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# **It's about Poverty: Explaining Educational Disparity between Han Chinese and Ethnic Minorities in China**

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## Introduction

Ethnic equality has been a central concern in China. Over a hundred million minorities of 55 officially recognized nationalities account for 8.49% of the country's population (State Council Population Census Office and State Statistical Bureau, 2012). Ethnic minorities' educational and consequently economic disadvantages have consistently been documented (Hannum and Xie, 1998), but there is scarce literature on how the educational gap comes into being.

Hannum's (2002) pioneering study focuses on family socioeconomic status (SES) in explaining the gap in China. However, scholars propose that SES alone does not account for all the educational gap by race in America (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Kao, 1995). To account for the remaining effect, they consider alternative factors, particularly culture, in explaining Asian Americans as "model minority" (Hsin and Xie, 2014; Liu and Xie, 2016). Do Han Chinese also have an advantageous culture that leads to their better educational achievement? What are the relative roles of SES and culture in contributing to the educational gap by ethnicity in China? To answer these questions, we need to separate the effects of SES and culture in an empirical study.

Using data from the baseline of China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) 2010, we investigated how SES and culture affect educational achievement of children of different ethnicities. We test the cognitive and behavioral aspects of culture respectively. Our results show that: first, family SES is the major mediator to explain the gap in educational achievement between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. Second, although there is significant difference in cultural belief,

measured through educational aspiration, between children of Han Chinese and ethnic minorities, the difference originates from the difference in their family SES. Third, there is no significant difference in habitus, measured through attitude towards study and behavior in school, between children of Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. In other words, Han Chinese children are not more motivated in school than their ethnic minority counterparts.

The study has following contributions. We empirically test how family SES and culture matter for the ethnic educational gap in China. By eliminating culture as a valid explanation, we demystify the stereotype of minority culture. By emphasizing the pivotal role of family SES in shaping the gap, we reaffirms the necessity of the ethnic policy that elevates minorities' socioeconomic standing. Methodologically, we conduct a more rigorous mediation test of the effect of SES, and use the special case of intermarriage to separate the effect of culture from that of SES. Theoretically, we discuss why cultural difference could be missing in China while observed in America, highlighting the country specificity in studying the causes of educational inequality.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Ethnic educational gap has continuously attracted scholarly attention, though what shapes it remains debated. Scholars debate on two causes: family SES and culture (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Kao and Thompson, 2003; Liu and Xie, 2016). From the family SES point of view, ethnicity or race has a situational effect: children of different ethnicities inherit differential structural positions in the society, which enable or constrain their educational opportunities. From the cultural point of view, ethnicity has a dispositional effect: children of different ethnicities incubate differential orientations towards education, which affect their education outcomes.

The structural factors such as family SES are the most salient predictor of educational and occupational achievement gaps between minority and majority groups (Duncan et al., 1972). Children from high-income families receive more material supports, and their parents are more likely to be well-educated and offer other forms of guidance. The composite effect is, of course, better

educational achievement (Kao, 1995; Goyette and Xie, 1999). For example, second-generation Asian Americans have higher educational achievement partly because their parents are better off than immigrants from other areas (Nee and Wong, 1985; Lee and Zhou, 2015). On the contrary, minority groups who lack stable economic resources for continuous investment in education suffer from lower educational achievement.

Challenge to the dominant structural explanation comes from the case of Asian Americans as the “model minority.” The family SES fails to explain why some Asian Americans, even from disadvantaged families, still achieve upward mobility through education. Cultural belief unique to certain ethnicities emerges as an alternative explanation. This line of research dates back to Wisconsin model of status attainment, which incorporates psychological elements, such as parents’ educational expectation, to explain reproduction of class (Sewell et al., 1969). Scholars apply the model to Asian Americans, arguing that education is highly valued in most Asian cultures, and parents devote more to their children’s education. Parents also pass down traditions, such as deferred gratification, to help the structurally disadvantaged children “make it” in America (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou and Bankston, 1994; Lee and Zhou, 2015).

Most empirical studies consider family SES and culture as two separate, if not competing, explanations of ethnic educational gap. However, structural and cultural boundary are mutually constitutive in social theory. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argues that different forms of capitals transform into each other. Higher socioeconomic status, measured by father’s occupation, leads to frequent cultural consumption, which in turn, results in school performance and occupational prospect. Empirical studies in America gradually attend to the interplay of SES and culture in shaping inequality (for a review, see Small and Newman, 2001). For example, Warren (1996) finds culture is no longer a valid explanation of lower educational achievement of Hispanics once the effect of SES is controlled. Following these studies, we employ mediation test to explicate the relationship between family SES and culture in the causal mechanism of ethnic educational gap.

Another issue overlooked in previous studies is the precise definition of

culture. Previous researches on racial educational achievement gap treat culture as an all-encompassing concept for all kinds of non-economic factors, such as belief, attitude and behavior (Hsin and Xie, 2014; Liu and Xie, 2016). These conceptions neglect the differences between cultural value and habit. Toolkit theorists argue that people consciously use culture as strategy of action to cope with different situations (Swidler, 1986). For example, even if ethnic cultures transmit differential beliefs about or attitudes towards study, if schooling is the primary means to upward mobility, students regardless of ethnicities will study hard, or in other words, adopt a similar strategy of action in the same situation. Even if ethnic minorities hold certain cultural beliefs, it is unclear in previous studies whether they indeed practice it in the educational setting. Therefore, it appears imperative to distinguish people's cultural belief from their daily behavior. Specifically, we measure educational aspiration as cultural belief, and the behavior in school as action. Since our measurement of behavior in school resembles the measurement of "habitus" in previous study (Gaddis, 2013), we categorize culture into cultural belief and habitus, and investigate their effects on educational achievement of children step by step.

## China Context

Different immigrant groups come to America with different educational level and career aspiration: recent Asian American are often skilled professionals (Saxenian, 2002). Chinese ethnic minorities, on the contrary, usually live in poor regions: 71.6% of ethnic minorities live in the less developed provinces in western China (Hannum, 2002). In fact, intersectionality of poverty and ethnicity is pervasive in most countries. To reach a generalizable explanation for ethnic educational gap, evidence outside American context is valuable.

Moreover, ethnic minorities in China face less discrimination. The intermarriage rate from 2004 to 2014 in Beijing is about 10% (Gao and Zhang, 2014), suggesting that ethnic relations in China is less oppositional than that in America. Chinese government carries out affirmative actions for ethnic minorities. Guo and Li (2008) find children from Han-minority intermarriage family are twice more likely to identify themselves as minority in official

registration. There is not as severe cultural segregation among ethnicities in China as in America, which again casts doubt on culture's role in fostering ethnicity-based inequality.

Besides separating family SES and culture, it is also important to distinguish cultural belief from daily practice. Ethnic minorities face homogenizing pressures from Han Chinese. Several waves of government-initiated immigration of Han Chinese to border ethnic regions occurred in recent decades. Even in five officially-designated provincial-level autonomous regions for ethnic minorities, Han Chinese consists of the majority of the populations. Local governments in ethnic regions are led by both minority and Han officials. Ethnic minorities go to the same schools with Han Chinese, where speaking Mandarin is promoted. It is possible that although some ethnic minorities hold dear to their cultural beliefs, they decouple daily practice from the beliefs to assimilate into the mainstream society.

Besides these characteristics that may open up space for theoretical contribution, the ethnic educational gap in China is important in its own right. There are about 114 million ethnic minorities of 55 nationalities, accounting for 8.5% of the total population of China (State Council Population Census Office and State Statistical Bureau, 2012). Ethnic minorities ages 16-21 are one-third less likely to complete nine-year compulsory schooling than their Han Chinese peers (Hannum and Wang, 2012). A rigorous analysis of the causes of such gap would inform ethnic policy that affects the life courses of a large number of people.

## **Data, Variables, and Method**

### *Data*

This paper employs data from the 2010 baseline survey of the Chinese Family Panel Survey (CFPS). The CFPS is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of Chinese families and individuals using stratified and multi-stage sampling methods. Through interviews with 14,960 households from 635 communities, the CFPS baseline survey covers 33,600 adults and 8890 children in 25 provinces in China. It represents 95% of the total population in China in 2010 (Xie and Hu, 2014). We use the CFPS dataset for its high quality and

representativeness. Previous study finds the age, sex, and socioeconomic distributions in the CFPS data match the 2010 data in China Census and the China General Social Survey (CGSS) to a high degree (Xu and Xie, 2015). CFPS also provides reliable data that describe our variables. It contains a children's dataset, and responses of children are compared with those of their parents to ensure reliability of such variables as family SES.

We analyze the dataset with children ages 10 to 15 because these children receive an in-person interview. Also, educational achievement is hard to measure for children below age 10.

### *Variables*

We use two indicators to measure our independent variable, ethnicity. First, we directly use children's ethnicity as documented in the survey. We code Han Chinese as "0" , and ethnic minority children as "1" . Second, in the robustness test, we manually merge these children's dataset with their parents' and use their parents' ethnicities as an indicator of ethnicity. We classify children into three groups: children from Han-Han marriage family, Han-ethnic minority marriage family, and minority-minority marriage family.

We use children's math ability to measure our dependent variable, academic achievement. Math and Chinese are the major subjects in Chinese schools. Although CFPS includes Chinese test scores, they are biased measure of academic achievement due to the linguistic diversity of ethnic minorities. CFPS measures children's math ability in two ways. Each child answers 24 math questions and receives a score based on the number of correct answers (Zhang and Xie, 2015). We standardize the score to create a variable named "math score in survey." CFPS also asks for children's math exam scores last semester in school. We standardize the score to create a variable named "math score in school."

Our first proposed mediator variable is family SES. Following previous studies (Liu and Xie, 2016), we measure family SES by parents' educational years, parents' occupational status, and net household income last year in logarithm. For numerical comparison, we convert parents' 4-digit International Standard

Classification of Occupation (ISCO) code into the International Socioeconomic Index (ISEI). We use factor analysis to create a variable named “family SES.”

We separate culture’s effects into belief and habitus, and propose other two mediators:

Our second proposed mediator variable is cultural belief. We measure cultural belief by the highest educational years which a child expects to attain.

Our third proposed mediator variable is habitus. Following previous study (Gaddis, 2013), we measure habitus through a child’s attitude towards study and behavior in school. Four following questions in CFPS are relevant:

*How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?*

- *I work as hard as possible in my study.*
- *I do my best to learn about what I study.*
- *I will check up my homework as careful as possible after finish it.*
- *I do not play unless finish my homework.*

Participants respond to each question on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree.” The higher score represents better attitude and behavior in school. We use factor analysis create a variable named “study attitude.”

Control variables include children’s gender, age, *Hukou* (household registration) status, grade, number of siblings, and community of origin. CFPS questionnaire includes all these variables. We treat *Hukou* status as categorical variables with “1” representing rural, “2” urban, and “3” children without *Hukou*.

### **Method**

Because we propose family SES and culture as mediators between ethnicity and educational achievement, we employ mediation analysis with multiple regression. Baron and Kenny (1986) establish mediation in three steps. First, we run regression between the dependent variable, math scores, and the independent variable, ethnicity. Next, we regress family SES and culture on ethnicity to find if these variables are valid mediators. Third, we regress math



scores on both the independent variables and the proposed mediators to test how much do family SES and culture mediate the effect of ethnicity on educational achievement. As robustness test, we apply the same analytical strategy to another indicator of ethnicity, parent's ethnicities. Because the respondents are from different communities and grades, we used fixed effect at both community and grade levels.

## Results

Table1. Descriptive Analysis of Dependent and Proposed Mediator Variables

Variables	Han Chinese	S.E	Ethnic minorities	S.E	Pr( T  >  t )
Math score in school	0.050	0.019	-0.424	0.059	0.000
Math score in survey	0.045	0.018	-0.380	0.057	0.000
Family SES	0.055	0.017	-0.418	0.050	0.000
Expected educational years	14.807	0.063	13.759	0.194	0.000
Habitus	0.003	0.014	-0.014	0.042	0.697
Sample size	2318		320		

Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of our dependent and proposed mediator variables. There is significant educational achievement gap between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities have both lower math exam scores in school and lower math test scores in the CFPS survey. The family socioeconomic status between Han Chinese and ethnic minority children is also significantly unequal, as suggested by previous researchers. Ethnic minority children have lower educational aspiration, a cultural belief. However, there is no significant difference in study attitude, a habitus, between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities.

Table 2. The Effect of Ethnicity on Educational Achievement

	Math score in survey	Math score in school
Minority	-0.214*** (0.050)	-0.372*** (0.068)
Female	-0.040 (0.026)	-0.068 (0.034)
Urban Hukou	0.319*** (0.034)	0.337** (0.090)
No Hukou	-0.254* (0.105)	-0.189 (0.384)
Age	0.383*** (0.044)	-0.027 (0.022)
Numbers of siblings	-0.166*** (0.027)	-0.174*** (0.034)
Constant	-4.465*** (0.529)	0.726** (0.243)
Observations	2,702	2,474
R-squared	0.494	0.089

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

We now run multiple regression to test if family SES and culture are mediators in the proposed effect of the children's ethnicity on their educational achievement. As the first step of the mediation effect analysis, we establish in Table 2 that ethnicity does have a significant effect on educational achievement. The Model 1 in Table 2 shows the results of an OLS regression to predict the effect of ethnicity on math test scores in the CFPS survey, and the results of a regression to predict the effect of ethnicity on math exam score in school is shown in Model 2. Both results show that ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in the educational achievement when other demographical characteristics controlled. Specifically, ethnic minorities are about 0.214 lower in the standardized math test score in CFPS survey and 0.372 lower in the standardized math exam score in school: Han Chinese children are about 12 times of standard deviation higher in math score in survey and 20 times of standard deviation higher in math score in school. The results are consistent with previous studies

and confirm the educational achievement gap between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities.

Table 3. The Effects of Ethnicity on Family SES, Educational Aspiration, and Habitus

	Family SES	Aspiration	Aspiration	Habitus	Habitus
Minority	-0.257*** (0.033)	-0.349** (0.127)	-0.201 (0.144)	-0.054 (0.060)	-0.045 (0.065)
Female	-0.081*** (0.017)	-0.373** (0.142)	-0.363** (0.124)	-0.221*** (0.029)	-0.214*** (0.042)
Urban Hukou	1.094*** (0.043)	1.285*** (0.167)	0.399 (0.286)	-0.056 (0.038)	-0.001 (0.075)
No Hukou	-0.211** (0.077)	-0.266 (0.461)	-0.141 (0.563)	0.304 (0.216)	0.356 (0.245)
Age	-0.011 (0.019)	-0.139*** (0.034)	-0.127*** (0.025)	-0.030*** (0.007)	-0.029*** (0.006)
Numbers of siblings	-0.194*** (0.008)	-0.651*** (0.112)	-0.510*** (0.117)	0.008 (0.018)	-0.003 (0.020)
Family SES			0.793*** (0.104)		-0.039 (0.044)
Constant	0.428 (0.249)	17.930*** (0.518)	17.620*** (0.408)	0.485*** (0.081)	0.485*** (0.048)
Observations	2,182	2,642	2,133	2,682	2,167
R-squared	0.397	0.091	0.113	0.027	0.025

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

As the second step of the mediation effect analysis, we show in Table 3 the effects of ethnicity on family SES, cultural belief, and habitus. The Model 1 in Table 3 shows that ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in family SES. The Models 2 and 3 in Table 3 shows the effect of ethnicity on educational aspiration, with family SES controlled in Model 2 but not in Model 3. Before controlling the effect of family SES, we find a significant difference in educational aspiration, while the difference no longer exists when the family SES controlled. In other words, the gap in cultural belief originates from the effect of family SES. The Models 4 and 5 in Table 3 do not reveal significant difference in habitus,

measured by attitude and behavior in school, between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities without or with family SES controlled. In other words, Han Chinese are not more motivated or disciplined in school than their ethnic minority counterparts. In sum, the results emphasize the significant direct and indirect effects of family SES on educational inequality. The results also demystify the stereotype of ethnic minority students as less motivated, and eliminate cultural belief as an independent explanation for the ethnic educational gap.

As the third step of the mediation effect analysis, we show in Tables 4 and 5 the mediation effects of family SES and cultural belief on the relationship between ethnicity and educational achievement. As shown in the previous step, because habitus is not a valid mediator, we treat it as a control variable in this step.

Table 4. The Mediation Effects of Family SES and Educational Aspiration between Ethnicity and Math Score in Survey

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	-0.207** (0.054)	-0.164** (0.058)	-0.195** (0.054)	-0.158** (0.060)
Female	-0.035 (0.028)	-0.015 (0.041)	-0.031 (0.026)	-0.016 (0.042)
Urban Hukou	0.322*** (0.037)	0.163*** (0.027)	0.276*** (0.040)	0.148*** (0.034)
No Hukou	-0.256* (0.103)	-0.182 (0.120)	-0.238* (0.093)	-0.168 (0.114)
Age	0.383*** (0.044)	0.383*** (0.039)	0.388*** (0.042)	0.387*** (0.039)
Numbers of siblings	-0.167*** (0.027)	-0.128*** (0.023)	-0.148*** (0.030)	-0.119*** (0.028)
Habitus	0.005 (0.025)	0.007 (0.028)	-0.022 (0.025)	-0.016 (0.029)
Family SES		0.196*** (0.027)		0.173*** (0.027)
Aspiration			0.034*** (0.004)	0.027*** (0.006)

Constant	-4.458*** (0.523)	-4.522*** (0.459)	-5.057*** (0.535)	-4.990*** (0.522)
Observations	2,682	2,167	2,624	2,120
R-squared	0.493	0.521	0.505	0.525

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

In all Models in Table 4, we use math score in survey as the dependent variable. The Model 1 in Table 4 is a null model, including only control variables and ethnicity. The Model shows similar results to the Model 1 in Table 2: ethnic minorities fall behind Han Chinese by about 0.207 standardized math score in survey. In the Model 2 and 3 in Table 4, we test the proposed mediation effects of family SES and habitus, which exist only if the coefficients of family SES and habitus are significant. The coefficients are indeed significant in both models. Specifically, family SES is positively related to children's educational achievement, and the family SES explains about 21%  $[(0.207-0.164)/0.207]$  of the difference in math score in survey between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. The Model 3 in Table 4 shows educational aspiration has a slight effect on the relationship between ethnicity and math score in survey. It explains only about 6%  $[(0.207-0.195)/0.207]$  of the educational gap among ethnicities. Since we show in the previous step that the ethnic gap in educational aspiration mainly results from the ethnic gap in family SES, we can alternatively state that SES indirectly explains 6% of the educational achievement gap through the effect of cultural belief. In aggregate, family SES explain about 27% of the gap in math score in survey among ethnicities.

Table 5. The Mediation Effects of Family SES and Educational Aspiration between Ethnicity and Math Score in School

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Minority	-0.338*** (0.074)	-0.291** (0.087)	-0.294*** (0.068)	-0.268** (0.079)
Female	-0.016 (0.026)	0.019 (0.026)	-0.017 (0.029)	0.015 (0.035)

Urban Hukou	0.357** (0.092)	0.123 (0.088)	0.245** (0.079)	0.0939 (0.075)
No Hukou	-0.264 (0.407)	-0.093 (0.355)	-0.212 (0.363)	-0.037 (0.301)
Age	-0.021 (0.023)	-0.021 (0.020)	-0.011 (0.023)	-0.013 (0.022)
Numbers of siblings	-0.178*** (0.037)	-0.120** (0.045)	-0.121** (0.037)	-0.079 (0.043)
Habitus	0.222*** (0.024)	0.250*** (0.029)	0.157*** (0.025)	0.184*** (0.028)
Family SES		0.247*** (0.026)		0.182*** (0.027)
Aspiration			0.083*** (0.015)	0.077*** (0.015)
Constant	0.623* (0.248)	0.522* (0.212)	-0.838* (0.349)	-0.800* (0.384)
Observations	2,455	1,981	2,410	1,945
R-squared	0.118	0.153	0.184	0.207

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Next, we estimate family SES and educational aspiration's mediation effects on math score in school. The Model 1 in Table 5 shown that other variables controlled, Han Chinese is about 0.338 higher in standardized math score in school. The Models 2 and 3 in Table 5 confirm both family SES and educational aspiration are mediators. The Model 2 shows the difference in family SES represents about 13.9%  $[(0.338-0.291)/0.338]$  of the educational achievement gap among ethnicities. The Model 3 shows the difference in educational aspiration explains about 13%  $[(0.338-0.294)/0.338]$  of the educational achievement gap among ethnicities. Again, this effect can be attributed to family SES's indirect effect. To sum up, family SES explains about 26.9% of the educational achievement gap between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities.

Our work until now confirms the vital role of family SES in explaining educational gap among ethnicities in China. In addition, we adopt Liu and Xie (2016)'s approach to test the interactive effect between culture and ethnicity.

Since we do not find significant results in math score in survey or in school, we do not include the interaction models in our result.

## Conclusions and Discussion

Current literature focuses on family SES and culture in explaining educational inequality among races in the U.S. Prior studies regard cultural difference an important factor explaining the gap. Can cultural factor also explain the educational achievement gap among ethnicities in China?

Based on the nationally representative longitudinal survey of CFPS 2010, we run several regressions on two indicators of children's ethnicity, and obtain the results that explain how ethnic educational gap comes into being in China. Our results reveal that ethnic minorities are not less motivated than Han Chinese in school. Though their educational aspiration is lower, most of the difference can be explained by family SES, which is the major contributing factor to the educational disparity by ethnicity.

Although previous studies use cultural difference to explain Asian Americans' superior academic performance (Hsin and Xie, 2014; Lee and Zhou, 2015; Liu and Xie, 2016), we do not find cultural difference a valid explanation for educational advantages of Han Chinese. Why is there significant difference in cultural beliefs among different races in America while none is found among different ethnicities in China? We identify two plausible explanations. From the demographic perspective, America is country with immigration tradition. Cultural assimilation occurs gradually in generations (Gordon, 1964) and is countered by residential segregation (Massey and Denton, 1998; Charles, 2003), ethnic enclave (Wilson and Portes, 1980) and replenishment (Jiménez, 2008). Han Chinese has historically cohabited with ethnic minorities. Though ethnic regions exist in China, even in five officially designated autonomous regions, Han ethnicity consists of the majority of the populations. The intermarriage rate in China, for example, is much higher than that in America (Guo and Li, 2008). In short, symbolic boundary is more permeable among ethnicities in China. From the economic perspective, the huge rural-city and regional inequality in China is a major factor explaining the educational inequality in China.

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## **It's about Poverty: Explaining Educational Disparity between Han Chinese and Ethnic Minorities in China**

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Despite of abundant literature on the economic aspect of ethnic stratification in China, the inequality in educational achievement among Chinese ethnicities is a relatively new topic. What is missing from the existing studies is a thorough account of how the educational gap among ethnicities comes into being. In this paper, we consider two contributing factors to the gap: family socioeconomic status (SES) and culture, consisting of belief and habitus. Drawing from children's dataset in the 2010 baseline survey of the China Family Panel Study (CFPS), we found that (1) the gap in family SES is the major mediator to explain educational disparity among ethnicities in China; (2) there is no significant difference in habitus between Han and ethnic minorities; and (3) the difference in educational aspiration among ethnicities, a cultural belief, can be explained by the effect of family SES. The results are contrary to some people's stereotype of ethnic minorities' culture and reaffirm the necessity of current ethnic policy that elevates the socioeconomic standing of ethnic minorities. We also discuss why our results differ from previous studies in the American context.

Keywords: Educational achievement, ethnicities, family SES, culture, China