

Article

Learning to Succeed? Interplay between Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Students' Perception on Social Mobility in a Xinjiang Class School of China

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Abstract: While studies on students' ethnic identity, national identity and social mobility gained relatively good research development in Western societies, little attention has been given to other social contexts, particularly non-Western societies like China. A questionnaire (N = 570, aged 14 to 20) was conducted in a Xinjiang Class school in Southern China to examine the nexus of students' ethnic identity, national identity and perception on social mobility. The Xinjiang Class is currently one of the most iconic preferential educational policies recruiting students from ethnic groups in Xinjiang (an ethnic minority-concentrated border region) and offering them senior secondary education in select Han-centric, senior-secondary schools in China's central and east coast provinces. The results demonstrate that the strengthening effect of students' ethnic identity on national identity is not obvious; students' strong national identity contributes to their positive perception on upward social mobility. However, the widely accepted viewpoint that students' ethnic identity has a negative influence on perception of social mobility cannot be fully supported in this case. This study enriches the extant literature by providing a combined model to explore the nuanced mechanisms between ethnic identity, national identity and students' perception on social mobility in a multi-ethnic society and by helping to unveil the identity politics unfolded in current China's educational sector.

Keywords: ethnic identity; national identity; social mobility; education; Xinjiang class; China



Citation: Yuan, Z.; Xie, Y.; Li, J.; Li, J.; Yang, R. Learning to Succeed? Interplay between Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Students' Perception on Social Mobility in a Xinjiang Class School of China. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 4444. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084444>

Academic Editors: Eloy López Meneses, Emilio José Delgado-Algarra, César Bernal-Bravo, Antonio Alejandro Lorca-Marín and Fausto Cavallaro

Received: 5 January 2022

Accepted: 5 April 2022

Published: 8 April 2022

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1. Introduction

Managing the relations between nation and state has posed challenges for policymakers in most parts of the world. Most states in today's world were built on multi-ethnic backgrounds, and the so-called single-nationality states also have become ethnically diverse in the age of globalization. Military and semi-military interventions are enforced less frequently to respond to tensions among ethnic groups, while non-violent strategies, such as affirmative actions and preferential policies, are increasingly being implemented by policymakers [1–5]. Among other strategies, education functions as long-term means of social engineering that reinforce nation-building. Education not only contributes to creating social norms of ethnic identity and national identity, but also reflects a systematic strategy serving to bridge inequalities in income, employment and education between ethnic groups and thus promotes upward social mobility [6–8]. In this vein, education is inevitably entangled with the nuanced processes of students' identity construction and social mobility (Terms being used in scholarship are different, including perception, expectation, aspiration, etc. Though the terms are mostly used interchangeably, this paper uses

“perception”, as it allows researchers as well as participants a more neutral perspective of self and others while engaging in this research) [9,10]; inquiry into the interplay among ethnic identity, national identity and social mobility in an educational context becomes particularly important in understanding the asymmetric power relationship in multi-ethnic societies [11].

While empirical studies have examined the relations between ethnic identity, national identity and social mobility, their findings are divided [12–14]. Though recent studies have begun to argue that the relationship between ethnic and national identity is not necessarily conflicting, the tension between the two identifications has been highlighted for years [15–19]. One doctrine contends that ethnic identity lowers ethnic students’ career expectations and aspirations [20,21], while the other school demonstrates that social and cultural capital can be produced by ethnic identity in helping the younger generations within minority groups to break through barriers and achieve upward social mobility [22–25]. There is a general consensus that stronger national identity indicates positive perception on upward social mobility of adolescents within ethnic minority youths who are being educated and well prepared for mainstream society.

Although ethnic identity and its influence on social mobility have received increasing attention, ethnic identity, national identity and their relations to the perceived social mobility are relatively understudied. To address this gap, the current study focuses primarily on the pathways and results of social mobility while taking into account young people’s perception of social mobility. For adolescents/ students who are subject-to-be and will be developing their own careers in societies, their perception of social mobility significantly influences their future educational behavior and career choice [26–28]. Investigations on students’ perception of social mobility is particularly important, but still understudied, and deserves further examination. Although pairwise relationships between the three factors have been well-developed in the existing scholarship [29,30], the mechanisms by which the nexus of ethnic backgrounds and perceived social mobility has unfolded in an educational context are still underexplored. A combined model would be helpful in providing a more dynamic and comprehensive perspective to unfold the interrelationship among the three factors.

Moreover, while studies of ethnic identity, national identity and social mobility have gained relatively good research development in Western societies, especially the U.S. and Europe, little attention has been given to other social contexts, particularly non-Western societies like China, where identity construction is considered a major component of the social engineering aspect of nation building. China is officially composed of 55 ethnic minority groups, with a total population of 117.35 million: equivalent to the entire population of Japan and twice the population of the UK. More importantly, occasional outbreaks of violent ethnic rioting in ethnic minority-concentrated areas, such as the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Tibetan Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, have forced Beijing to position nation-building as a priority in policy-making for these areas. Moreover, there are barriers for scholars wishing to conduct detailed fieldwork in these areas, which lead to the relative scarceness of qualitative and especially quantitative studies on identity transformation and social mobility perception among youth in these regions.

Additionally, limited accessibility to this topic and the research fields has somewhat rendered the extant literature dominated by qualitative approaches [31]. Like other qualitative research, analysis of the qualitative data (i.e., documents, reports, and other second-hand data) are highly subjective, variable, and context dependent on the researchers’ personal beliefs, experiences, and available resources. Moreover, some critical thinkers even state that the current qualitative approach has deepened the mutual misunderstanding and stereotyping among scholars from within and outside China regarding Chinese ethnic issues [32–34]. Drawing on a unique accessibility to a school in China where an ethnic minority-focused educational policy was implemented, this study employs a quantitative

research approach to explore the nexus of students' ethnic identity, national identity and perception on social mobility.

This study engages in the debate on ethnicity, nationality and social mobility in contemporary China as well as other multi-ethnic states by offering a quantitative model and approach. Briefly, this article enriches the extant literature on the interplay between ethnic-minority backgrounds (e.g., ethnic identity and national identity) and perceived social mobility by conducting a combined approach to examine the dynamics among these three dimensions. Furthermore, this article provides quantitative evidence aiming to deepen our understanding of the social engineering aspect of national identity building and to unfold identity politics in China's educational system. Practically, this study helps to unveil and explain the practice being undertaken by China to promote its stability and legitimacy from the rarely studied perspective of Chinese students' identity-building and perception of social mobility.

2. Theoretical Development

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Students' ethnic identity is negatively correlated with their national identity.*

The relationship between ethnic and national identity is a recurrent topic of debate [35,36]. While ethnicity is understood in varying ways across disciplines, ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging and self-categorization in terms of membership in a particular ethnic group [37,38]. Meanwhile, ethnic identity is a dynamic formation and progression that evolve and change in line with one's socialization experiences in family, community, and larger social settings [39–42]. Like ethnic identity, national identity involves feelings of belonging to, and attitudes toward, the larger society [43]. Cultural identity is a broad term often used to include both ethnic and national identity and their interplay [44].

According to the influential two-dimensional model of acculturation [40], ethnic and national identities are assumed to be independent. It indicates that each identity could both be either high/strong or low/weak [45]. However, the linear or unidimensional model indicates that the two identities are negatively correlated [46], implying that ethnic and national identities are assumed to be opposites located on a continuum.

As Phinney and Ong [47] have argued, although ethnic and national identities may be theoretically independent, the relationship between them varies empirically. Indeed, the tension between ethnic and national identity has been considered as a source of conflict in multi-ethnic societies [48]. In his often-cited "Lessons in Being Chinese," [49] articulated how the politics involving ethnic identity and national identity are played out in the educational system among ethnic minorities in China. Specifically, ethnic minorities have few chances to study their own cultures, and the state education system highlights collective consciousness and national identity (e.g., their loyalty to the state and arguably the mainstream Han majority). The tension between the two identities could be crosschecked by the existing literature on ethnic minority education in China [8,50–52]. Recently, Leibold and Chen [6] reviewed the dualism of plurality and unity in the education context, contending that ethnic integration still dominates in Chinese schooling, while ethnic identity and culture have largely been seen as conflicting with the national identity and the ideology of national unity in China's educational system [2,53,54]. By reviewing the current literature on the relation between ethnic and national identity in China's educational system, we hypothesize that students' ethnic identity is negatively correlated with their national identity (H1).

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Students' sense of ethnic identity and perceptions of upward social mobility are negatively correlated.*

Researchers have focused on the influence of students' ethnicity on their aspirations, expectations and perceptions of future social mobility. Drawing on extensive original

research on Tibetan, Muslim Hui and other minority people, Yi [55] argued that the cultural exclusion of ethnic identity and ethnic culture in the policy and practice of education for ethnic minorities has led to problems of social mobility and thereby to economic inequities between minorities and the Han majority. In particular, the stronger ethnic identity of a student implies her/his stronger sense of being excluded in the educational system, which is dominated by the Han-centric culture. Indeed, Gao [56] examined the relations between education and perception on social mobility among ethnic Koreans in China, who have been largely considered as a “model minority” primarily in terms of their academic success. She articulated that though most ethnic Koreans value education as a practical means to achieve upward mobility and access to the Chinese mainstream, they still have a strong sense of marginalization, within which ethnicity chiefly plays a negative role in constructing a positive sense of the future. It should also be noted that the role played by ethnic identity in social mobility results from the majority group’s expectations. Yuan et al.’s [2] recent study on the cultural politics of everyday schooling in a Xinjiang Class school stated that ethnic minority students tend to comply with the prescriptions of patriotic education and ethnic Han-dominant ethnic integration owing to their aspirations to gain upward mobility in the ethnic Han-centric society. Likewise, Yi [57] articulated that the majority Han population’s expectations regarding ethnic integration (i.e., the ethnic minority’s acquisition of Han Chinese language, literacy, values, beliefs, etc.) have affected the ability of ethnic minorities to achieve social mobility. In this vein, we hypothesize that students’ sense of ethnic identity and perceptions of upward social mobility are negatively correlated in the educational context of China (H2).

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Students’ sense of national identity and perceptions of upward social mobility are positively correlated.*

Unlike ethnic identity, a growing body of research conducted in both China and the Western societies has claimed that national identity is a key element in developing a student’s perception on upward social mobility. To put it simply and critically, Oakes [58] (p. 36) contended that social mobility can be defined as an assimilation to the dominant outgroup. In Ogbu and Simons [13]’s often-cited cultural ecological theory of minority school performance, voluntary minorities are those who are willing and able to adopt themselves to the dominant culture in schools. Generally, voluntary minorities have better expectation of opportunities (jobs, freedom, etc.) in the future and thereby have higher perceived social mobility. Patriotism, nationalism and national identity are highlighted as an essential part of the social engineering aspect of nation-building in China [19,59,60]. By inserting nation-building agendas into state curriculums, the Chinese government aims to cultivate students’ loyalty to the country and to encourage students’ continuous engagement in the country’s “socialist modernization.” Empirically, Yuan [31]’s recent studies of an ethnic minority-focused education policy of China indicated that education provides a window for ethnic minorities to have mobility in the geographical sense, which, in turn, enriches students’ knowledge of geography, culture, and languages of the country and, perhaps more importantly, cultivates their skills of coping with tensions and conflicts of norms and values between the mainstream and their own. In doing so, those ethnic minority youths who have the cultural sophistication of the mainstream population are expected to have a better sense of national identity, thus having a positive imagination and perception of career development in the future [61,62]. In this vein, we hypothesize that students’ sense of national identity and perceptions of upward social mobility are positively correlated (H3).

3. Methods

3.1. Case Selection, Participants and Procedure

Recruitment of participants and data collection were conducted in a school running the Xinjiang Class policy in Southern China during June to July 2016. Since 2000, the

Xinjiang Class policy has been one of the most iconic preferential educational policies, recruiting junior-secondary school graduates from ethnic groups in Xinjiang and offering them senior secondary education in select senior-secondary schools in China's central and east coastal provinces [31,63,64]. The network of Xinjiang Class schools currently encompasses 93 schools across 45 cities in China. Xinjiang, as an area with a majority population of official minorities in China's border areas (According to the 2010 Census, the one billion-strong Han comprise 91 per cent of China's population. Within Xinjiang, however, the Uyghurs comprise 46 per cent of the total population, the Han only 40 per cent, and other ethnic minorities (such as the Kazakh, Hui, Kirghiz and Mongol) 14 per cent. Information was retrieved from <https://cpianalysis.org/2016/03/07/spatial-results-of-the-2010-census-in-xinjiang/>, accessed on 28 December 2021), has been a key political concern for the central government [65], especially following one of the deadliest outbreaks of violence between ethnic Han and Uyghur in Ürümqi in July 2009 [66,67]. According to a recent census, there are about 12 million Uyghurs, mostly Muslim, living in Xinjiang. The Uyghurs see themselves as culturally and ethnically close to Central Asian nations [68]. In fact, owing to its isolated geography, relatively inferior economic and developmental status and different visibility in religious (Muslim-concentrated area), linguistic (Uyghur and other ethnic minority languages) and cultural aspects compared to other regions in China, Xinjiang has been a key concern of China in promoting interethnic mingling and integration [65]. In response to ethnic tensions and inequality, the Xinjiang Class policy seeks to create an educational space for Xinjiang youth with diverse ethnic backgrounds to interact and thereby to break down the barriers to inter-ethnic mingling and cultural fusion in Xinjiang [2,31].

Specifically, the Xinjiang Class policy was chosen as the case in this study owing to three reasons. First, a fundamental goal of the policy is to reduce educational inequalities between different ethnic groups in China. As Xinjiang is considered to be a region with inferior educational infrastructure and educational outcomes compared with central and coastal provinces, the policy is aimed at providing the local students with better education and better capability of upward social mobility. Meanwhile, by moving Xinjiang students to other regions for education, the policy seeks to break down the spatial and cultural barriers between Xinjiang and other provinces and cities, thus creating new space for Xinjiang youth to understand mainstream Han society. Second, the demography of the Xinjiang Class school is multi-ethnic, rendering the case a unique field to examine the politics of ethnicity in an educational context. For the surveyed school, the majority of the students belonged to the Uyghur group, which constitutes a majority population in Xinjiang (see Table 1). Meanwhile, participants of 15 additional ethnic groups that inhabit Xinjiang (e.g., ethnic Han, Hui, Kazakh, Mongolian, etc.) were also chosen. Moreover, the diverse ethnic demography of the surveyed school reflects the general demographical students of the Xinjiang Class schools. Third, the policy is taken as a key strategy endeavor for building a shared national identity [6,63,68]. As Leibold and Grose [53] have argued, the Xinjiang Class policy has the significant political ambition of constructing the legitimacy of the Chinese-dominated government in contemporary China. It makes the school an ideal case for probing relations between students from ethnic-minority backgrounds (e.g., ethnic identity and national identity) and those students' perceived social mobility in China's educational context.

Before we conducted the survey, the questionnaire was tested in a pilot [14]. The sampling frame consisted of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds from different grades (preparatory, level 10, 11, 12) (see Table 1). In total, 577 participants were initially recruited from the surveyed school. After data screening, 570 participants, aged between 14 and 20 years old, were found to be valid. Participants were from 16 ethnic backgrounds, in which Uyghur (46.0%) is the majority among the student participants, followed by ethnic Han (21.2%) and Kazakh (16.3%).

Table 1. Demographic details of the sample.

Demographic	Frequency (N = 570)	% of Respondents
Age		
14	2	0.4%
15	38	6.7%
16	142	24.9%
17	153	27.0%
18	140	24.6%
19	82	14.4%
20	12	2.1%
Gender		
Male	197	34.6%
Female	373	65.4%
Grades		
Preparatory Class	166	29.1%
Level 10	163	28.6%
Level 11	133	23.3%
Level 12	108	18.9%
Ethnicity		
Uyghur	262	46.0%
Kazakh	93	16.3%
Hui	57	10.0%
Kyrgyz	6	1.1%
Mongolian	12	2.1%
Tajik	2	0.4%
Xibo	4	0.7%
Man	1	0.2%
Uzbek	1	0.2%
Russian	1	0.2%
Daur	1	0.2%
Tartar	1	0.2%
Han	121	21.2%
Other (Dongxiang, Tujia and Tu)	8	1.4%

It is worth noting that we are cautious about the inconsistencies in English–Chinese translation of the questionnaire. The original questionnaire was developed in English and then translated to Chinese, as the language was being used in daily teaching and the students have sufficient proficiency in the language. We invited Chinese-speaking educational researchers to review the questionnaire to make sure the students would easily comprehend the items. Moreover, to ensure the accuracy of the meaning, the Chinese-version questionnaire was translated back into English by a third-party translator again. Then, we compared the translated version with the original English version, making necessary (though in fact very minor) modifications. Finally, modifications were added to finalize the Chinese version of the questionnaire for data collection.

The project, following the local statement on ethical conduct in human research, has been approved by the ethics committees at the authors' institutes. Student participants responded to the questionnaire in a self-study class, which was a comfortable environment free from teachers' and administrators' unnecessary intervention and influence. Each participant handed in his/her responses independently. Moreover, an author of this study managed the whole process of the questionnaire survey, stating to students in advance that no personal information would be collected. The participation in the survey was totally voluntary. The participants were told about their freedom to withdraw at any time during the survey.

3.2. Variables and Measurement

This study adopts Yuan and Li's [14] measurement model for evaluating the three dimensions (ethnic identity, national identity and perception of social mobility). Building on Phinney and Ong's [47] Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R), Phinney and Devich-Navarro [43]'s measurement model of national identity and Goodman et al.'s [69] scale of subjective social status with youth version, the measurement model comprises seven factors (e.g., commitment, exploration, etc.), which are related to ethnic identity, national identity and perception of social mobility. Specifically, exploration can be defined as a series of actions and behaviors being taken to seek information and experiences relevant to an ethnicity and a state/nation [70]. Exploration is most prominent in adolescence, indicating a proactive psychology and practice of questioning their identity and pursuing more knowledge on one's relations to a group [71]. Commitment can be defined as one's psychological and emotional attachment and investment in a team [72]. It also indicates the strength of an individual's ties with a group and her/his sense of clarity surrounding the meaning of her/his membership [47,73]. Educational attainment normally indicates the level of education that a person has successfully completed. For this case, it refers to one's cognition of their academic performance and achievement (i.e., knowledge, skills and competencies) in school [74]. Perception of social status refers to a person's belief about her/his location in a status order [75]. Sense of being elite in this study mainly refers to one's awareness of her/his elite-ness in school contexts. Therefore, it is better understood in an academic sense [76]. Items were measured by agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

4. Results

4.1. Validity and Reliability Tests

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first performed to validate internal and external consistency of the study's factors. Internal consistency among the indicators within each latent factor was supported by Cronbach's α coefficients ranging from 0.812 to 0.877 [77] (Nunnally, 1978). As demonstrated by Table 2, the CFA results confirmed a satisfactory goodness of fit indices ($\chi^2(df) = 615.900$ (278), $p < 0.00$ ($\chi^2/df = 2.200$); CFI = 0.959; GFI = 0.922; NFI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.044; SRMR = 0.045) [78]. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) (greater than 0.50) and composite construct reliability (CR) (greater than 0.70) were considered acceptable [79]. The results provide support for the convergent validity and reliability of the latent factors.

The average, standard deviations and correlations are demonstrated in Table 3. Ethnic-Commitment, Ethnic-Exploration, National-Commitment and National-Exploration were positively correlated with Educational Attainment, Perception of Social Status and Sense of Being Elite. Ethnic-Commitment and Ethnic-Exploration were positively correlated with National-Commitment and National-Exploration. All square roots of AVEs (e.g., ranging from 0.738 to 0.824) were higher than those correlation coefficients among latent factors. Thus, good discriminant evidence was supported [79].

Table 2. Results of CFA.

Paths	Loadings (t-Value)	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Ethnic-Commitment		0.883	0.656	0.877
EC1	0.668 ***			
EC2	0.839 *** (17.246)			
EC3	0.881 *** (17.843)			
EC4	0.835 *** (17.193)			
Ethnic-Exploration		0.851	0.590	0.843
EE1	0.665 ***			
EE2	0.780 *** (15.645)			
EE3	0.825 *** (16.264)			
EE4	0.794 *** (15.855)			
National-Commitment		0.880	0.650	0.874
NC1	0.801 ***			
NC2	0.891 *** (23.703)			
NC3	0.870 *** (23.175)			
NC4	0.639 *** (15.837)			
National-Exploration		0.840	0.638	0.836
NE1	0.714 ***			
NE2	0.824 *** (17.257)			
NE3	0.851 *** (17.431)			
Educational Attainment		0.825	0.545	0.812
EA1	0.834 ***			
EA2	0.663 *** (16.561)			
EA3	0.614 *** (15.085)			
EA4	0.817 *** (21.406)			
Perception of Social Status		0.862	0.679	0.850
PSS1	0.678 ***			
PSS2	0.892 *** (18.144)			
PSS3	0.884 *** (18.084)			
Sense of Being Elite		0.871	0.630	0.867
SBE1	0.786 ***			
SBE2	0.859 *** (21.613)			
SBE3	0.808 *** (20.255)			
SBE4	0.714 *** (17.506)			

Fit indices of the reflective measurement model: $\chi^2(df) = 615.900 (278)$, $p < 0.00$ ($\chi^2/df = 2.200$); CFI = 0.959; GFI = 0.922; NFI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.044; SRMR = 0.045. Note. *** $p < 0.001$. The average variance extracted (AVE) and the composite reliability (CR) appear in the reflective scales to evidence reliability.

Table 3. Average, standard deviations, correlation and the roof of AVE.

Variables	Mean	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Ethnic-Commitment	3.159	0.470	0.810						
(2) Ethnic-Exploration	3.544	0.727	0.482	0.768					
(3) National-Commitment	4.901	0.334	−0.326	−0.346	0.806				
(4) National-Exploration	3.945	0.799	−0.130	−0.434	0.295	0.799			
(5) Educational Attainment	4.333	0.760	−0.278	−0.323	0.351	0.339	0.738		
(6) Perception of Social Status	4.047	0.920	−0.171	−0.248	0.184	0.294	0.665	0.824	
(7) Sense of Being Elite	3.997	0.935	−0.164	−0.120	0.177	0.208	0.719	0.569	0.794

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test our proposed hypotheses (Figure 1). The overall fit of the SEM met the acceptable levels ($\chi^2 (279) = 627.783$; $\chi^2/df = 2.250$; RMSEA = 0.047, SRMR = 0.049, CFI = 0.957, NFI = 0.926, GFI = 0.920) [79]. Table 4 demonstrates the results of hypotheses testing.

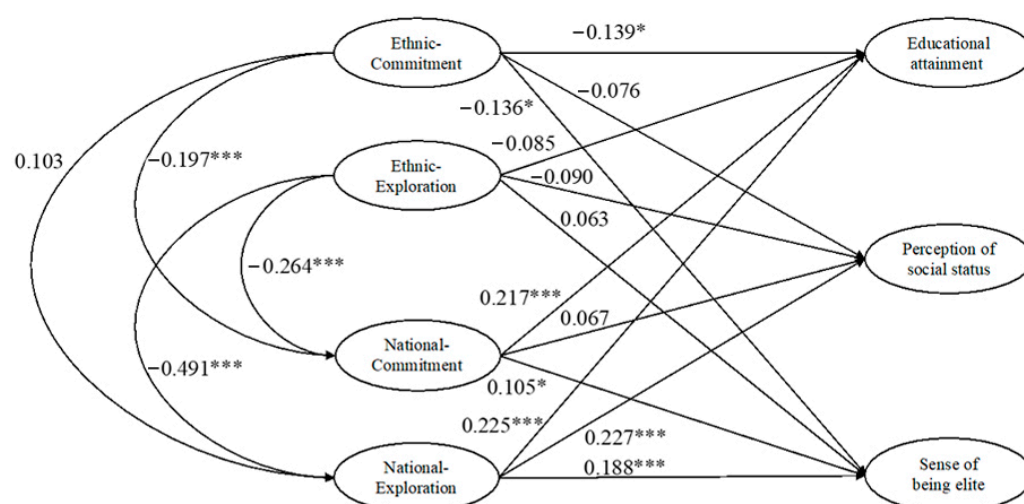


Figure 1. Estimated path coefficients from the SEM results. * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. The test of hypotheses.

Relationships	Path Coefficient	Supported
H1: Ethnic Identity → National Identity (–)		Partial
H1a-1: Ethnic-Commitment → National-Commitment	-0.197^{***}	Yes
H1a-2: Ethnic-Commitment → National-Exploration	0.103	No
H1b-1: Ethnic-Exploration → National-Commitment	-0.264^{***}	Yes
H1b-2: Ethnic-Exploration → National-Exploration	-0.491^{***}	Yes
H2: Ethnic identity → Social Mobility (–)		Partial
H2a-1: Ethnic-Commitment → Educational Attainment	-0.139^*	Yes
H2a-2: Ethnic-Commitment → Perception of Social Status	-0.076	No
H2a-3: Ethnic-Commitment → Sense of Being Elite	-0.136^*	Yes
H2b-1: Ethnic-Exploration → Educational Attainment	-0.085	No
H2b-2: Ethnic-Exploration → Perception of Social Status	-0.090	No
H2b-3: Ethnic-Exploration → Sense of Being Elite	0.063	No
H3: National identity → Social mobility (+)		Partial
H3a-1: National-Commitment → Educational attainment	0.217^{***}	Yes
H3a-2: National-Commitment → Perception of social status	0.067	No
H3a-3: National-Commitment → Sense of being elite	0.105^*	Yes
H3b-1: National-Exploration → Educational attainment	0.225^{***}	Yes
H3b-2: National-Exploration → Perception of social status	0.227^{***}	Yes
H3b-3: National-Exploration → Sense of being elite	0.188^{***}	Yes

$\chi^2 (279) = 627.783$; $\chi^2/df = 2.250$; RMSEA = 0.047, SRMR = 0.049, CFI = 0.957, NFI = 0.926, GFI = 0.920. * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Ethnic-Commitment was found to have a significant and negative impact upon National-Commitment ($\beta = -0.197, p < 0.00$). Ethnic-Exploration was found to have a significant and negative impact upon National-Commitment ($\beta = -0.264, p < 0.00$) and National-Exploration ($\beta = -0.491, p < 0.00$). H1a-1, H1b-1 and H1b-2 were supported. Ethnic-Commitment had no significant influence on National-Exploration ($\beta = 0.103, p > 0.05$). H1a-2 were not supported. Ethnic-Commitment had a significant and negative effect upon Educational Attainment ($\beta = -0.139, p < 0.05$) and Sense of Being Elite ($\beta = -0.136, p < 0.05$). H2a-1 and H2a-3 were supported. Ethnic-Commitment had no significant influence on Perception of Social Status ($\beta = -0.076, p > 0.05$). H2a-2 were not supported. Ethnic-Exploration had no significant influence on Educational Attainment ($\beta = -0.085, p > 0.05$), Perception of Social Status ($\beta = -0.090, p > 0.05$) and Sense of Being Elite ($\beta = 0.063, p > 0.05$). H2b-1, H2b-2 and H2b-3 were not supported. National-Commitment significantly influenced Educational Attainment ($\beta = -0.217, p < 0.00$) and Sense of Being Elite ($\beta = -0.105, p < 0.05$). H3a-1 and H3a-3 were supported. National-Commitment had no

significant influence on Perception of Social Status ($\beta = 0.067, p > 0.05$). H3a-2 were not supported. National-Exploration had a significant influence on Educational Attainment ($\beta = 0.225, p < 0.00$), Perception of Social Status ($\beta = 0.227, p < 0.00$) and Sense of Being Elite ($\beta = 0.188, p < 0.00$). Thus, H3b-1, H3b-2 and H3b-3 were supported.

5. Discussion

The results of the study not only partly echo with the hypotheses drawn from the existing literature, but also provide new contextual evidence to draw a more detailed picture of how different constructs of ethnic identity, national identity and perception of social mobility are related in China's educational context.

First, the results support Hypothesis 1. The strengthening effect of students' ethnic identity on national identity is not significantly obvious in general. It demonstrates the often-mentioned politics of identity-building in the current qualitatively based literature on ethnic minority education in China. The negative relation also indicates a paradoxical process of identity construction among students, which is a conflicting sense between ethnic identity and national identity. In so doing, though policies and actions have been designed and enacted by the Chinese state to promote ethnic mingling and ethnic integration [68,80,81], the tension between ethnic identity and national identity is perceived as obvious among students. However, it is worth noting that ethnic commitment has a positive influence on national exploration, which implies that students' psychological and emotional attachment to their ethnic groups motivate them to further explore information and knowledge related to the state. This finding agrees with Harrell and Ma's [82] description of a "mobility strategy", whereby ethnic minority youths tactically protect their ethnic identity and proactively opt for the national identity building agendas that the school provides, which creates a complex landscape of identity-politics in China's education system. In contrast to the current educational policies of the Xinjiang Class school, which generally highlight the dominant role of Han culture and downplay ethnic culture, policy makers should be paying attention to the positive effect of ethnic commitment in promoting students' exploration of the information, knowledge and experiences relevant to the nation. In so doing, it might contribute to establishing a subtle balance between students' ethnic and national identities.

Second, the results only partly support Hypothesis 2 that students' sense of ethnic identity has a negative influence on their perceptions of upward social mobility. Specifically, students' ethnic commitment exerts a negative effect on their educational attainment and sense of elite-ness. This finding confirms Yi's [55] argument that ethnic identity would negatively influence students' performance in school. Furthermore, the results help to explain the current gaps in education between the minority and the majority in China [83]. However, ethnic commitment has no significant influence on perceived social status; ethnic exploration has no significant influence on educational attainment, perceived social status or sense of being elite. The results imply that a stronger sense of ethnicity does not necessary lead to a students' negative perception of social mobility and sense of being an elite. This is true that one's ethnic identity is in essence a "cultural capital", which would contribute to one's social network and thereby upward social mobility. In terms of policy reflections, policy makers could exert the power that ethnicity has in shaping one's perception and path of social mobility, especially helping the ethnic students and graduates to create and generate social capital that contribute to their competitive power in China's market economy.

Finally, the results also partly support Hypothesis 3 that students' sense of national identity has a positive influence on their perception of upward social mobility (H3). As reported in the above section, except the insignificant negative influence of national commitment on perception of social status, national commitment and national exploration have a significant positive effect on the structures of the perception of social mobility. The result supports the mainstream argument in the existing literature that a student's strong national identity contributes to a positive perception of social mobility [45,57]. Educators and policy

makers may continue to reinforce nation-related education in daily teaching, providing students with rich knowledge reserves for their decision-making and practice of social mobility in the future.

To summarize, the results support the three hypotheses in general, especially the negative influence of ethnic identity on national identity and the positive effect of national identity on social mobility. The negative influence of ethnic identity on social mobility, however, cannot be fully supported in this case. In other words, the negative influence of ethnic identity on students' perceived social mobility, which has been generally accepted and supported in the existing qualitatively based research, is indeed intricate and still needs further study.

6. Conclusions

As Postiglione [84] contended in his widely discussed "Education and Cultural Diversity In Multi-Ethnic China," education plays the unique roles of easing inter-ethnic conflict, enhancing mutual trust, and promoting national unity in a multicultural society like China. Noteworthily, equality of education between ethnic groups appears not only in entrance opportunities but also, and more importantly, in educational outcomes and future performance in social mobility. The interplay between ethnic-minority backgrounds and social mobility is a key to unveiling the politics of identity-building in schools and to understanding educational (in)equality in a society.

This study, identifying the structures of the three factors, examines the nuanced mechanisms between ethnic identity and national identity, as well as their impact on students' perception of social mobility. First, unlike most of the extant studies, which examine dynamics between ethnic identity, national identity and social mobility separately, this study employs a combined framework to examine the relationships between identity building and social mobility within the educational sectors of a multi-ethnic society. In a critical sense, as Yuan and Li [14] have argued, this triangular framework is indeed a "work-in-progress", which needs to be tested in social contexts including different educational circumstances of China and other multi-ethnic societies. Second, drawing on the triangular measurement model, this paper provides a quantitative approach to explore how the three factors are related in China's educational context. We argue that the quantitative approach is a supplement to the dominant qualitative approach for researchers to understand China's agenda of ethnic integration and nation-building in its education system. We suggest mixed-method approaches should be taken more into consideration in future studies to unpack the nuanced identity politics and educational equality in the educational context of China.

For policy making, further reflections on and reforms of the educational policy of the Xinjiang Class are needed, especially providing students with rich and valuable ethnic and national identity education which helps them to establish a positive perception of and prepare them for their upward social mobility. We believe that national identities grounded on multiculturalism could be less problematic than national identities built upon a single ethnic identity. Learning about and developing respect for diverse ethnic cultures lay an important groundwork for national unity and harmony. Meanwhile, policy makers should open channels for ethnic students to capitalize on their ethnic cultures and relations in their self-improvement. Besides, authorities should provide ethnic students with more trust and opportunities for their engagement in broader social and national development in contemporary China.

This study has several limitations. First, although the selected case provides a suitable context for researchers to have the model tested and analyzed and the case has representativeness, it is in essence a single case study, so that the results cannot be generalized to the overall situation in China. Further examinations in different contexts are expected in future studies. Second, while we encourage a mixed-methods approach in the studies of identity and its impact on students' social mobility, this article focuses primarily on quantitative analysis. The ways of integrating quantitative and qualitative data in the studies on Chi-

nese ethnic minority and education deserve further exploration. Third, the assumptions of “time” are downplayed in the use of a path analysis. There are inter-correlations between the various variables, but the time dimensions remain unclear.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Z.Y. and R.Y.; Data curation, J.L. (Jun (Justin) Li); Investigation, Y.X.; Methodology, J.L. (Jun (Justin) Li) and J.L. (Jie Li); Resources, Z.Y.; Writing—original draft, Z.Y. and Y.X.; Writing—review & editing, Z.Y. and R.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by [The National Natural Science Foundation of China] grant number [42071183; 41971184], [The Natural Science Foundation of Guangdong Province] grant number [2022B1515020087; 2019A1515012102; 2018B030312004], [The Basic and Applied Basic Research Project of Guangzhou City] grant number [202002030282], and [China Postdoctoral Science Foundation] grant number [2021M690770].

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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