

# Multiculturalism and Multilingual Education for Minority Ethnic Groups in China: Examples of Southwest China and Xinjiang Uygur Regions and the Goal of Educational Equality

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**Abstract** This chapter reviews the historical development of China's bilingual education policy for minority ethnic groups exploring whether this relates to Western notions of multicultural education. The chapter discusses the Chinese setting at national and provincial levels and focuses on four historical periods of China's education policy. The first is the period under the control of the Nationalist Party from 1905 to 1946. The second is the 'rapid development' period from 1947 to 1958 – the early years of rule by the China Communist Party. The third is the so-called 'sluggish' period from 1959 to 1976, which was characterized by the Cultural Revolution and ideological movements that resulted in the suppression of minority identities as unsettling the stability and cogency of the communist state. The fourth is the 'rejuvenation' period from 1977 to the present, which involves nationwide cultural, educational and economic restoration after the disruption of the Cultural Revolution. This latter period has seen curriculum settings that resemble multicultural and multilingual education gradually assuming a critical place in China's education system. During this period, multi-ethnic identities have been perceived as less disruptive and have even been acknowledged as components of a broader, inclusive Chinese national identity.

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## 1 Introduction

Two regions are studied here in detail: the South-Western part of China and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. This is done in order to illustrate the complexity and regional variations of Chinese bilingual education and how expanding conceptions of multiculturalism have impacted upon Chinese education policy over time. The authors contend that there is an increasing gap between the central government's standardized approach to language policy and the fast-changing reality among the nation's multiple ethnic minority groups, as the recent acceleration in modernization, globalization, and urbanization have significantly impacted China's bilingual education. Therefore, this chapter reviews how government policy makers have responded to this complexity, especially with regards to the preservation of ethnic minority languages and maintenance of social equality and stability.

Most accounts of what is termed 'multicultural education' tend to adopt assumptions taken from western societies and their experience of immigration or their responses to indigenous populations being granted more recognition in schooling. In China's case a very different historical pathway has led to its own version of cultural diversity policy. Though no equivalent of the term multiculturalism is in regular use, the Chinese government officially celebrates its cultural diversity. Indeed, official documents describe China as a 'multinational, multi-ethnic state', where questions of nationality 'have been solved' (McCarthy 2009, p. 4). China's education policies were historically seen as officially mandated, conservative, authoritarian and ideological (Tse 2014, p. 191). However, much has shifted in the twenty-first century and, as will be shown, there is a growing awareness that education needs to be student focused and adaptable rather than rigid, exam oriented and overly standardized. Nonetheless, the Chinese state has strongly emphasized unity, continuity and order through its policy decisions. Thus when ethnic or minority differences are recognized it is usually assumed that such recognition does not and will not destabilize a secure sense of national unity, which persists as a fundamental objective of maintaining China's self-perception as a nation comprised of multicultural constituents.

## 2 Language and Ethnicity in China

China has a remarkably rich linguistic ecology. According to the Ethnologue China report, there are 297 individual languages. Of these there are 15 institutional, 23 developing and 100 vigorous languages. Despite this apparent vitality, diachronic

intergenerational analysis shows that minority languages are under threat with 127 languages classified as ‘in trouble,’ and 32 ‘dying’ (Ethnologue 2015). As well as this abundance of languages, China also has 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. These 55 ethnic groups account for 8 % of the total national population, equating approximately 106 million people according to the China National Statistics Bureau (2002). This large minority population also exhibits a large level of linguistic diversity. There are over 80 languages spoken by different minority groups of which 30 have written forms (Zhou 2000). This diverse and complex language and ethnic composition of the national population means that China is far from monolingual or culturally hegemonic. Indeed, approximately 53 % of the total population are capable of socializing in modern standard Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua), revealing that bilingualism and multilingualism is the lived reality for a large amount of people in the nation.

### 3 Recent Approaches to Education in China

It has long been held in China, as elsewhere, that education is a key factor for national production, economic competitiveness, and social equality and stability. Education is seen as the key way in which to eradicate poverty among China’s large population, as well as providing the foundation of civilization and culture. Thus education serves both a material and symbolic function in Chinese society. Because of its centrality to national goals and identities, the ‘Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education’ was enacted in July 1986 to ensure that all Chinese citizens attained quality education (Yeoh and Chu 2014, p. 84). The enactment of such laws has dramatically increased both the enrolment rates and the average length of education in China, which has enabled initial steps in transforming the country’s enormous population into a wealth of human resources (p. 85). Education has increasingly become seen as of critical national importance, which has brought questions of curriculum and pedagogy to the fore in educational policy and its implementation.

As education becomes increasingly elevated as a national concern, the delivery and focus of educational programs becomes more contested in both policy making arenas and in schools themselves. Because of the expanding and changing demands placed on education, the general curriculum has been significantly refocused in China since the early 2000s. In response to mounting criticism that the education system was overly centralized and exam oriented, the Ministry of Education set about reforms to make education more conducive to lifetime learning and more diversified in order to be more accessible to a wider range of communities in China. (Zhu & Ma 2015)

The educational reorientation is partly due to the multiple and varied needs of students in the extraordinarily diverse multicultural reality of Chinese schools. Indeed, China’s global economic development has, according to Hinton (2011), ‘accentuated gaps between rural and urban populations and homogenous and minority groups’ (p. 728). Disparities in opportunity and achievement have led to bouts of

'ethnic unrest', which has prompted educational institutions to teach national unity and emphasize values of social order within the curriculum.

In addition, achievement gaps between minority and majority groups have been addressed by an increasing awareness that bilingual education has a crucial role to play in promoting national unity and increasing educational equality. China has had a long and difficult relationship reconciling its national goals with the rights and concerns of its ethnic minority populations and, as this chapter demonstrates, its language policies and educational approaches to bilingualism and multilingualism have sometimes failed to attain the educational equality that the nation espouses through such policies. Nonetheless, China's increasing awareness of the value of recognising minority language rights and offering bilingual education to help minority groups attain educational equality, alleviate poverty and imbue its citizenry with cohesive national and cultural identities, provides an important snapshot of how multicultural diversity can contribute to national material and cultural success.

## 4 Bilingual Education in China

Due to China's immense diversity in its population, bilingual education policies and programs vary dramatically between regions and individual schools. According to Tsung and Cruickshank (2009), bilingual education in China generally refers to schooling in which both minority and Mandarin/Putonghua languages are used as the medium of instruction or taught as subjects. Bilingual education is therefore employed in Chinese policy circles in a rather ambiguous fashion when compared with the intricate specificity the term often carries in multilingual education research literature (p. 549). Gu (2014) points out that there are three types of bilingual teaching for minority ethnic groups in China. The first involves teaching in minority mother-tongue languages, with Mandarin Chinese added. The second comprises of teaching in Mandarin Chinese, with minority languages added. The third entails teaching both in Mandarin Chinese and in minority languages.

In the second bilingual model mentioned by Gu, Mandarin Chinese replaces the mother-tongue, which is later added as a stand-alone subject. The ultimate effect is subtractive bilingualism, in which the second language does replace the native tongue.

The third model, whereby both Mandarin and native-tongues are used as languages of instruction, reinforces the values of positive cognition derived from additive bilingualism, while still providing strong foundations of literacy required for employment and societal contribution in the national language. This version of additive multilingualism is the preference of UNESCO and is consistent with the goals of their Education for All global initiative, of which China is a key signatory (Yeoh and Chu 2014, p. 85). While this model presents unique challenges including the editing of language textbooks and supporting materials for minority ethnic

groups, as well as specialist training of ethnic minority teachers, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of holistic bilingual and multilingual education in redressing disparities in China's education system.

At a major UNESCO/China conference in Suzhou in 2014, a critical declaration known as the 'Suzhou Conclusion' was issued in which China proclaimed its official commitment to bilingual education, especially regarding the use of mother-tongues as languages of instruction. The conclusions stressed the importance of native minority languages and stated that they should be taught in pre-school and primary schools. Delegates from a wide range of expertise agreed that mother-tongue instruction is vital for the improvement of teaching efficacy and the increase of learners' self-esteem, as well as the development of their culture and ethnic identities. Family and local communities need to play a major role in minority language education, which bolsters community ownership of education and language policy decision-making and implementation (UNESCO 2014).

In a more elaborate typology, Zhou (1991) distinguishes three models and seven sub-models of Chinese bilingual education. These models relate to the timing, duration and pedagogical approaches in using multiple languages in the classroom. For example, the Maintenance Model refers to policies and practices aiming at preserving minority language and culture, and increasing minority children's capabilities in using their mother tongues. Under this concept there exist three further sub-models. These sub models can be broken down as follows. In the first, the minority language is used as the teaching medium of each subject and Chinese is only used as the teaching medium from the second or third grade of primary schooling. In the second, Chinese is used as the teaching medium of every subject and the minority language is only taught as a subject from second or third grade of primary schooling. In the third, both Chinese and minority languages are taught as subjects in the senior grades of primary and/or middle schools and both languages are used as the medium of instruction for some subjects ('maintenance model' – Zhou 1991). The other two models are (i) the Transitional Model, which involves transitioning from a minority language to Chinese; (ii) the Expedient Model, which teaches minority languages in the middle or high school for 2 or 3 months.

It is worth noting that China's education system has an additional element of multiculturalism produced largely by China's position as a global economic power. Mainstream Chinese children are required to learn world geography and history in middle schools. English is also made compulsory in many primary schools, as it is seen as an important economic resource (Lo Bianco et al. 2009). A survey conducted by the British Culture Association indicates that there were two billion English learners in China in the past decade (Ji 2013). The National College English Test (CET) is conducted annually and a minimal score is required for college graduates to get their diploma/degree highlighting the significance attached to English language learning, particularly in the Tertiary environment. From 1987 to 2004, more than 11 million students sat in the CET Band 4 and Band 6 (Wu 2005). Despite these trends which demonstrate that more emphasis is being placed on learning English and incorporating second language learning in early schooling, much can

be done to implement lasting, sustainable bilingual and multilingual education practices that cater to China's multicultural reality.

In the following sections, the chapter will give a brief review of the historical development of Chinese bilingual education and general government language policy. We will do this in four stages (admittedly in a simplistic way) in order to provide a foundation for the detailed discussion of the language situation in Southwest China and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

## **5 Bilingual Education: Four Stages of Development**

According to Zhou's detailed overview (2015), China's bilingual education can be divided into four periods. These can be described as the initial period before the founding of PRC from 1905 to 1946; the rapid development period from 1947 to 1958; the slowing down period from 1959 to 1976; and the rejuvenation period from 1977 to the present. During the latter period, from the late 1970s, bilingual education has assumed a crucial place in China's education system, with nation-wide cultural, educational and economic restoration after the Cultural Revolution. Here, we follow this periodization and illustrate details from aspects of language planning and language policy and how they succeed or fall short of reflecting China's policy aspirations in response to its nation's diverse multiculturalism.

## **6 Initial Period: 1905–1946**

The first school in China that taught ethnic minority languages in the modern era was established in 1905 by British Methodists and local Miao minority Christians in China's southwest province of Guizhou (Zhou 2015). The founders assisted the local population in transcribing a written version of the Miao language. This became known as the Old Miao language, as distinct from the New Miao language developed by the Chinese communist government at a later stage. This early version of Miao was taught in schools alongside other subjects such as maths, geography and Mandarin Chinese. In 1930, the Chinese government (Nationalist) issued China's first official bilingual education policy (Year Book of Chinese Education, p. 917). Accordingly, a series of bilingual textbooks in Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur and Chinese were published and used in some schools, which provided a basis for the promulgation of bilingual education as both a necessary and achievable policy for Chinese society.

## 7 Rapid Development Period 1947–1958

In the early years of Chinese communist party reign, pluralistic minority language policy was much needed as it served the pressing task of consolidating different regional and ethnic groups into a united nation. Local autonomous minority governments were established, and communist cadres were encouraged to learn minority languages in order to better communicate with ethnic groups. In September 1951, a number of decisions were made in the first national conference on education in minority communities. Commonly used written languages such as Mongolian, Korean, Tibetan, Uygur and Kazak were required as media of instruction for subjects in schools in minority regions. Furthermore, minority groups were grateful of the right to choose the language of instruction for the subjects that were available (Xie 1989). It was stipulated in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1954 that 'every nationality is free to use and develop its native language and writing system' (Art. 1.77). This was extremely significant for multilingual language policy in China and reflected an early recognition of the multicultural reality of the newly consolidated national, communist state. Because flexible and locally sensitive approaches to language education and use were critical to the consolidation of power in regional areas, the language rights of minority groups as enshrined in the national Constitution are emblematic of an awareness of the importance of such rights in accommodating and including regional differences within China's strong sense of itself as a cohesive society. In this sense, language is both important symbolically and materially as it performs multiple functions of facilitating economic mobility, solidifying links to cultural and historical lineages and identities, as well as fostering among ethnic minorities a sense of belonging to the overall nation.

At the end of 1955, the first minority language conference was held in China. The conference resulted in the issuing of 'The Tentative Language Planning for Minority Languages' declaration, as well as a decision to conduct a survey on minority languages. In 1956, seven research teams of the Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted survey research on the sociolinguistic situation of 16 provinces across China (Zhou 1992). The Chinese government, influenced by Latinization in the former Soviet Union, moved to reform minority language writing systems. According to Zhou (1992), during the 1950s, new writing systems were created, including for the Zhuang, Buyei, Miao, Yi, Li, Naxi, Lisu, and Hani languages. Latin alphabets were designed in addition to the extant Arabic writing systems of Uygur and Kazak (p. 68). Consequently, 14 writing language systems were created for different ethnic minority groups during the 1950s, including the so-called New Miao language, which itself included 4 variations. The Government's endeavor to protect and preserve traditional minority cultures generated a large number of publications including a series of books entitled the Brief Record of the Ethnic Minority Languages in China.

However, these reforms were later challenged by scholars and minority groups alike. The top-down imposition of these measures failed in practice mainly due to resistance from minority groups who took language as an important part of their

cultural identity, and whose scripts and social standings the central Government wished to determine. The central Government's attempt to standardize and reform these languages was resisted by minority groups who felt threatened by what they saw as state intervention aimed at shaping and determining their cultural and ancestral languages. Such reactions from minority groups reveal that attempts by governments to standardize, intervene and centrally direct local language interests can be seen as a form of cultural coercion that exacerbates pre-existing cultural and ethnic tensions and greatly detracts from multicultural cohesion. As such, a delicate balance between assisting local languages attain levels of literacy needed for adequate schooling and respect for their autonomy must be struck.

## 8 Slowing Down Period 1959–1976

Following a number of ideological rejuvenation movements, landmarked by the Great Leap Forward Movement and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, linguistic differences were viewed as a barrier to national unification. Minority groups were collectivized and forced to abandon their traditions including their languages and customs which were deemed 'backward' and antithetical to the collective identity of the great proletarian project of the Chinese Communist state. In this context, the *Resolution for Pinyin* and *The Scheme of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet*, passed on February 11, 1958 by the National People's Congress (Min et al. 2014, p. 3) that set up the Pinyin Romanization system for Mandarin Chinese can be seen as the milestone for Chinese monopolistic language policy. After The Great Leap Forward ended in a national famine and admitted failure, there was a short period of relaxation of the assimilation of minority languages until the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. As pointed out by Bruhn (2008), even though the national Constitution and various national regulations were still technically in effect protecting minority language rights, assimilation still dominated government practices. This was evident in the widespread existence of Chinese-only education and government services (p. 7). The freedom for minority groups to use and develop their own language and writing systems, as was stipulated in the 1954 Constitution, was essentially eroded. In reality, minority groups were not allowed to use their own language or appreciate their cultural traditions, as this was seen as undermining national and communist unity. Requests for bilingual education and minority curriculum were regarded as threats to ideological correctness and as oppositions to socialism (Nelson 2005). In this sense, the educational needs of local populations were sublimated into the ideological imperative of a unified communist population. Minority groups could be easily identified as disruptors by highlighting their desires for educational autonomy, but as we will see, China's multicultural reality could not be explained away through appeals to ideology.



## 9 Rejuvenation Period from 1977 to the Present

After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China experienced a nation-wide restoration of its social, educational and economical order. Minority language education became one of the focuses of government policy. Indeed, ‘Chinese language policy slowly returned to an accommodationist approach, reopening the doors for autonomous governments to promote and develop their own languages’ (Bruhn 2008, p. 7). In 1982, the Constitution was amended to stipulate the equality of all ethnic groups. During this period, the state began to protect lawful rights and interests of minority identities and uphold and develop the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China’s ethnicities. Discrimination against, and oppression of, any nationality was prohibited. Furthermore, any acts that would undermine the unity of the various cultural or ethnic identities or instigate their secession were also prohibited. A key development at this time was the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities enacted in 1984, in which six articles address minority groups’ rights, of which include rights of language use (Zhou 2004). Article 37 states that:

In schools which mainly recruit students of minority nationalities, textbooks in languages of minority nationalities should be used where conditions allowed. Languages for instruction should also be the languages of the minority nationalities concerned. Primary school students of higher grades and secondary school students should learn [the] Chinese language. Putonghua [Mandarin Chinese], which is commonly used throughout the country, should be popularized among them. (Hu and Seifman 1987, p. 178)

From this declaration it is evident that although Mandarin Chinese remains crucial to educational goals and economic mobility, the rights of minority children to learn their native tongue and develop their sense of ethnic identity is theoretically protected under law.

This protection of local languages was further bolstered under ‘The Law of National Regional Autonomy of the People’s Republic of China’, which was ratified in 1984. This law promulgates rights for minority groups to use their native languages and writing systems. It is also stated in Section 6 of the Ninth Five – Year Plan for China’s Educational Development that ‘the translation and publication of teaching materials for ethnic minority education should be ensured’ (MOE 1982). Having minority languages protected by law is a huge step towards legitimizing those languages as both valuable to individuals and to the wider language ecology of the nation.

In Article 12 it is stated that the Chinese language shall be the basic oral and written language for education in schools and other educational institutions. However, schools or other educational institutions which mainly consist of students from ethnic minority groups may use the language of the respective ethnic community or the native language commonly adopted in that region (MOE 1995). This flexibility in allowing local populations to decide upon the appropriate language of instruction for schools in their regions was an extremely significant development in fostering the ideal of educational equality for all Chinese children. The main

principles decided upon during these changes included recognition that mother tongue-based learning for minority children is crucial for their cognitive development as well as their sense of social inclusion in the multicultural environment of modern China.

## 10 Language Situation in Southwest China

Southwest China is a region that is socially and economically lagging behind the coastal regions. It is home to many ethnic minority groups in China, such as Miao, Sui, Qiang, Yi and Tujia. The Miao people were believed to have lived in the Yellow River Basin before being defeated by Han tribes and forced to migrate south to the Yangtze River. The Miao were later displaced by Chinese imperial troops and withdrew to a slash-and-burn economy in the higher mountain slopes in Hunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces. In the twenty-first century, the Miao who live in Southwestern China have a population of 8.9 million, half of whom live in Guizhou province. There are six autonomous prefectures in Guizhou where the ethnic variations of Miao people are the principal populations. Outside China, Miao subgroups in Southeast Asia and immigrants living in the United States, France and Australia account for proximately another 4.5 million (China National Statistics Bureau 2002).

Previously Miao people were regarded by Han Chinese as mountain-dwellers and barbarians as they did not have written language or other expressions deemed to be cultured by the ruling majority. In the 1930s, the Chinese Nationalist party followed the policy of assimilating tribal people into the Chinese nation. Miao was not officially recognized as an individual nationality until the 1950s when the Communist party came to power. During this period, the local government conducted a number of sociolinguistic surveys. Different Miao scripts were created in accordance with the phonological variations of the wider Miao language, all of which eventually adopted the Latin orthography. A forum on Miao and its written format was held in Guiyang in October 1956 to mediate on the direction and place of ethnic minority languages in a unified China. In the 1980s after the Cultural Revolution, the local government conducted classes to increase literacy among Miao people. In Dafang County for example, adult and community-based illiteracy rates in the area dropped from 89.5 % in 1981 to 35.5 % in 1985. In the Bijie region, in the 1980s, a total of 12,000 Miao people attended Miao language classes (Wu 2012). Guizhou province has set up eight Ethnic Minority Teacher Academies in order to strengthen minority language education. These colleges have trained 40,000 graduates, of which 75.5 % are from ethnic minorities (Ding et al. 2013). In 1993, Yunnan province set up a Steering Committee on Minority Language Affairs under whose leadership, a group of linguists collaborated to standardize the Yi language using Yi ideograms. As a result of these efforts, a dictionary of Yi was published in 1996. These measures demonstrate a growing awareness among public authorities that China's diverse language ecology is worth preserving and that it is vital for the

continued economic and social development of the nation. By recording and creating writing systems for local languages, minority children can attain literacy in their native tongues which in turn helps them achieve literacy in Mandarin Chinese, all of which empowers them to be more economically and socially mobile.

Many minorities consider their distinctive ethnic language as a crucial part of their identity and require their children to learn and speak their mother tongue at home. A look at one Miao village at Xuan'en, Hunan province, serves as an example. Wu (1999), states that the local Miao families have strict rules about daughters-in-law learning and speaking the Miao language at home. Within one family, at least one daughter-in-law needs to be Miao minority. In the Feng family, members from 2-year-old children to those in their 60s and 70s can speak fluent Miao. They speak Putonghua to outsiders, but are required to speak Miao at home. Adults can sing Miao folksongs and tell folk stories. According to Wu (1999, p. 83), even the dogs, cows and sheep can follow the Miao language commands, which shows the centrality of Miao to the group's sense of its cultural identity and metaphysical space in the world.

Another example is Sui, a language with a high intergenerational vitality. In primary schools, teachers use Sui for early schooling and then shift to standard modern Chinese Mandarin, commonly called Putonghua, as the instructional language from fourth grade. According to a survey conducted in Southeast Guizhou province in 1995, 51.06 % of participants considered the proper method of bilingual education involved learning the Miao language before learning Putonghua. 34.47 % considered the preferable model to be teaching in two languages simultaneously (BGEA 1995). This reveals the crucial importance that local populations place on their ancestral languages. In this particular case, learning Sui, as a signifier of culture and history, far outweighed the potential economic and social benefits of learning Mandarin Chinese.

Despite Miao's limited presence outside its cultural homes, families attach more than merely material status to language. Fortunately, learning and being schooled in native-tongues in early education does not detract from those students' abilities to achieve mastery over their second language, which reveals the importance of bilingual education programs for the preservation of native languages and the learning of additional languages.

In recent decades, China's modernization has had a great impact on the once locked-away minority groups, a fact which is evident in observable changes to minority language use. Stanford and Evans (2012), through the examination of the sociolinguistic situation of Sui and Qiang minority groups in Southwest China, point out that with the development of transportation and communication, as well as labor migration to the coastal cities, Putonghua is gaining sociolinguistic influence on the usage of Sui and Qiang languages. During the 1940s, Qiang was so remote that no Qiang-speaking villages were accessible by wheeled vehicle (Graham 1958). As a result of this isolation, Qiang remained relatively uninfluenced by the majority Mandarin language. However, with greater mobility and increased access to remote places, Putonghua influence is now felt in Qiang languages. This is evident in the fact that Chinese loanwords have made the 'double H' combination possible in the

Qiang language, dramatically altering its spoken variants. For Sui, a new tone (H) is being reinforced in the tone system through daily use of Southwest Putonghua loanwords. Noticeably, older generation women are monolingual and can speak ‘authentic’ versions of local languages, while young generations and men are usually bilingual, partly due to their increased exposure to the multilingual labor markets outside the villages.

Taijiang County in Guizhou province is considered to be the ‘heartland’ of Miao culture where Miao ethnic identity is professed by 97 % of the local population. However, in 2002, 9 out of 187 villages did not speak Miao. In the nearby villages such as Danzai, the number of people who could speak Miao was also decreasing. In recent years, a number of Miao language rescue campaigns have been initiated by local governments and clubs set up to teach Miao, as well as ethnic songs and dances during the weekends. In local schools, minority culture teaching and research divisions have also been established (Lu 2010). These efforts reflect more than a nostalgic desire for old customs. Language is a crucial vehicle for cultural practices and is thus seen as an indispensable part of the dissemination of history and identity across generations. Perhaps less obviously however, access to local languages serves the vital function of ensuring that local children are not excluded from educational achievement, which is often the key factor in pulling themselves, their families and communities out of systemic poverty and social alienation, even in a nation as developed as China. The preservation of minority languages through implementing sound bilingual education programs thus serves as way in which education equality can be realized, not just theorized, within the multicultural landscape of modern China.

## **11 Xinjiang Uyghur Language Education: The Gap between National Policy and Reality**

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is special in China due to its unique religious, social and cultural background, and because of political contestation about its place in China. At all times during China’s long history, there have been various ethnic minority groups inhabiting the XUAR area including Uyghur, Hui and Turkic peoples. In the early years of the Communist regime, a large number of ethnic Han Chinese were encouraged by the government to migrate to this area, so that today Han Chinese account for approximately 40 % of the population in XUAR. A nationalist separatist movement has become a serious concern for the current government in recent years.

Bilingual education in this region has its own particular traits but has continually been impacted upon by the central government’s language policies since 1949. During the first stage of Chinese bilingual education, ethnic minority children were encouraged to attend schools and the enrolment in primary schools in Xinjiang increased more than 130 %, from 307,000 to 718,000. In secondary schools, student numbers surged from 16,162 to 61,000 (Benson 2004). However, as pointed out by

Meng and Xing (2015) an analysis of government minority language policies revealed that language education at this stage largely referred to the teaching of Modern Standard Chinese (Putonghua) not necessarily appreciating and promoting ethnic languages. The major objective of the push to raise attendance rates was to increase literacy levels among minority language speakers. However, there were no regulations with regard to the levels of proficiency required in minority languages, nor detailed curriculum documents for the teaching of those languages. Even the terminology 'bilingual language education' did not appear in government language policy until after the national economic reform of the 1980s. After this point of reform, the concept of bilingual language education started to be accepted by policy makers and became a focus of language policy and planning activities. The objective of bilingual education became the 'integration of Minority and Han languages' (min-han jiantong) in order to achieve solidarity between ethnic groups and Han Chinese.

During the 10 years of Cultural Revolution, the education system effectively ceased to exist with students abandoning schools due to social and political upheaval. The beginning of 1980s however, saw large numbers of students returning to schools and a renewed focus on the importance of education and education policy. Students attending primary schools increased to 43 % and illiteracy within the Uyghur population also decreased from 45 % to 26 % (Gladney 2004).

Rapid development of bilingual education in XUAR started from 2004. This increased after that year's landmark language policy, which was published by the local government to promote bilingual education (Meng and Xing 2015). Research was conducted into language issues, and large numbers of bilingual textbooks were published, both of which opened the door for more students to attain education in their native languages alongside Mandarin Chinese. The bilingual objective of education has been reiterated by both central and local governments so as to enable minority high school graduates to become competent in both minority and Han languages. This ensures that cultural heritages, identities, and languages are maintained while simultaneously providing students with the linguistic tools to participate in both the Chinese and global economies.

From 2010 onwards, a slowing down of bilingual education has been observed and a number of policy adjustments were made by local governments. The major reasons for this include the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the central government's language policy. Even questions of scripts pose particular vexations as governments seek to alter, enshrine, and intervene in particular characteristics of languages. This attempt at widespread standardization of languages minimizes the significance of local differences. In the past, 'Uyghur script was altered three times from Arabic to Cyrillic, to Latin and then to a modified Arabic script, which is used today' (Grose 2010, p. 98). These policies and associated interventions failed to address regional identity differences and lack a structure to classify various education goals at different levels of ability and achievement (Meng and Xing 2015). Resistance from minority groups pushed governments to make adjustments to the language policy. The emphasis was not only on the promotion of bilingual education, but also the appropriateness and scientific legitimacy of promoting multilingual education practices. Government bilingual language policies also diversified according

to the situations and needs of different areas. Some of these diversifications involved long-term bilingual goals, and other were more mid-term. In the government documents, “The Mid-Long Term Educational Reform and Development Plan for XUAR” (2010–2020) and the “Bilingual Education Development Plan for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Schools in Ethnic Autonomous Regions” (2010–2020), the goals of bilingual education were expressed as needing to expand ethnic and Han mixed classes as well as bilingual classes. This was done in order to gradually realize the usage of a national commonly used language for teaching and to enable ethnic minority students to master and use both national commonly used languages and their ethnic minority languages. These policies in the region show an increasing awareness that education equality for areas with high levels of multi-ethnic and multicultural populations rely on adequate bilingual programs to achieve educational success. With education now so privileged in Chinese society as both a material tool and signifier of culture and civilization, it is imperative that minority learners of all ages are not excluded from and denied the opportunity of realizing these goals.

## 12 Challenges for Ethnic Minority Language Maintenance

As mentioned earlier, on the macro level, ethnic minority languages are protected by the law in China. Moreover, in different provinces there are relevant language policies supporting and promoting minority language education despite the disruption that occurred during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution and other ideological social movements between 1966 and 1976. However, the gap between policy goals and the ways in which they are implemented persists as a significant challenge to China’s education system. Discrepancies between government policies and practice have been pointed out by a number of studies (Wang and Phillion 2009).

Despite the apparent promotion of multilingualism, more minority languages in China are endangered. Poverty, lack of funding and qualified bilingual teachers, and the often discriminatory attitude of local government officials toward ethnic minority language and culture, all contribute to a decline in the linguistic ecology of China. The rapid economic development in recent years has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. In some remote areas such as Southwest China, Xinjiang and Tibet, there are many people still living in poverty with low levels of literacy. Among the 55 minority groups, 40 have lower than average percentages of college graduates and 43 have lower than average percentages with secondary education (Zhou 2001). Of the large minority groups, Uyghur and Tibetans have much lower educational outcomes.

A further problem related to educational equality in China is that, for thousands of years, ethnic minorities have been perceived as ‘barbarians’. Some local Han officials still hold stereotypical and discriminatory views towards ethnic minority culture which has a negative impact on the enactment of law. Nima (2001) asserts that some local Han officials in minority regions interpret minority language and

culture as ‘backwardness’ and Han language and culture as ‘civilization.’ This is despite the fact that Article 53 in the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities in 1984 states, ‘autonomous government should encourage officials and masses of all ethnic groups to respect each other’s languages and scripts’ (as cited in Zhou 2004, p. 78).

Ethnic minority groups often live in the less developed areas of China, such as Guizhou, Yunnan, Xinjiang and Tibet. In these areas, funding for bilingual education becomes a significant burden for local governments, especially when inadequately planned and implemented bilingual education programs become more costly than monolingual education (Li, T. 2013; Li, X. 2013; Zhao 2014). Lack of community support is another reason for the discrepancy between bilingual policy and its implementation, as pointed out in the Survey of Minority Language Situation (1999).

In 1982, the PRC Constitution required Modern Standard Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) to be promoted nationally. Since then, additional legislation has been adapted to increase the spread of Chinese, especially in the realm of education (Bruhn 2008, p. 7). The impact of the promotion of Modern Standard Chinese/Putonghua on minority language preservation has been significant. The use of Putonghua is protected by the law, represented by *The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language*. In September 2001, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the State Language Commission (SLC) initiated a nation-wide evaluation project to promote the standard spoken and written Chinese. The standards for evaluation are set up by MOE and SLC. All cities in China were classified into three categories according to administrative division, and observation groups were sent to the primary cities to check the evaluation process. In order to meet the national standard, Putonghua training and tests were booming especially in government departments and in service industries (Yu 2013). How to keep the balance between standardization and promotion of Putonghua and the protection and preservation of minority languages becomes a great challenge for policy makers and education practitioners alike (Yu 2013). The emphasis on testing in Mandarin appears at odds with the broader curriculum changes that were instituted to refocus education practices on student needs. The promulgation of standardized testing as a means of evaluating language proficiency by the Ministry highlights how official policy is not always implemented to its full extent by relevant bodies. By focusing on very narrow parameters of academic achievement in the national language, minority and immigrant students are immediately disadvantaged and placed against unaccommodating and exclusionary education ideals that undermine their sense of belonging and ultimately erode the tenets of multicultural citizenship.

### 13 Conclusion

China is a multicultural nation comprised of multiple ethnic groups that have settled in the national territory throughout history and have become a part of its national identity. China's rise as a global economic and political leader has increased the multicultural nature of its constituents, as the speed and level of penetration of global and local information reaches more and more communities and breaks down previous boundaries of isolation. In response to globalization, China's conceptions of citizenship and multiculturalism have dramatically changed with language and minority rights being enshrined in constitutional law since the 1980s. Language plays a crucial part in attaining the nation's economic, social, cultural and political aims.

Language policies play a significant part in fulfilling Chinese government political objectives, which are always heavily impacted by political movements and power. On the one hand, minority languages are protected and respected by law, but are difficult to implement because of the often derisive attitude to minority languages of government officials. On the other hand, Putonghua is promoted nationwide by a highly centralized and targeted political power and therefore is implicated in the endangerment of minority languages. The efforts to achieve the balance between Putonghua promotion and minority language maintenance are rarely observable. Discrepancies exist between the language laws in China at the macro level and the implementation at the micro level in different regions, especially in Yunnan, Guizhou, Xinjiang and Tibet, which have a large population of ethnic minorities in historical and current times.

Some scholars argue that the recent practice of Chinese language policy reflects a 'social-Darwinist' attitude toward language vitality (Zhou and Ross 2004). Under this conception it is argued that language policy has been deliberately exclusive and aimed at killing off languages, which are in any case, under threat by systemic promotion of Mandarin. This can be justified in Social-Darwinist language as merely allowing language natural selection to take place, but is really illustrative of a concerted effort to ignore and even suppress linguistic diversity. As has been shown however, linguistic diversity is critical for educational equality, as allowing and promoting the use of minority languages helps those students attain better levels of education, which is a stated ambition of the Chinese government and its policy frameworks. To ignore the multicultural reality of the Chinese citizenry by failing to adequately provide bilingual education programs amounts to neglecting the stated aims and pedagogical position of the Ministry of Education. It is therefore incumbent upon the ministry to continue the path towards realizing in practice the goals and objectives that have begun to be expressed in policy and enshrined in Law.



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