

# Chapter 8

## How China Best Educates Its Ethnic Minority Children: Strategies, Experience and Challenges

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### Introduction: The Multiethnic China

China, with a territory of 9,600,000km<sup>2</sup> and 1.3 billion people (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001, 2003b), is a vast and the most populous country in the world. From the hinterlands of the north to the lush jungles in the south, from the mountains of Taiwan in the east to the top of the world in the west, China is home to 56 official ethnic groups. The largest group, Han, makes up over 92% of the population, and it is the Han civilization that the world considers to be Chinese culture. Yet the 55 ethnic minorities nestled away on China's vast frontiers maintain their own languages and rich traditions and customs (Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, 2007). The 104.49 million ethnic minority people account for 8.41% of the nation's total population (Information Office of China's State Council, 2005). The five largest ethnic minority groups (Tian, 1991) are Zhuang (15 million), Manchu (9.8 million), Moslems or Hui (8.6 million), Miao (7.4 million), and Uygur or Weiwu'er (7.2 million). While the Han are concentrated mainly in the Northeast Plain and the middle and lower reaches of the three major rivers (the Yellow, Yangtze, and Pearl rivers), 95% of the minority population lives in the underdeveloped northwest, west and southwest border regions of China, which account for 64% of the nation's territory and boast the richest natural resources of minerals, grazing land, forests and water. Except for Hui and Manchu, who speak Mandarin as Han does, all other 53 minorities have their own languages, which amounts to a total of more than 70 tongues (Xinhua, 2005b).

In the 1950s, five provinces with large minority populations were designated as autonomous minority nationality regions: Xinjiang, Inner-Mongolia, Tibet, Ningxia, and Guangxi. This constitutes the basic principles of Chinese ethnic relations: equality, respect, solidarity, and mutual assistance (Wangden, 2006). It means increased local control over the administration of resources, taxes, birth planning, education, legal jurisdiction, and religious expression. The central government would provide social and cultural services, including education.

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Because of historical factors (feudal society, religion, and wars) and geographical remoteness, the socioeconomic development in minority-inhabited areas falls far behind Han regions. Prior to 1950s, the illiteracy rate among ethnic minorities was often over 95%, compared to the 80% overall illiteracy rates in China (Law, 2006). Fifty years ago, only 10% of school-age children attended school in Ningxia, 97% of the people in Tibet were illiterate, and there were only 16 secondary schools in Inner Mongolia (Information Office of the State Council, 2000). Even in the 2000s, 80% of the nation's poverty is found in minority areas, which also shelter most of the illiterate and semi-illiterate populations in China. The Per capita income for two cities in minority areas, Qinghai (4,426 yuan) and Ningxia (5,804 yuan) is much lower than that of Beijing (28,449 yuan) and Shanghai (40,646 yuan) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002b). In 2003, the per capita net income of rural residents in Xinjiang and Tibet was 2,106.19 yuan and 1,690.76 yuan respectively, equivalent to 80.32% and 64.48% of that of rural residents nationwide (Information Office of China's State Council, 2005). Fifty percent of the counties in minority regions have 10–15% illiteracy rates, while other areas in China have less than 5% illiteracy (Ministry of Education, n.d.a.). The average education received by people in the east is 10 years and 9 months, compared to 3 years and 6 months for people in the west (Liu, 2005). Poverty plus illiteracy have hindered the economic, social, and educational development in minority areas for centuries.

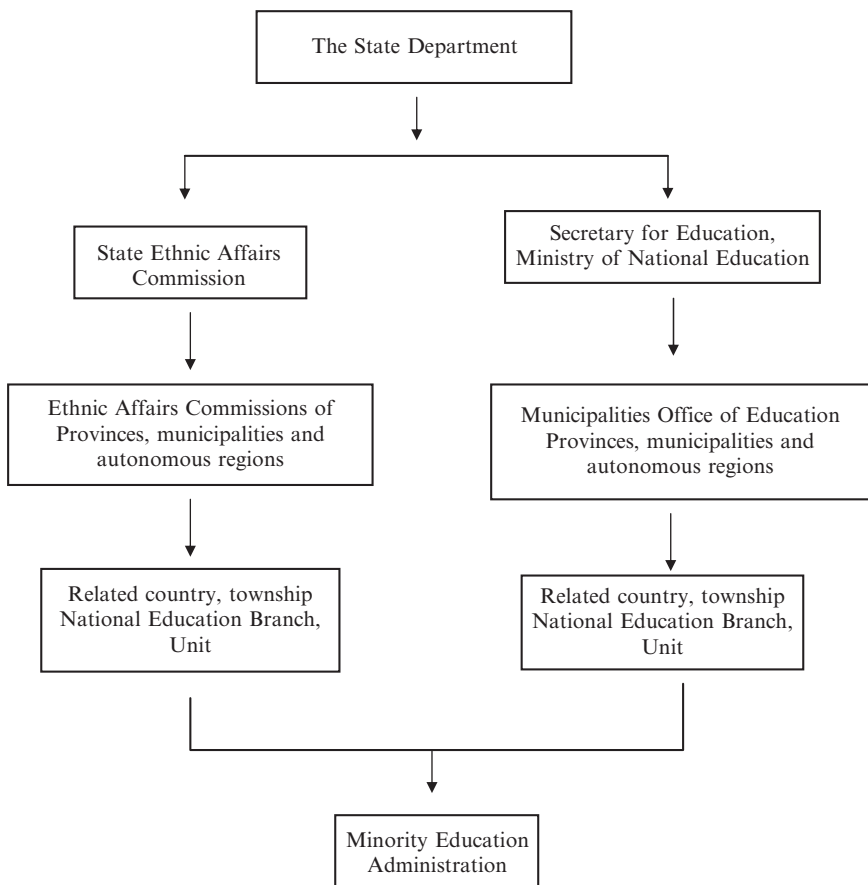
Disparities in educational resources and student achievement exist between the majority and minority groups in China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has given top priority to the education of minority population, providing various funds and adopting a series of preferential policies and strategies to improve minority education and to help the ethnic minority areas develop their own educational systems. While these efforts have made tremendous and unprecedented progress and impact on minority education, there are still many unanswered questions and unsolved problems. This chapter, focusing on the reform efforts since the 1980s, outlines the current status of minority education in China, overviews the policies and strategies employed, and discusses the effectiveness of these reforms and the challenges that still exist.

## **Policies and Strategies to Improve Minority Education**

Beginning in the mid-1980s, China initiated many fundamental education reforms to enhance the quality of its labor force for economic development at the lower, middle, and top occupational strata, including minority education. The education of minorities in China has developed considerably during the past 20 years. A fairly complete minority education system has been established, which has greatly increased the literate population. This system with Chinese characteristics consists of early childhood, basic education (primary and secondary), vocational and technical education, and adult and higher education. For example, the Tibet Autonomous Region now offers early childhood, primary, and secondary education, continuing through tertiary education.

The system also offers specialized ethnic personnel training and adult education for local communities. Schools teach in ethnic languages and use textbooks written in ethnic languages as well. According to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (Xinhua, 2005a), 90,704 primary schools, 11,486 secondary schools, and 92 higher education institutions had been founded in ethnic regions by 2004. There were 21.35 million ethnic students enrolled in elementary schools, high schools, and colleges nationwide, up 13.48% from 1999. The numbers of those in middle schools and colleges reached 6.76 million and 807,300 the same year, up 31.47% and 69.31% respectively over 1999. The number of full-time ethnic minority teachers reached about 1.025 million in 2004, up 11.36% over 1999 (Xinhua, 2005a).

In addition, an established administrative system of ethnic education at various levels has played a positive and supportive role in promoting and managing the development of education in ethnic minority areas (see Fig. 8.1).



**Fig. 8.1** The system of Chinese Ethnic Education Administration (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 1952).

Major policies and strategies implemented to support minority education in China and to narrow the gap between minority and majority include increasing educational opportunities for minority children through flexible and various ways of schooling, bilingual instructions, recruitment and training of minority teachers and salary increases for them in minority regions, various state funds, and several preferential policies – affirmative action for university admission (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002).

### ***Legislation: Eradication of Illiteracy and Universalization of Basic Education***

As the 3rd National Census in 1982 showed, 235 million people, or 23.5% of the population, were illiterate or semi-illiterate (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1982). As this became one of the obstacles to economic development, two major education goals were set in 1985 to inculcate basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The eradication of illiteracy among people age 15 and above to less than 5% by the end of the 20th century was the first goal. Various literacy programs were set up, monitored, and evaluated at national, provincial, prefectures, and country levels. Full-time teachers were employed by townships to teach these classes, assisted by teachers from primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Education raised and provided various funds for these literacy programs. Also monetary awards were given to excellent literacy programs. Every 2 years a total of 5 million yuan in awards were given to excellent teachers and administrators of literacy programs. As a result of this initiative, the illiteracy rate was reduced to less than 4% in 2004 according to Ministry of Education (Xinhua, 2005c), while minority population illiteracy was down to 10–15% or below. The existing illiterates are located mainly in remote rural and mountain areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, which is quite a challenge because the population is scattered and migrates often.

To keep illiteracy rates low and decrease school dropout rates, the universalization of basic education or the 9-year basic compulsory education for children ages 6–15 was initiated in 1986 (Sixth National People's Congress, 1986). To support these two initiatives, child labor was forbidden in 1991 by law. Ethnic autonomous regions were key targets for 9-year basic compulsory education. The government implemented many projects to help fund the initiatives in minority areas such as the Basic Education Development Project in Poor Areas, National Compulsory Education Program for Poor Areas (NCEP) (Zhang et al., 2004). Eighty-three percent of the school-age children in Xinjiang, Tiber, Ningxia, and Qinghai receive free textbooks and are exempted from school fees. In rural areas of Tibet, children receive free meals on top of exemptions from school and textbook fees. All these efforts helped secure the right to compulsory education of school-aged children in poor rural minority areas.

According to the 2000 census, Chinese children above age 15 had received an average of 7.85 years of schooling, an increase of 5.3 years from 1982 (National

Bureau of Statistics of China, 2003a). In minority areas the average length of education was 7.2 years in 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2006). In the 1990s, the Korean minority achieved the goal of compulsory education for the entire population. With the enrollment rate of school-aged children reaching 100%, Korean minority took the lead in the 9-year compulsory education in the country (Xu, 2004).

### ***State Funding to Promote Equity in Minority Education***

Commitment to funding minority education is one of the Chinese government's major ethnic minority policies (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2004a). Since 1990, the Chinese government has established various major funds to prompt equity and support to minority education. The National Compulsory Education Program for Poor Areas (NCEP) was a major one. Of the 39 billion yuan in the fund, 22 billion went to the 12 underdeveloped western regions and provinces; another 1.3 billion supported children from ethnic groups with financial difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2006). In addition, the government allocated special funds to support teacher education and vocational and technical education in minority and impoverished regions. Four World Bank project loans totaling \$200 million helped building and renovating dilapidated school buildings in 200 minority counties. From 1996 to 2001, the Chinese government dedicated funds to strengthen higher education in minority areas through a series of education projects, such as the minority poverty reduction project and the "211" project, which is the largest government investment aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century (State Council, 2001). Universities in minority areas, such as the Central University for Nationalities, Inner Mongolia University, the University of Yunnan, Guangxi University, and Yanbian University were among the institutions that benefited from the 211 project, which helped with campus building construction and computer networks. Recently, the central government allocated 30 billion yuan to renovate dilapidated primary and secondary school buildings in minority areas. In the period of the 10th Five-Year Plan, the government invested 50 million yuan to help with improving education in minority areas (Liu, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2006).

### ***Flexible and Diverse Forms of Schooling***

Another major strategy to promote education in minority areas is to build schools that meet the needs of ethnic minorities (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2004a). To help achieve the two basic goals (eradication of illiteracy and universal basic education) and to meet the needs of minority students, flexible and diverse forms of schooling were adopted. For example, boarding schools were built to attract student enrollment. Because of the vastness of the regions, the scattered

population, the lack of schools in some areas and lack of transportation, it is hard for some children in the northwest area to commute miles to schools daily. To solve this problem, the government dedicated special funds to build large numbers of rural boarding and semiboarding schools in which both teachers and students reside. These funds cover students' living expenses at school, teacher salaries, and school fees. Six thousand boarding schools for ethnic primary and secondary students have been built in autonomous regions with more than 1 million students attending total. The boarding schools not only helped to increase the enrollment of school-age children in remote areas, but also helped to equally distribute primary and secondary schools in minority areas. Boarding school has become the main schooling system for China's ethnic minorities in pastoral and the mountainous areas. The central government invested 100 billion yuan for "Rural Boarding School Project" from 2004 to 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2005c).

To accommodate minority religious beliefs, girls-only schools have been founded in some areas to encourage parents to send their daughters to school. For example, in 1986, Hairu Girl Middle School, a Muslim girls' school, was founded in Tongxin County of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Because girls school respects the religious beliefs of Muslim families and young women, the enrollment rate of girls in this community increased from 40% in 1984 to 75.6% in 2004 (Ma, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2005a). The region also tries to hire female principals and teachers for girls' schools and allows girls to bring younger siblings to classes with them (Cai, 2005). Similar girls' schools were established in many other minority regions, such as Guangxi, to increase girls' school enrollment. Schools with flexible schedules and informal forms, such as half day and every other day schedules, can be found.

By 2004, 474 of the country's 699 autonomous counties, or 67.8%, had achieved the two basic goals (Xinhua, 2005a). The illiteracy rate in minority regions had dropped to less than 15% (Xinhua, 2005c). The enrollment rate of school-age children has increased steadily in most minority areas. In Tibet, primary school enrollment has increased from 85.8% to 95.9% and the rate of secondary school enrollment has increased from 32% to 75.4% (China Education Statistics, 2006).

### ***Bilingual Instruction and Textbooks***

The Article 4 of the constitution of the PRC states clearly that each ethnic group has the right and freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages (Fifth National People's Congress, 1982). The Compulsory Education Law explicitly states that schools with majority minority enrollment may use minority languages for instruction (Sixth National People's Congress, 1986). Acknowledging that language carries important cultural knowledge and that native languages help minorities inherit and preserve their cultural values and beliefs (Lin, 1997), the use of ethnic local language in school instruction has been encouraged. In minority regions, most schools use both ethnic language and Mandarin as instructional

languages. Twenty-nine ethnic groups with some 10,000 schools and 6 million students have conducted classroom instruction in Mandarin and ethnic languages, e.g. Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Korean, Miao, Zhuang, Buyi, Dong, etc. (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2006). Huang (2003) said bilingual instruction of the minorities in China roughly falls into two types. On one hand are the bilingual programs of Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak, and Korean, in which all courses are conducted in the mother tongue and Mandarin Chinese is taught as a subject. There also are programs in which courses are taught in Mandarin Chinese and the mother tongue is taught either as a subject or used as an auxiliary language of instruction. Huang's study (2003) proved that bilingual instruction in the mother tongue is much more effective than instruction solely conducted in Mandarin Chinese. However, the study also found that minority children lack enthusiasm for learning in their mother tongue because they believe that ethnic languages won't help them advance in society, whereas mastery of Mandarin Chinese will.

To assist bilingual instructions, ethnic education publishing companies appeared in Mongolia, Xinjian, Jilin, Qinghai, Sichuan, and many other ethnic regions to publish textbooks and instruction materials in local ethnic languages. The annual publication of ethnic language textbooks reached 3,500 titles with about 1 billion volumes (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2006).

The implementation of bilingual education has made teaching and learning in schools more effective, and promoted the implementation of the nation's education policy in ethnic minority regions.

### ***Teacher Recruitment and Training***

Knowing that the priority for the development and advancement of ethnic education is to have qualified minority teachers who could meet the needs of the children, education administrations at all levels have done everything possible to invest in teacher training since the mid-1980s.

Efforts have been made to recruit and train adequate number of qualified ethnic-language-speaking teachers, including encouraging college graduates to go to teach in minority areas. Professional development courses and half-time training programs have been offered to in-service teachers in minority areas. Since 2000, 400,000 teachers from minority areas have participated in the training. Other efforts to recruit quality teachers for ethnic minorities include founding teacher training institutions in ethnic minority regions and communities, e.g. normal universities, 2-year normal colleges, and normal secondary schools; and establishing ethnic teacher training centers in major universities, e.g. Northwest Normal University, Beijing Normal University, etc. At present, there are more than 40 ethnic teacher colleges and 110 secondary ethnic normal schools in China (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2004c).

Another initiative to provide teachers to minority schools is the linking of college admissions with future employment in minority regions (Ming, 2006a). Students in

this program agree at the time of college admission to work in minority regions for 5 years after graduation; in return they receive scholarships and free tuition for their college studies. In addition, the China Teachers Legislation enacted in 1993 stipulated that graduates from teacher education programs will receive subsidies if they choose to teach in minority and remote areas of the country (Ming, 2006b).

By 2005, there were 1.4 million full-time ethnic minority teachers in all types of schools at all levels across the country (State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC, 2004c). These efforts improved the situation, but a shortage of qualified teachers still exists.

### ***Eastern and Western Regions: Partnership and Support***

In 2000, the State Council initiated some projects to encourage urban schools to pair up with rural schools and urban inland cities to pair with rural western counties to support minority education development (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2001). The guidelines called for help to schools and regions that did not meet the two basic goals through establishment of sister schools, provision of funding, instructional equipment, and materials, offering on-campus programs for minority students, and conducting professional development for minority teachers and administrators.

In 2 years, schools in the east regions sent to the west some 18,000 teachers and administrators, funding of 1842.9 million yuan, 14,619 computers, 1.18 million pieces of clothes, 6.49 million books, 410,000 pieces of stationery, 60,000 pieces of instructional equipment, 80,000 desks and chairs, 13 sets of laboratory equipment, and 11 computer assisted learning labs, and had sponsored 13,211 minority students (Xinhua, 2002; "To improve education," 2002). Eastern schools also trained some 1,400 minority teachers and administrators ("To improve education," 2002). Zhejiang province in the east region allocated 40 million yuan annually to support minority education (Zhejiang Minority Commission, 2005).

Since 1984 Tibet programs and schools have been established in about 20 developed Han provinces and cities. A total of 33,100 students from middle school through college graduated from special Tibet programs. The 14,000 Tibet college graduates went back to their hometown and became major forces in social and economic development of Tibet (Li, 2007).

In the past 10 years, 20,000 Xinjiang students from middle school to college graduated from programs for them in Han provinces and cities. Programs for Xinjiang students can be found in Beijing, Tianjing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and other major cities in China (Cao, 2006).

### ***Preferential Policies for Minority Students***

It is believed that one of the reasons that minority areas lag in social economic development is the shortage of professionals and leaders with expertise and skills. To narrow the gap between eastern and western regions, to raise the living conditions



of people in ethnic regions, and to assist the development of higher education in these areas, the Chinese government has had a number of preferential policies for minority recruitment in college since 1950s (State Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2004a, b). Giving minority student priorities and preferences for admission with similar qualifications and flexible admission requirements (lower admission scores) for minority students are two examples. The number of scores to be lowered for minority student admission depends on universities and regions and varies from 40 to 80 points (Ministry of Education, n.d.b) on national entrance examinations.

In 1980, the Ministry of Education and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission announced that college admission of minority students should follow merit admission plus appropriate ratio. The ratio of admission of minority students should not be lower than the ratio of minority population in that region (Ministry of Education, 2004b, c). Some regions implemented affirmative action in minority admissions and set up annual quotas for minority recruitment in colleges. In Guangxi Autonomous Region, the regional higher education institutions had a minority enrollment of more than 90% (later changed to 80%) annually. The local colleges and universities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region had 20% minority enrollment each year.

Also acknowledging that students whose primary language is not Mandarin are in disadvantageous positions when they take national entrance examinations in Mandarin, the Chinese government passed the Law of Regional Minority stipulating that examinations should be given to minority students in their native languages (Sangay, 1998). If these students do take entrance examinations in Mandarin, bonus points are added to their final scores (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002). They do have the choice of taking this exam in their mother tongues.

Universities offer college preparation programs for minority students, which teach them English, computers, Chinese, and math for a year before letting them start college classes (Ministry of Education, 2005b, n.d.b). Currently, more than 100 colleges and universities have set up ethnic matriculation classes and ethnic classes in the country with an annual enrollment of 20,000 students (Ding, 2007). Target admission program enrolls students from underdeveloped regions and provides scholarship to them for their college study under the condition that they agree to work for 5 years in their hometown after graduation. The purpose is to provide these regions with skilled people for economic development and break the vicious circle.

The latest news on 2007 university admission of minority students reports that all the preferential policies discussed above are still in place (Jiang, 2007).

## Challenges

Minority education in China has made significant achievement in the past 20 years due to the efforts, policies, and various strategies reviewed (China Internet Information Center, 2007). However, the development of minority education is still too slow to meet the need of the country's fast economic development and globalization.

The gap between education in minority and other areas in China still exists, and the education in rural minority areas still faces many challenges. Professor Wu (Zhu, 2006) points out that shabby classrooms with falling roofs, unpaid teachers, and shortages of funds and instructional equipments are some words often used to describe western rural schools.

### ***Gaps in Socioeconomic Development and Education***

The socioeconomic development of minority regions lags behind other areas in China. A wide gap between rural and urban education is obvious. As discussed earlier, nearly half of the minority areas still need to meet the two basic goals (Xinhua, 2005a, c) – eradication of illiteracy and universal basic education. Resources are needed to improve and reform minority education. The still-developing economy in China, especially in minority areas, makes it hard to completely universalize basic education and eliminate illiteracy because it limits the resources and available funds to carry out these tasks. Poverty and illiteracy always come together and feed each other, and this circle needs to be broken.

Tables 8.1–8.5 show major discrepancies and gaps between living standards and education in minority regions and the rest of the nation. The per capita income of minority groups is much lower than that of other areas in the nation; the use of technology, Internet, and telephone is much less popular in minority regions than in other parts of the nation. In minority regions there are higher rates of school dropout, lower school enrollment, and higher illiteracy rates than other areas. More secondary schools, vocational schools, and higher education institutions are needed to meet the needs of minority education, and more teachers with appropriate qualifications are especially needed for middle and high schools. There are only 53.03% of primary teachers with educations at associate degree and above, and 39.65% middle school teachers with college degrees (Ministry of Education, 2006). It is a challenge to hire and keep qualified teachers for schools in minority regions, especially teachers of music, physical education, fine arts, and foreign languages. The tables below are comparisons between the northwest and western provinces, where most of the Chinese minority population live, with the northeast and eastern provinces, where the majority Han Chinese live.

### ***Incompatibilities: Education and Minorities***

There still exist incompatibilities between minority education and minorities' lifestyles, beliefs, and religions in terms of the schooling systems, curriculum, instructional languages, and strategies.

First, for historical reasons, most minorities live in remote and underdeveloped rural regions away from cities and modern amenities with different lifestyles.

**Table 8.1** Major economic indicators: Eastern and northwestern provinces, 2002

Provinces	GDP (10,000)	Income per capita (yuan)	Consumption per capita (yuan)		Disposable income per capita (urban)	Per capita net income (rural)
<i>Eastern Provinces</i>						
			Urban	Rural		
Beijing	3,212.71	28,449	11,365	4,390	12,463.92	5,398.48
Shanghai	5,408.76	40,646	16,457	7,516	13,249.88	6,223.55
Guangdong	11,796.73	15,630	10,890	3,001	11,137.20	3,911.90
Jiangsu	10,631.35	14,391	7,742	3,109	8,177.64	3,979.79
Zhejiang	7,796.00	16,838	10,481	4,017	11,715.60	4,940.36
<i>Northwestern Provinces</i>						
Shanxi	2,035.96	5,523	5,837	1,320	6,330.84	1,596.25
Gansu	1,161.43	4,493	5,344	1,078	6,151.44	1,590.30
Xinjiang	1,598.78	8,382	6,257	1,525	6,899.64	1,863.26
Qinghai	329.28	4,426	5,558	1,423	6,170.52	1,668.94
Ningxia	341.11	5,804	5,426	1,404	6,067.44	1,917.66

Figures adopted from National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002a

**Table 8.2** Indicators of socioeconomic development: Northwest minority regions vs. national averages, 2003

Areas	Poverty (%)	Rural per capita income vs. national average (%)	Telephone Use (%)	Internet Use (per 10,000 head) (%)	Human Development Index Rank (in China)
Shaanxi	9.0	65	5.06	3.88	25
Gansu	11.5	63.4	3.78	1.26	28
Qinghai	14.0	65.9	4.43	0.83	29
Ningxia	12.6	79.6	6.97	0.14	26
Xinjiang	8.9	74	6.84	0.80	15
Northwestern areas average		11.2	69.58	5.42	2.58
National average		4.6	100	7	5.42

Figures from National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2004

Nomads, who live in grazing land move about with the change of seasons. This lifestyle becomes a huge inconvenience for children to go to school, hence the low enrollment rate among children of nomads.

Second, the value, culture, and belief systems of minorities sometimes prevent children from going to schools. Some minority parents believe that knowing about their language and religion is more important than learning mathematics and science. Religion and education are not related in the Chinese national curriculum, while in

**Table 8.3** Comparison: illiterates and semi-illiterates in 5 eastern and 5 northwestern provinces (person and %)

Areas	Population: ages 15+			Illiterate and semi-illiterate population			Percentage of illiterate/semiliterate of population ages 15+		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Nationally	921,891	463,566	458,253	140,026	40,341	99,685	15.14	8.81	21.5
<i>Eastern provinces</i>									
Beijing	10,413	5,183	5,230	672	148	524	6.45	2.85	10.01
Shanghai	12,469	6,150	6,318	1,083	206	877	8.68	3.35	13.88
Zhejiang	35,491	17,825	17,666	5,573	1,535	4,041	15.70	8.60	22.87
Jiangsu	56,498	27,705	28,794	9,484	2,165	7,319	16.79	7.82	25.42
Guangdong	50,707	24,958	25,749	4,679	948	3,731	9.23	3.80	14.19
Average							11.37	5.28	17.27
<i>Northwestern provinces</i>									
Shaanxi	26,058	13,259	12,798	4,766	1,589	3,176	18.29	11.99	24.82
Gansu	17,999	9,053	8,947	4,515	1,476	3,139	25.64	16.30	35.09
Qinghai	3,587	1,806	1,781	1,095	355	740	30.52	19.66	41.53
Ningxia	3,764	1,898	1,866	878	283	595	23.52	14.89	31.90
Xinjiang	12,521	6,353	6,168	1,223	469	754	9.77	7.38	12.22
Average							19.55	14.04	29.11

Figures from National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2003a

**Table 8.4** Enrollment and dropout rates of school-age children in various regions, 2003 (%)

Regions	Enrollment rate of school-age children				Dropout rate			
	Overall	Male	Female	Gender difference	Overall	Male	Female	Gender difference
National average	99.09	99.13	99.04	0.09	0.90	0.93	0.86	0.07
Eastern areas average	99.72	99.72	99.73	-0.01	0.25	0.26	0.24	0.02
Western areas average	97.86	98.03	97.66	0.36	1.13	1.18	1.07	0.11
Northwestern areas average	97.12	97.63	96.57	1.06	0.85	0.82	0.88	0.06
Shaanxi	99.38	99.34	99.43	-0.09	0.45	0.37	0.53	-0.16
Gansu	98.62	99.10	98.11	1.00	1.33	1.42	1.23	0.19
Qinghai	93.53	94.58	92.39	2.19	1.11	1.04	1.21	-0.17
Ningxia	97.01	98.18	95.74	2.44	0.98	0.87	1.09	0.22
Xinjiang	97.09	96.97	97.21	-0.24	0.39	0.42	0.36	0.06

Figures from Development and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2004

**Table 8.5** Percentages of full-time teachers with high school or higher education, 2003 (%)

Regions	Primary school teachers w/high school+	Junior high teachers w/associate degree+	High school teachers w/college degree+
National average	95.90	85.63	65.85
Eastern area average	97.28	88.22	70.98
Northwestern area average	95.54	83.40	55.93
Shaanxi	94.71	77.95	58.41
Gansu	91.59	80.44	52.94
Ningxia	95.30	90.13	68.66
Qinghai	94.31	81.51	46.92
Xinjiang	96.81	86.96	52.71

Data from Development and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2004

Tibet, religion is the main form of organized education outside the family (Postiglione, 1999). The transition from religious education to mass secular education has been slow and difficult in Tibet and some other minority regions. Minority groups would like to include some religious information in the curriculum so their children will be motivated to learn (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002; Postiglione, 1999). This often results in parents sending children to temples or monasteries and lowering school attendance rates. The national curriculum, without much relevance to local ethnic content and characteristics, does not help minority participation in school learning (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002; Postiglione, 1999).

In addition, minority parents and children do not see much future or meaning in schools. Because of the competitive nature of Chinese education, most minority children will not be able to make it to college despite of various preferential policies for them. They will return to work on farms or tend herds like their parents after high school, so going to schools is regarded as useless and waste of money. Thus, some parents prefer to have their children leave school to help the families make money. On the other hand, some minorities undergoing economic hardship cannot afford to send their children to school. The average dropout rate for middle school in the western regions is as high as 10.31% (Ministry of Education, 2006).

All these factors become challenges to keep high enrollment and low dropout rates from middle to high schools in remote and mountainous areas especially.

### ***Problems with Bilingual Instruction***

The biggest challenge for bilingual education in China is the severe shortage of qualified native language-speaking minority teachers. “The number and diversity of languages used by the non-Han peoples of China is a formidable barrier to the popularization of education in China’s rural and remote frontier regions” (Postiglione, 1999, p. 95). There are some 70 mother tongues spoken in China. How to deal with

this diversity has been a challenge. For the past 20 years, graduates from teacher education programs have been encouraged to teach in minority areas with incentives such as better working and living conditions, higher wages, and permission to have a second child (Lin, 1997; Johnson, personal interview with teachers at Lhasa Language School, Lhasa, Tibet, June 26, 1999). Unfortunately, the trend of qualified minority teacher shortages is likely to continue for some time.

Other challenges to bilingual education come from minority families who believe minority languages may “not help their children’s future” (Sangay, 1998, p. 294). They are concerned about their children’s ability to pass the Chinese national entrance examinations to move on to higher education. School administrators and teachers are worried that study of a native language may slow the learning of Chinese, and that minority textbooks will not offer the same curricula as the Chinese language textbooks, which are required for the national examinations (Johnson & Chhetri, 2002).

### *Lack of Technology in Minority Education*

Despite the 2003 state initiative calling for the use of technology and distance learning in rural schools (Ministry of Education, 2006), there is a lack of awareness in the use of information technology in minority education, which makes it hard for minorities to compete with students in other areas in China, let alone other countries worldwide. As information technology is still a new concept for educators and government officials in many minority areas, they do not have the training and knowledge of integrating technology in education, thus can not take advantage of it in instruction. Some of them have never used a computer and use traditional method in instruction.

There is also a shortage of equipment for information technology in education and personnel for professional training in technology (see Table 8.6). As shown in Table 8.2, the national average use of telephone and Internet are 7% and 5.42%, while in northwest regions they are 5.42% and 2.58%, respectively. Although the use of the Internet has been developing rapidly in China since the end of the 20th century, the majority ethnic population has been left far behind. While most existing equipment is obsolete, it will take some time to change the situation due to economic constraints.

**Table 8.6** Computer sets in primary and middle schools in selected western regions

Province	Year		
	2001	2005	Percentage increase, 2001–2005
Yunan	55,821	130,424	133.7
Tibet	2,566	13,806	438.1
Shannxi	210,340	274,364	30.4
Gansu	144,711	161,715	11.8
Qinghai	21,410	36,165	68.9
Ningxia	38,096	51,596	35.4
Xinjiang	11,242	134,171	20.6

Data from Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 2

## Discussion

To meet the need for economic development and globalization and to turn the large population into human resources, education in China still has a long way to go. The Chinese government has made great efforts in funding since 1980s, enacting various legislation and strategies to support minority education. Although minority education has improved in many aspects over the past 25 years, continuous efforts and some fundamental reforms are needed for it to catch up with that in Han areas and to close the gap of learning among the 56 ethnic groups.

First, research shows a strong correlation between household poverty and illiteracy and that illiteracy/undereducation is not simply an education problem. It is a symptom of deep and widespread social inequality created, in large part, by poverty (Literacy Alberta, 2005). Poverty is not just about having too little money. Poverty is about lack of dignity, respect, choice, and opportunity. People must work to end poverty. Literacy is about more than just reading and writing, which are only the tools for participation. To reform the education and raise literacy rates in minority areas, social economic development for minority people must catch up first.

Second, the issue of how to implement universal education for all children and at the same time preserve the language and culture of minority students is a problem that China must face (Johnson and Chhetri, 2002). China struggles with how best to educate its minority students. Should emphasis be on preserving ethnic cultures or advancement into the mainstream? For the two basic goals to be fully embraced in minority areas, education must be seen as a way to improve one's future in life. Minority students need to believe that there is a possibility of making it through the competitive secondary program and gaining a place at a university. More preferential policies in college admissions and even in job markets may contribute to this course. Founding more colleges and universities in minority regions for minority students might be another way. Otherwise, minority student will continue to drop out.

Along with autonomous self-governing policies, more autonomy of school curriculum and management will make schooling more relevant and meaningful to the life, religion, and beliefs of minority families and children. Efforts should be made to revise curriculum and add ethnic-related content and literature to make curriculum truly multicultural learning. More local participation in curriculum making should be encouraged for this effort.

Bilingual education beyond the elementary years could be one way to infuse minority culture and language into the school system, and has the potential to encourage minority participation in schools, improve minority school achievement, and enhance student self-confidence of their origins. However, the debate over bilingual education is part of a larger political debate over two competing visions of the future – diverse societies made up of many cultures or one societal or global culture. While some praise diversity, others believe that the country will be divided by differences with too much diversity. China has embraced a multilingual approach. However, lack of policy enforcement and conflicting political forces within the nation could continue to make bilingual education a policy dilemma for many years to come (Johnson and Chhetri, 2002, p. 151).

In short, closing the gaps in economic development among the regions will boost minority education. With economic development, more funds will be available to build more schools and higher education institutions, to hire and retain more qualified teachers for minority regions due to improved living condition and income, and to provide equipment and training for the use of technology in instruction. Also promote rural distance learning in all rural schools (to include a CD-ROM with the curriculum package for each village school or class, a satellite receiver and relay facilities for each school, and a computer classroom in each lower secondary school) and multimedia-equipped classrooms will facilitate resource sharing among all nationalities. Provide flexible scheduling for students, facilitate various formats of schooling, and extend access to education to areas where schools and transportation are not available are also ideas to improve minority education. Finally, to successfully improve education in minority areas, efforts and motivation from minority people themselves are equally important, if not more. Through joint efforts between local ethnic groups and local government, with the support and funds from the state, minority education will catch up and meet the need of globalization.

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