

## Family Structure, Institutional Context and School Success – Charting the Achievement Gap among Korean Chinese Pupils

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**Abstract:** This article ethnographically examines how family characteristics, school resources and teacher expectations affect educational aspirations and attainment among Korean Chinese pupils in one ethnically-mixed Korean school. The academic success of Korean students in China has been widely discussed in local press/media often within the context of a “model minority” discourse. This discourse typically explains Korean student achievement as the result of a cultural emphasis on education combined with lived experience that confirms the perceived payoffs of that education. Not only does the model minority discourse perpetuate a myth of universal Korean student achievement, it also fails to consider the widening achievement gap among Korean students at a time of local transition and change. Using the Open Systems Approach (Ballantine, [2001. *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis (5th)*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall]), the author demonstrates the variations in academic performance which are viewed as the result of the relationship between the school organization (“process”) and the environment outside the organization (“input”). Fieldwork focuses on two fourth-grade classes, both of which consist of a certain number of *Danqin* (Single-parent household) and *Wuqin* (Living with relatives) Korean pupils. Alongside detailed observations, in-depth, largely semi-structured interviews and the use of secondary source data, research results link the achievement gap among Korean pupils at this particular Korean school to the family structure, to the home learning activities, in which pupils participate with their families, to the school resources and the expectations Korean pupils have with their teachers and classmates. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature that critically examines Korean Chinese academic success by viewing it through the lens of open system of education which emphasizes the need to look beyond cultural explanations of success and failure to include an analysis of structural and institutional factors influencing the school experiences of Korean pupils.

**Keywords:** model minority, *Danqin*, *Wuqin*, school context, academic achievement

### Introduction – Korean Chinese: The Model Minority in Question

The Constitution adopted in 1982 defines the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a “unitary multi-national state” (*tongyide duominzu guojia*) composed of the people of all its nationalities (*minzu*) (Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.). The Chinese term “*minzu*” or “nationality” which is distinct from the European concept of “nation” that refers to the rise of nation-states in Western Europe, broadly applies to ethnic groups in various stages of development, according to Fei Xiaotong (see Fei, 1979). There are fifty-six “official nationalities” with a total population of 1.29533 billion in China (NBSC, 2001). The majority of the population belongs to the Han nationality. China’s other fifty-five officially recognized

nationalities referred to as minority nationalities account for 8.41 per cent of the population according to the fifth national census, taken in 2000.

The Korean nationality is the thirteenth largest minority in China with a population numbered 1,923,842 in 2000. Generally speaking, the minority population is growing at a faster rate than the Han population since among other privileges minority nationalities are exempt from China's "one-child" birth control policy (Kormondy, 1995). However, the population growth rate of Koreans is the lowest among all the fifty-six nationalities in China. Koreans are therefore considered to be in a relatively advanced position demographically as a nationality with the lower population growth through reduced fertility (Ma, 2003). The history of the Korean minority compared with other minority nationalities in China, is a relatively recent phenomenon (Lee, 1986). The modern-day Koreans immigrated into northeast China and began rice cultivation there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century especially following a severe famine in the northern part of Korea in 1869 and in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century when Japan annexed Korea and drove many peasants off the land (Piao, 1990). Korean people are scattered over vast areas. According to the 1985 census an overwhelming majority of them reside in the three northeastern provinces of Jilin (61 per cent), Heilongjiang (24 per cent), and Liaoning (11 per cent), commonly known as Manchuria in the west and referred to as *Dongbei sansheng* in China (see Lee, 1986). The largest concentration of Koreans is in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in eastern Jilin Province, which contains a little more than 40 per cent of all the Koreans in China (Lee, 1986).

The Korean nationality, among China's fifty-five minority nationalities, is known as a "model minority" with the highest level of college attendance and lowest level of illiteracy rates (Ma, 2003). The national census corroborates the popular belief. It demonstrates the substantially higher level of educational attainment among the Koreans than among China's total population or other minority nationalities (see Choi, 2001; Lee, 1986). A front-page article in China's People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*) ever praised the Korean people in Yanbian for their laudable tradition of emphasizing education and their exceptional educational achievements as a stimulus for China's four-modernization campaign. Koreans in China have been popularly identified as a model minority, a minority group that is primed for socioeconomic advancement and academic success. At the heart of their achievements are, it is said, their cultural predispositions, which attach a high priority to the value of education (see Choi, 2001; Lee, 1986). Koreans occupy a critical reference position for evaluating relative progress and achievement among other minorities in China. The image of Korean nationality as a model minority is upheld as a positive representation and implies that if Koreans can make it, then all minority groups should be able to achieve academically, as long as they uphold the values of education, hard work, and a nuclear family that Koreans supposedly prize. However, there are a variety of factors that account for Korean remarkable educational and cultural accomplishments in China, which may cause difficulty in transplanting the Korean model of educational experience to other minority nationalities whose social characteristics are

substantially dissimilar. In addition, while the model minority discourse attributes academic success and failure to individual merit and cultural orientation, its meanings and implications for the contemporary Korean experience have been a matter of some controversy.

Korean students are far from a homogeneous group. Homogenizing Koreans essentializes them, implying they have a fixed “ethnic” experience that accounts for their success. Model minority discourse neglects critical structural and institutional factors, such as their parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds and educational level, and expectations of teachers and classmates, and their access to schooling resources. While a growing body of literature (e.g., Kibria, 2002; Lew, 2004; 2006) breaks down the model minority stereotype among Korean American youth, there is limited understanding of how these structural and institutional factors impact Korean Chinese academic aspirations and achievement, and how Korean Chinese students, particularly those who are failing in schools may cope with their school worlds in different social and economic contexts. This article mainly draws on data collected from a group of fourth-grade Korean pupils at an ethnically-mixed Korean school in Fushun, China. It is intended to examine how structural and institutional factors influence academic aspirations and achievement among Korean Chinese pupils.

### **The Open Systems Approach – A Model of Academic Achievement**

This school is an ideal site to study school experiences of Korean pupils and their academic performance, broadly reflective of a range of structural and institutional factors precisely because there is a large achievement gap among Korean pupils. The widening achievement gap provides a unique opportunity to examine the model minority stereotype and Korean pupils’ school experiences at a time of local transition. Because the present study has its focus on the relationship between structural and institutional factors and academic aspirations and achievement around Korean pupil population in the two fourth-grade classes, it is helpful to situate this group of pupils within a wider regional and national context.

Schooling does not exist in a social vacuum. An educational system is a whole, integrated, dynamic entity. An open systems approach (see Figure 1) can help “conceptualize a whole system and understand how the small pieces fit together, and which pieces do not fit” (Ballantine, 2001, p. 17). This model of open systems represents a generalized picture of complex interacting elements and sets of relationships in many educational settings and allows us to find out one theoretical approach which may be more applicable for the study of certain parts of the educational system.

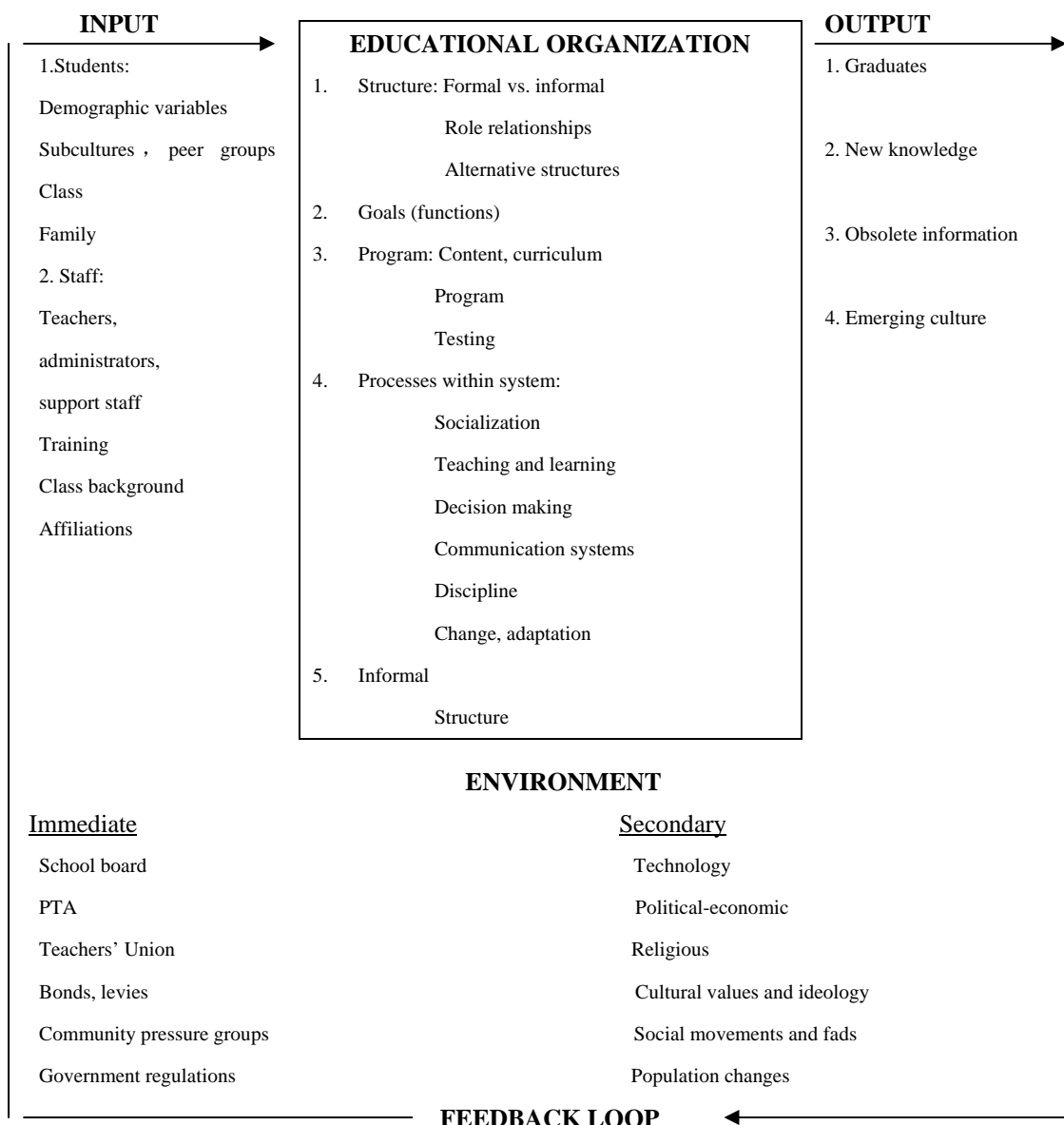


Figure 1 *Systems Model of Education* (Ballantine, 2001, p. 18).

Sociologists of education have long been interested in the variations which facilitate or inhabit academic acquisition of students in schools. Some sociologists of education are largely preoccupied with the influences of home or community background as a set of “inputs” which students bring with them to school on their academic outcomes (e.g., Bankston, 2004; Coleman, et al., 1966). Some other sociologists of education concentrate on school characteristics, such as resources, teacher experience, and class sizes as “process” factors that account for the variation in schooling (e.g., Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1997). Scholars who subscribe to the “process” approach focus attention on what goes on inside schools and classrooms, and ask questions about complex forms of classroom interaction that may produce the outcomes and relationships of interest.

An open system implies that there is interaction between the school organization and the environment outside the organization (Ballantine, 2001). Figure 2 displays how this study conceptualizes the relationship between them. According to Pollard & Filer (1999), there are particularly three clusters of influence on academic acquisitions of school children, which are homes, parents and siblings; school playground and peer relations; and the classroom interaction with teachers. Academic achievement and educational aspirations among Korean students are viewed as the result of a multilevel process of interactions among parents, students, teachers, and peer groups. Parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds and educational level form family values and educational expectations and influence the home learning activities. The “input factor” outside the school can influence “process” factor such as teachers’ perceptions of students which may rival some of the input factors in their impact on the school experience of students (Bankston, 2004). Children are always involved in two inextricably interwoven cultures – children’s and adults’ (Corsaro, 1997). Each school child develops academic self-expectation based on their parents’, teachers’, and peer groups’ educational expectations of them.

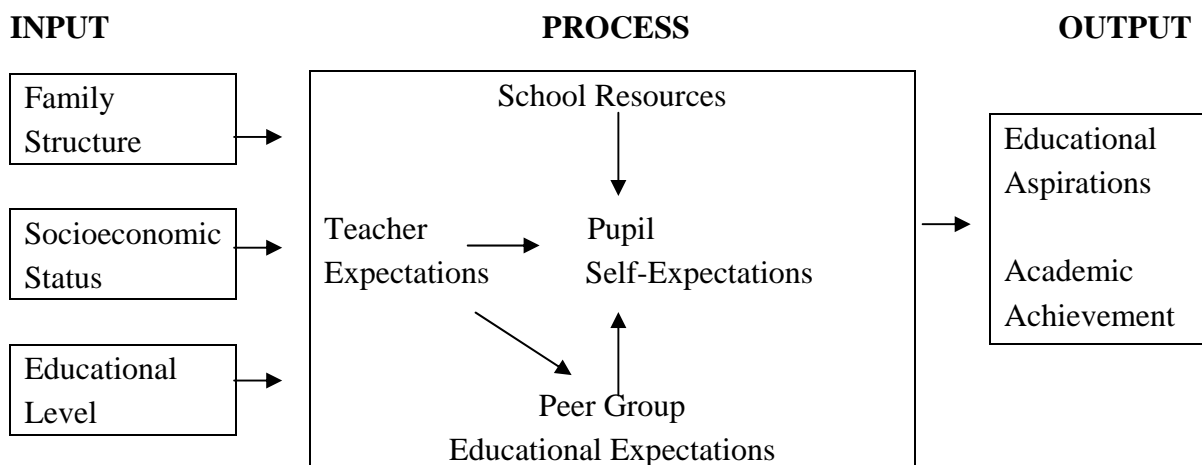


Figure 2 A Model to Explain Korean Pupil Academic Achievement

**Research Site and Methodology**

The schooling experiences of Korean students in Fushun, China merit special attention given that Korean nationality is one of the largest ethnic groups. Fushun is the fourth largest city of Liaoning Province, where thirty-three minority nationalities account for 27.49 per cent of the total city population (2,260,000). The three largest minority nationalities are Manchu with 555,761, Korean with 43,583 and Hui with 14,881 members, according to the fifth national census. The study school is an ethnically-mixed Korean school which is located at Fushun Lishizhai Economic Development Zone where a mixture of different nationalities exists. These demographic patterns have shaped Fushun’s long history, with different ethnic groups living together in one area on the one hand and others living in individual compact communities in special areas on the other hand.

Fushun Lishi Korean School (FLKS), established in 1943, was originally composed of pre-school and primary education, with the junior-secondary education offered since 2004 through merging the initial No. 3 Korean Middle School. This school used to only recruit Korean students from Fushun Lishizhai Economic Development Zone. However, FLKS is currently recruiting a growing number of Han Chinese students because of a lack of Korean student intake. The number of Han pupils enrolled in the school is about 17 per cent of the total population (fifty-five in September 2006). The principal medium of instruction is Korean except for Chinese and English language classes. There has been an increasing “educational zeal” in Korean language studies. Nevertheless, a serious concern that both Korean and Han parents have may be closely related to whether or not their children can get into those schools designated formerly as “key schools” which have become the new experimental and model schools. This concern stems from the fact that students in “key schools” are more likely to advance to the institutions of higher education and thus to obtain prestigious status and desirable employment since the “key schools” receive more funds and better facilities than general schools (see Lee, 1986). This school has successfully been transformed from a rural primary school into a modern experimental school which receives special consideration in educational budgets, qualified staff members, and modern equipment and facilities.

An exploration of the differences in academic performance among Korean pupils can be undertaken by ethnographic approach, all of which encourages to look in depth at school experiences of pupils which are shaped and modified by influences of broader social processes beyond the confines of the school. Ethnographers engage in a process of interpretation that Geertz (1973) has called “thick description”. The product is a descriptive textual account that places a primacy on the importance of situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behavior (Brewer, 2000; Pole & Morrison, 2003). The concern with contextualized meaning ensures that the structural and institutional factors shaping, constraining and in some cases defining social action is important to the explanation and understanding of school experiences of Korean pupils. Social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Educational institutions and individuals are generally located within complex social context with all the implications and influences that it entails. Ethnographic approach provides an opportunity to discover the complexities and contradictions in which Korean pupils experience success or failure in school.

A field-based study using ethnographic interview and observation techniques has been conducted in two fourth-grade classes. The study examines both well-performing and poor-performing Korean pupils in terms of their family background characteristics, parent attitudes and values toward education, school resources and teacher and peer expectations. The preliminary fieldwork leading up to the following field research help begin to make sense of academic performance among Korean pupils in the school context, nevertheless illustrative of broader social processes outside the school.

### Family Structure and Educational Strategies

The group of Korean pupil clientele is indeed a heterogeneous one in terms of academic achievement (see Table 1).

Table 1: 2005-06 Results of Pupil Grades\*

	Grade Four Class One		Grade Four Class Two	
	Highest Grade in All Subjects	Lowest Grade in All Subjects	Highest Grade in All Subjects	Lowest Grade in All Subjects
First Semester	1267.9	1004.5	1256.3	906.3
Second Semester	1155	938	1167	908

Source: Compiled from school records.

\*All Korean pupils are enrolled in two four-grade classes in September 2005.

While the highest grades in both semesters are 1267.9 and 1155 in Grade Four Class one, which I call 4.1 and 1256.3 and 1167 in Grade Four Class Two, which I call 4.2, the lowest grades are only 1004.5 and 938 in 4.1 and 906.3 and 908 in 4.2. Koreans, as relative newcomers to China, have retained a strong sense of attachment to the value of education. Traditional Korean sayings such as “parents must educate their children even if they have to sell their precious land or ox” reflect the commonsense of the importance of education among Koreans (Lee, 1986). Koreans view education both as a process of intrinsic cultivation and as the best insurance of survival and upward social mobility. Both well-performing and poor-performing Korean pupils and their parents believe that education is important and want their children to do well, but their ability to translate such aspirations into concrete school achievement vary widely and rely on important structural factors.

When carefully examining the family characteristics within Korean communities concerned, the widening achievement gap is less surprising. Since China launched market-oriented economic reforms and started the process of integration with the global economy in the late 1970s, Korean community in the northeastern China has experienced great economical, demographic, and socio-cultural transformations. The primarily agricultural-based Korean economy has lost its edge in the industrialization period and led to a mass exodus of the Korean peasants mainly toward coastal urban areas, large cities in the three northeastern provinces, those areas where the activities of South Korean people are concentrated or even to South Korea especially after China and South Korea established formal diplomatic relations in 1992 (Kim, 2003). Visiting South Korea is regarded as “the ‘American dream’ for Koreans in China, which they call ‘*Hanguk baram*’ (South Korean wind)” (Choi, 2001, p. 132). The major type of migration to South Korea involves labor export which has mainly been caused by labor shortage in the South Korean industrial field (Choi,

2001; Kim, 2003). In Fushun, many ethnic Korean residents who used to be peasants find laboring jobs in South Korea, especially in the construction field and in restaurants, which pay much higher than in China. They earn an income almost ten times higher than they would earn in China. As a consequence, many Korean pupils in the two classes live with their guardians (e.g., grandparents, other relatives or even friends of their parents) or grow up in the single-parent households. Yanbian University, in August 2006, held a forum on education for Korean Chinese (1906-2006), which involved Korean scholars from various circles. The increasing *Danqin* and *Wuqin* Korean families are a major issue discussed (e.g., Jin, 2006; Piao, 2006; Shen, 2006). According to Yanbian Association of Education, *Danqin* students are referred to students who live with either fathers or mothers, whereas *Wuqin* means that students do not live with parents.

Table 2: *Korean Pupils' Background\**

Pupil Participants	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	18	66.7
Female	9	33.3
<i>Danqin</i> (Single-parent household)	15	55.6
<i>Wuqin</i> (Living with relatives)	8	29.6
Had at least one parent working abroad	14	51.9

Source: Compiled from school records.

\*All Korean pupils are enrolled in two four-grade classes in September 2006. Data were collected on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2006.

According to a background survey in the two fourth-grade classes (see Table 2), approximately 55.6 percent (15) of the pupils are living in single-parent households. There are about 29.6 percent (8) of the pupils are living with distant relatives. 51.9 percent (14) of the pupils have had family members working abroad.

The difference in family structure impacts educational strategies, particularly home learning activities, in which Korean pupils participate with their families. Korean pupils living with their grandparents who lack necessary educational qualifications are frequently reported failed in school. The lower academic performance is also reflected in how Korean single mothers or fathers structure the learning environment and the amount of time they spend tutoring their children on academic matters. Data show that some Korean pupils who grow up in the single-parent households limiting their family income receive less tutorial assistance from their parents. The single-parent households are either unable to tutor their children and give extra homework problems from workbooks purchased outside of school, or unable to pay



tuition for their children to have private lessons in music, computer science, martial arts, or languages.

### **Teacher Expectations and Institutional Resources**

Any analysis of academic achievement among Korean students in China, which depends solely upon this cultural spectrum, obscures the ways that school-level dynamics contributing to the experience of any student. The dynamics of educational goals are highly mediated by the internal histories of educational institutions and by the needs and ideologies of the people who actually work in them as they go about their day-to-day lives in the institutions (Apple, 1990). The same element will be expressed differently in different kinds of schools, though schools do share underlying features that link them to each other and to wider societal forces (Giroux, 1981). It is therefore important to consider the ways in which the academic performance of Korean students is inextricably linked to the school contexts in which their learning experiences are formed.

Koreans accept education as a sort of basic human need. The teachers tend to refer to the slower students as “the key-point section” and target them for special key-point tutoring (also see Pepper, 1996). There are only two classes in each grade, except the only one fifth-grade classroom. All the classrooms are located in a small school building. Teachers in this school are often able to distinguish pupils from each other. The small class size (e.g., eighteen pupils in 4.1 and 4.2 respectively) is one contributing factor, which allows for large amount of time teachers can attend to each pupil as observed. In addition, class teachers (teaching Korean and mathematics), English teachers, or Chinese teachers sometimes, if not often, take up extracurricular activities, 20-min classes (*xiaoke*), lunch time or even Saturdays for extra tutoring.

The pervasive influence that Confucian system exerts upon Korean people should not be underestimated. Confucius advocated that education should be applied according to individual capacities. This idea has defined an attitude that is central to the Korean sense and sensibility in this school. Since 1986, the “three goods” (*san-hao*) – good in health, study, and work have not been the unique conceptualizations of “ideal-types” to the pupils. Pupils now can be qualified if they are considered such as highly intelligent (*xiao boshi*), and artistically talented (*xiao yishujia*) according to twenty-two labels of special capacities. This school is characterized by its provision of six extra-curricular classes including computer, English, Korean music, dance, pickled vegetables (*kimchi*) and encirclement chess. Right after lunch on Wednesdays and on Friday afternoons, extra-curricular activities take place. A library containing a profusion of children’s books, newspapers and magazines, is also open to pupils in the meantime. However, the pupils’ widely disparate academic performance provides them with equally disparate educational resources. While well-performing pupils enjoy taking part in these out-of-class activities, a handful of pupils, who are often worst performers are considered unable to join the activities, and are left in the classrooms for homework under the

watchful eye of class teacher. The worst performers have limited access to school resources and opportunities. They also report lower special capacities compared with well-performing counterparts.

While Korean family structure impacts academic performance among Korean pupils, the structural factor helps us see how the “input factor” of family structure outside the school can become a “process factor” by influencing teachers’ perspectives of pupils. Erickson (1993) defines “school failure” as “a reflexive process by which schools ‘work at’ failing their students and students ‘work at failing’ to achieve in school...” (p. 336). Teacher’s attitude has particular effects on disparate pupils’ experiences of school. From the pupils’ perspective, their relations with teachers are one significant aspect of their school experience. Pupils’ priorities in their relations with teachers are evident from the manner in which they talk about their teachers, with a majority emphasizing how teachers interact with them (by being patient/impatient, kind/cross, polite, moody/good humored) as well as teacher control and the allocation of instructional assistance. It is often the case that labels, especially those implying some sort of deviance, “slow learner”, “discipline problem”, “poor reader” and so on, serve as types to confer an inferior status on those so labeled. And those pupils referred to personal deficiencies experience low academic self-expectations which are reinforced by their teachers and classmates.

### **Conclusion – Lessons from Korean Chinese Communities**

Results of this study indicate that family structure and home learning activities as a set of “inputs” which pupils bring with them to school, and expectations of teachers and classmates and pupils’ access to schooling resources as “process” factors influence Korean pupils’ academic outcomes. A cultural discourse positing Korean Chinese as a homogeneous model minority conceals disparities among Korean Chinese students in their educational aspirations and achievement and underestimates important structural and institutional resources that all students need in order to achieve academically. The research therefore points to the need to complicate the model minority discourse that often accompanies Korean students in China.

China’s state education for minority nationalities has been of greater significance than their numbers suggest (Bass, 1998). While there is a great diversity in the degree of literacy, culture, size, geography, and the level of development among the minority nationalities (Postiglione, 2000), analyzing one minority group as a single entity is also impossible due to internal socioeconomic, cultural and educational disparities among group members. This diversification among Korean Chinese contains specific and concrete implications for how Korean students should be educated at current times. A policy agenda which is concerned with how schools can both recognize difference and teach Korean students effectively should be informed by structural and institutional context within which students’ school experiences are formed. Koreans are concerned about how to maintain their own languages and cultures, while enjoying the same benefits to the members of the Han majority. The success or failure of

Korean educational efforts will determine to a great extent the future status and well-being of the Korean children in China. It is therefore important for policy-makers, school managers and classroom teachers who are interested in helping Korean students succeed in school to look beyond cultural explanations of success and failure to include an analysis of the ways that structural and institutional factors affect how Korean students adapt, negotiate, and resist changing structural and institutional forces to construct their school worlds.

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