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ISSUES RELATED TO DECISIONS ON SCHOOL SELECTION FOR UYGHUR CHILDREN IN XINJIANG, PRC

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Abstract

This article discusses the issues faced by Uyghur people on school selection in Xinjiang, People's Republic of China (PRC). Every Uyghur family needs to make decisions on the school, ethnic language or *Putonghua*¹, for their children.

This article attempts to examine the issue in a holistic historical background. In other words, focusing on the historical sequences the Uyghur people sent their children to Han schools in which teaching and learning activities are carried out in *Putonghua*, it aims to review the factual cases and clarify the process until modern times.

The issue of school selection is not a recent phenomenon. History reveals that Uyghur children started to be sent to Han schools in the 1950s. Over the years, the number has increased. A generation of Uyghur people who could not use their own ethnic language preferentially was thus created, which has led to the apprehension in Uyghur society about the future of their ethnic language and culture. This resulted in the widespread dilemma in school selection for Uyghur family and society.

Key words: Uyghur, ethnic language, *Putonghua*, school selection (维吾尔族, 民族语言, 汉语, 择校)

¹ *Putonghua*, also known as Mandarin in English, is a standard language that is the official language of the People's Republic of China. The central government of PRC adopted that term to describe Mandarin in 1955, and regulations of its pronunciation, grammar and simplified writing characters were issued in the following years. While it is mainly used by the Han and some of the ethnic groups in China, the study and use of *Putonghua* as an inter-group language in China is advocated for the communications among all the ethnic groups of China.

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the problem of school selection faced by Uyghur people in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China.

In 1993, in Urumchi City, the autonomous region's capital of Xinjiang, a boy was born into a family of Uyghur intellectuals and subsequently lived with his grandparents in a linguistic environment where Uyghur was constantly spoken. But when he became seven, rather than sending him to an Uyghur school, his mother sent him to a Han school. But even by his second year, he still had not become used to the Han school. He spent weekends at his grandparent's house, as his mother was concerned that because her son was receiving an education at a Han school, he would forget his Uyghur. So she wanted him to maintain contact with an Uyghur environment at the home of his grandparents. The parent's decision to send their son, who could not speak *Putonghua* to a Han school, was reached after two years of worrying about it.

This case is not especially unique in Xinjiang and it is a universal problem that exists in every home in Uyghur. When it is time for their child to go to school, every family faces the school-selection problem, of whether they should send their child to an Uyghur school or to a Han school.

At the time, the People's Republic of China was first established, a modern school education in an ethnic language was provided in Xinjiang and the majority of younger and older children received an education in Uyghur. The school-selection problem did not exist. But due to the rapid increase in the Han population, the frequency with which *Putonghua* was used in the region also increased. Against this backdrop, some Uyghur parents began sending their children to Han schools and their numbers gradually increased. By the 1980s, there had arisen a sense of anxiety in Uyghur society about the future of its ethnic language, and since then, it has continued to be a problem facing Uyghur society. In recent years, many researchers have focused on this problem. Dimulati provided an overview of the characteristics of Uyghurs who had received an education in *Putonghua* through a comparison with the situation in Kazakhstan (Aomaier Dimulati 2001). Further research, which focused on their identity, explored this phenomenon from an anthropological or sociological aspect (Smith Finley 2007; Zuliyati Simayi 2009). On the other hand, in her research Li Xiaoxia presented specific case studies based on on-location surveys (Li Xiaoxia 2000). Xirinayi and Otani clarified many of the facts pertaining to this phenomenon through questionnaires and interview surveys (Xirinayi Maisuti and Ôtani Junko 2012).

This body of research has without question produced a certain level of findings. However, the Uyghur school-selection problem has a historical background that goes back a long way and in this sense, the above-described research has not presented systematic findings. Therefore in this paper, an attempt is made to ascertain a picture of the whole within this historical background. In other words, we throw light on the historical details that resulted in Uyghur children being sent to Han schools, and clarify the process up until recently by which this

phenomenon occurred and developed.

The perception that school selection is a problem among the Uyghur in Xinjiang, which is not a perception shared by ethnic minorities in other parts of China, has occurred against the following backdrop. For many years, there has been an ethnic language school education system in Xinjiang and by the end of the 20th century many Uyghur children had received an ethnic language education. But in this context, a situation developed in which Uyghur parents sent their children to Han schools and this created a generation of Uyghur who could not speak their own ethnic language well. This came to be recognized as a major problem for Uyghur society. Therefore, it is thought that clarifying this problem holistically will provide useful findings for the education in Xinjiang in the future.

This thesis mainly deals with the time period from 1949 until the end of the 20th century. This is because from 2000 onwards, the ethnic language education in Xinjiang was transformed. The authors wish to examine this time period in a future paper.

2. Historical details of school education in Xinjiang

In the period of Qing dynasty Uyghur people in Xinjiang began to receive an education in *Hanyu* (漢語), Han language. After the Xinjiang province was established in 1884, as a part of new policy by Xinjiang government, Confucian style education came to be provided to Uyghur people. Upon the establishment of the province following a proposal by the Qing bureaucrat Zuo Zongtang in 1878, Confucian schools (*yishu* 義塾) were established for Uyghur children in various places in Xinjiang.

Within this education, educational materials such as “*Qianziwen* (千字文)” (the Thousand Character Classic), “*Sanzijing* (三字經)” (the Three Character Classic), “*Baijiaxing* (百家姓)” (the Hundred Family Surnames) and “*Liujing* (六經)” (the Six Classics) were used (Ma Wenhua 1992: 65–72; Kataoka Kazutada 1991: 203). However, it is clear from a number of records from that time that many Uyghur felt a sense of discomfort toward these schools and refrained from sending their children to them. In these sorts of circumstances, in the so-called new politics of the Qing period, even when Chinese style modern schools (*xuetang* (學堂)), in which the Han language was used for classes, were established in place of Confucian schools, it is considered that no major changes occurred in Uyghur society. The following is recorded in “*Xinjiang tuzhi*” (新疆圖志), which was compiled by Wang Shunan (王樹楫) of the Xinjiang provincial government during the Qing period.

All the Muslims (Uyghur) avoid (having their children) enter the schools when they hear students are being recruited for them. Rich people employ someone to go to the *xuetang* instead of their children. ...All other tasks are easy, only this task is difficult (for Uyghur people) (*Xinjiang tuzhi*, juan 38, xuexiao: 4a–4b).

Originally, with regards to the objective of providing a Confucian style education, Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠), when reporting to Guangxu Emperor (光緒帝), stated that “On all sides we must make efforts to change their unique customs (*shusu* 殊俗) so they may become the same as our Chinese customs (*huafeng* 華風),” indicating a policy that can be described as one of type of assimilation² (Li Xiaoxia 2000: 94). In Uyghur society at that time, there already existed a value system and social norms that were centered on Islam and also a culture of writing that had developed in a unique way. An Islamic religious education system was already in place. At the stage, where the authorities faced the problem at that time despite time having passed, the education promoted by the provincial government had still not made advances into Uyghur society, and the editors of the “*Xinjiang tuzhi*” expressed their awareness of this problem as follows.

In every Uyghur neighborhood there is always a mosque and there is always a school within the mosque. They believe fervently in the founder of their religion (the prophet Muhammad) and their belief is strong and unbreakable. So to them, to worship Confucius would be a terrible shame. We attempted to enforce the system through the power of the bureaucracy, but ultimately this was not possible. The Uyghurs continue to resolutely defend their old beliefs. Also, when a child enters (a *xuetang*), they consider this action to be an apostasy and in every case it is looked upon disdainfully (*Xinjiang tuzhi*, juan 38, xuexiao: 5)

In Uyghur society there was the presence of a unique Uyghur language and culture. In addition, the Uyghurs had practically no opportunities to actually come into contact with the Han, and there was little need for them to come into contact with Han language and culture. It can be thought that one of the important reasons why the education in Han language was not making any progress in Uyghur society is that the authorities attempted to rapidly spread such an education in Uyghur society at that time without fully understanding how this society functioned.

However, on entering the 1910s and 1920s, major changes occurred in Uyghur education in terms of the positions occupied by traditional Islam religious education schools and the *xuetang* from the Qing dynasty. Specifically, initiated by ethnic Uyghur capitalists and intellectuals, a reform movement rose up within Uyghur society that sought to form and develop a modern ethnic language school education. By the middle of the 1930s, with this movement as the foundation and against the backdrop of the policies of the provincial government of that time, which in turn was influenced by the Soviet Union, a formal and modern social education came to spread dramatically across Uyghur society due to the independent participation in this movement of Uyghur leaders and intellectuals. What should we pay attention to here is that these schools, apart from some public schools, provided an education in which the Uyghur ethnic

² From “Bianli Xinjiang shanhou shiyi zhe” (弁理新疆善後事宜折) in *Zuo wenxiang gong zougao* “左文襄公奏稿”, juan 56: 212–213.

language (using Arabic characters) was used for classes on the whole.³

According to a government report released immediately after the People's Republic of China was established, in Xinjiang at that time there were 1,629 elementary schools and 283,845 students. Within this number, Uyghur and other ethnic minority students constituted more than 80% of the total number of students, and the majority attended schools in which classes were taught in the Uyghur language (Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqu jiaoyu ting ed. 1980: 1; Reziwan Abulimiti 2008: 117–118).

In 1949, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the new Xinjiang Province People's Republic Government incrementally requisitioned ethnic language school education and fundamentally placed it under the jurisdiction of the new people's education, which was the form of education that succeeded the previous form. So beneath China's new ethnic policy, these schools continued to provide an ethnic language education as before, and further developed as Uyghur schools. In contrast, Han schools, in which teaching and learning activities were carried out in *Putonghua*, also existed in Xinjiang within the unified and nationwide educational system after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At that point in time, practically all Uyghur children received an education at Uyghur schools as they had done in the past.

However, changes began to appear in this situation from around the second half of the 1950s. Uyghurs who had formerly refrained from sending their children to the *yishu* or *xuetang* independently began sending them to Han schools. It is unclear precisely how many children were sent at this time, as statistics on this phenomenon from this period cannot be found. But it is certain that in the beginning, the numbers were extremely small. The report of Xirinayi and Otani clarified this point from the following interview with Mr. M, who is an Uyghur now retired but who was formerly a teacher at Xinjiang University.

When he was five, he went with his parents to Lanzhou in mainland China where he attended a Han school. In 1956, when he was in his fifth year of elementary school, he returned to Xinjiang and attended the Urumchi 20th elementary school. After he attended junior high and high schools in Urumchi, and continued on to university. During that period, he only encountered one other Uyghur student who had also attended a Han school, which was when he attended the junior high school. In other words, at all the other schools, only Mr. M had previously attended a Han school (Xirinayi Maisuti and Ôtani Junko 2012: 285–306).

In actuality, there are no statistics that can clarify around what time the number of Uyghur children being sent to Han schools started to increase. In an interview with the authors in 1996, Ms. N, who attended a Han school within Urumchi City around the beginning of the 1970s, said that at that time at the very least there were five or six students who were Uyghur or Kazakh in one class. Incidentally, almost all the students at the elementary school that Ms. N attended were the children of the teaching faculty of Xinjiang University. From her recollection

³ With regards to the historical situation of the Uyghur-language school education before 1949, see Schluessel 2009.

of her experiences, it seems that the number of Uyghur children being sent to Han schools gradually increased from the second half of the 1960s. It also seems likely that the majority of them were the children of intellectuals or the elite.

Subsequently, the numbers of Uyghur children being sent to Han schools gradually increased, and by the 1990s, the range of this development had extended to the southern part of Xinjiang, where the Uyghur are concentrated. In the discussion of Li Xiaoxia, the following statistics were presented. In a Han elementary school in the oasis city of Yarkand, which is historically well known and located in the southern part of Xinjiang, in 1995 there were 100 Uyghur students attending it, but by 1998 this had increased to 400, which constituted 28.6% of all the students in the entire school (Li Xiaoxia 2000: 96). Also, according to a survey conducted in 2001 by the Autonomous Region Board of Education, the percentage of students in Xinjiang's Han schools who were ethnic minorities students was more than 20% (Wang Zhenben, Liang Wei, Abula Aimaiti and Zhang Yong 2001: 55).

3. Sending children to Han schools and the background to it

So why did Uyghur children start being sent to Han schools and their numbers gradually increase after the establishment of the People's Republic of China?

In the research of Dimulati, two reasons are given as the background to this development. First is that following the inflow of a large number of the Han into Xinjiang, Uyghur and Han public officials did not have a common language and so could not understand each other, and this had an impact on their work. Second is that command of *Putonghua* became an important skill in order to be employed in and promoted to elite positions, and also a criterion when reviewing the achievements and abilities of intellectuals and administrators. Within this kind of situation, the Uyghur gradually became aware of the importance of *Putonghua* (Dimurati Aomaier 1998: 19–25).

The Han population in the region unquestionably increased. According to Dimulati, their population in Xinjiang in 1949 was 291,000 people, but by 1961 this had risen to 1,877,200 people.⁴ The authorities' promotion of a migration policy resulted in a rapid expansion of the Han population, and as a result, the frequency with which *Putonghua* was used in Xinjiang increased each year. In 1956, the official report titled "Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqu jiaoyu gongzuo fazhan gaikuang he dangqian cunzai de wenti baogao" (新疆维吾尔自治区教育工作发展概况和当前存在的问题报告) analyzed the situation at that time and pointed out the necessity of studying *Putonghua*.

⁴ According to the relevant documents, the numbers of Han immigrants were as follows: 1,877,200 people between 1949 and 1961; 194,600 people between 1962 and 1963; 1,499,000 people between 1964 and 1980; 625,300 people between 1981 and 1989; and 213,100 people between 1990 and 1992. For further details, please refer to Zhang Yaohua et al. 1997: 32–36; Xu Xifa 1996: 23–26; Yang Zheng, Yuan Xin and Tong Yufen 1995: 11–17.

Currently, six years have already passed since Xinjiang was peacefully liberated and the social situation has changed greatly. In particular, the railway between Lanzhou and Urumchi will soon be open and it is likely that in the future, for the ethnic groups (in Xinjiang) contact with the Han and their language will inevitably increase. Moreover, in the future many students and leaders will likely go to the interior of China to study. Therefore, it is necessary now to investigate the problem of studying the Han language and reach a common understanding for it (Xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqu jiaoyu ting 1956: 119).

On the other hand, at practically the same time, in order to deal with the problem of a shortage of university teachers, the government of the Autonomous Region decided to send students to prestigious universities in the Soviet Union and China (Xinjiang jiaoyu nianjian bianweihui ed. 1991: 220). After these students had graduated from the university they were sent to, they would return to Xinjiang's universities and research institutes as researchers and teaching staff, and moreover to important positions in the government and so became active as members of the elite. Mr. A was dispatched to Beijing Normal University in 1952, graduated in 1957, and became a university teacher at Xinjiang University. He described his career history as follows in an interview in 1998.

I was born in a certain oasis village of the Aksu prefecture located in the southern part of Xinjiang in 1933, where I lived until I was 16. In February 1950, I entered and studied at the Aksu Normal school. In November of the same year, Xinjiang College (Xinjiang xueyuan (新疆学院)) (currently Xinjiang University) was recruiting applicants to train to be teachers. So I applied and passed the entrance exam. I entered Xinjiang College and a year later in August 1952, I was one of eight students with excellent results selected to attend a university in Beijing. The eight of us entered Beijing Normal University in January 1953 and studied the Han language intensively until August of the same year. From September 1, I entered Beijing Normal University as a new student and studied there for four years. After graduating in July 1957, I returned to Xinjiang, became a teacher at Xinjiang University, where I worked until my retirement.

In actuality, in 1952 the Regional Government released an important report titled "jiaoyu gongzuo zongjie baogao" (教育工作总结报告), in which it is recorded that "In 1951, 300 students from various regions in Xinjiang were mobilized to enter into Xinjiang College," which supports the details of Mr. A's recollections (Xinjiang sheng jiaoyu ting 1952: 19).

Just like Mr. A, from the 1950s to the 1960s not a few Uyghur intellectuals were dispatched to the universities in Mainland China. Also, in a report by Osman Ziya, who at that time was the Vice Minister of Education in the Xinjiang Ministry of Education, it was noted that "In 1958 alone, 53 high school students were dispatched to Beijing Normal University and Minzu

University of China” (Wusimanziya 1959: 133). According to Mr. A, from 1954 onwards every year a certain number of Uyghur students were sent to Beijing, where they entered and studied in each of its prestigious universities.

In this way an ethnic elite was created, the first following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. They graduated from China’s prestigious universities and learned how to speak *Putonghua* fluently and as a result, they were promoted to important positions.

On entering the 1960s, the second generation of the ethnic elite was born and by the 1970s they had reached the age to enter schools. What we should pay attention to here is that the majority of them entered Han schools from the first year of elementary school. As a result, the entry of Uyghur into Han schools became a fully fledged development. These children would later be called “Minkaohan” (民考漢). According to Dimulati, “Minkaohan” originally signified “ethnic minority students who attended Han schools from a young age and took the same university entrance exam as Han students” (Dimulati Aomaier 1998: 19–25). But subsequently, this term was also used for ethnic minority members of society who had graduated from Han schools. In contrast, the examinees belonging to various ethnicities who took the university entrance exam in their own ethnic language were known as “Minkaomin” (民考民).

On the other hand, in order to have Uyghur parents send their children to Han schools, the government actively implemented preferential treatment policies, such as providing scholarships for students who received an education at a Han school, and it worked to promote these policies (Li Xiaoxia 2000: 95; Xinjiang jiaoyu nianjian bianweihui, ed. 1991: 78). But what proved decisive in having Uyghur parents send their children to Han schools was the preferential treatment policy implemented for the university entrance exam from 1977. This policy “lowered the pass line in the university entrance exam for ethnic minority students whose mother tongue was not the Han language so that they were able to pass even with a score below the usual pass score,” and this policy was made even clearer in 1985 (Li Weiqing 2001: 77–82). In China at that time, the percentage of students who continued on to university was less than 10%. So within this context, it can be recognized that this policy constituted extremely preferential treatment.

Against this backdrop, the number of Uyghur children attending Han schools gradually increased. Moreover, this was not restricted to the children of intellectuals and the elite in cities such as Urumchi, and gradually expanded as far as to children from diverse social classes and home background in various parts of Xinjiang (Dimulati Aomaier 1998: 19–25). What we need to pay attention to here is that the Uyghur elite that had received a university education at places such as Beijing in the 1950s were already proficient in their ethnic language before they entered university. But this second generation of ethnic elite attended Han schools from the elementary-school stage, and so on this point they were fundamentally different from their parent’s generation. This would subsequently cause important problems to be discussed in Uyghur society.

4. Uyghur society's reaction to "Minkaohan"

"Minkaohan" children had entered and received an education at Han schools from a young age and so even as they grew older, their command of Uyghur language remained at a low level. But this was not all; they also came to adopt a lifestyle incorporating Han culture (Smith Finley 2007: 226–227). Even in public places and within Uyghur communities, their practice of speaking in *Putonghua* made them stand out. As for how this behavior was received, the following anecdote describes the type of reaction that was prevalent among the Uyghur at that time.

One day, two young Uyghur women got on a bus that one (Uyghur) teacher was also riding on. The women talked constantly in *Putonghua* in front of the seated teacher. The teacher was not impressed with the attitudes of the two women, who made no attempt to keep their voices down. After a while, the bus stopped suddenly, causing somebody to stand on one of the women's feet. She let out a cry of "Aiya (哎呀)!" The teacher, further angered by this cry, asked the woman, "Is even the pain of your foot the pain in a style of the Han language?"⁵

Whether this incident actually happened or not, it reflects that the ways "Minkaohan" acted were perceived to be a major problem in Uyghur society at that time, and it is thought that the teacher's critical attitude toward their behavior was one shared by many Uyghur.

Subsequently, the group known as "Minkaohan" who had received an education at Han schools was not accepted by Uyghur society and came to be recognized as having a different existence. Dimulati noted that, "People think that we should not lose our language, and according to circumstances, felt it was shameful (losing one's mother tongue)," (Aomaier Dimulati 2001: 829). By the 1980s, the "Minkaohan" had become a target for comic dialogues and satirical criticism.

Later, this problem would even be mentioned in government-related materials, and after that, to a certain extent it had an effect on policy decisions. Badai, who at that time was Vice Chairman of the People's Government of Xinjiang, proposed to the Autonomous Region Party Committee "Dui jiaqiang minzu xuexiao hanyu jiaoxue de jianyi" (对加强民族学校汉语教学的建议) in 1982. It suggested that a policy to strengthen *Putonghua* education in Uyghur schools should be implemented, founded on the principle of "Min han jian tong" (民汉兼通) (being able to speak both the ethnic language and Han language). One of the reasons for this was precisely the problem related to the group known as "Minkaohan".

⁵ According to another version of the anecdote, the Uyghur woman whose foot is stepped on shouts: "Aiya! Tengde yaoming." (哎呀! 疼得要命.)

Previously, many ethnic minority infants had entered Han schools from the first year of elementary school and had passed through elementary, junior high, and high schools before graduating from university. However, now they are unable to proficiently use their ethnic language, and therefore they are subject to strong criticism from Uyghur society and their parents. Therefore, recently there has been a major decrease in children of ethnic minorities being sent to Han schools (Badai 1982: 4).

Based on this kind of reaction in Uyghur society, Badai, rather than promoting the children's enrollment in Han schools from the elementary school stage, instead proposed a policy of aiming to promote *Putonghua* education in Uyghur schools⁶. In actuality, Badai, in an interview with the authors in 1999, recollected that in this "proposal" he requested the enhancement of *Putonghua* education in Uyghur schools, because at that time the existence of "Minkaohan" was looked with critical eyes by parents who had sent their children to Han schools and from Uyghur society.

As was noted by Badai, at that time many of the Uyghur children who attended Han schools were unable to converse easily in Uyghur with their parents. In the interview described above, Mr. A clarified the facts of this situation as follows. When she was young, Mr. A's daughter attended a Han kindergarten and after that, she continued to receive an education in Han schools. As a result, she was completely unable to converse with her mother, who did not understand *Putonghua*. Whenever the daughter wanted something from her mother, she would communicate this to her mother via her father, Mr. A, who could speak *Putonghua*. Her mother, who could not understand her requests, would express her irritation at this.

So what kind of understanding was Mr. A's decision at that time to send his child to a Han school based on? He explains the reasons behind this decision as follows.

When we studied in Beijing, we keenly experienced difficulties due to the language problem. So the first reason was that I did not want my child to have the same experience. The second reason was that precisely because we could speak Han language comparatively well, we could be appointed to important positions and communicate our own ideas. So when thinking of my child's future, we decided to have her learn Han language. But we saw that in the future should she be different to us on the point she would have received a Han language education from the time she was small. When my generation went to Beijing, we were already fluent in Uyghur and had also acquired the ability to understand Uyghur culture, so we had established a foundation for our ethnic spirit. However, I have to say that we failed to recognize the possibility that sending our child to Han schools would result in her gradually becoming unable to converse in Uyghur.

⁶ Please refer to Reziwan Abulimiti 2009: 43-77 for details on Han language education in Uyghur schools.

In other words, Mr. A said that they wanted their daughter to have a command of *Putonghua* so that in the future, she would become a person who could receive full recognition within Chinese society that was centered on the Han, the same as they (the first generation of ethnic elite) were. So the strong wishes of the parents who were members of the elite constituted the main motivation for children being sent to Han schools. However, they lacked an apprehension about the loss of their children's ability to communicate in Uyghur. This was a problem that Mr. A's generation failed to anticipate.

5. Inclination toward Uyghur schools

On entering the 1980s, the "Minkaohan" problem became placed even more under the spotlight. In 1976, following the complete rejection of the Cultural Revolution, a basic policy of respect for ethnic languages and ethnic culture was confirmed as the national ethnic policy. As a result of this, a movement that aimed to revitalize Uyghur ethnic culture materialized, and combined with this backdrop, Uyghur schools came to be viewed as more important.

Against this historical background, a critical argument about those children and young people who were unable to speak Uyghur well arose in Uyghur society, and it expressed people's fears about the future of their ethnic language. So there was self-examination among parents and society about the fact that children were losing their ability to speak Uyghur because they were attending Han schools from a young age. Subsequently, a trend appeared in which the numbers of Uyghur children attending Han schools greatly decreased. This trend can be seen in the results of a survey carried out in May 1996 by a survey team from Xinjiang University. The subjects of the survey were the principal of Han elementary schools at Lükchün in Turpan Prefecture. Through the interviews with him, it became apparent that, "While in recent years (the 1990s) there has been an increasing trend in the number of Uyghur students each year, previously (in the 1980s), there were years when not a single Uyghur student entered (my school)" (Muhabaiti Hasimu, Halike Niyazi and Tashi Reheman 1997: 3).

So how did the parents' self-examination about the fact that their children were losing their Uyghur because they were sending them to Han schools manifest itself? One example of it is expressed by the case of Ms. R, who currently lives in Urumchi (from a 1996 interview).

Ms. R was born in 1960 in Kashgar, and her grandfather was formerly an influential Beg (an influential person in the region under the former system) in Kashgar. Ms. R herself attended a Han school when she was a child and by the time she was an adult, could only speak fragmented Uyghur. When she married, her husband was also a "Minkaohan" who had graduated from Han schools. The two of them had two daughters, both born in the 1980s, and when they were old enough they sent them both to Uyghur schools. Ms. R explained the reason for this as follows. "We were not able to read, write, or speak in Uyghur at all and we lived with feelings of conflict in our hearts. Fortunately, at last the one saving grace was that we were not alienated from the

Uyghur community. We did not want our children to have these feelings.”

“Minkaohan” who received an education at Han schools had many Han friends when they were children, so they did not experience this sense of alienation to a great extent. But when they became adults, gradually an increasing distance grew between them and their Han friends due to differences in lifestyle, etiquette, and even in how they thought. Not to mention, there were no opportunities for all the members of their family to be on friendly terms with their Han friends. Therefore, naturally they sought human relationships in the Uyghur community. Previous research has touched on this type of phenomenon, which has been defined as, “Returning to one’s ethnic cultural identity” (Aomaier Dimulati 2001: 835; Zuliyati Simayi 2009: 69). On this point, in the case of Ms. R, as symbolized by her words, her relationship with the Uyghur community moved in a positive direction and she can be ascertained to be an example of “returning to an ethnic culture” with a comparatively happy outcome. However, it is not the case that all “Minkaohan” succeeded in this type of “return” during their subsequent lives. The paper by Li Xiaoxia presents the following facts.

An Uyghur woman who worked in a government institution in Hotan Prefecture had formerly received an education at Han schools. But keeping in mind her own experiences, she sent her own child to an Uyghur school. The woman was able to read and write in *Putonghua*, but could only speak Uyghur, which she felt was extremely disadvantageous. She had few Uyghur friends, which she regretted, and did not want her child to have the same feelings (Li Xiaoxia 2000: 97).

According to the research of Dimulati, during the process of “returning to one’s own ethnic culture,” “Minkaohan” experienced “feelings of regret, worry, and depending on their circumstances, anxiety and fear, which could cause abnormalities in their lives. Finally, they all managed to successfully return to their own ethnic community.” (Aomaier Dimulati 2001: 835).

In the case of Ms R, she reflected on the feelings of regret she felt at being unable to read and write in Uyghur and so felt she should have her child attend an Uyghur school, while the woman in Hotan felt a sense of alienation from the Uyghur community, and from this self-reflection, decided to send her child to an Uyghur school. Though in parts the motivations of the people in these two examples are slightly different, in actuality they are the same on the point that they are based on that person’s self-reflection about their loss of Uyghur.

On the other hand, there was one more important problem in the background to the decline in the number of Uyghur children attending Han schools. That was that a phenomenon of some students becoming frustrated in the middle of their studies came to the surface. The first examples of these students were those that initially entered a Han school but could not follow along with the classes and had to be transferred to an Uyghur school. But as they could not read and write in Uyghur, they experienced frustration for a second time. The second were students who continued to attend Han schools up to high school and were able to graduate with no problems, but ultimately the only skill they acquired was the ability to speak *Putonghua*. As an example of the second type, in a survey by the authors conducted in August 1997, one Uyghur teacher

who taught *Putonghua* at a certain junior high school in Hotan Prefecture described the experience of her own son as follows.

As I teach *Putonghua* at a junior high school, my son entered into a Han school. But it didn't go as we had hoped. Our son continued on in Han schools and graduated from high school, but was not able to pass the university entrance exam. Looking back on it today, even though he studied *Putonghua* for 12 years at school, we can see that he was only able to learn how to speak *Putonghua*.

This problem is not limited to this one example, and is a phenomenon that can be frequently seen in the southern part of Xinjiang, where the Uyghur are particularly concentrated. For example, as was previously described, each year in the university entrance exam a preferential treatment policy was implemented for “Minkaohan” students in terms of the score required for a pass. But despite this, only less than half of the “Minkaohan” examinees could pass the entrance examination in 1999 (Xinjiang jiaoyu nianjian bianji shi ed. 1999: 361, 391).

6. Inclination toward Han schools

On entering the second half of the 1990s, a noticeable inclination toward sending children to Han schools once again appeared. “Minkaohan” students who had been passing the university entrance exam from the 1980s gradually began graduating from university in the 1990s, and as the second generation of elite, started to be active in a number of fields. In the work place, not only were they able to assert themselves without problems, they had also grown to be adults with an ethnic identity and gradually they established this position for themselves. This sort of awareness of being Uyghur motivated them to learn the language and culture of their own ethnicity. As a result, many “Minkaohan” independently returned to reading and writing in Uyghur while they were working.

In Uyghur society up to that time, not only could “Minkaohan” not speak using their own ethnic language, they had also been losing the etiquette unique to their ethnicity, which cultivated strong feelings of discontent against them. However, they were able to obtain a new position within Uyghur society with the emergence and behavior of a new “Minkaohan” youth, which brought about changes in the awareness of Uyghur intellectuals who were comparatively influential at that time.

In the research of Dimulati, he notes that “Minkaohan” in the 1980s who were not able to speak Uyghur were labeled as being a kind of different ethnicity by Uyghur society, even being called the “14th ethnicity”⁷. But from the second half of the 1990s, by which time they had

⁷ Originally it was said that there lived 13 ethnic groups in Xinjiang. But as the “Minkaohan” could not speak Uyghur well, they could not be Uyghur, and also they could not be Han. So they were therefore positioned as being a new ethnic group and somewhat sarcastically named “the 14th ethnic group”. See Smith Finley 2007: 229.

acquired a certain level of Uyghur ability, they came to be highly evaluated by ethnic society and recognized as being talented people (Dimulati Aomaier 1998: 19–25). In other words, the new “Minkaohan” who had graduated from Han schools restored their reputation in conjunction with the change of the times.

On the other hand, these “Minkaohan” who had received an education at Han schools up to university were also welcomed by the Han as the ethnic elite. In January 1987, Wu Yan proposed that when employing new teachers, students with a high level of *Putonghua* should be employed preferentially. “Among the ethnic minority students who have graduated from Han schools, even if some have slight problems in terms of their ability in their own ethnic language, this can be overcome in a short period through study and is not an impediment to them working as teachers. They should be viewed as an important reserve force of ethnic minority teachers. They are able to fully utilize their knowledge of Han language and improve the quality of school education” (Wu Yan 1987: 19–23). From this proposal, we understand that the graduates of Han schools were highly evaluated and it was stressed that applicants with *Putonghua* ability were to be given priority when recruiting teachers. According to Dimulati, the image that the Han held of “Minkaohan” can be appropriately ascertained from the following psychological tendency.

The great majority of the Han, when they meet with people who cannot speak *Putonghua* and when the language barrier makes interaction between them difficult, naturally feel that they have come into contact with a different ethnicity (someone foreign to them), which psychologically also makes them consider the other person different to themselves. But if the other person is able to converse with them in fluent *Putonghua*, then intuitively they recognize the other person to be the same as them. Within this type of psychological context, their attitude toward the other person also becomes friendly. In other words, instinctively they lose their feelings of wariness about the other person (Dimulati Aomaier 1998: 19–25).

So “Minkaohan” who had received an education at Han schools were welcomed by the Han and were seen as necessary human resources. Therefore, when employing workers from ethnicities other than Han, whether or not the candidate had *Putonghua* ability became an important condition for their employment.

Against this sort of societal backdrop, the motivation among Uyghur parents to have their children attend Han schools once again increased. By the second half of the 1990s, Uyghur children attending Han schools had increased. Moreover, their number greatly exceeded the number of the children of the above-mentioned Uyghur elite in the 1950s, who attended Han schools. For example, during this period, in a Han school (junior high school) in Yopurgha County, Kashgar Prefecture, which is where the Uyghur are concentrated, it was reported that Uyghur students constituted 45% of the school’s total number of students (Wang Zhenben, Liang Wei, Abula Aimaiti and Zhang Yong 2001: 55)⁸.

⁸ Extremely unfortunately, there are no publically released statistics with regard to the question of what percentage of students in Han schools are Uyghur students.

TABLE 1.

The number of Uyghur children entering into the Han elementary school department of the junior high school attached to Xinjiang Normal University

Time of entry	No. of classes	No. of entrants	No. of Uyghur children	%	The number of students registered in 1999, including in the junior high school, was 738 students. Of this number, 69 were Uyghur students, or 9.3% of the total number.
September 1989	1	39	2	5.1	
September 1992	2	34	2	5.9	
September 1993	2	91	5	5.5	
September 1994	2	125	11	8.8	
September 1995	2	119	2	1.7	
September 1996	3	130	15	11.5	
September 1997	2	105	9	8.6	
September 1998	3	128	14	10.9	
September 1999	3	131	18	13.7	
Total	20	902	78	8.6	

Source: Xirinayi Maisuti 1995: 8.

As can be seen from the results of this survey, the number of Uyghur attending Han schools is estimated to have risen to a significantly higher percentage than previously. The table above shows the numbers and percentage of Uyghur children who entered the Han elementary school department attached to the Xinjiang Normal University between 1989 and 1999. The growth rate can be seen from the data on that period.

In conjunction with the increase in the percentage of Uyghur children attending Han schools, a new problem emerged. This was that in Han schools, there continuously appeared cases of bullying by Han teachers and students, which spread a shock wave through Uyghur society. But despite this, with each passing year the number of parents sending their children to Han schools continued to increase. One reason given for this is that the parents felt that the Han teachers had a greater sense of responsibility. In an interview survey conducted by the authors in 1998 in Urumchi, the parents were asked for the reasons why they had their children attend Han schools. On the one hand, many of the parents stressed that their decision was because they were thinking about the futures of their children. But on the other hand, some among them added that "Han teachers are extremely serious and enthusiastic about their work. When we take our children to school early in the morning, the teacher responsible for them is always waiting to welcome the children into his or her class. Uyghur teachers completely fail to do this."

7. Trends in selecting schools and searching

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Uyghur parents have constantly faced the school-selection problem, of whether to have their children attend Uyghur schools or Han schools. Together with the passage of time, Xinjiang society has changed and its political

structure has also undergone reforms. As a result, the shape of Uyghur school education in Xinjiang has also been transformed. At the present time, we have reached the point of “bilingual education” that is taught in two languages and so there is no longer that great of a difference between Uyghur schools and Han schools.

But regardless of this sort of change to the situation, as before the school-selection problem has not been solved for Uyghur parents and in recent years, they have still continued to experience a certain type of worry. This is especially expressed when they have their children attend a Han school. This problem is symbolically reflected in the survey report by Guo Weidong and Huang Li. The survey was conducted with 149 “Minkaohan” students in Kashgar Prefecture. Their parents were also asked to write answers on the questionnaire. Among the children, 79% responded that it was their parents’ decision to send them to a Han school, while 16.8% answered that it was the decision of the extended household family. Only 4.0% answered that the decision was made while considering the wishes of the child. But despite the fact that in the majority of cases it was the parents who decided to send their child to a Han school, 34.0% of parents responded that they subsequently worried about their child losing his or her ethnic language, and 68.4% of parents said their child was taught Uyghur at home (Guo Weidong and Huang Li 2007: 90–95). These results suggest that even when the parents have their child enter a Han school, unquestionably they subsequently experience feelings of doubt about their decision and continue to worry about it.

So why do Uyghur parents decide to send their children to Han schools, even while continuing to worry about? Also, what criteria do they use to select the school? The answers given in the questionnaire survey by Xirinayi and Otani clarified the following points. First, the three most frequently given answers by the parents as to why they had their children attend a Han school vividly express their thinking. These were that (1) Han language and culture is the mainstream language and culture in China and so having their children attend Han schools will give them many advantages in the future, (2) they experienced hardship in their studies and work due to their lack of ability in *Putonghua* and they do not want their children to experience the same hardship, (3) they feel there is a problem with the quality of education provided by Uyghur schools and so had their children attend Han schools so they could go on to attend a better university.

Next, the answers given for the reasons why the parents had their children attend an Uyghur school can be summarized in the following two points. (1) If they had their children attend a Han school without them first learning to speak and read and write in their ethnic language, no matter how strictly they were taught how to speak, read, and write in Uyghur at home, their Uyghur ability would not reach the level of their *Putonghua* that they were taught at school every day. Also, they decided to have their children attend an Uyghur school as they were worried about changes to their children’s personalities (if they attended Han schools). (2) They felt that Han schools give a lot of homework and place too great a burden on the children, and having to study

in *Putonghua*, their second language, places a lot of pressure on the children. As they considered that this would have a negative effect on the child's growth process, they selected an Uyghur school (Xirinayi Maisuti and Ôtani Junko 2011: 295).

From these answers, we can see that the biggest reason why Uyghur parents selected Han schools is that they were thinking about their children's future. This is based on the motivation that being sufficiently proficient in *Putonghua* will give their children an advantage in getting an ideal job and improving their position in society. But parents' decision to have their children receive an education in *Putonghua* is ultimately set schematically as a condition to advance in society and is not a decision that satisfies them psychologically. Therefore, for example even if they have their child attend a Han school, they continue to feel a sense of conflict about their decision.

In recent years, a phenomenon has emerged that should not be ignored in terms of a standard parents use when selecting a school for their child to attend. This is school-selection decisions based on the parents' own experiences of attending schools. That is to say, there has emerged a tendency for parents who received their education at Uyghur schools to send their children to Han schools and "Minkaohan" parents who received their education at Han schools to send their children to Uyghur schools. There is an extremely interesting example of this in the research of Xirinayi, which is the experience of a woman in her forties who was working at a certain university in Xinjiang at the time the survey was carried out.

The woman received an education at Han schools up to high school. However, when she continued on to university, she found herself in the same class as students who had graduated from Uyghur schools. At first she could not understand the Uyghur spoken by the teachers, and wrote her answers in *Putonghua* on tests. Even though her Uyghur had only slightly improved after two years, she subsequently graduated and began working at the University. Today, her Uyghur language ability remains as before at a conversational level and some reading and writing, but even now she cannot write an essay in Uyghur. She said the following. "In the end, my *Putonghua* ability is not as good as that of the Han, and my Uyghur ability is limited to conversations. So I am neither Han nor Uyghur. I absolutely did not want my children to have the same feelings as me, so had them enter an Uyghur school. Some members of my family were opposed to this, but the decision was made in accordance with my strong wishes." (Xirinayi 2003: 169).

At the current time, as in the past the majority of Uyghur children attend an Uyghur school. But according to the survey of Xirinayi and Otani, amongst parents in their thirties, those who answered that they want their children to attend Han schools exceeded those who answered they want their children to attend Uyghur schools (Xirinayi Maisuti and Ôtani Junko 2011: 295–296). It is difficult to forecast how this issue will develop in this future. Considering what we have seen up to the present time, constantly in the background to it we can glimpse the influence of the pursuit of benefit. When an Uyghur child receives an education at a Han school, while

there are differences in degrees, there is enough evidence to suggest that they will not be recognized as a normal member of their own ethnic community. Depending on the circumstances, they may even be treated as a kind of “different ethnicity.” But acquiring the resource of *Putonghua* ability brings with it a number of benefits. In this sense, it can also be considered possible that this tendency will also change, depending on the government’s ethnic policy and preferential treatment policy.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, the historical background to the school-selection problem faced by the Uyghur in Xinjiang, the People’s Republic of China, was provided. In addition, aspects such as the trend to oppose it in Uyghur society, the contradictory feelings and emotional turmoil experienced by the parents, and moreover the changes to the reputations of “Minkaohan” that reflected changes in the times, were investigated and described. As a result of this, we can provide the following conclusions.

The start of Uyghur sending their children to schools taught in the Han language can be traced all the way back to the Qing dynasty. However, this was a policy unilaterally implemented by the Qing government that met with only a lukewarm response from Uyghur society, and did not develop as the government expected. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, for the first time Uyghur parents began voluntarily sending their children to Han schools, and gradually their numbers expanded. By the 1970s, Uyghur children attending Han schools had reached a certain scale and these students became the existence that could not be ignored in Uyghur society, subsequently coming to be called the “Minkaohan”. On entering the 1980s, against the backdrop of the apprehensions among Uyghurs that their ethnic language and culture was being lost and of the subsequent restoration of Uyghur language education, Uyghur schools recovered their dominance as the choice for parents to send their children. But on entering the 1990s, with the opportunity provided by the “Minkaohan” students who were able to insist their thought in *Putonghua* and were able to demonstrate their abilities in a number of fields after their graduation, a conspicuous trend of parents sending their children to Han schools began to appear. Following these sorts of twists and turns, the percentage of Uyghur children attending Han schools steadily increased, particularly in cities, and it can be said that a “flight” from Uyghur schools developed.

In the school-selection problem, in many cases the parents use their own experiences at the schools they attended as the criterion for the decision on which school to send their own children. But regardless of whether the decision is the result of a careful consideration, particularly in cases when the child is sent to a Han school, the parents experience contradictory feelings and emotional turmoil and continue to worry about it. This undercurrent of conflicted emotions is their concern about losing their ethnic language and culture.

Today, more than 60 years have passed since the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the time that Uyghurs began sending their children to Han schools. During this period, the perceptions and evaluations of the Uyghur themselves about this problem can be said to have oscillated tremendously. This has been a result of the changes of the times. It was also based on a change to the situation; namely, that decisions made based on their own experiences have brought about consequences that they did not expect and resulted in them newly reflecting on their decisions. Whatever the case, it is unmistakable that the changes have occurred in conjunction with the parent's constant internal conflict. So in the future, conquering this problem is likely to be something that the Uyghurs themselves must do.

The situation in the period after the time period that was mainly targeted for the discussion in this paper—that is to say, the situation in recent years from 2000 onwards—has been a period of major transformation in Uyghur schools in Xinjiang. Following the visit to the region by Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, in July 1998, it was decided to each year send 1,000 ethnic minority high school students to mainland China for them (Xinjiang jiaoyu nianjian bianji shi ed. 1999: 469).⁹ As an extension of the policy to strengthen *Putonghua* education, in 2004 the Xinjiang government distributed “The Decision on the Promotion of Completely Bilingual Education,” which brought down the curtain on the history of Uyghur language school education up to that time. In this form of education, classes in the subject of “*yuwen*” (语文) (language and writing) were given in the Uyghur language and all other subjects were to be taught in *Putonghua*. This has been positioned as “bilingual education,” in which the children are provided with an education in both Uyghur and *Putonghua*. From this new phase of recent years, even more complex aspects of the school-selection problem have emerged. But nothing has changed in that Uyghur parents continue to experience emotional turmoil when it is time for them to send their children to school. The authors hope to fundamentally investigate this in the future.

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⁹ With regards to “Xinjiang classes” of high schools in Mainland China, see Chen 2008.

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