

Stephen Morgan (Nottingham)

‘Child welfare and authoritarian social control: The state of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, China, 1980-2010s’

Economic reforms in China since the late 1970s have transformed the economy and the standard of living. The Chinese are richer, taller and better educated than they have ever been. Poverty has been vastly diminished from more than 80 percent in 1980 to less than one percent in 2020. Nutritional status has accordingly changed. The average height of Han Chinese children has increased 1-2 cm per decade, the rural-urban gap has narrowed by more than half, and in East China cities Chinese children have stature on par with well-nourished children in advanced economies. In fact, overweight and obesity is an issue among many urban children in the rich cities of East China. In West China, where the majority of the non-Han minorities live, average stature of both Han and non-Han children is lower. These regions are very much poorer. An empirical question is once we control for location have Han children benefit more than non-Han from economic reform. The picture is mixed. Over the past four decades of economic reform the average stature of many non-Han children has increased along with the Han. In some locations, minority children have even done better than Han children in same location, such as the Hui in Ningxia and the Bai in Yunnan. In other places, not so. This is surprising since in 2000 the Chinese government implemented a programme to raise the income and prosperity of the 12 West China provinces. Many of these areas are also politically fragile and they border various country in Central and South Asia. In Xinjiang the Uighur children since the mid-2000s have on average gone backward; their heights have declined in absolute terms and relative to Han children. What might explain this unusual change? The decline in stature follows the increasingly authoritarian crackdown against the Uighur and other Muslim minorities of West China after 2009. Using reports of school-based health examination data, the paper explores the trends in the stature of ethnic minority children in China since 1980s focused on Xinjiang and looks at the interaction between nutritional status and local level political policies.