

Educating a Frontier Capital: Schooling, Language, and Urban Modernity in Urumqi (Dihua), 1906–1949

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Abstract

Schooling was a key engine of Urumqi's transformation from a garrison town into a frontier provincial capital in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet its urban impact, and its entanglement with ethnicity and gender, has received little attention. This paper takes a different angle on Xinjiang's state-making by placing schools, curricula, and translation work at the center of Urumqi's urban history. It shows how institutional nodes, a Russian-Chinese-Uyghur language regime, and the gendered geography of women's education reshaped streets, neighborhoods, and public space. In doing so, it defines a form of "frontier modernity" that was uneven, multiethnic and education-led rather than purely state-designed.

Keywords

Urumqi, Xinjiang, multilingual education, frontier modernity

1. Introduction

Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, is often described as a remote frontier city. Yet it is also a place where modern education and local society met. Historians of Xinjiang have usually focused on high politics, rebellion, and diplomacy, while giving less attention to the city itself as an urban space shaped by schools [1]. Recent Chinese scholarship traces Urumqi's shift from "twin city" to multicenter metropolis, but education still appears mainly as background to economic or political change [2].

This paper takes the period from 1906, when new schools and language reforms began to take root, to 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established. This paper uses the name Urumqi rather than the official Republican name Dihua, to stress continuities with the contemporary city and to follow recent practice in Xinjiang studies [3]. This paper argues that schooling in Urumqi between 1906 and 1949 worked as a key driver of frontier modernity. It did so by creating new institutional nodes in the provincial capital, by reorganizing Russian, Chinese, and Uyghur language hierarchies, and by opening uneven, gendered routes into education and public life. The sections move from institutions, to language and curriculum, to the gendered and ethnic geography of women's schooling, and finally to the imprint of educational space on Urumqi's urban form.

2. City and Institutional Nodes: From Provincial Middle School to Xinjiang College (1924–1935)

Urumqi's educational institutions were assembled into a set of "nodes" between 1924 and 1935. These nodes linked knowledge, bureaucracy, ethnic groups, and road networks. They propelled a frontier provincial capital onto the path of a modern city.

Although a "Law and Politics School" was established in Urumqi as early as 1906, it quickly closed down and left little legacy for the city or for schools that followed. In 1924, the "Xinjiang Provincial Russian-Language Law and Politics Specialized School" was founded in Urumqi. It served the new administrative system and directly responded to the exchanges between northern Xinjiang and the Soviet Union. In 1930, the school was renamed the "Xinjiang Provincial Russian-Language Law and Politics College," and the curriculum shifted to a dual focus on law and politics as well as Russian language. Around 1935, the provincial-level middle school system expanded: the "Xinjiang Provincial Russian-Language Law and Politics College" was renamed "Xinjiang College," attached to the Provincial First Middle School, forming a tiered structure from middle school to college [4]. This evolutionary line transformed Urumqi's urban education from a single point to a network, organizing the city's school districts, government offices, and road system, ultimately achieving the modernization of urban education.

These nodes are more than just "schools." They are "landmarks" and "nodes" in the city's perception. Kevin Lynch calls "nodes" the focal points of human flow and meaning [5]. The Provincial First Middle School and Xinjiang College in Urumqi form such a pair of nodes. They bring students, teachers, translators, and clerks into the heart of the city. Roads, dormitories, playgrounds, and reading rooms extend the "schools" into the public spaces of the neighborhoods. These modern professions and facilities were something that Urumqi and its neighborhoods had never had before the schools opened.

Public opinion and travelers' observations have provided us with firsthand perspectives. When the Swedish Expedition entered Urumqi in 1933–1934, they documented the provincial capital's administrative order, military and political ceremonies, and the mixed old and new street scenes. Sven Anders Hedin pieced together a "capital landscape" where military, political, and educational functions coexisted [6]. These writings are not educational statistics, but they explain how educational nodes were "seen" by power and transportation. They illustrate how students and officials operated within the same urban area. They also explain how the demand for translation and Russian language services tied the curriculum to the provincial capital's modern external connections.

At the institutional level, the two-tiered structure of college and middle school provided a hub for curriculum and language diversion. Han Chinese, Hui (回, Muslims who speak Chinese), and Chan Hui (纏回, Muslims who speak Turkic languages) students were assigned to different classes and pathways to higher education based on their curriculum [2]. This is not simply a school history, but a technique of urban governance. Around 1935, Sheng Shicai implemented policies such as "ethnic quotas" and "admission for nomadic children," directly bringing non-Han youth into the provincial capital's classrooms [3]. This kind of mobilization was both educational and political. It embedded the link of "borderland youth, provincial capital classrooms, and dissemination to the homeland" into the urban rhythm of Urumqi. As a result, the modernization of Urumqi spread beyond Urumqi, which in turn accelerated the modernization of Urumqi itself.

If Lefebvre emphasizes the three elements of urban space: space of practice, space of concept, and space of representation, then the educational nodes of Urumqi correspond precisely to these three elements [7]. The schools and the neighborhood represent a practice; regulations and timetables represent a concept; and the daily lives of students and teachers represent a representation. De Vito's advocacy of the "micro-space" perspective also reminds us to treat the schools as a historical unit with variable scale [8]. Therefore, the "schools" become the methodological entry point for urban history, rather than an appendix to the history of education. Thus, Urumqi's "frontier modernity" is not instilled from top to bottom, but rather practiced day after day between a middle school and a college.

3. Language and Curriculum: The Russian-Chinese-Uyghur Division of Education and Translation

Language and curriculum are not neutral teaching tools, but rather institutional forces that produce modern urban spaces. In the first half of the 20th century, Urumqi developed an education-translation system with Russian, Chinese, and Uyghur as its three axes. This network connected schools, newspapers, printing presses,

and government translation offices, reshaping the radius of citizens' social interactions and literacy pathways. In other words, language diversification is a process of the continuous production and delineation of "urban social space" [9].

First, there was the Russian language axis. From the late 19th century onward, Russian gained prominence in trade, postal services, and judicial practices in northern Xinjiang. The Xinjiang local government established special classes, sent students abroad, and set up a specialized school in Urumqi, the provincial capital [10]. The "Xinjiang Provincial Russian-Language Law and Politics Specialized School," founded in 1924, trained translators and administrative officials based on Russian law and politics courses; in 1935, it expanded into the "Xinjiang College," becoming a hub for modern higher education in the province and driving demand for Russian-Chinese and Chinese-Russian translation from classrooms to archives throughout the city. Travelers and journalists documented the prevalence of Russian language and interpretation during this period, highlighting the high dependence of trade and administration on language intermediaries [11].

Second, there was the Chinese language axis. The textbook catalogs and school system guidelines of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China provided national curriculum standards (subjects such as history, geography, Chinese language, and arithmetic). Urumqi's middle school and specialized school aligned their examinations and textbook systems accordingly, making "national language education" an optional pathway for advancement for students of all ethnic groups in the provincial capital [12]. This set of standards defined the order of "where knowledge resides in the city": schools, bookstores, and government-run libraries formed a corridor for Chinese reading, writing, examinations, and advancing. Or, in other words, a channel for modern advancement.

Third, there was the Uyghur language axis. In the first half of the 1930s, Uyghur-language newspapers emerged in Urumqi, Ili, Tarbagatay, Kashgar, Aksu, and other places, and the readership expanded rapidly. In the mid-to-late 1930s, with the connection between Sheng Shicai's regime and the Soviet Union, the provincial publishing system absorbed and expanded Turkic-language printed materials. After the official recognition of "Uyghur" as a language-ethnic category in 1935, the public printing and literacy movement in Uyghur was accelerated [13]. These newspapers and new textbooks brought the streets and markets outside the classroom into "reading spaces," and newsstands, newspaper reading corners next to mosques, and night schools became new nodes of social material and spiritual modernization.

Translation truly wove these three axes together. Provincial government offices established translation departments, and laws, proclamations, and forms were presented in bilingual or trilingual formats; schools offered Russian-Chinese and Uyghur-Chinese translation courses; and translations of current events, popular science, and literature for Uyghur-speaking readers appeared in society [14]. Urumqi's modernization is thus not isolated in the three languages, but rather interconnected.

From an urban history perspective, the trilingual system is not one of isolation, but rather a "relational juxtaposition." Russian language schools and postal streets, Chinese bookstores and the examination system, and Uyghur night schools and mosque communities form a mutually permeating network. The nodes and paths within this network are precisely the "urban images" that people repeatedly traverse in their daily commutes to school, reading newspapers, and conducting business [5]. Therefore, using language and curriculum as entry points, it is shown that Urumqi's modernity is not a diffusion of a single center, but rather a synchronous collaboration of multilingual systems within the city.

4. Gender and Ethnicity: The Urban Geography of Women's Education

The education of women in modern Urumqi was not an abstract "story of progress," but rather a reflection of gender and ethnic geography etched into the urban landscape. Literacy courses in girls' schools, vocational classes for women, and religious schools brought women from diverse backgrounds out of their homes, enabling them to move through the city, a blend of Han Chinese administrative districts, Muslim communities, and Russian emigre commercial areas. These female-centered educational "micro-spaces" both propelled the city's modernization and continuously exposed gender and ethnic inequalities.

In the late 1910s, the first modern girls' schools appeared in Urumqi. In 1917, Urumqi established its first girls' school, the "Dihua County Girls' National School," with the aim of "enabling girls to receive modern education in order to cultivate new people for their families and society." As shown in Table 1, the school

curriculum includes seven subjects: “morality, Chinese language, arithmetic, handicrafts, drawing, gymnastics, and sewing,” with particular emphasis on physical training and home economics skills for female students [15]. Located near the county government office and the Confucian temple, the school was clearly embedded on the axis of Han Chinese government offices and Confucian spaces. Female students commuted daily between their homes and the school, bringing the traditionally “inner” female body into the “public space” of the city center. From the perspective of urban history, this was not merely a modernization of educational content, but also a gentle disruption of the old “men outside, women inside” spatial order by the women’s commuting route.

Table 1: Class timetable of the Dihua county girls’ national school

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8:00–9:00	Morality	Chinese language	Arithmetic	Morality	Chinese language	Arithmetic
9:00–10:00	Breakfast					
10:00–11:00	Chinese language	Chinese language	Chinese language	Arithmetic	Chinese language	Chinese language
11:00–12:00	Chinese language	Arithmetic	Chinese language	Chinese language	Arithmetic	Chinese language
12:00–13:00	Recess					
13:00–14:00	Sewing	Sewing	Sewing	Chinese language	Sewing	Sewing
14:00–15:00	Drawing	Gymnastics	Handicrafts	Gymnastics	Handicrafts	Gymnastics

Source: ref. [15]; table translated by the author.

By the 1930s, the Sheng Shicai regime incorporated women’s education into its “vocationalization” plan, attempting to integrate women into modern labor and the urban economy on a larger scale. In accordance with Xinjiang’s “Two-Phase Three-Year Plan” for developing vocational education, girls’ schools in Urumqi underwent a transformation from primary school to vocational education. In 1935, the “Provincial Girls’ Middle School” first established a “Vocational Class for Women at the Higher Primary Level,” presided over by the Communist Zhao Yunrong, attracting a group of “young women from enlightened Uyghur families” to learn sewing, embroidery, and weaving skills. In 1936, the “Dihua Women’s Vocational School” was established, and in the same year, a women’s vocational class was created at the Hui People North Mosque, enrolling forty female students [16]. These women’s vocational classes were mostly located at the intersection of Han commercial streets and mosque settlements, facilitating the movement of Han female workers while also attempting to attract Muslim women to a space defined as “modern labor” and “urban consumption.”

Meanwhile, provincial-level statistics show that although the number of educated women is still limited, they have already formed an identifiable group. *The Xinjiang Gazetteer* records in its section on “Number of Male and Female Students in Schools at All Levels” that by the 20th year of the Republic of China, there were over 2,000 female students in the province. Under the section on “Women’s Vocational Education,” it further states: “The Dihua Women’s College has attached vocational schools and junior high vocational classes; Yili (Ili) and Suilai (Manas) also have women’s vocational classes... According to statistics from the 31st year, there are currently over 820 enrolled women” [17]. From the perspective of urban history, these figures are not merely “indicators of progress” in educational history, but rather signify that an increasing number of women are moving daily between schools, mosques, women’s dormitories, and markets in the city, participating in the formation of “visible modernity” on the streets of Urumqi.

However, this process was highly uneven across genders and ethnic groups. With modernization, the traditional urban spatial structure of the Manchu-Han dual city was broken down, and old spaces were constantly reorganized, with new spaces gradually emerging, such as the space dominated by Russian capitalist colonial forces and the space dominated by Uyghurs and Hui Muslims [18]. Han girls’ schools were mostly concentrated in the administrative city and the new commercial streets, while Muslim women’s education often relied on mosques, religious groups, or affiliated vocational classes. This spatial distribution meant that women of different ethnic groups took different routes to school: Han female students appeared more frequently between government offices, banks, and new shops; Uyghur and Hui women traveled between mosques, markets, and vocational classrooms. Modern education here did not erase the differences, but rather reinforced the “Han-centered—Muslim-peripheral” urban structure through spatial zoning.

Looking back from Lefebvre’s perspective of “spatial practice,” these girls’ schools and vocational classes for women represent a series of new “practice nodes” [7]. They intertwine the state’s educational planning, the power of local officials, Sheng Shicai and his Soviet advisors’ vocational education vision, and the compromises and resistance within families regarding girls leaving home. De Vito’s concept of “multiple

social practices spanning single but interconnected locations” manifests here as the educational choices of multi-ethnic families, teacher recruitment networks, and the daily order of urban neighborhoods [8]. For middle-class Han Chinese families, sending their daughters to girls’ schools is a means of connecting the family with the state and modern urban life; for some Uyghur and Hui families, sending young women to vocational classes is a limited attempt to enter “national modernity,” while simultaneously striving to maintain religious norms and ethnic boundaries.

From the perspective of urban history, women’s education transformed Urumqi’s perception of a “modern city.” Lynch emphasizes that the “image” of a city comes from people’s daily perceptions of paths, nodes, and landmarks [5]. When girls’ schools and vocational classes for women became important nodes, the sight of groups of female students, classrooms where native and foreign languages intertwined, and graduation performances showcasing vocational skills all entered the daily memories of city residents. This “visibility of the female figure” meant that Urumqi’s modernity was no longer solely symbolized by railways, banks, or military and government institutions, but was collectively shaped by the girls who moved through the streets and alleys and learned in multilingual classrooms.

Therefore, gender and ethnicity are not merely “background variables” in the story of women’s education, but rather key dimensions constituting the modernity of Urumqi. Women’s education partially liberated women from the home, creating new divisions and boundaries within the city. It is through these highly concrete educational practices, imbued with a strong sense of physicality and space, that Urumqi has gradually transformed from a military and bureaucratic stronghold into a “frontier provincial capital” characterized by diverse educational nodes and gendered public spaces.

5. Visible Modernity: School Buildings, Neighborhoods, and Public Space

In the 1920s and 30s, modern educational institutions began to concentrate in the northern part of Urumqi. Provincial middle schools, normal schools, and the later merged Xinjiang College were mostly located on high ground near government offices and military camps, at intersections of main roads. The administrative, educational, and financial institutions of modern Urumqi gradually clustered in the northern part of the city and the newly developed streets, becoming a “window” through which to observe the city’s modernization [18]. In the 1940s, Xinjiang had only one institution of higher learning, Xinjiang College in Urumqi, which included nine middle schools with approximately three thousand students [19]. This number, though not large, was enough to outline a clear educational axis on a map: from the college and middle schools in the north to the primary and vocational schools scattered throughout the city. For students from traditional neighborhoods like South Gate and Talamen, walking through the city gates and along the main roads to school in the north was itself a daily practice “choreographed” by the rhythm of modern city life. In Lynch’s terms, these campuses, squares, and intersections constitute key “nodes” in the city’s image, bringing together pedestrians, roads, and spaces of power [5]. The brick-and-mortar school buildings, straight running tracks, and tall flagpoles contrast with the low earthen houses and winding alleys of the old city, making “nation” and “modernity” visually recognizable.

During the Republic of China era, Urumqi generally presented a “one city, multiple districts” pattern: the Han Chinese administrative district in the north, centered around government offices, schools, and banks; the Muslim commercial district centered around the South Gate Mosque and bazaars, inhabited by Hui, Uyghur, and other Muslims; and immigrant villages and military camps outside the city. The northern districts were home to most government officials, teachers, and students, while the South Gate area was dominated by artisans, small vendors, and newly arrived farmers and herders [2]. This social spatial structure was directly reflected in the distribution of educational facilities. Xinjiang College, provincial middle schools, some girls’ middle schools, and normal schools were concentrated in the north and the newly developed “new urban area,” where staff dormitories and government apartment buildings quickly appeared. Although the South Gate also had mosques, primary schools, and private schools, they could not form a symmetrical relationship with the modern campuses in the north. Women and ethnic minorities who wanted to enter the modern education system often had to cross these spatial boundaries daily, commuting between city gates, bridges, and main roads. From the perspective of urban history, this imbalance itself is a component of modernity. It “writes” gender and ethnic differences into the city’s geography: who can live near the school, who can only commute long

distances, who has to go around mosques and bazaars on the way, and who can walk directly to the campus along the newly built avenue.

Modern schools meant more than just classrooms and timetables; they also meant a whole new set of public spaces. During Sheng Shicai's rule, the Urumqi authorities frequently held commemorative days and mass rallies in parks and squares, activities often closely linked to schools. In 1935, the Urumqi authorities constructed the "First Municipal Park and its attached Products Expo" about three miles southwest of Urumqi city. The park's buildings were constructed with five million taels of provincial money, and it officially opened on the "April 12th Anniversary" [20]. This space, later known as "West Park," quickly became a popular venue for student spring outings, sports meets, and exhibitions. In 1943, the Urumqi municipal government built squares in front of the South Gate and the Governor's Office, ostensibly for the students, but also to provide new, modern spaces for gatherings and celebrations for students and city residents [21].

Lefebvre reminds us that the state, through planning, regulations, and architecture, produces an abstract, homogeneous space to support its ruling order [7]. The zoning and building management regulations implemented in Urumqi in the 1940s attempted to rewrite the spatial script of this frontier city with uniform street widths, land use categories, and architectural forms [18]. But as Massey emphasizes, space is always a convergence point of multiple relationships, not a projection of a single power [9]. In Urumqi, administrative orders from Nanjing and Lanzhou, educational models from Almaty and Tashkent in the Soviet Union, religious schedules from the South Gate Mosque, and daily routines from modern girls' middle schools and vocational schools were all compressed into a limited urban space. School buildings, surrounding blocks, parks, and squares "overprinted" these different rhythms on the same urban plane. Therefore, so-called "visible modernity" includes not only brick-and-mortar school buildings, tree-lined avenues, and planned parks and squares, but also the diverse ethnic male and female students, teachers, and citizens moving among them. It was in this continuous process of production and reproduction that Urumqi gradually took on the image of a "frontier capital" during the Republic of China period.

6. Conclusion: The "Frontier Modernity" of Urumqi

The "frontier modernity" of Urumqi did not come from a single reform or institution. It emerged from many small changes that took place in schools, streets, and neighborhoods over several decades. This paper has shown how educational nodes, language regimes, and women's education together reshaped the city. They turned a garrison town at the edge of empire into a provincial capital that looked, and felt, more modern.

School buildings and their surroundings created new urban centers. Middle schools and Xinjiang College fixed state power, professional training, and youth culture in specific districts. Trilingual education and translation work linked Urumqi to Chinese and Soviet circuits while also structuring daily movement across Han and Muslim quarters. Women's schools and vocational classes brought girls and young women into public view and inscribed gender and ethnicity onto the city's map. At the same time, they opened limited but real paths for social mobility.

Urumqi's modernity was therefore uneven and relational. It relied on ethnic hierarchies and on strong state control, but it also drew energy from local communities and cross-border ties. In this sense, the city's schools were not only mirrors of state policy. They were active urban agents that produced a distinctive frontier capital.

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