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# Learning Across Cultures: How Minority Students Construct Identities That Foster Academic Success

MaryJo Benton Lee

*Diversity Coordinator, College of Engineering, South Dakota State University*

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# Learning Across Cultures: How Minority Students Construct Identities That Foster Academic Success

## Abstract

*In China, successful minority students are those who construct "achievement-oriented selves." Through interaction with significant others, these students develop perspectives of themselves as "successes." This, in turn, makes academic achievement possible. The "identity work" of Chinese ethnic students can serve as a model for those involved with minority education in the U.S.*

## MaryJo Benton Lee

Diversity Coordinator, College of Engineering, South Dakota State University

The problem of underachievement by minority students at times can seem overwhelming and unsolvable. Sometimes solutions can be found through exposure to multiple perspectives. By studying other countries and cultures, we sometimes come to understand more about the United States.

In the People's Republic of China, eight percent of the population is comprised of ethnic minority people, people with cultures (particularly languages and religions) that are distinct from the majority (or Han) Chinese. Ethnic students in China, like ethnic students the world over, face monumental obstacles to getting a good education.

In China, a tiny, but growing, percentage of ethnic minority students actually manage to beat the odds, win university admittance and earn college degrees. These students find ways to function effectively in a second culture using a language other than their native one. How do these students do that? And what role does a strong ethnic identity play - first in the educational achievement of these students and later in the empowerment of their minority groups?

The presenter spent three months doing research at a teachers college in the People's Republic of China in order to answer these questions. Her research led to a book titled *Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment: How Minority Students in Southwest China Construct Identities* (Ashgate 2001). The presenter is a clinical sociologist who works primarily with American Indian students at a Midwestern university. She found much in China's system

of ethnic education that can inform and enlighten those working with minority students in the United States.

In China, the minority students who do well in school are those who early on are able to construct "achievement-oriented selves." These successful minority students are well aware of the limitations imposed upon them by their ethnicity. Nevertheless, with the backing of important others in their lives, these students manage to develop perspectives of themselves as "successes." The "selves" the students construct make academic achievement possible.

This presentation focuses on the "identity work" that minority students do with their reference groups. In China, teachers, neighbors and parents of successful minority expect

them to go to college. These minority students, who are repeatedly defined as achievers by significant others in their lives, begin to see themselves the same way and to share these same expectations.

It has long been known that reference groups strongly influence how ethnic students view themselves and that self-concept plays an important part in academic achievement. The specifics of how this process operates in China - and, more importantly, how it could operate in the United States - are emphasized in this presentation.

Ample work has been done in many settings on underachievement among minority students. Continuing to document failure only demonstrates the obvious. It does not open the way to a better future. Sociologist Robert Merton puts it this way: "More is learned from the single success than from multiple failures. A single success proves it can be done. Thereafter, it is necessary only to learn what made it work." Thus, it is important to look at strategies employed by minority students who do well in school and at the specific behaviors of those around them, behaviors that foster the students' academic success. To repeat, the work the Chinese are doing, to assure the equality of groups through education, is exemplary. It is also worthy of emulation by those working in minority education in the United States.

### **Presenter**

**Dr. MaryJo Benton Lee** is Diversity Coordinator for the College of Engineering at South Dakota State University. She is also the Coordinator of the SDSU-FIS Success Academy. Success Academy is a partnership between South Dakota State University and the neighboring Flandreau Indian School, designed to encourage early career awareness and college preparedness among Native American high school students.

In 1991 Lee served as an exchange professor at Yunnan Normal University in the People's Republic of China. She returned to China in 1997 to do further research on minority education. That research culminated in the publication of a book titled, "Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment: How Minority Students in Southwest China Construct Identities" (Ashgate 2001).

At last year's People of Color conference, Lee presented a session on China's aggressive program of preferential policies in higher education. That presentation focused primarily on macro-sociological phenomena. This year's presentation looks at Chinese education at the micro-level, that is, at identity construction by individual minority students and their reference groups.

Lee's doctorate is from South Dakota State University with a minor in Asian Studies. Her current research focuses on the construction of ethnicity and the sociology of education.