Uyghur college students' heterogeneous acculturation and related strategies in developed Eastern Chinese Cities

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Received: 26 April 2020 / Revised: 7 January 2021 / Accepted: 12 January 2021 / Published online: 29 January 2021
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Abstract

This study examines the acculturation of Uyghur college students to a different culture in universities in developed eastern Chinese cities. This study recruited 12 Uyghur university students from Xinjiang who are studying in two elite universities in eastern China. Research shows that Uyghur students often experience acculturation issues in dietary habits, language, and courses and teaching. These acculturation dilemmas are mainly due to differences between colleges' and universities' overall cultural atmosphere in mainland China and Uyghur students' customs and identity. This study finds that Uyghur students generally adopt two strategies—accommodation without assimilation and ambivalence—when reflecting on their living conditions and development while maintaining their steadfast ethnic identity.

Keywords Uyghur college students · Developed cities of east china · Acculturation · Heterogeneous culture · Ambivalence

Introduction

The Uyghurs, who primarily practice Islam, are one of the largest ethnic minorities in China. The 2010 census lists the Uyghur population at 10.06 million, ranking fourth among China's ethnic minorities.¹ Recent years have seen an increase in the number of Uyghur students studying in economically developed areas in eastern China due to the massification of higher education in the country. Uyghur students are different from Han students, who constitute a dominant ethnic group in China, in terms of physical appearance, lifestyle, and religion, having retained their unique ethnic features. An estimated 20,000 Xinjiang ethnic minority students are currently studying in eastern China universities.² Uyghur students in mainland China, whose living conditions have attracted more public and academic interest, are in a vulnerable position because of sensitive ethnic conflicts in recent years.

Overall, studies focusing on this group remain scarce, as they are limited to Uyghur students in developed cities. This is because of differences between Uyghurs and the Han in terms of diet, belief system, living habits, and education

experience, as well as challenges in learning and living in a completely heterogeneous culture. We presume that Uyghur students in developed cities are on the front line of cultural conflicts, as they occupy a distinctive and vulnerable position in Han-dominated colleges and universities. Relative to the strong Han culture, the Uyghurs may be in a weak and passive situation. Therefore, we adopted qualitative research methods to study 12 Uyghur college students living in eastern China.

We used the concept of acculturation to explain Uyghur college students' adaptation problems in a heterogeneous culture and analyzed this using Ogbu's "acting white" strategy. This study on the status of these students, especially in the context of a heterogeneous culture and their related strategies, could provide insights into the higher education system in mainland China, shed light on the predicament of socially vulnerable groups, and promote the development of a fair society as advocated by sociologists.

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¹ See <http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s5147/201307/153756.html> for details.

² See <http://www.column.chinadaily.com.cn/article.php?pid=18694> for details.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Definitions and theories of acculturation

Acculturation refers to the cultural impact of a dominant Western mainstream culture on a submissive minority (Berry 1997; Sam and Berry 2006). Haviland defined acculturation as a set of changes in cultural patterns occurring in different cultural groups due to the direct profound contact among them (Haviland 2002). Acculturation can simultaneously be a process and a result as in the exchange of traits among culturally similar groups who maintain contact with one another (Phinney 1990; Rudmin 2003).

Acculturation-related theories have profoundly influenced education research, which, as advocated by scholars, must attach considerable importance to vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities, lower middle class groups, and women, who confront acculturation difficulties in heterogeneous cultures (Makarova and Birman 2015; Van Praag et al. 2016; Yang and Yang 2018; Kusurkar 2018).

Empirical studies have established that ethnic minorities endure cultural conflicts and acculturation in European and American colleges and universities. For example, scholars have found gaps in cultural values between ethnic minorities and universities (Gupton et al. 2009; Harper 2012; Locke 2017), with the dominant culture naturally isolating ethnic minority students (Reay et al. 2001; Maramba and Velasquez 2012). An oppressive classroom environment was found in white-majority American and British colleges and universities, where white culture was dominant and indubitable (Jessop and Williams 2009; Stromquist 2012; Martínez 2017).

The academic culture in colleges and universities has ignored and excluded the culture of ethnic minority students (Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Scholars have argued that when communicating with professors and writing papers, ethnic minority students need a satisfactory understanding of, as well as familiarity with, conventional academic language, which had been based on the standard “white” English that these students have struggled to adopt (Ball et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2008; Smith and White 2015; Tao et al. 2017). Such compelling cultural effects can easily create a sense of isolation among ethnic minority students, who would generally choose low-level and low-ranking schools to avoid such cultural subjugation (Read 2003; Shah et al. 2010; Lessard-Phillips et al. 2018).

The “acting white” phenomenon and related strategies in black students’ acculturation experiences

When in a heterogeneous culture, ethnic minority students adopt different response strategies when confronted by a cultural plight. In the United States, black students imitate or act similar to white people in terms of language, behavior, or ways of doing things to gain a foothold in white-dominated scenarios, including colleges and universities. The history of black people, especially their enslavement and colonization, has led some scholars to analyze the inevitability of black people “acting white” and point out the unique significance of such behavior. This phenomenon among blacks was first and most famously explained by Fanon and DuBois, who examined the discipline and dual nature of the psychological worldview of oppressed black people (Dubois 2007; Fanon 2008).

“Acting white,” along with the renunciation of their cultural identity, is believed to be a burden to black people (Buck 2016). This is commonly witnessed in schools, as black people intending to change generally confront challenges associated with the change itself as well as pressure from peers who refuse to adapt, resulting in poor academic performance (Ogbu and Simons 1998; Ogbu 2003).

Several concepts in Ogbu’s theoretical framework on the acculturation and response strategies of ethnic minority students, particularly black students, were inspired by Berry’s two axes of cultural orientation in which there are four types of acculturation: integration, assimilations, separation, and marginalization (Berry 1992, 1997). Scholars have widely used Berry’s two-dimensional approach when analyzing minority students’ acculturation strategies when facing a heterogeneous culture. Ogbu revised and improved Berry’s conceptual structure, asserting that black students generally adopt five strategies when acculturating to white culture: assimilation or emulation, accommodation without assimilation, ambivalence, resistance or opposition, and encapsulation (Ogbu 2007).

Ogbu’s ideas were controversial in academic circles. Certain scholars, such as Mocomble, have accused Ogbu’s theory of attributing the differences in learning achievement between black and white students to the peer pressure of “acting white,” which, as a result, ignores the root causes of inequality in the American school system (Mocombe 2011). Hilliard and Stinson further argued that Fordham’s and Ogbu’s theories provide an overly simplistic analytical perspective of the differences between black and white students’ academic performance. Tyson and others also believed that attributing black students’ failures to black students themselves disregards the structural factors of schools and lacks a comprehensive analysis of social

and political forces in the American educational system (Hilliard 2001; Tyson et al. 2005; Stinson 2011).

However, many scholars continue to support Ogbu's theory. When analyzing the adaptation conditions encountered by different ethnic groups, Ogbu described the different states of voluntary and involuntary immigrants in the heterogeneous cultural context. He argued that voluntary groups had better adaptability initiative and states than involuntary groups. He also differentiated the adaptation conditions and strategies of different ethnic groups, including economic immigrants, refugees, undocumented workers, migrants from former colonies, and so on, which have been widely recognized (Ogbu 1991; Gibson 1997).

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey introduced the "oppositional peer culture" concept to explain the phenomenon of accusing peers of achieving good grades, which supports the "burden of acting white" hypothesis regarding differences in academic achievement between black and white students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). In addition, internalized racism and other theories indirectly support Ogbu's theory (Harper 2007). The "acting white accusation" theory further explores the pressure of "acting white" among the black community and its influence on their school performance (Durkee and Williams 2015).

Contemporary acculturation studies in a Chinese context

European and American scholars have conducted a wide range of studies on ethnic minority students' acculturation based on theoretical or empirical research, with considerable achievements. In contrast, studies in the Chinese context are scant. In this section, we mainly discuss English-language research on ethnic minorities by Chinese scholars in China although we also included those from non-Chinese authors.

Chinese scholars who have conducted limited theoretical research on acculturation have seldom used such concepts. In addition, most existing studies have used acculturation theories to explain the possible reasons for educational differences (Yu 2004; Tan and Chang 2013; Wang 2016). Much of the empirical research on the acculturation of vulnerable college student groups in China have focused on those living in rural areas (Jia 2013; Qiao 2015; Sun 2016). Indeed, acculturation studies involving ethnic minority students in colleges and universities are fewer than those examining students from rural neighborhoods (Garcia 2016; Li 2020). Such studies have concluded that ethnic minority students were at a disadvantage in terms of teacher and peer interactions, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships because of linguistic and cultural differences (Chen and Hao 2008; Tang 2010; Wang 2017).

Not surprisingly, we found only a few studies on the acculturation of Uyghur students in Chinese colleges and

universities, which were conducted using a limited number of questionnaires. Such research has concluded that Uyghur students encounter acculturation challenges (Long and Duan 2012; Wang 2016; Guo and Gu 2018; Chen 2019). The current literature on the acculturation of Uyghur students in China generally lacks in-depth research outcomes, which provides opportunities for qualitative research interventions. Hence, this study used qualitative methods to describe Uyghur students' acculturation in eastern China universities as well as their current living state from a deeper cultural perspective.

Possibility and significance of "acting white" strategies in a Chinese context

While Ogbu's theory has been controversial among academics, much of the criticism had been from U.S. scholars lamenting the theory's lack of institutional factors. Nevertheless, because the theory explores black students' real-world experiences in the American context, we believe that the theory is worth applying to the reality of higher education in China, as the present study intends to analyze the characteristics of Uyghur college students' strategies when dealing with a heterogeneous culture.

Some scholars have questioned Ogbu's theory for its lack of an in-depth discussion of its rationale and institutional factors (Mocombe 2011). However, the concepts of the strategies adopted by black students in a white-dominated heterogeneous culture and their related inductions continue to establish the rationality of Ogbu's theory. One such strategy is accommodation without assimilation. Despite Ogbu's lack of a thorough explanation of the theory's institutional context, Olitsky argued that many academically skilled black students, while initially hesitant, exhaust their efforts and adapt to the culture of schools and white society. These students support their national identity and succeed in the school system, which is a typical manifestation of adaptation without assimilation and partly confirms the value of Ogbu's concept (Olitsky 2015).

A few theories have focused on the contemporary Chinese context when examining Uyghur students' performance in heterogeneous cultures. Regardless of the flaws of Ogbu's theory, it continues to apply to the framework of black students' acculturation strategies in a heterogeneous cultural context. The concept and theory of "acting white" describe black students' pressure and strategy in imitating "whiteness" in a white-dominated society, but the phrase "acting white" does not mean this theory is limited to the relationship between blacks and whites.

We believe that all minority groups living in heterogeneous mainstream cultures face the same situation as black people in white-dominated societies. The "acting white" theories and their corresponding concepts are applicable when

Table 1 Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year	Discipline categories	University	City
Mali	20	Female	Sophomore	Science	985 university	City A
Guli	22	Female	Junior	Humanities	985 university	City A
Aliya	23	Female	Senior	Engineering	985 university	City A
Reheman	23	Male	Senior	Humanities	985 university	City A
Rena	19	Female	Sophomore	Social Sciences	985 university	City A
Ayi	21	Female	Junior	Social Sciences	985 university	City A
Aizezi	22	Male	Senior	Science	211 university	City B
Kamaner	23	Female	Senior	Humanities	211 university	City B
Batuer	22	Male	Junior	Engineering	211 university	City B
Zuhela	20	Female	Sophomore	Social Sciences	211 university	City B
Sare	21	Female	Sophomore	Science	211 university	City B
Halahan	22	Male	Junior	Social Sciences	211 university	City B

analyzing their strategies and practices in the heterogeneous culture. Hence, the “acting white” strategies framework is worth adopting in a Chinese context. The conceptual framework of this academic effort provides us with a new perspective to observe how Uyghur college students acculturate to a heterogeneous culture.

This study aims to test its hypothesis by explaining the acculturation phenomenon according to the theoretical framework. Based on the above literature review, we can establish a hypothesis for this study—that is, Uyghur students who study and live in eastern China will face acculturation difficulties or dilemmas in the Han-dominated cultural atmosphere. To address such challenges, Uyghur university students will adopt acculturation strategies that they can adapt to their own survival. The specific application and performance of these strategies will be summarized in the research findings.

Methodology and participant selection

This study will build on some contemporary studies on the acculturation of ethnic minority students in mainland China (Postiglione 2009, 2013; Guo and Gu 2016). To further explore and understand the acculturation state and experience of ethnic minority students, qualitative research methods were adopted, as they seek to explain the nature and meanings of social phenomena, which is suitable for this study’s research theme and purpose (Taylor 1971; Geertz 1994).

We selected Uyghur students as participants because of their special and unique physical appearance, dietary habits, and language. In recent years, there has not been a significant number of Uyghur students studying and living in developed areas in eastern China. In all aspects, these students are considerably different from those in eastern cities, most of whom are of Han nationality. These Uyghur students

were chosen mainly via purposive sampling based on the environmental and economic differences between eastern and western China. Because they come from less economically developed western areas and live in a different cultural environment, they are vital to the achievement of this study’s goal, which is to investigate how college students acculturate in a heterogeneous culture. Studying the acculturation strategies of Uyghur students is the best way to explore their living conditions.

We selected 12 Uyghur undergraduates from two universities (one from Project 985 and another from Project 211) in City A and City B, which are developed cities in eastern and southeastern China, respectively (see Table 1, The pseudonyms of the 12 students and their basic information have been listed). It must be noted that the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, which is the language of communication that the researchers and participants were most familiar with. In the qualitative analysis, all materials that were in Mandarin Chinese were translated into English and used in this study.

Considering acculturation due to geographical and economic differences before and during university attendance, we chose the sample universities from City A and City B, which are developed regional economic hubs in eastern and southeastern China. The subjects were students from Xinjiang who were studying in universities in developed cities in mainland China, whose differences in living conditions before and after starting university could provide abundant qualitative data for this study.

The male-to-female ratio of the 12 Uyghur participants (four males, eight females) corresponds to the overall gender ratio of Uyghur students in their respective universities. These students were in their sophomore, junior, or senior years, taking humanities, social science, engineering, and science courses. Qualitative data were collected from two rounds of in-depth interviews that lasted one year; each session took about two to three hours. In the latter stage of data

collection, a third interview was conducted with five participants to clarify the details of some of their statements. In the research study, all interviews were carried out on campus and a semi-structured approach was adopted. The interview outline had four dimensions and 15 interview questions but allowed for changes depending on the interview content. During data collection and analysis, we conducted axial and selective coding for qualitative data and performed category analysis to summarize the shared concepts of Uyghur college students' perceptions, which we then classified and examined.

We should emphasize the possible sampling bias in this study. The Uyghur students in this study were enrolled in Chinese mainland universities through college entrance examinations (Gaokao) and were among the best Uyghur students in Xinjiang. Some of these students were already from relatively good family backgrounds, and some were from the lower middle class. Since social class is out of this study's scope, no further distinctions were made in terms of family background.

Regardless of their family context, Uyghur students from Xinjiang who attend universities in developed eastern Chinese cities are part of the few who have had the rare opportunity to experience directly a Han-dominated university culture. Most of these Uyghur students have had little contact with Han people, and the Han culture before they went to universities, which is new to them, has a great impact on them. Although their situation may not be generalized to all Uyghur students from Xinjiang, this group of students still possesses a unique research value from a qualitative standpoint.

Findings

The qualitative research data generated several findings. Most of the participants reported experiencing various acculturation problems during their university years, which are summarized as follows.

Dietary habits

Because Uyghur students practice Islam, they are burdened with numerous taboos and concerns according to Islamic customs. For example, Uyghur students are banned from eating pork and drinking alcohol; such food taboos often make it impossible for them to blend in with their Han counterparts, who outnumber ethnic minority students in developed eastern Chinese cities. For instance, Uyghur students may be excluded from meaningful college activities. One subject, Aliye, said that she failed to integrate herself into the circles of her Han counterparts because of her special dietary habits:

In class, we are together. However, after class, they go to Han canteens while we go to Muslim canteens. Finally, the result is less communication between us.

The other participants shared similar opinions. Batur reported wasting significant time and energy looking for places to eat because of the limited number of Muslim restaurants near his university in City B. He said that before choosing a university for postgraduate studies, he must first determine if it had restaurants that served Muslims. He would not consider a university with no Muslim restaurants regardless of how excellent it is. Meanwhile, Gvlmira lamented her failure to participate in normal social interaction activities with her Han professors and classmates because of her special dietary habits. She recalled that during her sophomore year, she joined the research team of a Han professor who typically ate and drank with Han students. She highlighted that this professor liked drinking. This discouraged Gvlmira from going to such parties, as well as some other important socialization activities, resulting in missed opportunities to communicate deeply with her professors and classmates:

I noticed that they [Han roommates] had been on better terms with professors. Most of their communication with professors took place primarily when they were dining and drinking together. They often became familiar with each other in this way. But I had to avoid such situations. Some professors were not able to understand my dietary habits, and I was also tired of repeating my explanations.

Eating and drinking are important socialization routines among Han Chinese people. People attend dinners to establish close and personal relationships with one another. However, such communication opportunities are practically unavailable to Uyghur students, who practice Islam. According to Aliye, their eating taboos function as a "natural barrier" when communicating with their Han professors and classmates.

Language

Since the Uyghur participants in this study mainly received Uyghur language education in their childhood, most of them are not fluent in Chinese. Some of their pronunciations and limited vocabularies have only allowed for simple or general conversations with Han Chinese, not in-depth communication. These differences in language environments and habits have led to adaptation challenges for them at universities.

For instance, Sarhan reported having to retake a few courses every semester, especially in science and engineering, as they were too difficult for her, and because she was not fluent in Chinese, she could not understand what the

professor was saying in class. In China, all college students must take and pass basic public elective courses, which generally include English, advanced mathematics, ideological and political theories, and physical education, regardless of their major. While Han students can easily pass advanced mathematics, Aygvl, another participant, found it extremely difficult, retaking it three times before finally passing. In addition, Aygvl also faced great challenges in English-language courses because she only started learning English during her precollege education and did not study it during middle school.

China's higher education system implements a precollege program, also known as precollege class, to consolidate ethnic minority students' knowledge and prepare them for university. Students from Xinjiang, whose mother tongue is Uyghur, generally spend one or two years in precollege programs after graduating from high school and before entering university to learn Chinese and English and review their basic high school subjects. Only after completing the precollege program will ethnic minority students be allowed to study in universities.

Aygvl reported being emotional when recollecting the time she wrote a thesis in English:

As we must do exercises or present ourselves in English for a public elective course, we had to attend classes and learn English desperately. It was too difficult for us to take English courses, I still remember the scene where we learned English with tears streaming down our faces.

Uyghur students mainly use Uyghur and Chinese languages in primary and middle school; English is their third language. Those in Xinjiang are given different language options when taking the Gaokao; Uyghur students who take it in the Uyghur language do not seriously study English during middle school. Ethnic minority students who choose Mandarin are called "ethnic minority students taking the exam in Chinese", whereas those who choose Uyghur are called "ethnic minority students taking the exam in ethnic minority languages." The former is challenging and requires Uyghur students to be highly proficient in Chinese, but they can receive extra points on their Gaokao scores. Meanwhile, the latter exam is less challenging, and students who take it receive no extra points during enrollment.

Because of their poor English, these students fail to adapt to teaching and learning in colleges and universities. As many scholars have pointed out, against the backdrop of English as a global language, English proficiency has become a scarce cultural capital for many non-native English students (Harrison 2013; Jayadeva 2018). This study found that Uyghur students are severely deficient in this cultural capital. As mainland colleges and universities focus on English teaching and learning, students with poor

English abilities end up disadvantaged in terms of academic competition.

Kamar feels the same way, stating that all the Uyghur students she knew had to retake several courses. This situation is clearly linked to their weak academic foundation but is primarily attributed to their inability to familiarize themselves with teaching in colleges or universities because of their poor language proficiency. Kamar emotionally recounted how female Uyghur students would perform better compared with their male counterparts, who would give up because of the huge academic gap.

Nevertheless, since 2004 the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has aggressively promoted a bilingual teaching policy in primary and secondary schools. Bilingual teaching refers to teaching that uses both the native Uyghur language and the general Chinese language during primary and middle school, including kindergarten, intending to improve the Chinese language proficiency of students whose mother tongue is an ethnic minority language. Xinjiang bilingual education evolved into a national strategy during the first Xinjiang Work Seminar of the State Council in 2010. Hence, many Uyghur students in Xinjiang, even those in kindergarten, have received bilingual teaching in recent years. By 2015, a total of 520,800 ethnic minority children in Xinjiang (including Uyghurs) have received bilingual instruction during their two-year preschool education, accounting for 78.67% of the 662,000 ethnic minority school-aged children (age 5–6).³

Indeed, many Uyghur students in Xinjiang have been exposed to the Chinese language and Mandarin instruction. However, because the Chinese language is not their mother tongue, and owing to their poor Chinese skills, most Uyghur students fail to satisfy the requirements of high-intensity learning in mainland colleges and universities, resulting in considerable academic pressure.

Along with unmet academic requirements, some Uyghur students also suffer from embarrassment when speaking their mother tongue in a heterogeneous environment; one such instance involves being teased by other students. Meryam expressed that her roommates would deliberately or unintentionally laugh at her for speaking her mother tongue:

I would call my family using the Uyghur language. My roommates would say, "She is calling in the 'bird language' again." I have corrected them many times, and we even angrily argued over this once. If you are a Russian who understands Chinese, if I call Russian a bird language in front of you, as a Russian, wouldn't you be angry?

³ See <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm> for details.

The Chinese slang phrase “bird language” is a derogatory term for a foreign language, implying insult and ridicule. It is possible that Meryam’s roommate referred to the Uyghur language as “bird language” because she could not understand it. However, such insults have sometimes made Meryam extremely uncomfortable—a feeling that most Uyghur students in this study are familiar with. Meryam believes that her Han roommates regard the pronunciation of the words of her native language as quite strange, thus referring to it as “bird language,” which pushes her to despair. This phenomenon is consistent with the teasing, bullying, or harassment theory often discussed in the literature. Students who are ridiculed this way often feel helpless and uncomfortable in school, which is harmful to their situation (Land 2003; Leary et al. 2003; Lacey and Konold 2017).

Courses and teaching

Many Uyghur students in this study reported that the settings of their various college courses have failed to accommodate their cultural demands. Aliye referred to a public elective course she attended, titled “Appreciation of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy,” which she thought would be about the paintings and calligraphies of all ethnic minorities in China. However, she later discovered that this course specifically focused on the calligraphies of the Han ethnic group and did not include the works of the Uyghur.

One chapter of another course that Aliye attended, “Environment Appreciation,” introduced architectural styles in different places. The Chinese architecture styles discussed included the characteristics of the garden landscape architecture of the lower areas of the Yangtze River. However, whenever the Islamic architecture of the Middle East was mentioned, the professor would emphasize that the architectural style in Xinjiang was significantly influenced by Islamic architecture, which Aliye felt strongly about:

I think our things seem different from the mainstream, at least in many ways. So the teacher emphasized that the architectural style of Xinjiang is more influenced by external factors. However, this explanation makes me feel a little strange. Our style seems to be dispensable.

For Aliye, the curriculum settings in colleges or universities, as well as a considerable amount of explicit or implicit content in different courses, center on the dominant Han culture. While such settings are natural for Han Chinese students, ethnic minority students such as Aliye feel that their ethnic culture is being deliberately, or perhaps unintentionally, ignored. This perception can easily create a sense of disappointment and being part of “others” (Young 1989). This is consistent with the phenomenon of cultural otherness where, according to Young, cultures that do not conform to

the dominant one are regarded as “others” (Young 1990, p. 58). Students who find no traces of their culture in colleges or universities will certainly feel that their ethnicity is “dispensable.”

Uyghur students also find it difficult to adapt to teaching methods. Most of the Uyghur students in this study reported experiencing considerable learning challenges in most subjects, particularly English and mathematics, primarily caused by their failure to acclimate to teaching methods. For example, some Uyghur students stated that because English-language courses in colleges and universities are taught entirely in English, they feel as if they are “listening to double Dutch” (Tianshu).

Eziz narrated that in a public elective course he attended, the professor added a bonus question to a test that needed to be answered in a non-Chinese language. The professor obviously wanted the students to answer it in English, but several ethnic minority students in the class used their native languages, such as Uyghur and Kazakh. The professor could not understand such languages and thus gave these students zero points. Getting a zero means taking the course again, which exasperated the students and caused a serious teaching accident, because these students went to the dean’s office to complain about the teacher after they got zero points. Eziz believed that the professor must have ignored the Uyghur students in the class when creating this examination question. This habitual ignorance shows that only a few professors accommodate the needs of other ethnic minority students in the teaching environment, which is also dominated by the Han. Eziz said,

In fact, the professor never realized that his classmates could speak other languages besides Chinese and English. Even in the exam, he had always ignored our existence.

Not surprisingly, deliberate or unintentional ignorance on the part of professors causes dilemmas and mixed emotions for Uyghur students, who do not know whether to laugh or cry. Many students in this study reported spending considerable time adapting to such teaching environments from the day they entered university.

We summarized the participants’ acculturation problems in terms of dietary habits, language, and courses and teaching. Because of limitations in length, this paper did not discuss any specific acculturation issue faced by Uyghur students. However, as this study emphasized, the participants have pointed to the Han-centric cultural atmospheres in colleges and universities and the lack of a sense of belonging and identity among ethnic minority students in such settings.

A basic conclusion from the above summary is that Uyghur university students studying in eastern China generally face acculturation dilemmas. Their confusion and discomfort in such a heterogeneous context reflect the conflict

between their own culture and the university culture of the Han, which validates our research hypothesis.

Discussion and conclusion

Acculturation strategies adopted by Uyghur students

This section further summarizes and describes the acculturation strategies adopted by students in culturally heterogeneous colleges or universities in eastern China.

The primary analysis framework for the acculturation strategies in this study adopts Ogbu's classification. As mentioned earlier, Ogbu argued that black people generally exhibit five types of attitudes or strategies when being pressured to "act white": assimilation or emulation, accommodation without assimilation, ambivalence, resistance and opposition, and encapsulation (Ogbu 2007). We will use these categories to analyze the situations of the Uyghur students in this study. Based on the collected data, we assert that the Uyghur participants generally employ accommodation without assimilation and ambivalence.

Accommodation without assimilation

Ogbu argued that in the accommodation-without-assimilation strategy, dominant cultures and academic performance are judged based on the white cultural standards of contemporary American society and education system. Black students must imitate how white people talk, think, and communicate to achieve satisfactory results. Only in this way can they stand out through educational selection (Ogbu 2008). In essence, though black students change certain cultural behaviors to adapt to the dominant society, they remain unwilling to assimilate. Such refusal reflects these students' preservation of a clear and steadfast ethnic identity (Harper 2007).

Gibson's analysis of the accommodation-without-assimilation strategy emphasizes the position of minorities in a strong mainstream culture. Minorities will not reject all aspects of the mainstream culture; rather, they will integrate into it in the process of cultural application. At the same time, they will embrace a firm identity within their own culture and refuse to assimilate into the mainstream ethnic group. They will even try to adapt to mainstream social norms in public but strictly follow their own way of life in private to adhere to their own cultural identity (Gibson 1988, pp. 24–25).

The Uyghur students in this study are fluent in basic Mandarin, though with different levels of proficiency. Faced with the need to survive in a Han-dominated culture, they began learning Mandarin at a young age and

tried to think in Chinese when doing their schoolwork. To some extent, this is similar to the previously mentioned strategy highlighted by Ogbu; in this context, Uyghur students imitate and familiarize themselves with the corresponding practice of using Chinese to think and learn like Han students, who represent the dominant culture.

These students have to learn Chinese proactively to advance in life or in their studies and meet the requirements of college and university education in developed cities in eastern China. Rahman is a typical example of an Uyghur student who actively applies the accommodation-without-assimilation strategy. According to him,

I try to live, play, and study with my Han classmates. For over 6 years (starting from the precollege program), I have been living with my Han classmates in order to learn Chinese from them. As Han culture is dominant in China, I would be finished if I came to City B to study, but I had no knowledge of Han culture. I did this partly for the environment and partly to lay a solid foundation for the future development of my major.

Rahman believes that a minority student needs to integrate themselves actively into Han Chinese circles to learn and understand Chinese language and culture. Only by doing so can an ethnic minority student succeed in their future career. Rahman is one of the few ethnic minority students in this study from Xinjiang who have no plans of returning to Xinjiang after graduation. He believes that Xinjiang lags behind and wants to work in a large city in eastern China and lead a different life. Rahman's active "Sinicization" (Hanhua) is similar to Ogbu's "acting white" practice. To succeed in the education system, black students must talk and act white, as it is the dominant culture (Ogbu 2007; Sohn 2011). Rahman uses the same strategy, actively requesting to live and communicate with Han classmates to learn standard Mandarin as well as be further exposed to Han culture. However, Rahman's clear ethnic identity and firmness in his religious beliefs must be highlighted. Although he took the initiative to learn Chinese in university and communicate with Han students, he sees this learning as the only strategy or method that would make it easier for him to integrate into Chinese mainstream cities dominated by the Han. This strategy has never affected his national identity. He is resolute in his identity as an Uyghur in Xinjiang, a trait that similar studies have discussed (Chen and Postiglione 2009; Guo and Gu 2018).

Kamar also practices accommodation without assimilation. She speaks Mandarin as fluently as a Han Chinese, which is linked to her cultural background and experiences. Because her grandfather is a member of the Hui ethnic group, she studied in a Han Chinese school when she was a child.

The Hui, a minority nationality with a large population in China, are commonly known as Chinese Muslims. They practice Islam devoutly but have no distinct ethnic minority language; hence, they speak the same Chinese language as the Han. They also speak different dialects depending on the area they live in. The Hui people in China are descendants of Arab and Persian Muslims who immigrated to China as early as the Tang Dynasty. In Xinjiang, majority of students in Han schools are of Han nationality, with a few ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority students who have spent their childhood education in Han schools demonstrate high Chinese proficiency because of their frequent interactions with Han teachers and classmates. Nationality schools, which primarily recruit ethnic minority students, and mixed schools, which enroll a proportionate number of ethnic minority and Han students, are counterparts of Han schools.

Kamar's grandfather strongly requested that all his grandchildren attend Han schools, which mainly use Chinese, because he believed that speaking fluent Chinese was crucial for the future of Uyghur children. While Kamar embraces her Uyghur identity, she acknowledges that speaking fluent Chinese will facilitate her life and studies. Nonetheless, she values her native language and prefers to think and write in the Uyghur language whenever possible. Although Kamar's uses a less active response strategy compared with Rahman's, her acculturation practice also falls into the accommodation-without-assimilation category.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence refers to the vague mental state and behavior of ethnic minority students who want to assimilate with the dominant culture but are reluctant to (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 2008). The qualitative data collected from the participants in this study clearly reflected ambivalence. Although the Uyghur respondents accommodate Han culture without assimilating, they are ambivalent in the accommodation-without-assimilation process. For instance, though Zöhre studies in a developed eastern Chinese city and fluently speaks Mandarin, she strongly laments the lack of Uyghur language education for future generations. She said,

We began learning our native language, the Uyghur language, in the first year of primary school. Now, students who are at the same school where my younger sister studies learn the Uyghur language from their third year of primary school. I think it is not advisable because it is too late to learn their native language. The shorter the learning period, the lower the possibility of mastering a language.

While Zöhre can speak fluent Mandarin, she and her other peers began to learn Chinese from an early age and took the initiative to use Chinese in thinking and learning so that

they can adapt to the mainstream education and examination selection system. This can also be described as an “act Han and speak Mandarin” state, a practice that is similar to that of black students “acting white.” However, although many of Zöhre's peers are fluent in Chinese, they worry that the bilingual teaching policy implemented in Xinjiang will reduce their opportunities to use their native language. In addition, Zöhre knows the importance of learning Chinese and learning it well, which is crucial for her future job prospects and career development. She believes that as an Uyghur student, she still needs to learn the national language because it is her mother tongue.

Sarhan holds the same view. She reported specifically using Mandarin to communicate with other Uyghur students at her university. This practice is advantageous for popularizing Mandarin; however, she feels that the Uyghur cultural atmosphere will weaken if Uyghur students do not even use their own language when communicating among themselves at the university.

In this study, some students are in the middle of being acculturated, and some are not. They can be considered to be in a state of partial adaptation, which may also be perceived as another form of ambivalence. Batur, for example, is a typical student in this field. He said that he likes and often participates in the university's cultural and entertainment activities. However, because he feels that he cannot integrate himself into the academic culture, he sees himself as being a bit “out of business” in the university, feeling his headache when talking about his studies. The same is true for Mamat, who finds it difficult to say whether he has fully adapted to the Han culture at the university. He can speak Chinese but feels he cannot speak it fluently. He also tries to communicate with Han students but does not fully integrate into their social circles. He describes this feeling as standing outside the door but being afraid to go in. He thinks that he is in a semiadaptive state, or partially acculturated, which almost corresponds to Berry's concept of marginalization (Berry 1992).

From the analysis, it can be concluded that many Uyghur college students are ambivalent—and are even in a chaotic state of ambivalence—when choosing acculturation strategies. Compared with students of the same age from the same ethnic minority group, the participants of this study found it more difficult to be admitted into universities in developed eastern Chinese cities owing to their strict selection processes. Therefore, it seems they should appreciate that the existing education system provided them opportunities to stand out among other students. The participants also took the initiative to accept the Chinese language and identify with Han culture. Despite this situation, many of them do not fully recognize the acculturation strategies they adopt primarily because they identify as ethnic minorities. However, these students' experiences compel them to worry about

the current situation of their ethnic language and culture. In essence, this perception is caused by the ambivalence resulting from their clear ethnic identity and consciousness. Although they must accept other cultures to complete the process of acculturation, they find that ambivalence is an arduous journey (Tyson et al. 2005; Buck 2016). Sometimes, some of them are in a state of ambivalence, making it difficult to explain their adaptation status.

Overall, the Uyghur students in this study employ the accommodation-without-assimilation and ambivalence strategies to acculturate. Part of the reason they are not fully assimilated is their clear ethnic identity. However, they do not demonstrate encapsulation partly because of their lives and academic pressures in developed cities in eastern China. Encapsulation, after all, denotes an impasse in a completely heterogeneous cultural environment. A strategy that causes trouble and blindly repulses the dominant culture may encourage these students to abandon reality (Wildhagen 2011; Cao et al. 2017).

Conclusion I: Difficult acculturation in heterogeneous cultural contexts

We described the living conditions of Uyghur college students in developed eastern Chinese cities, examining their acculturation problems and strategies. Uyghur college students encounter varying acculturation problems in terms of dietary habits, language, the classroom and teaching environment, and other aspects. The emergence of such acculturation is rooted in the inconsistency between the dominant cultural atmosphere in Chinese universities and ethnic college students' cultural habits and identities.

In the heterogeneous cultural context of universities, many Uyghur students in this study have shown awareness of relational justice because of their different life situations and cultural particularities. This is different from distributive justice theory, which emphasizes the allocation of material resources and goods. Instead, relational justice theory highlights the fairness of interpersonal relationships, the higher focus that social justice must place on equality among people, and the abandonment of the institutional structure of interpersonal inequality caused by social systems (Young 1989, 1990).

Culture fundamentally reflects a country's tendencies and a society's macro system and its characteristics. Once differentiated from the mainstream culture, members of any minority or non-mainstream group face the influence of the dominant culture and therefore confront its effects and the difficulty of adapting to it (Boekestijn 1988). These cultural conflicts and adaptations are present in many different educational settings (Ogbu 1992; Zepke and Leach 2005).

For Ogbu and other scholars, this state is more similar to the situation of marginalized groups adapting to dominant

cultures (Ogbu 1995, 2008). However, we believe that environmental and even situational changes are an important cause of such marginalization. For the Uyghur students in this study, the cultural situation completely transforms when they go to their respective universities in eastern China. In such heterogeneous cultural situations, they feel a sense of marginalization, reflecting a state of acculturation that has been examined by other studies (Ogbu 2003; Gibson 2005; Harding 2011). This study's participants encounter acculturation challenges in their respective universities. Given the substantial differences in appearance and characteristics between the Uyghur culture in western China and the Han culture in eastern China, the extensive perceptions of cultural acculturation by the Uyghur students in this study are on the front line of cultural conflicts.

Conclusion II: Inevitable strategic choices at the structural level of cultural institutions

Minority students who accommodate the mainstream culture in schools are actually embarking on a positive endeavor toward considerable progress (Ferguson et al. 2001); they realize that if they fail to implement such a strategy in a survival-oriented environment such as a school, then they can only fail in their academic pursuits. Indeed, the goal of this strategy is not self-depreciation but rather survival. In today's Chinese mainland society, Uyghur students share the enthusiasm of their Han counterparts in their search for academic success, which is similar to the situation in the United States where both black and white students tend to pursue high academic achievement, for which they must proactively accommodate the mainstream culture (Cook and Ludwig 2008; Buck 2016). To achieve academic success, Uyghur students typically choose the strategy of coordination and balance between their own culture and the mainstream.

However, when several mainstream cultural practices and characteristics are accommodated, many Uyghur college students show an ambivalent mentality, which reflects their complex mindset in adopting accommodation strategies. On the one hand, they actively integrate into the mainstream to succeed; on the other hand, they have certain worries or confusion about their culture and identity as they undergo active or passive integration, which is common in cultural conflicts between minority or non-mainstream groups (Jost and Burgess 2000; Park 2010).

Scholars have often questioned Ogbu's concept of "acting white" because the induction of its relevant strategies seldom considers the underlying institutional factors and lacks theoretical depth (Hilliard 2001; Stinson 2011; Olitsky 2015). The present study summarizes the strategies adopted by Uyghur college students in heterogeneous cultural situations in eastern China, and Ogbu's concept explains the characteristics of such strategies. This study specifically

discusses the institutional elements that underpin these strategies in its analysis.

The reasons behind these strategies can therefore be recapped as follows. To acculturate to the mainstream culture, Uyghur college students adopt two strategies—accommodation without assimilation and ambivalence—which have a profound link to the cultural system in Chinese universities. Their own culture makes Uyghur students incompatible with the mainstream cultural system, but to achieve academic success, they need to adopt a mainstream cultural attitude. However, if Uyghur students do so in the process of adaptation, they put themselves in a further state of ambivalence. In an institutional context on which a strong mainstream culture depends, Uyghur students' contradictory mentality is not difficult to understand and has a certain inevitability. These students can adopt this mentality when confronting a heterogeneous culture, which is a byproduct of the influence of the overall educational system and the general cultural and social structure.

Finally, we should emphasize that the acculturation status of these Uyghur college students and the characteristics of their strategies analyzed in this study may not be generalizable. Because of its qualitative approach and limitations in participant selection, this study can only explain the conditions of the participants themselves and cannot represent the entire population. Nevertheless, the 12 Uyghur students in this study and their experiences possess a distinctive value, and their perceptions remain highly significant for enriching relevant acculturation theories and concepts.

Acknowledgment We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to professor Adam R Nelson and professor Stacey J Lee for their useful suggestions to improve this paper.

Funding This study was funded by the Institute for advanced study of educational development in Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Great Bay area, SCNU.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

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