Ethnicity, Poverty, and Secular Schooling:
Muslim Hui Students' Identity Negotiations in Rural China

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Abstract

Intrigued by the heterogeneous development of rural and urban China, persistent poverty in rural ethnic minority regions, and dilemmatic quality compulsory education provided for ethnic regions as a key to poverty alleviation, this dissertation sets out to examine the rural appropriation and implementation of compulsory education and its impacts on the lives of students from one particular ethnic group, Muslim Hui in Xihaigu, Southern part of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in Northwestern China, as they respond to changing rural dynamics, fighting against poverty, and trying to maintain ethnoreligious identity.

Informed by critical theory and constructivism paradigms as well as studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity, cultural reproduction theory, and cultural production theory, this study use critical ethnography as a method of research to particularly examine how secular schooling is practiced in this rural and Muslim Hui concentrated region and is lived everyday through routinized pedagogical practices and administrative maneuvers. Most importantly, through the voices of local Muslim Hui, it explores parents' changing views of secular schooling and how the changed views affect Muslim Hui students' exercise their power to participate in school activities, whether they resist against and struggle with secular schooling or straddle across secularity and ethnoreligiosity.

In the end, this study attempts to make a theoretical contribution by challenging the binary relationship between the dominating and the dominated that guided majority of studies of ethnic groups in China. Muslim Hui students in my study exhibit diverse

reactions and responses to the dominant Han culture and constantly negotiate a life of their own.

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Prologue

Born and raised in a Muslim Hui family in an urban Han-dominated region, I always felt that I was not one of "them," the people with whom I grew up and studied in school. My middle-school classmates were surprised to find out that I was a "Hui" and I didn't eat pork like they did. This little incident has remained deep in my consciousness and constantly reminds me of how I downplayed my minority identity in school because I didn't want people to know that I was different. I also felt that I was not capable of explaining my differences because of my own poor knowledge of Islam.

Over the years, I became accustomed to not talking openly about my minority identity, unless I was with my family, relatives, or close friends. Thus, my identity as a Muslim Hui minority was often displaced by my other identities as an urban resident, a diligent student, a good caring daughter, a nice friend, and many more. However, during these years of my early adulthood, I never forgot this part of myself, though it was submerged and I seldom brought it up. When needed, I used the ethnic term "Hui" to identify myself and shied away from the Islamic part of Hui nationality, though ethnic and religious aspects of being Hui are integrated in China (when you are a Hui, you are a Muslim). I am hesitant to identify myself as a Muslim because I have limited knowledge of Islam and haven't followed the Islamic doctrines besides keeping the dietary restrictions and occasionally learning about Islam through reading Koran, visiting mosques, and discussing Islam with my father.

My personal understanding of Huiness is thus not aligned with societal views of Hui as a radical and violent group of Muslims which often causes political unrest and

cultural rivalry. Whenever I mention that I am Hui, people ask, “Are you a Muslim? Do you believe in Islam?” In my experience, Hui is often a religious label attached to Chinese Muslims who have some association with Muslims in other parts of the world, and the ethnic nature of Huiness seems reserved only for official recognition and categorization. The search for my own identities continues, but I still struggle to identify and hesitate to reveal myself as a Muslim Hui.

In recent years, studying and living in the United States, I often prioritize my identity as Chinese because I feel it is impossible to explain myself as a member of a Chinese ethnic and religious minority. I was in the U.S. when 9/11 happened, and I became even more afraid of exposing my identity because there was a growing hatred against Muslims in general. An American neighbor fiercely pontificated to me about how inhumane Muslims were, a few Chinese friends who knew me as “Hui” joked about how my Muslim “brothers” were so “brave”, and some of my Chinese Muslim friends in the U.S. stopped going to mosques to avoid confrontation. Because of these incidents, I had to prove to my friends that Muslims are good people through my representation as a Muslim, even though I’ve considered myself ethnic Hui all these years.

My journey of finding, negotiating, and choosing my identities became the impetus for my dissertation topic around identities and designing a study to learn more about the Muslim Hui and my cultural roots and religious origins. I always want to know more about the unforgotten part of me, and doing such research is like “going home,” as I told my Chinese Muslim friends who fully supported my study. Being an urban Muslim Hui, I was also interested in knowing about Muslim Hui living in rural northwestern

China where the Silk Road passed through and where the first group of Muslim businessmen traveled through and introduced Islam into China. I believe that this region, with its large Muslim Hui population, preserves many Islamic traditions, though it is less known to outsiders.

During the time I was formulating my study, a Muslim Hui friend recommended to me an English book entitled *The Diaries of Ma Yan: The Struggles and Hopes of a Chinese School Girl* published in 2005, an autobiography of a schoolgirl from a rural impoverished village in the Xihaigu region of Ningxia. As my friend said, this is a book about the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu. In this book, Ma Yan describes her struggle against hunger and poverty as well as her wishes to continue her education for a better life and to lift her parents and the children alike in her community out of poverty. I was moved by her determination to get out of rural poverty and desire to take care of her parents through education. Reading this book gave me a better sense of what life and education were like in the rural Muslim Hui region in Northwestern China and how Muslim Hui perceive their life of poverty and view education and its value for accessing prosperity.

Inspired by the schoolgirl's autobiography, the terms Muslim Hui identities, rurality, poverty, education, and filial piety converged in my mind and became the topic of this study. A place unknown to me seemed to reveal a little of itself. I was curious to find out if education had changed the lives of the Muslim Hui as Ma Yan had wished during the ten years since her diaries were revealed to the outside world. Reflecting on my own experience with identities, I was also eager to know how Muslim Hui in that region cope with their multiple identities in the context of schooling; the diaries didn't

spend much time on this topic. This study is partly a fulfillment of my childhood dream to take a personal journey and learn more about ethnic Muslim Hui in northwestern China. Most importantly, the study seeks to present stories of an unknown group of people who struggle against poverty and have a strong will to preserve Islamic traditions. Compulsory education lies between poverty and Islamic teachings, having as its mission lifting Hui out of poverty while challenging religious education in some aspects. Is compulsory education a cure for the rural poverty of the Muslim Hui? This study suggests that the current implementation of compulsory education has not significantly improved the life of the Muslim Hui in the Xihaigu region, and the Muslim Hui students in the local community I studied question and challenge the promised value of education in accessing prosperity and changing their destinies while negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities to construct a reality of their own in school.

Chapter One

Introduction to Education for Rural Muslim Hui

Situating Education for Rural Muslim Hui

Despite rapid economic development in the past three decades, China is straying from its socialist goals of achieving social equality. The income gap between the rich and the poor are widening, as reflected in an increase in Gini coefficient from 0.28 in 1981 to a peak of 0.49 between 2005 and 2009, as reported by China's National Bureau of Statistics (Whyte, 2014). China's rural-urban divide is also broadening with increased urbanization and export-oriented strategies (Bhattarai & Chen, 2014). China is growing into an economic superpower that is capable of competing with other nation states in the global economy, but the central government is finding it difficult to ignore its persistent rural poverty. Urbanization has led to China's urban population exceeding its rural population in 2011 for the very first time in history, and its rural population still constitutes 48.73% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Currently, the rural residents of China face a worsening economic situation as income gaps and the rural-urban divide are expanding. Ethnic minority groups, consisting of eight percent of the Chinese population, disproportionately live in rural areas where poverty is persistent. According to Gustafsson and Sai (2008), almost one-third of ethnic minorities were impoverished in the years 2000, 2001, and 2002, and these populations are concentrated in the western regions and villages. The percentage remains approximately the same today, as it was reported in 2011 that a total of 39,170,000 members of ethnic minority populations were still in poverty, which was 32% of the total

minority population living in poverty (Chinadaily, 2012). Therefore, the central government targets its poverty alleviation initiatives at ethnic minorities in the rural regions and strives to provide monetary support to build and maintain sustainable development. These initiatives focus on not only providing material goods but also alleviating human poverty as well as improving labor force quality, as they are thought to be the causes of persistent poverty in western regions (Liu, Yeerken, & Stein, 2013).

One of the strategies adopted by the Chinese government to tackle persistent poverty in rural ethnic minority regions is to provide free compulsory education for rural ethnic minority groups. Considering the poor quality of the rural labor force, compulsory education is believed to be able to improve the quality of ethnic minorities by teaching them scientific and cultural knowledge in school and preparing them with skills to work. In addition, through compulsory education, rural ethnic minority groups can be culturally and socially assimilated and integrated into a unified nation state while maintaining a certain level of cultural diversity (Chen, 2008; Wu & Han, 2011).

When compulsory education is thought to be essential for alleviating poverty in rural ethnic regions, the quality of it becomes critical. On the one hand, the basic education for ethnic minority children in China intends to narrow equity gaps; on the other hand, the quality of compulsory education provided for these concentrated rural ethnic minority populations raises many concerns, including that ethnic minority students' attendance and completion rates remain low, a result of students' lacking motivation to study in a learning environment with which they are unfamiliar, and that irrelevant curriculum and inadequate teachers and administrators make education itself

meaningless (UNICEF, 2011). For rural ethnic groups with strong ethnoreligious identities, such as the Uygur, their ethnic language leads to pushing back against compulsory education (Schluessel, 2007). Some ethnic groups also consider religious education to be a replacement of or supplement to secular compulsory education (Lin, 2007).

Intrigued by the heterogeneous development of rural and urban China, persistent poverty in rural ethnic minority regions, and dilemmatic compulsory education provided in ethnic regions as a key to alleviating poverty, this dissertation sets out to examine the rural appropriation and implementation of compulsory education and its impacts on the lives of students from one particular ethnic group, the Muslim Hui in northwestern China, as they respond to changing rural dynamics, fight against poverty, and try to maintain their ethnoreligious identity.

In particular, this dissertation seeks to examine the implementation of compulsory education and its influence on the Muslim Hui in Xiji County of the Xihaigu area, the southern part of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in northwestern China.

Figure 1. Map of Ningxia Autonomous Region in China, retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:China-Ningxia.png

It also situates rural Muslim Hui students' identities at the center of analysis and reveals their struggles and challenges in responding to compulsory education. It illustrates how secular schooling is practiced in a rural, Muslim Hui concentrated region and is lived everyday through routinized pedagogical practices and administrative actions. Most importantly, in the voices of local Muslim Hui, it explores parents' changing views of secular schooling and compulsory education and how these changed views affect Muslim Hui students' ability to exercise their power to participate in school activities, whether they resist and struggle with secular schooling or straddle secularity and ethnoreligiosity.

By revealing the struggles and challenges Muslim Hui students experience and strive to negotiate through compulsory education, this dissertation uncovers multiple factors contributing to low attendance and school completion rates from the perspectives of rural ethnic youth. While previous studies focus on how the culture of compulsory education is being reproduced through state schooling and assimilating ethnic minority youth into the Han culture (Hansen, 1999; Kaup, 2000; Mackerras, 1999; Zhu, 2007a) and how reluctant Muslim Hui parents are to send their children to school, afraid they'll lose their ethnoreligious identity (Gladney, 1991; Lin, 2007), this dissertation problematizes such binary relationships and incorporates rurality, poverty, and ethnoreligiosity into discussions of the impacts of compulsory education as it is understood and interpreted by active participants in education. Therefore, my dissertation asks the following questions:

1. How is secular schooling/compulsory education understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural school located in an ethnic Muslim Hui community in China?
2. How do the local Muslim Hui perceive secular schooling?
3. How do Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education while negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities?

These three research questions not only have helped me understand how compulsory education is uniquely understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural, poverty-stricken, Muslim Hui region, but also guide me to seek answers about the impacts of compulsory education on changing rural dynamics in the ways in which local Muslim Hui fight against poverty and maintain their Muslim Hui ethnoreligious identity.

Approaching Xihaigu

Before I delve into discussions of compulsory education for ethnic groups in China and Muslim Hui in Xihaigu, I will first introduce the Muslim Hui ethnic group in China. Then, I will present the geographic location of Xihaigu and its economic conditions. In this way, I provide context for further exploring how rural poverty, filiality, and ethnoreligiosity are entangled in Muslim Huis' responses to compulsory education.

The Muslim Hui in China. The Muslim Hui are the second largest ethnic group in China. Based on data from the sixth national population census, there are over 10 million Muslim Hui (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010), and they are both concentrated in certain ethnic minority regions and also scattered through all provinces,

municipalities, and autonomous regions (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of People's Republic of China, n.d.). According to Yang (2006), Muslim Hui people on the east coast occupy 21.05% of the total Hui population in China, Hui members in the middle regions account for another 18.21%, and the majority of the Hui population (60.75%) resides in western China. In northwestern China, the Muslim Hui are mostly concentrated, as opposed to their counterparts scattered along the east coast. The Ningxia Hui autonomous region, located in northwestern China, was established in 1958 and is the designated provincial-level area for Muslim Hui. There, the Hui population occupied 35% of the total regional population in 2010 (Ningxia Statistics Bureau, 2011).

Because the Muslim Hui reside in diverse parts of China, they express a wide spectrum of ethnoreligious identities influenced by the local social and political environments (Gladney, 2004a). For example, in urban areas, many Muslim Hui do not equate their ethnic category with a religious affiliation, and they are often difficult to identify by the ways in which they practice Islam. In some regions, occupational specializations and dietary restrictions may indicate the Muslim Hui; however, among Muslim Hui who follow dietary restrictions, the practice of consuming only Qingzhen or halal food also differs across different Muslim communities (Gladney, 1991).

In Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Muslim Hui mostly reside in the southern rural impoverished mountainous regions, including Xihaigu. The rural Muslim Hui in Ningxia, particularly, form communities around mosques (Chinese Muslim Archived Database, 2010). In comparison to Muslim Hui in other parts of China, rural

Muslim Hui in Ningxia express their Hui identity by exhibiting their Islamic beliefs and rituals (Gladney, 1991).

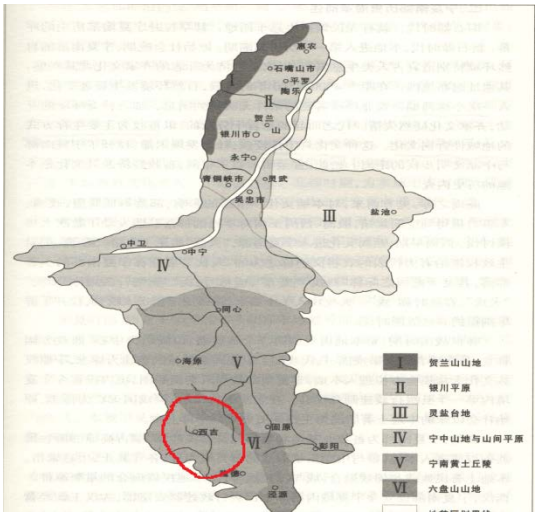

Figure 2. Map of Xihaigu in the southern part of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Taken from Ningxia Natural Resources Map Collections, 1990

Geographic location. Xihaigu, indicated as V and VI regions in the map above, is a mountainous area in the southern Ningxia autonomous region. This extended mountainous region is shaped like a turtle, surrounded by Gansu province on the southwest with six counties in Guyuan city, and Yinchi and Tongxin counties of Wuzhong city of Ningxia. Located on the Huangtu Plateau or Loess Plateau, it is located on the Silk Road and historically was an important hub for importing and exporting trades, where many Muslim traders finally settled and integrated into Chinese society.

Xihaigu is also the place where the culture of pastoralism from the north interacted and integrated with the culture of farming in the central plain. The isolation of the region by layers of mountains and underdeveloped transportation as well as by the

cultures of sedentary pastoralism and farming has led to slow development of the area. Islamic practices are relatively intact and maintained and are the core of local Muslim Hui life. Therefore, the Chinese Muslim Hui people in Xihaigu have religiously followed Islamic teachings and economically depended on agriculture and sedentary pastoralism (Xu, 2002). In addition, *"jiaofang"*, the religious community is maintained via activities centered around mosques (Ma, 2008).

Economic conditions. Xihaigu was listed as one of the world's most uninhabitable zones by the United Nations World Food Program in 1972, and chronic water shortages and a harsh natural environment are ever present threats (Chinadaily, 2013). Year-round drought makes it impossible for many crops to grow in Xihaigu except potatoes, corn, and flax, and overly-grazed grassland leads to depletion and erosion of the soil. In some remote mountainous regions in Xihaigu, drinking water simply isn't available, and people have to walk miles and miles to fetch water (Zhu & Chiang, 1996). The economy is underdeveloped, and people are in poverty, barely making ends meet.

Education for Ethnic Minority Groups in China and Xihaigu

Although secular schooling is required for all school-aged children in China, including ethnic minority students, religious education is also prevalent in some concentrated ethnic regions, including Xihaigu. Therefore, in order to explain secular compulsory education for ethnic minority groups in China and specifically in Xihaigu, I will first discuss how ethnicity has been constructed historically in China and is currently influenced by five major discourses: modernization, backwardness, civilization, integration/assimilation, and plurality. By discussing these, I lay a foundation to further

elaborate how compulsory education is carried out by the government for Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu for the purpose of achieving modernization, civilization, and integration/assimilation. First, I will briefly introduce the dual educational system implemented in Xihaigu, namely, religious or mosque education in contrast to secular compulsory education. I will also describe the main differences between secular compulsory education and religious education to sketch the current educational context in Xihaigu. Finally, I will review related studies on ethnic identity and secular compulsory education in China that respond to these discourses of ethnicity, showing the significance of my study of the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu in filling a gap in existing scholarship.

Modernization. China's modernization started after its establishment in 1949. At that time, the central government emphasized four foci of economic modernization: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. The Communist party believed that it could modernize the nation by following the Soviet pathway to modernization. However, it was not until the creation of the open door policy in 1978 that China really took on rapid modernization in a socialist vein (Rozman & Berstein, 1982).

While trying to modernize the nation, the government also launched its project of categorizing and identifying its ethnic populations for the purpose of maintaining political stability and, more overtly, encouraging a homogenous society (Mullaney, 2011). In the early 1950s, ethnic minority groups in China constituted not 55 government-recognized groups but over 400 self-identified ones. The government organized a group of ethnologists and implemented a highly systematic approach to identifying and recognizing only 55 non-Han ethnic groups. Although this project aimed

to unify the nation, it also indicated to the Han that during the period of economic development for modernity, ethnic groups remained primitive or backward (Dreyer, 1976).

Modernization in China is understood as socialist modernity, which encompasses economic and political activities as well as educational policies for ethnic groups (White, 1998). It borrows the concept of modernization (market economy and democracy) and integrates it with Chinese stance on socialism (Cao, 2005). According to Cao, China adopted market socialism during the period of economic reform beginning in 1978 in order to break away from Stalinist and Maoist practices so that it could generate a productive workforce to build its path to modernization.

Backwardness. Backwardness is another discourse associated with ethnic groups as in need of specialized knowledge to advance in technology and science. The term "backwardness" is also used in educational policies to simultaneously describe ethnic groups' low education level and economic production (DeJaeghere, Wu, & Vu, 2013). White (1998) also suggested a discourse of "social evolutionism" to denote a similar understanding of backwardness of ethnic groups, in which ethnic groups are regarded as being at an early stage of social evolution in comparison to the Han. Along with the modernization discourse, backwardness has framed education for ethnic groups to a certain extent as a tool to teach them science and technology so they can achieve modernity and thereby change their status of being backward.

Civilization. In addition to the discourses of modernity and backwardness that relate mainly to economic status, the Chinese "civilization project" also focuses on

transforming the cultures of ethnic groups. The concept of “civilization” was derived from Confucian philosophies, which value the Han culture as civilized and define non-Han cultures as barbarian or uncivilized (White, 1998). Thus, the government regards education as a “civilizing tool” to change ethnic groups toward the goal of common prosperity in a modern Chinese nation (Harrell, 1996). Therefore, education provided by the Chinese government aims not only to teach ethnic minorities science and technology but also to teach them the Han or civilized culture. During this process of educating ethnic groups, an assimilation/integration approach is adopted by the Chinese government to fulfill both the “modernization” and “civilization” missions of education—that is, to fulfill the goal that ethnic groups will become as modernized and civilized as the Han.

Integration/assimilation and plurality. The interconnected discourses of integration/assimilation and plurality explain the relationship between the Chinese government and ethnic groups because there is always a tension between integration/assimilation and plurality in policy formation and transformation in China (Dreyer, 1976). On the one hand, the integration/assimilation approach used by the government, through which ethnic groups are acculturated into the Han culture, is thought to be the solution to national problems (White, 1998),; on the other hand, plurality acknowledges cultural differences that allow for the maintenance of cultural diversity (Chen, 2008; Wu & Han, 2011). After all, the government recognizes the traditions and cultures of ethnic groups and doesn’t forcibly integrate them into the Han state (White, 1998). This tension between integration and plurality is exemplified in the

case of preferential treatment given to ethnic minority students who are admitted to college (Sautman, 1998), because these preferential policies “essentially center on the autonomy of minority peoples and integration with the state” (Wang & Zhou, 2003, p. 88).

Because large numbers of ethnic minorities reside in rural areas, the discourses of modernity, backwardness, and civilization also define rural identity. However, the discourses of integration and plurality are rather unique to ethnic groups, since they are culturally different from the Han. In my study, all of these discourses helped me understand how they concurrently construct the identities of the Muslim Hui who are situated at the conjunction of rurality, poverty, and ethnoreligiosity.

Religious education. While secular compulsory education contributes to the construction of Muslim Hui identities, religious education is also essential in shaping the distinctiveness of the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu, especially their ethnoreligious identity. The existence and expansion of Islamic or *Jingtang* education in China can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (Wang, 2012). For hundreds of years, *Jingtang* education was considered by the Muslim Hui in northwestern China as a way to gain knowledge of Islam to satisfy the needs of preserve religious and cultural practices (Ma, 2002), since many of them believe that they can’t identify themselves as Muslim Hui if they don’t have basic knowledge of Islam. With *Jingtang* education, they are able to maintain their ethnoreligious identity.

In contrast, secular education wasn’t a tradition within the Muslim Hui community when Hui ancestors settled in northwestern China in the late Ming Dynasty.

Modern or secular education was introduced to Muslims as a way of learning scientific knowledge and a path to jobs within the bureaucracy. However, both forms of education are available to the Muslim Hui, and they have both been actively practiced. It has become expected that Hui children receive both religious teaching as well as acquire knowledge to survive in society. In this sense, education for the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu is characterized by two relatively independent systems, a system to teach Islam and Islam-related knowledge, and a system to focus on social knowledge, such as earning a living.

Three channels are usually used to carry out both kinds of education. The first one is families, through which Muslim Hui children develop their ethnic consciousness by inheriting Islamic knowledge from their parents while developing some work skills. The second one is community, where *Jingtang* education is carried out in mosques. Prior to attending secular compulsory education provided by the Chinese government, Muslim Hui children often received *Jingtang* education in the mosques. Muslim Hui also participate in activities centered on the mosques to practice Islamic culture and traditions. The third channel for education is the region, in which Hui people gradually become familiar with Chinese traditional culture through attending secular schools and interacting with other ethnic groups in daily life (Wang, 2012).

Secular compulsory education and ethnic identities. Studies of education and ethnic identities in China have mainly focused on the tension between the national identity and ethnic identities in school, particularly in how educational policies represent ethnic identities. A few studies focused on ethnic groups and their participation in higher education in China (Clothey, 2001; Keyongo-Male & Lee, 2004; Trueba & Zou, 1994).

Others have attempted to uncover the experience of ethnic minorities in boarding schools in Han dominant regions, in which ethnic identities are contrasted with the national identity constructed by the Han through school activities (Chen & Postiglione, 2009; Wang & Zhou, 2003; Zhu, 2007a). Although some authors recognize ethnic resistance to the mainstream Han culture (Zhu, 2007a) and ethnic empowerment (Lee, 2001), many studies still focus on the "construction" aspect of identity and argue that the state policies have created a narrative of unification which strives to shape ethnic minorities into one Chinese nation (Hansen, 1999; Kaup, 2000). They point out that when these state policies guide educational practices, such as the adoption of a national curriculum, the Chinese government is able to integrate ethnic minority students into a nation dominated by the Han culture. This perspective also asserts that through attending government-run schools, members of ethnic groups become assimilated into the Han culture and gradually lose their ethnic identities (Hansen, 1999; Mackerras, 1999).

A few scholars have carried out studies on Muslims in western China. For example, Qian (2007) examined the interactions of students from three ethnic groups—Tibetan Buddhist Yugur, Muslim Sala, and Muslim Baoan—and argued that the hidden curriculum led to cultural discontinuity for the local minority Muslim students and contributed to their low academic performance. Lin (2008) briefly touched upon the rural Muslim Hui population in a Tibetan dominant region and argued that the Muslim Hui performed poorly because their cultural values and norms had prevented them from seeing the benefits of education.

However, these studies described above tend to focus on the binary relationship between the nation-state and diverse ethnic groups; they often assume a unidirectional application of power as the Chinese government enforces national policies and curriculum to integrate ethnic groups into the Han culture. Similarly, because of the power enacted by the government, ethnic groups are rarely able to respond effectively to education framed by the Han culture, but encounter cultural discontinuity and differences in values and norms. Therefore, these studies conclude that ethnic identities are sometimes weakened by the reinforcement of national identity through compulsory education. Less attention has been given to the dynamic processes of identity constructions and negotiations by ethnic minority students as a way of responding to compulsory education. In addition, poverty has not been examined as a contextual factor and a driving force to understand the process of identity constructions and negotiations in any of these studies. Also, none of these studies were conducted in western China, except Qian (2007) and Lin (2008). However, Qian focused on the hidden curriculum, and his findings followed the binary relationship I mentioned above, in that they emphasized the power of curriculum in changing ethnic identities in school. Lin also noted the importance of cultural values and norms in affecting academic performance, overlooking the fluid nature of culture in that it constantly changes with contexts.

Therefore, my study attempts to fill the gap in the existing scholarship, focusing on local responses to education. By challenging the notion of a binary relationship between the nation-state and diverse ethnic groups, my study attempts to examine multifaceted forces in the school which shape and reshape ethnic identities at both macro

and micro levels. It additionally encompasses poverty as a factor in which multiple identities are negotiated to question and challenge compulsory education. Rather than discussing how ethnic minority parents influence their children's schooling as do in some of the studies I reviewed, I investigate how filial identity, the virtue of respecting one's parents, actually impacts students' attendance and participation in schooling.

In Chapter Two, I draw on studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity, cultural reproduction theory, and cultural production theory to lay out the theoretical framework and concepts that inform my study of rural Muslim Hui students' experience in a secular school in the Xihaigu region of China.

In Chapter Three, I elaborate on my choice of critical ethnography as my methodology, especially my continuous reflections on the study and my own multiple identities in the field. I also introduce the research site and describe how I accessed the site and gained the trust needed to conduct the research through interviews, participant observation, archival research, student weekly journals, and reflexive memos. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the limitations of the study in response to the general critiques of qualitative studies.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present the major findings of the study. Based on the data collected from local teachers and administrators, Muslim Hui parents, and Muslim Hui students, each of these three findings chapters focuses on one particular group of these actors. Chapter Four examines how compulsory education is understood, interpreted, and appropriated in the rural Muslim Hui community and explores the discourses of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* as guiding principles in the physical environment and

routine of school life, especially the standardized curriculum, teachers' pedagogical practices, and students' ritualized learning in the school. This chapter also introduces the uniqueness of the study's locale—where Muslim Hui are the ethnic majority in the local community—and how such a demography responds to the gated culture of compulsory education in the middle school. It additionally discusses the reproduction of the culture of compulsory education in school through *Suzhi* maneuvering and teachers' construction of an imaged future of prosperity. Chapter Four is intended to present the imposed structural and policy constraints in the school, laying the foundation for discussions of Muslim Hui parents' changing perceptions of compulsory education and of identity negotiations of Muslim Hui students.

Chapter Five begins with a brief introduction of local Muslim Hui perceptions of compulsory education in the past, followed by an examination of newly-defined compulsory education from the point of view of Muslim parents. Then it examines the heterogeneous perceptions of Muslim Hui parents of secular schooling and compulsory education, showing how recent views of compulsory education are different from their previous inattention to secular schooling, and how these views are being interpreted and understood through their current attitudes towards secular schooling.

Building upon these two chapters, Chapter Six focuses on Muslim Hui students' responses to secular schooling and how they negotiate their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities to make sense of secular schooling and compulsory education given the expectations of both teachers and parents. The chapter starts by describing students' understandings of filiality, rurality, ethnoreligiosity, and the secular school,

followed by examining three major contestations Muslim Hui students experience in school—i.e., between filial identity and self-development, between rural identity and imagined prosperity, and between ethnoreligiosity and secularity. The chapter also presents stories of seven students as they question, challenge, and believe in compulsory education through negotiations of multiple identities. In the last section, three categories of students—resisters, strugglers, and straddlers—and their different strategies adopted in constructing a reality of their own are discussed.

Chapter Seven concludes the study with a discussion of its significance and implications as well as my reflections on my experience in Xihaigu. It states the theoretical significance of challenging the ethnic minority/majority dynamics in studies of education for ethnic groups in China and the empirical significance of its presentation of the Muslim Hui's strong ethnoreligious identity, in contrast to previous studies' finding of ethnic identities as acculturated and integrated into the dominant Han culture. This chapter also includes implications and limitations, and proposes two future studies.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework:

Ethnicity, Ethnic Identity, and Cultural Reproduction and Production

Introduction

This study is driven by two paradigms: (1) critical theory, which identifies the asymmetrical workings of power in social reality; and (2) constructivism, which sees identities as fluid and situational social constructs. Specifically, it is informed by three bodies of literature based upon critical theory and/or constructivism: studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity that speak to the ways in which students understand, construct, and negotiate multiple identities in response to economic, political, social, and cultural contexts; cultural reproduction theory and the studies informed by it that explain the ways in which the dominating acculturate the dominated; and cultural production theory that explores human agency and subjectivity and the realization of social positions while interacting with different contexts. Together, this scholarship helps me understand how compulsory education is understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a middle school located in a rural impoverished Muslim Hui region, how such policy as practice has changed the views of secular schooling among Muslim Hui parents, and how local Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education through negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities.

Since the focus of my study is the implementation of compulsory education for ethnic Muslim Hui and its influence on identity constructions and negotiations in a rural poverty-stricken region, I want to first understand the concept of ethnicity and ethnic

identity as it is central and essential to helping me understand how identities are understood and constructed in a social context where compulsory education is introduced. By doing so, I am able to familiarize myself with different perspectives on identity constructions and negotiations as well as find connections and limitations in applying them to my own study. Second, in order to examine how compulsory education is implemented in a rural ethnic Muslim Hui region, I introduce cultural reproduction theory because I am interested in how the dominant educational discourses are reproduced and altered by both Han and Muslim Hui appropriators in the local area. Last, I include cultural production theory to help me understand how rural ethnic Muslim Hui respond to compulsory education and further explore the underlying causes of struggles and challenges these students face in coping with multiple identities as well as academic expectations. I also discuss my critics on these scholarships and my consideration in applying them to my study. Before I review these three bodies of literature, I will briefly touch upon the two paradigms I choose to inform my study: critical theory and constructivism.

Critical Theory and Constructivism

Critical theory was first defined by Max Horkheimer in contrast to the traditional theory that aims at understanding and explaining societies. Critical theory was created to critique and transform society as a whole. It serves as a paradigm that seeks to emancipate human beings who are constrained by all kinds of circumstances (Horkheimer, 1982). By explicating the problems in the current social reality, critical theory attempts to identify actors who can change the reality as well as establish practical

goals for transforming the reality. Critical theory assumes that, to a certain extent, human beings are the producers of their own history (Horkheimer, 1993).

Informed by Horkheimer's discussions of constrained social circumstances and self-creating human beings, other scholars continued developing critical theory, such as by elaborating that reality is shaped by an asymmetrical relationship of power and that knowledge is value-mediated (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). In a practical and pragmatic sense, critical theory is "concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and…matters of race…education…and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 281).

Within the studies of education among ethnic minorities in China, critical theory has also been used to understand how the ideologies of ethnic minorities are gradually changed by the dominant Han culture through schooling and how ethnic minorities are integrated and assimilated into the nation-state. These studies explore the power the Chinese government seeks to enact over its ethnic population--power that constructs knowledge of the dominating culture. The discourses of the dominant Han are embedded in the process of integration and assimilation. For instance, Qian (2007) discussed the hidden curriculum of schools that tries to modernize ethnic minority students to meet Han standards. Zhu (2007a) introduced different ways in which state schooling has attempted to construct Tibetan identity as civilized and patriotic in a boarding school, including school rituals, school management systems, songs on campus, and school bulletin boards and newspaper. Lin (2007) also pointed out the symbolic boundaries drawn by the discourse between the mainstream and ethnic groups, and the cultural-political

mainstream use these symbolic boundaries to retain its power. These studies indicate the applicability of critical theory to understanding ethnic groups in China, including in educational settings.

In addition to critical theory, I use constructivism as my other paradigm. Constructivism, according to Kicheloe, asserts that “nothing represents a neutral perspective” (2005, p. 8). Reality is constructed subjectively. Knowledge of the world can only be understood through interpretation of people. Because people are from diverse backgrounds, they see the world differently based on their perceptions of how the world is constructed. Responding to critical theory, which aims to problematize power in the social structure, constructivism seeks to explain the process of knowledge construction, not only examining how ideologies are formed and influenced by those in power, but also investigating how people construct their own knowledge by interacting with social constructions and those in power.

The paradigm of constructivism has also informed some studies of education for ethnic minorities in China. These studies argue that ethnic minority students construct their identities in and through education. For example, Lee (2001) observed that Chinese Miao students used academic strategies in school to attain good grades and they constructed their identities situationally. Similarly, Chen and Postiglione (2009) argued that Muslim Uygher students constructed their academic world of learning and their perceptions of ethnic identity and solidarity in an inland boarding school.

Combining both paradigms helps me understand how compulsory education has impacted rural Muslim Hui students in a poverty-stricken region, as it is required by the

national government and appropriated by local schools. It also illuminates my interest in investigating how rural Muslim Hui parents and students in poverty respond to secular schooling and compulsory education, especially the promised values of compulsory education. School, as a site of social interaction, contributes to individual Muslim Hui students' identity constructions and affects the ways in which students engage in school activities.

In the following section, I will review three bodies of literature: ethnicity and ethnic identity, cultural reproduction theory, and cultural production theory.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

Ethnicity is a term referring to ethnic groups who share common languages, cultures, traditions, and physical characteristics, while ethnic identity is ascribed and exercised *by* ethnic minorities. Therefore, to better understand ethnicity and ethnic identity, it is important to include both individual and collective aspects. The individual aspect of ethnicity and ethnic identity relates to examinations of how a person constructs their own identity and establishes their affiliation with a specific ethnic group; the collective aspect of ethnicity and ethnic identity is often linked to social and cultural contexts with which a person interacts, negotiates, and realizes ethnic boundaries.

In the following, I will review how different definitions and understandings of ethnicity and ethnic identity have changed over time, including individual, social, and cultural perspectives. In the meantime, I will emphasize current understandings of ethnicity and ethnic identity that are influenced by constructivism, one of my chosen paradigms, through which I develop my study to explore identity constructions and

negotiations in a school at a Muslim Hui community in Northwestern China. However, I want to note that I recognize another perspective on ethnicity and ethnic identity that are based on primordial tie (Geertz, 1963), but I will not review them in this section as they do not reflect on my ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Phinney defines ethnic identity (1990, 2000) as subjective and a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or "sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (2003, p. 63). Her definition explains that an individual associates herself with a group and constructs an identity based on a similar culture, race, religion, language, kinship, social practices, and/or place of origin. Phinney also argues that ethnic identity is not inherent in individuals but rather is fluid and dynamic. Individuals alter their ethnic identity as they encounter a larger sociocultural setting and gradually become aware of their ethnicity (Phinney, 2003).

Different from Phinney's elaboration of an individual's subjective identity, Weber tried to understand ethnicity and ethnic identity from a social perspective. The social aspect of ethnicity first appeared in his concept of "ethnic group," which he defined as "a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities in physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration….[I]t does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists" (1978, p. 389). Weber argues that different customs may be caused "by the diverse economic and political conditions of various social groups" (p. 392). Ethnic group is a form of status group the characteristics of which are socially recognized by others. Thus, ethnic identity, according to Weber, is determined by several factors, including shared political

memories, persistent ties with a previous community, strong feelings of kinship, and other persistent relationships.

However, Weber's understanding of ethnicity is influenced by class conflicts in that he assumes that the dominant groups control power and status in the societies who construct ethnicity (Malesevic, 2004). Therefore, ethnicity is often associated with the status privilege of the dominant ethnic groups (Malesevic, 2004). Situating my study in China, a country significantly influenced by Marxism, some aspects of Weber's concept of ethnicity help me understand the Muslim Hui as a status group formed by diverse economic and political conditions, with an ethnic identity influenced by a complex social environment in which the Muslim Hui live and construct their lives.

The work of Phinney and Weber both consider ethnicity a subjective construct and ethnic identity as dynamic in that ethnic identity can be altered by ethnic individuals and mobilized collectively by ethnic groups. Similarly, Cohen (1974) articulates an instrumentalist approach that defines ethnicity as a social construct related to political action. According to Cohen, ethnicity is used to negotiate social relations and to gain access to political and economic resources. Jones (1974) further categorizes the instrumentalist approach into objective and subjective stances. The objective stance focuses on social, structural, and cultural dimensions of ethnicity, whereas the subjective stance emphasizes an interpersonal aspect of constructed ethnicity. Both Cohen's and Jones' work continue the ethnicity discussions of Phinney and Weber, but they further the understanding of ethnicity as being utilized in social and interpersonal relations.

The socially-constructed concept of ethnicity and ethnic identity posited by instrumentalists is also related to another concept, “ethnic boundary,” introduced by Barth who went further than Weber in discussing the culturally constructed concept of ethnic identity (1969). Barth argues that ethnic groups are not formed on the basis of shared culture but on the basis of differences of culture. He further explains that an “ethnic boundary” is realized when people interact with each other and recognize their cultural differences, and thus people can identify and categorize themselves as “us” and “others” through social contacts with others. Barth also argues that ethnic groups persist only when cultural differences persist and that the maintenance of ethnic boundaries requires continuous realization of cultural differences. Therefore, how groups perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others as different in social relations are both crucial elements in establishing culturally distinctive units or ethnic boundaries (Malesevic, 2004). This socially-constructed concept of ethnicity and the idea of “ethnic boundary” help me examine how cultural differences are recognized and stigmatized by Muslim Hui students in a rural Hui-dominant region as they travel between the Hui community and the school dominated by Han culture.

The individual, social, and cultural definitions and understandings of ethnicity and ethnic identity described above take different perspectives, but they influence each other and share some commonalities. The individual perspective focuses on the idea that individuals become aware of their ethnic identity through interactions with the sociocultural world. The social aspect looks at how power plays into the process of identity construction for the purposes of establishing status groups and social relations.

The cultural view uses the concept of “ethnic boundary” to illustrate the cross-cultural fluidity of identities and how individuals realize cultural differences through interactions with people from other ethnic groups. In summary, these definitions agree that ethnic identity involves interactions between individuals and a social world, and that ethnic identities are fluid and dynamic social constructs.

In addition to understanding ethnicity and ethnic identity as concepts and sociocultural constructs as discussed above, knowing how ethnic groups construct their own identities is also salient to my study. Although I am hesitant to use primordial ties alone to define ethnicity, I agree that primordial ties contribute to identity constructions as they acknowledge individuals’ preexisting attributes that influence the process of constructions. Therefore, the work of Cornell and Hartmann (2007) is especially informative as they use portions of primordialist and circumstantialist (also known as instrumentalist) perspectives to elaborate how groups participate in the construction of their own and others’ identities. To them, identities are made and remade through interactions between group characteristics and contextual factors. Group characteristics are associated with pre-existing attributes of a group that individuals are assigned to and given at birth, such as kin, religion, and social practice; contextual factors include political, economic, and cultural environments and others’ perceptions of the group. Cornell and Hartmann further state that “identities are made and remade from the initial formation of a collective identity through its maintenance, reproduction, transformation, and even repudiation over time” (2007, p. 80).

Echoing Cornell and Hartmann (2007), Nagel (1994) states that construction of ethnic identity is a process of self-definition influenced by external social, economic, and political processes. Wimmer (2008), however, goes a step further to discuss the active roles of individuals in making ethnic boundaries that lead to a shared understanding of where they reside and the boundaries. He argues that when actors are constrained by the institutional environment, they develop different strategies to construct ethnic boundaries. Gladney (2004b) also found a similar process in play in his study of the Chinese Muslim Hui. He calls the process "dialogical," which includes internal dialogue between Muslim Hui and their ancestral traditions and external dialogue with the sociopolitical contexts defined by the state. These discussions of ethnic identity conclude that the process of ethnic identity constructions involves interactions between individuals and an external environment (the larger social, cultural, political, and economical contexts).

The concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity have also been examined by some educational researchers to understand the relationship between ethnic identities and educational engagement and achievement. For example, in a study of Chinese ethnic minority students and their ethnic identities in school, Lee (2001) argued that ethnic identity was linked to educational achievement and eventually to empowerment of ethnic minority students at universities. Based on the data she collected from ethnic minority regions in Yunnan province in southwestern China, she observed that ethnic minority students constructed identities that would allow them to do well in school. For example, these ethnic minority students developed ways of functioning effectively in schools where the Han culture was dominant, such as speaking the Han language, Mandarin

Chinese. Thus, Lee concluded that ethnic identity was socially constructed, fluid, situational, and changeable. Lee's arguments correspond to the above discussions of ethnic identity in that the individuals in her study could alter their identities and adapt to cultural differences to meet their needs.

Lee's later work with Kayongo-Male (2004) further elaborated ethnic identity as the product of multiple levels of dialectical interactions between individual students and social structures. They proposed a model including macro and micro factors that affect constructions of ethnic identity and educational outcome. These factors include the macro-level state and the values and norms of a culture as well as micro-level institutional context, student background, and campus experience.

In summary, the studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity I have discussed above tend to share three assumptions. First, power relations are an integral part of examinations of ethnic identity constructions, including both internal and external dynamics. Internal power dynamics involve individuals' self-identified ethnic characteristics, such as shared religion and language; external power dynamics include the state as a structural constraint defining social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. Second, these studies typically consider ethnic identities fluid and dynamic; ethnic identities are responsive to change and may be shifted situationally by individuals depending on their interests, such as in the case of identity boundary making. Third, ethnic identities are typically treated as the results or products of interactions and dialogues between individuals and contexts and between individuals and their ethnic origins.

Cultural Reproduction Theory

The second body of literature that informs my study is that of cultural reproduction theory and relevant concepts and ideas generated from it. Choosing cultural reproduction theory as one of my theoretical frameworks is based on my paradigmatic assumptions derived from critical theory. Some empirical studies about ethnic identities and schooling in China using this framework also inform my study on how compulsory education is implemented, interpreted, and appropriated in other rural regions of China through the lens of cultural reproduction. In this sense, cultural reproduction theory is related to my first research question: How is secular schooling/compulsory education understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural school in an ethnic Muslim Hui community in China?

Cultural reproduction theory emphasizes the power of the dominating group in reproducing existing social relationships through different mechanisms; it argues that education is used as a mechanism to facilitate the transmission of dominant ideologies to the dominated (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). These fundamental arguments resemble the epistemological assumption of critical theory—that reality is shaped by an asymmetrical relationship of power. For example, the Chinese government's promotion of national unity through the implementation of standardized curriculum for ethnic minority students (Postiglione, 1999) is an example of using a hidden curriculum to transmit the ideology of unity to its ethnic groups.

The discussion of cultural reproduction theory in education can be traced back to the 1970s (Apple, 1978; Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Influenced by

Marxism and its theory of capitalist production, cultural reproduction theory also focuses on social and economic inequality in societies and how dominant groups reproduce unequal social and economic relations through teaching dominant ideologies. Apple (1978) associated cultural reproduction with economic reproduction and argued that cultural reproduction is the collective result of economic inequality in that certain political and social forms generated from the division of labor are imposed upon people through schooling to maintain an unequal social order. According to Apple, a “legitimate culture” or curricular knowledge is a form of reproduction because it reflects the existing social relationships and unequal economic structure.

Bernstein (1975) also articulated a theory of cultural reproduction in an educational setting. He argued that class relations are reproduced through a set of codes or regulatory principles within a system of unequal distribution of power and control. Bernstein defines these codes as integrating relevant meanings, forms of realization, and contexts in communication. These codes legitimize some meanings and not others, regulate the ways people acquire meanings, and determine the contexts for communication. From Bernstein’s perspective, people acquire these codes through communication, including interactional activities and textual productions, and develop abilities to regenerate these codes after acquiring them. Dominant ideologies are reproduced through these codes. Similar to Apple, Bernstein’s approach to understanding cultural reproduction is informed by Marxism because it assumes that the dominant groups have control of power in societies that mediate transmission of ideologies through a mechanism--language--to reproduce class relations.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) also elaborated on cultural reproduction theory and its application in an educational system. Similar to Apple's argument, Bourdieu and Passeron pointed out that educational systems are used by the dominant class as mechanisms to "inculcate" dominant cultures and cultural values in students through curricular and other school activities. However, they add that examinations in schools have a hidden function of legitimizing and translating the values of a dominant class by eliminating the unqualified. Bourdieu also expanded Apple's approach of linking economic reproduction with cultural reproduction by introducing three specific forms of capital to further explain the theory: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, economic capital is associated with money and property. Cultural capital takes three forms: dispositions in mind and body, cultural objects (pictures, books, and dictionaries), and an "institutionalized state" or educational qualifications. Social capital is defined as a potential resource that can be accrued to achieve certain ends through established networks or membership. These three forms of capital can be reproduced through bureaucratic procedures, educational institutions, and social rituals, such as using cultural codes and languages (Bourdieu, 1999).

Furthermore, Bourdieu and Passeron's discussion of cultural reproduction extended Bernstein's analyses of the processes that legitimize the transmission of dominant ideologies through codes. Bourdieu and Passeron focused on mechanisms in educational systems that lead to cultural reproduction, such as examinations and hierarchical arrangement of schools based on class. Apple, Bernstein, Bourdieu, and Passeron all considered education a tool used by those in power, such as the elite class, to

transmit the dominant culture through curriculum, codes, language, and other school practices. To be more specific, the government can reproduce hierarchical cultures and social relations by implementing educational policies and carrying out educational practices. Individual students, through compulsory schooling, are forced to accept these policies and practices as well as be inculcated with cultural values that are embedded and reinforced in schools. In this way, education is an instrument of cultural reproduction because it slects and excludes students based on their capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000).

To better understand cultural reproduction theory, Bourdieu's (1999) concept of *habitus* is worthy of discussion. *Habitus* refers to a system of embodied dispositions acquired by individual agents through constant interactions with the social world. These dispositions include the rules, values, norms, and beliefs set by the structure of the social world. Because individual agents internalize these dispositions as their *habitus*, they behave in the way that is in accordance with how the social world is constituted. Using *habitus* to understand power differentials, Bourdieu argues that power resides in a historically formed structure, such as in schools, and it is acquired by individual agents as their *habitus*. *Habitus* makes it possible for individual agents to accept the dominant cultural values and unequal social relations that are imposed upon them. Through *habitus*, the dominant are able to transmit and reproduce the dominant culture because the dominated are receptive to pre-set social relations.

For some scholars, *habitus* is a limited concept in that it is almost exclusively interested in "how the taken for granted practice of socialized individuals is effective in

realizing the strategic ends of their cultural group" (Nash, 1990, p. 434); in other words, it ignores the choices and actions individuals themselves may take while generalizing practices from *habitus.* However, others read Bourdieu's work differently, arguing that *habitus* is dynamic in that students react to dominant structures divergently, which may come from their acquisition of *habitus* through their early childhood experiences and continuing restructuring of *habitus* by interacting with the outside world (Di Maggio, 1979).

Some empirical educational research has explained how individuals acquire *habitus* to develop perceptions about education and school success (Nash, 2002; Dumais, 2002). Nash (2002) studied "the educated *habitus*" and argued that working classes exclude themselves from schooling by rejecting the concept of education as it is understood in schools because they regard education as "superfluous to their perceived needs….[T]hey simply have a different conception of what is worth knowing than the school (p. 34)." Dumais (2002) conducted a quantitative study including *habitus* as one of the variables to test the influence of cultural capital on school success. Although Dumais stated that this study was her first attempt to operationalize the concept of *habitus*, she concluded that *habitus* had a strong effect on students' cultural participation and affected their perceptions of the necessary opportunities available for them to achieve occupational success. Both Nash and Dumai showed me that *habitus* is dynamic because students react to dominant structures differently. Their studies help me understand the various reactions I received from Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu, such as that they challenge the promised value of education for lifting them out of poverty.

Reproducing dominant cultures leads to another one of Bourdieu's concepts: symbolic violence. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as mechanisms "exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). It occurs when social agents with more symbolic or cultural capital intend to perpetuate their rules, values, thoughts, and perceptions through structures to people with less capital, and these subordinate agents unconsciously accept the legitimized hierarchical structures. Education used as a mechanism by dominant groups to control the dominated is a form of symbolic violence through which the dominant groups exercise their power over social agents with their complicity and legitimately perpetuate the ideologies of the dominant to the dominated. Apple's (1978) concept of curricular knowledge is a good example of how schooling controlled by the dominating uses curricula as the legitimate culture to educate students. In summary, the concept of symbolic violence explains that "Modern societies furnish the educational system with vastly increased opportunities to exercise its power of transmuting social advantages into academic advantages, themselves convertible into social advantages" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 166). However, symbolic violence overlooks individual choices and actions in responding to domination. It also fails to explain the historical development of the social world that may have been constantly changing when the dominating imposed their cultures. Therefore, including other forces, such as economic and political changes, may add other dimensions to our understanding of this rather culture-relevant concept.

The idea of cultural reproduction in education was further developed and elaborated through the notion of "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1982; Bowles & Gintis,

1976; Giroux, 1983). The hidden curriculum is the unstated norms, beliefs, and values set by the existing structure and delivered to students in schools and classrooms (Giroux, 1983). In this sense, education functions as a means of reproducing the existing class structure and determining cultural capital for students, such as their intellectual abilities and occupational choices (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). As a result, students correspondingly experience cultural struggles, compromises, and agreement while confronting the dominant culture in school (Apple, 1982). Although the notion of "hidden curriculum" reflects the deterministic nature of the concept of dominant structures, it recognizes individual students' different reactions to these structures.

Apple and Bourdieu's work referring to class-based reproduction are not sufficient in explaining how race and ethnicity may create cultural differences between the dominant and the dominated. Cultural discontinuity (Ogbu, 1982) and cultural incompatibility (Erickson, 1987; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) were introduced to address this insufficiency. Both terms refer to the disparity among family culture, community cultures, and school cultures. Ogbu (1982) introduced the concept of universal cultural discontinuity, defined as discontinuity between school cultures—such as classroom practices, teachers' chosen communication styles, and language usage—and students' family and community cultures. Therefore, a student's inability to perform well in school is due to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of school cultures. Ogbu also introduced another discontinuity that occurs when people from two different cultural backgrounds come into contact for a period of time. The discontinuity in this type of

encounter likely forces the dominated to develop resistance to maintain their cultural identity.

Similar to cultural discontinuity, cultural incompatibility explained that there are incompatibilities between students' natal culture and school culture, which contribute to ethnic students' failure in schools (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). The concepts of cultural discontinuity and cultural incompatibility help me understand the differences in the cultures individual Muslim Hui students encounter in school and experience in the community. These concepts also imply that failure in schools would cause Muslim Hui students to remain dominated, which is how cultural reproduction works. In comparison to the notion of hidden curriculum that seeks to explain how dominant cultural values are manifested in school activities through unstated rules and values, cultural discontinuity and cultural incompatibility identify school practices, school cultures, and stratified relationships in schools as observable evident factors that hinder the success of students from different cultural backgrounds. However, both concepts underestimate individual agency in adapting to the context to achieve academic success in schools. Rather, they associate low achievement with students' inherent (or ascribed) cultural backgrounds, which deny other factors, such as cognitive and social development, that are also crucial to academic success.

Although the theories and concepts presented above were developed by western scholars largely to explain U.S. and European contexts, they are also applicable to China in the context of studying the transmission of the dominant Han culture, of the realization of cultural difference, and of the reproduction of the Han culture in schools. Apple's

concepts of “legitimate culture” (1978) and “hidden curriculum” (1982) can be applied in understanding Chinese education for ethnic minorities to explain the process of transmitting the dominant Han culture. The Chinese government has implemented a standardized national curriculum through compulsory education that aims at maintaining social stability and national unity. By teaching skills and knowledge regulated by the standard curriculum to ethnic minority students, the Chinese government believes that a homogenous culture can be produced and that ethnic minorities can become modernized toward the goal of common prosperity (Mackerras, 1999). By instilling ideologies of stability and unity into education, the Chinese government hopes to achieve a multiethnic harmonious society in the end (Wang, 2011).

Qian (2007) used the concept of hidden curriculum to reveal cultural discontinuities that occurred in classrooms within ethnic minority regions. He argued that there was no particular curriculum specifically designed for each ethnic group in a region where more than one ethnic group resides. Instead, a common curriculum emphasizing modern knowledge and values, such as science and technology, for both majority and minority students was provided by the government for these minority students. Qian pointed out that the concepts of modernity and modern education embedded in the curriculum were in accordance with Han values. Through interviewing and observing students from three ethnic groups (Yugur, Sala, and Baoan), Qian also argued that teachers labeling ethnic minority students as low performers based on certain national standards has been, in part, responsible for the actual low achievement of ethnic minority students. According to Qian, the hidden curriculum was practiced and manifested in

classroom instruction primarily through teachers. He provided an example from his observations that showed that teachers constructed an academic identity for ethnic minority students based on their grades and classroom performance. He also noticed that these teachers believed that only “good students” would succeed, so they continuously paid attention to “good students” and neglected “bad students.” Consequently, “good students” who met modern curriculum standards set by the Han would progress, but their ethnic consciousness would diminish. “Bad students”, on the other hand, limited themselves by accepting the teachers’ perception of them as “bad” and eventually failed in school. In this way, the values of modernization constructed by the Han were transmitted to “good students” who followed the value-embedded curriculum standards well. Ethnic minority students’ struggling responses to the modernization discourse indicate that schools reproduce the values established by the dominant culture and attempt to transform every individual ethnic minority student based on national standards. Qian’s work is another example of how ethnic identities are constructed by the dominant Han culture and how identities are related to low achievement in schools. However, like other cultural reproductionists, Qian failed to recognize how ethnic identities may be reconstructed by individual students while these students are negotiating modern values. He did not recognize any ethnic resistance, such as that the students might purposely perform poorly to resist dominance (Willis, 1977).

In addition to Qian’s discussion of hidden curriculum, Lin (2007) used the framework of discursive repertoires to examine the Chinese government’s discourses that define minority cultures and subjects. Drawing on a lexicon of terms and metaphors in

government documents, academic documents, and interviews with ethnic minority students, he analyzed events and actions and concluded that the Chinese government adopted educational policies that perpetuate the mainstream Han discourse. He pointed out that there was a prominent, developmental discourse of minorities needing to "catch up" apparent in both government policies and academic discourses—ethnic minorities were constructed as backward in productivity, cultural development, and living standards. According to him, this discourse defined minority culture as inferior and less valuable in comparison to the mainstream Han culture. He further argued that the ethnic minority population has gradually absorbed the discourse of advanced versus backward cultures and have come to perceive themselves as being backward in development and inferior in culture. Lin also pointed out that there were symbolic boundaries between the mainstream and ethnic groups drawn by this discourse, and that these boundaries were used by the cultural-political mainstream to retain its privileges and power. Lin's discussion of discourse formation reflects Bourdieu's concept of *"habitus"* in that ethnic minorities internalize the discourses of "backwardness" and "inferiority" and accept the power differential between the mainstream Han and themselves.

Lin's study also indicates that the mainstream discourses of backwardness and inferiority are embedded in educational policies and are transmitted through schooling. His analysis of discourses based on archives and ethnographic interviews further shows that schooling reproduces cultural inequality by the majority Han culture creating a particular image of minority cultures. Similar to the findings articulated by Qian (2007), Lin recognizes the power of the discourses created by the mainstream Han culture in

constructing ethnic identities. Different from Qian (2007), who focused on the hidden curriculum used by the Han, Lin takes his analysis a step further to examine both the dominant and the dominated by stating that symbolic boundaries are formed by discourses embedded in schooling and internalized by ethnic minorities. However, both studies fail to examine ethnic identity negotiation by ethnic minority students themselves. Rather, they center on binary relationships between the dominant Han and the dominated ethnic minorities that lead to constructions of ethnic identities.

Informed by cultural reproduction theory, the notion of hidden curriculum, the concepts of *habitus* and symbolic violence, and the idea of cultural discontinuity and cultural incompatibility, this dissertation examines the structural dominance that exists in China, which reproduces the mainstream Han culture and influences the construction of the ethnic identities of Muslim Hui students. Cultural reproduction theory helps to explain how Chinese government policies construct ethnic relations between the Han and the Muslim Hui. For example, the government has implemented the educational policy of recruiting ethnic minority students to be cadres or public officials who serve in the government of autonomous regions. Sautman (1999) also noted that another educational policy, preferential admission of ethnic minority students to higher education in China, was to ensure sufficient numbers of qualified ethnic cadres to serve local governments in ethnic regions. The recruitment of ethnic cadres and preferential admission show that the discourses of unification and multi-ethnicity are embedded in current policies and construct current ethnic relations in China.

The concepts of cultural discontinuity and cultural incompatibility also inform my study of other discourses that create a binary relationship between the dominant Han and the Muslim Hui. White (1998) elaborates on state discourses that the Naxi ethnic group encountered, including progress/modernization versus backwardness, being cultured/civilized versus being uncultured/civilized, scientific forms of knowledge and practice versus unscientific/feudalism, and open-minded versus conservative. Although White's study was on the Naxi ethnic group, the state discourses that he identified are also experienced by other ethnic groups. DeJaeghere, Wu, and Vu (2013), in their discursive analyses of national educational policies for ethnic minorities, argued that the discourses above are guided by a Marxist perspective in that policies in China tend to refer to economic backwardness. Lin (2007) and Qian (2007) also identified similar discourses. Therefore, state discourses about ethnic minorities as they are codified in school practices are also important to consider in my study of Muslim Hui students.

Cultural reproduction theory, discussed above, suggests that a power relationship exists between the dominant Han culture and ethnic minority cultures in the Chinese educational system. State discourses of ethnic minorities are transmitted and reproduced through schooling. However, cultural reproduction theory is criticized for its insufficiency in explaining local interpretations of the dominant culture and individual responses to that dominance. Considering that China has adopted a unified multiethnic framework that allows for a great deal of flexibility in local implementation of national standardized education policies, another theory needs to be introduced to help understand how local ethnic minority students may flexibly respond to the social and cultural

structure while negotiating their multiple identities. The following section will examine cultural production theory to compensate for what the theory of cultural reproduction overlooks.

Cultural Production Theory

Cultural production theory, in contrast to cultural reproduction theory, acknowledges the active roles of individual students in producing cultures at the micro-level to replace the dominant. This theory argues that individual students have heterogeneous educational experiences and that they have different ways of negotiating their ethnic identities in schools. It also retains Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and symbolic violence. Using cultural production theory as my third theoretical framework is in accordance with the ontological assumption of constructivism (that reality is constructed by individual actors) as well as with the epistemological assumption that knowledge is subjective. In my study, I want to understand how Muslim Hui parents understand secular schooling and how Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education while negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities in the school and in the community. To be specific, my second and third research questions ask: How do the local Muslim Hui perceive secular schooling?, and How do Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education while negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities?

Cultural production theory, elaborated by Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996), attempted to understand schools as one of the major sites of struggle by the disadvantaged against the dominant. Cultural production theory was created to address

three main criticisms or limitations of cultural reproduction theory. First, according to Levinson et al. (1996), earlier reproductionists were Marxist-oriented and privileged class structures over other categories, such as gender, race, and age, as explanatory forces. Secondly, Levinson et al. argued that what was known about schooling and inequality using the lens of cultural production theory was based on Euro-American societies; very few such studies had touched upon non-Western educational systems. Thirdly, they argued that reproduction theory overemphasized the deterministic nature of the dominant structure and culture, and it became "highly schematic" and used schools as "instruments of control" (p. 7). Therefore, a new theory was needed to fill the gap in understanding the dynamics in educational systems.

Cultural production theory emerged from integrating cultural reproduction theory and the cultural difference approach adopted by American anthropologists to study race and ethnic differences in American schools (Levinson et al., 1996). Cultural reproduction theory looks at the historical and social causes of cultural differences between the dominant and the dominated, but it fails to recognize individual power exercised in schools. The cultural difference approach argues that failure of ethnic minority students is due to their inability to adapt to the dominant culture in schools and that schools cannot provide an environment to accommodate ethnic minorities, but this approach fails to address the historical and social foundations of cultural differences. Therefore, cultural production theory attempted to incorporate both reproductionists' and cultural difference perspectives to understand the educational experience of ethnic minorities in schools while accounting for constructed cultural differences in history and society. Cultural

production theory retains the notions of cultural capital and symbolic violence from Bourdieu to explain how students acquire new cultural capital to replace the old and how symbolic violence makes students come to realize their social positions. Ethnographic research is considered to be essential and vital to the development of cultural production theory in that it is able to capture cultural differences at the micro level, such as different cognitive styles among students and different language usage in communication.

Willis (1983) claimed that cultural production occurs when social agents are active appropriators in the process of transforming cultures and have a collective ability to produce meanings, practices, and discourses within social structures. In this sense, cultural production theory challenges the deterministic nature of structures advocated by reproductionists by arguing that social agents may develop their own mechanisms to resist and negotiate with social structures. Willis' (1977) book, *Learning to Labor*, indicated that it was the white working class "lads" who exercised the power to produce a culture of resistance for the purpose of disqualifying themselves from believed-to-be-better jobs—jobs which might not necessarily have been in the best interests of the agents. In summary, cultural production theory "sought to understand how 'reproduction' could be both contested and accelerated through actions by the same people, in the same educational institution" (Levinson et al., 1996, p. 9).

Fordham and Ogbu (1987) apply cultural production theory to the case of ethnic minorities: African Americans. They discovered that black students who shared social and economic relationships in schools reciprocally developed "fictive kinship", which was different from their ethnic backgrounds of descent. This "fictive kinship" was formed

as an oppositional collective social identity as well as an "oppositional cultural frame of reference which includes devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and white Americans" (p. 181). Therefore, some black students intentionally performed poorly in school because they were afraid of being accused of "acting white." The notions of "fictive kinship" and "acting white" indicate that individual students are able to produce certain cultures in schools while under a dominant white structure, and that their educational experiences are heterogeneous. The tensions that could arise from students from "acting white" illustrates that peer pressure from people of the same ethnic group can sometimes be powerful in forcing students to adopt strategies to both meet schools' academic expectations and validate their identity within the ethnic group they are affiliated with.

Cultural production can further be examined through analysis of national and local policy. Local educational practices are substantially influenced by how national educational policies are interpreted and appropriated in a given local cultural context. Shore and Wright (1997) argue that government policies are not only rhetorical documents but also cultural texts, and through the lens of these cultural texts, a system of meaning is constructed. Therefore, an analysis of policy as cultural text is a means to further investigate wider issues in political, social, and cultural contexts, such as technologies of governance to ensure individual consent, attempts to maintain social stability, and discursive formation of cultural homogeneity. As Shore and Wright suggest, "By focusing on policy…it is no longer a question of studying a community or 'a people'; rather…analyzing connections between levels and forms of social process and

action, and exploring how those processes work in different sites—local, national and global" (1997, p. 11). In short, by critically examining how national educational policies are put into practice in a school in a local community, I will be able to examine the power relationships in the local educational system, in which actors, institutions, and discourses are interactively producing educational experiences in the Muslim Hui community.

Sutton and Levinson (2001) also argue that policy is a social practice, as it is embedded in a specific sociocultural context and cultural production occurs when different actors construct it in given social and institutional contexts. Vavrus and Bartlett (2003) similarly suggest that changes in policies at the national level influence social practices at the school level. In turn, they continue, local forces also affect formation of policies at the national level. By examining discourses and educational practices evident in the school, I am able to "to develop a thorough understanding of the particular at each level and to analyze how these understandings produce similar and different interpretations of the policy, problem, or phenomenon" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2003, p. 11).

Research on cultural production—through policy and classroom practices—is not limited to Western scholars. Cultural production, especially the idea of local responses to a dominant culture, has also been used to study education among ethnic minorities in China. Ethnic minority students with strong ethnic identities, such as Muslims in Tibetan regions, show resistance to the dominant Han culture in secular schooling (Yi, 2005); in contrast, ethnic minority students with weak ethnic identities, such as Muslims who live in urban regions in Northwestern China, have been shown to assimilate to the Han culture through schooling. Zang (2007) discovered that Muslim students with weak ethnic

identities in some secondary schools did not even know what Islam was. There are also ethnic minority students who often cross ethnic boundaries and negotiate their ethnic identities within the Han dominant culture, such as in Clothey's (2005) study of university students in the Central University for Nationalities. Some of these ethnic minority university students felt that their ethnic culture was disappearing, while others felt that being educated in modern and marketable fields would help them succeed in the job market in the future.

Local responses to a dominant culture have also been observed in the case of ethnic minority students' experience of attending boarding schools in China (Zhu, 2007a; Jiang, 2002). Boarding schools were established by the national government to provide education for ethnic minority students in economically affluent regions with the intention of using resources, including high-quality teachers and well-maintained facilities and equipment, to help ethnic minority students improve their school performance and competitiveness in the job market. For example, Chen and Postiglione (2009) noticed the cultural adaptation of Muslim Uyghur students in an inland boarding school. Based on four months of fieldwork, they argued that Muslim Uygher students holistically constructed their world of learning and their perceptions of ethnic identity and solidarity. According to Chen and Postiglione, those Muslim Uygher students had developed a bonding form of social capital that maintained solidarity among them in the form of language usage, food, greeting rituals, and dressing customs. This bonding form of social capital led to a resistant culture to contest the school's goal of ethnic integration. Chen and Postiglione also noted that religion was very important in establishing social capital

and a sense of belonging among Muslim Uyghur students because these students were placed in a separate and closed educational environment in which they were the majority, while the school itself was located in a Han dominated region. This study of the boarding school experience suggests that ethnic minority students negotiate their ethnic identities by maintaining their ethnic boundaries through a variety of strategies when the surrounding culture is dominant. With these strategies, individual students in boarding schools exercise their power to resist assimilation.

The above examples have shown that cultural production theory is an apt theoretical framework to study how the dominated construct their realities at the school level in response to dominant structures. These examples have also illustrated the heterogeneous experiences of individual ethnic minority students in schools, which challenges the assumed deterministic nature of social structures in reproducing dominant cultures through education. This theory also explains the phenomena that ethnic minority students may develop resistance toward dominant structural constraints and adopt strategies situationally to maintain their ethnic boundaries. In my study of education among Muslim Hui students, cultural production theory illuminates how a unified multiethnic approach advocated in compulsory education by the Chinese government is negotiated by local Muslim students in a secular school, though the concepts of ‘unity’ and ‘multiethnicity’ contradict each other to a certain extent. In addition, because cultural production theory adds ethnic and cultural elements to the previously class-oriented structural analysis of the effects of education, as cultural reproduction theory supports, it

is more suitable for studying ethnic populations who encounter dominant structures, such as the Muslim Hui I examine in my study.

Both cultural reproduction theory and cultural production theory try to explain the role of culture in negatively and positively affecting educational experience of ethnic minority students in schools. The former argues that a dominant culture is reproduced through education and reinforces social inequality; the latter states that individual agents may develop negotiation strategies to contest an imposed dominant culture and produce a culture salient to their needs.

Conclusion

Informed by the critical and constructivist paradigms and studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity, cultural reproduction theory, and cultural production theory, my study examines how the Muslim Hui in an impoverished rural region respond to the implementation of compulsory education, specifically focusing on the local appropriation of national educational policies, Muslim Hui parents' views of compulsory education, and identity constructions and negotiations of Muslim Hui students in response to secular schooling.

The studies of ethnicity and ethnic identity lay the foundation for me to understand how the concept "identity" is influenced by individual, social, and cultural perspectives. Cultural reproduction theory provides a possible explanation of the intentions and practices of the Chinese government in handling its ethnic populations, specifically the Muslim Hui in this region, through the implementation of compulsory education. Cultural production theory illuminates the divergent views of Muslim Hui

parents on the value of secular schooling as well as the heterogeneous experiences of students and their agentic powers in negotiating multiple identities as a way of responding to secular schooling. Informed by these bodies of literature, my study intends to incorporate these different perspectives to understand how compulsory education has impacted the life of the Muslim Hui in the context of rurality and poverty as well as challenge some limitations of the studies reviewed above in understanding ethnicity, the dominant culture, and individual constructions of reality.

Chapter Three

Methodology: Critical Ethnography

My choice of critical ethnography as a research method is based on my epistemological and ontological assumptions that power relations are involved in constructing the life of Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu, China. While traditional ethnography has been criticized for its neutrality in describing human societies and cultures and its inattention to social structure constraints on human actors, critical ethnography seeks to discover the dialectical relationship between “social structure” and “human agency” and reveals individual actors’ exercises of power in negotiating with dominance and repression in a given society (Anderson, 1989). In my study, I examine not only how the policy of compulsory education was implemented in a rural ethnic Muslim Hui dominant region and changed the opinion of secular schooling among local Muslim Hui, but also describe nuances and interactions occurred in students’ daily lives and use ethnography to uncover the process of cultural production in schools initiated by students (Masemann, 1982). I also aimed to, particularly through “critical” ethnography, observe the filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities students negotiated in schools while they exercised agentic power to construct a school life of their own by questioning, challenging, and believing in required compulsory education as a path to prosperity and changed destinies. In addition, I sought to include my subjectivity and positionality in the study and actively reflect on my power in affecting students’ responses and reactions to my presence. Through these reflections, I wanted to ensure that my interpretations of Muslim Hui students’ educational experiences were not based on my presumptions but were commonly practiced by participants (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

In this chapter, I first start with questions I pondered throughout my fieldwork to show how I attempted to stay open to the unpredictable and adjusted my approaches to completing the study at different stages of fieldwork. Then, I introduce the research timeframe and the research site, especially my primary research site: Prosperity Middle School. Next, I discuss accessing the research site, becoming immersed in the research site, and gaining trust from potential participants. In addition, I elaborate the procedure I used to select participants, and describe my struggles with multiple identities in the site and my relationship with the participants after I exited from the school. I introduce the five methods of data collection I used in my study: participant observation, interview, archival research, reviews of student weekly journals, and reflexive memoing. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of limitations of my research methods. The following emic terms will also be used to discuss my methodology.

English Translations of Emic Terms in Chinese

Emic Term in Chinese	English Meaning
Shanqu	mountainous areas
Chuanqu	basin areas
Tangping	plastic ewers
Qingzhen	halal
Banzhuren	head teachers
Zhongerbing	referring to 8th graders who are “ill and awkward”
Zhiliang	Quality of the educational system
Benbenche	smaller trucks used to transport crops

Questions for Pondering

When I started fieldwork in Fall 2012, I was interested in examining the ethnic identity of Muslim Hui students in a school located in an impoverished rural area of China. I wanted to find out how Muslim Hui students constructed and negotiated their ethnic identity in relation to how the Chinese government represents their identity in the official and hidden curriculum in secular schools. I was also keen to see if there was any relationship between ethnic identity and students' academic engagement and willingness to participate in compulsory education. While I expected to examine primarily ethnic identity prior to beginning the fieldwork, I was also aware of other identities constructed in schools along with ethnic identity, such as rural identity and academic identity.

After I had been in the research site for over a month, I realized that the Muslim Hui students in the secular school were not strongly conscious of their ethnicity and didn't feel any tension between their ethnic identity and school structure, but other identities emerged as influential in students' academic engagement and performance, such as filial identity and rural identity. At first, I was a little disappointed by this realization. I started to visit the homes of these Muslim Hui students and had hoped to find out how their family and Muslim backgrounds affected their school experiences.

I had observed that many Muslim families maintain a strong loyalty to their religion and that some also believe in the value of secular schooling. For example, they require their children to attend mosque education to learn Koranic texts during winter breaks and summer breaks, and they also believe that going to school will provide their children with opportunities to land government jobs with stable income and high social

status. Such religious beliefs and views of schooling affect Muslim Hui students' attitudes towards schooling and constructions of multiple identities.

Meanwhile, incidents of resistance to schooling occurred in the research site, such as peer-to-peer bullying, teachers' verbally assaulting and physically punishing students, and students' verbally attacking teachers. The tensions between teachers and students were sometimes elevated and led to students' refusal to return to school in some cases. Some young adults and teenagers who had previously dropped out of school were also involved in some of these incidents. I was surprised to witness these incidents and became interested in examining the underlying causes of this resistance and investigating students' other reactions to schooling. It was interesting for me to hear teachers' complaints about how rebellious and disrespectful the students were and their feelings of helplessness in persuading students to learn; however, I also heard from students that they didn't think learning was that important because it couldn't guarantee them jobs. Regardless of their academic performance, they believed they would become migrant workers, helping their relatives run Muslim restaurants in nearby cities.

I recognized that there had been diverse perceptions and expectations of secular schooling after two months of staying in the field and that these perceptions and expectations had changed in the Hui community over the past eight years after the establishment of compulsory education. With an increasing desire for the economic and cultural capital of the majority Han, some Muslim Hui families and their children have slowly accepted that secular schooling is a pathway to future prosperity. Secular schooling, in this sense, seemed to reproduce the Han culture while producing multiple

identities for Muslim Hui students, including filial, rural, and ethnoreligious. I wanted to understand how multiple identities are present among these Muslim Hui students from both township and mountainous regions, from both affluent and impoverished families, and from both religiously conservative and unconventional families. I also wanted to understand how compulsory education implemented in a rural, poverty-stricken, and Hui-dominated area has been constructing and transforming a local Muslim Hui community.

As my fieldwork continued, I felt fortunate to have a Muslim background because it drew the people of Xihaigu closer to me; however, I also felt the struggle between my own knowledge of Islam and their practice of Islam. I was sometimes trapped in a spiritual conundrum, reflecting on the differences between my understanding of Islam and interpretations of Islamic teachings and theirs. It took me a few weeks to adjust my knowledge of Islam to theirs, and I learned to let the differences be. I did not want to impose my knowledge on or produce knowledge for the people there, but I still felt that my presence naturally affected how local participants reacted to me. I was producing knowledge with them. Therefore, it was helpful to continuously observe and reflect on my own biases throughout the year of fieldwork, during which time I tried to stay open and flexible to emergent incidents and my unexpected responses and reactions.

The Research Timeframe and Site

I conducted fieldwork from early September 2012 to mid-May 2013, except two months of break during Chinese New Year from January to February 2013 when school was not in session. Fall semester at the middle school lasted from September 10, 2012 to January 5, 2013, and Spring semester lasted from February 21, 2013 to July 1, 2014. I stayed for a full semester in Fall, but didn’t spend the full Spring semester as I had

originally planned. I decided to cut my fieldwork short due to the considerations of my personal involvement in daily activities at the school and my influences on students' reactions to my presence and other teachers. These considerations will be elaborated in the following discussion of "struggling with my multiple identities." Thus, in total, I spent seven months as a researcher at the middle school.

In Xihaigu region of China, I selected Xiji County as my primary research site. It is situated in the southern mountainous area of Ningxia Hui autonomous region. Specifically, I spent most of my time at Prosperity Middle School in Xiji County, one of the most populous counties in Ningxia. Xiji County also has the most concentrated Muslim Hui population in Ningxia. Prosperity Middle School, located in a township of Xiji County, is 45 minutes south of Xiji County. It is one of 25 middle schools in Xiji County (Xiji Bureau of Education, 2011) and is considered as a "decent" school by the numerous Prosperity students who pass the high school entrance exam every year (conversation with county officials, 2012). Prosperity Middle School is composed of over 1,500 students, 98% of which are Muslim Hui living within 20 kilometers of the school. Below, I describe Prosperity Middle School in more detail.

I chose to study the Muslim Hui students at Prosperity Middle School in Xiji County based on two considerations. First, I wanted to select a school site with a large Muslim population so that I could observe how Muslim students responded to compulsory education by constructing and negotiating multiple identities. Ningxia is the only Hui autonomous region in China and has one of the largest concentrated Muslim

Hui populations in the country. Within Ningxia, Xiji County has one of the most concentrated Muslim Hui populations.

Second, I wanted to examine the relationships between these identities and the academic engagement and performance of Muslim Hui students in secular schools. According to Xu and Luo (2012), the completion rate of compulsory education was 61.3% from 2003 to 2006 in Ningxia. This compares to a national completion rate of 76.6% in 2002 (Sheng & Wang, 2003) and is second to the lowest in the nation. The low completion rate in Ningxia indicates that Muslim Hui students face challenges and difficulties in engaging in secular schooling and in maintaining academic performance to government standards.

In summary, Prosperity Middle School in Xiji County, Xihaigu region of Ningxia was a site that not only allowed me to investigate Muslim Hui students' multiple identities but also enabled me to look at how multiple identities are constructed and negotiated in response to secular schooling.

Prosperity Middle School and its surroundings. Prosperity Middle School is a four-year middle school, including students in grades 6-9. Some students are from nearby villages situated in *Shanqu* (mountainous areas), while others come from *Chuanqu* (basin areas) where the town of Prosperity is located. Prosperity Middle School is a 20-minute walk from the town center. It is connected to the town by a narrow concrete road, the only main road linking the town to Xiji County center and other nearby towns. This one-lane road is about 5 meters wide and is traveled by semi-trucks, long-distance buses, taxi cabs, personal sedans, motorcycles, electrical tricycles, bicycles, pedestrians, and

animals. Alongside the road are shops, farmers' houses, corn fields, and sheepfolds. On the far side the town, layers of mountains surround the town with crop terraces carved out on their edges. Often, students ride their bicycles with friends sitting on the back, racing with a bus, a car, or a motorcycle. It is also not surprisingly to see a herdsman whip their sheep around a semi-truck on the road. When the town holds its market day, on odd days on the Chinese lunar calendar, many Muslim men and women come to the town in white hats and colorful headscarves, joining the students in uniform who shop and eat in the town center during lunch time. This road is not only the lifeline for local Muslims but also the pathway for students at Prosperity Middle School who travel on it, going to school, coming home, and hanging out with friends.

Figure 3. The road traveled by cars, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, and animals

Off the main concrete road, an unpaved bumpy path leads to the school, muddy in bad weather and dusty in good weather. Built on a deserted corn field, the school occupies about 50,000 square meters. Its main gate faces south and to the side of the path. The school name is printed largely and noticeably on the wall. Entering the gate, the playground or exercise field is in front of the school, with the main four-story teaching building behind it. On the right are a few parallel bars and a bicycle parking shed. On the left are two outdoor basketball courts used for P.E. classes. On the far left are rows of flats built to accommodate approximately 50 teachers and administrators. Because the school is a boarding school, teachers who are from faraway towns or villages usually stay at the school during the week. Likewise, most students are also given dorm rooms to stay in during the week, except for those whose families live within a five-kilometer radius and who can get to school by bike or on foot. Female students and male students are separated in two dorm buildings at the back of the campus. Close to the dorm buildings are kitchens, home to 17 cooks who are all Muslims and prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the 1,500-plus students. No Han cooks are allowed in the school to prepare food. There are also two small grocery stores on campus selling students instant noodles, buns, snacks, and school supplies. With 5 to 10 RMB (.80 cents to $1.25 USD) spare money in their pockets from their parents a week, going to these grocery stores seem luxurious for them at times.

Like other boarding schools in China, Prosperity Middle School operates on a rigid daily schedule. Students usually get up at 6:00 a.m. and clean the dorm rooms and playgrounds. Then, they do their morning run for about a half-hour. After that, they

return to their classrooms to study on their own for an hour before the teachers come in. They have four classes in the morning and three classes in the afternoon with a lunch break and some extracurricular time. After dinner, they have an hour break before they return to the classrooms for individual study at night. Students seldom have free time until the lights are turned off at 9:30 p.m. every night. Then, chatting, singing, and laughing begin while some diligent students still study with flashlights. A detailed school schedule is included in my findings section. “This is how you can succeed academically,” some teachers repeated.

Unlike other boarding schools, however, this Prosperity Middle School has strict rules for using water on campus. Water is precious because the area doesn’t get enough precipitation yearly. *Tangping* or plastic ewers are used by almost all students, as they are the most common water containers and washing tools used by Muslim families. During breaks in the school day, students carry *Tangping* to a well with one tap and fetch cold water back to their dorms. They pour water out of *Tangping* onto their hands and use only a small amount to wash their hands and faces. They also line up in front of a boiler room and wait their turns to get hot water with their thermos bottles. They are even more careful about using hot water because they only get it once a day. In this school, water also needs to be *Qingzhen* or pure. Han students are not allowed to touch the water because Hui students would not use it afterwards. Only Hui students are assigned to distribute food to other students and wash food containers and utensils after lunch and dinner.

It is not uncommon to see students in white hats and colorful scarves like their Muslim parents, though students are required to wear uniforms on campus at all time. Some female teachers also wear round-shaped blue hats to cover their hair, a typical dress code for women in the local Muslim communities. I heard that this is meant as a way to remind them of gender differences and to maintain a certain distance from the opposite sex.

Access the research site. Gaining approval to do research in China is about finding the right connection with authoritative power over subordinates. In Chinese culture, relationships are emphasized when duties arise from one's situation in relation to others (Yang, 2011). It is crucial to know who occupies a higher position and how different levels of authority are related in China. Therefore, it was important for me to develop relationships with local town administrators, teachers, and Muslim Hui students. Through these relationships, I gained the trust of the local people. Soon, with the help of the right connections and development of these relationships, I became known by officials from the county and town governments. They further facilitated my access to the site and my data collection.

In Muslim communities in Xihaigu, relationships are often derived from a sense of kinship based on shared Islamic beliefs. Muslims treat each other as brothers and sisters, and they expect reciprocal treatment from each other. Thanks to my friends at Ningxia Social Science Academy and Ningxia University, who drove me directly to the town in Xiji County of Xihaigu I was going to do my research at and introduced me to the town mayor, a Muslim Hui whom they both knew. Because both scholars had

previous research experience in Xihaigu, they had also informed me of potential challenges, especially with living in the Xihaigu area. They both treated me as a fellow scholar and a Muslim sister and hoped that they could help me with my research; in turn, they expected that my research would improve education in the poorest region of China. Such kindness and good intentions were also expressed by the mayor, who also called me sister and constantly reminded me to regard him as my big brother. He later became the key connection to facilitate my access to the research site, Prosperity Middle School.

Sitting in the mayor's office in the town government center, my friends introduced me as a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota with a research project studying education for Muslim Hui students. He was very happy to greet me and immediately agreed to help me with my research. I told him that I could volunteer to teach students English as my way of thanking them for assisting me with the research. He agreed and thought this was a good idea. Interestingly, the mayor only remembered me as a "professor" who was going to study Muslim Hui education in the area, even after I told him that I was just a doctoral student on several occasions. Later, I figured that they couldn't tell the difference between a professor and a doctoral student because they never had someone like me in the area before. My mistaken title was attached to me until I completed my fieldwork. "Professor" was, in the end, a habitual title for them to call me, even though local town and school administrators knew I was just a doctoral student doing dissertation research. However, this mistaken title was advantageous, especially when I was meeting with other government officials, formally and informally.

With the help of the mayor, I was introduced to Principal Ma of Prosperity Middle School, also a Muslim Hui. After the mayor told him about my purpose and my willingness to volunteer to teach English classes at the school, Principal Ma was quite pleased and offered me a free dorm room to do research at the school. He also assigned two newly-hired teachers to be my assistants—not only to support my fieldwork but also to take care of my daily needs. On the same day, Mr. Ma called in almost all the school leaders and introduced them to me. I was immediately granted written approval to start my research.

My story of coming to Xihaigu and doing research on Muslim Hui education was always introduced by Principal Ma with the following three components: she is an American professor; she is a Muslim Hui from a very prominent Hui family in Nanjing; and she is brought here by a scholar who is the classmate of the Communist Party Head in Xiji County. My previous extensive self-introduction was shrunk into three sentences. Some were truths; others were mainly exaggerations, but to my advantage. I was given power by people who wanted to believe I had power through my connections.

The next day, the head of school logistics came to pick me up from the town government center where I had stayed for two days before school started. I was taken to the dorm assigned to me and was treated to a very nice meal—a ritual, I found out later, that they held to welcome new teachers. Soon, all of the teachers in the school heard about me and showed their curiosity and nervousness toward me. Almost all of them had never met a doctoral student, let alone from a university in the U.S. In the beginning, they were afraid that I was going to criticize their classes. During the first few weeks, I always

had visitors coming to my dorm and asking me where I was from, what I was doing, why I was here in this town, how long I had stayed in the U.S., and how long I would stay in the school. Once in awhile, I had teachers come to my dorm and consult with me on how to educate their students in the middle school. Apparently, I was regarded as an expert in education with extensive experience outside the country.

After the first two weeks, I already felt that the teachers were comfortable with me being there in the school, and they would share with me about things happened on whatever day. Some teachers came to me and complained about students; others started to teach me about how to be tough and gentle at the same time with rural Muslim students. There were also older teachers who kept telling me that physical punishment is the only effective method to discipline students and force them to learn. I also heard many politics and rumors going on in the school. By this time, I knew I was being treated like one of their own.

In the meantime, I felt that the students started to recognize me, and I realized that all the teachers with whom I had made friends had told their students about me. I didn’t need to introduce myself to the classes, since I was already known by all students. When I was walking on campus, I often overheard students talking about me, saying that I was a “professor” from the U.S. When I turned around, they shied away. Some brave students sometimes greeted me in English and immediately ran away, and I could hear laughing right afterward by their friends. However, I still felt that I had no opportunities to build closer relationships with these Muslim Hui students until two months had passed.

Learning the local dialect. Another important component of access to the research site was learning the local dialect. Since Xihaigu is located in the northern part of China where local dialects are supposed to be similar to Mandarin Chinese, I thought I wouldn't have any difficulty understanding them before I entered the field. However, to my surprise, the local dialect is quite different from Mandarin. (There are also different dialects across different Muslim sects in the local area because of their geographic origins, though the differences are small.) When I arrived, I couldn't understand a single word said by a local child. I felt worried and discouraged in the beginning. Although the dialect is verbally different, it is still considered a dialect of Northern China rather than a distinctive language from standard Mandarin Chinese (Gladney, 1991).

When I arrived at the school, I immediately noticed that Muslim Hui students communicate in dialect on campus even though Mandarin Chinese is required in the classroom. Teachers know Mandarin Chinese, but they speak the local dialect in some teaching activities and in most non-teaching interactions. A teacher told me that local people would think of a person as arrogant if s/he spoke Mandarin Chinese to them; thus, they usually speak the dialect to each other. Another teacher also commented that some students would not understand them if they spoke Mandarin and said that "Giving instructions in the local dialect is much more effective." A school leader told me that, "Speaking the local dialect is to preserve their cultural heritage." Some students also shared with me that older Muslim generations, such as their grandparents, don't understand Mandarin Chinese at all. When they are at home, their grandparents do not allow them to speak Mandarin Chinese. In the school and among students, if someone

speaks Mandarin Chinese, others would laugh at him/her. Hearing these comments, I realized the importance of learning the dialect, at least to the extent I could understand it. I used all the opportunities I could to listen to local people talking through chatting with teachers, asking them questions about certain dialect words, attending students' daily activities, and visiting students' dorm rooms every night. In about a month and a half, I could almost completely understand the dialect and how certain words were used differently in the local area.

When my fieldwork was deepened after getting to know the dialect and more about students, I had opportunities to converse with parents, through whom I was exposed to the local dialect at a deeper level. Though my Muslim Hui students had to be my interpreters in some encounters, I was able to communicate with local people successfully in most cases. Eventually, people in the school wouldn't switch to Mandarin Chinese when they talked to me. They responded to me in the dialect even when I talked with them in Mandarin Chinese. I was also able to respond to local people's questions quickly, even when they asked me in dialect. I felt that they were comfortable speaking the dialect with me and included me as one of their own. In some occasions, I spoke a few words from the dialect when local people asked me if I would understand them. Then they burst out laughing and remarked about my accent. However, this laughter showed me the acceptance and closeness I had achieved through learning the local dialect, which significantly helped with my interviews and transcription of interview notes.

Becoming immersed and gaining trust. After becoming friends with the teachers, I was asked by Vice Principal Ma to evaluate classes with him. He gave me the

flexibility to choose the classes I wanted to evaluate that day, and I selected a total of 24 different classes in 7th and 8th grade in the subjects of English, math, Chinese, physics, biology, politics, chemistry, P.E., and music. After each class, Vice Principal Ma and I would give the teacher of that class comments and suggestions on his/her performance in class. Through these opportunities, I became familiar with the teaching styles of these teachers and the contents of academic subjects taught in a rural middle school that also met the standards of national standardized curriculum.

I was also able to expose myself to more students and interact with them in some classes. Although some students still shied away from me, some did come to me and ask me questions in English. Occasionally, I was invited by teachers to give lectures in their classes to inspire the students to learn English. For many rural Muslim Hui students, it is very difficult to learn English because they either had no English instruction at all or had poor-quality English instruction when they were in elementary school. Some of them don’t know any English letters by the time they enter middle school, while students in urban middle schools can usually converse in basic English sentences. I thought teaching them English and teaching them how to learn English would become the breakthrough of my research agenda.

However, finding opportunities to talk with students was still on my mind. Seeing them so shy and afraid of an outsider, I was a little worried. Surprisingly, my initial offer to teach them English didn’t pan out. Principal Ma told me that he was concerned about me being a temporary teacher, which would not benefit students in the long run. I didn’t agree at first, since they were already lacking English teachers and they had to ask

whoever knew English to teach English classes. Teachers who were trained to teach Chinese, math, chemistry, and art were assigned to teach English.

Later, I understood Mr. Ma's worries: these rural Muslim Hui students would become attached to me and be hard for the other teachers to discipline after I left, a general situation he sees happening often. In the impoverished rural middle school, teachers are also on the move. They usually stay for a year and then transfer up to other schools in the county or leave the teaching profession for higher paying jobs. His previous and current students had constantly been required to adjust emotionally and academically to different teachers, which potentially affected their overall academic performance.

On the one hand, I tried to respect his decision; on the other hand, I had to persuade him to give me an entry point to interact with students. Eventually, Principal Ma assigned me to be an assistant to the *Banzhuren* or head teacher of an 8th grade class. He thought this class had average performance among all seven classes. Though being an assistant to the head teacher didn't give me a chance to teach, I was still happy that I would most likely be helping with facilitating class activities (e.g., disciplining students) and responding to students' needs and requests. By not teaching, I could focus on students' school experience as well as their personal lives.

I also negotiated an evening English tutoring hour with Principal Ma on weekdays. It was intended to be an hour for me to be available to whoever was interested in getting extra help in English, but it turned out to be an evening English class that all students in this 8th grade class were required to attend. Their teachers were worried that

no one would show up if the class wasn't mandatory and that I would be disappointed after all. I appreciated their kindness and hospitality, but I didn't want to force these students to learn more if they were already overwhelmed by their assigned schoolwork. Doing ethnography means capturing the social meanings of informants in "naturally occurring settings" (Brewer, 2000); I had no intention of interrupting and changing their daily learning routine.

After my new title as "assistant to the head teacher" was announced, I received many questions from students about myself. My interactions with students suddenly skyrocketed, not only in this particular assigned class but also in other classes as these students introduced me to their friends on campus. I had many opportunities to get to know them in person: their personalities, academic performance, family backgrounds, personal issues and concerns, and life struggles.

However, I also faced dilemmas when interacting with them. Seeing me as one of their head teachers, students considered me an authority figure who, they expected to, would orally discipline them, physically punish them, and track their academic performance and monitor their daily activities. I was given the power to check their daily attendance, call their parents about delinquent behaviors, and supervise their cleaning jobs. It took me a few weeks to convey to them that I wasn't the authority figure they assumed I was. I ran with all the students in the early morning around the campus, went to the classroom I was assigned to during class breaks and chatted with them, accompanied students to have lunch and dinner every day, conducted class meetings when the head teacher was absent, supervised cleanings in the dorm, visited my students'

dorm rooms every single night, helped students in need of medical attention, and even lent some money to students who needed money to buy food or go home. Eventually, the students didn't stand up as I walked into the dorm rooms, took turns singing or performing for me, shared personal dreams and difficulties with me, and wanted to keep me in their dorm rooms for as long as possible, I knew the trust I had been striving to gain was there, and I wasn't just the outsider or the role model they were told about by their teachers. At that time, I felt that I was pulled into their lives without much hesitation. However, I was inexperienced with interacting with rural Muslim Hui students in this community and didn't consider the previous warning from other teachers of not becoming too close to the students. The temptation to get to know them was strong, and led to my struggles later on with my own positionality and subjectivity.

Selection of Participants

Originally, I intended to recruit 8th graders as my main participants. I thought 8th graders would not face the challenges 7th graders may have, having just transitioned from primary schools to the secondary school and perhaps struggling to adapt to the new school. I also thought that 8th graders were not like 9th graders, who were busy preparing for the High School Entrance Exam and less likely to actively participate in extracurricular activities. I targeted 8th graders because they were already familiar with the secondary school, had more time to interact with peers and teachers in different contexts, and were less stressed about the High School Entrance Exam.

After entering the field, my original thoughts proved true with additional surprising dynamics. Eighth graders exhibited more resistance that seventh and ninth

graders against teachers; 8th graders tended to be involved in peer-to-peer violent acts; more 8th graders chose to and were forced to drop out of the school after the second semester; and 8th graders showed more delinquent behaviors than students in other grades, such as damaging public property. Eighth graders also constituted the most dynamic group on campus and impressed me with a variety of identities they constructed and negotiated. Later, I found out that 8th graders were thought to be affected by "*zhong er bing*", a term used throughout China to refer to 8th graders who are "ill and awkward" because of puberty. The previously unexpected dynamics added another dimension to my selection of participants. Selecting 8th graders could not only help me see why these dynamics tend to emerge after 7th grade, but also could provide me with information about how they negotiate multiple identities in dealing with academic difficulties and choosing a life of their own before entering 9th grade.

In order to select key informants and participants, I started to observe the seven 8th grade classes in order to identify potential informants and expose myself to the teachers of these classes. Soon, I noticed different roles in the classrooms: leaders, followers, good performers, academic models, strugglers, pranksters, jokers, and so forth. I observed students' interactions among each other and with their teachers. After a few days of observation, I had some ideas about whom I wanted to select, but I wanted to ensure my selections were representative. So I asked the head teachers of four classes to select 5-6 students for me to interview based on six criteria: gender, age, family background, academic performance, location of homes, and religious beliefs. Then, I talked to these students and decided whom I wanted to focus my interviews on. I asked

the teachers to help me obtain parental consent because of the low literacy rate among parents. For the class I assisted, I selected my own students and gained parents' oral consent by visiting their homes. All of these students signed consent forms before I interviewed them.

Selecting stakeholders to interview wasn't difficult. I wanted to interview teachers, administrators, and parents, because their responses would triangulate my findings and provide explanations for my emergent questions. After having been in the field for over a month, I came to know quite a few teachers who were willing to participate in my study. During my early informal conversations with them, I had already expressed my intention of interviewing them at a later time and asked for their permission. I also wanted to compare the perceptions of teachers and students on certain issues, so I asked the 8th grade teachers to participate in my study. They were all happy to help, but a little nervous about being interviewed. Some of them asked me for an outline of interview questions so that they could prepare for the interviews. I kindly told them that I wasn't looking for perfect answers but wanted to learn about their students, their experience of teaching, and their thoughts on school life in the area. I didn't want them to craft the answers they thought I wanted; rather, I wanted them to share ideas they would normally share with each other (Patton, 2002).

I selected administrators who represented leadership so that I could gain information about educational policies and practices in the school. In addition, I also selected a few parents to interview who were parents of some of the interviewed students. As I visited the homes of these local Muslims, I found that the majority of parents had

never attended secular schooling and thus had limited literacy. My initial plan of asking them to sign consent forms had to be adjusted. A few parents who had graduated from elementary schools were able to sign the forms. For parents who couldn't read and write, I requested change of protocol while I was in the field. Oral consent was eventually approved by IRB.

One of the challenges of selecting parents to be my interviewees was that they speak the local dialect described above and I couldn't understand them well. In order to ensure that they could understand my questions, I purposely selected parents who had sufficient exposure to Mandarin Chinese, either through watching TV or having been to other cities to do labor work. In order to observe the ethnoreligious identity inherited and maintained in the community, I also included an additional selection criterion: the interviewed parents needed to regularly attend mosque activities, especially the five daily prayers. In addition, the parents I selected were the heads of households who have family members in other provinces doing labor work, a typical situation among Muslim families in the local community. However, because fathers are dominant in the Muslim family relationship and most mothers do not understand or speak Mandarin Chinese, I was not able to formally interview any mothers. I did converse informally with a few mothers during my visits to their homes.

Struggling with Multiple Identities: Positionality and Subjectivity

One of the challenges for critical ethnographers is their positionality and subjectivity in the process of constructing local participants' knowledge (Foley, 2002). Andrade (2000) felt that her ethnicity influenced her participants and their interactions

with her because her participants perceived that she already possessed certain knowledge of their ethnic background. Peshkin (1988) points out that subjectivity is like a garment that you can never remove but are trapped in.

One of my major challenges in the field was to balance my multiple identities in the school. I struggled with my positionality and subjectivity. As a researcher conducting research on rural Muslim Hui students, some teachers and administrators expected me to write a report about the problems in rural education and submit it to a higher authority. Through me, they hoped that the current educational situation in the local area could be changed. Therefore, even when I picked the last seat in the classroom to avoid interrupting and intruding upon their class, the students and the teacher for that class still acted nervous, treating me as an inspector. I was regarded as someone whom they believed to be similar to the officials from the Bureau of Education, who came to the school to judge their performance.

As an assistant to the head teacher, I was authorized to discipline students and monitor their daily activities. I had to show the students that I had the authority to make final decisions on a variety of issues arising in the class. At the same time, I also wanted to present myself as a friend who was willing to listen to their ideas and opinions. Being an assistant allowed me to be closer to students and to participate in their life. But, this empowered assignment somehow negatively influenced my relationship with students, in that they became reserved and scared to share stories with me at times.

As a “role model” introduced to students by their teachers, I felt that students were looking up to me and showing respect by keeping their distance. I still remembered

the moment when a girl cried in front of me and told me that she could never be like me because we were from different worlds. Her perception of herself and the world she belonged to taught me that I needed to show them that I sincerely wanted to know them and that I believed in their abilities to achieve a life like mine. I was afraid that any of my suggestions or comments on their studies and life could be perceived as demeaning and condescending.

I often received suspicious, surprised, and excited looks from students when I told them that I was also a Hui. After some time, some students came to see me as one of their older Muslim sisters and assumed that I knew everything about Muslim Hui, such as whether a Muslim could donate blood or whether the end of world would come. Teachers, on the other hand, perceived me as a relaxed Muslim who does not strictly follow Islamic teachings, a typical type they believe represents most urban Muslims. Therefore, they sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally, tested my authenticity of "Hui-ness" by asking me questions, such about whether I pray or drink. I tried to explain to them that Muslims have similar but different practices across China. While I was asking them about how much they knew about Islam, I also shared stories with them about being raised in a Muslim family and challenges I had faced growing up in a non-Muslim area.

My "Professor" title was convenient when Principal Ma introduced me to his colleagues or other government officials. Principal Ma was always proud of announcing me as an "American Professor" in his school, which I interpreted as his way of showing off his success in leading the school. Soon, all of the town government officials knew me

as a visiting professor from the U.S. They even invited me to some government receptions and personal outings. It seemed as though I became a valuable resource to them and they wanted to make a connection with me because I was the one with power. Because of my special title, I received much respect from local authorities, which helped with my archival research throughout.

My multiple identities became more complex and unpredictable when I visited the homes of these Muslim Hui students. I didn't know how and what these students had told their parents about me and why I was visiting their homes. Initially, I thought that the students would tell their parents that I was a Muslim teacher from the U.S. who wanted to see their homes and possibly interview them. Later, I noticed differing parent reactions to my presence. Some parents apparently knew who I was and asked me questions about studying abroad; others didn't even know that I had come to visit. Some thought I had come to report their children's performance in school. I learned that I had to figure out how to present my identity to parents by informally talking with parents. However, in most of my visits, I was perceived as a head teacher—parents always asked me about their children's performance in class and allowed me to discipline their children. Although I was attributed multiple identities, the identity I wanted to have was their trusted Muslim friend with whom they were willing to share their school and life experiences.

I also worked hard to maintain some distance from students and keep myself as a non-intrusive observer. However, I still struggled with balancing different identities. Because I looked young to these students, they treated me as one of their 20-year-old

intern teachers they had had in the past. A few students called me “sister”, although I am probably the same age as their mothers because early marriage and childbirth are very common in the area; some young girls are married as early as age 15. This sense of sisterhood allowed me to get to know students from different angles, but it also created dilemmas for me. For example, students occasionally invited me to their off-campus activities, which I thought would be a great venue in which to get to know them better; however, I couldn’t go to any of these activities because I might be in trouble if any student-related safety issues arose—I would have to be the responsible adult. I had to be cautious about what I could do and what I couldn’t, so sometimes I had to disappoint the students.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I decided to take a different approach to participating in school activities. As Andrade (2000) states, insider status is not granted but created through continuous interactions between researchers and participants, and this status is constantly being evaluated by the performance of both sides. Participants are not only sharing their knowledge but “crafting interpretations in reaction to and through interaction with researchers” (p. 286). Previously, I had tried to be close to students and act like their friend.

After reflecting on the evolving relationship between students and me, I felt that reestablishing some distance from students would be beneficial to the research. I purposely showed and told them that I was busy with processing my data and writing the dissertation, because I sensed that they took advantage of our close relationship. I became worried about whether my role was truly non-intrusive. The students from the class I

assisted showed off their privileges over students in other classes. My refusal to use corporal punishment unintentionally empowered students to not take my instructions seriously. It became impossible for me to manage the class and keep the students attentive in the classroom. They even attempted to challenge my authoritative power by rejecting my requests jokingly. Some students justified their misbehaviors by saying that Teacher Wu would approve; but in fact, I didn't comment on these behaviors. Others told their friends that they were good friends of mine to instigate jealousy. In addition, I didn't want to be the judge of teaching methods in the school. Somehow, my choice of not corporally punishing students became the teaching standard some students used to bargain with other teachers who believe in corporal punishment. Some students also tried to gain my pity by telling me how horrible other teachers were who scolded and punished them. I felt that the power people granted me in the school had affected the interactions between teachers and students, which wasn't what I expected or intended to achieve. Therefore, I chose to put some space between the students and me in hope of maintaining my relationship with other teachers and maintaining the peer-to-peer relationships among students.

Exit from Prosperity Middle School

I mentioned above that I decided to cut my fieldwork short because I was inadvertently used by students to judge other teachers' teaching methods. Leaving the school at that time meant that I wouldn't interrupt their daily activities and practices any more. By the time I left, I still felt that my multiple identities hadn't changed much. To teachers and town officials, I was still the "Professor" they had known for a few months,

doing research; to students, I was more of a teacher and a Muslim Hui sister whom they sometimes contacted and asked questions of. In the end, both teachers and students probably thought of me less as a researcher and more as a teacher, like other intern teachers they had had before. Even now, some students still contact me and ask me where I am and what I'm doing through an online chat service. Being included in their online community after leaving the school gives me access to their current lives and a platform to continue our communications.

Methods of Data Collection

Participant observation. While I had to continually struggle with my own multiple identities and constantly change my own positions in the field, I was satisfied with the amount of data I collected via participant observation. When I entered the field, I already had some ideas about what to observe as my starting point, though I expected that many themes, including some unexpected ones, would emerge during my fieldwork. I drew from the work of Levinson (2001) and Hopkins (2010) and started by observing students' appearances, then visiting their homes, hanging out in the community, and paying attention to the symbols of Chinese nationhood. I also painted a picture of the physical environment of the school; attended the ritualized routines of school life; listened to student discourses; documented curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher practice; and discussed school regulations and policies with administrators and teachers.

I kept in mind the specific context of this impoverished rural region with a highly concentrated Muslim population and the conditions of local Muslim students being enrolled in the boarding school; therefore, I made some modifications to the work of

Levinson and Hopkins to fit my own work as outlined in the table below. The four scales of observation, as Hopkins (2010) provides, are sites where I observed various activities and events; criteria list specific areas of observation I carried out in the field; and description indicates various levels of spatial relations and religious, familial, economic and political environments I paid special attention to. In order to be more specific on what to observe, I included the modified themes below so that I could have a checklist to follow when I lost direction at some points.

Scales/sites	Criteria	Description
Marginalized body	clothing, choice of dialect, appearance, and general conduct	These embodied practices associated with Muslim religious practices
Understanding of home	people's understandings and representations of home (identity at home)	Perceived family social status, intensity of family attachment and connections, parents' backgrounds
	continuity and stability of home across the life course	Family values, rituals, religious teachings
	structure, agency, and space	How spatial, psychological, and social relations play out within the home, such as self-identification of ethnicity
Neighborhood and community	Education discourses, Koranic teachings, and social relationships	Economic capital associated with geographic locations; Muslim students' and parents' understanding of the relationship between secular and religious education
Nation	Engagement issues, nationality, politics: how	Meanings of local buildings, landscapes,

	nationality is constructed and interpreted in Hui community	posted signs, expectations of future opportunities, youth sense of belonging, school curriculum

Note. Modified criteria from Hopkins's (2010) frameworks

Themes	**Things to observe**	**Rationale**
Physical environment (spatial)	1. School location 2. Classroom decoration 3. Demographics of study body: from what villages	This theme centers on providing information about the spatial configuration in which Muslim Hui students interact, and it also reflects how the school constructs power relations.
Ritualized routine of school life	1. Morning assembly, exercises 2. Daily class schedules 3. Lunch and dinner time 4. Extra-curricular activities 5. Faculty meetings 6. Faculty-parents-students meeting 7. Student relations in the dorm rooms	This theme focuses on examining how school culture is reproduced and internalized by students through these rituals as well as seeking variations among these ritualized routines, such as activities specific to Muslim Hui.
Students' practices and discourses	1. Peer interactions 2. Groups forming 3. Students' narratives of their school lives 4. Choices of discourse/language usage by Muslim Hui students 5. Classroom participation	This theme looks interpersonal and intergroup interactions among students and examines how certain identities are maintained and negotiated.
Curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher practice	1. Structure of curriculum/	This theme provides background information on

	arrangement of classes 2. Teachers' interactions with students (students' perceptions) 3. Textbooks	how the dominant Han culture is operationalized in the school attended by Muslim Hui.
School regulations and policies	1. The mission and vision of the school 2. Compulsory education requirements 3. Students' aspirations	This theme examines how Muslim Hui students respond to school regulations and policies.

Note. Modified themes to observe from Hopkins's (2010) frameworks and Levinson's (2001) study

To facilitate my observation, I took a few pictures of the physical environment of the school, capturing aspects such as the arrangement of classrooms (who are assigned to sit by whom) and classroom decor (posted signs and blackboard news) to look for Muslim Hui characteristics. While I was observing classroom activities (in 24 different classes), I sought to understand how identities were being constructed and negotiated among students and between students and teachers through their daily interactions. By participating in faculty meetings, I was able to identify school discourses, such as teachers' expectations of the graduation rate. In teacher-parent meetings, I observed teachers' expectations of parents' participation in educational activities through seeing how school policies were being conveyed to parents by teachers praising good students and pointing out misbehaving students. In these meetings, I was also able to see Muslim Hui parents' views of schooling by the questions they raised and concerns they expressed. Furthermore, I participated in the ritualized routines of daily school life, such

as Monday morning assemblies, accompanying students for lunch and dinner, and visiting dorm rooms for most of the days I was at the school. Through these activities, I learned that what had been emphasized in school and how students had reacted to these activities.

Visiting the homes of Muslim Hui students turned out to be very effective for learning about the Muslim Hui community culture. My informal conversations with parents taught me the importance of their Islamic beliefs and the ways they practice their faith. I was also able to probe their understanding of compulsory education and their relationship in the community. For instance, the social structure in all of the villages I visited is based on patrilineal relationships, with male family members being dominant. In most of these villages, families share common kinship, and the school performance of a child from a family affects how parents in other families educate their children. Some parents like to compare their children with other well-performed students in other families and give children pressure or incentives to catch up with the good ones.

To better understand this Muslim Hui neighborhood and community, I tried to attend community events during my spare time. Most of these events were religious. I had the opportunity to celebrate Eid al-Adha and the Tomb Sweeping Festival (see Chapter Four) with my students' families. I was also invited to a local celebration of the return of Hajjis (a Muslim who fulfills his/her pilgrimage to Mecca is granted title "Hajji") as well as a Muslim wedding organized by the entire villages of the bride and the groom. I was able to observe social relationships manifested in Islamic holiday observances and ethnic identity exhibited through Islamic practices. I also visited shops

and market days in Prosperity Town to acquire a sense of the economic situation in the local area and observed that students living in town help their families run business after school and on weekends, such as by being waitresses or cashiers. Some enthusiastic students took me on guided walking tours around their villages, chatting with their relatives and showing me local elementary schools and mosques. I gradually came to understand the connections between the structural constraints Musim Hui students live within and the opportunities they have and aspire to gain through both religious and secular education. The religious, social, and economic conditions may have prevented these students from achieving their aspiration to lifting their families out of poverty. However, I was still regarded as an outsider after having been in the field for six months.

During my data analysis phrase, I used some of the themes that guided my observation, such as physical environment, ritualized routine of school life, to organize my findings. I also use some data collected based on my criteria, such as family backgrounds and different social relations and environment, to support my findings.

Interviews. In order to triangulate my findings from participant observations, I conducted both informal and formal interviews. I used informal conversational interviews to acquire general information about the school, its general policies, teachers, and students. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I used informal interviews as a major approach to familiarizing myself with the environment. However, teachers and administrators seemed a little intimidated by my presence; they expressed inferiority to me and jealousy of me being a “Professor” in the U.S., a country they couldn’t even think of visiting in their lifetime. Therefore, I used informal interviews to establish

relationships with them and insisted on the purpose of my study: “I’m not here to inspect or criticize the quality of your teaching or administrating but to learn from your experience and to find out challenges and difficulties you face and try to overcome.” I found that such informal conversations eased their nervousness and laid the groundwork for formal interviews. Although each conversational interview was different, I found that the interview approach was flexible enough for me to explore the spectrum of my study (Patton, 2002). Some questions that administrators, teachers, students, and parents raised for me became optional questions in my second-round interviews. After initial informal conversations, I started my first round of formal interviews approximately a month later. While formal interviews would yield the information I was looking for, I still continued to conduct informal interviews to fill in the gaps in my structured questions and to seek connections among ideas or emergent themes.

With the help of teachers and my own observations, I ultimately selected a total of 22 students to be my key informants, 9 boys and 13 girls. Among these 22 students, I identified 8 students, and the 8th grade head teachers selected the other 14 students (see Appendix I). I tried to obtain maximum variation among these students, and with the teachers’ help I was able to include students from both Han and Hui families, students from rural mountainous regions and nearby townships, students with high performance and underperformance, students raised by grandparents and brought up by both parents, students from rich and poor families, and underage and overage students. Though some students fell into more than one category, such as an underperformer raised by grandparents, these overlapped criteria reflected the interconnections between academic

performance/engagement and ethnic, geographic, familial, economic, and social factors. The individual interviewees themselves described a variety of labels they were given and identities they were constructing. To achieve a more holistic picture of the school life of these Muslim Hui students, I also conducted formal interviews with six stakeholders: two 8th grade teachers, one administrator, and three parents of selected key informants (see Appendix II).

I focused my first-round interviews with students on their lives (see Appendix III), e.g.:

- Please tell me about your average day at school
- What do you want to do after completing schooling?
- What do you image about your future?
- Are you worried about anything lately?

However, I noticed that some of the answers students provided could also be gleaned from my participant observations and my informal conversations. Although all students were willing to share their stories, I found that their answers were often minimal and couldn't coherently form themes related to my research questions. As the fieldwork continued, I stepped back and listened to my interview recordings, because I didn't have sufficient time to transcribe each interview immediately after I conducted it. I noticed that some students only answered me with single words and phrases and others just told me they didn't know how to answer. It was difficult for me to construct stories from some of the interviews. However, the students who couldn't share much in the interview were actually the ones with a lot of stories, based on what I observed and heard from other

students. Some of them were troublemakers and disciplined by teachers, so they were reserved and afraid to speak up in front of authority figures like me. Being afraid of being too intrusive, I approached this kind of student with more flexibility. Besides interviews, I also paid special attention to them during participant observations and chatted with them on casual occasions. Using both approaches, I could form stories about their school and life experience.

My interviews with teachers and administrators also started with "basic" questions (see Appendix IV), such as:

- What do you think about the current compulsory education in your area?
- What do you think about the current quality of education in your area?
- What do you think are factors that may affect the quality of education in your area?
- What are some challenges in your classroom?
- What do you think is the most effective way of dealing with these challenges?

I tried to make the questions as open as possible so that I could provide them with enough space to reflect on their own teaching and administrating experience. I intentionally selected three 8th grade teachers who also had administrative assignments. One was highly praised by students; one was liked by some students but not by others and was self-identified as a good teacher; and the third taught a subject in the 8th grade as well as supervised teaching activities at the school level. With this variety, I was able to capture

both campus-wide and 8th grade teaching activities driven by policies, curriculum, and pedagogy that were intertwined and interpreted by teachers.

Selecting parents to interview was unexpectedly challenging. I tried to use the same interview questions for teachers and administrators with Muslim Hui parents but found it unfeasible. First, the majority of parents in the local Muslim Hui community have very limited knowledge about schooling. Many parents have never visited a school except when they send their children to the school at the beginning of the semester. Second, there is little communication between some parents and students about school engagement and performance. Among 40 student homes I visited, more than half of the parents in those households told me that they didn't know what and how their children did in school. They knew that their children went to school every Sunday and come back every Friday. Lack of communication made my pre-designed interview questions, such as questions about compulsory education and the quality of local education, irrelevant. Third, the local dialects these parents speak vary by village, though differences are slight. I had hard time fully understanding what they were trying to convey. It took me awhile to get used to the linguistic variations. Therefore, I decided to ask these parents open-ended questions on topics that they were likely more familiar with, such as:

- How many children do you have? Have they all gone to school?
- Has he/she (the specific one I know) helped you out at home?
- Do you know how he/she does in school? Can you tell me about it?
- Do you have any plans for your children or your family in the near future? If yes, can you share them with me?

Through these simpler questions, I gained a sense of what they knew about and how they viewed education for their children.

Then, I further selected parents who had traveled outside of the villages and been educated for some years. I was ultimately able to identify three fathers who were willing to be interviewed: two from the mountainous region and one from nearby township. With some modification, I used my pre-designed questions to interview them (see Appendix IV), such as:

- How do you define “compulsory education”?
- What do you think about the current compulsory education in your area?
- Would you say that education could result in a brighter future for your child? If yes, please explain. If not, why not?
- What are some challenges for you in raising your children?

These interviews actually went well.

Toward the end of the first semester, I felt that I had reached data saturation, where the same ideas and thoughts were shared and discussed again and again; however, I was a little disappointed in the data regarding ethnic identity. As I explained in my “Questions” section above, I had anticipated that certain identities would be significant for my study. I came to realize that Hui ethnicity isn’t identified strongly and seen in opposition to against Han culture in this area with large, concentrated numbers of Muslim Hui, because Hui culture is considered the dominant norm understood and accepted by both Hui and Han. Consequently, Muslim Hui students are less conscious of their ethnic

identity than I expected them to be. Ethnic identity is taken for granted, while other identities are coexisting and more conscious, including filial identity and rural identity.

Reflecting on my first-round interviews and emergent themes, I developed the second-round interview questions and used them to conduct interviews during the second semester. My intention was to focus on specific themes that arose from my previously collected data. I interviewed the students on identity, dominant/authoritarian culture, and violence; I asked stakeholders about physical punishment, curriculum, violence, and identity. I interviewed three male and three female students from the original set of student key informants again (see Appendix V). I also reinterviewed two originally selected 8th grade teachers with newly developed questions.

In addition, I selected four newly-hired teachers to interview: one teaching 6th grade, two teaching 7th grade, and one teaching 8th grade. Two of them were Han and the other two were Muslim Hui. I wanted to gain background knowledge about the Muslim Hui identity from these new teachers through their reflections on identity and the schooling they had experienced. They had been exposed to both Hui and Han cultures growing up in Hui-dominant regions and were educated in the Han educational system. I developed a separate set of questions for them (see Appendix VI), asking about their experience with both Han and Hui cultures in the school and the community. Their answers revealed frustration and struggle as they went through childhood and adulthood in relation to Muslim practices and educational discourses. These supplementary data supported the themes I generated from my study.

Archival research. In order to better understand how policies were implemented and practiced at Prosperity Middle School, I also conducted archival research in the school, at the local government center, and local bookstores, gathering and analyzing both educational and noneducational documents. I chose to consult publicly-accessible documents to avoid any privacy and confidentiality concerns. The school and government archives included the following sources, which I examined: the national and local governments' educational policies on ethnic minorities, officially published school news briefs and work reports from 2011-2013, annual work summaries from 2011-2013, speeches given by school leaders on various occasions, and research studies in the Chinese language on the topics of identity, schooling, academic performance, and poverty. By examining the governments' educational policies in the local community, I understood the guidelines a secular boarding school in Xihaigu needs to follow in terms of moral education, school management, quality of teaching, campus security, school culture, and financial support. I also identified educational discourses the school favors through its briefs and work reports, such as *Zhiliang* or quality. Furthermore, I realized the inadequacy of current research on Muslim Hui identities and education by reading local reports on identity, schooling, poverty, and academic engagement and performance. I also encountered difficulty searching for a book on the history of Xiji County. After I went to the libraries in both Xiji County and Guyuan City as well as a few bookstores in both locations, I was only able to find one, published in 2001. Fortunately, this book is well-recognized by local scholars. It provided me with background knowledge of the

Muslim Hui in Xihaigu and their interactions with Han and the national governance from past to present.

Student weekly journals. Collecting data from students' weekly journals, one of their after-class assignments, was not part of my original data collection plan. However, when I was assigned to be the assistant to the head teacher of an 8th grade class, such data became accessible. From September 10 to January 5, I collected weekly journals from the 61 students in this class. I was able to accumulate 270 pages of journals from them. In the beginning, when they were required to turn their weekly journals in to me as one of their assignments, I gave them the choice of what to write in the journals in order to capture a broad picture of their concerns about school and in their lives in general.

Gradually, these journal assignments developed into a dialogue format, in which students sought solutions from me for their problems. Some students shared their personal stories with me that they wouldn't tell in public; other students treated their journals as a way to get teachers' attention and raise concerns about the school. There were also students who considered the journals a communication channel they could express their determination to succeed to teachers. The topics students wrote about included peer relations, family pressures, feelings toward teachers, feelings about school life, religious events, and curriculum. These journals became a window into their inner lives for me and helped me understand their thoughts about parents, teachers, peers, and life. Through these weekly journals, I was able to longitudinally study individual students and examine the issues they were worried about the most. To better facilitate the communication between students and me, I made comments on all journal entries and

tried to provide them with the answers they were eager to hear. Students sometimes would reply to my comments in their next journal entries and carry on the dialogue for a few weeks. In the end, these comments served as my reflections on understanding Muslim Hui students' identities. The journals document my views on Muslim Hui students' future and my insights into peer relations and students' feelings towards parents and teachers. Because of the nature of these journals, they enrich the data and complement the findings.

Reflexive memoing. Reflexive memoing is a method of engaging researchers in ethnographic writing and including researchers in the process of knowledge production (Foley, 2002). Above, I discussed the multiple identities I was attributed and the constant struggles I had with my subjectivity and positionality in the field. To better document my struggles and the process of coproducing knowledge, I wrote reflexive memos on a daily basis. I kept a daily log, including dates, every single event I participated in, everyone I met and talked to that day, and my thoughts on the activities I was involved in or encountered. When a thought recurred in my mind, I noted it and discussed it with others. Because I had dates, names, and events recorded every day, I was able to trace back where my original thoughts had come from. In this way, I found this memoing helpful in reflecting on my interactions with local Muslims and Muslim Hui students. Some of these thoughts became themes of my study; others reminded me not to be judgmental. For instance, I noted in my daily log that my presence as a Chinese doctoral student at an American university with a Muslim background had somehow given them an identity to aspire to: a Muslim who succeeded in school would have a life that everyone is envious

of. With these reflexive memos, I felt that I could possibly “escape the thwarting biases that subjectivity engenders, while attaining the singular perspective its special persuasions promise” (Peshkin, 1988). I was able to use these memos to show how I generated my themes and brought different voices together to coproduce knowledge.

Limitations

One of the challenges of doing a qualitative study is to ensure its credibility and trustworthiness. To maximize these, I learned the local dialect, prolonged my engagement in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and triangulated my findings with different data sources (Patton, 2002). An ethnographic study is not intended to be generalizable but provides a particular case to shed light on a topic or concern—here, ethnic students’ identities and their relationship with schooling in impoverished rural areas. Therefore, my discussion of limitations is not about lacking generalizability, as some positivists may argue; rather, the discussion is to help other ethnographers to understand the three main constraints I was not able to overcome and strategies I used to navigate these constraints.

First, I initially thought I would go to a research site where the ratio of Han and Hui students was about the same. Based on my literature review, I assumed that the Muslim Hui population in Xiji County resembled other ethnic groups studied by scholars which were substantially acculturated to the Han culture and were struggling with maintaining their ethnic identity at school. I also predicted that the dominant Han culture was being explicitly reproduced in the school in Xiji County. I thought that I would see a lot of interethnic interactions which would reveal the Muslim Hui’s ethnic identity by contrast with the dominant Han culture.

However, when I arrived in Xiji County, especially Prosperity Town, I noticed that its population was over 90% Hui. The interethnic interactions were limited, but the intraethnic interactions were extensive. In addition, Muslim Hui culture, not Han culture, is dominant; and the Han usually adjusted their lifestyles to the Hui's. The political and social environments are different than I expected. This demographic composition limits the ability of my study to examine interethnic interactions, even though Han culture is present in the school and the government. I was not able to capture the differences between such Hui-dominated schools and Han-dominated schools. Later, I heard that Han are dominant in other towns in Xiji County, and students in those towns are quite different. Even Hui-dominated middle schools in other towns in Xiji County are slightly different. But considering my personal safety and the lack of public transportation in this local area, I was not able to visit those schools. I gained a general understanding of those schools by talking to parents and teachers who told me about how Hui students in other schools were treated and eventually achieved academic success. Through talking to teachers at Prosperity Middle School, I also learned how other schools in Xihaigu operated. In my findings, I present some similarities across these schools, such as a test-oriented teaching and learning environment and the use of corporal punishment, but I mostly focus on the uniqueness of Prosperity Middle School and explore how economic conditions have significantly influenced both Muslim Hui parents and students' views and attitudes towards secular schooling.

Second, the economic situation of Muslim Hui in Prosperity Town was not only relatively better than some other regions in Xihaigu but divergent, with the more affluent

in the basin areas and the less affluent in the mountainous regions. Before I arrived in Xihaigu, I pictured it as an extremely poor town with limited access to natural resources and daily necessities. Once there, I found it poor as an urban region in China but relatively affluent compared to other towns in Xiji County, especially the Muslim Hui living in the basin areas. Daily necessities are abundant, and local businesses are flourishing. A large number of people own cars or at least "*Benben*" cars (smaller trucks used to transport crops). The people from the basin areas develop a sense of pride with their economic capital and look down upon those from poorer regions. This is not usually the case in other Hui-dominated regions. A Hui teacher told me that her friends were concerned about her being at Prosperity Middle School because they heard students there were very difficult to deal with. "Students have money here," she said. "They can do whatever they want to do." Though many Prosperity Middle School students didn't have much money, more students there were probably from better-off families compared to those at other schools in Xihaigu in extreme poverty who I hadn't had a chance to visit but heard about from other Hui teachers. Because of this uniqueness, I was very attuned to how Muslim Hui in different areas of Prosperity Town talk about each other, because I didn't want to be led on by the richer or the poorer and trapped in the preconceptions they held about each other. However, I noticed that, even proceeding with caution, my own values and views of people in different economic conditions affected how I interacted with certain Muslim Hui, although I tried to note these values and views to avoid making judgments.

The third limitation comes from my selection of Muslim Hui parent participants. Because many local Muslims have low literacy, I purposely chose ones who were able to understand Mandarin Chinese well, had traveled to other parts of China, had completed a few years of schooling, and had some knowledge about compulsory education to interview. My selection criteria excluded those who only spoke the local dialect, had been farmers all their lives, had no schooling, and possessed minimum knowledge of compulsory education. Also, I wasn't able to formally interview any women due to their inability to communicate well in Mandarin Chinese and their lack of knowledge of schooling. However, I attempted to capture the voices that I excluded through my conversations with the parents I interviewed—I usually asked these parents whether other parents they knew would give similar answers to the questions I asked. In this way, I hoped that I could include broader views from different parents. Nevertheless, the study may still miss some perspectives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed my choice of methodology, critical ethnography, to examine the implementation of compulsory education in a Muslim Hui dominant region as well as how Muslim Hui students question, challenge, and believe in compulsory education as they negotiate filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities. I first presented the questions that informed my fieldwork, followed by an introduction of the research site and period. I particularly elaborated how I accessed the site and gained the trust of local participants. I also examined my multiple identities in the field and how I struggled with them on different occasions. I discussed my five methods of data

collection, including participant observations, interviews, archival research, reviews of student weekly journals, and reflexive memoing. Some limitations of the study are highlighted in the last section.

Chapter Four

Policy as Practice:

Interpretation and Appropriate of Compulsory Education

in an Ethnic Muslim Hui Dominant Region

Introduction

Based on my theoretical framework, the following three chapters address the research questions that frame this study:

1. How is secular schooling/compulsory education understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural school located at an ethnic Muslim Hui community in China? (Chapter Four)
2. How do the local Muslim Hui perceive secular schooling? (Chapter Five)
3. How do Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education while negotiating filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities? (Chapter Six)

Data were collected on all three research questions. Through coding, memoing, and analysis of the data, themes of quality education, local perceptions of secular schooling, and identity negotiation became prominent. These themes do not reflect a homogenous perception and attitude of Muslim Hui students toward secular schooling, but rather they reveal diverse responses and reactions to secular schooling across different Muslim Hui students. While many students are still adjusting to the changes secular schooling has introduced, a shifting mentality was evident among some Muslim students and their parents—namely, a reinterpretation of secular schooling, and to a certain extent, a belief in its importance in providing a pathway to future prosperity.

There were also significant numbers of students finding strategies to accommodate and negotiate their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities to make sense of secular schooling. Therefore, Chapter Four examines the first research question and presents the findings on how secular schooling/compulsory education is understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural school of an ethnic Muslim Hui community. It introduces the changing majority-minority landscape, followed by examinations of the gated culture of compulsory education, including discourses, practices, and expectations. It also investigates how educational discourses are guiding the practices of a secular middle school in constructing a test-oriented quality education and the imagined future of prosperity.

Chapter Five unpacks research question two and discusses the ways in which secular schooling/compulsory education is perceived and valued by Muslim Hui parents in this community. Chapter Six takes on research question three and addresses the ways in which Muslim Hui students respond to compulsory education while negotiating filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities and the roles parents, teachers, and the community play in the shaping of these different identities.

In this chapter, I introduce the following emic terms to describe the school experience of Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu.

English Translations of Emic Terms in Chinese

Emic Terms in Chinese	English Meaning
Gongbei	enshrined tomb
Qingzhen	Halal
Hancan	non-Halal restaurants

Bengbengche	small truck used to transport crops
Tangping	plastic ewer
Ahong	Imam, an Islamic clergyman
Shangfen	visiting ancestors' tombs
Zanshengjie	the Eid al-adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice
Youxiang	fried round doughnuts
Sanzi	fried string doughnuts
Zai	butcher
Kaizhaijie	the Eid al-Fitr, or the Festival of Breaking the Fast
Zhuma or *Jumu'ah*	a congregational prayer held every Friday
Wudu	cleansing any impurities
Chaohezi	pilgrimage to Mecca
Dandanche	a privately owned vehicle used by the local transportation service
Nianshu	read books
Nianjing	read scriptures
Zhiliang	quality of the educational system
Suzhi	quality of individuals
Wenhua zhishi	intellectual knowledge
Mianbi siguo	facing the wall to contemplate your own faults, a form of self-repentance
Yangcheng xiguan	habitual behaviors
Wenhua luohou	cultural backwardness
Hunju	mixed inhabitants from both Han and Hui
Juju	concentration of Hui inhabitants
Zuoren	conducting oneself
Liudong hongqi	The Flow of Red Flag, an given to the class that exceeds the performance of other classes
Xueshengyang	the appearance of a student

Xuexi	study
Shibada	an abbreviated saying for the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

Muslim Hui Students at Prosperity Middle School

Green mountains, green water, and I, an adolescent

Muddle through Prosperity Middle School for three years

Waste time and waste money

Rather go home and grow crops

Finish this semester quickly

Everyone would achieve something

But me, I get nothing….Sigh!

This is a poem written by one of the students at Prosperity Middle School. One day, when I walked into my home classroom, I noticed a few students talking about a piece of paper that that had been torn out of a notebook. I went up to them and asked to look at the paper. I saw scribbled Chinese characters on it, telling about life at Prosperity Middle School. I read it and couldn't help agreeing with what this poem conveyed. It was consistent with what some students had told me earlier—that many students in the school just want to sit in the classroom and not participate in education in any way because they don't see the value of schooling. They "muddle through" middle school, thinking of it as wasting time and money with no economic return. To these students "one day in school feels like a year," as an 8th grader helplessly stated to me. Some see no hope of achieving

something after three years of education and believe that eventually they will return to the farmland they are familiar with and experience no changes in their lives due to schooling.

Although I do not share this pessimistic view of Muslim Hui students as wasting time in school, my data suggest that their academic self-confidence has been largely diminished by continuously failing their exams. I initially hoped that my teaching efforts could somehow help students improve their academic performance, but I later found this impossible because their foundation in their subjects was so poor. Some teachers' previous expectation of me being a role model and a life counselor to these students was also proven ineffective. The more I showed them the importance of education, the more adverse ideas I heard. "My father had no education, but he makes a lot of money now," a boy proudly told me. "My brother runs a Muslim restaurant in another city, and he only graduated from elementary school," another boy said. This disconnect between the promise of success in secular schooling and future prosperity discourages students from continuing schooling because they had both examples of people who had left school but succeeded economically and of those who had finished school and not found suitable work. Even seeing some students eventually succeed in school and find jobs, many students still doubt their own ability to achieve the life education promises. In the rest of the chapter, I will expound on these points by examining how compulsory education is understood, appropriated, and interpreted at Prosperity Middle School by constructing a culture of unfamiliarity to the local Muslim Hui and painting an imagined but unguaranteed future of prosperity.

A Changing Majority-Minority Landscape

Before I discuss how secular schooling and compulsory education are practiced at Prosperity Middle School, I will describe how Muslim Hui and Han cultures are present in the community where Prosperity Middle School is located. In this way, I provide information about the ethnoreligious and cultural backgrounds of the Muslim Hui in the community to compare and contrast with the majority Han culture practiced and reproduced in the school. This context is essential for understanding the ways in which teachers and the school adopt the requirements of secular schooling and compulsory education set out by the national government. Educational discourses of secular schooling in China are also introduced in this chapter to further examine the challenges and difficulties specific to a rural middle school in an impoverished region with a high concentration of Muslim Hui.

Xihaigu, the region where I conducted my fieldwork, has the most concentrated Muslim Hui population in Ningxia, with some counties' population over 90% Muslim Hui. Unlike other regions in China where Han are the majority, such a high concentration of Muslim Hui in Xihaigu creates a landscape dominated by Muslim Hui. The Han, in this rare case, are considered minorities.

When I was riding the bus and passing through the layers of terraced mountains to enter Xiji County in the Xihaigu region, I noticed not only the change of scenery but also the change in outward manifestations of culture and local people from other regions I have traveled to.

Figure 4. Houses scattered and nestled in a valley of the Xihaigu region

As soon as the winding roads end, the bus reaches the plains where many Muslim Hui live. Mosques stand in the middle of the harsh landscape or are nested at the foot of mountains, far away from the main road but glittering at passersby with their shiny crescent moons and stars on the top; *Gongbei*s, or enshrined tombs, are built magnificently holding the remains of spiritual heroes or founders of various sects, stretching a few blocks in some villages; *Qingzhen* (Halal) restaurants line the streets, decorated with boards written *Tasmi* in Arabic scripts that read, “In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful.” Images of Al-Masjid Al-Haram, the Sacred Mosque or the Grand Mosque in the city of Mecca, are also hung up on the walls, while *Hancan* (non-Halal) restaurants are nearly invisible.

Figure 5. A village mosque standing in the middle of the harsh landscape

In addition to these different looking buildings, men generally wear white hats and women cover their heads with colorful headscarves. As I heard, Muslim Hui have to wear these head coverings them all the time, except when they go to bed. During market days in the counties or the towns, Muslim men and women drive from their villages to the towns and counties on their *Bengbengche* (small truck used for farming purposes, to sell and buy goods). Daily necessities of all kinds for Muslim Hui are sold at these markets, such as *Tangpings* (plastic ewers), hats, headscarves, large water containers, Halal food (rarely available in other parts of China), and prayer rugs.

Figure 6. A regular market day where all kinds of Muslim Hui goods can be found

Boys and girls are sometimes seen in white hats and colorful headscarves, though wearing these is not required unless they attend mosque education to learn Koranic texts. I was told that boys I see in white hats are often apprentices of *Ahongs* (Imams) of mosques. It was summer time when I arrived, but I hardly saw anyone in sleeveless shirts, shorts, or skirts as one finds in Han-dominant parts of China because in this region,

overexposure of the skin in public is culturally unacceptable. I was reminded by my local Muslim friends that I needed to keep long pants and long-sleeved shirts handy in case I was invited to events at the mosques or casual meetings with local Muslim Hui. Having been in the U.S. for quite a long time, I often forgot that I needed to follow the Muslim dress code while in Xihaigu. As my local Muslim friends explained, the Muslim Hui in the Xihaigu region are strict about this dress code, and one would be criticized for dressing inappropriately, whether one is Hui or Han.

After entering Xihaigu, I observed that unlike the Muslim Hui I am familiar with in urban regions, Muslim Hui in this region practice conservative Islamic traditions. For example, the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu don't celebrate Chinese holidays, although they get days off during state-recognized national holidays like other Chinese. Most of the Muslim Hui community members seldom give each other greetings during Chinese holidays, and they use Chinese holidays as days of rest and for finishing family chores. Conversely, Islamic festivals are grandly observed with the community fully engaged. Hui employees with government jobs receive days off during the Islamic holidays, and some Hui families who have migrated to other cities for jobs travel back to celebrate these Islamic holidays, such as *Shangfen*, or visiting ancestors' tombs, with their families,.

During my fieldwork, I was in the Hui community for National Day. I noticed that Muslim students were very excited to receive a week off from school, although they didn't celebrate National Day with their family members; in contrast, the few Han students in the Hui community did celebrate it. Parents were happy because National Day

fell during the potato harvest season, and they were highly in need of their children to be back home picking potatoes in the fields before the snow came. When they returned to school, many students told me that they were so tired of picking potatoes during the holiday and hadn't gotten any rest during the time off.

In comparison to National Day, Islamic festivals, such as *Zanshengjie,* the Eid al-adha or the Feast of Sacrifice, were observed throughout the entire county. Students, like other local government employees, also received a day off thanks to a regional policy specific to the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Invited to celebrate the holiday with a few families of my students, I ended up choosing one family to visit whom I found to be knowledgeable about Koranic texts. In the morning of the Festival, the family I visited in this small mountainous village cleaned their house and prepared meals. The male family members got up early and dressed at the house in preparation to attend prayers at the mosque. The villagers fasted and waited for the congregational prayer to be done at the mosque.

The female Muslims weren't allowed to be present at the mosque but stayed home and prepared *Youxiang*, fried round doughnuts, and *Sanzi*, fried string doughnuts, typical Hui dishes, and meat dishes for their families. For my visit, the family killed a chicken for the festival. I saw my students taking the chicken to the mosque nearby and asking the *Ahong* (Imam) to *Zai* (butcher) it while reciting *Tasmi*. The family host told me that "the chicken tastes better if it is *Zai* (butchered) by *Ahongs*." Later in the afternoon, the family also invited an *Ahong* home to share the chicken with him. Many families in the community also *Zai* (butchered) sheep and cows for the Festival that day, and the meat of

sacrificed animals was shared with their relatives and friends in the neighborhood. After they returned to school, my students wrote in their journals about the excitement and happiness they had felt during the festival, especially the food they had enjoyed and the time they had spent with relatives and friends. “It is a very important day for our Hui,” Youfang wrote in her journal. “It is the holiday we have been looking forward to,” Chaohong wrote.

Another important festival for local Muslim Hui is *Kaizhaijie*, or Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast). It is the celebration of the end of Ramadan, a month of *Sawm*, or fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam. While Han in other parts of China maintain regular work and study hours during the month of Ramadan, the life of the Muslim Hui in this community is quite different. Most restaurants are closed, with only a few left open for travelers who pass through counties and towns to do businesses. The majority of the local Muslims fast and pray during Ramadan, because they believe that they will be more thoroughly blessed by Allah if they do so. Guoqin is a local Muslim Hui student, and his story about fasting surprised me, as I didn’t think the younger Muslim generation could observe Ramadan as strictly as their parents. He told me that he had to get up at 2:30 a.m. to have breakfast and then went to the mosque to pray with his father every morning. Both his parents were very strict about following this schedule. On the 30th day of the month, however, he was too tired to get up at 2:30 for the prayer, even after the alarm clock went off: “I am still regretful about this because I have persisted for 29 days but missed the last day.” Guoqin was sadly telling me that he couldn’t receive the full blessings from fasting because he hadn’t completed it. Seeing him shaking his head

and sighing about his situation, I realized the importance of Islam in his life and in the life of his community, as Guoqin is one of many Muslim children who fast during the month of Ramadan.

In addition to *Sawm*, other pillars of Islam are also fulfilled by the local Muslim Hui. Friday is one of the busiest days in the community because the majority of male Muslims go to mosques for *Zhuma* or *Jumu'ah*, a congregational prayer held every Friday. A few local mosques are packed with crowds, and mosques with facilities for female Muslims, mostly in large towns, also attract large numbers of women. A Muslim teacher told me that Muslims who have jobs don't usually pray five times a day due to the conflict of work and prayer schedules, but they at least attend *Zhuma* once a week. I was walking on the street in Prosperity Town on one of these Fridays, and I saw people flood into a mosque nearby. Cars were parked randomly on the street, and nobody cared about whether the cars were blocking the roads. I went into a few public showers to check their availability and was told that all services were closed for a few hours to the general public but reserved for male worshippers prior to *Zhuma*. The purpose of such closure is to ensure that as many Muslims as possible can make *Wudu*, or cleaning any impurities of their bodies by washing their hands, mouth, throat, nose, ears, arms up to the elbow, and feet.

In this community, Muslim boys are taught about prayers when they are about 12 years old, and some Muslim girls also start to learn how to pray at 9 years old. A few Muslim Hui student at Prosperity Middle School told me that they used to attend *Zhuma* but haven't gone since they started schooling. "I can only go to the mosque in my village

to pray on weekends," Rende said to me. "I am too busy with my studies and homework on weekdays." He also shared with me that only those who don't attend secular schools would go to the mosque to continue learning Koranic texts for prayers and commemoration of ancestors. For students like him, it is impossible to study and pray regularly because the school schedule doesn't accommodate their prayer time. They neither get any opportunity to pray during the school day.

While prayers are widely practiced in the community, *Chaohezi* or the pilgrimage to Mecca is only fulfilled by relatively affluent Muslims because it usually costs a local Muslim his or her life savings to complete this fifth pillar of Islam. When making ends meet is already difficult, going on such a trip is unthinkable. As so few people had and would have the opportunity to complete this once-in-a-lifetime event, *Chaohezi* is more than an individual fulfillment of fifth pillar—it is a community celebration of blessings brought back by local Muslim Hajjis who have successfully completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. The return of Hajjis is one of the grandest rituals every year for the local community.

Muslim students at Prosperity Middle School also join this annual event. On a Saturday morning, a student texted me and asked if I wanted to attend this ritual organized by her village. Because I had visited her house before and knew her father, I decided to go and thought it would be a good opportunity to meet her family again. I took a local *Dandanche*, a privately-operated car transporting passengers across several villages, to her village. As soon as I arrived, I saw people already lining up on the side of the road, anxiously waiting for the Hajjis. My student waved at me and asked me to stand

with her family in the line. Some people were in their 80s and others were babies in their mothers' arms. Men were in the front, followed by the women. I noticed a few students also standing in the line—their school uniforms gave their identity away. A few minutes later, cars decorated with a red sign reading "Welcome Hajji" on their dashboards were slowly approaching the crowd. A group of elderly Hajjis wearing garlands of red flowers stepped out of the cars and strolled down the road. Local people eagerly went up to them and couldn't wait to be touched by them. The crowd was excited and held hands tightly with the Hajjis one by one. Then, the Hajjis stepped back into the cars, continuing their journey to other neighboring villages. The crowd scattered and resumed their normal daily routines. I started to chat with the father of my student, and he smiled at me and expressed his admiration for Hajjis. "I don't think I could go. It is just too expensive. After they return, people still need to *Zai* (butcher) a cow for more than 10000 RMB ($1,500 USD) and share with the villagers," he said. "None of my family members have ever gone to Mecca, but they are hopeful," my student said. The father looked at his daughter and jokingly said, "Maybe my children can give me some money to go one day."

Islam is an essential influence on everyday life for local Muslim Hui; therefore, a strict observance of consuming Halal food is also emphasized in the community. When I asked my students what they considered the differences between Han and Hui, the first thing they mentioned was "not eating pork and non-Halal food." Similarly, when I asked Muslim parents how they expected their children to behave if they went to college in other cities dominated by Han, they usually responded with their concern about the

availability of Halal food in the colleges. “It is wrong if my children eat non-Halal food there,” a father stated. He continued, “I always ask my children to try their best to eat Halal food, such as eggs and fruit.” Because the concept of Halal is so embedded in the community, maintaining it is largely enforced by the local Muslim Hui. Han members of the community are not allowed to prepare Halal food because they may contaminate it with non-Halal food they have touched. Any cookware and cooking utensils that have been used to cook non-Halal food are avoided by the Hui, even after they have been washed. The Hui I knew in the community also don’t drink or use water offered by the Han. When I first arrived, some students asked me if I was Hui or Han, and I was puzzled and didn’t understand why this even mattered. Later, a teacher enlightened me, “When Hui students ask you if you are Hui or Han, they most likely want to find out if it would be fine for them to borrow water from you whenever it is needed.” As not all teachers in Prosperity Middle School are Hui, it is important for the Hui students in the school to find out who are and are not Hui so that they would not mistakenly consume non-Halal food.

As local Muslim Hui try to maintain their ethnoreligious identity, they are also strict about endogamous marriage, as it is critical to conserving Huiness. Teacher Liu used to be Han, but she converted to Hui through marriage to a Muslim young man. She told me that intermarriage is allowed if a Muslim boy marries a Han girl; however, intermarriage is generally prohibited by the families if a Muslim girl decides to marry a Han boy. Muslims believe that if a Muslim boy marries a non-Muslim girl, she has to join the Muslim family, become a Muslim, and practice Islam together with her husband, as in

Teacher Liu's case. Muslims also believe that a Muslim girl would eventually stop practicing Islam if she married a Han boy. Among the Muslim families I visited, I did not see any intermarriage.

During one of my visits, I happened to meet a 42-year-old grandmother. While I was in awe of seeing such a young grandmother, she explained that she was married at age 16 to a Muslim boy from a neighboring village, and they immediately started a family. Her daughter was also married to a Muslim boy at age 16 and had given birth to three babies by the time she was 21. Like some other villagers, she told me that she farms and does sedentary pastoralism and had never left her village. However, some Muslim parents agree to delay their children's marriages if they are still in school. I found it interesting that some local Muslim Hui thought the reason that I was still unmarried was that I was still getting an education in school. The Muslim Hui students in my classes also believe that they could always find good Hui husbands even when they are out in the majority Han region, and none of them considered the option of marrying a Han boy in the future.

The Gated Culture of Compulsory Education: Discourses, Practices, and Expectations

In contrast to the dominant Islamic culture in the local community, Prosperity Middle School promotes a distinctive secular culture of compulsory education manifested through its physical environment, ritualized routine of school life, and pedagogical practices. The school gate separates two worlds: the religious community and the secular school. The practice of Islam in the school becomes a personal choice and an individual

preference because it is not encouraged and is sometimes restricted by school regulations. Learning secular knowledge gains priority as a perceived key to future prosperity for families and the community.

Previously, I have used the phrase “secular schooling” to contrast with the “religious education” or “mosque education” practiced in the community. For local Muslims, the phrase *Nianshu* (read books), is used in comparison with *Nianjing* (read scriptures). The former is equivalent to secular schooling; the latter refers to religious education. From the perspective of local Muslim Hui, the purpose of attending school is to receive compulsory education provided by the government. Therefore, in the following discussion, I use “compulsory education” to connote “secular schooling,” as compulsory education is the type of secular education understood by the local community.

Before I delve into examining the culture of compulsory education, I want to first discuss the definition of “compulsory education” understood by the state and the people in the local community. According to the “Compulsory Education Law” in China, initially formulated in 1986 and amended in in June 2006, the purpose of compulsory education is defined in Article 3 as:

> to provide quality-oriented education, to improve the quality of instruction, with a view to enabling school-age children and adolescents to achieve well-rounded development -- morally, intellectually, and physically, so as to lay the foundation for bringing up well-educated and self-disciplined builders and successors of socialism imbued with lofty ideals and moral integrity.

According to this state definition, compulsory education is not only providing knowledge-based education, but also teaching school-aged children and adolescents about morality, self-discipline, and socialism. In addition, one of the key characteristics emphasized in this definition is quality, or *Zhiliang* in Chinese (about which more below).

Local teachers' understanding of compulsory education echoes this definition, although the government's interpretation of the implementation of compulsory education is different from their interpretation. Lianqing, an 8th grade Muslim Hui teacher and the Director of the Dean's Office, has over 10 years of teaching experience in middle schools in the nearby town and in Prosperity Town. He was trained to teach politics, a subject focusing on teaching about morality and the Communist Party's ideology in middle schools, but now is a math teacher. He shared his definition of compulsory education with me:

> Students are able to complete nine years of education….[Graduation] does not require high *Zhiliang* or quality but solely completion….Taking the example of that parent the other day, compulsory education is only about having children attend school, but the real meaning of compulsory education is not like this….*Zhiliang* is not good, including issues of students' *Suzhi* or quality and teachers' views on education.

Lianqing believes that *Zhiliang* or the quality of the school is not good because *Zhiliang* should include measures of students' individual *Suzhi*, which is currently lacking. The parent he encountered the other day cared about whether he had sent the children to the

school, but didn't care much about if his children had been getting a quality education there.

Zhengyi is another Hui 8th grade math teacher and is also the Vice Principal of Academics at Prosperity Middle School. Having taught mathematics to middle school students in the area for the past 22 years, he still struggles with achieving *Zhiliang* in delivering compulsory education. His understanding of compulsory education is:

> to complete nine years of academic tasks as well as students' *Suzhi* education. I think compulsory education is unsuccessful if students are only taught intellectual knowledge (*Wenhua zhishi*) and academics…What I mean by *Suzhi* education is students' self-cultivation and their love for classmates; they respect older generations, respect teachers, cherish families and communities, and cherish the nation, etc.

Both teachers spoke about the importance of having both *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* education while completing nine years of schooling. The terms *"Zhiliang"* and *"Suzhi"* are both translated "quality" in Chinese. "*Zhiliang*" usually refers to the quality of the educational system with the purpose of "enabling school-age children and adolescents to achieve well-rounded development -- morally, intellectually and physically," as the law states, whereas "*Suzhi*" is often associated with qualities of individuals who are "self-disciplined" and could achieve "lofty ideals and moral integrity," as the law also notes. Education with *Zhiliang* is expected to not only provide intellectual knowledge but also include *Suzhi* education for individual growth. "*Suzhi*", on the other hand, is hard to quantify. "Well-rounded development" doesn't clearly convey what specific

characteristics would result in a student's "well-rounded" development, and Zhengyi's examples of *Suzhi* education seems only cover a few aspects of "*Suzhi*".

Kipnis (2006) explores the rising popularity of *"Suzhi"* discourse and the formation of such discourse in Chinese culture. He indicates that "*Suzhi*" can encompass both specific individual characteristics as well as a collective manifestation:

> facilitates the types of hierarchical discourse that require moving from one of the many specific qualities of an individual, such as the way she is dressed, her accent, her table manners or her score on a particular test, to an overall judgment of her capital Q Quality (p. 304).

While Zhengyi (the math teacher mentioned above) tried to list all the possible qualities a Muslim Hui child should possess, he eventually wanted students to achieve the "capital Q Quality." Kipnis also points out that nationalism is one of the major bases of contemporary *Suzhi* discourse, and it is evaluated in terms of an individual's patriotism, such as love for one's country and love for one's party. Anagnost (2004) additionally argues that *Suzhi* differentiates and highlights gaps, such as rich and poor, civilized and uncivilized, and modern and backward. To include *Suzhi* education in the school, in this sense, shows that compulsory education is expected to civilize and modernize students through teaching intellectual knowledge so that students are no long considered uncivilized and backward.

However, in the local community, *Zhiliang* of education is primarily measured by standardized test scores and the numbers of students who are able to enter high schools and colleges, though the teachers I interviewed all expressed their wish that *Zhiliang*

could be assessed beyond test scores. They hoped that a school with *Zhiliang* could educate students to the extent of improving their *Suzhi*, even when students fail the high school entrance exams. These teachers told me that if this were the case, “If students cannot go to high school, at least they know how to conduct themselves and interact with others ethically.” Principal Ma kept emphasizing, “Quality education is about educating students to be intellectuals and morally qualified with good conduct in behavior…and then it is the level of knowledge they should gain.…[I]n this way, students can be considered as completing the education.…[I]f we don’t foster their abilities in establishing themselves, they can’t handle matters in the society if they go out.” Junling also said, “Students had to achieve morality, intelligence, and physicality to qualify as graduates, and *Suzhi* education is primary and essential in this process of educating students.”

In the 2011-2012 work plan set out by the school, *Suzhi* education was considered the primary and foremost important task to accomplish. It is perceived as the foundation for achieving harmonious development of school culture in the school and for deepening education on civilized behaviors. The requirements of *Suzhi* education were also explicitly stated in the school news brief, a report about work the school has done during a period of time, including: no disruptive behavior in the classroom, no screaming in the hallways after class, no cheating on exams, no copying homework, no damaging public property, no polluting the environment, no profanity, and no smoking in teaching and learning areas. Although these are specific rules the school requires individual students to follow, they are seen as contributive to the overall achievement of capital Q Quality.

In order to better explain the concepts of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* embodied in compulsory education and the discrepancy between local understanding of *Zhiliang* and local appropriation of it at Prosperity Middle School, I use the definition of *Zhiliang* as the quality of education as measured by test scores as well as its component of *Suzhi* education. I use *Suzhi* as individual innate and learned qualities, but I want to emphasize nationalism and patriotism building within *Suzhi* education because they are regarded as ways of assimilating religious culture (Hansen, 1999). In the following, I examine the culture of compulsory education in Prosperity Middle School and illustrate how *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* discourses are guiding principles in the physical environment and the routine of school life, especially the standardized curriculum, teachers' pedagogical practices, and students' ritualized learning in the school.

Physical environment. While I was stunned by the grandness of mosques built by donations from local Muslims I saw on the way to Prosperity Middle School, I was also impressed by the beauty of school buildings financially supported by the government. Before I arrived at Prosperity Middle School, I had already seen a few middle schools in other towns, with their newly painted building walls and school gates, carefully designed gardens with pine trees and flowers, well-considered education-themed sculptures, and freshly renovated basketball courts and sports facilities. Even just examining these schools' exteriors, I came to realize that the government has invested large amounts of money on infrastructure with an attempt to create comfortable learning environments for local students.

I recalled the Basic Education in Western Areas Project (BEWAP) I had researched in 2011, which was one of the projects advocated by the Chinese government to improve education in five impoverished western regions. It was funded by the World Bank and the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID) from 2004-2009 and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region was one of the five targeted regions. The majority of funds, 84%, were focused on school construction and renovation, including building more schools close to where children live and providing a safe environment for children to learn. It also provided school furniture and teaching equipment and distributed textbooks and library books (World Bank, 2003). Having seen these beautiful school buildings, I realized that the Chinese government also believes improving the learning environment for ethnic minority students will lead to better quality education, a strategy recommended by Chapman, Weidman, Cohen and Mercer (2005) in the study of five countries in central Asia.

When I entered the gate of Prosperity Middle School, its beauty also caught my eye. The teaching building is newly renovated, and some parts are still under construction. The principal told me that the government just gave them 200,000 RMB (USD $33,000) to add concrete reinforcement beams and bars to the building because it was cracked and had become unsafe after the devastating Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008. Behind the teaching building, the female student dorm was also completed in 2012. When I asked a Muslim Hui student what he liked about the school during our interview, he told me, "I like the school architecture.…[S]ince [earlier] this year, the female student dorm is extremely beautiful and it was not like that before." To him, the school buildings

are a lot more beautiful than his house, which is made of dirt with storage space in the caves, a typical village house in the local community.

Figure 7. A typical house made of dirt in the local community

Kitchen and cafeteria facilities are also considered important to enable provision of free lunch and dinner for boarding school students. In 2006, the policy of "Three Exemptions and One Subsidy"—i.e., free tuition, free miscellaneous fee, free textbooks, and living subsidy—for boarding school students, was initiated in the Ningxia Autonomous Region, and Muslim Hui students are now given subsidies to cover food expenses. In this way, these students could focus on learning without worrying about the food they used to lack due to poverty. While I was staying at the school, a temporary kitchen was set up with stainless steel utensils and vessels provided for daily use, such as large basins, rice containers, cook woks, noodle makers, knives, etc. On the other side of

the dorm buildings, a cafeteria is under construction and is expected to be complete by this year. I also heard from Hailin, my roommate and a newly hired Hui teacher, that another middle school in the town nearby already has a grand cafeteria built with different menus prepared each day of the week. She couldn't believe that the cafeteria there is even better than the one at her college in Beijing. Principal Ma believes that the cafeteria at Prosperity Middle School will be even grander than the one in the town nearby: "By that time, our students will have many food options." He smiled at me as he was picturing the future.

Not only do the buildings show the determination of the government in improving *Zhiliang* for education, but the slogans painted on the school walls indicate the intention of emphasizing *Suzhi* on campus. Walking around the campus, I saw slogans on the walls of teachers' dormitories, on the back of student dorm buildings, and on the side of and in the front of the teaching building, reminding students of their academic conduct, personal behavior, and acceptable ways of treating peers and teachers, for example:

1. Smiling is our language; Civilization is our belief; Politeness and civilization are the golden key to our coexistence
   (*Weixiao Shi Women de Yuyan; Wenming Shi Women de Xingnian; Limao he Wenming Shi Women Gongcu de Jinyaoshi*)
   微笑是我们的语言；文明是我们的信念；礼貌和文明是我们共存的金钥匙
2. Do not long to jump for a thousand miles, but wish to progress one step a day

(*Bu Kewang Nenggou Yiyueqianli; Zhi Xiwang Meitian Nenggou Qianjing Yibu*)

不渴望能够一跃千里；但希望每天能够前进一步

3. Friendship: in our friendship, we use no words

   All thoughts, all wishes, and all hopes

   Happened and shared in our happiness.

   (*Youyi: Zai Youyi Li buyong Yanyu; Yiqie Sixiang, Yiqie Yuanwang, Yiqie Xiwang*

   Dou zai Wusheng de Huanle zhong Fasheng er Gongxiang le)

   友谊： 在友谊里不用言语；一切思想，一些愿望，一切希望都在无声的欢乐中

   发生而共享了

4. We only think of methods for our success,

   We don't look for excuses for our failure.

   (*Zhi Wei Chenggong Xiang Banfa, Bu Wei Shibai Zhao Liyou*)

   只为成功想办法，不为失败找理由

These slogans not only show that the school expects students to respect each other and maintain a civilized environment, but they also indicate that the school wishes students to progress steadily and eventually achieve success. They are what a *Zhiliang* education is aiming to achieve.

The routine of school life. The school is operated on a strict schedule with activities starting as early as 6:30 a.m. and ending as late as 9:30 p.m., when the lights are

turned off in both male and female student dorms. Some students may stay up late to study with their own flashlights or hang out with classmates in the hallways. Since it is a boarding school, students are required to stay on campus from Monday to Friday and are only allowed to go home on weekends. Students who live nearby usually go home after the last study session ends at 5:15 p.m. on Friday. The following chart provides an overview of an 8th grade daily schedule in Fall 2012, and it exemplifies the routine of school life at Prosperity Middle School.

	Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
6:00 a.m. to 6:30 a.m.	Get up and get ready for school	Get up and get ready for school	Get up and get ready for school	Get up and get ready for school	Get up and get ready for school
6:30 a.m. to 7:00 a.m.	Clean campus	Clean campus	Clean campus	Clean campus	Clean campus
7:00 a.m. to 7:40 a.m.	Morning exercises	Morning exercises	Morning exercises	Morning exercises	Morning exercises
7:40 a.m. to 8:20 a.m.	Morning Assembly	Independent study session	Independent study session	Independent study session	Independent study session
8:20 a.m. to 9:05 a.m.	Chinese	Math	English	Chinese	Math
9:15 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.	Math	English	Chinese	Math	English
10:20 a.m. to 11:05 a.m.	English	Chinese	Math	English	Chinese

11:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.	History	Physics	Geography	History	Geography
12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.	Lunch time and campus cleaning	Lunch time and campus cleaning	Lunch time and campus cleaning	Lunch time and campus cleaning	Lunch time and campus cleaning
2:00 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.	Politics	Chemistry	Biology	Physics	Computer
2:55 p.m. to 3:40 p.m.	P.E.	Biology	Politics	P.E.	Chemistry
3:50 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.	Extra-curricular	Extra-curricular	Extra-curricular	Extra-curricular	Extra-curricular
4:30 p.m. to 5:15 p.m.	Class meeting	Independent study session	Independent study session	Independent study session	Health Education
5:15 p.m. to 6:45 p.m.	Dinner time Campus and dorm cleaning	Dinner time Campus and dorm cleaning	Dinner time Campus and dorm cleaning	Dinner time Campus and dorm cleaning	Dinner time Campus and dorm cleaning
6:45 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.	First independent study session	First independent study session	First independent study session	First independent study session	First independent study session
7:40 p.m. to 8:25 p.m.	Second independent study session	Second independent study session	Second independent study session	Second independent study session	Second independent study session
8:35 p.m. to	Third	Third	Third	Third	Third

9:20 p.m.	independent study session (9th grade only)	independent study session (9th grade only)	independent study session (9th grade only)	independent study session (9th grade only)	independent study session (9th grade only)
9:20 p.m. to 9:45 pm or 10:30 p.m. for 9th grade	Dorm free time	Dorm free time	Dorm free time	Dorm free time	Dorm free time

This chart shows that students spend most of their day time and night time studying for the subjects that will be tested in the High School Entrance Exam. In addition to class instruction, independent study hours are also used to learn these subjects. Students follow a rigid routine to learn the standardized curriculum in hope of success in the exam.

Standardized curriculum. Different from what Muslim Hui students are familiar with back home, such as helping their parents grow plants and going to mosque for prayers and learning Koranic texts, this schedule shows that the school curriculum is based on the aim of preparing students to pass the exam that measures the *Zhiliang* of Prosperity Middle School. Among the 30 class periods each week, Chinese, Math, and English classes are taught every day, and Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Politics, P.E., and History are taught twice a week. All of these subjects are tested in the High School Entrance Exam; thus, they are paid special attention by the school. When I interviewed Lianqing, an 8th grade math teacher, and asked him what he thought about the quality of education, he reviewed the history of the school and proudly told me the

number of students who went to high school had been rising in the past five years. “I think the quality of education has skyrocketed in the past 5 years,” citing data in his mind. “Previously, our local students went to middle schools in other towns; now they came back from other places, [because] the quality of Prosperity Middle School has been lifted up.” His answer about quality of education is based on the number of students admitted to high schools, although he agrees that *Zhiliang* must include *Suzhi*. Junling, an 8th grade Chinese teacher, also confirmed that the *Zhiliang* of a middle school is really based on test scores: “Whichever middle school is able to increase students’ scores in the High School Entrance Exam, it would be considered a good quality school. Parents like to send their children to this type of high-quality school.” Though both Lianqing and Junling wanted students to grow morally, the reality of the national exam has shaped their views and their pedagogical practices toward the goal of achieving high scores.

In such a standardized curriculum, non-tested subjects seem to be allocated a minimum amount of instructional time. Computer class, the “fun class” as Muslim Hui student Jincheng describes it, is only offered on Fridays. Health education class, assigned to be taught on Fridays on the schedule, was never taught during the time I was there. When I asked students whether they had attended such a class, they responded, “We just used that class for independent study.”

The “Elementary Knowledge of Policies for Nationalities,” a book provided to middle schools in Ningxia, has never been used at Prosperity Middle School as far as I could tell. It is considered to be a local curriculum, an integral part of “Ethnic Unity Education” mandated by the Chinese government but not a subject on the national exam.

It teaches the national policies for ethnic minorities, including policies about ethnic equality, ethnic autonomy, and ethnic rights of using their own languages and practicing their own traditions. As I was asking Junling about the specific book, he stopped for a second to think and then said:

> We have this book, but no teachers teach this class. Teachers who teach a politics class should teach this one, but they have politics books to teach, a test subject in the High School Entrance Exam. The school doesn't make an arrangement for this class.

Pedagogical practices. Within the culture of "*Zhiliang*," teaching and learning activities are organized to ensure high scores in the High School Entrance Exam, though *Suzhi* is also observed and enforced. Teachers center their teaching around test standards and monitor students' performance using test scores. Rankings of students and classes are conducted after every major exam and are announced in each class and among teachers. Students are given class rankings and letters to their parents on their academic progress or academic regress in their classes based on their test scores. Students would talk about their test scores after exams, and their mood was usually swayed by test scores. Guoqin, a top 10 student in a class, told me in the interview, "My scores were not good, because I hadn't reached 400; I think 400 is decent, and 500 is excellent." Similar to Guoqin, in my conversations with some girls after class, I was also told that they didn't think they could go to high school because their scores were too low. In their weekly journals, students wrote about how worried they were about exams and how they were afraid of being scolded by their parents because of their low test scores.

It is not only teachers and students who esteem and internalize test scores as the most important measure to measure the quality of education at Prosperity Middle School. I also felt pressure to raise students' scores after being an assistant to the head teacher of a class for a few weeks. Almost every day, teachers shared with me news that a student had received 10 or 20 out of 100 marks on his/her test. Some teachers also came to my dorm to show me their students' test scores and ask me how to improve their academic performance. I was also influenced by the students who kept telling me how they would be punished if they received low scores on the exams. In order to help them raise their scores, I taught them some test-taking strategies with the hope that they somehow made right guesses of answers to questions they didn't know. No matter how hard I tried *not* to assess them by their test scores, I always fell back to the test-oriented system.

Ritualization of recitation. One of the key pedagogical practices at Prosperity Middle School is recitation; it is regarded as an effective practice by both students and teachers. In our interview, Ma Li told me that she recited assigned content from Chinese and English textbooks every day after dinner because she felt that she could only achieve high scores in this way. At night, whenever I walked in and out the female students' dorm, I always saw her reciting something by the entrance where it was quiet and had a light on even after 9:45 p.m. To her, recitation of certain textbooks had become an essential part of her study habits.

However, Ma Li was not alone in this journey of recitation. It was a daily ritual for all students to walk around campus or to sit on benches, studying and reciting Chinese textbooks and English words after dinner and before independent study hours at night.

Teachers were assigned to check classrooms and dorm rooms to ensure that all students were out in the playground, reciting assigned homework. At times, some teachers volunteered to walk around and answer students' questions. When I was there, this became my daily ritual as well. I often walked around with the intention of checking their attendance but was usually stopped by students from all grades to help them with their English pronunciation.

This ritual continues into winter until the temperature is too low to bear. One day, it was close to 9:00 p.m., and it was already dark outside with the street lights turned on, looking hazy. I felt a little chilly with my windbreaker on. I saw some students carrying their flashlights to quickly make their way through campus. A few students were standing right below the light, holding their Chinese textbooks close to their eyes, murmuring to themselves and trying to recite as much as they could. When the wind blew by, I shivered, but they were just pacing back and forth and raising their heads occasionally without appearing to be bothered by the cold. Test scores determine their futures, and they believe they have no better options for changing their destinies than by improving their scores by reciting texts.

Teachers agree that recitation leads to good academic performance in terms of test scores, especially in rural schools. They think that the students will not learn anything if they don't give any assignments involving recitation. The general perceptions of Muslim Hui students in the local community being low in learning ability, unmotivated in pursuing intellectual knowledge, and poor in knowledge foundations have convinced these teachers that recitation could at least force these students to learn something. The

small number of Han students in the school are believed to be more motivated and diligent, but they still follow the general practice of recitation. In this way, teachers feel that they are fulfilling their responsibilities to make all students learn.

Junling is one of the best teachers in 8th grade, as recognized by both students and parents. He also leads a higher ranked class with 71 students. As a local Muslim Hui teacher, parents sometimes call him and ask him to take their children into his class. I heard from parents that if their children can get into his class, the chance of them passing the High School Entrance Exam is greater. Yet he also uses recitation as a key teaching method. When I asked him whether this view of him as a teacher whose students pass at a higher rate was true, he chuckled and humbly said, "I think I am lucky because I am given good students." Whether he is lucky or he has his own unique way of teaching students, the results are something both parents and the school want to see.

As I was inquiring about his reason for choosing recitation as a key teaching method, I noticed his hesitation. Talking to me, whom he believed was an education expert, he thought I would definitely not be in favor of recitation. Then, he opened up by comparing my educational background with the Prosperity Middle School students' background. "Our kids are different from the kids from urban regions like you….They are not self-motivated to learn….Some students' IQ is low." He continued, telling me a story about a boy in his class who studied so hard days and nights but still could not do well on his tests. "He is a typical case of low IQ," he posited. Therefore, "using recitation is important to our rural students." He finally said it, but he was still reserved in commenting on teaching methods used in urban areas:

> Recitation also manifests the learning ability [because students need to] recite every single sentence. Especially in English, we are learning a foreign language. We need to first memorize them [words/sentences], and then understand them. Based on my long-term teaching experience, if [students] cannot recite them, the results are not good. If you cannot recite them, then you cannot understand them. They are now middle school students, and the basic ability for middle school students is to enhance memory. After they go to high school, they can understand them. Now they have very limited ability to understand anything.

I agree with him on some points. Although I had attempted to push for non-recitation teaching methods, asking students to summarize their readings, to make connections between knowledge conveyed in the textbooks and current events, to generate ideas from existing texts, and to think critically about messages delivered in the textbooks, I received silent responses from students. The majority of them would just sit there, nervously staring at me. What was a simple English word to me took them awhile to process. “What if I make recitation mandatory,” I kept asking myself, “would this be better?”

By the end of these classes, I sometimes vented my frustrations to local teachers, and they showed compassion to me. When they were new teachers at Prosperity, they all had similar ideas to mine. They were trained in student-centered learning in teachers colleges, and they hoped to use some of these methods in their first teaching careers. However, they ended up choosing recitation as the only effective way of teaching because it worked and would continue to work, at least to a certain extent. With the pressure to achieve high test scores or probably *Zhiliang* as they understand it, both

teachers and students have very limited options but to follow such pedagogical rituals in hopes of better test results.

Moralization of corporal punishment. While recitation is considered a path to high test scores, corporal punishment is used as a mechanism to ensure that students stay on this path through discipline and eliminating any non-*Suzhi* behaviors at school. *Zhiliang*, in this sense, can be achieved; students can be shaped into "good" students as well as "good" citizens of society.

Currently, corporal punishment is prohibited by law. If a teacher wants to use corporal punishment, he or she has to adopt strategies to legitimize his or her choice of corporal punishment as a way to help students succeed. In this way, both teachers and students come to believe that what they do and what they are punished for are morally acceptable and understandable. According to Rozin (1999, p. 218), "moralization is the process through which preferences are converted into values, both in individual lives and at the level of culture," which implies that corporal punishment may be acceptable and permissible if it is converted into a positive value by teachers and the local community. At Prosperity Middle School, corporal punishment is positively moralized and internalized as a value such that its practice is believed to be for students' benefit. Only when teachers punish students do students feel that they are being given attention and opportunity to succeed in the future.

To legitimate corporal punishment wasn't necessary a few years ago because using corporal punishment was allowed in the school and was a pedagogical practice accepted and approved by parents. Traditionally for parents in the local community,

sending children to school meant giving their children to teachers, and teachers were granted full power to manage these children as trusted adults. When I visited students' homes, some parents sincerely asked me to punish their children if they didn't listen in class or if they behaved inappropriately. They relied on the school and teachers to prepare their children for a better future. Yamei's father even had a discussion with his daughter about the legitimacy of corporal punishment after Yamei came home and told him about an incident on campus: A teacher harshly slapped a girl's face in front of the other students, which seemed to exceed her understanding of routine corporal punishment, such as beating on students' hands and legs for not doing homework or violating rules. The father responded to his daughter:

> It is right that teachers punish students. [Teachers] punish [students] because [students] don't study well and are naughty. If [students] study well and respect teachers, teachers have no reason to punish them….I sent you to school and asked teachers to teach you and want you to study well, then why don't you study?

His words confirm that whether it is to ensure that students study well or to discipline students for misbehavior, teachers are viewed as correct in using corporal punishment.

However, after the introduction of compulsory education and the student-centered learning approach in education for *Zhiliang*, corporal punishment was prohibited. Parents have the right to report to the Bureau of Education any teachers' misconduct, which could jeopardize teachers' careers. Several teachers mentioned to me the same story, that a teacher was suspended by the Bureau of Education after he beat a student with the "good" intention of forcing him to learn. Now, teachers are afraid of executing corporal

punishment because of consequences they may receive. Students also know that they have the power to fight back against teachers if they are corporally punished. Some students take advantage of this new policy, and they muddle through school without worrying about being corporally punished by teachers for refusal to learn. This new regulation takes away the power of teachers, which not only frustrates some teachers but also is believed by teachers to lessen the quality of education. Lianqing, the Director of Dean's Office, commented about the current regulation in our interview:

> According to the previous regulation, teachers could corporally punish students. But now teachers can't punish students. Theoretically speaking, you have to obey the law, and the law says that we can't beat students, scold students, and punish students….This causes many teachers to be afraid of managing students. Thus, students drift along [without actual learning] for the day, and teachers also drift along [without teaching] for the day. This quality of education can never be good in this way.

Later, I visited the home of the girl who had been slapped by the teacher. Before I went, the teacher who had slapped the girl asked me to explain the incident to her parents, and he reminded me several times, "I was too angry and I couldn't control myself but slapped her." He kept clarifying, "It was a bad day for me when I slapped her. She came up to me and blamed me for the loss of her cell phone. I was humiliated by her disrespect." I nodded my head and promised that I would explain the situation to the parents. Apparently, the teacher himself felt regretful afterward and was probably trying to protect himself from being reported by the parents. Not surprisingly, immediately after I walked

into her house, the mother started complaining about what that teacher had done to her daughter with a frown on her face. I tried to explain the situation as I was told to do by the teacher. I found out through my conversation with the student's mother that all she wanted was to tell me that teachers could punish students with parental approval. She understood that children needed to be disciplined in the school. Although this incident had stirred quite a controversy on campus, it ended peacefully with corporal punishment continuing at Prosperity Middle School.

To many teachers who see themselves as "responsible," it is impossible not to use corporal punishment because the pressure to achieve high test scores is directly associated with their future careers and the school's reputation and attraction of more local Muslim Hui students, especially when local Muslim Hui students supposedly lack the motivation to engage in academic activities in the school. "You might be the only exception to this case, and the only teacher who doesn't corporally punish students," one teacher jokingly praised me. But I had struggled with and contemplated my teaching methods before I came to this approach. At first, I was very confident that I wouldn't need to corporally punish students—that my patience and verbal encouragement would pay off eventually, even after some older teachers kept suggesting that I use corporal punishment. Soon, I saw other new teachers start using corporal punishment to maintain the normal routine of teaching and learning in the school. I still believed that I could use my nonviolent approach to boost students' interest and motivation for learning. After three months at the school, there had been several times that I was at the edge of losing my temper and barely controlled my urge to physically punish students. I even held a

broom in the classroom, pretending that I was going to beat them if they interrupted me. Because my presence in the school had no direct relationship with my future teaching career, unlike my fellow teachers, I was able to keep my own preferred teaching methods. However, when teachers' performance is strongly associated with students' academic performance, they feel compelled to use methods that they believe to be the most effective, whether or not they are the most desirable.

Several teachers shared with me their perspectives on the functions of corporal punishment. Lianqing felt "corporal punishment at some level can make students realize the importance of education from their souls." Junling also agreed that,

> Corporal punishment is effective. If you only verbally tell them [students] what they should do and ask them not to make the same mistake the next time, they always make the same mistake. They think that there are no consequences even when they make mistakes. Using corporal punishment is to frighten them and make them scared.

Xiaojing echoed Junling's perspective, saying, "If they don't finish their homework, I will punish them. So they are scared of me, and then they start to learn and progress in school."

According to these perspectives, corporal punishment is effective in the sense of scaring students and letting students know the consequences of not learning or doing what a student needs to do. It is the pain that teachers want students to remember when they commit any misconduct. Through the moralization of corporal punishment, students also internalize the idea that their teachers' choice of corporal punishment is for their

benefit and future growth, and it is used to remind them to study. In some cases, like the one I mentioned above about harshly slapping a student on the face for an unclarified reason, students may challenge the use of corporal punishment by complaining, but they generally agreed with punishment for enforcing homework completion and discipline compliance. In my interviews with students, the majority of them thought that teachers were right to punish them. “I think teachers should punish us. It was my fault not memorizing the words in the textbook,” Ma Li told me unhesitatingly. “The teacher punished me. I thought it was worth it,” as Sanzi expressed his respect for the teacher. Jiayu and Rende both said, “They did it [corporal punishment] for our benefit, and they wanted us to be good.” Bowen also stated, “The teachers punished us because they wanted to give us an opportunity to study well.” Below, I use an episode on campus to illustrate how corporal punishment is strategically practiced and moralized by teachers and students.

Xiaojin was a newly hired Han teacher and arrived at Prosperity Middle School the same semester I did. A math teacher and the head teacher of a 7th grade class, he had done quite well in keeping his class in the lead in 7th grade and in maintaining an orderly class. He lived in the teachers’ dorm on campus and rarely went home on weekends.

On a chilly winter morning, I was walking through campus and fetching water from the tap next to the teachers’ dorm when I saw a student in uniform put his hands up against the red brick wall outside of Xiaojing’s dorm. I recognized him as one of Xiaojin’s students, and he seemed to be getting a punishment the Chinese call *Mianbi siguo,* or facing the wall to think of your own faults. The difference was that the student

also stretched his legs back and stood at a 45-degree angle from the wall. I didn't pay much attention to it as it was just a small punishment I had seen practiced in many classrooms in my hometown and in other parts of China. Later, during lunch time when I was on the way to a classroom to have lunch with students, I saw the student still standing outside of Xiaojing's dorm, shivering and stomping his feet on the ground. I still didn't pay much attention since I didn't feel it was a long time for him to have to stand there. In the afternoon, as I was wrapping up a class meeting with students and about to go back to my dorm, I saw him still standing there, but his body position was twisted, and he was rubbing his hands against each other. Apparently, he hadn't had lunch, and he hadn't attended any classes that day. In the evening, I went out again and didn't see him anymore. I never thought I was going to look into this little incident until two days later. Another teacher, a subject teacher of Xiaojing's class, was very excited to tell me about how Xiaojing's punishment of that student actually transformed the student, and she wanted to learn from him. It seemed that a few other teachers had also noticed what Xiaojing had done, and this one wanted to learn from him.

I became very curious about Xiaojing's method of punishment and knocked on the door of his dorm. As soon as I mentioned the incident and told him that another teacher was praising his punishment strategy, he showed a sense of accomplishment on his face and said, "He [the student] promised me that he would never go to the internet bars at night again." Xiaojing continued, and the full story was even more intriguing. The student liked to go to the internet bars at night and stayed overnight playing PC games. In the morning, he couldn't concentrate on studying and would sleep on his desk. Xiaojing

decided to take him out of the classroom and asked him to *Mianbi sigu* for a day. In the evening, Xiaojing invited the student to his dorm and talked to him about his family and his interests, and then asked the student to sit on his bed and watch the other teachers grading homework. At the end of independent study sessions at 8:25 p.m., the student was finally released back to his dorm. The next day, Xiaojing took the student out of the classroom again and dragged him to sit in the classes Xiaojing was teaching. For four class periods, he did nothing but curiously stare at the four different classrooms. In the afternoon, Xiaojing invited him to the dorm again and started talking about life and studies. By the end of the second day, the student had broken down and burst into tears. He told Xiaojing he would never go to the internet bar again and then thanked Xiaojing for all he had done.

This episode indicates a modified form of corporal punishment used on campus. Rather than exerting physical force on the student, this particular teacher made the student feel pain without direct physical contact. On the one hand, the student felt physical pain because of the excessive exposure to the cold; on the other hand, the student also felt mental pain when the teacher showed him brotherly caring. Xiaojing once told me that he wanted to be like a big brother to these students, and he hoped that these students could also see him as a big brother. In this incident, the student felt guilty about his wrongdoing and didn’t want to disappoint the teacher again. Xiaojing had showed the student that he was giving him another chance to grow and be a better person.

Later, I interviewed Xiaojing and asked him if he thought corporal punishment was effective. He confidently stated:

> Now, there are fewer people who are late for class in the morning. Nobody ever goes to the internet bars. Those students who used to hit girls' heads with chair legs during 6th grade also became obedient and started to learn. They want to study now. Having this idea tells me that the learning environment in my class is good. If there is not a good learning environment, even those students who want to study would not study anymore.

For these reasons, it was widely believed that corporal punishment has worked well and may be quite effective for Muslim Hui students in the local community since local teachers consider these students a little wild. Without pain, teachers generally believe that Muslim Hui students would lose their way in the puzzle of school life. It is the "stick" that keeps them on track and maintains the *Zhiliang* of education. On another occasion, I was invited by Xiaojing to his class to give a talk on how to study English well. Xiaojing wasn't present while I was delivering the talk, but I observed that students were attentively sitting there and listening to me. Unlike some other classrooms I sat in or watched for other teachers, this classroom was a lot quieter. By the end of the semester, the cumulative scores for this particular class were the top in its grade. Xiaojing was pleased with his class performance, which was probably due to his painful but caring approach to these students.

Student discipline watchers. When corporal punishment is used to monitor students' completion of recitation assignments, it is also predominantly used to discipline non-*Suzhi* behaviors that interrupt learning and teaching routines. In this process, class monitors and student leadership teams are given power by teachers to surveil other

students because head teachers are not always present to perform punishment. At the end of each day, class monitors write reports on who was misbehaving or interrupting others, and then teachers call in the specific students listed in the reports for punishment.

I found out about student discipline watchers on the second day of my new assignment as an assistant to a head teacher. I walked into the classroom and started the class meeting that the head teacher had asked me to lead that day. Previously, I had heard that the students in this class were disruptive, but I was feeling lucky because they seemed quiet and respectful that day. The class meeting went well, and I was proud of being able to manage the class. At the end of the meeting, the class monitor came up to me and handed me a piece of paper with a list of students' names on it. She briefly said in a soft and low voice, "Teacher Ma (the head teacher) wanted me to give you this." The monitor explained, "I didn't record everyone who was disruptive, but this is just for your reference." I skimmed through the name list and then thanked her. I realized that since I was given this new assignment, the students also expected me to take over the job of disciplining the disruptive ones. They understood that any behaviors that interrupted the class routines would be noted, warned, and corrected if needed. The earlier respect and silence I had received from the students were probably owing to the fact that they were afraid of being punished by me. The class monitor was watching, and they didn't know how I would punish them if they had caused any chaos.

Stigmatizing Muslim Hui's *Suzhi* and Orchestrating *Yangcheng xiguan*: *Suzhi* Maneuvering and Civilization in the Making

Previously, I described the landscape of Xiji County, where the Muslim Hui are the majority in the local communities and the culture of compulsory education constructed by the Chinese national government is promoted behind the gates of a secular school. I have also explored the concepts of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* embodied in the physical environment, routines of school life, and pedagogical practices of Prosperity Middle School. In the following sections, I will examine how the Muslim Huis' *Suzhi* is stigmatized in the secular school and how *Yangchang Xiguan*, orchestrated in the school, reproduces *Suzhi*, or the socially acceptable civilized behaviors of Muslim Hui students.

Stigmatizing the Muslim Huis' Suzhi. The Muslim Huis' *Suzhi* was often mentioned as being low by local teachers when I asked them about the factors affecting the *Zhiliang* of education in the local community. *Wenhua luohou*, or cultural backwardness, is a commonly used phrase to describe the Muslim Hui's collective lack of intellectual knowledge as well as their lack of *Suzhi*. By saying lack of intellectual knowledge, teachers mean that most Muslim Hui community members have never gone to secular schools or have only completed a few years of secular schooling. Also, *Suzhi* is associated with intellectual knowledge; thus, low *Suzhi* is the result of lacking intellectual knowledge.

Lijin is a newly hired Han teacher in the school. Growing up in a mixed town nearby *(Hunju)* with both Muslim Hui and Han people each representing approximately half of the residents, she has learned how to live with the Muslim Hui and had some knowledge of how to handle Muslim Hui students before she joined Prosperity Middle School. During our interview, she shared with me her stories of growing up with Muslim

Hui children and how she and her Han family members and friends perceive Muslim Hui in the region:

> When I was little, we [Han students] were often the bullying targets of Hui students. I remembered that when I passed by a mosque on the way to my elementary school, some Hui children stood by the mosque and threw rocks at me. I avoided them and quickly went to school. I remembered that Hui students in my middle school still liked to fight, but this had changed in my high school. I felt somehow different when I entered the high school, and I thought we [Han students] had a good relationship with Hui students. In college, we had less than ten Hui students in my class, so I didn't feel much difference between the Hui and us. I feel that the Hui people in my area are somehow violent. This is probably because they were influenced by their parents when they were little. The Hui look down upon us because we raise pigs. They think that we are dirty. If we touch water, they can't stand it. My parents told me to avoid Hui children in any confrontations, and I got used to it.

Lijin's experience with the Muslim Hui reinforces the stereotype that they are bullies, violent, and likes to fight. Because her elementary and middle school were located in the village and town where Hui students are relatively dominant, she had had unpleasant encounters with them. However, in her high school class, Han were the majority, and many Hui were unable to make it into high school and dropped out after completing nine years of compulsory education. Thus, Lijin didn't feel very different from the Hui who were selected out of the mass of Muslim Hui students and expected to have higher *Suzhi*.

The changing demographic composition from Hui to Han dominance from elementary schools to high schools also indicates that Muslim Hui students have lower educational levels compared to their Han counterparts, and significantly fewer Muslim Hui students test into high schools even though they are the majority in the region. Local teachers and some Muslim Hui parents commented that these shifting dynamics are due to Muslim Hui parents who historically viewed education as unimportant and unnecessary.

Xiaomei is also a newly hired Muslim Hui teacher in the school. Different from Lijin who is from a mixed Hui-Han village, Xiaomei used to live in a village where the entire population was Muslim (*Juju*). She attended a middle school in Xiji County after completing elementary school in her village. Then, she finished high school in Xiji County before attending a college in a nearby city for four years. She eventually returned to Xiji County and landed a job at Prosperity Middle School, as she wished to be closer to her family and maintain her Huiness. She shared her experience with Han:

> I psychologically rejected Han students when I was in middle school because I never had a chance to get to know Han people in my village during my time in the elementary school. I couldn't accept Han people, especially when they became dominant in my middle school. Later, I found that Han people are easy to get along with. They were just timid, but sometimes they really cared about you. Then I made friends with them. Since then, I have changed my perception of Han people.

Unlike Lijin, Xiaomei's interactions with the Han were not avoidance, but rather psychologically rejecting them in the beginning. Such a difference indicates that the

Muslim Hui tend to exhibit a hostile attitude toward Han people, whereas Han people choose non-confrontational approaches to deal with the Muslim Hui, whom they believe to be violent. Because the Han consciously recognize their ethnicity and their minority status in the local area, they learn to adjust to the ethnic environment and live with the Muslim Hui population. In this process, Xiaomei developed the perception of Han as timid, loving, and easy to get along with, in contrast to the perceived *Suzhi* of the Muslim Hui.

Like Lijin, Xiaomei had also experienced the same demographic shift of Hui-Han from her elementary school to college. “Hui people don’t consider education something important, and they are always good at business here.” Xiaomei shrugged her shoulders and said, “Han people are a lot more self-motivated and more disciplined.”

These two teachers’ experiences suggest that the local Muslim Hui are perceived as violent, bullies, quick to fight, business-savvy, and inattentive to secular schooling. These perceived characteristics of the Muslim Hui were repeatedly mentioned by teachers and administrators and are regarded both as manifestations of and as the result of Hui’s low *Suzhi*, even when many Muslim Hui students do not conform to these preconceived and stigmatized categories. Yongcheng, a Han math teacher from a local Han village who had taught in another elementary school for three years, further elaborated the two aspects of the low *Suzhi* of the Muslim Hui seen and practiced in the middle school:

> First, the Muslim Hui are selfish and lacking ideas of unity and caring for others. They only protect things that benefit them. Second, Muslim Hui students don’t

> think that they should appreciate teachers but rather think teaching is what teachers should do. When there are no conflicts of interest, Muslim Hui parents treat teachers well; however, when there are emerging conflicts of interest, Muslim Hui parents would not respectfully solve the conflicts but would use violent action to settle the matter.

Although Yongcheng's opinions seem pessimistic about the *Suzhi* of the Muslim Hui, his experience speaks to a common struggle that teachers encounter when they interact with Muslim Hui parents. This struggle takes the power from teachers who are too strict with students and empowers students to "muddle" through middle school. With Muslim parents protecting their children regardless of the reason, teachers feel that it is difficult to discipline students. Teachers who are not from Prosperity Town are even more challenged by the local Muslim Hui parents because they don't have the filial connections in the community to back them up.

I also witnessed and heard about a few violent incidents on campus. One was between Muslim Hui students with a Muslim Hui father involved. The afternoon of the final day of the fall semester, I saw a group of students flooding toward the playground in front of the teaching building. Then I heard shouting, yelling, and quarrelling. A teacher came into my dorm and nervously told me that a student had been hit on the head by another student's father with a brick, and the student had been seriously injured and taken into the hospital nearby. Later, I found out that only a small disagreement between two students triggered the incident, and the father hadn't even asked for the reason for the disagreement before he took revenge for his child.

The other incident happened between a Muslim Hui student and a Hui teacher. A Hui teacher had slapped one of the older students in the office because of his misbehavior in the classroom. While the teacher thought it was an acceptable punishment, the student stood up and slapped the teacher's face, breaking the teacher's nose. After these incidents, it became difficult for me not to believe that local Muslim Hui lack *Suzhi*; however, many other students demonstrated their *Suzhi* by respecting teachers, cleaning the campus, caring for the public property, and not being late for classes.

Yangcheng xiguan. Responding to the stigmatized Muslim Hui's *Suzhi*, the school arranges *Yangcheng xiguan*, a process for students to become habituated to certain 'civilized' behaviors through everyday practices. *Suzhi* is then fostered through daily routines and monitored and shaped by corporal punishment, as mentioned above. Muslim Hui students' participation in secular schooling is expected to lead to habitualization to these so-called civilized behaviors, and these students ultimately acquire *Suzhi* to guide their ways of *Zuoren,* or conducting themselves in the future. The notion of civilization is constantly being reinforced through secular schooling.

Daily Suzhi maneuvering. During one of the morning assemblies, the school principal used an analogy to compare students' lives on campus with cattle and sheep raised on farms in the community. He was angry about some students ruining the school environment by littering and urinating in public spaces, and he then stated that students need to understand that their lives are civilized and advanced and are distinct from those of animals.

The principal's analogy reveals the school's expectation that students distinguish themselves from animals by behaving in certain ways in the living and studying environment. Cleaning is the first "civilized" habit encouraged by the school every day. A teacher had previously told me that students in the local community hadn't developed the habit of keeping their bodies hygienic and the public space clean; therefore, to be able to "Create a Sanitary Campus" as the school puts it, it is mandatory for students to follow the cleaning rituals. Teachers also perceive that the inability to maintain sanitation reflects students' low *Suzhi* and uncivilized behaviors. Another teacher furiously shared with me a story of a student who intentionally dumped water and threw empty snack bags out of the dorm windows: "Students' *Suzhi* is too low!" I often heard this lament in these types of scenarios.

While students can be relatively undisciplined in their living environments at home, they are not allowed to act that way at school. Students in each class are assigned to small groups to clean dormitories, playgrounds, and the teaching building three times a day. The cleaning rituals start at 6:30 a.m., and students who are assigned to clean for a specific day collect cleaning tools, such as brooms, mops, and iron buckets, to start sweeping the floors of the hallways in the dorms, taking out trash from the previous day, dusting bunk beds, picking up trash on the playground, and sprinkling dusty classrooms to keep the air fresh. Before they start the daily running exercise at 7:00 a.m., all areas must be clean and checked by the teachers on duty. After lunch, students are also required to clean classrooms, sprinkle floors with water, and wash food containers by the kitchen. It was amazing for me to see how much trash could be accumulated after a

morning of classes. If the floors were not sprinkled, I could smell the dust in the air. After dinner and before the evening independent study sessions start, it was also mandatory for students to clean their dorms again, mopping the floors, tidying the bedding, and removing the trash.

While the rituals of cleaning are closely monitored, other practices are also checked daily by a group of three teachers who record misbehavior in each class and use these records to evaluate weekly class performance. The class weekly performance is based on the criteria of class attendance, classroom cleanliness, students' punctuality, dorm maintenance, and other *Suzhi*-related behaviors. Each criterion is given points with a total of 500 points for the week. During the morning assembly every Monday, students are gathered on the playground in front of the teaching building. Then, the teachers who are assigned to assess class performance for the previous week announce the cumulative points for each class. The highest scorer from each grade receives *Liudong hongqi*, or the Flow of Red Flag, an given to the class that exceeds the performance of other classes in the same grade. This inter-class competition also reflects the effectiveness of head teachers in managing and supervising their students; thus, the head teachers have to follow through on these cleanliness tasks every day. "If we don't give students *Suzhi* education, they will be like their parents and become wild," Principal Ma told me. He feels the need and responsibility to turn wild students into civilized ones and to habituate them to civilized behaviors through these routines.

Corporal punishment. Previously, I unpacked the strategic uses of corporal punishment by teachers as a pedagogical practice and mentioned that corporal

punishment is often used for the purpose of disciplining non-*Suzhi* behaviors. Below, I examine the students' understanding of corporal punishment in relation to *Suzhi* and the school's criteria of *Suzhi* violations. In this way, I show how the school targets *Suzhi* violators in the process of 'civilizing' students.

When I interviewed students and asked them to give me examples of what teachers expect them to do in school, Mingyan answered, "Teacher says we have to have *Xueshengyang* or the appearance of a student." She further explained that to have *Xueshengyang* is to study well, not wear inappropriate clothes, and not fight. Kai and two other students simply summarized the answer with one phrase: *Xuexi*, or study, saying, "besides *Xuexi*, still *Xuexi*." He didn't think anything else but studying seemed relevant. Ma Li, one of the top three students in 8th grade, shared her understanding teachers' expectations: "be united in the class, be helpful to classmates, be compliant with regulations, complete all homework, and be non-interruptive in the class." Hanxuan added his interpretation, but he emphasized these expectations were only for boys: "Don't go to the internet bars, drink, and smoke. Don't skip classes." Xiaolong also expressed his opinion, "Be polite, and don't swear. Don't litter." These students' understandings indicate that they understand teachers' expectations to include both academic and *Suzhi* components. In addition to *Xuexi* or study, *Suzhi* components are loosely defined, ranging from dress code, to classroom behaviors, to off-campus activities, and to religious expectations, such as no drinking and smoking. Violation of some of these may be punished, whereas not doing others may only be discouraged or warned, depending on the level of severity.

Teachers further elaborate their expectations in a written agreement. This agreement was established by the school for students and their parents with regard to *Suzhi* violations at Prosperity Middle School. After a student beat another student on campus, the school leadership felt an urgent need to formalize the non-*Suzhi* behaviors that they would not accept. Although teachers are forbidden to expel students for any reason under the Compulsory Education Law, the school made it clear to parents that if students violate the agreement, it would not be the school's responsibility to retain them, and students would be sent home for their misbehavior. The school's non-*Suzhi* behaviors are as follows:

1. Be in a romantic relationship or involved in forming gangs
2. Go to the internet bars
3. Be involved in a fight, a group fight, or ask others to fight
4. Skip five or more classes with no reason given
5. Leave the school for four times or more without approval from teachers
6. Not attending exams organized by the school with no reason given
7. Smoking, drinking, and intentionally causing chaos
8. Engaging in verbal arguments or assaults with head teachers, subject teachers, or administrators
9. Stealing public property or damaging public property to a certain extent
10. Playing cards or chess in the classrooms or dorm rooms

The points listed in this agreement are consistent with of the some points mentioned by students, and it shows that *Suzhi* is an important part of the education the school strives to

achieve through eliminating non-*Suzhi* behaviors. The expectations of the Muslim Hui students' *Suzhi* at Prosperity also reflect the stigmatized perceptions of the Muslim Hui and the need to correct non-*Suzhi* behaviors in the hope of maintaining a civilized space for students. In all my time at the school, I hadn't heard of anyone who had been dismissed for violating the agreement.

Decorative and performative nationality. Kipnis (2006) argues that nationality is one of the main bases of the *Suzhi* discourse, and it is evaluated by the patriotism of an individual. Different from other criteria that measure *Suzhi* examined above, education for nationalism is not practiced or monitored by force; rather, education for nationalism is practiced through decorative symbols and performative events at Prosperity Middle School.

Education-themed sculpture is frequently seen on the campuses of middle schools in the Xihaigu region. At Prosperity Middle School, a statue called "Flower of Nationalities" caught my attention. If it were not placed in the middle of the campus, I wouldn't have been able to tell that the school is a school for ethnic minorities. The Flower was designed with red petals and golden stamens. It symbolizes Hui as one of the 55 flowers (ethnicities) of the Chinese nation. It functions as a decorative representation of ethnic minorities who pledge allegiance to the nation-state and the Communist Party. I asked Principal Ma about the significance of the "Flower of Nationalities," and he explained to me:

> Our school is to serve the ethnic minority region, and our school is located in the ethnic region of the Communist Party. I hope the ethnic minority education can

> flourish here. To educate ethnic minority students is to educate intellectuals for the nation and foster flowers for the motherland.

The education for nationalism is also done through occasional school activities, often conducted when higher authorities come to school for routine inspections of *Suzhi* education, when a national holiday approaches, or when a political event requires national attention. To prepare for inspections, the school usually starts as early as a week or a day prior, depending on the nature of the inspection and the level of officials who are visiting. For a national holiday, the school plans thematic lectures and discussions about the traditions and customs of the holiday, which is described in one of the school news briefs as "education for patriotism". The school also conducts some activities to respond to political events happening in the country, especially when they are related to ethnic groups. For example, ethnic unification was advocated the Wenchuan earthquake was commemorated; this even called for everyone to share their love for the deceased. Ethnic pride was also summoned when the whole country was called to maintain civilized behavior to celebrate the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

I was involved in helping students prepare for an inspection. This inspection was to observe the *Zhiliang* of teaching as well as ensuring the teaching of the main ideas from the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which are required to be disseminated to all levels and all kinds of social institutions. A day before the authorities came to the school, the school started to prepare for the inspection, and including designing a bulletin board with the theme of Happily Welcoming *Shibada*, an abbreviated name for the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The

class monitor didn't know what to do and came to ask me for help. My task was to find relevant materials on *Shibada* for them to write on the bulletin board. In the afternoon, good students in each class were excused with special permission from head teachers to decorate the bulletin boards assigned to them. The atmosphere across the whole campus was focused on getting ready for the inspection. After a few hours, I noticed that their bulletin boards were full of information about history of *Shibada* and the grand achievements of China in the past 60 years since its establishment. "Cheers for China" was written in red, big font, showing the pride students felt in being Chinese. In the front of the teaching building, a red rectangle banner was hung with the characters "Happily Welcome *Shibada* and Welcome Leaders from the Bureau of Education to Visit and Guide" written on it. In addition, students were all called upon to clean the campus after school. This example indicates that education for nationality in the school is primarily for the purpose of inspection and is not practiced *Suzhi* behaviors.

Imagined Future: The Construction of a World of Prosperity

I have discussed the culture of compulsory education above to illustrate how the discourses of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* are understood and interpreted in a local middle school through the physical environment, the standardized curriculum, and the pedagogical practices. The culture of compulsory education at Prosperity Middle School exemplifies the general understanding of compulsory education in Muslim Hui communities. Below, I intend to unpack the values of compulsory education constructed by the school and teachers and examine how these values are entangled with *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* beyond campus and the community. I will first describe the socioeconomic situation in the local

community, and then I will discuss the linkage between schooling and students' future, as schooling is creating an imagined prosperous future that will change the destinies of these Muslim Hui families in Xihaigu.

The socioeconomic situation. In my methodology chapter, I briefly reviewed Prosperity Middle School and its surroundings and touched upon some aspects of local Muslim Hui life. In this chapter, I will introduce more information about their socioeconomic situation, including sources of income and ways of making a living, which provides a background to understand the linkage between schooling and the imagined future it promotes.

According to the Xiji County People's Congress Annual Report (2013), per capita income for its town residents was RMB 17,580 (USD $3,000), and per capita income for its farmers was RMB 5,360 (USD $900). While town residents mostly work for the local government and run small family businesses, majority of farmers in Xiji County live in mountainous regions and depend their lives on growing crops and raising livestock. The local government jobs usually require a college degree; small family businesses, on the other hand, have no requirements. As I saw, family restaurants and grocery stores are two most common businesses in town; other businesses, such as internet café, motorcycle repair shops, and clothing stores, also operate to meet local people's daily needs. However, as farmers, meeting the basic needs is the foremost priority. Often, a family member or a few family members have to travel outside to be migrant works so that they can make enough money to sustain their families.

Linkage between schooling and future. Traveling between villages on weekends was one of my favorite activities. I was not only able to visit students' homes but was also given tours by students of their villages. Elementary schools were sites I most often visited, mainly because students liked to show me where they spent their childhood and what their lives were like in the villages. While visiting these sites, a few slogans caught my attention repeatedly. I saw them in most villages I visited. Some are painted on enlarged billboards on both sides of roads; others are drawn in color on the red brick walls of schools.

1. To eliminate poverty and gain prosperity, education is the priority in paving the road to prosperity
   (*Yao xiang Tuopinzhifu, Jiaoyu Youxian Pulu*)
   要想脱贫致富，教育优先铺路
2. Attending school can change destinies, and knowledge can create wealth
   (*Dushu Keyi Gaibian Mingyun, Zhishi Keyi Chuangzao Caifu*)
   读书可以改变命运，知识可以创造财富
3. The hope of a family is its child, and the hope of a child is education
   (*Jiating de Xiwang zai Haizi, Haizi de Xiwang zai Jiaoyu*)
   家庭的希望在孩子，孩子的希望在教育
4. Knowledge changes destinies, and studying creates the future
   (*Zhishi Gaibian Mingyun, Xuexi Chuangzao Weilai*.)
   知识改变命运，学习创造未来

These slogans propagate the view of the very essential nature of education in the rural community—that education would eventually lead to the elimination of poverty, prosperity, better destinies, and a brighter future. Children, in this journey, play a critical role in fulfilling families' hopes. These slogans also emphasize that *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* in compulsory education are for the purpose of preparing Muslim Hui children to be ready to undertake different life paths from their parents and have a prosperous future.

However, hope is (only) hope, and not everyone can fulfill their hopes. I wondered whether any Muslim Hui had ever achieved economic prosperity by attending secular schools, but I was told that the numbers are quite small, and the majority of those who had had been hired by local government entities and schools. Many other adult Muslim Hui from the community still follow their parents' path of being migrant workers and seeking labor-intensive jobs in cities. In my conversations with students in the evenings, they also confirmed these experiences. Their parents, now in their 30s or early 40s, had only attended a few years of schooling, and many are farmers, truck drivers, small businesses owners, and seasonal migrant workers; only a few students' siblings had made it to high school, which leaves the majority working on the farms or helping with family businesses. I asked them whether they had gone to other provinces or cities, but almost no one had ever left Prosperity Town or had even travelled to Xiji County, 42 kilometers away. Considering these circumstances the students are familiar with and their inability to see places beyond their community, a different future is imaginary. Such an imagined future is unpredictable and uncertain. Therefore, Muslim Hui students' perceived future is constructed by the school and teachers, and this keeps some students

and their parents faithful in embarking on this journey of compulsory education. The following remarks capture three teachers' expectations of compulsory education in constructing and changing the destinies of Muslim Hui students.

Xiaojing, a Han teacher of 7th grade, believes that education could show Muslim Hui students a new world of possibilities. Moving out of poverty is not just a dream for students who study, and families of these students can also benefit tremendously from education. He continued:

> If you *Nianshu* or study a lot, you will become visionary and have long-term planning. You walk out of the Xihaigu region and walk out of northwestern China. Your social and practical experience must be a lot more than if you were at home. If you live better outside, you will have the ability to help your family. Even when none of your siblings could make to college and would probably experience difficulties in their lives, you would be able to help them….For example, you might have to budget your spending when you are out of work. If you know how to do personal financing, then you will spend less and save more money. In this way, your financial situation will be better.

Junling, a Hui Chinese teacher of 8th grade, points out from another angle the *Suzhi* component of compulsory education in ensuring a cultural common ground between the Muslim Hui and people with high cultural knowledge in big cities where the majority Han reside. He implies that earning money and leaving poverty can be difficult if the Muslim Hui don't know how to communicate with the Han. He stated:

> When people receive more education, their intellectual and cultural knowledge will be high and they will be competent in doing things, whether it is about running businesses or something else….Your ways of talking and behaving are important in communicating with others, such as those people in Beijing and Shanghai. People with high cultural knowledge don't want to do business with you if you can't talk in their language.
>
> I hope [students] would make big changes in terms of *Zuoren* or in the way of conducting themselves. Then I wish all of them could change the lifestyles of their parents' generation…change the living space and the status since they were little. I wish they could get into a relatively good high school and college so that they would be able to find good jobs in the future.

Zhengyi also emphasizes the importance of *Zuoren* and the expectation of students to change both their own destiny and their parents' ways of living. "Education could mobilize students to different space and improve their social status," he said.

It was not only those local teachers who were constructing the perceived future for their students—I also felt myself doing so. Using myself, a Muslim Hui, as an example, I had shown these students how education had changed my destiny and empowered me to choose my future. I also used "changing families' destinies" and "achieving prosperity" as key ideas in my "inspirational" talks with students, which was a strategy I adopted and found to be effective to motivate and encourage students to keep trying at school. Xuehua is from a village where her family is the only family with a distinct Hui last name. In her journal, she desolately told me that people in her village had

looked down upon them because of the family's last name. Her mother had wanted her to go to college so that she could bring honor to the family and stand tall for them. One day, I noticed Xuehua hiding in the corner of her dorm room playing a game on her cell phone while her classmates were studying. I called her out and asked her how she would bring honor to her family and how she could help her younger brother and sister if she didn't study. She silently stood there and lowered her head with a guilty look on her face. Thinking of the slogan "A child can change a family's destiny," I, as a Muslim sister to them, hope they will have a brighter future.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how the policy of compulsory education as practice is understood, appropriated, and interpreted in a middle school in a Muslim Hui dominant region in Xihaigu, northwestern China. It laid out the contextual foundation for Chapters Five and Six to further explore how the implementation of the policy has changed the views of Muslim Hui parents toward secular schooling in the local community and how it has played a role in affecting rural Muslim Hui students' constructions and negotiations of filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities as they question, challenge, and embrace compulsory education in a rural secular school.

Although Xihaigu is distinctive as a rural, impoverished, and ethnic Muslim Hui dominant region, the policy of compulsory education is still implemented in a similar way to how education is carried out elsewhere in China through national discourses of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi*, or quality education to guide the operation of school activities. Through building infrastructure, routinized school life, and pedagogical practices,

Muslim Hui students are monitored and guided by teachers in the areas of academic engagement, performance, and behavior. Rather than following the policy's promise to achieve quality education and well-rounded development of individuals, the school is pushed into a test-oriented system as its quality is measured and determined by the numbers of students who are able to test into high schools. It is also the imagined future of prosperity constructed by teachers and the school that helps to motivate students to attend and learn in hopes for a better and more prosperous future.

Chapter Five

Why Send Children to Secular Schools?

Muslim Hui Parents' Changing Views of Compulsory Education

In the previous chapter, I discussed how compulsory education is understood, interpreted, and appropriated in a rural secular school in a community dominated by Muslim Hui. While *Zhiliang* (the quality of the educational system) and *Suzhi* (individual virtues) discourses guide the organization and operation of the middle school, compulsory education takes as its mission preparing students for future jobs, both by raising students' test scores and monitoring their 'non-*Suzhi*' behaviors. In this chapter, I further unpack how the initiation of compulsory education has gone beyond the school campus to impact the Muslim Hui community and has gradually changed local Muslim Huis' views of what they initially saw as unnecessary and unimportant compulsory education.

This chapter starts with a brief introduction of local Muslim Huis' previous views of compulsory education based on their own inability to attend schooling, followed by an examination of Muslim Hui parents' evolving understandings of compulsory education as they gain more exposure to it. Then, it investigates local Muslim Hui parents' views of the value of secular schooling and compulsory education as well as the attitudes these Muslim Hui parents hold toward compulsory education. I will include the following emic terms used by the local Muslim Hui to illustrate their understandings of compulsory education and secular schooling.

English Translations of Emic Terms in Chinese

Emic Terms in Chinese	English Meaning
Xiaku	to endure pain
Yiwu jiaoyu	compulsory education
Yiwugong	volunteer workers
Dandanche	a privately owned vehicle used by the local transportation service
Gongchandangde yige tiefanwan	an iron bowl of rice from the Communist Party
Ahong	Imam (Islamic clergyman)
Laonong	old farmers
Kang	a long rectangular platform made of bricks or clay and used for sleeping and resting. its interior cavity is fueled with cow dung and dried crop stalks and other plant waste to keep it warm in winter
Jiaxiao hezuo	family-school collaboration
Bushizi	can't read or write Chinese characters

Previous Views of Compulsory Education Among the Muslim Hui

In Chapter Four**,** I examined the local teachers' stigmatized perception of the Muslim Hui as lacking intellectual knowledge and being low in *Suzhi* because they had not considered secular schooling necessary and important in the past. I also pointed out that some Muslim Hui parents agreed with the teachers' perception of their low opinion of secular schooling in the past. In my introduction chapter**,** I reviewed the studies of education among the Muslim Hui, all of which reach a common conclusion: that Muslim Hui parents would not allow their children to attend secular schooling because they worry

about their children losing their ethnoreligious identity. Another common conclusion from these studies is that the opportunity cost is high for Muslim Hui parents sending children to secular schools, because they lose family labor. These studies provide additional cultural and economic explanations of why the Muslim Hui have regarded secular schooling as unnecessary and unimportant, which hindered their children's attendance in compulsory education in the past. However, these previous views seem to be outdated, and I found the opposite to be occurring. Currently, the local Muslim Hui have started to accept compulsory education, with some believing that compulsory education is necessary and important for changing their economic situation. This trend has gradually resulted in varying views of the value of secular schooling and compulsory education.

Muslim Hui Parents' Current Understanding of Compulsory Education

In Chapter Four, I examined teachers' interpretations of compulsory education, which reflect their concerns about *Zhiliang* education and their call for *Suzhi* to be included as a key component of education for *Zhiliang*. Different from these teachers' interpretations that emphasize the implementation of compulsory education in the school, Muslim parents understand compulsory education from the perspective of their educational values. Father Wang is a Muslim Hui farmer with five children, two sons and three daughters. Having lived in one of the local Muslim villages his entire life, he regrets that neither he nor his wife was literate, and that two sons and two daughters have never gone to school. Now he puts all his hope on Yamei, his youngest daughter. He doesn't want Yamei to follow in his footsteps: "I don't want Yamei to *Xiaku* (endure pain)

anymore." He wistfully said to me, "I was diagnosed with back injuries from farming, and now I constantly feel a headache." Suffering from chronic pain, he sees compulsory education as a pathway to escaping physical pain. He further expresses his hope for Yamei to become a skilled person and also with the ability to contribute to national development:

> Compulsory education takes nine years. It is hoped that children study well so that they can go to good high schools and colleges, and then they can contribute to the country. All parents wish their children can be fostered this way….The country can grow rapidly with more talented people.

Father Ma, another Muslim Hui farmer, is a well-traveled villager. He spent most of his 20s in Xinjing Province and other western provinces doing construction work. He has three sons. The oldest two completed a few years of schooling and have already migrated to the neighboring inner Mongolia and Shanxi provinces as laborers. The youngest one is still in school. Having seen the outside world more than many villagers I met and living in one of the remotest mountain villages, he highly praised the changes compulsory education had brought:

> the Communist Party supports rural students, providing poor children a chance to live better and a chance to progress…[Education] is to solve [the problems] of poor people. Education is to help poor people, and this is the best. For example, some dropouts don't have fathers and mothers. These children don't have food to eat at home. Their families eagerly send their children to school because the

> children can at least have food to eat at school. Before, if there is no compulsory education, these children have difficulty finding food to eat.

He valued compulsory education, not because it taught students intellectual and cultural knowledge, but because it served as the Party's social welfare service to help people in poverty meet the needs of subsistence. Without enough income to buy food and raise children, some local Muslim Hui turn to the schools, for the schools provide free meals for children who attend them.

Changing Views and Finding Possibilities

The perspectives of by Father Wang and Father Ma indicate that compulsory education is no longer neglected and rejected by the Muslim Hui in this region, but that its economic value in providing basic sustenance to students and other economic benefits are recognized by Muslim Hui parents. The increasing attention to compulsory education shows that the Muslim Hui are aware of the value of compulsory education as it is perceived as a pathway to future prosperity. However, besides considering the school a pathway to prosperity, Muslim Hui parents have very limited knowledge about schooling. Teachers complain that Muslim Hui parents don't know what a school is like, what a school does, what a school teaches, or what their children do at school, When teachers ask parents to collaboratively educate students, such as monitoring students' completion of homework on weekends, it becomes difficult. Similarly, some parents also sincerely speak of their lack of knowledge of secular schooling and their worries about being incapable of collaborating with teachers to co-educate their children. Compulsory education, in this sense, is interpreted by parents as more of a symbolic space where the

school operates; and what the school is doing remains unknown to them. “Compulsory education or *Yiwu jiaoyu* is understood similar to *Yiwugong* or volunteer workers in our community,” a teacher commented,

> Because *Yiwugong* provides free services, they think the purpose of *Yiwu jiaoyu* is also to offer free tuition, free food, and free room and board for their children. Therefore, they only expect their children to grow safely in the school, and it is not important for them to know whether the children learn or not.

This teacher’s point may be exaggerated, but he does mention the various purposes and goals of compulsory education that Muslim Hui parents embrace, whether it is to provide basic needs or to provide future opportunities through knowledge.

When I visited students’ homes, some parents were a little surprised to see me because they had never had a teacher from their children’s school visit their homes. Some parents told me that they had never visited the school except when they delivered bedding and daily supplies to their children at the beginning of the semester. Others said they had never talked to a teacher about their children and had no knowledge of what subjects were being taught at school. Some parents said that they only came to school when teachers phoned them to settle issues of their children being in trouble or involved in violent incidents. My experience with these parents was consistent with the teachers’ perspective of Muslim Hui parents as uncaring about what their children were doing in school in some ways; however, there are many more nuances regarding parents’ views of the value of compulsory education. Because the gated culture of compulsory education in the middle school is still strange to the Muslim Hui in the community, it leads to a variety

of expectations and views of Muslim Hui parents toward secular schooling. Below, I describe some of these expectations and views, illustrating the heterogeneity of Muslim Hui parents in understanding compulsory education in the region.

"I just don't want my children to bear the same pain I have gone through." One of the most common chronic afflictions I heard about from these Muslim Hui parents is lower back pain or lumbar strain. As farmers, they have to bend over for an extended period of time, especially during the harvest season. During one of my visits, the father of the household had just returned from the village hospital after receiving physical therapy, and he shook his head and told me that farming has killed his back and he couldn't sit for long anymore.

Like their mothers and fathers before them, working long hours on the farms is common for these local farmers. Crossing from one village to another on the back of my students' bikes, I was often stunned to see farmers in their headscarves bending over in the middle of 50-60 acres of land at the foot of a mountain to work under the scorching hot sun. The land stretches hundreds of miles, curves around the mountain, and converges with terraced fields on the back of the mountain ridges. It seems that they rarely had time to stand up and take a rest with so much farming work waiting for them. They told me that they usually only take a lunch break in the early afternoon and then return to the land to continue harvesting and cultivating until sunset.

Figure 8. Local farmers working long hours in the cornfields

Long hours of working in the fields damages farmers' bodies, particularly because they don't have the means to obtain equipment that could make their work easier or increase their productivity. I was not only saddened to see their dry and dark faces with numerous wrinkles even in their early 30s, but also in awe of their hands when I touched them. Those hands are calloused, full of cracks, and filled with dirt. At first, I thought that the dirt in the cracks could be washed off, but I later noticed that it would never be washed off, no matter how hard they tried. The dirt has been imprinted on their palms and become the permanent marks of the hardship they have experienced. When I mentioned the hands I had seen to the town mayor, he narrowed his eyebrows, nodded his head, and said,

> Now you truly understand what their life is like. My mother has the exact similar hands as you have seen. Those dirt marks are proof of their endurance of pain and harshness. People from other places couldn't imagine that. I don't have those marks anymore.

These farmers follow their ancestors' footsteps and inherit the traditional methods of taking care of the land and the families they need to sustain. Combating the harsh environment, such as drought, these farmers have learned to survive. Without many job opportunities in the region, farming is their primary lifeline. However, if they were educated, the opportunities for making a living would be expanded to local government entities, banks, and schools. The educated mayor exemplifies how education gave him an opportunity to have a non-farming job to sustain his family.

Seeing educated people free of physical pain and intensive labor, some Muslim parents want their children to have lives similar to those of the educated. Compulsory education becomes an opportunity for them to seek a different lifestyle for their children. They hope that their children will sit in an office one day without getting sunburned outside. For this reason, they work even longer hours to compensate for the loss of their children's labor, and they are willing to sacrifice everything to ensure that their children are on the path to a different lifestyle.

On a Friday afternoon, I took a *Dandanche*, a privately owned vehicle used by the local transportation service, with a girl to her house, located in a village on the border of Prosperity Town's jurisdiction. It was close to dark when we arrived. The girl directed me to the kitchen, and her mother immediately opened the curtain of the kitchen and

welcomed me. This was the smallest house I had seen in the local area. The kitchen was combined with the living space, and the bedroom was set up in a storage room surrounded by piles of bagged rice and flour. I could barely see the mother's face with only one lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. There wasn't a television, though the dish had been installed outside with the government's subsidy. Looking around the room, there was nothing decorative on the unpolished yellowish dirt walls. In the bedroom, there were no lightbulbs, and I had to use a flashlight to illuminate the room. The mother was preparing dinner for me, while the girl was helping cut vegetables and make noodles.

The mother told me that she was a single mother—the father had left them after their son was born 8 years ago. She hadn't traveled anywhere outside her village, but she has another daughter who works in a restaurant in Xiji County and makes some money to support the family. She barely lives on the crops she grows yearly in a field on a mountain nearby. She only gets 50 RMB a month from the government, and most of her family living necessities are donated by neighbors and relatives. The mother also told me that eating fruit can be a luxury; they cannot afford to do so very often. I asked her if she wanted to bring the girl back home to help her with farming or other household chores. She replied with no hesitation, "I want her to study in school, and I hope she can change the family situation. I just don't want my children to bear the same pain I have gone through." Facing such harsh economic conditions, her daughter's education provides hope for her. I recalled that the girl had once cried in front of me, saying that she was not studying well, but she didn't want to grow up to be like her mother and have a very difficult life raising children on her own.

"I just want my children to have an iron bowl of rice from the Communist Party". While some Muslim parents may not have a clear idea of the prospective jobs available for their soon-to-be educated children, like the family above, others know that a stable government job is what their children's future should rely on. Having travelled to places outside Xihaigu, these Muslim parents have higher expectations of their children and conclude that education will bring an "iron bowl of rice" powered with higher social status from the Communist Party (共产党的铁饭碗 *Gongchandangde yige tiefanwan*) to their children. The "iron bowl of rice" is a job that is not only stable but high paying, which is believed to be the magic that can change families' and communities' economic situations.

Living in the mountainous regions of Prosperity Town and the town nearby, these Muslim Hui parents see no local job opportunities besides farming, sedentary pastoralism, or serving as *Ahongs* in the mosques. They understand that children have to go through compulsory education and eventually test into colleges to qualify for non-agriculture jobs. They also believe that entering the school gate could lead to a prosperous life that their communities are never going to be able to provide their children on their own. As some of them mentioned, the school holds the hope of these Muslim Hui parents who dream about the future development of their children and growing prosperity for their families and communities. They perceive that the school is connected to an outside world where opportunities are abundant and a better life is waiting, and they believe the school consists of qualified teachers whom they trust hold the power of to transform their children and whom their children listen to when are planning for their

futures. They are also convinced that only government jobs will empower their children to help their relatives in their home communities to flourish, as they have seen from other Muslims who received government jobs upon graduation.

Figure 9. A typical mountainous village nested in a terraced landscape with an elementary school at the far side by the foot of mountain

Shaomin is a Muslim boy living in one of the most remote mountainous regions in the area. Going home on weekends takes him as long as two hours with both a ride in a van and a walk through the mountain ridges. When it is raining or snowing, he is not able to go to school because the dirt road leading to his house is too muddy and slippery. When I visited his house, it took me about an hour to walk from the paved concrete road

to his house. I left school with him at around 4:30 p.m., but by the time we reached his village, it was after 7:00 p.m. Shaomin was telling me on the way that his relatives have lived in this village for generations, and one of his uncles is the head of the village, which is situated in the valley. After the sun had set, it was quite difficult to find our way. Following Shaomin's lead and after making a few turns on the dirt road, we finally arrived at his house. Shaomin's father was sitting on the brick-piled *Kang* when we entered the kitchen. A very warm welcome from his family made my visit pleasant while I was trying to understand the conversation in the local dialect. Looking around, a dim light hung high up in the ceiling, barely making the kitchen visible. A coal stove was fired up with an iron chimney set up for venting the smoke. A wooden table and a big cooking wok were placed right by the stove, making it a convenient place for women to prepare meals. In this simply decorated room, a map of China and pictures of beautiful scenery were posted, covering some of the unpainted dirt walls. The father told me that he would like to visit some of the places in those pictures, but he hadn't had the chance to do so.

I sat down on the *Kang* as Shaomin's parents insisted, and I started chatting with this talkative father. "What is your hope for Shaomin?" I asked outright. The father kept saying, "I don't ask for more, I just want him to study hard and eat a bowl of rice from the Communist Party." He continued, "

> We are illiterate and couldn't afford schooling before. His two older brothers are already out doing construction work. Now the Communist party pays for

> education, we just hope he [Shaomin] can bring honor to the village and become the first college graduate here.

The Muslim Hui in the region have been in poverty for many years, and now they see the school as a pathway to future prosperity. Without education, changing the current economic situation seems impossible. “You don’t know that we are still better off [than some others living in the area], and there are many other Muslims living over the other side of this mountain. Only motorcycles can reach that far,” the father expressed his helplessness. “We don’t know anything, and we are just *Laonong* (old farmers). He [his son] doesn’t listen to me, but he listens to his teachers.”

When it was near dark, the father excused himself for *Isha*, the last prayer of the day, heading to the mosque in the village, a five-minute walk from the house. Shaomin was already helping his mother with dinner and setting up the table, putting a small wooden stool on the *Kang*. The mother had kept quiet the whole time while I was chatting with the father, but now she smiled at me and spoke to me in dialect. Later, Shaomin told me that his mother didn’t know how to speak Mandarin and had hardly spoken to any strangers like me before. However, a sincere smile on her face said it all. Shaomin is their hope, and I, as his teacher, ignited up their hope that day.

“If you don’t study, you can’t even use a computer when you do labor work.”

Compared to the Muslim Hui parents who have high expectations of their children, other Muslim Hui parents don’t expect to see such great success, including economic returns, from their children as a result of compulsory schooling. They simply wish for their children to be literate enough and have sufficient technical skills so that they can meet the

new requirements for migrant workers, such as being able to read, write, calculate, and survive in city. To them, education is not a panacea to immediately solve families' financial difficulties, but it is an experience that equips their children with the knowledge needed to tackle new challenges they will face in the labor force. They understand that if their children are not literate, they will not be competitive in the labor market and will not even have a chance to find work in the city. These parents realize that the benchmark for hiring laborers has been raised by the overall increasing levels of education in Chinese society, and their children have to study and meet these higher job requirements.

Jiayu is a student from a relatively poor family. His father has passed away, and his mother has remarried. Having been raised by his grandmother, he struggles with schooling but tries hard to stay positive and study in hope of getting a job and then taking care of his grandmother. When I asked him how important was to his grandmother that he be educated, he said, "My grandmother told me to study well. She said if you don't study, you can't even use a computer when you work." I was a little surprised that his grandmother, who had never left the community in her life, nonetheless recognized the importance of education and explained this in her own way to her grandson.

On a Saturday morning, I visited another student, Bai, and his family, in another village. His aunt also happened to be in the village, visiting from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. She is a Muslim and used to live in this community, but she migrated to Xinjiang 20 years ago and has been working there since. While I was chatting with her about children going to school, she said that her daughter had come back to Ningxia and now studies at a top high school. She then said to me that she had to ensure

that her daughter was attending a good school and becoming educated. “I can’t read and write, but it was okay for me to find a job 20 years ago. It is not the case anymore. Because I can’t read and write, finding any job is impossible now.” Perhaps because of her own experience, she kept talking about the importance of education. Her experience indicates that even if students only want to be migrant workers without further ambitions, they still have to finish compulsory education. The middle school diploma can put them in a much better position to qualify for certain work. This reality has altered Muslim Hui parents’ previous views that their children could find jobs and bring money back to their families even without a formal education. Some other parents sadly told me that they used to believe that as long as they had strong willpower to endure pain and hardship, they would find jobs that urban people wouldn’t want to touch. Now, they see the competition for jobs is not about who can endure pain and hardship but rather who is more educated.

Listening to these stories was always heartbreaking for me. I was sad to see that rapid national economic development hasn’t significantly improved the lives of the Muslim Hui in this region but instead has led, in some ways, to a more difficult life for them. Finding jobs and earning money in the city and then financially support a family living in the rural area wasn’t difficult before, but it becomes unprecedentedly challenging with the development of the economy and rising requirements for job seekers. Job-seekers from rural areas have to compete with educated people, who are preferred by urban employers.

"It is so embarrassing to be illiterate." When education is believed by other Muslims to be fundamental to changing their destinies, eliminating poverty, qualifying them for lucrative jobs in the city, some Muslims perceive the value of education as simply helping them survive in the city. To this line of thought, children have to attend school to learn cultural knowledge—mainly, being able to read and understand Chinese characters.

There was a story I heard a few times from Muslim parents in different villages that illustrates how they view illiteracy to be embarrassing. A local Muslim woman was visiting her son in the city. One day, she wanted to go to a public restroom, but she couldn't read the Chinese characters for "男"and "女" ("Men" and "Women") painted on the walls of the restroom. When she couldn't hold it any more, she just walked into one and found that she had gone into the wrong one. When sharing this story with me, older Muslim Hui people expressed their regret about neglecting their own education in the past, saying, "It is so embarrassing to be illiterate." The point of the story is that relieving oneself is not an issue in their community where reading is not necessary to perform such a basic function, but it becomes an issue they encounter in the city. Surviving in the city requires an education, at least basic literacy and numeracy, and they believe that obtaining an education is a must if their children travel to cities or eventually migrate to work in them. A Muslim mother emphasized this point when she referred to the embarrassed woman above, "I would not be like that woman, and my children would know how to read and help me get through."

"If he can study, I will let him study. If he can't, I will take him home." For some Muslim Hui living in the mountainous regions of the community, compulsory education is perceived as the sole opportunity for their children to access cities, jobs, and future prosperity since no other opportunities are available, and the economic benefits of schooling are high. However, for other Muslim Hui from relatively affluent families residing in the plain regions of the community, compulsory education is perceived as a pathway to find alternatives to existing job opportunities already available to their children, such as being local government officials and teachers. These parents have the view that it is great if their children are able to study well and go to high school, but if they can't, there are still opportunities for them. To them, sending children to school is not going to drastically change their family's economic situation, for better or worse. They don't foresee that learning in school will make a big difference in their children's individual lives for now or for the future. In the end, they expect their children to inherit family businesses, emigrate to the cities for jobs, study to be *Ahongs*, or marry other Muslim Hui to start families nearby. The community is where they live and thrive. They believe that learning knowledge in the school with a hope for future prosperity doesn't guarantee jobs. "College graduates are still struggling with finding jobs, and we make more than them even without education," these parents argue, challenging the current education system. Although the potential economic benefits of schooling are not necessarily an incentive for this type of Muslim family to send their children to school, they do view compulsory education as a potential avenue to prosperity if their children are able to study well.

Rende is from a better-off family with his father running a business collecting and selling sheepskins. His two brothers own a truck company, running a transporting business between Ningxia and neighboring provinces. One of his older sisters just passed the Government Civil Service Exam and was about to start working for the local government, while another older sister works for a company in a nearby county. In the village, the two-story house in his family's yard is quite eye-catching. Rende told me that he had helped his father with the family business since he was little, and he wanted to continue the business for his father since it already makes good money. When I walked into his house, I saw sheepskins piled up in front of the house, ready to be sold to leather factories. His father was very proud to tell me that his family business had gone well enough to free him from some farming work. "He can't study, huh? He just can't study," the father said to me with a sincere big smile on his face right after I started chatting with him about Rende's performance in the school. "He is good at doing physical work at home though, but he just doesn't like to study," the father continued. "His sisters were good at studying, but I don't have high hopes for him." While I kept telling him that Rende was doing fine in the school, the father seemed to not agree with me. He smiled away, stood up from the sofa, and then headed out, leaving me with the mother.

Rende's mother had the opposite opinion regarding her son's education. She insisted that I needed to watch Rende's performance and wanted me to correct his bad behaviors at school. The mother believed that if Rende could receive the same education as his sisters, he could have a better life. "We are old, we are afraid, you know, we need to pray," the mother left me with such words before she headed to her bedroom. It is the

five prayers that comfort them and give them the power to survive life every day, though she was worried so much about her son's education. However, her hope turned out to be in vain. A few weeks before the fall semester ended, Rende told me that his father wanted him to drop out of school since he had already failed a few exams in 8th grade and he himself didn't think he could make it into any high schools. He eventually dropped out after 8th grade and started to follow his father in the family business.

"I don't know anything about school. If she wants to continue, I will let her." Unlike boys from better-off families in the local community who have multiple opportunities even without sufficient education, girls have fewer, among which marriage is a top option waiting for them. To parents, finding financially stable Muslim Hui husbands for girls is more important than ensuring their education. If a girl is too young to be married after she drops out, she will be held at home for a year or so helping with farming and then have a marriage arranged. Although more and more Muslim parents are sending their girls to school in the belief that girls are more mature and obedient, their choice still relies more on their girls' choice to stay in or to leave school.

During my visit to a student's house in a village, I happened to meet the student's friend who had already dropped out after 6th grade. Since I hadn't met a student like this, her presence piqued my curiosity. Though she didn't know who I was, she knew from her friend that I was a professor visiting the school. Then, she asked me to download a picture off her cell phone for her with the assumption that I knew everything. When she walked into the house, she was very shy and asked me softly if she could get my contact information. I asked her if she was in school, and she replied, "I couldn't do it anymore, I

just couldn't learn." She murmured with guilt on her face. It seemed that she felt fine about leaving school and going back to her familiar farming life. Later, I had the opportunity to chat with her mother and asked her what she thought of her daughter dropping out of school. The mother said, "I don't know anything about school. If she wants to, I will let her."

A few weeks later, I revisited the same household and saw the girl riding a scooter crossing the road. I waved at her, and she stopped and smiled at me. "What are you doing?" I asked her. "I am going to the store to pick up some stuff for my mom," she replied in dialect. "Do you regret not going to school?" I asked. "No, until now, I am not regretting not going to school." She still had that smile on her face as she continued, "Farming work is kind of tiring, but my mom needs my help." Later, I heard from my student that this girl was already arranged to marry a boy in the same village. Although this girl's dropping out was on her own choice, the student and friend of this girl had a different opinion:

> Parents here do not care about students' going to school. You see, they marry such young girls off. I feel so bad, and I think marriage should wait till girls are at least 21 years old. In the parents' view, it seems that girls who are old would not be accepted by boys. When other Hui parents come to ask for marriages, they would give their girls away. If the girl disagrees, the parents would force her into marriage.

My student was lucky because she has other older and male siblings to financially support her family, and her parents were open and supportive of her education. However,

for large Muslim families in the village with few male laborers at home, if their girl children could not do well in school, it is probably better to take them back and have them learn farming and other life skills. Learning in school without a promising future seems too risky for these Muslim families.

Hong, another Muslim girl, dropped out of school after the fall semester. Different from many other 8th graders in the class, she was well dressed, owning fancier school supplies, knowing all the popular songs, and was one of the town girls who didn't have to live on campus on weekdays but went home daily for lunch and dinner. Her family owned a business in the town. Because she had to repeat 8th grade, she is older than most of the students in her class. When I returned to the school site after the winter break, my students told me that her parents had already arranged for her to marry another Muslim boy in the community. Since dropping out, she works in her family-owned grocery store and has changed to be a "social" person who is no longer in school. Some of her former classmates said to me, "We felt she is so different from us now; she looks a lot older than us." Although Hong ended up dropping out of the school, she is probably in a better position to run the family business now than if she had not had any education, since at least she learned basic literacy and numeracy through schooling to help with the operation of the business. The economic benefits of schooling may not bring prosperity to her as an individual, but they contribute to the improvement of her family economic situation.

The school gate divided two worlds for these Muslim parents, an ideal and unfamiliar world in the school and a realistic and familiar world in the community.

Because these Muslim parents lacked knowledge of secular schooling and compulsory education, some idealized compulsory education as an essential pathway to change their children's, families' and the community's destinies, while others questioned compulsory education's claim to guarantee jobs for their children in the future. Nevertheless, most parents wanted to send their children to school, whether wholeheartedly or with reservations. Compulsory education at least holds some perceived economic benefits, and it is an opportunity provided free by the government to expand students' choices of life. Below, I want to further investigate Muslim parents' attitudes toward the implementation of compulsory education in addition to their views of education. In this way, I will illustrate the discrepancies between Muslim parents' changing views of education and how they actually participate in school activities.

"Education is free." Earlier in this chapter I described Father Ma's view of secular schooling and compulsory education as a social welfare service provided by the government to give local families a life of subsistence. His view indicates that the "free" aspect of education actually plays a role in helping certain families and their children meet basic survival needs, despite the unlikelihood of it securing jobs for some children who will never make to high school. In the poverty-stricken Xihaigu region, free meals for schoolchildren are very attractive to some Muslim parents, and the "free" aspect becomes how Muslim parents interpret the school and secular schooling. A local teacher shared his frustrations with this type of Muslim parent who sends his children to the school only for the purpose of getting free meals for the children: "They don't care about schooling, and they don't even let us corporally punish their children. How can students

learn?" During my visits to students' homes, I also sensed such Muslim parents' proclivity for "free" food over learning intellectual knowledge. When I asked them what they know about compulsory education and what they liked about the school, they always brought up the "free" meals provided for their children. Even if they doubt their children's abilities to learn and academically perform well in the school, they often think that at least their children would no longer suffer from hunger and could grow healthily.

In addition, some Muslim parents believe that education is the sole responsibility of the school and their responsibility is to send children to the school. An 8th grade head teacher told me,

> If I don't make a phone call to each individual parent and ask he/she to come to school for a parents meeting, there would be nobody here. Sometime even when I make phone calls, some parents tell me that they are too busy to come to the meeting.

One afternoon in the spring semester, I was sitting in the gatehouse at the school entrance, chatting with some other teachers. A student came in and asked for permission to use the telephone to call his parents. While he was on the phone talking to his parents, I overheard the conversation. He wanted his parents to come to a meeting for his grade, which was to start in half an hour. After a few minutes of persuading and arguing, he yelled at his parents, "If you don't come, I don't want to study anymore," and then he hang up the phone and left the gatehouse in anger. Soon after him, another student came into the gatehouse and also asked to use the telephone to call his father, and I overheard similar words of disappointment: "Everyone else's parents are here, why won't you

come?" It may be embarrassing for this student to sit in the meeting by himself, unaccompanied by his parents, but these two incidents demonstrate that some Muslim parents don't take their children's education seriously and they leave it to the school to educate their children. It also indicates that Muslim parents want their children to go to school, but they don't "care" enough for their children to stay there.

The teachers I was chatting with in the gatehouse when these two incidents occurred all felt the same way after seeing what happened in the gatehouse. They expressed to me how hard it was to hold a parent meeting at the school. When parents are busy with their own work, they kindly refuse to come to school for meetings; instead, they ask head teachers to tell them what they should do over the phone. In some cases, parents live far away and don't have the transportation to come to school for meetings at a certain time; in other cases, parents are out of town doing physical labor and can't come back for meetings. Therefore, having all parents of the students in one class gather together and engage discussions of their children's education seems impossible. When I walked into the parent meeting I was invited to, I noticed that quite a few students were sitting in the back of the classroom without their parents. The meeting didn't start until half an hour later than the scheduled time because not many parents showed up on time, which may be why the school has been advocating for *Jiaxiao hezuo* or family-school collaboration. As local teachers want parents to understand, compulsory education is not only provided free for removing the financial burdens of poor Muslim families, but it also facilitates students' learning and growing intellectually and culturally in the school.

"We are just farmers, and we *Bushizi.*" Although many Muslim parents force their children to complete compulsory education in hope of a better future, and they are willing to help the school ensure their children's daily attendance, they are still incapable of taking part in school activities and they leave teaching and learning completely to teachers and their children. This type of parent views education as important and critical to their children's future, but they are constrained by limited knowledge of secular schooling and compulsory education. They are familiar with the community they live in, but when they come to the school, they feel unmoored. Therefore, even though they have hopes for economic returns to education, these hopes are dependent on the teachers and the academic records their children create.

Since I was the assistant to the head teacher, I was invited to sit in a parent meeting of an 8th grade class. During the meeting, the Vice Principal, the head teacher, five subject teachers, and I were present. I was treated as one of the subject teachers to answer parents' questions in the meeting. The head teacher was the organizer and main speaker at the meeting, and all teachers were given a few minutes to talk about the academic performance of this particular class. There was a major theme I heard throughout the meeting: home-school collaboration. All teachers have asked parents to take some responsibility off the school and educate their children intellectually and morally. Though teachers were excited to encourage parents to collaborate by giving them a long list of good reasons to do so, many parents were visibly confused. At the end of the meeting, the head teacher kindly asked parents to inquire about their children's academic performance with the subject teachers. Quite a few parents had already left the

room, and the remaining parents came up to the front table and queued up to see the subject teachers. I stood up and smiled at them. Three mothers walked up to me and said the exact question in dialect, “I don’t know anything—how can I monitor my children in the school?” They were not inquiring about their children’s academic performance with me as I expected, but rather expressing their helplessness about what the school was asking them to do, such as watching their children do homework, signing the homework book before their children turn it in, ensuring that their children to study required subjects at home, and regularly checking scores and school performance. “We are just farmers, and we *Bushizi* (can’t read and write Chinese characters).” A mother shrugged, “We don’t exactly know what they do. They just write something on the paper.” Looking at their faces, I stuttered and didn’t know what to tell them about their children’s performance. They are pushed into an educational system that expects them to support their children’s learning, but they are hardly familiar with the idea of schooling. The gated culture will probably remain only superficially known to the community members unless they go through the system to learn, internalize, and externalize the culture.

Conclusion

This chapter presented changing views of Muslim Hui parents of secular schooling and discusses the reasons why Muslim Hui parents decide to send their children to school. Rather than perceiving compulsory education as unimportant and unnecessary as they believed historically, Muslim Hui parents currently value the various economic benefits of secular schooling, including providing free meals, changing Muslim families’ and the communities’ economic situations, preparing Muslim Hui children with

the skills needed to meet the higher requirements of jobs in the cities, improving literacy to expand job opportunities, and equipping some children from better-off families with more skills to run family businesses. However, due to limited knowledge of secular schooling, the majority of Muslim Hui parents feel helpless and desperate when asked to collaborate with the school to educate their children. To a certain extent, the “free” component of compulsory education is what motivates some Muslim Hui parents to send their children to school and gives these students an opportunity they wouldn’t otherwise have.

Chapter Six

Negotiating Schooling:

Questioning, Challenging, and Believing in Compulsory Education

In Chapter Four, I examined two cultures: the Muslim Hui culture in the local community and the gated culture of compulsory education at Prosperity Middle School. By presenting these two different cultures, I discussed how the culture of compulsory education is understood, interpreted, and appropriated in this Muslim Hui dominated region, in which two prevailing education discourses, *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi*, guide school life and construct the belief that compulsory education leads to prosperity and will improve the *Suzhi* of Muslim Hui students in the region. In Chapter Five, I investigated how the introduction of secular schooling and compulsory education has gradually changed local Muslim Huis' views of education, in heterogeneous ways. By unpacking the expectations of Muslim Hui parents about their children's learning and achievement in schooling, I showed: how the anticipated economic benefits of free schooling has incentivized parents to send their children to school, and the challenges and difficulties in bridging the rift between the unfamiliar culture of compulsory education and the familiar Islamic culture of the community.

In this chapter, I continue to explore how compulsory education is being questioned, challenged, and embraced by Muslim Hui students in this region as a path to prosperity as they actively participate in constructing and negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities in the school. They must cope with not only their teachers' expectations of a quality education but also their parents' changing views of and attitudes

toward secular schooling. Entering the school gate, Muslim Hui students develop strategies to satisfy both demands while struggling to create a life path of their own that is significantly influenced by the community's Muslim Hui culture. They carry on internal dialogues with their ancestral traditions and external conversations with the sociopolitical contexts defined by the state, through which they construct and negotiate their identities in the community and the school (Gladney, 2004b).

This chapter starts with an examination of Muslim Hui students' understandings of filiality, rurality, ethnoreligiosity, and the secular school. It then investigates three types of major contestations evident at Prosperity Middle School in relation to filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities. Before discussing these negotiations of multiple identities, however, I introduce seven participants in my study who exemplify how compulsory education is questioned, challenged, and believed as they frequently negotiate multiple identities. In the last section, I further examine three groups of Muslim Hui students, whom I have classified as resisters, strugglers, and straddlers, and the strategies they choose to adopt in questioning, challenging, and utilizing compulsory education while constructing a new self in the school and beyond. I also include a list of emic terms used by these Muslim Hui students.

English Translations of Emic Terms in Chinese

Emic Terms in Chinese	English Meaning
Suzhi	quality of individuals
Zhiliang	quality of the educational system
Yanglao	taking care of parents when they are old
Huanle	happiness

Wuyouwulv	Worry-free
Niansuier	pray
Manla	A student of an Imam
Ahong	An Imam or Islamic clergyman
Nianjing	Read scriptures
Wuchang	death
Qingzhen	halal
Benbenche	smaller trucks used to transport crops
Dandanche	a privately owned vehicle used by the local transportation service
Jiangzhuang	award certificates
Kang	a long rectangle platform made of bricks or clays and used for sleeping and resting, and its interior cavity is fueled with cow waste and dried crops' stalks and residues to keep it warm in winter
Baodao	a phrase in Chinese to inform teachers of a student's arrival, literally translated as "reporting my arrival"

Understanding Filiality, Rurality, Ethnoreligiosity, and the Secular School

Filiality. Filiality is often used to refer to filial piety, the virtue of respecting one's parents and ancestors from Confucian philosophy. As the foundation of Confucianism and supreme principle of human life, this virtue guides family relations as a core and fundamental component of social structures, in which individuals cultivate themselves and develop love of all human beings (Liu, 2003). For the Muslim Hui in China, this virtue is also practiced after it was adopted and reinterpreted by early Muslim scholars who use Islamic teachings to explain Confucianism (Liu, 1988). According to

Ma (2008), while Islamic prayers are viewed by Muslim Hui as one of the most important pillars of faith, filiality is also valued as just as important as prayers. While they are praying, the Muslim Hui may refuse to be interrupted at any time except when they are called by their parents. As sons and daughters, if they do not hold filial piety, they believe their prayers will be in vain.

While Muslim Hui students are expected to observe filial piety, education is viewed as a path Muslim Hui students may take to meet this expectation, especially in terms of its aspect of taking care of parents and families. During my interviews, I asked students what their aspirations are and what kind of life they picture themselves having if they obtain education, and most responses I received pointed toward fulfilling filial piety. *Yanglao*, or taking care of parents when they are old, is what their ideals focus on. It is also notable that there are students who feel less responsible for taking care of their parents, such as the younger siblings of a family or students from better-off families.

Linyuan, a talkative girl and top performing Muslim Hui student in her class, told me that she wanted to be a journalist or a TV anchor in a big city so that she could establish a family in the city and bring her parents with her. Jiayu also thinks buying a house is important after receiving a college degree and finding a good job in the city because he would be able to financially support his grandmother and provide her a comfortable place to spend rest of her life. Wenyan has a similar dream of buying a house for her parents, but she also wants to find good jobs for her parents as well as share her salary with her siblings. She believes that this way, she could lift the family out of poverty. Ma Li is from a poorer family, and she told me regretfully that she couldn’t buy

her mother a cell phone she needed. But Ma Li wants to try her best to fulfill her mother's dream, giving her a nice life in a big house where she would not suffer from fatigue any more. She said, "I want to change my family and my destiny. If I don't go to school, I can't do this and can't give my parents a good life. Whatever life I have, my parents should have a better one." Ma Lan and Ma Mingyan, the oldest daughters in their families, want to lessen the burdens of their parents by finding good jobs to support their siblings to go to school. Xieling further said that she would give all her monthly salary to her parents if she could become a teacher, because she would not be who she is without her parents' help. In addition to fulfilling filial piety, Hanxuan hopes that he could provide financial aid to poor students in the region if he could make a lot of money from his own business. Anlin also wishes that he could ideally lead a group of farmers in his village to look for better opportunities to develop in addition to farming.

These words of determination to create a better life for their parents, their siblings, and their community demonstrate how filial piety guides Muslim Hui students' choice of schooling and life in the community and beyond. To a certain extent, fulfilling filial piety can be stressful for some students, because they have to exhibit their identity as good sons/daughters with the potential to change their families' economic situation to their parents even when they struggle with and may fail schooling.

Rurality. Rurality is often discussed in comparison with urbanity. As I discussed in Chapter Four, some local teachers stigmatize the rural Muslim Hui as lacking intellectual knowledge and being low in *Suzhi*. The terms "uncivilized" and "backward" are also used to refer to Muslim Hui, especially for those who are uneducated or

undereducated. With Xihaigu being one of the poorest rural regions in Northwestern China, poverty is often mentioned in discussions of the economic situation in the area. However, Muslim Hui students' understandings of rurality are divergent, and some are even the opposite of the general perceptions of rurality I described above.

Kai defines rurality in comparison with urbanity, and he understands the backwardness in the community in terms of its economic conditions and the local people's level of education. Having traveled elsewhere in China, he sees the contrasts between his hometown and cities:

> I feel that we are backward here, such as in the areas of transportation, culture, technology, and industry.…We still have mountainous regions and unpaved dirt roads here, and majority of people here are illiterate. I have traveled to Sichuan and Xingjiang with my dad, and there are a lot of people there. Buildings are tall, roads are wide, and cars are countless.

Yefang, a girl from a mountainous village, also agrees that rurality is associated with poverty. On the day of my visit to her house, she came down from a mountain trail to pick me up. Her village is hidden in a valley surrounded by layers of mountains. Without her directing me, I could easily have gotten lost. While we walked back to her house on the dirt road, she told me that the dirt road becomes un-navigable if it rains or snows. She also told me that the mosque in her village was so decrepit and she felt sad about it. "The roof of the prayer hall almost fell off," she whispered in her soft voice, "but they will build another one next year." Yefang's understanding of rurality refers to lack of material goods and poor material conditions.

Shaomin further explains the relationship between poverty and *Suzhi* in the community. Having seen the inconsistent economic development across different villages, he names low *Suzhi* as an underlying cause of poverty in some villages:

> I think we are still economically backward, and we can't do anything about it….Farmers' *Suzhi* is not very high. For example, people only help those who are from their villages and don't help people from other villages.

For Shaomin, low *Suzhi* manifests itself in the practice of nepotism or favoring people with familial ties and within the same kinship group, which keeps the local economy stagnant. His opinion reflects one of the criticisms of filial piety noted by scholars. For instance, as Francis L. K. Hsu (1998) points out, "the ethic of filial piety...gave Chinese a high degree of kinship solidarity but prevented them from strong and enduring alliances outside of it" (p. 63). These students' understandings of rurality illustrate backwardness as a characteristic of the rural location and its poverty, and less of the people themselves. It contrasts with teachers' views, which attributed backwardness to Muslim Hui's *Suzhi* and their uncivilized behaviors.

Yamei, on the other hand, doesn't think the economic conditions in the community are poor. Raised in a family that supports education, she has seen her female friends from elementary school dropout or be withdrawn from school by their parents. Therefore, she defines backwardness in relation to the mentality of the local Muslim Hui people and compares their mentality with the Han's in ways of raising girls, which corresponds to the teachers' perception of Muslim Hui being backward in their behavior:

> Their mentality is relatively backward, not as good as the Han's.…They don't like girls sometimes to wear certain kinds of clothes, and they want girls to wear headscarves.…They marry their girls off to other families at 15 or 16 years old, and this is really bad.

She believes that the Muslim Hui prioritize marriage over education, which is bad for Muslim girls. For her, this kind of tradition is backward and needs to be changed. Although her father doesn't seem to be strict about how she dresses, she does think dressing in the traditional Islamic way is a form of backwardness. Wenyan also defines backwardness in terms of the Muslim Hui's perception of gender relations. She thinks that it is a feudal mentality that parents do not allow girls to speak to boys. Such mentality is backward and not aligned with the modern ideas she has in mind.

Kai, Yefang, Shaomin, Yamei, and Wenyan share similar understandings of rurality in the community, as discussed above. In some cases, backwardness relates to the poor living conditions in the community; in other cases, backwardness relates to the Muslim Hui mentality and their lack of intellectual knowledge. However, their understandings demonstrate additional aspects of rurality, such as the Muslim Hui's backward mentality in early marriage, gender relations, and nepotism and kinship solidarity. Moreover, I also discovered other understandings of rurality, opposite to the general perceptions. Rende is from a better-off family with members running the family business. He has spent most of his time in his village and nearby villages. Disagreeing with other people's stereotypes of rurality, he says, "The rural area is pretty good now.

People say that we are backward because they think we don't have money. But I think the rural area is developing quite well now."

Like Rende, Tianhua also denies the typical saying that Xihaigu is backward because it is underdeveloped. In my interview with her, she argued, "China is a developing country that is under development, but we never call it backward. So Xihaigu is not backward." Both Rende and Tianhua express a sense of pride in their understanding of rurality, which diverges from the general perceptions. The concept of backwardness seems have changed in their minds, as their families are becoming relatively affluent.

Ethnoreligiosity. The term ethnoreligiosity was introduced by Gladney (1991) to refer to the Muslim Hui in the Northwestern China. Because the Muslim Hui often refer to their Hui ethnic identity in terms of an Islamic tradition inherited from their ancestors, it is more appropriate to use ethnoreligiosity to connote these inseparable identities as understood by the Muslim Hui. In my examination of the local Muslim culture in Chapter Four, I described the routinely practiced Islamic rituals, a central component of the religiosity of ethnic Hui. Therefore, the Muslim Hui in Xihaigu live by Islamic traditions and construct their world and culture around Islamic doctrines. When I was interviewing Muslim Hui students about their understandings of the differences between Hui and Han, they often alluded to Islamic beliefs and dietary restrictions as key indicators of "Huiness," and other differences between themselves and Han students seem much less obvious.

In Ma Li's response to my question about these differences between Hui and Han, she said, "I don't think there are any differences. We are all classmates, and nothing is different. The crucial difference is our belief. We believe in Islam." Tianhua gave me the same answer after pondering my question for a few seconds, "We have different beliefs, but our characters and goals are the same." Shaomin interestingly said that the Han believe in God and the Hui believe in Allah to show me how the Hui and Han can be distinguished. Xiuqing, among a few Han students in the school, agreed with the others. She said, "The difference is that Hui and Han have different beliefs and diets. Hui pray, and we don't pray." These statements suggest that their ethnic Hui identity is religious-centric, and their understandings of their ethnoreligiosity are based on their adherence to Islam and Islamic doctrines. It was interesting for me to notice that they think that Han people also have a belief, whether Christianity or something else.

One of the teachers I interviewed told me that the Muslim Hui students in the community are not strongly conscious of their ethnicity and their status as an ethnic minority, but they know that they are Hui and believe in Islam. However, this teacher also pointed out that students are aware of being preferentially treated by the government in terms of being given extra points for admission to high schools and colleges. Because of these preferential treatments, some of these Muslim Hui students feel privileged and superior to their Han counterparts and often express their pride in being Muslim Hui in the community.

Although Islam permeates everyday life in the community for the Muslim Hui, not all Muslim Hui students have a strong ethnoreligious identity. As Kai said to me:

> I only go to the mosque to learn Koranic scripts for one or two days during winter breaks, then I try all kinds of excuses not to go. I will be fine with not having Halal restaurants if I go to cities where the majority Han live.

To him, ethnoreligiosity is probably habitual and situational. He goes to the mosque to learn Koranic scripts as a habit, but he will probably not go to the mosque after moving to a different living environment. A few students also criticized their grandparents as being un-modern and putting restrictions on their clothing, which resonates with Yamei's understanding of rurality—i.e.,that the Muslim Hui's mentality is backward. Connecting ethnoreligiosity with rurality shows that some Muslim Hui youth have challenged these "backward" Islamic practices with modern ideas.

The secular school. The secular school is where local Muslim Hui students spend most of their time and a site in which they question, challenge, and believe in compulsory education while negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities and constructing a life path of their own. In Chapter Four, I examined the perceptions of local teachers in understanding the secular school as providing a *Zhiliang* education as well as constructing an imagined future for Muslim Hui students. In Chapter Five, I unpacked local Muslim Huis' changing views of secular schooling, from unnecessary and unimportant to potentially economically beneficial, leading to poverty alleviation and future prosperity, though some are wholeheartedly with hope and others have reservations. However, Muslim Hui students' understanding of the secular school is much more "vibrant" than both teachers' and parents'. Both teachers and parents see the secular school as a site with a mission and an expectation of preparing students and

children to achieve prosperity and change families' destinies. However, Muslim Hui students understand it as a place of *Huanle* and *Wuyouwulv*, or a place of happiness and being worry-free, as well as a place of *Luan* or chaos. In this chapter, I reveal how Muslim Hui students understand the secular school, which provides a contextual background for examinations of their identity negotiations in the following sections.

During the first class meeting I conducted, the students were very curious about me and wanted to share their experience at the school with me. After each of them introduced themselves with names, likes, and dislikes, I posed a question: What do you do at school? The answers popped up across the classroom. Shaomin shouted out the answer first, "We are like a family, and we need to help each other and live in a harmonious life here." "Yeah, family," I wrote down a big Chinese character for family 家 in the center of the blackboard, "It is important to think of ourselves are a big family," I emphasized to the whole class. Then other students continued shouting out answers: to learn knowledge, to play, to smoke, to fight, to talk about love, to be corporally punished, to make friends, to sleep, to spend money, to play basketball, to eat, and to sing. If the meeting time hadn't ended, this list could have grown even more. I eventually stopped them while they were still laughing at each other about the list they had given me. The giggles, chuckles, and laughter could be heard up and down and one after another. They probably never thought I would take their words seriously and put them on the blackboard. Apparently, their teachers hadn't allowed them to be so carefree to talk about the life on campus, and they were taking advantage of the chance I gave them to have a little fun. But such reactions showed me that they see school life as much more than

learning and preparing for the High School Entrance Exam and future jobs, and that the school is where they are able to occasionally negotiate some leeway to construct a life they want.

Negotiating Filial, Rural, and Ethnoreligious Identities in the Secular School

In the following, I use a song I heard throughout campus to discuss Muslim Hui students' filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities as they strive to negotiate among them in the *Zhiliang*-driven middle school. Before I delve into examining these identities, I explore three major contestations present at Prosperity Middle School in relation to filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities: the contestation of filial identity and self-development, the contestation of rural identity and imagined prosperity, and the contestation of ethnoreligious identity and secularity. Then I use seven students' stories to illustrate how students negotiate their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities while questioning, challenging, and believing in compulsory education. In the last section, I discuss different strategies developed by Muslim Hui students to negotiate multiple identities.

My Father

Always asking you, but never said thank you to you

Until I was grown up, I didn't understand that your life wasn't easy

Every time you leave, you always pretend it is easy

Smiles and says "go home", but turns back with tears

How I wish to hold your warm hands as before

But you are not here by me, let the breeze carry my blessing to you, “Be safe and healthy”

Time, time, don’t go so fast, don’t make you get older

I would sacrifice everything just to have you live long

Be strong in your life, father, What can I do for you?

Please accept my trivial help

I first heard this popular song when I visited the male-student dorm at night. Because the song is based on the singer’s regret of not being able to see his father one last time before the father’s death, students seem to develop a similar feeling to the singer. Right before the lights went off, the boys started to sing and asked me to play the music for them on my smartphone. One by one—10 of them in total—sang together and screamed out the song for me. All of them clearly remembered the lyrics in mandarin Chinese, though they always communicate with each other in their local dialect. “What a moving song,” I commented after seeing their emotions pouring out.

A few months later, I heard the song for the second time when I held a music class and this song was again picked out by all the students. Ten boys stood in the front of the classroom, again screaming out the song with tears in their eyes. Some were sobbing, and others were choking. Wiping their tears and looking up at the ceiling as well as at each other, they continued and completed the song, though it was difficult. The classroom was quiet, and the song was touching everyone’s soul. Since that time, I occasionally heard the melody of this song lingering around campus and in the building, but I couldn’t seem to find where it was coming from.

This song tells a story of a child who misses his father, who has done everything and sacrificed for the family. It depicts a typical family situation many local Muslim Hui students have experienced. Being young, they don't worry about having hard lives because they are always protected by their fathers. As time goes by, they start to understand that their fathers are getting older and they need to grow up and be responsible for their families' wellbeing. As the hopes of the families, they constantly feel the pressure to fulfill filial piety: What can they do to pay back their parents and *Yanglao* or to take care of the elderly?

The song also portrays the disheartening reality that fathers always leave their children behind to work outside, and they are reluctantly saying "go home" "with tears" every time when they head out to work. This saddening separation occurs every year to these local Muslim Hui children. As one of the remotest rural regions in China, people strive to get out of the poverty through finding outside work. It is common for locals, especially males, to leave home and work as migrant workers in other provinces. In small families whose oldest children aren't adults, the fathers have to go away to make enough money to sustain their families. Students of these families don't usually see their fathers for eight months out of the year, and they are usually in school when their fathers are home for a very short of period of time. If a family has grandparents, both parents might need to be migrant workers because of the heavier family burdens, such as taking care of both their grandparents and their children. Students of these families receive money from their migrant parents but hardly get to see them. When a family is large with adult children present, both parents could be home to work on the farm, while the adult

children leave to pursue opportunities to support the family financially. Students of this type of family then have to worry about their parents' health because the parents are usually older and more likely to suffer from illnesses related to farm work. Being rural means fewer opportunities; being rural implies a higher chance of becoming migrant workers; and being rural stands for long-term separation of family members. What can they do to leave poverty? Going to school may be an option to achieve prosperity and change their rural identity: more opportunities awaiting, various occupations available, and more time spent with one's family. Following the same life paths as their parents could also be an option, though occupational choices are limited.

The song additionally reveals a child eager to have his father back with his "warm hands" as before, guiding and comforting him through difficulties. In the local community, fathers play a key role in leading their families to follow Islamic practices, whether during Islamic holidays or on a regular basis. In Jun's house nested at the back of a mountain ridge, a 30-minute motorcycle ride from the paved road, I met his father, who can read almost all of the Islamic doctrines and is often asked by his neighbors to *Niansuier* during the time for commemorating ancestors. He told me that he had taught Jun how to read Koranic script when Jun was little, and now Jun was able to read most of the Koranic texts. While Jun was anxious to show me the texts he had learned, he asked his father for permission to do so. I found out that they wanted to ensure that I was also a Muslim Hui before showing me the texts, so that I wouldn't contaminate the sacred books. Like Jun, other boys also look up to their fathers as religious role models and direct questions about Islam to their fathers.

Singing is telling; singing is feeling; and singing is retrospecting. Singing this song at school reminds this group of Muslim Hui students of their responsibilities, their regrets, and their wishes. Their familiar environment is challenged by the unfamiliar, and the school gate is being shaken.

Encountering contestations. As I discussed earlier, the secular school is understood by Muslim Hui students as a site of both happiness and chaos. In my observations, I came to know that some students think that they are temporarily released from the pressure of being good sons and daughters in front of their parents while at school but question whether they will eventually fulfill their filial piety through education. Some also appreciate the freedom from family chores and heavy farming work while they are at school but wonder whether compulsory education will guarantee them non-farming jobs. Others additionally believe that compulsory education is to their advantage so that they will improve their secular life through better job prospects, and that it is possible to escape poverty and backwardness without being migrant workers, a stereotypical job for rural Muslims in the community. I also heard students saying that obtaining knowledge could at least equip them to go beyond solely reading Koranic scripts to better understanding and explaining the Koran. For them, the school is unpredictable but full of opportunities and possibilities. It is also chaotic as they understand that different relationships are intertwined and multiple identities are being negotiated in the context of compulsory schooling. In the following, I open the school gate and examine this world of students' contestations and negotiations. I present the contestations in this way in order to better illustrate the strategic choices that Muslim Hui

students at Prosperity Middle School make to construct and negotiate a life path of their own, as I discuss in my last section.

Filial identity and self-development. This contestation is the most prominent among the three major ones. Reading students' weekly journals and chatting with them about their future plans and goals, fulfilling filial piety was mentioned most frequently as a motivation as well as a source of pressure. Therefore, while for some students, being in the school is to prepare for a job to fulfill filial piety, for others it is to get away from family pressure. Although the majority of the students have their own ideals of who they want to be, many also want to become someone their parents want them to be.

This contestation is also entangled with teachers' pedagogical practices and expectations—namely, in the ways which students are monitored to meet *Zhiliang* requirements. These practices further complicate students' motivations and pressures to learn, to negotiate, and to challenge, for teachers also construct an imaged future for students while teaching cultural knowledge and monitoring school activities.

This contestation comprises two main aspects in understanding students' fulfillment of filial piety: fulfilling families' dreams and repaying parents' sacrifice. Both aspects are sources of motivation as well as pressure. The first motivation or pressure is to fulfill families' dreams. "We have no other opportunities, and our children are our hopes." This is probably the most frequent statement I heard from the Muslim Hui living in the mountainous regions in Prosperity Town, where going to college is the only way to achieve a better life and to change their destiny. Thus, learning at school becomes a commitment students make for their parents, and going to school develops into an

impetus or a burden they suffer from. One of the Muslim Hui students wrote in his journal and expressed his sadness, “Because of the promise I made to my parents [to succeed in school], I lost happiness [because of my struggle to perform well] and everything else.”

The main pressure students feel comes from their desire to fulfill their families’ dreams. A student shared the pressure she felt in her journal, “I told my dad that I didn’'t want to study, but my dad persuaded me. I would not give up again because this is my dad’s hope. He hopes to have a college graduate in the family.” Another student also shared the same feeling with me in a poem, “Bright sunlight is the color of summer. It is the time that parents’ hope can be fulfilled and their children can go to college.” Secular schooling’s potential to fulfill families’ dreams is one of the main reasons that motivates many Muslim Hui students to remain in school, though it also leads to suffering and struggling at times.

The second motivation or pressure is to be able to repay parents’ sacrifice, as the song “My Father” conveys. In the local community, it is difficult for some families to send their children to school because it means that they would lose important labor both in daily life and during the harvest season. Only through the sacrifice of these parents does attending school become possible. Students stay in school because they want to repay their debt from their parents. As I was reading the weekly journals, I saw sentences like, “I want to study well because I want to repay the teachers who have educated me for so many years and parents who have raised me for over 10 years,” and “We should exercise, be strong people, study, and then repay parents, teachers, and classmates and

friends as well as society." After reading these types of sentiments, I often left notes at the end of their journals, reaffirming their hope, encouraging them to follow through, and sometimes offering tips for how to be a better learner, a way I found to help them decrease some of the pressure on them.

With family pressure on one side and teachers' expectations on the other side, students are often sandwiched between both parents and teachers and trying hard not to disappoint both, which can lead them to copy other students' homework and report to their parents higher test scores than they have actually achieved. A Muslim Hui student wrote:

> I just want to see the pleasing smile on my father's face. Sometimes I think about dropping out of school. But I can't do that because I am the only one in my family who goes to school. The family hope is on me. I can't disappoint my family. I can't see my parents being saddened because of me.

Therefore, students' education is not so much about learning for themselves as it is learning for their parents to become capable of fulfilling filial piety. This contestation is constantly shaping Muslim Hui students' life in the school.

Rural identity and imagined prosperity. The second major contestation is between students' rural identity and their imagined prosperity as a result of schooling. My conversations with students at the dorms during night hours often turned toward their concerns for future. They were always curious about what the outside world was like and wanted me to confirm things they had heard about big cities. Some told me outright that they didn't want to have a life like their parents, and they wanted to walk out of the big

mountains toward a prosperous future. Others wondered why education was even needed if the government had already invested so much money in the community to alleviate poverty, and figured they would eventually become prosperous simply through the development of the community. Still others expressed their satisfaction with their current lifestyle, or their resignation to it: “I will make a lot of money running my family businesses,” “I will be a migrant worker regardless of how hard I try in school, and I will make money as my friends do.” The future after secular schooling is unpredictable, but the present life in the rural region is familiar. Therefore, some students question and challenge the value of education. Weighing unpredictability and stability, they develop different attitudes toward secular schooling.

The core feeling of unpredictability stems from students’ witnessing their friends failing the High School Entrance Exam, dropping out of school, and ending up with the same life they would have had with no education. They know that being able to pass that exam requires not only mental determination but also physical endurance, but many students don’t have such determination and endurance. Therefore, they fail. One night, a teacher came to me and asked me for advice on how to convince her son to return to school. The son fiercely refused to go back after being corporally punished by his teacher, and none of his family members was able to persuade him otherwise. This incident indicates that if a student, like this teacher’s son, is not determined to do well in school, corporal punishment could trigger dropout at any time. However, Vice Principal Ma also told me that many of his successful former students would come back to the

school and thank him for physically punishing them. The physical pain those successful students endured eventually paid off.

Another feeling of unpredictability comes from students' own lack of confidence about performing well in school. When I asked them about what had worried them recently, a few students shared their concerns about catching up with their class subjects and their fear of failing exams. Yamei anxiously said to me, "I can't really understand mathematics, and I don't know what I can do to improve it." Bowen told me in a panic, "I am worried that I can't recite the textbook. If I can't, the teacher will corporally punish me when he comes." "I am so worried that I will fail the English exam," Ma Lan was also stressed. When the future is already unpredictable, being unable to engage in academic activities and perform well on exams exacerbates their anxieties and dampens their motivation to learn.

The other side of this contestation is stability or being content with their present and future lives. Many are satisfied with the jobs available in their community as well as living near friends and family. For some with family businesses in Prosperity Town, poverty hasn't impacted them much; completing a middle school diploma, they believe, will give them sufficient knowledge to live a good life in the community. They don't have to put any special effort and suffer all kinds of pain to invest in something that they think is probably doomed to be useless in the end. When I visited Kai's home in a remote village, his mother told me that he had already started doing construction work with a neighbor and made about 150 RMB or 25 USD per day. Kai was quite happy about his income and proudly told me that he earned the money with no education needed. Though

he might be right at this time, I thought to myself that he probably hadn't realized that he might not be physically able to do construction work for the rest of his life. Later, I was even more startled by his mother who politely asked me to find a wife for him after she learned that I had visited the house as his head teacher. I think of this short visit often, because I just couldn't believe that a mother would ask me for such a favor for her son.

Ethnoreligious identity and secularity. The third major contestation is between students' ethnoreligious identity and secularity. After interviewing these Muslim Hui students, I found that they do not feel a conflict between their ethnoreligious identity and attending secular school; they cope rather well ideologically with the relationship between *Wenhua zhishi* (cultural knowledge) and Islamic teachings. The conflict has to do with the amount of time they are able to allocate for learning at school and in the mosque, respectively. Some Muslim Hui students want to spend equal time on both kinds of learning. While secular schooling is some students' first choice of learning environment, religious education is an alternative to their unsuccessful academic endeavors. If religious education is some students' foremost calling, learning *Wenhua zhishi* is also helpful. Therefore, rather than questioning and challenging compulsory education, students utilize compulsory education to obtain knowledge, whether secular or religious. Such contestation revolves around Muslim Hui students' perception of themselves as religiously different from but given opportunities to pursue a similar life to Han students.

A few boys I interviewed told me that they hadn't been able to go to mosque and pray regularly since they started attending school. They spend most of their time studying

and only leave for prayers on weekends. I asked them whether any students went to mosque and prayed on weekdays, and the answer was “Nobody.” This was confirmed by one of my trips to interview a father on a Wednesday morning. As I passed by a mosque during a prayer time, I saw no children and only older males heading to the mosque. “Only *manla* or students of *Ahong* are there,” Kai, a Muslim Hui student, later told me. “Since we are all in the school, we have no common language with *manla* anymore.” Being in the secular school is pulling Muslim Hui students away from a life they are familiar with, but they still practice Islamic rituals on weekends.

The relationship between maintaining difference and acquiring similarity is also reflected in how Muslim Hui students construct their future. Tianhua has been learning to read Koranic scripts since she was young. While I asked for her opinion on *Nianjing* or learning the Koran, she told me in a firm voice, “Learning the Koran might be painful at present, but we will live a better life after death *or Wuchang*, in the Islamic term.” Guoqin also emphasized the importance of learning *Wenhua Zhishi* (cultural knowlege) that can help him understand the Koran better, saying, “If you improve your *Wenhua Zhishi*, you will be able to learn Koran faster.” Tingting, whose brother has already taken an *Ahong* (Clergy) position in a coastal city, additionally commented, “If I could *Nianjing*, I can also be a teacher. This is the second option for me.” Their remarks indicate that they are given opportunities a life similar to that of most teenagers in China, but they believe maintaining religiosity is also part of their life. Therefore, such contestation is usually unseen in the school, since Muslim Hui students have two different lives, one in the school and the other in the community.

Listening to stories of identity negotiations. In the following, I use seven students' stories to exemplify how they question, challenge, and utilize compulsory education. These tactics are the preambles to the process of identity negotiations in the school characterized by three categories of students: resisters, strugglers, and straddlers. The different strategies each category of students adopts to negotiate their multiple identities will be discussed in my last section.

***Kai: Being the only son and the hope of a family*.** Kai is the only son in a family with three older sisters in college and two younger sisters in elementary school. His father is a truck driver and spends his time on the road transporting goods from one province to another. Though the father never went to school, he makes enough money to support the family. Kai's mother is a farmer and spends most of her time working on the farm. Because Kai's parents are both busy, Kai is mostly taken care of by his grandparents, who run a small convenience store next to Kai's house and live a few feet away in a nearby courtyard.

While Kai is one of the most energetic students in the school as a class leader and a role model for the boys in his class, he is quiet and reserved at home. During my visit to his house, I saw him sitting on the sofa, staring at the TV and watching his younger sisters do homework. This was not the boy who had been involved in several fights with classmates and often broke school rules. "Hello, Teacher Wu." He stood up when I walked into his house and respectfully greeted me. He didn't even sit down until I asked him to do so. I was surprised to see him being different at home than at school. At school,

he often calls to me with a playful look on his face, and it is sometimes hard for me to order him to be quiet.

Rather than feeling blessed because of his three older siblings in college, Kai feels regretful and hopeless because of the pressure he receives from parents and older siblings. Since elementary school, he was expected to be No. 1 in the school because he is the only boy in the family:

> I tried so hard to stay at the top to fulfill my parents' hope because I knew they really cared about me and were afraid that I wouldn't study. However, with increasing pressure and decreasing scores, I was so scared. I took every chance to copy others' homework. I started to question the homework I did because I was afraid of making mistakes.

Kai has looked up to his father since he was very young, and he understands the hardship his father has gone through to sustain the family. Being in school gives Kai room to breathe and provides him the space to just be an energetic and fun-loving student, but he also wants to let his parents know that he hasn't given up and is still trying to build a future and fulfill the filial piety his parents hope for. However, he had little hope for himself to succeed in schooling, and he just wants to be like his father, driving a truck and transporting goods. Compulsory education for him seems meaningless, and he questions and challenges it by refusing to listen to teachers, making noise during class, and participating in unacceptable activities, such as fighting with other students. A few times, I saw him return from the head teacher's office after being lectured about controlling himself and studying hard, and he had a disdainful smile on his face as if he

didn’t care about what the school expect him to do. The pressure from his parents is the only motivation for him to stay, and learning is no longer for himself. In our interview, I asked him to describe himself, and here is what he told me:

> I am still a little naïve, childish, and innocent, but I am also a little rebellious with some adult thoughts. I like to keep things in my mind and don’t like to be blamed by other students and teachers. I always feel that there are a lot of lies surrounding me. I secretly ponder these things and then hide them inside. Gradually, I become a rebellious brat.

His self-perception reveals unceasing the struggles he has experienced beyond learning knowledge at school. I turned off the recorder before the interview ended. I felt that he was very stressed about studies, friends, and family, and he was trying so hard to challenge the school activities through resistance and violence. I noted in my transcript: recording at this point seems unethical because he already told me that he didn’t like to share some information with others. I only documented my approach to him at the moment to capture my feelings and reactions toward him. I felt that he was very much lost in the school and trapped in a net of untrusting teacher-student relationships. He considers the school a place where he can escape family pressure and guilt, but he doesn’t expect compulsory education to actually change his life path.

Haizhe: To learn and to become someone who fulfills my family’s hopes. Different from other girls I talked to, Haizhe wants to be a doctor. This thirteen-year-old girl is much more ambitious than others who seem to not be thinking of their long-term plans. Haizhe wants to fulfill a family dream and become the first college graduate in her

family. Her two older sisters were married when they were sixteen, and they now work on their in-laws' farms and do household chores at their husbands' houses. Her older brother completed six years of schooling and was married a 17-year-old girl two years ago. Now he has a two-year-old boy and works with his wife in a factory in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He only comes home during harvest seasons to help their father with difficult tasks, such as loading *Benbenche* and driving products to the nearby market to sell.

When I was visiting her house at dusk, her parents were still working in the corn field down in the valley, trying to finish harvesting the corn before the snow came. Because of my visit, Haizhe finished her work a little earlier and walked up to the paved road to pick me up where the *Dandanche* had dropped me. I followed her for another 20 minutes on the dirt and unpaved terraced trail before we arrived at her house. Our walk overlooked scattered houses nested at the bottom of the valley.

As we neared her house, Haizhe started talking about her family. Her 54-year-old father has never gone to school but worked his whole life on the farm. He has been sick for a couple of years but refuses to see a doctor. Haizhe told me that her father was worried that all family burdens would land on her mom's shoulders if he were to have surgery, and nobody would be able to financially support the family. With one 10-year-old younger brother and one 4-year-old younger sister at home, Haizhe feels she has to take care of both the old and the young. "I am so worried about my father, and he is getting more sick now." Haizhe kept talking about her worries with me, "My father is

extremely tired every day. He has to raise cattle and sheep as well as take care of our corn and potato fields."

We eventually arrived at her house, at which time the sky was already dark. Her parents had returned and started preparing dinner for me. Looking at her mother, I was stunned. She looked a lot older than her age, and her dark, dry, and wrinkled face told of a life of hardship and pain. Haizhe's father sat down by me, sweeping dust off his coat and wiping dirt off his face. "We haven't finished picking that corn yet," he told to me. "We grew too much this year because we had the most rain of the past 25 years." I nodded, knowing that rain is so crucial to sustain life in Xihaigu. Without rain, planting seeds would be in vain. Haizhe's father may not even know that she dreams of becoming a doctor, but she doesn't want to disappoint him and tries to fulfill her filial piety. The family pressure is on her, and she hopes that if she became a doctor, then she could cure him.

Later in the fall semester, she called me aside and told me that she couldn't perform well in school. Flipping through her weekly journals, I noticed that she always brought up the pressure she felt from her family:

> Every time I go home, I always answer my parents with my crisp, clear voice that I am studying seriously. But in reality, I don't know anything after a day of classes.
>
> The only job my father gives me is to study, because I can't help my parents do farm work.
>
> I can't fulfill my father's assignment; this is my biggest pressure.

Born into this kind of family, she is concerned with fulfilling her filial piety as well as changing her rural identity through becoming a doctor. Her father's wishes are her priority, and she believes that attending the secular school is going to turn her personal dream and her family's dreams into reality. By the time I left the school, she was still trying her best to learn and making slight progress on her academic journey.

Yanmei: Being the oldest daughter, to fail is to disappoint. While Kai finds a niche in the school to release the pressure his family puts on him and Haizhe places her dream in the school and hopes to eventually fulfill it through her efforts, Yanmei is fighting against a different type of pressure. Yanmei strives to maintain a high level of academic performance in school, because she constantly fears that she will be forced out of school by her disappointed parents. Being the oldest daughter in the family with two younger brothers, ages 8 and 10 respectively, she had been given more responsibilities as the major laborer. When her parents decided to send her to school, it was at the cost of losing her contribution to the home. They believed that Yanmei would succeed in the future.

Born in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, Yanmei returned to Xihaigu to attend Prosperity Middle School a few years ago. She has to ride her bicycle for about a half-hour and then walk for another half-hour on an unpaved and muddy road to get from the school to her home. Even with these difficulties, for students like Yanmei, going to school is probably the only path to a better future, freeing her from physical labor and changing her rural identity.

Sitting on the back of Yanmei's bike, I was a little nervous. But Yanmei was confident, because she had been bicycling for a few years. "It is not very far if we ride. We want to get back to the house by sunset," she comforted me. Riding on some hidden paths, she quickly reached the unpaved trail to her house. I jumped off the back seat and began to hike up to her house. On the way, I snapped a picture of her with her bicycle friend. She smiled at me as she had her first picture ever taken on this familiar path she rides on every week. "I've never seen the sun so beautiful." She said to me in dialect. She probably had never had time to stop on this path for a rest. By the time we arrived at her house, the sun had already set.

She flipped the door curtain open for me, and I walked into the kitchen. I immediately noticed three *Jiangzhuang* or award certificates posted on the wall. They recognize Yanmei's accomplishments in the elementary school and the middle school. Like many Chinese parents, her parents also like to post *Jiangzhuang* in a conspicuous place to show their pride in her. She had to strive to achieve such results. Yanmei's father is among the few other parents who actually went to elementary school, but he quit at 4th grade and continued to study on his own for several years. Not waiting for me to sit down, he immediately started talking about Yanmei:

> I told Yanmei that we sacrifice a lot and work hectically in the fields just to let her go to school. If she can't do well in school, I will take her back. It is very difficult for two of us to take care of so many acres of corn and potato fields as well as raise 5 cows and 20 sheep while all of our children are in school. Yanmei is the oldest daughter at home, and we need her help.

Yanmei's two younger brothers are too young to help with family chores. Sacrifice, compromise, and family members being apart are all intertwined in Yanmei's situation, and she has to succeed in school not to disappoint her parents.

The next morning, both parents headed out early to finish winnowing the wheat laid out in the courtyard, before I woke up at 7:00 a.m. Yanmei waited for me to get up and brought me some breakfast—typical local food of flour buns and fried dough. Then she wrapped her pink headscarf over her head and neck and walked out of the house. She started to feed the cows and sheep with wheat straw with me following her around. The weekend is probably the only time she is able to help her parents. However, she is determined to walk out of the mountains, leave her rural identity behind and pursue prosperity somewhere else. "What if you fail the High School Entrance Exam?" I followed up with a "discouraging" question. "I will *Nianjing*, or learn Koran." She wasn't hesitant because *Nianjing* was the path some of her friends who had dropped out of school had taken. However, her head teacher had high hopes for her to test into a good high school when I was there, and I still believe that she will eventually make it to a good high school through her determination and persistence.

Guoqin: Finding balance between secular and religious education. Like Yanmei, Guoqin is determined to learn well in the school. Born and raised in a devout family, Guoqin only ever wanted to become an *Ahong* throughout his life. Guoqin is among the few students I have met who have learned many Koranic texts, and he is able to read Koranic scripts on his own. Talking to Guoqin, I felt that he was very knowledgeable about Islam and Islamic traditions in the local community. He always gets

excited while talking about Islamic rituals he observes at home. When he talked to me about Islam, he always checked with me to see if I understood the Islamic terms he used.

Visiting Guoqin's house wasn't easy. Situated at the far end of a remote village, I had to hike over a mountain to reach his house. When I arrived, he was picking up cows' waste and cleaning up the courtyard with his younger brother. Seeing me show up at his house, he was very excited and put his work aside. Then he led me into the main living room. The living room is simply decorated with a small TV set on the side desk, and his *Jiangzhuang* are also posted on the wall, like at Yanmei's house. Besides a younger brother, Guoqin also has an older sister who is already attending high school. One of her works in Classical Chinese calligraphy hangs in the kitchen entrance. Guoqin told me that his sister has been his inspiration since he was little and has motivated him to study well in school. In this family, I saw that education is highly valued by the parents, and all of the children have performed well with aims of finding better jobs in the future.

He also told me about how he struggled to stay in middle school. "I have thought of quitting school several times because many of my friends left school after 6th grade and went to other cities for labor work." He stuttered, "I was also struggling with staying in school. I've always thought that I would become an *Ahong* in the future." Guoqin glanced at me and cleared his voice, "I was just like my friends, getting by in school every day without learning anything but waiting for the right time to quit." He used to question whether compulsory education would help him get a job, and he had doubted his unpredictable future in the city.

"But Teacher Wu, I now know I have to study, and I no longer think of quitting the school." Guoqin affirmed to me and wanted to ensure that I wasn't questioning his attitudes toward learning:

> My father taught me that if I could go to college, I can get a good job. He also said that even if I couldn't make it to college in the future, I can still gain knowledge in middle school that would help me understand the content of Koran better and prepare me for an *Ahong* job.

He explained how he overcame his doubts and finally decided to stay in school in hope of a better future, at least being more equipped with skills for a competitive *Ahong* training in the mosque if that is what he pursues. I thought Guoqin would be satisfied and fulfilled if he became an *Ahong*, a highly valued job in the community that receives much respect from local Muslim families. For him, there are two life paths ahead of him, either going to college or going to a mosque to learn Koran. He is striving to bring out the best in himself. "I will continue to observe consumption of Halal food," He confidently told me in our later interview, "If I go to a big city where Halal food is not available nearby, I will cook my own."

Guoqin now believes in the benefits of compulsory education and has constructed an ideal future for himself. It seems that he will have more options by pursuing *Ahong* profession as an alternative to his career prospects. Being optimistic and flexible in life, he is more motivated than pressured to fulfill his filial piety, cope with his rural identity, and maintain his ethnoreligious identity. Guoqin's attendance in secular school is to expand his life options, and he is learning to be a successful Muslim in his own way.

***Xiaoxia: Attending schooling to escape*.** Guoqin might be among the few who are determined to learn in the secular school while being flexible and optimistic in aiming for the best possible life in the future; most other students aren't as clear-minded. They perhaps know that they don't like the life their Muslim parents and siblings live, and they want to escape that type of life for the time being by going to school. However, they are unlikely to strive for an imagined and unpredictable future and prosperity; after graduating from middle school, they will likely return home or be migrant workers and continue to follow their parents' life paths.

Xiaoxia, an 18-year-old Muslim girl, is currently enrolled in 8th grade. Older than most of her peers, she had reenrolled at the school after being forced to drop out several years ago due to financial difficulties. Lianqing, one of Xiaoxia's teachers, once told me that he felt older Muslim Hui students in the school usually encountered more difficulties in their attempts to catch up with their peers. This type of student, according to him, had a different mindset from students age 14 or 15, and they seem not to be able to comprehend knowledge well. Although Xiaoxia didn't exemplify Lianqing's characterization to me, she did show her maturity when she complained about childish behaviors she experienced on campus, such as students' fighting about trivial matters.

Xiaoxia's father, a local coal miner, was sick and had exhausted much of the family savings by going to the doctor for over a year. He also traveled to Xinjiang to work a few times a year. Xiaoxia also has two older sisters who were married at 15 and 16, respectively. Currently, one sister is in Xinjiang with her husband, working in a restaurant; the other sister quit school after 8th grade and now lives in a nearby town with

her husband. In addition, she has one younger brother who is in 2nd grade, like many Muslim Hui families in the community who usually have at least one male child in the family.

Going to Xiaoxia's home was an interesting excursion because her house is right next to a dam, and I was told stories about how she had fished and played in the water as a child, an unimagined activity in chronically drought-stricken Xihaigu. Similar to Kai in my first story, Xiaoxia is quiet at home but loud at school. Xiaoxia's mother didn't seem to know much about her performance in school and seemed not to be putting much pressure on Xiaoxia to do well.

As soon as I left the house, Xiaoxia took me to the dam with her younger brother. Away from her mother's watch, she started laughing and joking about school life. Xiaoxia seems to have low expectations of learning at school, and she goes to school to have fun with her friends as well as to escape family chores. As I was asking about her sisters on the way to the dam, Xiaoxia angrily told me, "They are very tired every day and sometimes beaten by their husbands. I don't want to be like them and have a life like that." She determined that she needed to go to school so that she didn't have to get married that early.

Xiuqing: Quality schooling for a better life. Although the majority of students at Prosperity Middle School are Muslim Hui, Xiuqing is an exception. She is one of two Han students in her class of 60. The first time I met Xiuqing, she couldn't even look at me, but turned her back. I began to greet her, but she kept quiet and wouldn't turn

around. She is the shiest girl I ever met on campus, but she is also tough, as her classmates describe her. As a class monitor, she holds a position of power.

Born and raised in a town nearby, Xiuqing was sent by her parents to Prosperity Middle School for a better quality education. In our interview, she told me that children in her town all improved their academic performance by coming to Prosperity, so her parents believed that she would do the same. Her older sister quit schooling after 9th grade and is now a migrant worker in the city; her father is a construction worker, helping people build their houses; Xiuqing and her younger sister both attend Prosperity; and her mother takes care of a 4-year-old brother at home. While coming to Prosperity takes Xiuqing an hour by bicycle, she never regrets making the trip: "I gave up my friends over there to come here to study. Sometimes when I open my photo album, I feel very sad," Xiuqing looked aside and said to me, "I initially didn't want to come here, but my father and people in my village kept persuading me till I agreed." Xiuqing has pictured only one path: test into a good high school, find a job, and live a good life with her parents. She also told me that she had hard time getting along with her Muslim Hui classmates in the beginning because she wasn't allowed to wash food containers; but she has now adjusted to them and enjoys life on campus.

Different from many Muslim Hui parents I met, Xiuqing's parents communicate with her about her academic performance. Xiuqing told me that she was afraid of her father because he would scold her if she didn't do well in the school. He demands to see her grades whenever she has an exam. Xiuqing is both motivated and pressured to perform well in school. While I further asked her about her future plans, she replied:

> I want to be a doctor. Our people spend so much money on seeing doctors, so the majority of our families' incomes are spent on illness. I want to be a doctor to help them conquer the difficulties. I can use my own money to provide them with financial aid if they can't afford a doctor visit.

"But what if you fail the college exam," I was trying to be provocative, "what would you do?" "My father would find a job for me," she asserted. I was happy to see a student with high expectations of herself who wants to not only develop as an individual, but also contribute to the community as a whole. She believes that she will achieve her own dream through schooling, and she knows that her future is predictable at least with a job her father may provide. After all her effort, her filial and rural identities will probably have new interpretations. Walking on campus, I sometimes saw her laughing with her friends, playing basketball with her classmates, and yelling at others' mischievous behaviors. She is really not a shy girl, as she identifies herself, "I am an introvert in front of strangers, but I am an extrovert in front of friends."

Jun: Trading in Nianshu with Nianjing. While I was writing my dissertation, I received an online chat message from a former Muslim Hui student, Jun, asking me how I was doing and where I was now. A year later since the time I was in the field, I thought that those students should be fiercely busy preparing for the High School Entrance Exam in June, but I also realized that many of them might not have even stayed in school until the exam because large numbers of dropouts started to appear even when I was there. I was curious to find out where those dropouts are now.

Jun told me that he was now in Linxia, another Muslim Hui concentrated region in Northwestern China, attending an Islamic seminary. He typed, “I am a little homesick now. I have been home twice since I started to attend the seminary, but I have been here this time for approximately four months.” Reading his messages, I recalled my visit to his house the previous year, one of the toughest visits I ever had. Jun never thought he was going to perform well in school. He wasn’t motivated and didn’t put any effort into learning, and his parents had no expectation of him finding a job after secular education. He just wanted to *Nianjing* and become an *Ahong.* Before I went to his house, I thought I would convince him at least to try learning at school, but my visit ended up with me running out of words ten minutes into the conversation. Reconnecting again through internet reminded me of students like him: going to school is to pass the time until he can leave for *Nianjing*.

When I walked into Jun’s courtyard, he was bending over, lowering his head, and washing a pile of clothes with his mother. Seeing me come in, his mother put her chores aside and invited me into the kitchen without saying a word. Jun was also quiet, not even saying hello. The mother immediately started preparing food for me when I asked her to sit on the couch. She was still speechless but nodding her head to approve my request. Jun went out and made a cup of tea for me, and then was standing silently by his mother, helping her cook. I looked around, thinking that this family was probably among the poorest I had seen. The couch was well-worn with holes on the arms; bags of crops were piled up on the side of the room; the *Kang* seemed not to have been renovated for quite a long time; and the walls were smoked dark and greasy. Jun’s two-year old sister was

sleeping on the bed. With his mother cutting vegetables, kneading the dough for noodles, and scraping the wok, she seemed to hear nothing but only turned around once. I felt somehow intrusive and awkward because they had to stop their Sunday afternoon routine to host me. The mother still kept quiet and was busy with cooking. I tried to chat, but only found out that Jun's father is hardly home because of his transportation work. The conversation died. After a few minutes of silence, she finally finished cooking and handed me a bowl of potato noodles, a staple food and a typical dish. She also gave another bowl of potato noodles to Jun, and that was the last meal he ate before he headed to the school.

The mother finally sat down on a small stool by the couch, watching me eat and saying "Eat, eat, eat". I asked her if she knew anything about Jun's academic performance at school, but she didn't respond. I also showed her the grades Jun received on his midterm exams, but she seemed unconcerned. As I was hoping to convince her to help with monitoring Jun's schooling, she eventually said in her low voice, "Both his father and I have tried to make him study, but he just doesn't want to. We don't know what to do. Jun just wants to go out, and his mind is not set in the school." She looked helpless and continued to tell me to "Eat, eat, eat." Jun said nothing during my visit. I could see his determination to leave the school at some point. For him, putting forth effort at school seems to lead nowhere. Before I left, his sister woke up and started to cry. Jun held her up and patted her on the back. I felt that this little sister had probably received much more attention from his parents recently, and Jun had to be ready to get

out and pave out his own destiny. Jun put down the little sister and bagged some flaxseeds for me before his mother asked him to take me back to the school.

Sitting on the back of his bike and holding that bag of flaxseeds, crossing the village on a muddy bumpy road and heading back to the school, I couldn't stop thinking about what would be like for him to learn Koran in an Islamic seminary if learning itself is already so hard for him. But he is going to pursue a life he wants, and being an *Ahong* will make his family proud. This will be how he fulfills his filial piety. Hearing from him after a year, I was happy to know that his choice to dropping out of school wasn't too irrational, and that he is motivated to learn Koran even though it means being away from family and friends. His time at the secular school was probably going to be a source of fond memories of good friendship and happy times, and his identity as a rural Muslim Hui remains and will likely be enhanced after he returns from the seminary. He may never have imagined leaving the community for an unfamiliar culture and aspiring for a prosperous life with secular education.

Developing strategies of identity negotiations. In the previous section, I have used seven stories to exemplify and illustrate how both Muslim Hui and Han students at Prosperity Middle School question, challenge, and believe in compulsory education through negotiating their filial identity, rural identity, and ethnoreligious identity. These stories illustrate that Muslim Hui and Han students usually fall into three groups in terms of their learning and behavior at school, despite how they understand and interpret their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities in the community and in the school. Sandwiched between their parents' expectations and their teachers' expectations, some students

choose to resist secular schooling and proceed with their own plans, like Kai, Xiaoxia, and Jun; some students struggle and persist through schooling for the sake of their dreams and happiness, like Xiuqing and Haizhe; and some students constantly cross two worlds and two cultures, maintaining their ethnoreligious differences while learning to be similar to students in other parts of China, like Guoqin and Yanmei. These stories also indicate that compulsory education is constantly questioned and challenged by certain students no matter how teachers and parents perceive and interpret it; however, for other students, schooling is believed to be a way of leaving rural identity behind and changing individuals', families', and the community's future. In this section, I will examine how students develop strategies to negotiate these multiple identities during their secular schooling by classifying them into three groups: resisters, strugglers, and straddlers.

Resisters. I define resisters as those who purposely resist secular schooling through their limited motivation to learn or who are careless about attending and learning and frequently interrupt daily learning routines. These unmotivated students do not think secular schooling is going to change their lives in any meaningful way. I found that resisters at Prosperity Middle School not only find ways to refuse to learn but also of disrupting other students who want to learn. In the following, I discuss four strategies resisters adopt to survive in the school.

Expressing resistance through appearance. Although wearing a school uniform is required, I frequently observed students wearing white hats and headscarves. As I discussed earlier, entering the school gate means that following the Muslim Hui dress code becomes a personal preference. However, this type of student is worth mentioning

because they have battled with their teachers to keep their ethnoreligious identity. In this process, only a few persist. Xiaojing, a Han teacher, told me in our interview that he doesn't like students to wear white hats in the classroom, saying,

> That is a question of belief, and you should have it in your heart and be serious to do it. As a student, you come to school to study, and you take your hat off to be like others. You are all students. Now, none of them wear white hats. If I didn't require them not to wear hats, they would probably wear hats now.

His remarks reflect that the school leaders agree that students should not show their Muslim identity in the school.

A girl sitting in the front row of a 7th grade classroom in her headscarf once told Hailing, a married Muslim Hui English teacher who also wore a headscarf, that she was proud of wearing headscarves in the school and was afraid of taking them off. While Hailing shared this story with me, she seemed displeased with her student being an conspicuous Muslim Hui with unsatisfactory academic engagement and performance in the classroom. According to Hailing, this student has a short-term vision to learn Koran in the mosque and doesn't want to try to succeed at school:

> I was taught to wear my headscarf to show non-Muslim Hui how successful I am, and my headscarf represents all Muslim Hui sisters. If people see me misbehave as a Muslim Hui, they would think all Muslim Hui are low in *Suzhi*.

Hailing described how she perceives Muslims using symbols to identify themselves. "That student doesn't fully understand the representational value of wearing headscarves." Though this girl could not entirely comprehend how headscarves are

associated with Huiness, her symbolic expression of Huiness through her dress exhibited her ethnoreligious identity and her resistance to the removal of Huiness in the secular school.

"We are united." Being corporally punished for *Suzhi* violation is one of the moments resisters appeared to most dislike and tried to avoid in different ways. As I mentioned in Chapter Four, corporal punishment is a pedagogical practice that the majority of teachers believe to be effective and utilize every day. Although large numbers of students agree with this practice in the abstract, they usually don't like the physical pain. Therefore, in order to avoid punishment, resisters have developed a strategy to reduce the number of times they could be punished.

"We are united" is a phrase some resisters use to make class leaders, the student discipline watchers, feel too guilty to report their misbehaviors to head teachers. A girl once expressed her opinion about reporting on other students as such: "If you tell teachers, you might climb up a stair in the teacher's heart, but you will step down five stairs in students' hearts." Her statement vividly indicates that students don't like others to report their misbehaviors to teachers, especially resisters, who may exaggerate reporting as an action of brown-nosing teachers and turn this action into a violation of trust among students and a behavior despised by classmates. In my opinion, although some reporting among students is about trivial matters, such as "Someone took my shoes" and "Someone didn't let me in", there are critical matters worthy of reporting so that teachers can solve the problems and reestablish order in class, such as a collective action of students' interruption of classes and teacher-student conflicts. However, when

resisters put pressure on class leaders or discipline watchers by verbally emphasizing that students are “united”, class leaders become afraid of reporting because they fear isolation and exclusion from the other students.

Yamei, a class monitor, told me that students will swear in front of her if she tries to manage the class. She shook her head, tightened her lips, and said in dialect, “Some bad students will talk bad about me and spread rumors about my shortcomings if I report them to the head teacher; but good students will say that I am fair to both male and female students.” She has struggled with whether or not to report and who to report for what. I heard about an incident of class leaders being corporally punished by the head teacher because the head teacher couldn’t find out from the class leaders which students belonged to a group of instigators of a teacher-student conflict in the classroom. Nine class leaders were called to the office for corporal punishment, and then they were told to find out who the instigators were and to provide a list. The teacher in the conflict was mad and refused to come back to the class to teach. The head teacher had to find some students to punish as a way to show the other students that action was being taken. One of the class leaders angrily and helplessly expressed, “It was difficult for us to report. Students would blame us, and we got punished for no reason.”

The following is a conversation I had with a class leader who is a resister and tends to break class rules often. I strategically chose him to be a class leader so that he had to be a role model for others and monitor his own behavior. I asked him, “What do you think about students reporting to the head teacher about someone else’s misbehavior?”, and he said the following:

Ma: I disagree with this.

Wu: Why?

Ma: Our class doesn't have a single student using harsh words; I feel that we are united.

Wu: Why is the class monitor sometimes scolded by other students when she writes down a name?

Ma: Every class has a similar situation.

Wu: Why, then?

Ma: She [the class monitor] sometimes records other students' names, but she doesn't give her list to the teacher but secretly puts it into her notebook.

Wu: Why is she scolded sometimes, then?

Ma: Everyone is afraid of being corporally punished.

Wu: Have you scolded her before?

Ma: She never recorded my name before.

Our conversation illustrates some class leaders' dilemma in helping teachers manage classrooms. It also exposes how verbal assaults are used by certain students to avoid corporal punishment. When I first found out that class leaders were charged with the power to monitor classrooms, I thought that these students would be respected by their classmates because of their connections with teachers; however, I found that they were actually despised and scorned by classmates who were trying to exert their power over them to avoid corporal punishment. "We are united" is not just a simple phrase but a

strategy developed and adopted to respond to punishment and found to be useful in some respects.

Non-violent resistance. The third strategy resisters apply is non-violent resistance. They don't cause any serious trouble; they behave well, but they sometimes talk to each other during class periods, and they are not concerned about their grades. I experienced this type of resistance when the Fall semester was winding down. I reflected on my teaching, consulting, and visiting efforts and was disappointed, since I had previously been a teacher for some time, though never in rural regions of China. I wrote down my feelings, and the following excerpt is partially taken from my field notes:

> My previous effort to converse with these students and visit their homes seems not to be paying off, and I feel that I am on the edge of giving up. However, I realize that my frustrations could be an important piece of information related to the challenging vibe I receive from students every day: "Make me study, teacher! I want to see how you deal with me if I just don't want to be attentive in the classroom." I also feel that they are testing my patience and persistence. I am conscious that I have become impatient after they keep promising me so many times that they would not interrupt in class. Maybe I should ignore their countercultural attitudes and let the culture grow as I observe on the side. Being an assistant to the head teacher, I want to educate them and bring them back to the "right" track; but in the meanwhile, I feel that I am pulling and pushing the saw with them and we are both testing each other's bottom lines.

My feeling of struggle reveals a type of classroom performance students put on every day, battling with teachers non-violently for space to survive. They know that teachers will not give up on them, so they try to test how far they can resist without being corporally punished. I sat in on a few classes and observed that incidents of non-violence resistance often occurred. In the following, I will use a biology class to exemplify a few incidents of non-violent resistance in an 8th grade classroom. Though this specific class may seem out of control and the teacher blamed for poor class management, it represents a typical situation local teachers encounter on a daily basis.

Teacher Yang is the only biology teacher for the eight 8th grade classes, and she is the only unmarried teacher who wears a headscarf on campus and prays five times a day in her dorm. Muslim Hui students look up to her because she is faithful in Islam and knowledgeable about Islamic teachings. I often saw Muslim girls visiting her dorm room to ask questions about Islam. She is also considered by students as one of the teachers with a good heart.

When I walked into the classroom with her, half of the class was absent. Jun, a boy sitting in the last row, was talking to his neighbor, Xiaojun, who later dropped out of school after the Fall semester. I chose a seat at the back, trying to be non-intrusive. As soon as I sat down, the bell rang. I looked out of the window as I heard sound of shoes scratching the cement floor. A student was running down the hallway and stopped in front of the classroom door. He screamed "*Baodao*（报到）" (a phrase in Chinese to inform teachers of a student's arrival, and literally translated as report my arrival. When *Baodao* is used, a student needs to wait for the teacher's permission to walk into the

classroom) and quickly ran to his seat without waiting for the teacher's permission. Everyone burst out laughing at him. I looked around and smiled at whoever turned back to watch my reaction. I assumed that other students thought he would be embarrassed to see me sitting at the back when he was late. Since his entrance, the classroom was never fully quiet. I could always hear noises.

Teacher Yang used an interactive approach to teach her students. She put up a large poster of human anatomy on the left side of the board, then called students to the blackboard to write down the answers side by side to compare. She also asked students to stand up to share their answers with others. However, I observed that this type of teaching method actually gave students more freedom to chit chat and to work on other things in the classroom. Whenever the teacher asked the whole class a question, students would answer it in a popcorn style, in which one student after another yelled out answers randomly. Some students turned this learning activity into their entertainment, giving wrong answers just to get others to react. When a single student was called on, she/he just stood there silently or turned back and aside to seek help from other students. When Wenqiang, a student who had been bullied bullied in previous years, was called on by the teacher, others used his nickname to make fun of him. I also noticed that some students seemed to be always curious about me and kept turning around to check on me and to ensure that I was not documenting any of their bad behaviors. While the classroom was about to explode with so many students try to talk at the same time, I noticed a few students looking out of the window, distracted and isolated. It seemed like nothing that happened in the classroom concerned them.

Halfway through the class period, some students started to poke at each other, especially between male and female students. I figured that it was a way of interrupting others as well as getting attention from the opposite sex. Other students began to throw their books and notebooks around. Quite a few students couldn't sit still, and they kicked the stools of students sitting in front of them so that those students could not concentrate on listening and learning. Notes were flying around, and they travelled across the entire classroom without Teacher Yang knowing. When a cell phone went off, a few students immediately started coughing hard to cover the ringtone so that the teacher didn't know a cell phone was present in the classroom, which is prohibited. Students were helping each other cover up "misbehaviors". Later, I heard coughing again. A student turned to the coughing student and started to whisper. I realized that coughing was also a signal to warn others to watch out. I sat quietly, enjoying all the performance. Students were chatting amongst themselves with smiles on their faces; and they were looking at the blackboard with disinterested faces. Turning around, I captured two students sleeping on their desks. But I didn't want to interrupt because they seemed to have nice naps and sweet dreams. Teacher Yang agreed, and she didn't punish them throughout the class period.

I learned nothing from this biology class because I couldn't hear anything the teacher said. Teacher Yang had raised her voice a few times, but students correspondingly raised their voices. There was never a time I could clearly hear what Teacher Yang wanted to deliver to this class. I wondered what a student who wanted to learn could actually learn in such a noisy classroom. The majority of the students I

described in this classroom observation are resisters. They were challenging the teacher and one of the most basic forms of delivering knowledge: classroom instruction. Their performance of non-violence resistance angers some teachers and discourages others, but it continues nonetheless, as Youfang wrote in her weekly journal, “The majority of students share some commonalities: if a strict teacher assigns homework, we have to do it even though we don’t want to. If a non-strict teacher assigns homework, we are relaxed and don’t care about it.” The good-hearted Teacher Yang is probably considered a non-strict teacher, and students can be relaxed and careless in her class. Similar to Teacher Yang, the ways I was pulling and pushing in handling these students mirror my struggles of deciding appropriate ways to react to the non-violent resistance, as I was also a good and loved teacher. Such students spend most of the time playing, chatting in class, surfing the internet on their cell phones, and generally doing non-schooling stuff, which I could see as ways of resisting schooling and mentally fighting against their teachers’ and parents’ expectations.

Surrendering to schooling. While some resisters use non-violent resistance to express their unwillingness to attend and learn in the secular school, other resisters do not tolerate being forced or corporally punished to learn. The type of resistance they show usually ends with dropping out. Talking to underperforming students was always discouraging, because I saw them becoming uninterested and unmotivated to learn anything and I anticipated that they would conclude their school life sometime soon. A student told me that her sister had dropped out of school after she was beaten by a teacher; and another student shared that some students would intentionally seek corporal

punishment by purposely violating the rules so that they could have an excuse to leave the school.

When I returned to the school in Spring 2013 after the Chinese New Year, I was informed that approximately 200 students had dropped out of the school, many of them from the 8th grade. Although not all dropouts were resisters, the majority were, especially those who used to practice non-violent resistance. The remaining non-resister dropouts were mainly taken out of school by their parents who needed them to work. Students left in one 8th grade class were divided into four groups and then distributed into the four other classes. While the sheer number of dropouts was unbelievable to me, the teachers seem habituated to the situation. For various personal and family reasons, students left. According to the teachers, some students decided to go work as migrant workers so that they could fulfill their filial piety earlier; others wanted to help their parents with farming work because the families have emergent needs for their labor, and they see it as unrealistic to go through education and then look for a job; there were also some wanting to pursue *Ahong* training in Islamic seminaries without wasting time in the secular school. These students probably came to the school with doubts about compulsory education and its uncertain future value. After leaving school, their filial identity, rural identity, and ethnoreligious identity remain unchanged. After all, they were able to negotiate a life path of their own, whether they decided to drop out or to resist until the end of the journey of compulsory education. In the end, they still belong to a family-oriented rural Muslim Hui community.

Attending Islamic seminaries. After some students experienced secular schooling, the option of attending Islamic seminaries becomes attractive. Jun in my story, who currently attends an Islamic seminary in Gansu province, exemplifies how a Muslim Hui student can find learning Islamic knowledge and eventually becoming an *Ahong* in a mosque more appealing than seeking a labor-centric job in the city after dropping out. While secular schooling may bring prosperity to these Muslim Hui students as is commonly believed, religious education could also bring good fortune as well as respect to someone if he would become an *Ahong* in the future.

Tingting's brother is currently an *Ahong* in a mosque located in a coastal city. Even without secular schooling, he managed to graduate from an Islamic seminar and found an *Ahong* job. "Now he is making good money, and he has a family started there," Tingting told me. "I have been to his city, and I really like it there. I wish I could be like him." Tingting's brother had showed Tingting an alternative path to prosperity without secular schooling. The brother doesn't have to endure physical pain from agriculture work like his ancestors, and he is not doing labor-centric work in the city like many dropouts would after failing out of secular school. Religious education has brought him a prosperous and spiritual life.

Similarly, Rui told me that he admired his father, an *Ahong*, and he wanted to follow his father's path. Rui's father decided to attend religious education after completing third grade, and now he is a well-known and well-respected *Ahong* in his and nearby villages. He sometimes travels to neighboring villages to conduct religious rituals in the mosques. Although he doesn't have a stable income, he is able to sustain the family

with local Muslims' monetary contributions. Not only Rui but also some other resisters aspire to religious education and the *Ahong* occupation, as they are important and respected in Muslims' lives. Since some of these Muslim Hui students have prior knowledge of the Koran from regularly attending mosques prior to beginning secular schooling, pursuing religious education seems natural for them to continue and make a living from.

Strugglers. While I observed that large numbers of students fall into the resister group, there are some strugglers trying to survive through secular schooling with a hope of success and changed destinies, like Haizhe. Unlike the resisters, students in this group are usually motivated by their interpretations of filial and rural identities, but they are stuck in a cycle of academic disappointments and pressure, continuously receiving low test scores and unable to improve their performance because their elementary schools didn't prepare them with enough knowledge to handle the learning activities of middle school. Having been required by their Muslim parents to maintain their ethnoreligious identity, they are even more stressed. In the following, I describe how this type of student negotiates his/her filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identity through constructing a school identity as a good and happy student.

Being good students. When I was on campus, I often heard the sentence, "I like to come to school, but I don't like to study" from various students. School is a fun place to be, but performing well in school is difficult and requires tremendous effort. I liked to ask students how they defined being a good student, and most answers I received centered on two key points: studying well and behaving well. Ma Li is one of the top students in the

8th grade. She said, “A good student has to show that his/her grades are outstanding and his/her individual quality is good. Quality is about how to get along with others, your hobbies, and all kinds of aspects.” Jiayu, a mediocre student, stated, “[A good student] should study hard, pay close attention to studying, not fight with others or make noises in class.” Linyuan, a transfer student, expressed her opinion: “First, you have to be a good person; second, you have to have good grades; third, you are willing to help others.” Anlin, an underperforming student, echoed the others’ comments: “We need to develop into and become good students as our teachers expect…being developed all-around in morality, intellectuality, and physicality.” Their understandings suggest that both grades and morality count toward being a good student. When strugglers are motivated to learn and succeed in school, they tend not to interrupt the school routines and rituals. They are also less likely to commit morally unacceptable behaviors or non-*Suzhi* actions. Their pressures and struggles in school are mainly due to their inability to get good grades, which could hinder them from striving to do well in the test-oriented educational system and future career.

Reading through strugglers’ weekly journals and listening to their worries during my interviews, I slowly came to understand how important being a good student is to them, in the sense of getting high test scores. Being a good student is not only an indicator that the student has the potential to fulfill filial piety, but it also shows parents that the student will be able to change the family’s rural destiny. If Haizhe, in the above story, is not a good student, she will disappoint her parents. Because of the pressure of being good, strugglers experienced growing impatience, anxiety and nervousness, as

revealed in their written texts and comments. Lan timidly said, “I spend a day like going through a year in school.” “I am scared to sit there like a vegetable,” a girl sitting in the front row wrote. Mingyan whispered in our interview, “I am always worried about failing my English test.” Xielin also said forthrightly, “I don’t understand anything the teacher taught about Algebra.” Wenyan scribbled in her journal, “I felt enormously stressed, but this is the toughest and inevitable stage I have to go through in order to pass the High School Entrance Exam. I can’t release my emotions, and I feel depressed every day.”

Being happy students. While strugglers are worried about the academic performance that is the first step to fulfilling their filial piety and to changing their rural identity, they also find ways to entertain themselves. Temporarily forgetting about fulfilling filial piety and enjoying time with friends in school gives them some room to release the pressure they feel and prepare for the next task. For example, Yamei used to tell me that she wouldn’t ever get lonely at school because she has a lot of good friends. At home, Yamei is the only child left with her father—everyone else in her family is in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, running a Halal restaurant. Lei was also excited to introduce to me her sworn Hui brothers and Hui sisters on campus with whom she has established brotherly and sisterly love under oath. After winter break, she eagerly expressed her happiness in her journal:

> School life starts again, and tomorrow will be a new day. I return to the studying time that belongs to me, and I forget all bad things. The campus seems a little strange, but it makes me happy. I am so happy to see teachers, friends, classmates, new teachers, new classmates. Everyone makes me feel happier and happier.

She couldn’t stop smiling at everyone when I saw her again on campus. She was very happy to catch up with her friends and even her teachers. Rui, a half-resister and half-struggler, similarly wrote in his journal that “Students talk and laugh; students shout and goof around; students cry loudly” to express how vibrant the campus life could be for him. Though he sometimes follows a few powerful resisters around, he is motivated to learn for his father, a well-known and highly-respected local *Ahong*.

One of the student-created rituals and a major extracurricular activity on campus is singing songs after self-studying hours at night. I observed that at least two students in each female dorm room would have songbooks, in which students handwrite lyrics and stick small pictures of singers by their songs. For male students, cell phones are used to check song lyrics, although I didn’t know how they had snuck in their phones prohibited by the school. During the six months I was there, I was privileged to listen to them sing every single night, different songs by different student singers. During the day, they struggled with learning. It was only at night that I was able to watch their talents being released--mainly singing accompanied by dancing, roleplaying, and mimicry. It was only at night that I could sense their feelings of loneliness, helplessness, painfulness, and uneasiness replaced by happiness, zealousness, and craziness. Singing songs was a way to channel their pressures and share their passion and happiness with each other. They look forward to that moment of being themselves at night, new but somehow old selves. They test, and then they fail; they try to understand, and then they forget; they retry, and then nothing seems to change, but they never give up. Some of them may succeed after trying many times. They are happy, they have friends, and they are at least temporarily

free of worries and pressures, but they constantly remind themselves what it means for them to be Muslim Hui students.

Juggling academic excellence and ethnoreligious practice. Strugglers become more stressed when they are expected to maintain their ethnoreligious identity. When I walked into Bai's dorm room as my regular routine on one weekday night, a few girls had already started discussing their plans for their winter break. "My mom wants me to go to the mosque to learn Koran," Yonghua said to her friends. "My parents want me do the same," Xiaoling followed. "My parents want to send me to the mosque in town," Xueling shrugged and continued, "It would cost about 360 RMB for two months to cover room and board." Jing, the top student in her class, almost yelled out but with her soft voice, "No, I don't want to go." She was very serious about this, saying, "I have to study for math and English." "But, what if your parents decide for you?" "I would tell them I refuse to go and I don't care," Jing interrupted Yamei. "I want to go to the mosque," Hong giggled at everyone and said, "otherwise I would have to take classes during break." These interesting conversations may not occur in other rural middle schools in China, but they are typical of Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu region.

Muslim Hui students are given the hope of fulfilling their families' dreams of escaping from long-term poverty with skills and knowledge gained in school. However, on their way to achieving prosperity and fulfilling filial piety through secular schooling, these young Muslim Hui girls have to go to mosque to learn Koranic scripts when they are not in school, whether involuntarily, willingly, or indifferently. Traditionally, Muslim

families require their children to attend mosque education prior to attending secular schools. Mosque education is part of their life, equally as important as secular education.

The debate about whether to go to a cram school, an afterschool intensive program during breaks to help underperforming students to improve their grades in Math and English, or going to mosque to learn Koranic scripts at breaks probably never ends. Its resolution for a particular student really depends on how both Muslim Hui parents and students perceive secular education and religious education. Lanhua proudly told me before the winter break that she would go to mosque to learn Koran. When I returned, she was not as happy to share with me how much she learned in the mosque:

> I woke up at 8 every day, and went to mosque to learn Koranic texts for four hours in the morning. In the afternoon, I studied for awhile and helped my parents do some family chorus. But after all this, I don't think I have reviewed anything for my Math and English. Now I feel that I can't catch up with everyone else.

This is the dilemma she has to juggle, being academically excellent or ethnoreligiously active. On the day I went to her house during the Tomb Sweeping Festival in April, a Chinese holiday local Muslim Hui have adopted to commemorate their ancestors, I came to better understand such a dilemma and how it was embedded and integrated into many Muslim Hui students' lives. Invited by her father, I was fortunate to spend the long weekend with this simple and faithful family, instead of being left alone on campus.

I was moved and touched by what I learned, saw, and felt during the visit. A boy of 8 had already started helping his parents collect unneeded potatoes and cut them up to feed sheep; he had learned how to do this when he was 3. Now he is able to accompany

his grandpa to shepherd sheep twice a day. The youngest 5-year-old daughter is also capable of carrying a big shovel and handing it to her mom for putting the plastic cover on the soil. She can also sweep the courtyard and fetch small things for her parents and sisters. The older sister, age 15, had dropped out of school the same year I was there, and now she wears a headscarf and goes to mosque to learn Koran. She cooks, does laundry, and helps with other family chores. After her sister dropped out, Lanhua became the hope of the family, as she was already doing well in school.

In the sunny afternoon I was there, I sat down on the doorstep to the kitchen, watching the parents get ready for potato planting. The little boy pulled out a small table and began to do his homework; the little sister wasn't in school yet, but she mimicked her brother, taking a notebook out and writing numbers on it; the older sister was quietly sitting on the *Kang*, reading Koran from a book. The sunlight peeked into the window and shone upon her purple headscarf. She wasn't disturbed even when I secretly took a picture of her. Lanhua was washing her hair in the courtyard, preparing herself for more schooling. It was just a beautiful family portrait in front of me, peaceful, faithful, and joyful. While the sun was about to burn my eyes, the little girl interrupted me and used her calculator to quiz me on some math problems. The little boy wanted me to hear him reciting the story of "亡羊补牢", a tale from Chinese folklore about mending the fold after the sheep has been stolen, taught in elementary school. Both parents were laughing when they saw two little kids trying to show off their skills in front of me. I asked the little boy whether he wanted to herd sheep or go to college, and he answered with a big smile on his face, "I want to go to college." He probably knew that he would have a

better future with education, and he has already started his academic journey and so far done well. At dusk, the father excused himself for the prayer in the mosque right across the street from the hill his house is located upon.

The next morning, the four children led me up to the mountaintop at the back of their house. The wind was gusting, the girls' pink and purple beaded headscarves were flying, but their steps were moving upward. The plum trees were blossoming, the wild flowers and berries were growing, and they were about to reach the top. I snapped a shot of them when they lined up vertically and all turned around to face me with big smiles. This is where they were born and raised, and they can't leave it behind; however, they are determined to pursue a better life somewhere else even with hurdles along the way. They are hopeful like blossomed plums, fighting against the wind and struggling to stay on the branches. The tint of pink and purple were so bright in such a barren land, where Islam, as a spiritual power, supports local Muslim Hui to live and thrive.

Straddlers. On one hand, I was pulling and pushing the saw with resisters to find appropriate ways of teaching them; on the other hand, I was moved by strugglers who were determined and motivated to learn but were pressured by their academic disappointments and fulfillment of their multiple identities. In this section, I explore straddlers and their unique approach to compulsory education.

The term "straddlers" is adopted from Carter (2006), who argues that straddlers are those who are able to "traverse" cultural and ethnic boundaries in the school environment and become competent in multiple cultures. His argument is based on studies of African American and Latino students in the United States, but I use his notion

to describe Muslim Hui students in the local community who straddle across the school gate to experience both Han and Muslim Hui cultures. In addition to Carter's notion of straddlers as knowing both dominant and non-dominant cultures, the Muslim Hui students in my study additionally straddle theistic and atheistic worlds and encounter ideological challenges. Therefore, the Muslim Hui straddlers in a rural Chinese school are a type of Muslim Hui student who are not only motivated and academically successful, but also capable of linking secular education with religious education and associating present life with afterlife. They are familiar with the school culture as well as Muslim Hui culture, through which they construct an integrated self. Guoqin, one of the students in the story above who finds balance between secular education and religious education, is a typical student in this group.

Preparing for the best and thinking realistically. Previously, I mentioned that some resistant Muslim Hui students consider the *Ahong* profession their only career goal, so they refuse to even try in the secular school. Among the straddlers, the *Ahong* profession is just one of their career options after they graduate. When straddlers believe that they are capable of testing into high schools and possibly landing jobs in well-paid professions, they are motivated to try so that they can fulfill their filial piety, escape from poverty, and likely bring fortune and honor to the local community. They could remain ethnoreligiously active while their filial identity is satisfied and their rural identity is reinterpreted. However, straddlers also think realistically when the plan of going to college is forfeited along the way. They have already been taught how to read Koranic scripts from a young age, and they actively practice Islam as much as they can when they

are not at school—on weekends or during school breaks. After all, they believe they can use the cultural knowledge gained through secular schooling to better understand and comprehend Islamic doctrines when they receive additional Islamic training in the mosques or seminaries. Rather than purely reciting Koranic scripts as many of them are currently learning to do, straddlers would learn Koran faster and possibly go study abroad in a Muslim country to further improve their Arabic language, a route a few of my Muslim friends took after graduating from seminary.

In our interview, Tianhua, a top Muslim Hui student, told me that she once brought her Koranic texts with her to school and read them with some friends at night or during their spare time:

> I also asked them [friends] to bring their Koranic texts with them, and I could teach them and read some scripts with them. At that time, we did that every other week. But now we don't have time, so we have to give it up.

Both Tianhua and her parents consider both secular education and religious education important in pursuing the life they wish for. Like Guoqin, Tianhua is able to read the basic Koranic scripts after a few years of attending mosque education during school breaks. "My parents will send me somewhere to learn Koran if I fail the College Entrance Exam." She seems to have already paved her path out of the community, whether high school or Koran study. At school, she tries hard to study and enjoys a happy life with her friends.

Residing in duality. Before I entered the field, I heard that if Muslim Hui students are secularly educated, they are likely to acculturate to the mainstream and dominant Han

culture. Similarly, previous studies of education among the Muslim Hui or other ethnic groups tend to focus on the power of cultural reproduction in the school and hardly discuss ethnoreligious responses to secular schooling. However, after having lived in the Muslim Hui region for a few months, I learned that Muslim Hui students believe that they would maintain their ethnoreligious identity even when they have difficulty in accessing Halal food or going to mosque in Han-dominated areas. This finding may be in part due to the fact that the local community is Muslim Hui dominated, and Muslim Hui students have had few opportunities to be exposed to Han culture and be assimilated.

From this different perspective, I discover that straddlers may actually be able to construct a separate but interrelated space to prepare themselves for a future life of duality, both secular and spiritual. When Yamei, a Muslim Hui girl, imagined her future for me, she said, “Students can go to college and find positions in society, then they would have the power to influence others and bring more benefits to the Muslim Hui ethnic group.” This statement reflects how secular education is understood as a path to empowering Muslim Hui students and ultimately benefiting the Hui group. Returning to the community, they are able to preserve their ethnoreligious identity as they keep practicing Islamic traditions. I can’t predict what will happen in five years when they graduate from high school; neither can I estimate how ideological change will impact the community in the future after more Muslim parents are willing to send their children to school. However, their current understanding of secularity and ethnoreligiosity already challenges my preconceptions of Muslim Hui.

In order to further problematize my preconceptions, I evoked discussions with Muslim Hui students about how they will deal with the situation of attending college in a Han dominant city. By sharing with them my experience outside Xihaigu, I established a few possible scenarios for them where Han culture might interfere with and penetrate their daily lives.

Linyuan responded to the scenario in which she was asked to eat out with her Han friends to a non-Halal restaurant, and she said that she would order vegetarian dishes or dishes without pork. “I think Han would understand us,” she confidently added to her answer. Li replied to the scenario where Halal food was unavailable, and she said that she would buy vegetables and cook for herself. “As a Muslim Hui, I have to go to a Halal restaurant to eat, and I will try my best to do so.” She is unshaken by the potential challenges. Similarly, Xielin stated that she would use her own cooking utensils and eat her own food without touching Han food. Mingyan already knew what would happen to her outside her hometown when I gave her a similar scenario:

> My brother is already in a city. He told me that he has to go to a faraway place to eat because the school doesn’t have Halal restaurants. He goes to a mosque far from his apartment, and he has to take the taxi to get there.

She seemed worried about whether she would be able to adapt to that kind of life, and she commented that she would rather stay closer to home where Halal food is abundant. Tingting addressed the scenario about when Muslim holidays were not celebrated, and she said that she would remember the holidays and celebrate them on her own. Rende’s response complemented the others’: “I can’t forget myself as a Muslim Hui, and I am

emotionally tied to my belief. I think I would have a hard time when I get a chance to go to college in a Han-dominated region." Tianhua additionally felt that she would eventually return to her hometown after college because Xihaigu is where her roots are and the center of her life.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how compulsory education is questioned, challenged, and believed by Muslim Hui students through negotiating their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities. While some Muslim Hui students believe in the value of compulsory education for fulfilling their own and their family's dreams and strive to achieve prosperity, others question the opportunities compulsory education promises to bring after they graduate and challenge the educational activities in hope of negotiating a space to construct a school life of their own. It also discussed the different strategies Muslim Hui students—including resisters, strugglers, and straddlers—adopt in the process of negotiating multiple identities. It concluded that the straddlers are most likely to perform well in school, as they are not only motivated to learn with a hope of changing their present life but also persist in their belief in preparation for the afterlife. A life of duality, both secular and religious, is where secular education and religious education intersect.

Chapter Seven

Why Xihaigu?

Significance, Implications, and Reflections

Introduction

It was another sunny Tuesday, and it was my last day at Prosperity Middle School. Waking up with the school bell just like any other day, I started to pack my belongings and organize the materials I had used while I was there. School was still in session, but I didn't need to attend to its routinized schedule today; instead, I stayed in my room and prepared for my departure. I cherished the collegiality and friendship I was able to develop during the months I spent at the school. I realized that some of the teachers had to teach and administer corporal punishment this day, and others may have to enforce *Suzhi* behaviors. The leaders probably had to deliver a few encouraging lectures on the imagined future of prosperity, too. I didn't want to miss seeing any of them before I left because they had taught me through their experience and knowledge in implementing compulsory education and secular schooling in this rural middle school in a Muslim Hui region, as they constantly struggled between policy and practice.

I was also glad that I had said my farewells to the students the night before, when I visited the dorms and expressed my appreciation for their participating in my research and the hospitality they showed when I visited their homes. My last dorm visit was like my dorm visit on any other night, listening to them singing songs and chatting with them about future possibilities. I even showed them my western dance moves, as I had promised to do before I left. I knew they had to follow the school routines today while I

was packing in my dorm, whether resisting, struggling, or adapting to this secular school system.

The only people I missed seeing were the Muslim parents I had visited and chatted with on the *Kangs* for those unforgettable weekends, the delicious meals they prepared for me, the local knowledge they shared and taught me, and the places they introduced to me. It was probably just another busy day of work on the farms for them as I was about to leave. I pictured their faces and how they talked to me in the local dialect. I recalled that some were determined to change their children's destinies through secular schooling, others were depending on their children to decide their own futures, and many were unaware of their children's academic performance and left their education to teachers and the school.

In the meantime, Principal Ma called and informed me that the school leaders would host a farewell lunch for me, just like the one I had when I arrived. I said to myself that this would likely be the time that I had to resume my "Professor" identity to follow the rural social etiquette, expressing my gratitude through sharing food and drink. I would probably have to defend my Chineseness and Muslim Huiness when brushing off some local jokes about Americans, since Principal Ma never seemed to give up making fun of me being Americanized in the U.S.

The morning flew by, and my packing was almost done. I was also told that Teacher Shan would drive me to the nearest town where there would be a bus heading to a nearby city, and then I would be able to transfer to another bus going to a bigger city and take a train back to my hometown. After leaving Xihaigu, I probably would never see

any other places like it again. It is distinctive in its construction and reproduction of generations of Muslim Hui and its land of history, culture, and the Islamic religion. I personally already felt that my identity as a Muslim Hui had grown stronger since coming here. I didn't have to consciously remind myself to present my Muslim Hui identity to seek recognition or validate my uniqueness as I had before I came to Xihaigu. Muslim Hui people in this land had taught me that their Islamic beliefs and practices had guided and blessed them to survive through difficult times. I wondered what compulsory education would do to further affect local Muslim Hui views of secular schooling and life choices in general.

The bus was traveling on the winding road, turning left and right and leaving the mountains behind, and I felt as though Xihaigu itself would soon be only a memory populated by a group of Muslim Hui students. For many of them, leaving Xihaigu is difficult. It costs 10 RMB ($1.50 USD) to take a *Dandanche* from Prosperity Middle School to the nearest town and another 20 RMB ($3.50 USD) to take a bus to the nearest city. The total cost of $5 USD comprises three to four weeks of their pocket money. Maybe secular education would someday perform the magic it is perceived and expected to, of bringing prosperity and changing the destinies of these Muslim Hui families.

Riding the bus, I reflected on my fieldwork, thinking about my experience with the research and with myself as a Muslim Hui being constantly challenged and involved in negotiating my own identities in the school. I recalled a conversation with Lan after a night visit to the female dorms. She was asking me if I was mad that day because of the chaos that had occurred in the classroom. I told her I wasn't mad but only a little

frustrated with students not being able to perform well in class. At the end of our conversation, she was afraid to tell me in her barely audible voice, “Teacher Wu, you came to our school with hopes, but you were disappointed in our academic performance; now you are probably giving up any hope in us.” Her three words hope, disappointment, and hopelessness incisively summarized the identity negotiations I personally experienced. I went into the field with high hopes of learning about secular education for Muslim Hui students in China and how these students were agentically constructing and negotiating their identities. I was filled with hope to complete my research successfully as well as to make a difference in the school. While I was at the school, however, I gradually lost my confidence in teaching because I felt disappointed about how my effort went down the drain. I struggled through some difficult times in dealing with resisters. By the end of my fieldwork, I had probably turned into a desperate and hopeless teacher in the students’ eyes, trying to push them to study, but it seemed that everything remained unchanged. After all, my takeaway from staying and living in this community is that my ethnoreligious identity has been strengthened to the extent that I am confident in communicating with the most conservative Muslim Hui people in China, although I continuously question my identity as a teacher in the field.

My personal journey of identity negotiation resonates with my most significant finding: rather than being integrated and assimilated into the dominant Han culture by secular schooling, Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu are developing strategies to construct and negotiate their multiple identities in response to the power of compulsory education/secular schooling. I have seen how Muslim Hui students struggle under the

test-driven educational system that advocates *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* and claims a strong linkage between education and prosperity, I have listened to how local Muslim Hui parents talk about *Nianshu* (secular schooling) and *Nianjing* (religious education) as well as their expectations for their children's futures, and I have additionally witnessed the performance Muslim Hui students put on every day in questioning and challenging secular schooling and finding a space to survive between their community and their school. However, as far as their lives are concerned, compulsory education hasn't considerably alleviated poverty and significantly improved the quality of life in the local community. Many Muslim Hui students' life paths remain similar to their predecessors'. Therefore, I conclude my dissertation with three findings to reflect on my different observations.

First, the implementation of compulsory education/secular schooling in Xihaigu, just like in other parts of China, is guided by the two discourses of *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi*, and it aims to produce well-rounded students in terms of morality, intellectual knowledge, and physical fitness. However, unlike other places in China, the implementation of compulsory education in Xihaigu takes place in a gated middle school surrounded by a dominant Muslim Hui culture that both embraces secular schooling and dismisses it. The culture of compulsory education is understood, appropriated, and interpreted differently in this Hui-dominant region as it constructs an imagined future of prosperity for educated rural Muslim Hui students. Through structured and ritualized routines and pedagogical practices, especially recitation of textbooks and corporal punishment, a group of Muslim Hui students are being transformed based on *Suzhi*

standards and trained to be competent in test taking with a goal of changing their families' destinies. However, the nationalism and patriotism that is especially pertinent to defining ethnic minority Muslim Hui as part of the Chinese nation by the Chinese government is practiced only as decoration and performance in the school. In a word, on the one hand, *Zhiliang and Suzhi* discourses are being reproduced through daily practices; on the other hand, teachers and students in Xihaigu also actively participate in producing the culture of secular schooling as they perceive and understand it.

While the culture of compulsory education is being both produced and reproduced in the school, it remains unfamiliar to but has gradually become known to the local Muslim Hui community via the enforced Compulsory Education Law and increased recruitment efforts aimed at school-aged Muslim Hui students. Free secular schooling has enticed growing numbers of poor Muslim Hui parents to send their children to school in the hope of expanded opportunities for achieving prosperity, whereas better-off Muslim Hui families, especially those with established family businesses in the local community, see limited economic returns from compulsory education and express neutrality and indifference to secular schooling. Nevertheless, Muslim Hui views of secular schooling have noticeably shifted, with some strongly believing in a high return on compulsory education for students' future job prospects and others considering the value of education in its improving their children's levels of literacy and numeracy. With Muslim Hui students overwhelmingly engaged in secular education on weekdays, Muslim Hui parents still enforce the tradition of religious education or learning to read Koranic texts on weekends and during school breaks. In the end, the challenges for parents of

schoolchildren include difficulty in collaborating with the school in monitoring students' performance due to lack of familiarity with school culture and, in some cases, ambivalent attitudes toward the economic value of secular schooling.

With the culture of secular schooling and the culture of the local Muslim community intertwined to a certain extent, Muslim Hui students, the main participants in this secular school, are enmeshed in a space of expectations from both teachers and parents. They realize their filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities and try to negotiate them in the school through resistance, struggle, and traversing the border of secularity and ethnoreligiosity. They experience the contestations between filiality and self-development, between rural identity and imagined prosperity, and between secularity and ethnoreligiosity. They are motivated to learn to please their parents, but this means they must endure great pressure to learn and perform well. They feel that they are vulnerable to an unpredictable future, but this does not mean all of them are comfortable with their present life. They want to maintain their differences in religious beliefs, but they are fine with getting a similar educational experience to others. Diverse in life choices and family backgrounds, this group of Muslim Hui students is learning to negotiate multiple identities for the life they seek to pursue, whether for the community, their parents, or themselves; their ethnoreligious identity, however, remains unchallenged, as they claim that nothing would change their practices of Islam at present or in the future. *Qingzhen* is and will be in their minds to reflect their identity as Muslim Hui.

As I look back at my fieldwork, I have become convinced that Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu never cease constructing and negotiating a dual life of secularity and

ethnoreligiosity, whether willingly, indifferently, or forcefully. Constrained by the culture of the compulsory education system and given multiple identities, these Muslim Hui students frequently both negotiate their given identities and attempt to achieve their own identities. In the future, some may turn into urban Muslim Hui; others will probably remain rural.

Seeing myself being challenged by my ethnoreligious, urban, and foreign identities and consciously negotiating my identities in conversations and interactions with different local actors, I recognize the tensions created by my urban and foreign status as well as the ethnoreligious identity I present. In all my months in the field, I also carried out internal and external dialogues and adjusted my Muslim Hui identity according to local interpretations and understanding of Islam, and this is how I developed trust and friendship with the local Muslim Hui people in order to learn about their experience and life in one of the most remote and poverty-stricken regions of China. This is also how I learned about myself as a Muslim Hui, grew to appreciate my Islamic origins, and rekindled a forgotten part of myself after having lived in Han-dominated urban China and the U.S. for much of my adult life. Downplaying my identity as a Muslim Hui in urban China and prioritizing my identity as a Chinese in the U.S. for various unintentional and intentional reasons, I have struggled with my minority identity and strived to realize identities of my choice. Returning to Xihaigu, I found myself acquiring a majority status that I can identify and affiliate with using my limited Islamic knowledge. Leaving Xihaigu, I regained my minority status but with a strong attachment to the people I studied. The identities of these Muslims Hui students are not static or unitary but fluid

and shifting, just like how I have experienced my own identity formation for many years. However, we are on different life paths, and I never completely belonged to the place. I wonder about how I could explain to them that I sometimes got lost in the puzzle of finding and presenting my multiple identities.

Significance: Theory, Policy, and Practice

Putting my thick and rich descriptions of my findings and my self-reflection aside, I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and cultural significance of this study in terms of challenging the binary relationship between national educational policies and ethnic identity, adding a dimension to interpreting ethnic majority/minority dynamics in understanding cultural pluralism and unified multiculturalism in China. I emphasize the ethnoreligious identity of students to emphasize the cultural significance of the Muslim Hui population and its importance to understanding the context of defined ethnic minorities in China.

Policy and practice. As I stated in Chapter Two, the chapter on my theoretical framework, both cultural reproduction and cultural production contribute to our understanding of rural Muslim Hui students' experience in school. Compulsory education for ethnic minorities is in effect in Xihaigu, but its test-oriented implementation is understood, practiced, and appropriated differently and causes tensions and struggles for teachers, parents, and Muslim Hui students. It is insufficient to simply claim a binary relationship between the national government and individual students to explain the experience of this group of Muslim Hui students as they are integrated into a unified and harmonious multicultural nation through secular schooling. The experience of this group

is unique and enriched with teachers, parents, and students and their perceptions, interpretations, and responses in the process of policy implementation and co-constructions of a sociocultural context. The culture of compulsory education is being reproduced with *Zhiliang* and *Suzhi* guiding the practice of education, while the teaching and learning culture at Prosperity Middle School is being produced by teachers and students according to their understandings and interpretations. The notions of resisters, strugglers, and straddlers discussed in Chapter Six vividly demonstrates that Muslim Hui students engage in processes of both cultural reproduction and cultural production, during which they gradually internalize the culture of compulsory education as they produce their own cultural practices, such as the acceptance of corporal punishment.

Policy is "a complex social practice, an ongoing process of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse social and institutional contexts," as Levinson and Sutton argue (2001, p. 1). In this study, I attempted to "de-center the nation-state from its privileged position as the fundamental entity in comparative research" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009, p. 11), and focus instead on the national-local relationship to reveal how compulsory education policies are carried out in partially fulfilling their role of constructing the experience for Muslim Hui students in a secular school located in a Muslim Hui dominant region. Most importantly, I discovered that teachers, parents, and students were all involved in this process of policy appropriation and cultural reproduction/production through pedagogical practices, the perceived value of education, and negotiations of multiple identities. The complexity of the local community was manifested through the entangled filial, rural, and ethnoreligious

identities of Muslim Hui students, and such complexity is uncovered and captured via a sociocultural lens and diverse local responses to the structured policies. Having revealed how Muslim Hui students in Xihaigu respond to compulsory education and express their multiple identities, these findings fill a gap in the existing literature that overemphasizes the power of national governance and overlooks individual students' agency. The findings also paint a picture of how some ethnic minority students maintain a dual life between secularity and ethnoreligiosity.

Ethnic minorities. In addition to challenging the binary relationship between national education policies and ethnic identity, the study also calls attention to re-examining the term "ethnic minority" as used in education policies, which may overemphasize different approaches to educating ethnic minorities for the purpose of attaining harmonious multiculturalism in the country. Throughout the three findings chapters, I emphasize the changing dynamics of ethnic minority and majority in the local context to articulate the impacts of such dynamics on policy implementation and identity negotiation. As Postiglione (2008) also noted in his study of education for Tibetans in autonomous regions, ethnic identity issues are less prominent in poor and rural areas because Tibetans seldom encounter other ethnic groups. Similarly, in my study, the Muslim Hui are the local majority, but they are defined by the government as an ethnic minority; the Han are the local minority, but they are defined by the government as the majority. When the government labels the Muslim Hui an "ethnic minority", it tends to focus attention on the aspect of "minority" and execute policies aimed at ethnic

minorities. This practice may overlook other sociocultural characteristics of this specific ethnic group.

The Muslim Hui are not only ethnic minorities, but they highly value family relationships like the Han people do, have similar life experiences to many other rural Han, and share Islamic traditions with nine other ethnic groups. Some of the struggles and difficulties Muslim Hui students encounter in school are not particularly unique, because students in other rural middle schools also face similar situations. Their majority status in the local community may call for different policies for better results. It is probably ill-considered to treat the 55 national ethnic minority groups as a single group in comparison to the dominant Han majority. It is also inadequate to frame education for ethnic minorities in terms of a homogenous approach as opposed to the education for the majority Han. The overemphasis on ethnic minority education in policy discourses could reify preconceived majority-minority inequality in social and cultural recognition (DeJaeghere, Wu, & Vu, 2013). As this study shows, the struggles Muslim Hui students experience in school are not all about ethnicity but are derived from an array of economic, social, and political tensions unique to this region. The Muslim Hui, as the local majority, play a key role in forming a vibrant society and culture that is distinctive in some aspects and also has commonalities with other cultures in other aspects. The filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities are observably pertinent to the co-constructions of the Muslim Hui students' school experience. The preconceived inequality framed in policy discourses, such as ethnic minorities being economically backward and culturally uncivilized in comparison to the Han, is also questioned by some students.

Ethnoreligious identity. This study also challenges the idea that compulsory education may not have the assimilative and acculturative power to integrate ethnic minorities, as some other scholarship concludes. By recognizing persistent Islamic practices in the local community, at least while I was in Xihaigu, it would be more accurate to argue that this group of Muslim Hui was negotiating a dual life of secularity and ethnoreligiousity. The Muslim Hui resisters, strugglers, and straddlers I discussed in Chapter Six are constructing life paths by integrating their separate secular and religious worlds in and out of school at different levels. The resisters follow their parents' paths to take on labor-centric work on farms or in cities, with the majority of them purposely choosing to stay in northwestern regions where Islamic practices are relatively prevalent. The strugglers try to be good and happy students while still making time to learn Koranic texts during school breaks. Reflecting on what Tianhua shared, "Our learning in the school is for the present life, and learning Koran is to prepare us for a better afterlife," the straddlers are more competent in traversing school life and religious life and are not gradually assimilating to the dominant culture. I became convinced that an acculturative or assimilative binary approach to understanding Muslim Hui ethnoreligious identity or other identities is insufficient. I finally come to comprehend the essence and significance of the following saying from a Muslim father after immersing myself in the field for all those months:

> One is *Jiaofa* (教法) or religious teachings, and another is *Xuefa* (学法) or school teachings. [Children] have to study some school teachings, and they also have to study some religious teachings. The learning hall is in the school, and the

> religious hall is in the mosque. [Children] should be educated with both.…They are not contradictory, and both are for knowledge learning. For Hui, *Nianjing* is to learn spiritual knowledge. You have to study well in the school and learn well about spirituality.

Learning in a secular school is not always linked to assimilation to the mainstream culture; rather, the relationship between secularity and ethnoreligiosity are multifaceted and filled with diverse interpretations. The process of cultural reproduction and production continue to shape and reshape the school experience. The father's saying not only represents the local interpretation of the relationship between secular and religious education based on unique familial, economic, and social contexts, but it also demonstrates that secular schooling may actually be able to enhance ethnoreligious identity to certain extent, such as in the example of straddlers, who are competent in both worlds.

Implications

Besides theoretical and cultural significance, the study also has implications for compulsory education among rural ethnic minorities in China. Focusing on one ethnic group's cultural understanding of secular schooling, it aims at uncover the underlying tensions that challenge local implementation of educational policies, which provides insights for examinations of compulsory education in other sociocultural contexts. These implications include localizing policies, supporting parents and establishing school-family-community partnerships, and recognizing students' needs.

Localizing policies. I have showed in my findings chapters how national educational policies have guided local education practices and led to economic, social, and cultural tensions in the local community. Without localization of these policies, the potential value of education would probably remain hypothetical for local Muslim Hui students. For example, one policy that has been recently introduced prohibits students from repeating a grade they have failed. Although local teachers and administrators seem unable to clearly articulate the reasons behind this specific policy, they feel the pressure of pushing students to graduate, otherwise students lose their seats in the High School Entrance Exam and would be disqualified from the exam the next year. With this policy, teachers have to constantly lecture students, "Don't think you can slack off this year and retake the exam next year like before. You can't do it anymore," which is seen as a way of forcing students to engage in academic activities. The reality is that many students, both unwilling and willingly, drop out after 8th grade after losing motivation to learn and confidence that they can pass the High School Entrance Exam. The implementation of this policy has discouraged some students from maintaining interest in secular schooling, for they believe that they are not given another chance to improve their learning. If this policy could be modified to account for the local context, such the poor knowledge foundation common among students in this area, at least some students who strive to learn would succeed after a few attempts.

In addition, as I indicate in my study, the compulsory education implemented in rural ethnic regions faces multidimensional challenges. Some Muslim Hui students do not consider compulsory education as a path to their future, and neither do some Muslim

parents. Muslim Hui parents are mostly illiterate and lack the ability to help their children learn as parents in urban China usually do. Parents' not paying much attention to education in the past also makes compulsory education hard to execute in the present. Therefore, educational policies advocated by the central government, such as education for *Suzhi*, should be localized to meet local needs. For example, the Communist Party leader at Prosperity Middle School once told me that the national promotion of a student-centered teaching approach, believed to be able to improve education for *Suzhi*, is not suitable for the village due to the large class sizes and many unmotivated students at Prosperity Middle School. Corporal punishment is more effective in pushing students to pass the High School Entrance Exam. Echoing this opinion, Vice Principal Ma succinctly summarized the local approach to compulsory education: "Suzhi Jiaoyu Honghonglielie, Yingshi Jiaoyu Zhazhashishi," or "*Suzhi* education is advocated vigorously, but test-driven education is practiced solidly" (素质教育轰轰烈烈，应试教育扎扎实实). While a student-centered method may be effective in urban contexts, it probably can't be transferred directly to rural settings because of differences in the characteristics of students and the sociocultural environment for learning. "Students will be hard to discipline if they are the center of learning," Principal Ma firmly stated. Therefore, it is essential to take context into consideration and rethink what rural ethnic minority education aims to achieve, be it improving literacy and numeracy, preparing students for high school education, or expanding students' opportunities for non-farm jobs in the future. A local teacher's opinion on dropouts corresponds to this point: if students learn something irrelevant and are destined to fail, they waste not just the time they spent in

school but also the time they could have spent learning farming and livestock breeding skills as well as building their physical strength.

Supporting parents and establishing school-family-community partnerships. In Chapter Five, I articulated how Muslim parents divergently perceive compulsory education and secular schooling and how they feel unequipped to collaborate with the school to monitor their children's academic performance. Unlike the relationship between the school and parents in urban regions, the communication between Prosperity Middle School and Muslim Hui parents in the community is minimal, since teachers struggle to deliver school messages to parents via students or phone calls. Muslim Hui parents also make only limited efforts to educate themselves about secular schooling. Although my study did not delineate the types of Muslim Hui parents who tend to communicate more or less with the school and the current ways in which Muslim parents do communicate with the school, it does reveal that Muslim Hui parents have limited ability to help their children succeed in school. My findings are supported by those of Hannum and Adams (2008) in their study of rural schooling in Gansu province. Although they didn't specifically focus on the ethnic minority population in rural Gansu, they concluded that rural schooling in other parts of China face the same challenge I illustrated in my study: a dearth of effective parental educational support. Therefore, when compulsory education is implemented in rural ethnic regions, a support system should also be put into place to play the role of parents in helping students in need of educational support. Schools in rural ethnic regions should establish school-family-community partnerships to promote collaborative efforts for improving students' engagement in learning. Epstein and

Salinas' school learning community should be introduced and adapted in these rural impoverished regions to create a collaboration of "educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities" (2004, p. 12).

Recognizing students' needs. Many of the students' struggles I examined and discussed in Chapter Six were centered on their contestations of filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities and the gap between the life teachers and parents want students to have and the life Muslim Hui students wish to pursue. Students' needs are sometimes overlooked by teachers because the school follows test-oriented routines that aim to construct a group of good test-takers, rather than individuals of character. Students' needs are also ignored by Muslim Hui parents who are unfamiliar with the process of schooling and incapable of providing educational support for their children. The contestations among these multiple identities indicate that secular schooling doesn't recognize students' needs and facilitate their learning and growth, but rather frustrates students who try to fulfill their dreams through schooling. The needs of resisters, strugglers, and straddlers are different, and the differences are manifested in their various levels of engagement in learning and achieving. Parental expectations, in many ways, affect how these students respond and react to compulsory education. While attending compulsory education is required by law, it is vital to recognize students' different needs and adjust the process of knowledge delivery and learning to help both parents and students see the value of education, as education is not simply a system imposed upon them but truly a life-changing mechanism for families and communities.

Reflections: Proposed Further Research

While Islamic culture is conservatively maintained and practiced in the community by many local Muslim Hui, I have seen it reinterpreted along with the introduction of compulsory education. This study attempts to understand how the gated culture of schooling and the community culture are transmitted, contested, interpreted, and integrated into educational activities through different actors, and how compulsory education socially and economically impacts the life of a rural Muslim Hui community.

As I reflect on my study, I realize that the market economy is fundamental to understanding the effects of compulsory education for the life of the local Muslim Hui. The social policies developed and implemented locally to encourage the market economy also influence students' learning and achievement in the school. I mentioned the propaganda of education for prosperity and the unseen economic return to education, but I was not able to substantially explore the long-term impacts of the market economy on societal changes and salient social policies that may also influence education, such the impacts of the government's poverty-reduction initiatives on education. Therefore, I would like to conduct a longitudinal study to further examine these current initiatives and investigate their relationship to the construction of a new generation of Chinese Muslim Hui. I want to explore whether these initiatives—such as free installation of a TV dish for every family, establishment of "immigrant villages" to move villagers from the remote mountainous regions to designated places near townships and counties and provide them with free housing, compensation for people who return the farmland to growing trees (Tuigenhuanlin 退耕还林) (an effort to stop desertification due to overgrazing)—have

shifted or will shift the Muslim Hui mentality and attitudes toward schooling. I also want to find out if current policy initiatives will help remove poverty-derived obstacles or hinder local Muslim Hui from developing independence in all aspects of their lives. As I already heard a Muslim Hui student questioning, “If the government has invested so much money in helping us alleviate poverty, why would I have to study hard?”, I come to realize that these initiatives may have negatively influenced local people’s self-motivation to develop socially and grow economically.

In addition to longitudinally examining social policies and their impacts on education, I would also like to continue following the Muslim Hui students I encountered and interviewed in my study and conduct a longitudinal study to track their life paths over the next 2-5 years, when they may be enrolled in high schools and colleges. I want to find out how the school life these students negotiated at Prosperity Middle School influences their future choices and effort to take on different challenges in life. I hope to deepen and extend my knowledge of identities and how these students may adjust and present their identities in diverse social environments. I am eager to know whether their ethnoreligious identity will remain unchanged or gradually be integrated into the mainstream culture after they are exposed to more Han culture. I also want to compare students who leave the community with students who stay in the community after several years to examine differences in their understandings of filial, rural, and ethnoreligious identities.

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Appendix I

Selected Student Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Family Background	Self-perceived Academic Performance	Location of Home	Ethnic Group
Anlin	Female	14	Parents and two younger brothers	Average	Mountainous village	Hui
Bowen	Male	15	Parents, one older brother and one older sister	Below average	Mountainous village	Hui
Guoqin	Male	15	Parents, one older sister and one younger brother	Above average	Mountainous village	Hui
Hanxuan	Male	15	Parents, one older brother and one younger brother	Average	Mountainous village	Hui
Jiayu	Male	14	No parents, grandmother and a younger brother	Below average	Town	Hui
Kai	Male	14	Parents, three older sisters and two younger sisters	Average	Mountainous village	Hui
Lei	Female	15	Parents, one older brother, one older sister, and one younger brother	Below average	Mountainous village	Hui
Mingyan	Female	14	Parents, one older brother and one older sister	Average	Town	Hui
Lan	Female	14	Parents, one younger brother and a younger sister	Below average	Mountainous village	Hui
Li	Female	14	Parents, grandpa, one older sister, and four younger sisters	Above average	Mountainous village	Hui
Li-2	Female	14	Parents and one	Above average	Town	Hui

Name	Gender	Age	Family Background	Self-perceived Academic Performance	Location of Home	Ethnic Group
			younger sister			
Linyuan	Female	13	Parents, grandpa, one younger brother and one younger sister	Above average	Town	Hui
Rende	Male	14	Parents, two older sisters and two older brothers	Below average	Town	Hui
Sanzi	Male	15	Parents, one older brother and one older sister	Below average	Mountainous village	Hui
Shaomin	Male	16	Parents and two older brothers	Above average	Mountainous village	Hui
Tianhua	Female	14	Parents, two younger sisters and one younger brother	Above average	Town	Hui
Tingting	Female	18	Father, older brother and sister-in-law with three children; mother died in 2011	Average	Mountainous village	Hui
Wenyan	Female	14	Parents, two older brothers, one older sister, and one younger brother	Above average	Town	Hui
Xiren	Female	15	Father, grandma, one younger brother, and one younger sister; mother left	Above average	Town	Hui
Xiaolong	Male	15	Parents, one older brother and one older sister	Below average	Town	Hui
Xielin	Female	15	Parents and three younger brothers	Above average	Town	Hui
Xiuqing	Female	16	Parents, one older sister, one	Average	Town	Han

Name	Gender	Age	Family Background	Self-perceived Academic Performance	Location of Home	Ethnic Group
			younger brother and one younger sister			
Yamei	Female	14	Parents, two older brothers and two older sisters	Above average	Mountainous village	Hui
Yefang	Female	12	Parents, grandma, one younger brother and a younger sister	Above average	Mountainous village	Hui

Appendix II

Selected Stakeholder Participants

Name	Gender	Title	Nationality	Grade	Administrative Duties
Father Ma	M	Father	Hui	8	N/A
Father Ma-2	M	Father	Hui	8	N/A
Father Wang	M	Father	Hui	8	N/A
Hailing	F	English teacher	Hui	7	No
Junling	M	Chinese teacher	Hui	8	Yes
Lijing	F	English teacher	Han	8	Yes
Lianqing	M	Math teacher	Hui	8	Yes
Xiaomei	F	English teacher	Hui	6	No
Xiaojing	M	Math teacher	Han	7	Yes
Zhengyi	M	Math teacher	Hui	8	Yes

Appendix III

Education for Muslim Hui Students in China:

Ethnic Identity Negotiation in Schools

Student Interview Questions

Time of Interview:
Date:
Location:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, such as your name, where you go to school, where you live, etc.?

2. Tell me what you wear to school.

3. Tell me what you normally like to eat.

4. Tell me a little bit about your family.

5. Tell me a little bit about your county.

6. Please tell me about your average day at school, such as:

   a. What time do you go to school?
   b. How many hours do you spend doing homework?
   c. In what kinds of extracurricular activities are you involved?
   d. What time do you usually go home?
   e. Do you go home by yourself or with friends? Do your parents or grandparents come to school and pick you up after school?

7. What is it like to go to school here?

8. What do you like most about school?

9. What do you dislike most about school?

10. What do you think is the hardest and the easiest subject in your school? Why?

11. What do you think about being a Muslim student in your school?

12. What challenges and difficulties do you have as a student?
13. What do you think about your academic performance?
14. What do you want to do after you finish schooling?
15. What do you imagine about your future?
16. What do you think is the aim of attending school?
17. How often do you go to mosque? What is it like for you to go to mosque?
18. What do your parents want you to do after you finish schooling?
19. Are you worried about anything lately? Can you share it with me?
20. Do you remember anything that made you happy recently? Can you tell me about it?
21. What has troubled you the most recently?
22. Do you have anything else you'd like to share with me?

Appendix IV

Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Date:
Time:
Location:
Position (teachers, administrators, or parents):
Ethnic Group:
Grade, if applicable:
Class Head Teacher: Yes or No

1. How do you define “compulsory education”?
2. What do you think about the current state of compulsory education in your area?
3. How do you define “quality education”?
4. What do you think about the current state of quality of education in your area?
5. What do you think are the factors that may affect the quality of education in your area?
6. What do you think are some opportunities for school graduates in your area?
7. How much would you say your area has changed in the past 5 years? Can you give me some examples?
8. Are there any changes to education in the past 5 years in your area? What are they?
9. What do you think of people’s lives in your area?
10. What do you think of being a Han or Muslim Hui in your area? Have you had any challenges in terms of educating your children?
11. How do you discipline your children or students?
12. What do you expect your children to accomplish after they graduate?

For Teachers and Administrators Only:

1. Are you a Han or a Hui teacher? What do you think of teaching at or administrating at the school?
2. Can you distinguish Han students from Hui students? If so, can you tell me what some differences are you have observed between Han and Hui students?
3. What are some challenges in your classroom?
4. How have you been dealing with these challenges?
5. What do you think are the causes of these challenges?
6. Of all the challenges you handle that we have discussed, what do you think are the most urgent and why?
7. What do you think is the most effective way of dealing with these challenges?
8. How do you think students perceive you?
9. Have you communicated with parents? If yes, in what situations?
10. What do you think of textbooks?
11. What do you consider the criteria for a student to be “a good student”?
12. Do you think using Mandarin in your classroom is important? Why or why not?

For Parents Only:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your family and why you chose Prosperity Middle School for your child/ren?
2. Have you noticed any changes to your child/ren or your family since you sent your child/ren to school?

3. Do you communicate with your child/ren's teachers? If yes, how often? And in what situations?
4. How often do you talk about school with your child/ren?
5. What do you think of your child/ren's academic performance in school?
6. What do you think about the supporting services at the school, such as complimentary lunch, dinner, and living arrangement?
7. What are some challenges you experience in raising your child/ren?
8. What are some factors in your family that may affect your child/ren's education?
9. How do you think your child/ren perceive you?
10. Do you have any plans for your child/ren or your family in the near future?
11. Would you say that education could bring a brighter future for your child/ren? If so, please explain. If not, can you tell me why?
12. Do you have anything else you'd like to share with me?

Appendix V

Student Interview Protocol

Identity

1. If I ask you “who are you?”, how would you describe yourself?
2. What does Hui nationality mean to you?
3. Do you know how your teachers perceive you? Can you share with me?
4. Do you know how your classmates perceive you? Can you share with me?
5. How do you perceive students from nearby towns as opposed to students from nearby mountainous regions?
6. What do you think are the differences between your school and your family?
7. What do you think about the school life you have experienced?
8. What do you think when others say this is a “backward” area? What do you think they mean? What does that mean to you?

Dominant/authoritarian Culture

1. Do you think of Han teachers and Hui teachers differently? If so, how do you treat them differently?
2. What kind of teacher do you have difficulties with?
3. What kind of teacher do you like the most?
4. I have heard from some students that they “do not like to study” and they “cannot learn anything”. Why do you think they say this? Do you think the knowledge you are learning is relevant or irrelevant to you?
5. What kind of knowledge would you be interested in learning at school?

Violence

6. Have you felt intimidated at school? If yes, please share.

7. What kinds of words do you consider swear or harsh words?

Appendix VI

Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Physical Punishment

1. Some students have told me that they are required to recite textbooks. Why do you think that recitation is so important for students' learning?
2. Do you agree that recitation is especially important in a rural area? Why or why not?
3. Some students have told me that they would be physically punished if they do not memorize certain words or forget certain concepts while teachers are quizzing them. Do you think recitation is an effective way of teaching? Why or why not?
4. In what situation would you choose physical punishment to discipline students?
5. What kinds of students do you think physical punishment is most effective for?
6. Generally speaking, do you think physical punishment is effective for improving students' engagement in learning? Why or why not?
7. Some students have showed reluctance to learn, saying they "cannot learn". How do you understand this claim? In this kind of situation, what would you do?

Curriculum

8. What do you think is the relevance of textbook knowledge for students' daily lives or future development? If it is relevant, what part of this knowledge do you think is relevant? If it is not relevant, what suggestions do you have to increase students' interest in learning?
9. What school subjects would you add that could benefit students in the long run?

Violence

10. Have you had students involved in fighting or other violent incidents? If so, how did you deal with the incidents?
11. What do you think are the reasons for violence in school?
12. I have heard that it is easier for local teachers to become head teacher, is this true? If so, why?
13. What are some disagreements or conflicts you have identified or perceived between teachers and students?

Identity

14. What do you think when people say you live in a “backward” area? Can you tell me what “backward” means to you?
15. Do you agree that education can reduce poverty in your region? If so, why?
16. What is your general impression of the students in your school?
17. Do you agree that “students are wild here”? If so, can you interpret “wild” for me?
18. What behaviors do you think are appropriate for a student in school?
19. What do you consider “civilized behaviors” and “uncivilized behaviors”?
20. How do you identify “good students” and “bad students”?
21. Do you have any or have you had any older students in your class? If so, what do you think of them?
22. Have you had any dropouts? If so, what do you usually do in this situation?
23. What do you think of dropouts?

24. Have you observed any differences between students from mountainous regions and students from nearby towns? If so, please share.
25. What are some characteristics of Hui students in your region?

FOR NEW TEACHERS ONLY

1. What had you heard about the school environment before you came to the school? What has surprised you since you arrived?
2. <u>For Han teachers:</u>
    - Did you choose to come to a Hui-dominated school? If so, why? If no, what do you think of the environment?
    - Have you found teaching in a Hui-dominated school difficult? If so, please share.
    - What are some differences you knew of or noticed between Hui students and yourself?
3. <u>For Hui teachers</u>:
    - What are some phenomena you have observed at school that differ from what you are familiar with about Hui nationality?
    - Going through high school and college, did you encounter any challenges being a Hui student? If so, please share. If no, what other challenges have you encountered?
    - Have you encountered situations in which you have to identify yourself as Hui or in which you are asked about your ethnicity? How do you identify yourself in these situations?

4. Did you receive any nationalistic education while in school? Can you give me some examples? What do you think of it?
5. What do you expect Hui students to achieve after they finish schooling?
6. As a new teacher, what have you been taught about starting your teaching career in an ethnic minority area?
7. Does the school operate as you anticipated it would?

Appendix VII

Glossary of Emic Terms Used by Local Muslim Hui

Ahong: Imam or an Islamic clergyman

Banzhuren: head teacher

Baodao: a phrase in Chinese to inform teachers of a student's arrival, and literally translated as report to arrive

Benbenche: smaller trucks used to transport crops

Bushizi: can't read and write Chinese characters

Chaohezi: pilgrimage to Mecca

Chuanqu: basin areas

Dandanche: a privately owned vehicle used by the local transportation service

*Gongbei*s: enshrined tombs

Gongchandangde yige tiefanwan: an iron bowl of rice from the Communist Party

Hancan: non-Halal restaurants

Huanle: happiness

Hunju: mixed inhabitants of both Hui and Han

Jiangzhuang: award certificates

Jiaxiao hezuo: family-school collaboration

Juju: concentrated Hui residents

Kaizhaijie: *the* Eid al-Fitr or the Festivity of Breaking the Fast

Kang: a long rectangle platform made of bricks or clays and used for sleeping and resting, and its interior cavity is fueled with cow waste and dried crops' stalks and residues to keep in warm in winter

Laonong: old farmers

Liudong hongqi: Flow of Red Flag

Manla: students of Ahongs

Mianbi sigu: facing the wall to think of your own faults

Nianjing: read scriptures

Nianshu: read books

Niansuie: pray

Qingzhen: halal

Sanzi: fried string doughnuts

Shanqu: mountainous areas

Shangfen: visiting ancestors' tombs

Shibada: an abbreviated saying for the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party

Suzhi: quality of individuals

Tangping: plastic ewers

Wenhua luohou: cultural backwardness

Wenhua zhishi: intellectual or cultural knowledge

Wuchang: death

Wudu: cleaning any impurities

Wuyouwulv: worry free

Xiaku: endure pain

Xueshengyang: the appearance of a student

Xuexi: study

Yangcheng xiguan: habituated behaviors

Yanglao: taking care of parents when they are old

Yiwu jiaoyu: compulsory education

Yiwugong: volunteer workers

Youxiang: fried round doughnuts

Zai: butcher

Zanshengjie: the Eid al-adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice

Zhiliang: quality the educational system

Zhong er bing: a term used throughout China to refer to 8th graders who are "ill and awkward"

Zhuma or *Jumu'ah*: a congregational prayer held every Friday

Zuoren: conducting themselves