Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Educational Innovation and Philosophical Inquiries
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

Navigating Transitioning Experiences: A Review of Ethnic Minority First-generation College Students in Chinese Higher Education

Winci Yun Shi Liang[1,a,*]

[1]*Department of Sociology, Emory University, 201 Dowman Drive, Atlanta, USA*
a. winci.liang@emory.edu
**corresponding author*

Abstract: Since the 1980s, educational opportunity programs aimed at reducing the disparities between ethnic minority groups and the Han have been implemented in China. In reflection of the policies, the China College Student Survey (CCSS) finds a positive trend of enrollment from first-generation college students with rural backgrounds in the past ten years. An increasing number of scholarly works have also investigated the effects of policies on ethnic minority college students and proposed recommendations for improving policies to assist individuals in adapting to college life. This paper considers the importance of resilience in transitional experiences on both academic and life outcomes and reviews both quantitative and qualitative studies on ethnic minority university students' experiences in Han-dominant urban areas. Through Tummala-Narra's multicultural resilience framework, this paper concludes three dimensions of resilience employed by ethnic minority individuals—resilience as active capital accumulation, resilience as hope and empowerment, and resilience as social support—and finds that to ensure well-being in the Chinese context, individuals most likely find resilience from their personal abilities and interactions with mainstream culture, while downplaying the role of community and family support. In the future, cross-sectional, periodic, and longitudinal data can be introduced to the topic as waves of cultural, economic, and policy shifts engender different experiences for each cohort generation and the diverse pool of ethnic minority students. Considering the fluidity and context-dependent nature of resilience, future studies could probe into how resilience functions in multicultural workspaces post-college and how identities concerning race and ethnicity shape economic relations.

Keywords: ethnic minority, first-generation college student, adaptive stages, resilience

1. Introduction

The diversity of the Han Chinese culture has been widely recognized nationwide and international-wide. However, rarely discussed are the 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, which consist of approximately 110 million people, though together, the communities only account for 8.89 % of China's overall population [1]. Among themselves, these ethnic minority groups have distinct customs, religious practices, and native languages than Han Chinese. Moreover, ethnic minority groups are dispersed along China's western border areas, where economic developments are not as

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

robust as in Han-dominant urban centres in the East [2]. For national defence and stability reasons, the Chinese government consider it essential to maintain positive relations with ethnic minority groups. As a result, accelerating interracial harmony became one of the central components in the government programs known as the "Chinese dream" [2,3].

Subsequently, a series of equal opportunities programs has been implemented since the mid-1980s, many of which seek to promote educational equality in the forms of work-study programs and long-term subsidies, among others [2-4]. In some aspects, the policy outcomes seem promising. The China College Student Survey (CCSS) found that between 2011 to 2018, more than 70% of college students in China were first-generation students, and 69.74% of them came from rural areas [5]. As the first to attend college in their families, these individuals are often seen as the "future's hope" by their native communities in mountainous and rural areas, as they obtain the opportunities to advance their socioeconomic positions through educational credentials and higher-paid jobs. They also became sources of connections between the ethnic minority communities and the dominant group in China. Due to the abovementioned reasons, more attention should be paid to the aids that enable individuals of ethnic minority groups to negotiate their transitioning experiences on their own.

Across the globe, however, research on first-generation college students (FGCS) has been growing in countries in academia, namely in the U.S. From discussions of social and cultural capitals to roles of environmental and social supports, abundant empirical research has progressively enriched the literature on ethnic minority and FGCS [6-9]. They have yielded rich insights into how individuals develop and mobilize resilience throughout their transitions to college. For instance, studying Hmong Americans, Vang concludes that family and perceptions of gender impact students' academic performances [8]. In contrast to family capitals, Brouwer et al. suggests the importance of peer capital (in forms of help-seeking and collaboration) and faculty capital (in forms of mentor support) in shaping academic successes [9]. Comparing the two studies, it is noted that different resilience resources have varying levels of prominences among different sets of participant groups even under the same social and institutional contexts. The nuances in recent studies also suggest that there is still room for furthering the discussion of resilience mechanisms.

Furthermore, these findings are predominantly based on the American educational context, in which the qualities and mechanisms to succeed academically are far from the same as in Chinese education, which includes a standardized curriculum and extreme focus on test preparation. Thus, further studies should be considered in the Chinese context to examine the extent previous findings and theoretical frameworks can travel across time, space, and cultures. Given the plenty of scope for scholarly scrutiny, the value of understanding interracial dynamics and deriving suggestions for related public policy, this paper will focus on the minority FGCS communities in China. From examining the literature on FGCS and ethnic minority experiences across the Western and the Chinese context, this paper asks, how are risk factors in transitioning experiences negotiated by First-Generation College Students with Ethnic Minority Backgrounds in China?

2. Theoretical Framework

In light of Tummala-Narra's cross-cultural approach to resilience, this paper seeks to fill the gap of knowledge by critically examining the extent to which the resilience framework is applicable to the Chinese context and systematically analyzing previous empirical studies on ethnic minority FGCS. Tummala-Narra suggests that resilience is not only influenced by individuals' innate or learned capabilities but also determined by the degree of identification with their family and communities and interactions with the mainstream culture [10]. Using Tummala-Narra's multicultural resilience framework as a vantage point, this paper will systematically analyze the ways ethnic minority individuals developed and mobilized protective coping mechanisms in the presence of difficulties as they dislocate into the Han-dominant urban cities for higher education.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

3. Challenges and Stressors in Transitioning away from Home

Studies on ethnic minority FGCS in China outlined numerous risk factors and challenges facing these individuals, which may affect measured outcomes, such as academic performance, workspace occupation, and mental health assessments, and perceived outcomes, such as one's change in the sense of culture and racial identity and trust in the dominant social institute.

Previous research has pointed out that similar to working-class Han students of rural backgrounds, ethnic minority students confront various stress factors, such as economic hardships and geographical adaptation difficulties when making their transitions into urban areas where most colleges locate. As a result, they may experience a sense of temporal dislocation, being distant from their native communities [11,12].

Unlike working-class Han students of rural backgrounds, ethnic minority individuals are met with additional stress factors, including psychological maladjustments and a lack of social and cultural capital in the Chinese educational context. Psychological maladjustments include situations of drastically different or even opposing display rules in one's native cultural community and the dominant-cultural community. For instance, Shen and Qian investigated the gap between school education offered by the Chinese state and local cultures in Yunnan province and pointed out how the school curriculum clashed with cultural festivals, principles, and ideals of the Dehong Dai and Jingpo people [13]. In analyzing emotion systems among different ethnic groups, Lu and Wang find that ethnic minority students experience more negative moods because of cultural shock, the particular challenge of simultaneously dealing with issues of ethnic identity, assimilation of a dominant culture group, and forming interpersonal relationships [14].

Language—which can be considered as both cultural capital and financial capital—can also pose an important challenge to ethnic minority students during their journeys post-secondary education. Many ethnic minorities in China have their mother tongues that derive a different writing system than Chinese and operate local schools where Mandarin is not the only language of instruction [2, 15-17]. In addition, ethnic minority students often lack resources in primary and secondary Chinese education (quality and shortage), especially if they live in remote areas. Therefore, the amounting cultural capital disparity between them and the Han students resulted in language barriers in college life, which suggests that minority individuals may disengage from participation in social activities, struggle to achieve academic excellence, and even face institutional marginalization among Mandarin-native Han students. Furthermore, language operates as financial capital, as the competence of the dominant language can provide individuals with an edge in securing employment prospects and accessing public services [2].

The abovementioned challenges unique to ethnic minority students may be transformed into lessened motivation for achieving goals, resulting in lowered levels of hope and heightened feelings of inadequacy that could lead to negative mental consequences like increased anxiety and depression. This, in turn, could impact these individuals' future personal and professional developments and cultural identity construction [18].

4. The Three Dimensions of Resilience in Adapting to College Life

In response to the variety of risk factors, studies have also pointed out a variety of mechanisms in which ethnic minority FGCS used to succeed in their college careers, which could be considered as expressions of resilience defined by Tummala-Narra as the capabilities to overcome adverse effects. In this section, a typology of resilience mechanisms is proposed to summarize findings in previous literature concerning ethnic minority university students. Moreover, this paper applied Tummala-Narra's understanding of resilience to discern the characteristics and patterns of coping mechanisms developed and mobilized by these individuals in Han-dominant colleges and urban communities.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

4.1. Resilience as Active Capital Accumulation

Active capital accumulation is defined here as one's efforts to leverage all available resources to enhance one's performance and potential for success. Capital, alluding to Bourdieu's theorization, includes the knowledge, language, and styles of behaviours representing the dominant group in society and is distinguished between economic, social, and cultural forms [19]. According to the theorization, different forms of capital are convertible, thus allowing individuals to transform identities and attain social or economic mobility through capital accumulation [20].

In the case of ethnic minority university students, the capabilities to capitalize on a set of linguistic and social resources in and outside the classroom enable one to also acquire communicative competence, expand social circles, navigate academic instructions more easily, and thus assume the position as a acceptable member in the Han-dominant multicultural community [20]. In particular, individuals developed and mobilized resilience to bridge the gap between themselves and other students by actively seeking exposure to mainstream Chinese culture and languages and exploring linguistics resources like internet buzzwords that are generally unavailable in the classroom setting [20-22]. Moreover, individuals amount skills and knowledge to facilitate social integration and cultural mobility as they drew upon critical resources in both the Han and their native communities [16,21]. In mobilizing resources simultaneously from two cultural worlds, individuals refused to be defined by or isolated from either cultural world while expanding the scope and amount of capital. In short, capital accumulation provides the building block for achieving goals and sculpting a fuller picture of oneself in transitional stages [21].

4.2. Resilience as Hope and Empowerment

In the studies reviewed, hope is also an important source of resilience in the face of changes, as well as a moderating factor for expressions of empowerment that also equip individuals with emotional flexibility. In that, empowerment is conditioned on hope. Therefore, this section will discuss hope and empowerment together as one dimension of resilience.

Hope is defined as one's positive perception of education and the consistent effort to pursue goals even in the face of obstacles. In most cases, the value of education is understood as an avenue to attain upward mobility for ethnic minority families in the more impoverished regions in China [12,15,22]. Therefore, even in the face of adversity in transitioning to college, hope has helped mediate the effects of perceived prejudice on one's mental health outcomes and sense of self in the world, as illustrated by Yao's study on ethnic minority individuals in China [18].

On top of hope, empowerment refers to one's development of a positive self-image and appreciation of their own multilingual competence [16,21]. Xu and Yang suggested that the journeys in higher education provided opportunities for ethnic minority individuals to negotiate their ethnic identities in new ways, with the motivation to make change through knowledge as a by-product of the experience [12]. This is clearly illustrated by Uyghur participants in Cui and Costa's research, who developed identities as potential linguistic and cultural brokers to clarify misunderstandings and stereotypes that existed between Han people and their native Uyghur community [20].

In relation to Tummala-Nara's multicultural resilience framework, both mechanisms mentioned above emphasized two of the three aspects of resilience sources in managing the dual-existence of being an ethnic minority [10]. In active capital accumulation and hope and empowerment, innate or learned capabilities and interactions with the mainstream culture are discussed while the role of social support is underdiscussed.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

4.3. Resilience as Social Support

Social support frequently denotes the emotional, informational, or tangible assistance from others in one's social network. Cohen noted that several studies have suggested that social support is linked to both physical and mental well-being in the general population, while Tummala-Narra's research on ethnic minority populations further explained how familial and community support aided individuals by providing spiritual guidance in developing protective coping mechanisms when facing stress and adversity [10]. Scrutinizing works on ethnic minority university students in China, this paper finds that familial support is often deemphasized, while institutional and peer support do manifest in individuals' cross-cultural adjustments and resilience-building processes [2,13,15,20].

Contrary to Tummala-Narra's finding that the family aids distressed individuals in building resilience, ethnic minority individuals in China often opt into higher education without sufficient guidance from their ethnic communities that are distant and inexperienced [11-13, 15-17]. Moreover, in some cases, breaking free of ties with one's family offered an escape from arranged marriages and persistent subordinated positions in the patriarchal household [20]. Opportunities for higher education in urban areas in China thus enabled individuals to regain decision-making power and independence, among other skills and experiences. Nevertheless, these findings do not seek to undermine the implication of familial support; instead, it underscores the underlying multi-directionality in its effects, as Tummala-Narra also noted.

Moreover, Tummala-Narra suggested that a sense of shared efficacy, manifested in group movements for social change, may play a more significant role in fostering resilience within more collectivist cultures like the Chinese [12]. However, studies have suggested that China's broader political environment may not provide the needed political opportunities to launch collective efforts and social movements [3]. For instance, a sense of collectiveness and belonging may not always be formed among individuals coming from the same ethnic group, as *min kao han* (individuals who received primary- and secondary- education under Chinese-only curriculums) and *min kao min* (individuals who received primary- and secondary- education under bilingual curriculums) students often assumed different cultural identities and bifurcated into cliques [2,16]. Specifically, the latter conveyed unfavorable opinions of the former, who are too "Han" and often hold condescending attitudes toward their *min kao min* counterparts [16]. In another instance, ethnic group formations are discouraged on campus as college institutions take an assimilatory approach towards ethnic minority groups and see them as a potential threat to local stability: the institutions are wary of the difficulties that arise in disbanding individual ethnic groups and asking students in these groups to integrate into the broader university community [17]. As a result, these students lack access to form an individual ethnic group on campus, connect to people and communities that they identifies with, and obtain communal social support.

Nevertheless, institutional support via school programs has assisted individuals in navigating their educational journey. Work-study programs, long-term subsidies, mentorship programs, and lower passing points are granted to ethnic minority students as academic and personal assistance [11,15,17]. However, scholars have also suggested the need for more executions of these equal-opportunity policies. In particular, Shen and Qian propose several strategies to bridge cultural gaps in Chinese education, suggesting the incorporation of more diverse teaching materials that reflect the local culture and values of students [13].

5. Conclusion

In essence, this paper concludes several insights from applying Tummala-Narra's multicultural resilience framework to trace adaptation trajectories of ethnic minority students in Chinese colleges. First, the resilience mechanism employed by ethnic minority students largely relied on one's innate

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

or learned abilities and their interactions with mainstream culture, which underlined these individuals' agency in striving for educational attainments and cultural mobility when facing challenges posed by the larger social institutions. Through capital accumulation and hope and empowerment, these individuals successfully incorporated their minority identity into the dominant society and actively constructed a decent academic and professional future. Second, the relational and communal aspects of resilience, namely social support, are often downplayed and less relied on by the individuals, possibly due to contextual factors such as sensitivity in the larger socio-political environment in China, policy factors such as assimilatory and deficit orientations toward ethnic minority groups, and representation factors such as underrepresentation of ethnic minority groups in Chinese higher education. Lastly, the above analyses confirmed that the expression of resilience is multi-determined on personal, relational, and environmental levels while also demonstrating that resilience is not a static characteristic either one possesses or not, but rather accumulated and employed at different domains of life across times.

That said, this study has drawn evidence from related research, which predominantly uses purposive sampling within one particular context. To fill the gap in data, future research could collect cross-sectional, periodic or longitudinal data, which may be more useful for identifying trends and patterns between different regions and periods. In particular, tracking the trajectories of ethnic minority individuals over time, both in terms of their career paths and personal lives, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of transitional experiences and the resulting implications.

Furthermore, this paper showed how developing and mobilizing resilience can not only shape one's academic and social outcomes in college, but also influence one's career outcomes post-college. Indeed, studies have noted the career choice dilemma many ethnic minority individuals faced once they graduate. A different set of risk factors than the abovementioned may be experienced during this particular transitional stage. Accordingly, future research could conduct qualitative interviews with recent graduates and survey employers across sectors and regions in China, probing into factors that influence ethnic minorities' career decision-making and hiring practices. Doing so could provide useful insights into how identities concerning race and ethnicity shape workspaces and economic relations in China, as well as in other multicultural communities worldwide.

References

[1] *National Bureau of Statistics (2021). Main Data of the Seventh National Population Census. http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817185.html.*

[2] *Clothey, R. (2005). China's policies for minority nationalities in higher education: Negotiating national values and ethnic identities. Comparative Education Review, 49 (3), 389-409.*

[3] *Hansen, M. H. (1999). Lessons in being Chinese: Minority education and ethnic identity in Southwest China. Hong Kong University Press.*

[4] *Yang, R., & Wu, M. (2009). Education for ethnic minorities in China: A policy critique. SA-eDUC Journal, 6(2), 117-131.*

[5] *Li, H. (2020). Beginning of the Popularization of Higher Education in China. The Research Institute at Tsinghua University. https://www.rwxy.tsinghua.edu.cn/shssen/info/1001/1004.html.*

[6] *Ogbu, J. U. (1990). Minority status and literacy in comparative perspective. Daedalus, 141-168.*

[7] *Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, L. I. (2005). The role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of ethnic minority first-generation college students. Journal of college student development, 46(3), 223-236.*

[8] *Vang, L. (2015). The impact of culture and acculturation on the academic achievement of Hmong American college students (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Fresno).*

[9] *Brouwer, J., Jansen, E., Flache, A., & Hofman, A. (2016). The impact of social capital on self-efficacy and study success among first-year university students. Learning and Individual Differences, 52, 109-118.*

[10] *Tummala-Narra, P. (2007). Conceptualizing trauma and resilience across diverse contexts: A multicultural perspective. Journal of aggression, maltreatment & trauma, 14(1-2), 33-53.*

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/14/20230961

[11] *Chen, Y. (2019). The educational success of low-income and first-generation college students in private colleges of China(Doctoral dissertation, University of the Pacific).*
[12] *Xu, C. L., & Yang, M. (2019). Ethnicity, temporality and educational mobilities: Comparing the ethnic identity constructions of Mongolian and Tibetan students in China. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 40(5), 631-646.*
[13] *Shen, H., & Qian, M. (2010). The other in education: The distance between school education and local culture. Chinese Education and Society, 43(5), 47–61. doi:10.2753/CED10611932430503*
[14] *Lü, W., & Wang, Z. (2012). Emotional expressivity, emotion regulation, and mood in college students: A cross-ethnic study. Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal, 40 (2), 319-330.*
[15] *Verhoeven, J. C., & Zhang, J. (2016). The pathways to higher education for ethnic minorities in China are not easy. In Educational Development in Western China (pp. 121-135). Brill.*
[16] *Tsung, L., & Clarke, M. (2010). Dilemmas of identity, language and culture in higher education in China. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 30(1), 57-69.*
[17] *Wang, H., Chao, X., & Sun, S. (2020). Tibetan students at an interior university in China: Negotiating identity, language, and power. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 40 (2), 167-181.*
[18] *Yao, J., & Yang, L. (2017). Perceived prejudice and the mental health of Chinese ethnic minority college students: the mediating chain effect of ethnic identity and hope. Frontiers in Psychology, 8, 1167.*
[19] *Bourdieu, P. (2018). The forms of capital. In The Sociology of economic life (pp. 78-92). Routledge.*
[20] *Cui, Y., & De Costa, P. I. (2021). Becoming Uyghur elites: How Uyghur women in a mainstream Chinese university negotiate their gendered identities. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 1-16.*
[21] *Li, L., Wu, A., Li, X. W., & Zhuang, Y. (2012). Constructing self-identity: minority students' adaptation trajectories in a Chinese university. Integrative psychological and behavioural science, 46, 335-356.*