muslim students do not seem to have a lower, but rather, a similar level of achievement compared to their male counterparts in my survey. One of the possible reasons might be that a number of Muslim girls have never attended school or dropped out at a very early stage, e.g. after two or three years study in primary schools, while their brothers tend to stay much longer in schools. This is particularly the case in the ordinary Muslim families I interviewed. That the family needs someone to do housework when both parents have to stay away from home to earn money is one of the explanations.

34 Ogbu developed similar theoretical models in his other works though he did not necessarily employ the terms of ‘community forces’ and its opposite ‘the (social) system’. See, for instance, Ogbu (1987).

35 Legendary rulers of China in remote antiquity. This is taken to refer to the ancestors of the Chinese people.

36 Buddhism, also an ‘imported’ religion, was well accepted by Chinese society. On the difference in the accommodation of Islam and Buddhism, see Ma Mingliang (1999).
Muslims are barely identified by the larger society as Chinese people unless they sinicize themselves, involuntarily or voluntarily, like many of their compatriots in ‘China proper’, by substantially hiding or removing their ethno-religious markers. This oppression is more apparent among those who strongly encourage their children to study hard by emulating the Han model, and correspondingly do not regard it as appropriate to go to school with a recognizable Muslim appearance. A parent, when explaining why he did not encourage his child to go to school in his Muslim cap, said (Interview 030201):

Here is a multi-ethnic area, Han and Tibetans do not consider this (Islam) is important, and meanwhile if they see a Muslim wearing a white cap, they will have some discomfort in mind due to the symbolic difference emerging through capping between Muslims and non-Muslims; furthermore, after class, fellow students will be driven by their curiosity to ask about the meaning of capping, about holidays, customs of Islam, and then about Muslims themselves, many questions. So if Muslim students do not wear caps, other children will not have such ideas as who is Han, who is Tibetan or who is Muslim. There will not exist such a kind of clash.

The two comments have actually revealed a gap between formal level of laws and constitutions and informal level of public discourse and attitudes, in Kymlicka’s words (Kymlicka and Opalski, 2001: 58). This is to say that public discourse, including the government discourse (such as the claim of ‘yanhuang zisun’), has not shown respect for diversity in spite of the fact that at the level of legal formalities it guarantees freedom of, for instance, religious belief. Although Kymlicka keeps reminding his readers of his liberal standpoint, many concrete arguments or suggestions are still applicable to China, as they are to Eastern Europe in Kymlicka’s discussion. Kymlicka distinguishes between several different types of minorities, of which national minorities and immigrants are the two ‘majorities’. Nevertheless, Chinese Muslims such as Hui, Bonan or Salar, are difficult to fit in with any of his types of minorities as can be seen from footnote 1. Moreover, whilst Hui are Chinese speakers, Bonan, Salar or Dongxiang all largely master the Chinese language, and to a lesser extent, Chinese characters if they are literate. This should make it even easier for them to integrate into the societal culture, a thin culture, defined by Kymlicka as centring ‘on a shared language which is used in a wide range of societal institutions, in both public and private life’ (ibid.: 18). Correspondingly, a thin societal culture means that it leaves many other things unsanctioned by the state, such as religion, recreation and economy.

However, the national culture that the Chinese nation-state has offered to its citizens is not a thin one, but rather, a thick one that tends to exert control over a large number of other aspects except for a standard language. Among which, religion is a key factor that is under strict sanction throughout the history of the People’s Republic (PRC), particularly after the Religious Reform in the late 1950s. In other words, when the
party-state guarantees citizens freedom of religion, it adopts much the same political philosophy that French public policy holds, i.e. the idea of laïcité (Favell, 2001: 74–79). This French idea allows religious freedom under a pre-condition that religious practice should recognize the principles of French public political order, i.e. ‘sacred secular ideas’. In other words, particularistic interests in and practices of one’s own culture is structured or ‘disciplined’ through a state political engagement in the form of public associations in the sense that the interests and practices would otherwise impair the liberty of others if an official sanction is absent. As a result, the political structure will impose its priority over cultural interests when there is a conflict (ibid.). This paradox is particularly reflected in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) policy towards Muslim minority schools.

Unlike many Tibetan or other minority schools where the Tibetan or other minority language is permitted as a subject or the medium of instruction of other subjects at the same time, the demand for a course on Arabic by some Muslim minority schools is rejected by the government. One of the explanations is that the Arabic language has never been the common language of any (Islamic) ethnic minority group in history but used by a minority population as the religious script; in fact, it is suspected that the aim of this demand is to offer the subject of religion in the name of a language lesson (Jiaoyu Bu 1983). On the other hand, the state runs or supports some Islamic schools which provide students with substantial Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language, including the schools of this kind for Muslim women (Ma Jinhu, 1998; Ma Qiang, 2003). This partially seems to be a kind of compensation for the absence of Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language in Muslim minority schools. As a result, Muslim minority schools (particularly those for Hui) hardly function as more than a mainstream school with a Halal canteen (Sun Yaoquan, 1997). In this sense, it does not make a significant difference if Muslim children go to mainstream or minority schools, and the call for a Muslim minority school by my respondents would predictably not lead to a desirable result.

Indeed, the gap between legal formalities and public discourse essentially lies in the ambivalence and the ambiguity of Chinese political philosophy, which provides citizens on the one hand with cultural rights in laws, and on the other hand keeps sanctioning citizens’ exercise of these rights. As a result, Muslims still have to struggle over whether or not it is worth engaging themselves more in state education by investing significant energy and finance in it, even the state leaves considerable room for them to flourish their economy. In fact, an economically orientated agenda on the part of the party-state is very likely to aim at distracting public attention away from the hard-to-compromise tension between the party-state ideology and minority ethnic cultures, which are largely counter-ideology or counter-scientism in the CCP’s mind. However,

37 There are in total more than 10,000 schools nationwide that have employed 21 minority writing systems for their bilingual education (Minzu Jiaoyu Si, 2002: 205–206).
as Kymlicka rightly points out, based on his case in the West, ‘the accommodation of ethnocultural diversity will remain a powerful source of conflict . . . even when all of these other goods are in place’, namely, democratization, economic prosperity and personal tolerance (Kymlick, 2001: 84). This also exactly echoes the situation Chinese Muslims are in as quoted above, in which my respondents evaluated that, while the state has provided them with material benefits, it still regards them as ‘wairen’ (outsiders) (interview 030203). This is in the end about the way in which the state balances (majority based) nation building (national identity) and minority rights sensibly so as to move towards a resolution of the conflict between the two. It is therefore predictable that Muslims will not become more motivated, enthusiastic and confident if they cannot see the social system delivering significant improvements with regard to the social and cultural rights of their community as a whole.

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Appendix

Table 1. Illiteracy rate and college students rate of Muslims in comparison to those of Tibetans

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<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.68</td>
<td>−0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 PU</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>15.26</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−14.74</td>
<td>−0.52</td>
<td>−15.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>−4.11</td>
<td>−2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 PU</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>23.44</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>−17.51</td>
<td>−5.28</td>
<td>−22.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>−0.17</td>
<td>−0.79</td>
<td>−0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3 PU</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>187</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>18.73</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>−14.37</td>
<td>−3.83</td>
<td>−18.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>−0.63</td>
<td>−0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A: TP = Total population; IR = Illiteracy rate; B: BA70 = Born after 1970; M = Muslim community; C: BA80 = Born after 1980; M = Population; CR = College students rate; T1, T2, T3, = Tibetan village 1,2,3. 
D1 = Discrepancy A-B; 
D2 = Discrepancy B-C; 
D3 = Discrepancy A-C; 
Sources: The local government documents.
¹ In this community there are also 89 Han residents, accounting for about one sixth of the community population.
² I have chosen the two age groups in comparison with the whole community or the older group for two reasons: 1) those born in 1970 should have gone to school in around 1977 when China embarked on its open-door policy, which triggered a wave of schooling after a ten years' gap; 2) from 1986 or 1987 onwards, the desire to take advantage of new economic opportunities at the cost of education emerged when those born in 1980 should have started schooling. This wave drew a great number of both teachers and students to abandon education in order to enter the larger society of marketisation.

Table 2. Illiteracy rate and years in school of Muslim parents in comparison to rate and years in school of parents from other ethnic backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illiteracy rate</th>
<th>Average schooling years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibetans in MS</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han &amp; Others in MS</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims in MS</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibetans in TMS</td>
<td>19.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Fieldwork questionnaires.
Table 3. Outcome of examinations in the mainstream school in 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>In total</th>
<th>Han</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Others¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EJ</td>
<td>NE 180</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AS 318.83</td>
<td>342.95</td>
<td>288.65</td>
<td>337.65</td>
<td>330.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA 34.29%</td>
<td>60.26%</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td>NE 96</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AS 320.78</td>
<td>336.49</td>
<td>283.20</td>
<td>284.95</td>
<td>362.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA 50%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>43.48%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>NE 316.40</td>
<td>321.19</td>
<td>301.86</td>
<td>325.16</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA 50%</td>
<td>62.75%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AS = Average score;  
BA = Below total average score;  
EE = Outcome of the senior secondary entrance examinations of the students in Tongren County in 2002;  
EJ = Outcome of end-of-year examinations of the junior third year students in Huangnan Prefecture school in 2002–2003;  
ES = Outcome of end-of-year examinations of the senior first year students in Huangnan Prefecture school in 2002–2003;  
NE = Number of examinees.  
Sources: School database.

¹ ‘Others’ include students from other ethnic backgrounds as well as from mixed ethnic background such as Han-Tibetan, Tu-Tibetan, etc. This group is thus highly heterogeneous in terms of both ethnic identification and academic achievement. This category does not include students from a mixed background of different Muslim minority groups such as Hui-Salar, Hui-Bonan.

In other words, all the Muslims show a significant homogeneity in ethno-religious identification and academic achievement, and therefore make up a single group.

Table 4. Ethnic population in the Mainstream school in 2002–2003 and in Tongren County in 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Han (%)</th>
<th>Muslim (%)</th>
<th>Tibetan (%)</th>
<th>Others (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JT</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>70 (35.90)</td>
<td>78 (40)</td>
<td>17 (8.72)</td>
<td>30 (15.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>21 (42.86%)</td>
<td>19 (38.78%)</td>
<td>4 (8.16%)</td>
<td>5 (10.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13 (26.53%)</td>
<td>22 (44.90%)</td>
<td>6 (12.24%)</td>
<td>8 (16.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Three</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18 (37.5%)</td>
<td>23 (47.92%)</td>
<td>2 (4.17%)</td>
<td>5 (10.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Four</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18 (38.78%)</td>
<td>14 (28.57%)</td>
<td>5 (10.20%)</td>
<td>12 (24.49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>38 (39.58)</td>
<td>25 (26.04)</td>
<td>10 (9.60)</td>
<td>23 (23.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>21 (43.75)</td>
<td>10 (20.83)</td>
<td>2 (4.17)</td>
<td>15 (31.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>17 (35.42)</td>
<td>15 (31.25)</td>
<td>8 (16.67)</td>
<td>8 (16.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>77165</td>
<td>7723 (10.01)</td>
<td>4285 (5.55)</td>
<td>55602 (72.06)</td>
<td>9518 (12.38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EP = Ethnic population in Tongren County in 2002;  
JT = Ethnic background of the junior secondary third year students of the Prefecture school in 2002–2003;  
Sources: School database.
Table 5. 2002 Ethnic population and government officials in Huangnan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EP %</th>
<th>OP %</th>
<th>OPC %</th>
<th>Han</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Mongolian</th>
<th>Tu</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>32.86</td>
<td>38.28</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>65.94</td>
<td>13.65</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85.71</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>45.71</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EP = Ethnic population;
OP = Government Officials at Prefectural Level;
OPC = Government Officials at both Prefectural and County Levels.
Sources: HZT 2003; the local government documents.