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# Uyghur educational elites in China: mobility and subjectivity uncertainty on a life-transforming journey

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## ABSTRACT

The Xinjiang Interior Class is one of the most influential but controversial ethnic minority-focused educational policies in contemporary China. The policy recruits ethnic minority youth from their northwest homeland and offers them senior secondary education in eastern and central parts of the country. The literature on the policy is flourishing, yet little attention has been paid to spatial contexts outside of school that also significantly contribute to the interethnic politics of the policy. Drawing on interviews (N=16), participant observations, and questionnaire surveys (N=97) with Uyghur students on a train which took them to their new educational world, this article examines what the students felt, thought, perceived and did during the trip, and analyses how these subjective experiences are related to the process of being mobile. This article finds that the train space is a physical space of mobility, but also an affective space, entailing students' intensive subjectivity experiences: a conflicting sense of eliteness, reinforced sense of self-discipline, and increased place identity to Xinjiang. The article supplements the current literature by presenting the poetics and politics of subjectivity among Uyghur students in a mobile space, further reinforcing the significance of mobility theories in understanding ethnic migration and its politics in China.

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## 1. Introduction

This is my first time going to a place so far away from home ... I told myself that since I had received a place in the Xinjiang class, I could not make this journey a matter of regret ... There are still more than 40 h for this train to get to the destination. I want to change myself, from the inner world of my heart ... I was wondering if I have made myself different from myself in the past when I stepped in this train ... I am on the train leaving my hometown ... (Arzigül, female Uyghur student)

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'It could be the longest train trip in the world.' Arzigül, a Uyghur female student from Kashgar, a Uyghur-concentrated prefecture in Southern Xinjiang, China, said to me during our three-day and two-night train trip from Ürümqi, the capital city at the western-most tip of China, to a coastal and Han-centric city in China (see [Figure 1](#)). The end destination of the journey is a first-tier city and an economic powerhouse, a thousand miles away from her hometown in Southern Xinjiang, China's far-west ethnic minority concentrated region. Arzigül was one of 10,000 Xinjiang junior secondary graduates (mostly ethnic minorities, in particular Muslim Uyghur) selected by the Chinese government to join a boarding school project, the Xinjiang class (*Xinjiang ban*, 新疆班) which provided the students with ethnic integration-oriented state education in 93 schools across 43 cities in central and eastern China ([Chen 2019](#)).

The Xinjiang class is an emblem of a nationalist project aimed at improving minority education and fostering solidarity among ethnic groups ([Leibold 2019](#)). As [Postiglione \(2013\)](#) has argued, education has been perceived as a key mechanism to ease interethnic conflict, enhance mutual trust, and promote national unity in China, a state that has been presented for decades in its official media as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. However, taking the Uyghur as an example, although preferential policies have been deployed for years, conflicts between the Uyghur and Han-dominant educational systems have continuously been reported. Religion ([Finley 2015](#)), language ([Guo and Gu 2018a, 2018b](#)), and sense of ethnic belonging ([Grose 2015](#)), etc. are the most-discussed factors leading



**Figure 1.** Spatial Distribution of Xinjiang class schools and the surveyed train line (dash line). (Source: Official website of the Xinjiang class (with authors' revisions); host city kept anonymous for ethical reasons).

to gaps between Uyghur students and mainstream society in educational/career contexts across schools, universities, and workplaces.

The Xinjiang class policy has been defined as successful in official discourses, increasing from 1,000 enrolments in 2000 to around 10,000 enrolments since 2014. By 2017, nearly 100,000 Xinjiang students had received education through this policy, with about 21,000 graduates starting their careers in Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup> However, the policy has been critiqued due to its strategy of removing students from their homeland, and its explicit political goals of cultivating politically loyal (mostly ethnic minority) elites (Leibold *ibid.*; Leibold and Grose 2019). Arguably, the Xinjiang class policy has been one of the most influential but controversial ethnic minority-focused educational policies in contemporary China (Yuan, Qian, and Zhu 2017; Yuan 2019).

The policy has attracted increasing academic attention. Existing scholarship has focused on interethnic interaction and identity politics among current students and graduates in different spatial contexts (including schools (Grose 2008; Chen 2010; Yuan, Qian, and Zhu 2017; Yuan 2019), universities (Chen 2014; 2019), and workplaces (Grose 2016)), unveiling both the efficiencies and problems with of the policy. Building on existing studies, this article interrogates students' subjectivity politics in a distinctive spatial context – a train space travelling across China from northwest to southeast, on which the students are sent into their new educational world.

Although the existing research has revealed myriad interethnic politics in everyday schooling, critical, but still underexplored, questions are: Who are the students before they enter such a new educational world? How did they experience the relocation process? Drawing on theories of mobility and subjectivity, especially in relation to train space, this study interrogates Uyghur students' subjectivity experiences in this space-in-motion. Subjectivity, in this study, refers to all the elements that make up a thinking, perceiving and feeling human subject (Pile 1996; Longhurst 2003). These consist of the various domains of conscious experience – the attitudes, values, memories, feelings, beliefs, interpretations, perceptions, expectations, imaginations and personal or cultural understandings specific to a person (Wylie 2006; see also Pile and Thrift 1995). This study focuses on subjectivity since it focuses more on ideas about the subject and one's own mental world, which is expected to provide a more subtle and nuanced perspective on understanding the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the Xinjiang students during the process of mobility.

Drawing on participant observation, a questionnaire, and interviews with the students during a single train trip, this study argues that a conflicting sense of eliteness, a reinforced sense of discipline, and a strong place identity to Xinjiang were identified as the three most significant subjectivity experiences/responses to the movement and relocation. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of ethnic politics among Uyghur students in the Xinjiang class by extending the context to a space outside school and facilitating a dialogue between mobility studies and interethnic politics in contemporary China.

The article consists of four sections. The first section explores the strategy of relocation that the Xinjiang class policy employs. The second section explores the entangled relationship between mobility and subjectivity. The third section explores the Uyghur students' subjectivity experiences and uncertainty in the train space, followed by the concluding section.

## 2. Relocation as a strategy: policy designs and spatial agendas of the Xinjiang class

The Xinjiang class is one of the Chinese government's most ambitious educational policies, deployed with the aim of securing the state's long-term legitimacy and its rule in Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the trend of 'moving-inwards' that introduces educational resources into Xinjiang (Li 2018) – the focus of most preferential educational policies related to Xinjiang – the Xinjiang class represents a 'moving-outwards' trend: Xinjiang students are relocated from their home areas to receive education at designated campuses in selected central and eastern cities (see Figure 1). The programme recruits junior secondary graduates from Xinjiang with Xinjiang *hukou* (household registration). Although there is no threshold for recruitment in terms of ethnicity or place of origin, ethnicity matters for admission: more than 80 percent of the total enrolments are allocated to ethnic minority students, while ten percent of the quota is reserved for Han students; as Uyghur comprises a demographic majority in the region (accounting for 48.53% population of Xinjiang<sup>3</sup>), most of the recruited students are Uyghurs (see Table 1).

Spatial movement and relocation are the core tactics of the programme. Arguably, from the perspective of the state, and those who embrace the agenda of the Xinjiang class programme, the relocation involves not only the mobility of subjects but also the ongoing exchange of ethno-cultural knowledge, experiences, and imaginations, which could exert a great influence on lowering the symbolic and physical ethno-cultural boundaries that structure contemporary China (see Yuan 2019). On a practical level, organising such a long-distance, mass and collective educational migration is never easy. According to a report issued on *People.cn* in 2016, China Railway Corporation organised special trains (*zhuanlie*, 专列) to offer students exclusive space, thereby ensuring their 'safety' during the journeys. Before departure, all the enrolled students had to attend a three-day 'pre-school training' in Ürümqi, during which lectures on the history of the Xinjiang class, patriotism, and de-radicalization were delivered. On the journey, students enrolled in the same school will be booked onto the same train carriages. Each host school will send three to five teachers (mostly ethnic Han) to accompany students over the entire journey, looking after their needs and safety.<sup>4</sup> For management convenience, teachers used one class as a unit for the organisation of seating in a compartment; students were not allowed to visit other compartments during the trip. Therefore, this exclusive, enclosed compartment provides the students – mostly unknown to each other – with time and space to share their feelings and views. Table 2.

Most ethnographically-based studies on the policy have revealed the tensions between the institutionalised power of the Han and the response of Uyghur students to that power. Chen (2008) has contributed pioneering analyses of Xinjiang class policies, arguing that Uyghur students construct a bonding network that cultivates Uyghur identity and

**Table 1.** Ethnic structure of the surveyed Xinjiangban school (by numbers of students)<sup>9</sup>

Ethnicity	Uyghur	Kazakh	Kyrgyz	Hui	Han	Dongxiang	Tujia	Uzbek
Student numbers on the surveyed train (male/female)	99 (43/56)	12 (5/7)	5 (3/2)	19 (8/11)	16 (6/10)	1 (1/0)	1 (0/1)	2 (1/1)
% of total surveyed students	63.87%	7.74%	3.23%	12.26%	10.32%	0.65%	0.65%	1.29%

Source: School document.

**Table 2.** Basic Information on Key Informantsa.

Pseudonym	Gender (Male/Female)	First time travel out Xinjiang? (Yes/No)	Place of Origin	Source
Arzigül	Female	Yes	Kashgar	Questionnaire
Nuerali	Male	Yes	Hotan	Interview
Yüsup	Male	Yes	Kashgar	Interview
Shirin	Female	Yes	Ili	Questionnaire
Ömer	Male	Yes	Ürümqi	Interview
Arzigul	Female	Yes	Kashgar	Questionnaire
Amina	Female	Yes	Hotan	Questionnaire
Osman	Male	Yes	Kashgar	Questionnaire
Ahmet	Male	Yes	Turpan	Interview
Asmagul	Female	Yes	Kuche	Questionnaire
Eshanjan	Male	Yes	Aksu	Interview
Paruk	Male	Yes	Yining	Interview
Ali	Male	Yes	Hotan	Questionnaire
Limanneysa	Female	Yes	Aksu	Interview
Imin	Male	Yes	Hotan	Questionnaire
Saguydam	Female	Yes	Kashgar	Questionnaire
Roshengül	Female	Yes	Hotan	Questionnaire
Mukerim	Female	Yes	Hami	Interview
Dilinuer	Female	Yes	Kashgar	Questionnaire
Sajidanmu	Female	Yes	Ürümqi	Questionnaire
Nigar	Female	Yes	Ürümqi	Questionnaire

Table 2 shows only information on the ‘key informants’ cited in the following empirical sections. However, in addition to the so-called ‘key informants’, all the participants provided rich data to this study.

resists the Han-centred education of the Xinjiang class. Grose (2008, 2010), however, has examined and raised questions about the uncertainties related to participation in the policy, identifying a series of potential difficulties for Uyghur students, including interethnic exclusion, religious restrictions enforced in schools, and lack of competitiveness on the job market, resulting in Uyghur discontent about Xinjiang class education. Yuan, Qian, and Zhu (2017) claim that the Xinjiang class school is a prescribed space where strict time–space control of daily routine is applied to persuade ethnic minority students to minimize expressions of ethnic identities. However, some research shows that ethnic minority students are active in maintaining, and even strengthening, their ethnic and religious practices, which make the Xinjiang class a contested educational space (Leibold and Grose 2019; see also Grose 2019). More recently, Yuan (2019) interrogate multi-ethnic relations in a Xinjiang class school, stating that although hierarchies and tensions are found between ethnic groups, the school provides a ‘multi-ethnic cube’ for Xinjiang students to experience personal ethnic interaction. This is believed to be helpful to bridge misunderstandings and stereotypes between ethnic groups, but also to reinforce a shared sense of place identity to Xinjiang.

Drawing on fieldwork in a significant but understudied spatial context – in an on-the-move train heading to an ‘unknown’ educational world the students were about to enter, this study aims to supplement the extant literature on the Xinjiang class policy by reversing temporally and spatially to the time and space before their arrival, contributing to understanding of the ethnic politics revealed within the daily operation of the programme.

### 3. Subjects on the move: subjectivity, mobilities and train space

Drawing upon the ‘new mobilities paradigm’, which sees mobilities theories as a critical approach to examining movement as a social and cultural practice (Cresswell 2006;

Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Doughty and Murray 2016), scholars have begun to explore the intricate connection between subjectivity experience, mobility and space (Laurier and Philo 2003; Cresswell 2010; Jensen 2012; Lockrem 2016). Studies of different forms of movement, from more episodic travel, e.g. migration and tourism covering long distances to more quotidian forms of movement (such as daily commuting) on a small and intimate scale through different modes of transportation, from aircraft, ship, train, car, truck, coach, bus, bicycle to walking, have provided rich analyses of how physical bodies move through space and how actors perceive space during movement (Freedman 2002; Budd 2011; Butcher 2011). Mobility, as this study will indicate, can be understood as a consequence of social structures and (re)production, but also an active factor that shapes who we are and how societies are run (Bissell 2009; 2010).

Notably, social categories, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc., affect how a person chooses, experiences and ascribes meaning to modes of transportation (Letherby and Reynolds 2005; Löfgren 2008). These identities, as Bissell (2010) states, may influence travellers to perform in particular ways, creating complex sociality within mobility spaces (for example, see Symes 2007 study on educational activities and performances of students commuting on Sydney's suburban trains). Building on studies of interactions between subjectivity and mobility space, this paper focuses on the experience of ethnic minority students and explores how, in the process of being mobile, they come to perceive who they are, and how they are connected to places, broader matters and networks, differently.

Just as subjectivity shapes mobility experiences, so mobility experiences also shape subjectivity (Bissell 2018). First, the body is relatively sedentary in a time and space of mobility (Bissell and Fuller 2011). Waiting/stilling during a journey can evoke a passenger's emotions and contemplations, transforming a banal cabin/carriage into an affective space. In addition, given the interaction between travellers and/or other mobility practices (e.g. wandering around a station, walking through carriages, or watching the moving landscape) conducted during a journey, a train (or car, bus, etc.) becomes a space where knowledge is exchanged, personhood is performed, and (geographical) imaginations are created and reshaped (Dodge and Kitchin 2004; Watts 2008). Third, travel and mobility often involve relocation and separation. Increasing/decreasing geographical distances to a place of departure/destination might encourage a traveller to rethink their social and emotional bonds with places and communities, arguably exerting significant influence on their senses of place and community (Holdsworth 2013).

As Vivanco (2013) notes, 'different mobilities carry the potential for knowing, sensing, and interacting with the world in specific ways'. This paper concentrates on 'slow train travel', through which the Xinjiang class students experience long-distance educational migration. For de Botton (2002), the train, of all modes of transport, is the best aid to thought. He argues that 'at the end of hours of train-dreaming, we may feel we have been returned to ourselves—that is, brought back into contact with emotions and ideas of importance to us'. Unlike aircraft, often seen as a faster and more modern machine for time-space compression (Dodge and Kitchin 2004), the train is a relatively slow mode of long-distance transport, often entangled with the poetics and politics of movement, making train travel a unique arena for examining social differentiation and hierarchies and interactions between self, others, landscape, etc. (Letherby and Reynolds 2005). Despite the recent development of high-speed trains, the ordinary passenger train is still one of the most common modes of long-distance travel for many societies (including China, especially for its extensive migrant



work and student movement), due to its affordability and good safety record. Studies of train journeys have, therefore, proven particularly fruitful for analysing the connection between mobility, space and subjectivity (Bissell 2010). In an English context, Watts (2008) explores the activities of and interactions between passengers, demonstrating that heterogeneous passengers play active roles in exchanging knowledge with other passengers, experiencing materials associated with the train, gazing on the passing views, and perceiving places connected to the journey, making the moving space and time full of imagination and emotions. Lockrem (2016) states that current attention to relations between subjectivity experience, mobility and space identifies ‘phenomenological engagements with the environment, sensorial perceptions during movement, and emotional entanglements with ways of moving through space’.

Drawing on theories of mobilities and subjectivity, this paper focuses on the experience of the Xinjiang class students during the train trip, with the aims of exploring what the students felt, thought, perceived and did during the trip and how these subjectivity experiences are incurred, conducted and related to the process of being mobile, to which we now turn.

#### 4. Research methods

The field site of this study is a moving train. My special access to the train trip was made possible owing to my six-year longitudinal research in a Xinjiang class school in Southern China. I graduated in 2007 from a school that hosted a Xinjiang class programme as a local (non-Xinjiang) Han student with two years’ experience of studying with Xinjiang students. From 2012, I have served as a casual external educational consultant for both Xinjiang class teachers and Xinjiang students in a Xinjiang class school. First, this position allowed me to gain access to different educational and management processes of the Xinjiang class school (in this case, the chance to experience the entire train trip together with the students). Second, my dual role as a ‘former student’ and ‘returned alumnus’ offered me flexible ways of positioning myself within the relationships between students and teachers, helping me build up mutual trust with the two groups.

This study is based on a ‘mobile ethnography’, which is a qualitatively-based method of tracking the students’ journey, gathering students’ insight and capturing the student voice (see Johnson 2010). I had a seat in the same compartment as the students, spending the entire three-day and two-night trip with them, which offered me significant time and space to talk with students, hear their voices and observe their behaviours. I employed a mixed-method research approach (supplementing a questionnaire with interviews and participant observation) to collect information about students’ experiences. The ‘experiences’ include, but are not limited to, memories, feelings, perceptions, expectations, imaginings and personal or cultural understandings.

For the questionnaire, the theme was ‘For your new journey (*xiegei xinde zhengcheng*, 写给新的征程)’. The open-ended questions included: Is this your first time travelling outside Xinjiang by train? Could you please tell me what you are feeling now? What do you want to say to your family, local community and yourself at this moment? Do you have any expectations of future life in the new school? Please share with me what you see, what you feel and what you think on the train. The questions were preceded by a statement that participation in the research was voluntary, and that the contents of the questionnaire would be used only for academic purposes. The questions were meant to solicit information about students’



feelings, memory, perception, expectation, etc., helping to understand their subjectivity experience during the process of being mobile.

Questionnaire respondents<sup>5</sup> were required to provide three kinds of information: ethnicity, gender, and the time they wrote down their responses. I distributed the questionnaires to all students (n=155) at the beginning of the journey and collected them during the journey at a time when they were happy to return them. I therefore defined the questionnaires as a special 'space' for students to record their feelings at a preferred time and location. The return rate of the questionnaire was high: 145 completed questionnaires were returned. Of these 145, this article draws on the 97 completed by Uyghur students.

Fieldwork also involved participant observation, through which I observed what the students did during the journey, and how students and other objects (including their belongings, the moving landscape, etc.) were connected, shaping this space of mobility. My observations were carefully recorded in field notes to ensure that the small details of everyday life did not escape my attention. Additionally, photographs and videos were vital observational techniques employed to record the students' practices (e.g. eating, sleeping, gazing out of the window, interacting with other students, sitting alone, etc., with students' consent).

Along with observation, 16 semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with Uyghur students who were willing to share their feelings and stories on the trip. Random sampling was employed in this survey. During the train trip, I walked through compartments at different times of the day, i.e. at dawn, noon and dusk, to invite students to share their memories, feelings, reflections and other psychological activities during the process of journeying. Questions asked included: What did you do and see during the trip? Are there any changes to your perception of self and imagining of different places during the trip? Data collected from interviewees was recorded in written notes and on audio (then transcribed into text), with informants' consent.

All text-based materials (including interview transcripts, field notes and students' responses on questionnaire) were entered into MAXQDA 12 for coding, thereby identifying themes (Rivas 2012). The coding procedures included descriptive codes and analytical codes (Holton 2007). For instance, as presented below, the theme 'sense of self-discipline' is developed from the analytical code 'politics of self-discipline', and descriptive codes including 'control myself', 'tolerant' and 'cherishing the opportunity'. The abovementioned descriptive codes appear in the interview transcripts and/or questionnaire responses; the analytical code is drawn from the reflection on descriptive codes, and echoes the concepts often discussed in the literature on the Xinjiang class (e.g. Chen 2008; Leibold and Grose 2019). In order not to neglect important themes, the coded book and coded materials were circulated among the different authors of this paper to cross-check if any important themes had been ignored and to test the strength of our interpretations.

## **5. Road to the East: Uyghur students' subjectivity experience on the moving train**

### ***5.1. 'As a little girl on the train heading to neidi, how could I be not proud of myself?': reminiscence, expectations and conflicting sense of elitence***

When the train whistled three times, indicating departure, the Uyghur students grasped their tickets and lined up to board. They then settled their luggage into the overhead

rack and found their seats in the reserved compartments. However, although the body had been settled down physically, the mind was not. The train slowly left Ürümqi Railway Station, and the students started to recall and rethink their relationships and connections with their families, their community and Xinjiang. As revealed below, the temporality of leaving can lead to a conflicting sense of eliteness and a feeling of uncertainty about future study life.

This fieldwork started with wandering the compartments where the students were seated. In car three, I<sup>6</sup> met Nuerali, a male Uyghur student from Southern Xinjiang. He was sitting in an aisle seat, looking at old photographs of his family on his mobile phone. Nuerali showed me a group photo of his large family, taken at a celebration for his successful enrolment into the Xinjiang class. Nuerali recounted the story behind the photo while the train gradually moved away from the station:

Being accepted by the Xinjiang class is a great honour in my local (Uyghur) community. All my family members within the same clan (*jiazu*, 家族) got together in my home to celebrate my success (being accepted by the Xinjiang class). They gave me two huge boxes of Uyghur traditional food, like badam (almonds, 巴旦木) and nan (Uyghur-style crusty pancake, 馕). I was so touched, because I have never received this kind of great courtesy (from my families and community) before. I packed all the gifts into my luggage. See, the luggage is up there, over our heads ...

As Bissell (2009) has argued, travel actually takes place together with a varied collection of objects; these shape the experience of being mobile. The group photo, food and luggage travelling with Nuerali not only reflected Uyghur society's recognition of the Xinjiang class policy, but also reminded Nuerali himself of his rising status within his family. Through mobility practices, a student (Nuerali in this case) might become aware of his 'eliteness' (mostly in an academic sense), in interaction with his belongings. In fact, like Nuerali, being offered a celebration party and receiving praise from family and local society were the experience of many Uyghur students. Yüsup, a Uyghur male student sitting next to Nuerali, said to me: 'my family is from a rural area. Only the best students can be accepted by the Xinjiang class. It (getting a place in the Xinjiang class) is a great honour for my family.' When I talked to the Uyghur students on the train, a strong sense of pride and eliteness could easily be seen from the students' high self-positioning, their expectations of a successful future career, and their families' expectations.

Notably, through accepting if not internalising the official slogan of the Xinjiang class policy, i.e. 'a place where dreams begin' (*mengkaishi de difang*, 梦开始的地方), some Uyghurs imagined the train trip as a road to a better future. Nuerali continued: 'I chose to study in the Xinjiang class because [I think] the [Xinjiang class] school is a place for me to improve myself and it gives me hope for my life in the future.' Similarly, Shirin, a Uyghur girl from Ili, wrote on the questionnaire that her parents thought of *neidi* as a place of 'gold-plating' (*dujin*, 镀金), where she could receive a better education and a higher chance of a superior position in the job market, thereby improving her family's future social and economic status. As Postiglione and Ben (2009) have argued, calculation of the 'risk-benefit' determines the decision-making process of studying in the Xinjiang class. This calculation intertwines considerations of benefits such as accessing China's economic and modernisation heartland, obtaining better educational resources, and enjoying the anticipation of future career development within mainstream society. The

risks include loss of labour for households, separation from family and cultural communities, and fear of losing ethnic culture and religious purity. Although I found some cases where Uyghur students' parents were reluctant to let them join the Xinjiang class, for economic and cultural reasons, most Uyghur students stated that their parents were proud of their enrolment into the Xinjiang class. Due to the popularity of the policy and the view of it as a pathway of upward social mobility, the students are generally seen as the hope for many families to acquire higher social and economic status.

The train trip itself was seen by the students as a demonstration of their better access to mobility than previous generations. The experience of long-distance mobility has become an important source of the students' sense of eliteness. Ömer, a male Uyghur student, said that travelling to *neidi* was a kind of 'achievement' for him. He said: 'I am now travelling to the *neidi* developed cities, which I could only see on TV at home before! Now I am going to get there!' Likewise, Arzūgul, a female Uyghur student, expressed her increasing sense of being ethnic elite during the journey:

I grew up in a village with poor family conditions. Now I have the chance (to study in *neidi*), how could I not cherish this? ... You know, *neidi* is a place the elders of my family have never been to, including my parents. So, as a little girl on the train heading to *neidi*, how could I be not proud of myself?

As Arzūgul stated, leaving Xinjiang and studying in an eastern city where previous generations of her family have never been is a kind of 'spatial capital' that made her exceptional within her family. First, the train trip consolidated and affirmed the students' recognition of their academic eliteness – being an elite student selected for the programme. Second, the train trip itself was a distinctive 'capital' that demonstrated greater access to and connection with the world outside Xinjiang (although this chiefly refers to mainstream Han-led society in China, rather than freedom of movement on an international scale). This capability is extremely important for students, shaping their sense of eliteness, since, as Zenz and Leibold (2017) note, there are many barriers to Uyghur mobility within Xinjiang, and in China more broadly, especially since securitization-driven surveillance has recently become a major approach of government in Xinjiang. The Xinjiang class provides the Uyghur students with an officially-designed path of physical mobility to the east, and potential future upward social mobility. The experience of travelling outside Xinjiang and developing careers in *neidi* cities has, at least for some Uyghur students, been a type of capital that improves their social status and strengthens their sense of eliteness.

However, this increasing awareness is coupled with a sense of uncertainty about life in a new educational world. Firstly, as the train travelled away from Xinjiang, homesickness immediately became a main source of psychological distress. Amina, a Uyghur female student, wrote down her perception of the distance between the two ends of her journey, at the start of the train trip:

The train starts running on its track, with the rhythm of the bumpy noise. I met my new study mates on the train – it was happy for sure, but it couldn't stop the distress in my mind. I know I am leaving Xinjiang. The distance between my family and me is gradually increasing, while the distance to my new life (in the Xinjiang class) is getting shorter and shorter ... I am a young person going far away with my dreams ...

During the journey, some Uyghur students started to calculate their distance from their previous familiar living space and from the upcoming, unknown educational world.

This distinctive ‘spatial calculation’ resulted in an emotional state of homesickness. Perhaps more importantly, feelings developed into a sense of uncertainty about a new life in a new educational space. Osman, a male Uyghur student, wrote down his conceptions of the local school and local students, stating ‘I have heard that local students are extra-outstanding in study. I felt rather stressed when I heard this.’ In addition to their concerns about possible gaps in their study, some students also worried about gaps in ethnic and religious culture. Ahmet, a male Uyghur student, stated that he had little knowledge of what the new study world would be like:

I felt super-excited when I boarded this train, I know the train can take me to developed cities in *neidi* ... I hope I can have good (authentic halal) meals in the school, and classmates and teachers there will respect my ethnic and religious customs. Also, I want to be educated and treated equally (as the students from local society) in the school.

For most students, the destination of the trip is an unknown world they have never visited, which been portrayed as ‘central’, ‘modernised’ and ‘developed’ in the mainstream media. Through imagining, and in some senses internalising, the gaps between the two ends of the journey, in terms of culture, economy and educational quality, particular psychological dilemmas emerged among the students during the train trip, resulting in uncertainty.

## **5.2. ‘When will we arrive?’: waiting, recalling and a reinforced sense of self-discipline**

As the train travelled further, I found that the students’ sense of uncertainty evolved into a sense of self-discipline. As Bissell (2010) has pointed out, the fatiguing effects of long-distance travel might deplete the capacity of the body to experience more positive affect. This is particularly true for the Uyghur students, who had left their local community for the first time. In this time and space of stilling, the students tended to develop, whether proactively or passively, a sense of discipline concerning the perceived cultural tension and the prescriptions of ethnic integration that the policy emphasises. This was partially reflected in their proactive willingness to adapt to the new educational environment, and to develop positive relationships with local students. Asmagul, a female Uyghur student, recorded an attitude shared by many students in relation to the upcoming interaction with local students:

I know my classmates in the Xinjiang class school come from different ethnic groups. I want to get along well with them. Meanwhile, I hope the local students can live harmoniously with us, respect the differences between us. I hope the Xinjiang class teachers and local students can offer more attention and help to me. I really want to make friends with them [local students].

Eshanjan, a male Uyghur student, showed that he had a clear perception of the cultural differences between western and eastern China and he further expressed his open-mindedness regarding Han-centric society in eastern China:

For me, the [reason that the Chinese Communist] Party and government offer us the chance of studying in the East is to cultivate qualified personnel for Xinjiang on the one hand, and to enhance ethnic integration on the other. I really hope I can make friends with students from other ethnic groups, being a model of ethnic integration. If local students can accept us [Xinjiang students], I won’t have worry and anxiety in my mind.

Apart from the sense of self-discipline concerning interaction with local peers, the spatial dynamic of relocation has increased the Uyghur students' sense of self-discipline in relation to interaction with other Xinjiang students with different ethnic backgrounds. Paruk, a male Uyghur student, stated that the experience of relocation had made him more tolerant and open-minded to interethnic interaction:

In the past, I was very easy to anger when other people did not understand my (Islamic) ethnic and religious customs. Well, I am currently leaving my homeland. I know for us (Xinjiang students) it is not easy (to attend a school far away from Xinjiang). (Therefore) I will control myself, and not conflict with other (Xinjiang) students. The relocation and the distance make me calm and tolerant.

The train trip and its process of mobility, therefore, seemed to become a cushioning process which created a transitional time and space for the students to consider their positionality and then prepare for multi-ethnic and multi-cultural encounters in the new educational world.

However, although many students expressed proactive and positive attitudes towards the upcoming inter-group interaction in the school, others commented that they would have to submit to the school's regulations and expectations to secure this educational opportunity. Firstly, self-discipline could be passively derived from their families' expectations and attention. To succeed and to behave well in the Xinjiang class is a way to win and protect the honour of their families. Ali, a male Uyghur student, recalled the moment when he left home for the Xinjiang class on the questionnaire:

When I got on the bus taking me away from my hometown, I saw my father's tears. This is the first time (seeing my father's tears). Since then, I told myself 'I can wear broken shoes and clothes, but I can't perform poorly in the school. I can't make my father disappointed.

Affected by her parents in a different way, Limanneysa, a female Uyghur student, learned how to be self-disciplined in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment from her parents. She recalled that her mother enjoined her to adapt to the new environment:

At the end [of the writing], I want to say some words to my parents, 'Dad and Mum, are you alright? I am on the train to *neidi*. No matter what the school looks like, I will remember your words'. I will remember your words at all times, that is, 'cherishing the opportunity and studying hard. Overcome all kinds of difficulties. You will meet classmates from separate ethnic backgrounds. You have to respect their culture, and develop our own culture at the same time'. Don't be worried. I will follow what your said and will not disappoint you.

Secondly, a sense of self-discipline could develop for more passive and pragmatic reasons. Imin, a male Uyghur student, gained an increasing sense of self-discipline while thinking of his poor family conditions during the train trip,

I am a son of peasants. I lived in a village and my parents are peasants. My family is economically poor. My parents have devoted their whole lives to raising their three kids, including me. They did several jobs a day to earn money. All my parents did is to let us know we need to study hard and behave well in the school to repay their effort. I promise you (mother and father) to study hard in Xinjiang class, obey all kinds of school regulations and listen to the words of school administrators ... I will definitely realize the dream of providing you (my parents) with better lives.

Like Imin, some Xinjiang students, particularly those from families with poor economic conditions, saw Xinjiang class education as an affordable route to upward social mobility. Saguydam, a female Uyghur student, for instance, had been living with her father. However, neither her father nor her mother now wanted to raise her. Saguydam wrote on her questionnaire:

I need to raise myself, relying on my own effort. My mother has gone away and my father has his new family, leaving no time or love for me. Studying in the Xinjiang class can not only free them up, but also free my own life and give me new hope.

To summarise, the space and time of travelling create a unique window for students to form their attitudes towards and perception of their future life in the school. One of the most significant consequences is that the students experienced and developed a sense of self-discipline: while some students have open minds about the Han-centric educational space in eastern China, others were effectively forced to obey the prescriptions of the Xinjiang class policy. Furthermore, regardless of whether the students held proactive/positive attitudes or passively accepted the school's regulations and expectations, most students predicted having difficulties in the new educational space, which arguably helped them prepare for the imminent educational world. [Figures 2, 3 and 4.](#)

### ***5.3 'Xinjiang is not bad at all!': gazing, imagining, and reinforced place identity to Xinjiang***

When dawn broke again, the train had travelled outside Xinjiang and was headed into the Hexi Corridor<sup>7</sup> in Gansu province. The students who were awake in the early morning started looking through the windows. Gazing at the moving landscape, the students generated a new perception of Xinjiang and a reinforced Xinjiang identity.

Imin was one of the students who watched the landscape along the railway (see [Figure 5](#)). Concerning his previous geographical imaginings of the world outside Xinjiang, Imin



**Figure 2.** Students lined up to board the special train for Xinjiang class students at Ürümqi Railway Station. (Source: authors).





**Figure 3.** The internal space of the compartment. (Source: <https://zhidao.baidu.com/>).

said: ‘I have never travelled outside Xinjiang before. This is the first time. Well, now I have really left Xinjiang.’ Then, he continued:

In the past, I watched TV to learn about other places in China. In my imagination the worlds outside Xinjiang were mostly like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou! High rise buildings, busy commuters and trees shading the street. Compared with these cities, Xinjiang seems a bit backward [in development]. But look, [there are] barren mountains and no-man’s-lands here. Xinjiang is a *bianjiang* (borderland, 边疆) region, but Xinjiang has big cities and big bazaars, very much more prosperous than these places. Xinjiang is not bad at all!

The train trip was the first time most Uyghur students had travelled outside Xinjiang. It offered them a chance to ‘verify’ their previous geographical imaginings of the world outside Xinjiang, which, as Imin discovered, significantly updated their geographical imaginations of Xinjiang and other parts of China. Specifically, most students had seemingly ‘internalised’ mainstream media discourses regarding development gaps



**Figure 4.** The landscape along the train trip (at the first dusk on the trip). (Source: authors).





**Figure 5.** The landscape along the trip in Hexi Corridor on the morning of the second day. (Source: authors).

between Xinjiang, Central China and East China, in which Xinjiang has been portrayed as backward and less-developed, while Central China and the East are modelled as modern and developed. The moving view offers the students a richer geographical image of the gaps between Xinjiang and other regions of China. Roshengül, a female Uyghur student, shared her observation on the landscape of the places along the way:

I feel that Xinjiang is not as backward as the public has imagined. I saw there were lots of mud houses along the railroad, which I can't see in Xinjiang anymore. Compared to what I saw along the way, I think many places in Xinjiang are thriving more than the places we passed.

The students' place identity to Xinjiang is, therefore, reinforced on their way to the school. As a Uyghur student notes on the questionnaire, 'only at the moment you leave her (Xinjiang) can you feel how much you love her (the land of Xinjiang)'. Yuan (2019) have revealed that the Xinjiang class students gain a stronger place identity to Xinjiang after experiencing multi-ethnic interaction in a Xinjiang class school. As an extension to the current study, this research further argues that the students' place identity to Xinjiang is reinforced on their way to the school; the increasing identity of Xinjiang-ese was partly derived from students' observation of/interaction with the changing view during the mobility process. I also found that the students took proactive roles in 'speaking for' Xinjiang. Mukerim, a female Uyghur student, noted that:

When I boarded the train, I realized that I represent not only myself, but also Xinjiang, in front of local students and teachers [at the Xinjiang class school]. We need to work harder to show them [local students and teachers] that a Xinjiang person is great.

Dilinuer, a female Uyghur student, stated that she wanted to be a spokesman for her hometown. As she expressed on the survey: 'I want to enjoy the beautiful environment in *neidi* and enjoy better facilities. More importantly, I want to advertise *Yecheng* – my beautiful Xinjiang and my hometown – to the people in the East.'

Notably, some Uyghur students contended that the experience of being mobile reinforced their sense of responsibility for showing the 'real' Xinjiang to their local

peers at the Xinjiang class school. Sajidanmu, a female Uyghur student from Ürümqi, outlined her responsibility for removing the stereotype of Xinjiang in mainstream society.

This long, long trip makes me realize that Xinjiang is somewhat different from the cities that I saw on the road in the landscape; people, culture and so on. But by and large Xinjiang is very modernized, just like other big cities I saw on the road ... I want to tell my future classmates that Xinjiang not only has vast desert, but also has beautiful skyscrapers, advanced facilities, high-speed trains and straight highways. It will take time (for me) to tell all this to the people in the East. But I would like to do that. As Xinjiang is my lovely hometown, my home forever.

Likewise, Nigar, a female Uyghur student, notes that 'I hope the *neidi* people can know more about Xinjiang and Xinjiang people, and remove their stigmatizations of Xinjiang, such as that Xinjiang is impoverished and backward and Xinjiang people are uncivilised and violent.' Indeed, 'to be a spokesman for Xinjiang (*wei Xinjiang daiyan* 为新疆代言)' was widely cited by Xinjiang students.

As Cresswell (2010) argues, mobility in practice brings together the internal world of will and habit and the external world of expectation and compulsion. The moving landscape and reinforced place identity to Xinjiang further encouraged the Uyghur students to rethink their relationship with Xinjiang, as well as the long-held central-peripheral geopolitical structure linking Xinjiang and other parts of China, especially the central and eastern parts.

## 6. Conclusions and discussions

Drawing upon a mobile ethnography on the train carrying Xinjiang class students across China, this study finds that the process of mobility provided the students with a specific time and space to rethink who they are and how they are connected to different places, people and communities. The rich but subtle experiences during the mobility process result in intricate subjectivity uncertainty for the students, chiefly entailing a strong sense of eliteness, a reinforced sense of self-discipline, and increased place identity to Xinjiang. Furthermore, these experiences also rendered the train an affective space, where bodies (students), materials, emotions and imaginations were intertwined, but also a social-political space entailing significant implications for examining the politics of ethnicity in relation to the Xinjiang class. Specifically, this paper speaks primarily to two bodies of literature:

First, this study supplements current studies of the Xinjiang class policy by offering researchers a mobilities perspective to examine the interethnic politics of the Xinjiang class, but also reminding both scholars and observers of China to extend their focus to other spatial contexts associated with the policy. Furthermore, although the extant studies have focused primarily on the politics within Han-centric schools, between Xinjiang students and local students, little attention has been paid to the intra-diversity of the socio-economic and family background of the Xinjiang students (Uyghur, in particular) and its relationship with their experience in the Xinjiang class. Drawing on our field research, we observe that students' social strata generated their varying perceptions of and responses to the policy, indicating a complex and intricate picture of the ethnic politics of the policy. In addition, by observing students' experience in the train, we argue that the

network of the Xinjiang class is not only constructed by the often-discussed triangular relationship between Xinjiang students-local students-school, but also by a broader original family/community/peer-Xinjiang students-local students-school-higher authorities' dynamic. Students' families and communities, as well as their personal relations (i.e. with peers) in Xinjiang, as this study has shown, might exert significant influence on the way they perceive and behave in response to the Xinjiang class policy. Consequently, while researching the different forms of politics (e.g. obedience, tolerance, negotiation, resistance, etc.) among Xinjiang students, these 'remote', 'invisible', but crucial actors within the network should be taken into consideration in order to draw a more comprehensive picture of the policy.

Second, we contend that mobility has become a core value and emblem of progress during China's modernisation and urbanisation, and should be a critical perspective for examining ethnic politics in contemporary China. The existing research on mobility among ethnic minorities in China focuses primarily on migration, especially inter-regional and rural-to-urban migration, among, for instance, Uyghur, Hui and other Muslim migrant groups in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (Iredale, Bilik, and Fei 2015). Moreover, most studies have largely been concerned with ethnic minority experience of inclusion/exclusion and adaption/alienation within the immigrant areas and identity politics involved, with limited attention paid to their actual experience in the process of being mobile. Burrell (2011) articulates that current mobility studies are 'slow to acknowledge the significance of the physical time-space of migration journeys', arguing that 'travel itself is an extremely important part of this migration experience.' (see also Crang and Zhang 2012). Accordingly, we argue that the process of movement/travel, an important but underexplored arena, might not only create a transitional time-space for (ethnic minority) migrants to conduct relocation, but also produces intense psychological and behavioural responses to their decisions about and expectations of im/mobility (see also Zhang 2018), which is connected to the broader socioeconomic picture in China.

Finally, this study must be evaluated in terms of certain limitations. First, the above analysis focuses primarily on the students' (especially emotional and imaginary) experience, making 'practice' rather absent from the interrogation of the students' subjectivity-making. Given that it was a long train trip, the ways the students moved about and used the space matters. For instance, the students' practices of eating, sleeping, gazing out of the window, standing near other groups of people, sitting alone etc. provide thought-provoking evidence worth further investigation – e.g. of how subjectivity is performed and shaped by 'doing' and how it shaped the social-cultural meaning of the train space, etc. Second, the train – as well as other moving spaces – is a crucial arena for exploring the intersection between temporality and the construction of identities. The paper has touched on theories of subjectivity, mobility, train space, and places, with less attention paid to examining how temporality, a moving place/space, and subjectivity are intertwined (see Xu and Yang (2019)'s recent discussion on ethnicity, temporality and educational mobilities among China's ethnic minority students). How spatiality, temporality and subjectivity intersect within spaces of movement are issues worth further exploration, especially given that mobility has become an essential part of China's modernisation, economic transformation and nation-building.

## Notes

1. See [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/27/c\\_1120885240.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/27/c_1120885240.htm).
2. Source: Ministry of Education of China, policy No. 2007[07], accessed at [http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A09/mzs\\_left/moe\\_752/tnull\\_1010.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A09/mzs_left/moe_752/tnull_1010.html).
3. Source: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (2016)
4. Host teachers were in the same compartments with students; they would walk through compartments to monitor the students' physical health and sometimes sit down and chat with students to discover their feelings on the trip. In doing so, the teachers could build up familiarity with their future students and kill time during this long train trip.
5. It is worth noting that the original survey design was for Xinjiangban students with different ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, 'respondent' here refers not only to the Uyghur students this study focuses on, but also to other ethnic groups, including Kazakh, Hui, Mongolian, Man, Kyrgyz, Han, etc. However, in response to the dominance of Uyghur within the demography of the Xinjiangban students, and the particular focus on Uyghur in the existing literature, this study focuses primarily on Uyghur students. Downplaying the subjective experience of students from other ethnic groups should be considered a limitation of this study, but simultaneously a direction for future study.
6. One author of this study conducted fieldwork. This article uses first-person pronouns because it somehow makes the readers feel more real and involving.
7. Hexi Corridor is a string of oases along the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, connecting Xinjiang with central and eastern China

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