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Does ethnic identity influence migrants' settlement intentions? Evidence from three cities in Gansu Province, Northwest China[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The debate concerning the determinants of rural-urban migration in China has thus far paid little attention to migrants with different ethnic backgrounds. The present article investigates the determinants of settlement intentions using survey data for three cities in Northwest China. Under four strategies: Settling in the city (as the baseline); Returning home; Moving to other cities, and Undecided, we analyse migrants' intentions through a multi-nominal logit approach, in conjunction with in-depth interviews and participant observations. The results demonstrate a range of determinants that include human capital, migration characteristics, employment, network, and local factors. Findings indicate in particular that types of contract and job training strongly influence migrant settlement in all models. The implication of these findings is that migrants will have to learn practical skills if they plan to settle down. It may be attractive for local authorities to invest in vocational schools and to regulate the labour market and contracts if they are willing to accommodate these migrants. As expected, ethnic identity and cultural characteristics of the cities also play important roles in determining migrants' decisions to settle. Worth to notice that minority migrants tend to stay in cities where there is higher cultural homogeneity, thus lower demand for integration. They are less likely to resort to migration for a better livelihood compared to the Han majority. We advocate that the creation of more equal and inclusive socio-cultural contexts may promote minority migrants' mobility, thereby improving their livelihoods through migration.

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1. Introduction

In China, the rapid growth of urbanisation has triggered massive rural-urban migration since the late 1980s. Millions of migrants have flocked from rural areas to cities in response to the high demand for labours. A major question has arisen as to whether these migrants will decide to settle in their destination cities. In fact, concern has grown about settlement intentions over the past few years (among others, Yang, 2000; Zhu, 2007; Yue, Li, Feldman, & Du, 2010; Fan, 2011; Shen, 2012; Cao, Li, Ma, & Tao, 2015). A noteworthy omission in the literature is the analysis of differences relating to the ethnic backgrounds of migrants in multi-ethnic regions in China. Possible reasons for such neglect could be that

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Chinese ethnic issues and policies continue to be sensitive, official data is often disputable and/or lacking, and scholars have low accessibility to these regions.

This article attempts to enrich the research on settlement intentions by paying close attention to the ethnic identities of migrants in China's multi-ethnic regions. The phrase "multi-ethnic migration" immediately conveys the idea that our migrants in question comprise different ethnic backgrounds. Migration to and settlement in cities has constantly been the escape route from poverty and the quest for better livelihoods, especially for minority migrants who are more likely to depart from economically depressed regions. Minorities are, however, generally vulnerable in the job market and are less prepared than their Han counterparts to compete for employment (Zang, 2008). Moreover, they face formidable challenges during the settlement process because not only do migrants need to overcome rural-urban disparities but they also have to manage the barriers raised by heterogeneous ethnicity such as culture adaptations. Local and regional governments may also witness incidents of tension among different groups during the

multi-ethnic migration process.

We specifically target three typical ethnic groups in Gansu province: Han, Muslims, and Tibetans in three cities, namely Lanzhou, Linxia, and Gannan in Northwest China (NWC). The Gansu province, situated in the buffer zone between the Tibetan and Loess Plateaus and the ancient Silk Road, is one of the most ethnic heterogeneous regions in NWC where mainly the Han Chinese, Central Asians, Arabic, Mongols, and Tibetans were frequently acculturated and commercially favoured to each other. We choose these three groups not only because they are the most influential ones in terms of the local socioeconomic development. Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu province, attracts many migrants (mainly Muslims) of different ethnic backgrounds. In Linxia, the Muslim population (59.2%, *The Sixth National Census, 2010*) is larger than the national majority Han. The prevalence of Muslim cultural practice and tradition in the city has made it renowned as the “Little Mecca” of China. Whereas Gannan, which is more populated by Tibetans (56.4%, *The Sixth National Census, 2010*) with diverse Tibetan cultural backgrounds, is the homeland of traditional Tibetan nomads. It is safe to say that the targeted groups and cities are representative for ethnic-oriented studies. We tackle the following questions: 1.) What are the determinants influencing migrants' settlement intentions in NWC? and 2.) How do migrants' ethnic identities influence their settlement intentions in different cultural contexts in different cities? The research presented here not only provides signals for future trends of population mobility but it also gives strong evidence to policy-makers and city managers as they formulate urban plans for future socioeconomic development and, more precisely, in their aim to better accommodate incoming migrants in this region.

2. To stay or to go? framing the settlement intentions in NWC

Both international and internal migration can be seen as human movement between geographical locations which is determined by a multitude of factors (*Mangalam, 2015*). In general, economic factors are among the most conspicuous in relation to migration behaviours. From the perspective of Neoclassical Economics (NE), the impetus for migration comes from a cost-benefit calculation, on the part of individuals, between destination and place of origin (*Hagen-Zanker, 2008*). Specifically, migration decision making is based on the calculation of “the material costs of travelling, the costs of maintenance while moving and looking for work, the effort involved in learning a new language and culture, the difficulty experienced in adapting to a new labour market, and the psychological costs of cutting old ties and forging new ones” (*Massey et al., 1993*, p. 434). Under this assumption, migrants seek higher wages and better employment opportunities. The whole migration process is regarded as an investment of individuals' human capital for the purpose of maximising their own utility (*Bauer & Zimmermann, 1999*). The theory of NE therefore assumes that maximising one's utility will promote migrants' settlement at their targeted destinations (*Constant & Massey, 2002*).

In a strict NE paradigm, migration decision-making is arbitrarily based on the rational choice of individual migrants. NE fails, however, to explain why, despite migrants earning a higher wage and successfully managing their employment, a large proportion of them still return home after years of working in the host society (c.f. *Dustmann, 1996*). The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) comes as a more nuanced approach to “shift the focus of migration theory from individual independence (optimisation against nature) to mutual interdependence (optimisation against one another)” because “migration decisions are often made jointly by the migrants and by some groups of non-migrants” (*Stark & Bloom, 1985*, pp. 174–175). In fact, migration is not exclusively maximisation of

the individual's utility but also includes minimisation of household risks in response to a failed market at home (*De Haas, 2010*). The NELM treats migration as merely a temporary action because migration, in this scheme, is regarded as a household livelihood strategy; the allocation of family members highlights the different ways to avoid risk as well as spread risk. Moreover, the migrants are seen as “target earners only seek short-term access to paid labour”. Logically, once migrants have earned enough money, they prefer to return to their place of origin (*Constant & Massey, 2002*, p. 11; *De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015*).

Although economic approaches are largely able to explain the impetus for migration, sociological approaches show more potential for explaining the continuation of migration. From the social network perspective, migrant networks are regarded as the paramount form of capital; these can provide access to information and resources and hence influence migrants' decision to stay or leave (*Reynolds, 2010*). When migrants move to the city, they tend to establish and expand their networks in order to generate social capital (*Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008*). To clarify the concept “social capital”, we can interpret it as group-based resources and information embedded in and generated by migrants' social networks when they arrive at destinations (*Lancee, 2012*). On the one hand, the mere forming of networks and their extensions suggests the capacity to consistently decrease migration costs by creating a social support system in the host society (*Massey & España, 1987*). On the other hand, the social structures created by migrants tend to encourage migratory behaviour (*Massey, 1990*). This process is known as cumulative causation, which leads to the spatial aggregation of the population (*Massey et al., 1993*). One result of cumulative causation is the socio-spatial aggregation of the population, in other words, the formation of communities.

As in social network theory, NELM also contends that building networks is the most important aspect of migration. The assumption of NELM is that the whole family is an enveloped unit and gives emphasis to the influence among family members. Whilst family is no longer a geographically enveloped unit; instead, the family members are open and linked with outsiders through the complex social networks (*Ryan, 2011*). Whereas social network theory takes a broader view and sees migratory behaviour as facilitated and guided by migrant networks. The networks are characterised by “sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin” (*Massey et al., 1993*, p. 448). These complicated social networks can be seen as resources that may positively or negatively influence migrants' settlement intentions. The main argument for making distinctions among Han, Muslim and Tibetan in the current research is because ethnic identity can be seen as a type of special social capital which is only achieved through one's own ethnic membership. In other words, ethnic identity reveals the embodiment of social capital through migrants' cultural backgrounds. In fact, both social capital and ethnic identity highlight the importance of networks. Migrants' ethnic identity offers them easy and reliable access to information and resources through the ethnic ties and networks, and in so doing, contributes to the formation of different ethnic communities (*Li, 2004*).

Ethnic identity not only relates to ethnic members, groups and communities; it also links to the cultural context of the receiving society (*Rosenthal & Feldman, 1992*). Some research finds that migrants' ethnic identity can be salient in one cultural context while being less pronounced in another (*Ethier & Deaux, 1994*; *Philip, 2007*). In fact, the settlement intentions of migrants are influenced by their cultural integration in the host society (*De Haas & Fokkema, 2011*), indicating that the interactions between ethnic identity and cultural contexts of the destinations may either

promote or discourage migrants' movement. DaVanzo (1981) proposes the location-specific capital to put forward the idea that the human capital, social capital and cultural capital that the migrants bear may not be easily transferred from one place to another. This is because the "location-specific capital ties persons to particular places, referencing goods which are not available everywhere, assuring that utility would be lost or diminished if the person were to migrate to another place" (Haug, 2008, p. 58). In other words, the cultural resources that migrants have absorbed from their ethnic identities can be seen as the location-specific capital in one cultural context while may be partly or completely lost in another. Thus, the decision to move to a certain location can be largely based on the preference of the cultural context of that location. Such preference, according to De Vroome and Van Tubergen (2014), is likely to exert the impact on migrants' settlement intentions.

3. Data source and research settings

The data sources for this article are derived from a joint project survey of quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews conducted in three cities in Gansu Province, NWC, from August to November, 2013. A total of 2500 questionnaires were prepared for distribution. Prior to the official fieldwork, we carried out a pilot study in order to localise our questionnaires (translation into Tibetan, Linxia and Dongxiang dialects and adjusting the questions). After exchanging ideas with key informants, including workers specialised in the floating population (*liu dong zhuan gan*) and family plan (*ji sheng zhuan gan*) in street level administrations, we narrowed our selection to 13 street level administrations. We chose these regions for two reasons. Firstly, they are all located in peri-urban areas or so-called "villages-in-the-city" (*Chengzhongcun*) in which the migrants are densely congregated due to high accessibility and low cost (key informants). Secondly, the low-rent independent housing in peri-urban areas offers more flexibility and relative privacy for migrants' family members (Fan, 2011).

Appendix 1 summarises the selection process and number of questionnaires distributed in each street. We have only targeted those who neither have an urban Hukou nor are registered in their place of destination. It would have been unrealistic to approach all of the interviewees in these street level administrations because migrants may live in one place and work in another. We therefore approached interviewees through two means. During the day time, and with the help of three groups of trained interviewers, we applied a random selection method and targeted migrants who work across the spectrum of every street-level administration. During the evenings, our interviewers visited migrants in their dwellings with the assistant of the special workers for floating population. These special workers are familiar with the basic conditions of local migrants and have gained their trust. Since they must register migrants every month, they are obligated to offer help to new arrivals. More importantly, the workers who are responsible for handling the cases of minority migrants usually have minority backgrounds. With these circumstances of familiarity, we overcame language and trust issues. After excluding 582 questionnaires due to discrepancies and incomprehensible answers (we set up the cross check questions in the questionnaires to guarantee the reliability of the answers), our data set comprised 1918 cases for analysis.

We conducted multinomial regression analyses using our 1918 cases. In-depth interviews and participant observations were also carried out to complement and enrich the results of quantitative data because the results of regression can sometimes be mechanical, inflexible and not entirely plausible with regard to explanations of dynamic social facts. We used the snowballing technique to select 39 interviewees: 5 Han and 5 Hui migrants in Lanzhou; 6

Han, 7 Hui, and 2 Dongxiang migrants in Linxia; and 5 Han, 5 Hui and 4 Tibetan migrants in Gannan. These samples are also included in the regression analysis for the purpose of data consistency. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and conversational. We focused on questions about migration-related issues, including migration history, migration decision-making and inquired into how migrants' ethnic identities and the cultural contexts of the cities influence their decision-making.

3.1. Dependent variable

In general, migrants' settlement intentions can be considered as a dual structure issue: to stay permanently or temporarily. Owing to the focus of researchers, different questions were used to obtain structured information about migrants' settlement intentions. For instance, Yue et al. (2010) concentrate on migrants' job type and categorise settlement intentions into three groups: migrants who plan to return for farm work, those for non-farm work, and settlers. In Fan's work (2011), settlement intentions are considered to be time-sequenced and observed using five categories: leave anytime, leave after 1–2 years, leave after 3–4 years, stay permanently, and undecided. To stress the importance of household strategies, Yang (2000) illustrates settlement intentions using three options: migrate as an individual, family migration, and no migration. In order to demonstrate the settlement intentions of migrants, we follow the methodology of Zhu (2007) and have developed four strategies for our questionnaire, namely, staying in the current city (stay), going back to the hometown afterwards (return), moving to another city (transfer hub), and undecided. We apply this strategy for two reasons. Firstly, the results of our pilot study showed that many interviewees were undecided about their future. Secondly, most surveys in the literature have been conducted in first-tier cities in terms of social and economic development, e.g., Beijing, Shenzhen or Guangzhou. In the aforementioned cases, host cities are likely to be the final destinations for migrants. However, in this article we assume that a certain number of migrants will consider their host cities merely as transfer hubs, and may move to the place with higher social and economic opportunities.

3.2. Independent variables

In accordance with the discussion of our framework, we group the determinants of settlement intentions into five categories in Table 1.

The first group, **Human Capital**, includes four variables: age, gender, educational attainment, and language proficiency. Existing literature on settlement intentions has already confirmed the importance of a series of human capital factors. For instance, Zhu and Chen (2010) argue that higher educated, female and younger migrants are more likely to settle down. As an alternative to the age factor, the generation factor (the "pre-80s" <=35 and "post-80s" >35) is highly recommended in studies of migration in the Chinese context (Liu, Li, & Breitung, 2012).

The second group, **Migration Characteristics**, includes length of migration, motivations for migration and household strategies. Migrants move to the city for a variety of reasons. Studies indicate that migration motivation is always decisive in migrants' settlement intentions (Van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009). Household circumstances of migrants are deemed to influence their opportunities as well as their risk behaviour (Zhu, 2007), i.e. household strategies are likely to impact on how migrants handle the uncertainties of an unfamiliar environment (Creese, Dyck, & McLaren, 2008).

The third group, migrant **Employment** conditions, is composed of incomes, job types, contract types, and job training. The

Table 1
Profile of independent variables and their definitions.

Independent variables	Definitions
Human Capital	
X ₁ Age	1-<=35, 0->35
X ₂ Gender	1-Female, 0-Male
X ₃ Education Attainment	1-High school or above, 0-Junior high school or below
X ₄ Language Proficiency	1-sufficient, 0-insufficient
Migration Characteristics	
X ₅ The length of migration	1->2 years, 0-<=2 years
X ₆ Motivations for migration	1-Economy/family-promoted, 2-Skill driven, 3-Others
X ₇ Household strategies	1-Single (unmarried), 2-Split (family members are not living together), 3-Family (family members are living together)
Employment	
X ₈ Incomes	1->2000, 0-<=2000 (Units: Yuan/month)
X ₉ Job types	1-Retail 2-Service 3-Professional
X ₁₀ Contract types	1-Long (1 year or more), 2-Short (less than 1 year), 3-No contract, 4-Self-employed
X ₁₁ Job training	1-yes, 0-no
Networks	
X ₁₂ Connections in destinations	The numbers of friends and relatives contacted frequently in destinations
X ₁₃ Neighbourhood relationships	The variables are measured through 5-point Likert scales. From 1 to 5: 5 is the highest, 1 is the lowest
Local Factors	
X ₁₄ Cities	1-Lanzhou, 2-Linkia, 3-Gannan
X ₁₅ Ethnic identity	1-Han, 2-Tibetan, 3-Muslim

employment mentioned in this article mostly refers to the “Three-D” jobs – dirty, dangerous and demeaning – which require non- or low-skilled labour; these jobs are not preferred by locals. “Retail” includes myriad types of street peddlers, like self-employed shops, food and clothing stands, where work is messy and uncomfortable and, as such, fits the “Three-D” category; “Service” indicates low-skilled occupations in the service sector, e.g., waiter, housekeeper and nursing-aid; “Professional” denotes all kinds of self-taught repairmen without qualifications, apprentices on construction sites, among others.

The fourth group is migrant **Networks**. Rural migrants, who barely have access to public services because of the institutional setting (the Hukou system), tend to concentrate in informal settlements, such as urbanising villages, in order to access social networks upon arrival in the city (Hao, Geertman, Hooimeijer, & Sliuzas, 2013). Thus, the neighbourhood relationships developed in these informal settlements may affect their intention to settle (Du & Li, 2010). There are six variables that we use to denote neighbourhood relationships, namely *friendliness*, *help given*, *help received*, *trust*, *communication frequency*, and *degree of familiarity*. However, we find multicollinearity between these six variables after a Pearson Correlation Test (Appendix 2). In response, we perform a factor analysis to reduce the six variables to a single variable representing migrants' neighbourhood relationships (Appendix 3).

The fifth group, **Local Factors**, consists of ethnic identity and city variables. The major Muslim groups in our final study sample include Hui and Dongxiang. We have, however, placed Hui and Dongxiang into one group because they share the same religion, geographical location and history, and have similar cultural backgrounds. They even identified themselves as the same ethnic group before the establishment of new China in 1949.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

As indicated in Table 2, the chi-square test shows that there is significant difference between different ethnic groups in terms of the settlement intentions. When we compare our findings with similar surveys conducted elsewhere in China (Fan, 2011; Hu, Xu, & Chen, 2011; Zhu, 2007), the proportion of respondents in our study who have chosen to stay is relatively high (40.1%). Considering the limited resources and relatively unproductive land in NWC, fewer migrants (25.8%) in our survey plan to return. We suggest, therefore, that the group “undecided,” which in our survey accounts for 18.6% of respondents, should not be ignored. “Undecided” might indicate that some migrants have vague attitudes and are more likely to be influenced by others' opinions (Lundberg & Payne, 2014).

Of the respondents, 15.5% assume the current city to be a springboard to a “better” destination. The reasons for regarding the current city as a transfer hub vary widely. Some assert that, once they have become more skilled, they will travel to a more developed place: “We are practicing skills; you know if you can survive here, then you may survive in a better place, and otherwise return” (male, Hui, 21, Linkia). Others plan to leave for better circumstances as soon as they assume they can adapt to city life: “Of course I want to go to Lanzhou ... first I want to get a feel for city life in Linkia” (male, Hui, 30+, Linkia). For some of the ethnic groups, the purpose of moving from rural to urban areas is because they consider the religion in the hometown as constraining them in modern life. However, when they move to the city and locate in an area where people of the same origin are concentrated, they are still confronted with a strong religious atmosphere. Longing for a more secular society makes them more likely to move again. For instance, “You

Table 2

The distribution of interviewees in terms of the cities, the ethnic groups and settlement intentions.

Settlement intentions	Lanzhou		Linxia		Gannan		
	Han	Muslim	Han	Muslim	Han	Muslim	Tibetan
Stay	44.1%	38.1%	41.9%	39.4%	33.0%	38.3%	45.5%
Return	29.7%	31.3%	25.7%	23.2%	18.7%	26.1%	18.8%
Transfer Hub	11.5%	9.7%	15.9%	10.9%	35.4%	23.5%	17.9%
Undecided	14.7%	20.9%	16.5%	26.5%	12.9%	12.1%	17.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Obs	390	339	339	414	209	115	112
χ^2	6.434*		12.931***		16.061***		

Note: *P < 0.1 and ***P < 0.01 in 2-tailed tests.

do not drink or smoke in front of them" (male, Dongxiang, 30±, Linxia); and "You would be criticised if you did not fast during Ramadan" (female, Hui, 22, Lanzhou). The motivation to reside in a secular city is also found in very different contexts elsewhere in the world (Iceland: Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; the Netherlands: Thissen, Fortuijn, Strijker, & Haartsen, 2010).

There is little difference between Han and Muslim migrants in Lanzhou and Linxia except for a lower percentage of Han migrants (14.7%) who are undecided, compared to Muslim migrants (20.9%). When we consider that Han migrants are among the least likely, percentage-wise, to choose "Undecided" in all the cities in our study, we may deduce that Han migrants are more explicit and consistent in their objectives. Han migrants, who consider the current city as a transfer hub, constitute the highest proportion in that category for all three cities. This finding suggests that Han migrants, more than all others, may perceive these cities as socially, economically and culturally backward, which then fosters higher mobility.

4.2. Modelling

A multinomial logistic regression analysis was conducted to model migrants' settlement intentions. We define "stay" as the reference group against the other three groups. We first estimate models using ethnic identity and city variables while controlling for other variables. Following on in a second estimation, we measure the interaction effects of ethnic identity and city variables while excluding ethnic identity and city variables to avoid multicollinearity. Results are given in Table 3. We only present the first estimation and the interaction effects of ethnic identity and city variables of the second estimation because the two estimations illustrate the same results in terms of the signs and the significant levels of the coefficients of the other variables. We next discuss the results of first estimation.

In the human capital group, we find age and language proficiency to be significant variables. In model A, the "pre-80s" tend to return home. It may be that the older generation more strongly considers migration as a way to generate income; furthermore, they might be more attached to their hometown than the younger generation. It is reasonable to assert that the "post-80s" have stronger intentions to stay in the cities, because the "post-80s" are more interested in non-farm jobs and city life so that they tend to establish more networks at their destination, which, encourage and foster their settlement in return (Liu et al., 2012; Yue et al., 2010). Model C shows how the attainment of sufficient language ability reduces the probability of "undecided." Language proficiency is always positively associated with migrants' length of stay at the destination, which is mainly because migrants obtain benefits from their settlement arrangements through effective communication (Dustmann, 1999). In addition, social exclusion and cultural

integration, which influence migrants' settling, are always related to migrants' language proficiency (Musgrave & Bradshaw 2014).

Three variables in the migration characteristics category: length of migration, motivations for migration and household strategies, are significant in the different models. Surprisingly, a longer migration experience does not reduce the probability of "undecided" in model C. In general, we assume that, compared to returning migrants, the length of stay in the destination city should be positively associated with the probability of staying (Snel, Faber, & Engbersen, 2015). Nevertheless, in our interviews we notice that some respondents do have clear targets when they are at the initial stage of migration, but as they spend more time at their destinations, the migration decision becomes difficult to make. We find this especially to be the case for some minorities. For instance, "I never thought that I could stay such a long time in the beginning, because I knew nothing except farming; I just wanted to make some money and go back" (Hui, male, 40+, Linxia). The relationship between motivations for migration and settlement intentions is revealed in model C. When we control for the other variables, migrants who came for economic reasons or are skill-driven (either to learn or to practice skills) are regarded as having a greater probability of staying rather than being undecided.

If we keep the other variables constant, single migrants tend to stay rather than return, compared to those who move with all of their family members. One of our single interviewees remarked: "The 'family' will not starve because I just need to feed myself well" (Han, M, 20+, Lanzhou). Single migrants seem to be less attached in regard to responsibility to family members. Family migration entails managing an array of practical problems, such as children's education, higher living costs, losing land in the hometown, etc., which we observe in our study to decrease the probability of staying. To some extent, family may even be a burden if the migrants themselves have few qualifications and thus appear vulnerable in the labour market, let alone the fact that employment opportunities in the labour market in NWC cities are relatively low. We find no significance between different household strategies (split and family) in the three models. It seems that different household strategies do not necessarily influence migrants' settlement intentions (cf. Fan, 2008, 2011).

Almost all the variables in employment are significantly associated with settlement intentions. In model A, migrants who are involved in retail and service jobs are positively associated with migrants who want to stay rather than return. We suggest that this is due to the difficulty in engaging in retail or service-related jobs in the NWC countryside, which is still heavily dependent on the primary sector. In model B, those who earn an income of over 2000 Yuan tend to stay rather than transfer to another city. We may consider this as risk aversion behaviour, since settling into another city leads to new uncertainties. Receiving job training, however, notably increases migrants' settling intentions in all three models.

Table 3
Regression results of the multinomial logistic regression.

Independent variables	Model A return		Model B transfer Hub		Model C undecided	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Human Capital						
X ₁ Age (Ref: Older generation >35)						
Young generation ≤ 35	−0.273**	0.129	0.118	0.158	−0.133	0.143
X ₂ Gender (Ref: Male)						
Female	0.093	0.123	0.167	0.145	0.180	0.137
X ₃ Education attainment (Ref: Junior high or below)						
High school or above	0.027	0.140	−0.009	0.166	−0.219	0.163
X ₄ Language Proficiency (Ref: insufficient)						
sufficient	0.044	0.133	−0.116	0.153	−0.307**	0.145
Migration Characteristics						
X ₅ Length of Migration (Ref: <=2 years)						
>2 Years	0.043	0.130	0.127	0.154	0.307**	0.146
X ₆ Motivations for Migration (Ref: Others)						
Economically motivated	−0.133	0.253	−0.044	0.321	−0.725***	0.252
Skill-driven	−0.298	0.265	0.120	0.331	−0.454*	0.262
X ₇ Household strategies (Ref: Family)						
Single	−0.802***	0.189	0.307	0.219	−0.201	0.204
Split	−0.147	0.154	−0.019	0.199	−0.179	0.175
Employment						
X ₈ Incomes (Ref: <=2000 Yuan/month)						
>2000 Yuan/month	−0.104	0.134	−0.286*	0.158	0.062	0.148
X ₉ Job Types (Ref: Professional)						
Retail	−0.652***	0.203	−0.260	0.242	−0.039	0.223
Service	−0.430***	0.148	0.060	0.178	−0.126	0.170
X ₁₀ Contract types (Ref: Self-employed)						
Long (More than one year)	−0.690***	0.222	−0.733***	0.261	−0.537**	0.245
Short (Less than one year)	−0.707***	0.229	−0.592**	0.265	−0.295	0.249
No contract	−0.151	0.220	−0.362	0.256	0.100	0.239
X ₁₁ Job training (Ref: No)						
Yes	−0.668***	0.203	−0.496**	0.252	−1.508***	0.299
Networks						
X ₁₂ Connections in destinations	−0.078***	0.029	0.045	0.031	−0.017	0.031
X ₁₃ Neighbourhood relationships	−0.282***	0.063	−0.099	0.075	−0.205***	0.071
Local factors						
X ₁₄ Cities (Ref: Gannan)						
Lanzhou	0.403**	0.201	−1.192***	0.215	0.296	0.234
Linxia	0.125	0.193	−0.968***	0.196	0.351	0.220
X ₁₅ Ethnic identities (Ref: Muslim)						
Han	−0.027	0.130	0.257*	0.157	−0.337**	0.145
Tibetan	−0.120	0.328	−0.697**	0.332	−0.032	0.348
Model -2 log-likelihood			4739.611			
χ ²			309.265			
X ₁₄ ×X ₁₅ Cities * Ethnic identities (Ref: Lanzhou Muslim)						
Lanzhou Han	−0.125	0.188	0.024	0.263	−0.448**	0.222
Linxia Han	−0.278	0.204	0.361	0.264	−0.382*	0.232
Linxia Muslim	−0.398**	0.198	0.066	0.267	0.008	0.208
Gannan Han	−0.524**	0.253	1.397***	0.271	−0.497*	0.284
Gannan Muslim	−0.400	0.298	0.877***	0.338	−0.676*	0.364
Gannan Tibetan	−0.580**	0.303	0.358	0.337	−0.386	0.314
Model -2 log-likelihood			4735.050			
χ ²			313.826			
Number of the cases			1918			

Note: *P < 0.1, **P < 0.05, and ***P < 0.01 in 2-tailed tests.

As mentioned above, migrants in East China generally surpass the skill levels of migrants in NWC, who are generally low-skilled or even unskilled labourers. Therefore, it is extremely important for NWC migrants to learn practical skills. In the long run, job training is expected to increase their skills and thus increase their opportunities for employment (Lechner, Miquel, & Wunsch, 2011).

Interestingly, in all three models having a labour contract is positively related to migrants' choice to stay, compared with the self-employed. This is because having stable work is essential to migrants' intention to stay (Hu et al., 2011). Zhu and Chen's (2010)

investigation in Fujian also confirms that the length of job contract is positively related to intention to stay. However, other literature argues the opposite that the self-employed are inclined to stay because they have invested more and are more involved in the urban socioeconomic environment (Cao et al., 2015). It is worth mentioning that the majority of the self-employed in our survey cities are unstable peddlers with little investment. They are vulnerable and their mobility is therefore easily activated by this unstable position.

Neighbourhoods are the physical forms and vessels of human

connections. Model A indicates that neighbourhood relationships are negatively related to the probability of return. Although nowadays there are more ways for migrants to access the job market, kinship, and friendship networks are still considered as the major means in Chinese society (Chang, Wen, & Wang, 2011). Furthermore, these networks can be widespread and deeply rooted within migrant neighbourhoods, especially in NWC, where the major job market for low- or unskilled migrants is the private sector, so personal networks are instrumental (Chua, 2011). Model C reveals that better neighbourhood relationships decrease the probability of being undecided. We may infer that good salient neighbourhood relationships increase the likelihood of mutual benefits between migrants and their neighbours, which could in turn influence the migrants' decision making if they happen to be undecided.

When we examine the city variable in model A, we observe that migrants living in Lanzhou are more likely to return, compared to those in Gannan. As mentioned earlier, the interviewees in our sample were in general low- or unskilled workers who usually lack competitiveness. They may be vulnerable and ill-equipped in terms of competing with others for employment in the socioeconomically more developed context of Lanzhou. Model B illustrates that Gannan is more likely to be considered as a transfer hub compared to Lanzhou and Linxia. We can offer two major potential reasons contributing to migrants' tendencies to move. One is that the underdeveloped labour market cannot provide stable job positions. Interviewees would commonly complain that *"Although there is less competition here, every job I have done was not last long"* (Hui, male, 30+, Gannan). And *"There are not many jobs; you finish what in your hand then you are likely to move or lay off"* (Han, male, 27, Gannan). The second reason derives from the harsh natural environment and living conditions in the Tibetan plateau. The comments are provided as follows, *"This is not a good place for old people; young people work, earn, and leave if they are not locals"* (Hui, male, 45, Gannan); *"It is easy money here but a really harsh environment"* (Han, male, 30+, Gannan).

In so far as ethnic identity variables are concerned, Han migrants are more inclined to consider the current city as a transfer hub and Tibetans are more likely to stay, compared to Muslims in model B. There are several reasons why Han migrants tend to have higher mobility than Muslim migrants. First and foremost, Han migrants are less bounded by their ethnic identity and hence freer to choose their destinations. They usually have higher adaptability to the socio-cultural context as long as the local environment is not exclusive. This attitude is expressed by Han migrants: *"Any place as long as I can make money"* (Han, male, 30+, Gannan); *"I am not jiangjiu [picky] ... I do business with minorities, I eat halal food"* (Han, male, 40±, Linxia). Muslim migrants in general are apparently more constrained by ethnic identity which lessens their probability of transferring to another city. Ethnic issues, such as a Muslim community, mosques, and diets, are taken into consideration when choosing destinations. For instance, *"When I arrived I first looked for a Muslim community ..."* (Hui, male, 40±, Lanzhou); *"I prefer living with minorities ..."* (Dongxiang, female, 30±, Linxia); *"I cannot go to a place without halal food"* (Hui, male, 45, Gannan).

The probability for Tibetan migrants to transfer to another city is even lower than that of Muslim migrants. Two Tibetan respondents commented: *"We cannot survive just like our ancestors, there is not much land left"* (Tibetan, male, 28, Gannan); *"I do not speak good Chinese ... It is not easy for us to get a job outside Tibetan regions"* (Tibetan, female, 40±, Gannan). The cultural heterogeneity, e.g., language and dietary habits, results in low adaptation to the

locations outside of Tibetan regions. Tibetan migrants, generally lack access to modern industrial society, which is predominantly run by non-Tibetans. It is difficult for Tibetans to return, since the main agricultural sector at home is animal husbandry which cannot absorb large numbers of workers. The only choice remaining for them is to stay in cities within the Tibetan region. Model C indicates that Han migrants are the least undecided of all. As Drinkwater and Garapich (2013) argue, the ones who are undecided are likely to be the "less qualified" migrants; whereas Han migrants in our study have the widest scope of working skills.

The results of the interaction terms of ethnic identity and city variables in the second estimation largely support the findings above and consistent with what we have found during the field-work. In model A, Muslim migrants are more likely to stay in Linxia while Tibetan migrants are more in favour of Gannan. Many Muslim and Tibetan migrants claimed that they prefer to stay in "their own place" because they cannot get used to the lives outside Muslim or Tibetan cultural contexts. Although we do find interviewees who are longing for secular lives, for most minority migrants, their choices of settlement locations are always grounded in issues concerning ethnic identity and religion, e.g. food taboos, language, fasting, and visits to temple. In other words, migrants tend to settle down in the place where they may encounter less culture-relevant barriers requiring lower demands for cultural adaptation. In this sense, the location-specific capital of the minority migrants is seen as a type of social capital embedded in the ethnic identity and can be only accessed within the specific cultural context.

It is worth mentioning that Han migrants also tend to stay in Gannan. We attribute this finding mainly to the state-orchestrated Han migration in the 1980s to support the development of underdeveloped areas which results Han controlling the Tibetan regions in terms of city economies (Fischer, 2011). In fact, there are only limited Tibetan migrants and Han people take up most of the jobs in urban areas in Tibetan regions (Fischer, 2008). Moreover, Han migrants generally have higher competitiveness than Tibetans in the job market, so it is easier for Han migrants to stay in Gannan if they are willing to. Model B demonstrates that compared to the stay group, the Han and Muslim migrants who are currently in Gannan may have a higher probability of moving to other cities. It seems that Gannan is less familiar to non-Tibetan migrants, and therefore more difficult to integrate into in terms of cultural context. For instance, *"I am not trying to integrate ... you practice your skills and earn some money, then you go"* (Han, male, 30+, Gannan). The variables in model C also echo the point that Han migrants in general are less likely to be undecided. They are more determined in terms of migration plans and targets.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In this article we have selected three cities in Gansu province in a case study analysis of the determinants of multi-ethnic migration in Northwest China (NWC). In contrast to previous studies, not only have we examined migrants' intentions to stay or return home but we have also discussed the scenario of the current city as a transfer hub and accounted for migrants who are "undecided." In the regression analysis we establish "stay" as the baseline. We find that those who are older, who have family members, are engaged in "low or unskilled" jobs, are self-employed, or who have not had job training, are likely to return. Migrants having more friends and relatives and better neighbourhood relationships decrease probability of return. Those who have a lower income; are self-employed and not trained are more likely to consider the current city as a

transfer hub. The probability of being undecided is positively related to the migrants with weak language skills and who have been at their destinations for a longer period, and negatively related to migrants who are motivated by economic and skill reasons and have a long-term contract, job training, and good relations with neighbours. After having considered theoretical approaches to migration behaviour, we contend that the determinants of multi-ethnic migration are more in line with NELM and network theory, which emphasise migrants' interdependence and interaction with their surroundings, e.g., family, friends, relatives, and neighbours, rather than NE, which highlights individual motivations in the economic context. Our research leads us to the conclusion that social capital plays a more significant role than human capital in the migration process in NWC.

It is also noteworthy that having a work contract significantly could increase migrants' intentions of staying in all models. Although the current labour contract law aiming to protect the legal rights of migrants has been in force since 2008 (*Standing Committee of NPC, 2007*), it is still difficult for migrants in NWC to obtain their legal labour rights, given that most of the contracts are only in oral and not written form. The bond between employers and migrants is built primarily on interpersonal trust rather than a written contract, especially if the work comes through introductions by friends and relatives (*Li, 2006*). Formal written contracts are even fewer among minority migrants, since their jobs are mainly initiated by friends and relatives (*Jinkner, 2015*). Another finding in our study is that job training also significantly increases the probability of staying in the destination. Job training not only increases wages and skills but also decreases the threat of unemployment in the long-run (*Lechner et al., 2011*). In fact, job training is understood to be an investment for the future for both individuals and the receiving society (*Knight, Song, & Huaibin, 1999*). Compared to well-developed regions, migrants in NWC are more often low-skilled or even unskilled labourers, with relatively low educational attainment. For migrants, it is therefore critical that they learn practical skills if indeed they have a longer settlement plan. For local authorities, it may be attractive to invest in vocational schools and to regulate the labour market and contracts for migrants.

As expected, ethnic identity and the cultural context of the city are also important determinants for migrants' settlement intentions. Migrants in Lanzhou are more likely to return, compared to those in Gannan. Migrants in Lanzhou and Linxia are less likely to move to another city. However, this sounds quite controversial

because on the one hand, it would be easier for migrants to survive in Gannan than Lanzhou due to weaker competition and given the low-quality requirements for the labour force. On the other hand, a Tibetan context seems to be the least favourable in terms of cultural integration, compared to migrants in the Han and Muslim context. Han migrants are more likely to transfer to another city while Tibetan migrants in the study are less likely to move, and Muslim migrants fall somewhere in between these two groups. This finding may be because Han migrants generally resort to a variety of methods when applying for jobs, while minorities still rely heavily on traditional ways, that is, personal ties. Both Muslim and Tibetan migrants tend to stay in cities with higher cultural homogeneity due to these cities' lower demands to integrate. This could be one of the main reasons why minorities have lower mobility. In our study, Han migrants appear to be less undecided and more confident and determined when facing the challenges and uncertainties of a new environment. So in a more general sense, Han migrants have higher mobility because they are more flexible when choosing their settlement destinations.

Overall, our findings indicate that migrants' settlement intentions can largely be based on the contradictory assessment and interactions of their ethnic identity and the socio-cultural contexts in which they move. This is especially true for those minorities who are still at disadvantage positions when seeking opportunities in the cities. According to *Li, Jowett, Findlay, and Skeldon (1995)*, ethnic identity is socially constructed and impacts individuals' opportunities at their destinations. We would therefore conclude that creating equal and more inclusive socio-cultural contexts may promote minority migrants' mobility, and in so doing, provide them with better chances to secure their livelihoods through migration.

The conclusions of the article are constrained by the nature of the cross-sectional data and the possibilities of controlling for the unobserved heterogeneity is limited. Besides, the richness and complexity of ethnic identity should be further explored through qualitative research. Future studies may also focus on whether and how the settlement intentions of migrants from different ethnic groups could be influenced by their extended family in the place of origin.

Appendix 1. The distribution of questionnaires in three cities

Provincial level	City level	District level	Street level (numbers of questionnaires)
Gansu Province	Lanzhou	Chengguan District	Yannan Street (250)
			Yanbei Street (250)
		Qilihe District	Xiyuan Street (250)
			Xihu Street (250)
	Linxia	Linxia city	Chengjiao Zhen (250)
			Nanlong Zhen (250)
			Baohan Zhen (250)
			Zheqiao Zhen (250)
	Gannan	Hezuo city	Yihe'ang Street (100)
			Jianmuke'er Street (100)
			Dangzhou Street (100)
			Tongqin Street (100)
			Nawu Xiang (100)

Appendix 2. The results of the pearson correlation test between 6 variables of neighbourhood relations

Neighbourhood relations	Friendliness	Help given	Help received	Trust	Familiarity	Communication
Friendliness	1	0,665****	0,613****	0,616****	0,579****	0,570****
Help given	0,665****	1	0,795****	0,658****	0,639****	0,720****
Help received	0,613****	0,795****	1	0,682****	0,646****	0,709****
Trust	0,616****	0,658****	0,682****	1	0,674****	0,675****
Familiarity	0,579****	0,639****	0,646****	0,674****	1	0,744****
Communication	0,570****	0,720****	0,709****	0,675****	0,744****	1
Number of cases	1918					

****P < 0.001 in 2-tailed tests.

Appendix 3. The results of the factor analysis of 6 variables of neighbourhood relations

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings	
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance
1	4.333	72.218	72.218	4.333	72.218
2	0.487	8.112	80.330		
3	0.412	6.870	87.200		
4	0.338	5.626	92.826		
5	0.237	3.949	96.775		
6	0.194	3.225	100.000		

Only one component was extracted. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy: 0.899.

Approx. Chi-Square: 8247.056 and P < 0.001 in a Bartlett's Test.

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