



Is the Xinjiangban an Effective Antidote to Ethnic Conflict?

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Six decades of industrialisation, urbanisation and economic growth have [failed to alleviate](#) ethnic tension and inequality in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang). The large-scale bloody street attacks against Han Chinese that erupted in 2009 forced the Chinese government to reconsider its long-held, economic development-centred strategy towards Xinjiang. Following a series of violent incidents the message was clear: the Chinese government can no longer simply depend on economic policies to effectively govern Xinjiang; it must directly address the mutual distrust, resentment, and sense of alienation between Han Chinese and the ethnic minority population in the region.

A package of [preferential policies](#) have been developed to better share the “development dividend” (发展红利 *fazhan hongli*) with Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities, including political representation, cadre promotion, education, infrastructure investment, employment initiatives, poverty alleviation, public health, along with business and trade. China has long used [education as a tool](#) to promote [nation-building among ethnic minorities](#), and it will be central to achieving the Chinese government’s agenda for ethnic integration, social stability, and national security in Xinjiang.

My doctoral research focuses on [the Xinjiangban](#) (内地新疆高中班, *neidi xinjiang gaozhong ban*) a 17-year old program. The Xinjiangban is an educational experiment designed to enhance ethnic integration and provide ethnic minorities with a ladder for upward social mobility by sending Xinjiang students to study in elite schools in central and eastern provinces. It recruits junior secondary school graduates (mostly ethnic minority students, particularly Uyghurs) and sends them to 93 selected middle schools where Han Chinese people and culture dominate.

Most students receive the education for free or pay a small tuition fee. The local school covers all the expenditure for students’ return travel, accommodation, food and other necessities of life. The program typically provides a one-year preparatory class plus three years of a standard high school program. After finishing the preparatory class, Xinjiang students will be mixed with local students in new classes. Chinese is the official language in everyday teaching and learning; Xinjiang students use the same textbooks and follow the same school regulations as local students. Most Xinjiangban schools are on a gated campus with a “studying collectively, living separately” (混班学习, 住宿分离, *hunban xuexi, zhusu*

fenli) pattern. This pattern is believed to enhance interaction between Xinjiang students and local students but also keep the two student groups at a “proper” distance to control inter-ethnic conflict.

In Beijing’s eyes, the Xinjiangban is a pioneering, highly successful program. Data provided by the Ministry of Education (MOE) shows that 43,000 students graduated from the Xinjiangban between 2000 and 2017. It has proved so popular that in 2016 more than 44,000 students competed for only 10,000 places. Nevertheless, [academics question the program's success](#). Xinjiang students continue to [experience cultural dislocation](#) and [limited social mobility](#) in China’s globalised and marketised employment market. In this Brief I offer my own analysis of the Xinjiangban’s success and uncertainty, based on a four-year longitudinal study of a Xinjiangban school in which I have collected first-hand data on the operation of the Xinjiangban and the lives of students involved in the program.

Positive interaction between Xinjiang students and local students

Much ink has been spilt on the topics of multi-ethnic interaction and ethnic integration in relation to the Xinjiangban policy. A key finding is the [tense and negative](#) interaction between Xinjiang students (mostly Uyghur) and local students (mostly ethnic Han). However, my research suggests that this is far from the case. Rather, it finds that the relationship between Xinjiang students and local students is largely positive. For this reason, the Xinjiangban policy could be considered a success in regards to its objective of ethnic integration.

The Xinjiangban creates a multi-ethnic space of encounter for Xinjiang students and local students. Unlike most ethnic-Han students of previous generations who had little knowledge of Xinjiang, local students involved in the study had learned from their Xinjiang peers about Uyghur language and Islamic customs. I observed that when encountering Uyghur students in the corridor, some male local students would offer their hands to Xinjiang students to send greetings in Uyghur style. *“It is interesting to greet each other in Uyghur style”*, a local male student told me. Some local female students paid more attention to their choice of clothing (e.g. avoid wearing sleeveless shirts) to match their Muslim peers’ dress code. As a local student said, *“There is new knowledge for me to learn. My Muslim peers let me how to get along with Muslims. I am happy to correct my behaviour so as to make friends with them”*.

Xinjiang students also spoke of opportunities to interact with and teach Han Chinese people about their home. In their very first encounters, local students generally raised what they described as “naïve” questions, such as *‘did you ride a donkey to school?’* or *‘are there any ATM machines in Xinjiang?’*. Instead of seeing these as deliberate attempts to stigmatise and exclude them, most Xinjiang students regarded these as amusing topics through which to initiate dialogue and to reach mutual understanding. One female Uyghur student explained that she embraced opportunities to talk with Han Chinese people. Due to her outwardly ‘foreign’ and non-Han Chinese appearance, she experienced “othering” while engaging in daily tasks such as shopping in the city. However, she stated that *“I didn’t feel embarrassed, I told people I come from Xinjiang, and I felt happy to let them know more about the Uyghur and Xinjiang.”*

I also observed that for Muslim students, being relocated to secular, Han-centric educational spaces produced new understandings of Islamic identity. A Uyghur student argued that *“I think here (the Xinjiangban school) is better than Xinjiang because fewer religious regulations have been employed. I enjoy*

the freedom here.” Another Uyghur student argued: “*We learned the Koran since childhood. Islam is the thing we will never forget. For us (Muslim students of the Xinjiangban), reserving belief in mind, and spending whole energy on study is what a progressive Muslim should do.*” In the relocated school space of the Xinjiangban, a critical and “progressive” understanding and performance of Islamic identity unfolded.

Inter-ethnic tension

The existing literature has focused primarily on the Han-Uyghur relationship, paying little attention to inter-ethnic relationships *among* Xinjiang students that constitute the everyday politics of the Xinjiangban. My research shows that while the relationship between Xinjiang and local students is largely positive, the agenda of ethnic integration is still full of uncertainty and unintended consequences owing to the tension between different ethnic and religious groups.

Uyghur/Muslim is positioned as the dominant ethnicity/religion in the Xinjiangban, which results in cultural marginalisation of minority students. The school deliberately decentralised management power to a Uyghur-led student union, and ensured Uyghur priority in daily cultural representation (e.g. teachers assumed that “Xinjiang culture” was equal to “Uyghur culture”.) For instance, most of the performances in the Eid al-Adha gala were conducted by Uyghur, leaving other Muslim minorities, including Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Hui, Tajik, etc., with limited space to reinforce their ethnic and religious identities. In addition, in the name of ethnic integration and security, the school required non-Uyghur and non-Muslim students to unconditionally adapt to Uyghur and Muslim living habits and customs, but not vice versa. For instance, Han students from Xinjiang were not allowed to eat non-halal food in the shared space with Muslim students. As a Han Xinjiangban student argued, “*Instead of Han-isation [汉化 hanhua] of them [ethnic minority students], I think I am now being ethnicised [民族化 minzu hua]*”. The school’s overemphasis on the self-discipline and tolerance of minority students produces tensions among Xinjiang students.

Is the Xinjiangban working?

[My research finds](#) that the inter-ethnic politics of the Xinjiangban are produced through relations between Han administrators and ethnic minority students, and between majority Uyghur students and those from other ethnic backgrounds. While the Xinjiangban policy has been criticised for its [explicit political goals](#), my research shows that the policy has had some success in promoting mutual understanding between Han and Uyghurs. However, this success coexists with other unexpected forms of ethnic tension.

During my fieldwork I often asked “How long will the Xinjiangban policy last?” One Xinjiangban teacher gave a critical response: “*As long as the educational inequality has significantly narrowed down between the West and the East, and more importantly, so long as ethnic issue is no longer a problem in Xinjiang.*” It may be too early to assess the long-term role of the Xinjiangban in alleviating ethnic tension, but in the meantime the policy will continue to produce multi-ethnic spaces of encounter.