

Education of Ethnic Minorities in Contemporary China¹

The Stalin's theory of "nationality" has been accepted by the Communist Party of China since the day of its founding in 1921. When Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, the new government of the People's Republic followed almost all system designing and relevant policies that the Soviet Union had practiced towards "minority nationalities" (Ma Rong, 2004: 167-168). As the base for such system settings and policy enforcement, an official "nationality recognition" campaign and identification of the "nationality status" for each Chinese citizen was necessary. This new system with a series of favorable policies towards "minority nationalities" has formed the relationship among all ethnic groups in China in the last half century.

After the recognition campaign of the "nationalities" in the 1950s and early 1960s, there are officially recognized 56 "nationalities" (ethnic groups) in contemporary mainland China, including the Han majority and 55 minority groups. The population sizes of these groups varied from 1,137 million (Han) to 2,965 people (Luoba) in 2000. The geographic distribution patterns of these groups are quite diversified. Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Mongolians live more concentrated in their traditional residential areas while Han, Manchu, and Hui are spread throughout the nation. A number of autonomous areas were established for ethnic minorities where they lived in compact communities, even though in most cases they did not constitute a majority of the local population². The total areas of these autonomous areas are consisted of 64 percent of the territory of mainland China.

There are over 80 languages used among these ethnic groups. The language usage patterns among the Chinese ethnic groups can be classified into three main groups: (1) three groups (Han, Hui, and Manchu) use Chinese Mandarin as their mother tongue³; (2) twelve groups use their own language and writing scripts (Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghur, Kazak, Kirghiz, Korean, Yi, Lahu, Jingpo, Xibo, and Russian); (3) the remaining groups have a spoke language but not a written script that is in common use. For these groups, the Chinese writing system is commonly used though they may have a phonetic script based on their native language. These minority scripts were developed by the Chinese government, and in some cases are used in the early years of schooling before the transition to the Chinese script. These groups were either with a very small population or have been assimilated by the Han to a certain extent, kept their spoken language but use Chinese in writing (*Encyclopedia of China*, 1986:554)⁴.

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² For detailed information of these autonomous areas about when they were established, their geographic locations and ethnic structure of their population at the time they established, see Ma Rong, 2006: 96-97.

³ Manchu used to have its language, but it is no longer used by the majority of this group even before the 1911 Revolution when the Qing Manchu Empire was overthrown.

⁴ There are other classifications of these languages. For example, they were classified into four groups: (A) writing systems in widespread use, (B) writing systems used primarily for religious matters, (C) writing systems used only in limited geographic areas, and (D) writing systems created this century and currently in limited use (Stites, 1999: 101).

The Chinese government helped several minority groups to create or adjust their writing scripts in the 1950s⁵. The result is that these newly created writing scripts have not been used in a massive way, mainly due to their small population size and uncommon usage in society. There was also a reverse trend after the “Cultural Revolution”. The new scripts created in the 1950s for Uygur and Kazak using Latin scripts were changed back to Arab scripts in 1982⁶.

The Constitution of the PRC and relevant laws clearly guarantee the legal right of minority groups to “use and develop” their own languages⁷. In autonomous areas established for different ethnic minorities, local minority languages are official working languages in administration, elections, courts, broadcasting, publication, and schools (Ma Yin, 1984:17-18). Therefore, school education can be conducted in minority languages as permitted by the legislation, a system has been in practice since the 1950s. In many communities, the system is permitted (has been since the 1950s) but is not “in practice” in many minority communities for a variety of reasons. This paper discusses several essential issues, including language of instruction, related to current situation of minority education in contemporary China as well as the problems this educational system are facing after the reforms of economic system and formation of labor markets in the 1980s.

I. “ Pluralist-unity” Framework of Language Pattern in China

1 . The two basic functions of languages

In general, languages might be considered to have two basic functions regarding group identity and group development.

Its first function is as the carrier of the group’s cultural heritage and historical records. The language is the cultural symbol of group identity, and all history and cultural traditions of the groups have been recorded in their language. Without their languages, the history and cultural achievement could not be inherited and carried on by the descendants of the groups. “Language, religion, customs and pigmentation are often taken to describe objective ‘cultural markers’ or differentiae” in ethnic identification (Smith, 1991: 23). When people consider of the possibility of losing their language in the future, they connect this possibility with the fate of their group. They would consider this fate a symbol of the destruction of their culture and history as well as the sign of their complete assimilation by another dominant group. That would be a tragic end of the tradition and identity of this group. Therefore, the language issue often becomes very sensitive and emotional among minority people and their elites. At the same time, the right of preserving their own language and traditional culture is one of the basic human rights supported by the international

⁵ In the 1950s, the Chinese government created writing scripts for 10 groups (Zhuang, Yi, Buli, Miao, Dong, Hani, Lisu, Li, Wa and Naxi); adjusted writing characters for Dai, Lahu, and Jingpo; designed new scripts for Uygur and Kazak using Latin scripts (Ma Yin, 1984:17). This policy also followed the Soviet Model. In the 1930s after Communist Party took the power and “recognized” various “nationalities” in Russia, the government created scripts for minority nationalities without writing systems.

⁶ The new writing systems using Latin scripts for Uygur and Kazak were officially enforced in 1964 by the State Council, and were abandoned by the People’s Congress of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in 1982 (*General Situation of Xinjiang Autonomous region*, 1985: 55).

⁷ The legislation of the right of minority language in China after 1949 has been repeated in all versions of the Constitutions in 1954, 1978, 1982 and 1999 (Zhou, 2000a: 130).

society today⁸.

The second function of language is instrumentality. Languages are tools people use to communicate with others and to learn knowledge from others. By speaking the same language, people communicate with others verbally; and by reading and writing characters, people communicate with others over long distances and learn about history from written records and literature. All human knowledge has been recorded in various languages. The motive for people to learn and master a useful language, which is commonly used for communication and receiving knowledge in a wide geographic and cultural scope, might be purely based on interest rather than emotion.

In the process of social and economic development, the interactions among different groups became intensified, and people have to select the most useful languages to learn and use to communicate with other groups. In this process, the languages of many small groups may vanish, simply because their functions as communication tools decline with modernization and globalization. The disappearance of languages is inevitable though many people cannot emotionally accept this crucial reality. If a small group insists on protecting its own language but at the same time, refuses to learn other useful languages, the group's limited capacity to learn and communicate will place them at a disadvantage in social and international competition, and hinder their future development opportunities.

2. The community, national, regional, and international languages

Because of the nature of languages as instrumental tools, any political entities and economic organizations would promote, not necessarily by legal means or official regulations, one language in daily mainstream usage in its "territory" for communication. This policy will not only increase the efficiency of communication and reduce of its cost, but promote ethnic integration in political, economic, and cultural aspects as well. "Through the centuries, language supremacy and the 'purity' of the dominant language have been focal points of struggle over power and over national or ethnic group identity in many lands" (Simpson and Yinger, 1985: 401). The authorities of a nation-state will use a common language to build a "cultural base" for the identity of the nation, and language will play a role as the carrier of its "national culture"⁹. There are various theories analyzing the relation between national language and national identity in the nation-building process. Some studies noted how one written language used in administration shaped national identities in Europe and Asia (Anderson, 1991), while others emphasized how national identity shaped "national" languages (Joseph, 2004: 13).

In today's world, the function of instrumentality of languages has become much stronger than any time in human history. To study a foreign language in school is required in most modern nations today. "In recent times, real isolation has become a rarity" (Dorian, 1999: 30). There are no absolutely isolated groups today who can escape from the global trend of foreign language learning. Therefore, "common languages" in a geographic-administrative scope for communication and education

⁸ As early as the 1930s, *the League of the Nations* declared that "no restriction will be imposed on the free use by any national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, in religion, in the press or in publications of any kind or at public meetings" (Roach, 2005: 15).

⁹ Even in ancient China, the leaders understood very well how a common language would play an important role in administrative efficiency and creating a new identity. The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty immediately enforced to use only one language script in its territory in 221 B. C.

would emerge at different levels: at a local community level, at a national level, at a regional level, and at an international level. Some languages became a common language in multi-ethnic communities according to the structure of their relative population size or power distribution. Some languages became the common languages within nations while local dialects of the common language are no longer taught in schools. Some languages are becoming the common languages in a large region, such as Spanish in Latin America and Russian among the former USSR republics. Those languages become popular for many reasons, but the need of a common language for communication in a nation or a region plays a major role.

When the international communication, for diplomacy, trade, exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, needs a common tool, one language will play this role¹⁰. Among English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Arab, and other regional popular languages before the 20th century, each of them has its glorious tradition and literature masters, but only one of them will become the most popularly used and learned language. It turned out to be English. The total size of English-speaking population (the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, Singapore, etc.) is huge and important. The U.S. has a strong influence in Europe and Asia after WWII in economy and diplomacy. These factors worked together made English become an “international language”. As Huntington describes: “English in the world’s way to communicating interculturally just as the Christian calendar is the world’s way of tracking time, Arabic numbers are the world’s way of counting, and the metric system is, for the most part, the world’s way of measuring” (Huntington, 1996:61).

It was reported that there were about 150,000 languages on the earth about 10,000 years ago whereas the population was around 1 million at that time. There are about 7,000 languages remained today and the world population reached 6.4 billion. It is estimated that the total number of human languages will reduce to 4,500 by the end of the 21st century. The international trade and introduction of computer will accelerate the vanishing speed of minor languages. Some argue that it could do just the opposite by making it easier to use native language and perfecting translation software to the degree that basic meanings can be communicated by computer. It may also make being bilingual and trilingual much easier than before. There is also increasing concerns about that the disappearances of languages will rob the earth of important aspects of its heritage just as endangered plants and animals may make life on earth less sustainable. In short, this is a touchy area of many scholars who are concerned about the McDonaldization for the world.

In order to develop national economy with advanced sciences and technology, many people believed that all nations now established modern educational systems following the school model of industrialized countries. There is also a debate about whether there is in fact a convergence or not. In the schools, standardized knowledge in sciences, technology, humanities, and social sciences are taught in similar programs and curriculum. There has emerged “a growing need for some

¹⁰ Some people considered creating a “world language” and there were campaigns to introduce “world language” in China in the 1930s. One of Lu Xun’s (a famous Chinese writer) foreign friends was a teacher of “world language” in Shanghai. Stalin also talked about “a new international language, it is not German, not Russian or English, but a new language absorbing the essences of all national and regional languages” (Stalin, 1950: 557-558). It is a “Utopia” to “create a new language” without a history and a “base” population.

formal education, because national unity and a better qualified workforce were thought to demand linguistic and educational homogenization. This rapidly made the official language the sole medium of education in the West” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999: 43). A common teaching language is a rational choice in modern school systems in most countries. It will be much easier for teachers to prepare textbooks and organize courses, and much easier for students to continue their study from a low grade to a high one in the school system. The common language used in school education will make the graduates easy to communicate with others in their future career. Because of above reasons, a teaching language system should be very carefully designed in multi-ethnic nations with various ethnic languages.

In China as in other multi-ethnic nations, the language policy in school has become an essential issue in educational development. Such a policy will deal with two facts. The first is that many ethnic groups have their own languages and they wish to keep using it. The second is an increasing need for a common language in social and economic development.

There are several options for the policy makers to select:

(1) “To designate a single language as the main medium of public education and offer special immersion programmes for children who enter the school system with limited proficiency in this languages”; (2) “To designate a single language of instruction but introduce a programme of translational bilingualism for children with limited proficiency in this language”; (3) “bilingual-bicultural maintenance programmes.....to use both the majority language—in the US case, English---and the (minority) student’s home language as a medium of instruction in different parts of the curriculum throughout the student’s time in the public school system” (Patten and Kymlicka, 2003:21-22)¹¹.

Some considered the language policy of Marxist-Leninist nations as a three-stage process: (1) pluralism, (2) bilingualism, and (3) monolingualism (Connor, 1984: 254-255). However, it is not only a trend in socialist countries. Wright notes that “20 years ago that bilingualism is accepted by much of the world as the solution to language diversity. Such acceptance was then out of favor, however, in all those countries where national state ideology had taken hold. Learning the national language was in the minority’s interest since it served mobility and inclusion” (Wright, 2004: 247).

It is natural that the language of the majority will gradually become popular among all groups as a nation-wide communication tool accompanying economic development and political integration. When the minority groups start to participate in international communication, “members of minorities who wish to maintain their first language and have access to global networks are faced with the need to manage personal trilingualism” (Wright, 2004: 247-248).

3. A “pluralist-unity” framework for a national language system

In his study of the ethnic relations in Chinese history, Professor Fei Xiaotong

¹¹ Other literature discussed the similar patterns of language policies in the US (Simpson and Yinger, 1985: 401). When President George W. Bush signed “the English Language Acquisition Act” in January 8, 2002, the bilingual education system in the US was officially abandoned (Cai Yongliang, 2007: 278).

suggested a framework of “pluralist-unity” to describe the basic pattern of ethnic relations in Chinese history (Fei Xiaotong, 1989). There are two levels in the structure of this model: one is at national level of the Chinese nation, emphasizing political unity; another is at the group level of ethnic minorities, emphasizing cultural diversity (in language, religion, customs, etc.). When we consider the language usage and teaching languages in school in China, this “pluralist-unity” framework provides a very comprehensive model.

First, about 91.6 percent of the Chinese population belongs to Han majority, and the Chinese Mandarin of the Han is obviously the most popular language in the Han regions and government institutions at the national level¹². Second, for the minority groups with a large population and own language, both the Mandarin and minority language in their own autonomous areas should be official languages in public and schools¹³. For those groups with a relatively small population and no writing scripts, Mandarin would be the language used for textbooks, and minority language will be used by teachers as supplementary language in verbal teaching. It should be emphasized that Mandarin is not the only “official national language” in China, but it is the common language nation-widely used for interethnic communication.

There are also many discussions about the future of minority languages in China, especially those only used by the groups with a very small population, regarding the diversity of human cultural heritage. On one hand, these languages should be carefully reserved by the groups and studied by scholars; on the other hand, if the majority of the group gradually no longer uses their language in a natural process of modernization without administrative enforcement, this trend cannot be reversed by anyone.

Because both the Mandarin and minority languages are official languages in minority autonomous areas¹⁴, the Chinese government established a parallel school system in autonomous areas since the 1950s, from kindergarten, primary school to university. One is an “ordinary school” system, using the Mandarin as teaching language while teaching English (or another foreign language) as the second language; The Han, Hui, Manchu and some members of other groups also attend these “ordinary schools” if their parents prefer their children to be educated in Mandarin. Another one is “ethnic school” system, using the local minority language as the medium of instruction while Mandarin is taught as a second language (in some areas also teach English or another foreign language as the third language). Minority students in these autonomous areas usually attend these schools¹⁵. This is the dual educational system in today’s China in the aspect of ethnicity. It cannot be called “bilingual education” because only one language is used as the teaching language and another one is taught

¹² The three groups with Mandarin as mother tongue (Han, Hui and Manchu) together consist of 93 percent of the China’s population in 2000. The majority of other 40 groups also speak Mandarin. It does not like the “two-way programs” in the U.S. and Europe where 50 percent majority and 50 percent minority children are taught by a fully bilingual teacher (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999:50).

¹³ There are 21 ethnic minority languages now used in school books.

¹⁴ But not in Ningxia and some lower level autonomous areas established for Hui and Manchu, because Hui and Manchu groups use the Mandarin as mother tongue.

¹⁵ In some areas, when the total population of a minority is very small and it is not efficient to establish a separate school for this group, its students might attend the “ordinary school”. In multi-ethnic areas, they may attend “minority school” established for another larger minority group. For example, some Tatar students attend Uygur schools in some areas in Xinjiang.

as a second language¹⁶. But the policy is often incorrectly called “*shuangyu jiaoxue*”.

By the above structure of teaching language design, the legal right of ethnic minorities to use and develop their own language can be guaranteed¹⁷. At the same time, the Han majority living in minority regions still may receive their education in Mandarin language. Actually, the Han consists of a significant part of the total population in many minority autonomous areas. Table 1 presents the percentages of the Han in total population in five autonomous regions (at the provincial level)¹⁸. It indicates that Mandarin is still a common language in minority areas, not only because it is widely used in local communities whereas Han population is a significant part in total, but for communication between minority areas and other Han provinces as well. A significant proportion of many minority populations also master Mandarin language. It is no doubt that the national common language in today’s China is the Mandarin, and it is also the language tool for national unity in aspects of political, economic, and cultural affairs.

Table 1. The Han in Total Population in Five Minority Autonomous Regions (%)

Areas	1953	1964	1982	1990	2000
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region	85.6	87.0	84.5	81.6	77.2
Tibet Autonomous Region	0.0	2.9	4.9	3.7	2.9
Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	6.9	31.9	40.4	37.6	39.2
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	-	69.2	68.1	66.7	65.4
Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region	62.1	58.9	61.7	60.9	61.6

Source: Economic Bureau of State Ethnic Affairs, 1991:43-44;
State Council Census Office, 1985: 218; 2002:18.

Since the education and teaching language is one of the key issues in understanding ethnic relations in China as well as the world, there have been many studies of minority education in China. Some discussed theoretical issues, and others studied the cases of specific groups (Zhou Minglang, 2000b; Tian, 1998; Wang and Mi, 1998; Postiglione, 1999 and 2006; Ha and Teng, 2001; Teng, 2001; Teng and Wang, 2002). The bilingual education has been a key topic discussed in the literature.

II. The Problems Faced by the Minority Schools during 1950-1980

The dual educational system has gradually established in minority regions in China since the 1950s. It should be noticed that modern schools had developed at very different pace of progress among the 56 groups before the 1950s. Some groups were more advanced and some fell behind. For example, there was no modern school

¹⁶ In recent 3-4 years, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has tried to practice a real “dual language courses” in primary and middle schools: all courses in humanities and social sciences (such as language, history, political science) are taught in mother minority language, and all courses in sciences (such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and computer) are taught in Mandarin Chinese. In 2007, there are about 150,000 minority students who attend such “bilingual programs” in Xinjiang (*China Ethnic News*, January 18, 2008).

¹⁷ It is important for minority groups to keep their language as teaching language in schools. “Schooling is the principal institution which produces ethnicity as linguistic community” (Balibar, 1996: 166).

¹⁸ The decline of the percentage of Han in total population after 1980s is mainly due to the impact of the national family planning programs which has been more restrictively enforced among the Han majority.

in Tibet before 1951. Therefore, the modern school system was gradually established at different foundations among minority groups in China. The significant variations in educational development among groups remain in 2000 after a half century development. Table 2 shows the variation among the 14 groups with a large population in educational achievement in 2000. For example, 45.5 percent of the Tibetan population never attended school while only 2.8 percent of Koreans never attended school.

Table 2. Educational Achievement of the Population Above Age 6 of 14 Groups (2000)

Group	Population of Age 6 and above								
	Never in school	Literacy class	Primary	Junior middle	High school	Specialized sec. school**	Univ.*	Graduate degree	Total (%)
Han	7.3	1.7	37.6	37.3	8.8	3.4	3.8	0.1	100.0
Zhuang	6.0	1.7	46.4	34.7	5.7	3.4	2.0	0.0	100.0
Manchu	4.6	0.5	37.5	40.4	8.5	3.6	4.7	0.1	100.0
Hui	15.6	2.7	36.8	29.0	8.3	3.5	4.0	0.1	100.0
Miao	17.1	3.4	50.9	21.5	3.3	2.3	1.4	0.0	100.0
Uyghur	8.8	2.8	53.1	24.6	4.3	3.6	2.7	0.0	100.0
Yi	21.2	4.8	51.6	16.4	2.6	2.2	1.1	0.0	100.0
Tujia	9.9	1.3	47.6	29.9	5.7	3.3	2.3	0.0	100.0
Mongol	7.2	0.7	37.3	34.7	10.2	4.6	5.1	0.1	100.0
Tibetan	45.5	6.1	35.2	7.7	1.7	2.5	1.3	0.0	100.0
Dong	9.1	3.0	49.8	28.4	4.4	3.3	2.1	0.0	100.0
Buli	20.3	2.5	50.7	20.3	2.4	2.5	1.3	0.0	100.0
Yao	8.2	2.5	52.3	27.7	4.6	2.8	1.9	0.0	100.0
Korean	2.8	0.5	20.4	43.1	19.8	4.9	8.4	0.2	100.0
Total	7.7	1.8	38.2	36.5	8.6	3.4	3.7	0.1	100.0

* Including both 4 year university graduates and 2 year college graduates.

** "Specialized secondary school" is a special training school system (3 year program) after junior middle school. It is also called "secondary technical school" in other literature (Sautman, 1999: 176).

Source: State Council Census Office, 2002: 563-567.

From the literature and my research experiences in minority regions in the past 20 years, there are several issues or problems in the Chinese minority education system since its establishment in the 1950s. Because some of them have been discussed by other studies, this paper only provides summary based on field research experiences.

1. Shortage of qualified minority teachers

Many minority groups in China did not have modern schools before the 1950s, especially those lived dispersively in mountain areas and plateau. Before the 1950s, the only places for their children to learn reading and writing were monasteries or private teaching house (Xie Qihuang, 1989: 37-51; Bass, 1998:2). Therefore, the first issue faced by these new "ethnic schools" was the lack of qualified teachers.

During the 1950s and 1960s, many young people of minority groups were recruited by special training programs and were trained as the first generation of minority school teachers. Because of short history of minority schools, the general levels of academic background and teaching skills of minority teachers, especially in the fields of natural sciences such as physics, mathematics, chemistry, and biology, are relatively weak. For example, the Tibetan teachers consisted of 24 percent in junior middle schools but only 2.7 percent in high school in the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1991(Ma Rong, 1996: 364). Another example we learned during our interviews in the 2003 Survey in Xinjiang is that a middle school teacher in Hetian Prefecture taught his students " $1/2 + 1/2 = 1/4$ " in his mathematic class. Therefore,

both number and quality of minority teachers in minority autonomous areas need to be increased and improved in order to develop minority education in local schools.

2. Quality of textbooks

Because some minority groups in China were still underdeveloped in the early 20th century, the knowledge of modern sciences and technology was introduced to many minorities in the 1950s for the very first time in history. The same was the case in many Han remote areas. The textbooks in some minority languages were started to be written and edited in the 1950s. They are mainly the translation from the textbooks in the Mandarin¹⁹. The teaching results of translated textbooks needed to be tested and improved through a long period of teaching practice. The expressions of the formulas, definitions, concepts, phrases, examples, and interpretations in a minority language need to be tested in classroom and revised over and over again, and then the quality of textbooks will be gradually improved.

The speed of developing minority language textbooks varies by group. For example, the translation of high school textbooks from Mandarin into Tibetan was only completed in the early 1990s. In Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces, the textbooks in local minority languages are still only available in primary schools or junior middle schools.

3. Local knowledge taught in school

The translated textbooks need further development to include local knowledge, traditional culture and history of the minorities. Otherwise, several problems will inevitably emerge. First, the ethnic cultural gap will remain in the school textbooks. The minority students might feel that they can learn few about their traditional culture, history, religion, and literature. Since the content of the textbooks mainly provide stories and figures of Han majority and a life style in urban or Han agricultural areas that they are not familiar, they might even feel that they are studying a stranger society, even the teaching language is their mother tongue. The situation has been noticed by the government, and some new textbooks have been improved in this aspect.

Second, after their gradation from school, some students will work as agricultural/animal husbandry laborers in their home villages, probably in grasslands or mountain areas. This is very common for them to return to home village after their graduation from junior middle school or high school in rural areas where students have few chances to pass the national examinations for college/university entrance, mainly due to poor quality of rural schools.

Because the content of the textbooks translated from the Han majority textbooks is designed for general knowledge (which is more related to urban society), minority graduates might find out that many useful knowledge and skills they need for agricultural works are not taught in textbooks. In our interviews in minority regions, many parents complained that their children cannot enter universities, and also fail to work in field as farmers or herdsman after spending 9 to 12 years in schools. The parents consider their investment in children's education was wasted. After spending several years in school, these students do not want to return to home community to become farmers and they are also lack of knowledge and skills to be a farmer or a herdsman. Some of them who can speak Mandarin left home and became temporary laborers in cities. But for those who received their education in minority language,

¹⁹ There were 1,400 different textbooks published in minority languages in China in 1988 for different courses (He Junfang, 1998: 78).

they would face a lot of difficulties in searching a job in city labor market.

4. Connection of ethnic schools and ordinary schools in some areas

In some minority areas, ethnic schools are established in a process first at primary school level, then junior middle school, then high school, and finally university. A small proportion of the junior middle school graduates attend specialized secondary school and became skilled laborers after graduation. Before the process completed, many minority students have to jump from an ethnic school at a low stage (e.g. a junior middle school or high school) to an ordinary school at a high stage (e.g. a high school or university) where Mandarin is the teaching language. Then they will have to face serious difficulties in another language environment.

Until the 1980s, there had been no Tibetan high school available in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The Tibetan students graduated from Tibetan junior middle schools had to attend ordinary high school where Mandarin is teaching language. After several decades, the situation of ethnic school system has been greatly improved but the gap among groups remains to a certain extent in some areas.

5. Lack of minority language teaching facilities in some disciplines

The departments of language and literature, history of minorities, philosophy and political economics were established in colleges and universities in minority regions in the 1950s as the first disciplines. But some other disciplines, especially in natural sciences and social sciences, had not been founded in universities and had not been taught by minority languages in some autonomous areas until the 1980s.

The graduate programs of minority students are also biased in universities. A large proportion of the minority graduate students are majoring in fields of the language, religion, history, and literature of their own groups. The unbalanced structure of disciplines in minority education might have some impacts on their fully participation in society and academic achievement²⁰. Besides, such a biased structure also has negative impacts on training of qualified middle school teachers for ethnic schools in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

There were few teachers who could really master two languages in teaching. Some minority teacher may speak Mandarin for daily conversation but cannot teach courses in Mandarin. On the other side, less and less Han teachers learn minority language, even they teach Mandarin course in minority schools. The lack of qualified bilingual teachers has been the key issue in bilingual education in China.

6. The policies in favor of minority students

In order to promote educational achievement of minority groups, the government has practiced a series of policies in favor of minority group members. The most significant policy has been the reducing standard of school enrollment of minority students at all levels, especially the college and university admission. The favorable regulations vary by regions.

“The Law on Regional Autonomy of Ethnic Minorities of the People’s Republic of China” was passed in 1984. Article 36 of this Law announced that local government of autonomous areas has the right “to decide the educational plans, establishment of schools, and curriculum, types of teaching, content of textbooks, teaching language, and methods of school recruitment of various schools” (Song Caifa, 2003: 363). Therefore, each autonomous region may design different policies

²⁰ The similar situation was also found in other nations. For example, the Black graduate students who received doctoral degree in the US in the 1980s also found more than 50 percent concentrated in education (Ellison and Martin, 1999:327).

in minority education, especially the standards of university admission.

In 1992, Ministry of Education issued a document (No. 13, 1992). It said that “for the minority students whose score reaches the bottom line of the national entrance examinations for high education, the mentioned admission standard, they can be recommended to ‘key-point’ universities²¹; for those whose score is 50 points lower than admission standard ordinary universities, they can be recommended to ordinary universities” (Bureau of Minority Education of Ministry of Education, 2004: 70).

The scales and methods of the policy designing in favor of minority students in “preferential admission” vary by region and change over time, depending on what university and departments are involved. In some areas (e.g. Inner Mongolia), minority students received additional 10 points²² in the national examinations of university entrance (the total points are about 750, vary by region). In other regions such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a quota system (for universities outside this Region, they must recruit at least 50 percent students from local minority groups, for the universities within the Region, 60 percent students should be recruited from local minorities) has been applied to guarantee the percentage of minority members in total university admission (about 50-60 percent) since the 1976 (Li Xiaoxia, 2003)²³.

This policy is different from the affirmative action in the US. First, in all schools and universities in the US, English is the teaching language. All students take examinations in English and their scores can be compared with each other. The affirmative action provides students from racial and ethnic minorities more opportunity to enter college or university. There is a parallel dual system in China’s education by teaching language: the Mandarin and a minority language. Then regardless which school system they wish to attend, minority students get a low entrance standard similar to the affirmative action in the US²⁴. But the examination scores in ordinary school system and minority school system cannot be compared since the content of examinations might be at different level of difficulty. In general, the difficulty of examinations in minority school is easier than that in ordinary school.

The positive result of these policies is the significant growth of the number of minority students in universities. But there are also some unpredicted negative consequences. First, this policy reduces the quality of minority students in universities in general. Second, some minority students have become to rely on this policy and reduced their efforts in studying. Third, due to the above two, there is a common impression about the low quality and capacity of university minority graduates in society. That has an unfavorable impact on their job searching after graduation.

²¹ In Chinese high education system, the universities and colleges are classified into three groups: (1) key-point universities; (2) ordinary universities, and (3) high technical colleges. They have different admission standards of national entrance examinations.

²² It is also called “bonus points” in some literature (Postiglione, 1999:11).

²³ For regional variation in “preferential admission” policies in university enrollment, the field interviews provided some examples (Sautman, 1999: 175-177; 183-193).

²⁴ This is why many areas like Xinjiang have its separate score standards for three different kinds of students: (1) “*min kao min*” (minority students who learn and take examinations in minority language); (2) “*min kao han*” (minority students who learn and take exams in Mandarin); and (3) “*han kao han*” (Han students who learn and take examinations in Mandarin).

Some officers, including both Han and minorities, “consider the number and percentage of minority students in school enrollment as the indicators of ethnic equality, (by reducing the admission standard) schools at different levels produced an unqualified ‘products’. That not only wasted educational resources and led to bad circulation, but further increased the educational gap between ethnic groups as well. This does not work for real interest of minority groups in a long run” (Zhou Chenghou, 1989: 59).

If the educational facilities (schools, universities and their teachers) did not “produce” qualified graduates, the facilities are considered “wasted” in China, especially there were some better candidates available but they could not enter schools by policy regulations. “Bad circulation” is a term commonly used in China. In educational studies, it often refers to such a circulation: the students with poor scores from middle schools entered universities under favorable policy, then they graduate and become teachers in middle schools, they offer poor courses to their students and that make their students to have lower capacities, and the next generation students would enter universities with favorable policy too, their achievement in university would be even lower. If a minority student can graduate from Xinjiang University with a score of 16 in physics (the total score is 100. Besides, the examination in Uyghur is easier than that for ordinary class), then he teaches physics in a high school in Aksu Prefecture, Xinjiang, his students would not be able to get a higher score in physics examinations in their entrance examination to university. This is the common beliefs of many scholars and teachers, but this conclusion needs to be proved by further empirical studies.

This situation is different from the “affirmative action” in the US, because all students in the US universities would attend same courses and take same examinations. When some minority students who had a lower score attend the course, teacher might reduce the speed or content in order to let these students to catch up with the others. That will lead some complains from advanced students who want to learn more and faster. In Xinjiang, all universities are actually divided into two parts: Mandarin division and minority division. Each division has all departments (physics, mathematics, history, etc.) and Han students and minority students are managed by different departments under their own division. They use different textbooks, taught by different teachers, take different examinations, and live in different dormitories. In deed, the situation just like that they study in “different universities”. There is no way to compare the scores or academic achievement of Han students and minority students, and that comparison is easy to be made in the US universities.

7. Social and professional communication of minority students after graduation

After their graduation from schools and entering job market, the students of minority schools often face two kinds of difficulties.

The first obstacle is their capacity of Mandarin language. In minority schools, Mandarin is a second language and often Mandarin language teachers are from minorities. Mandarin capacity of some of these teachers is not good enough for daily conversation and work communication. In the case of Xinjiang, there are few Han teachers in the Uyghur concentrated prefectures such as Hetian and Kashgar. Sometimes parents complained to us during interviews that Mandarin those Uyghur teachers speak cannot be understood by Han people.

The second is their language barrier in knowledge exchange with the mainstream. Since the knowledge and terminologies minority students learned from school is in

minority language, they cannot exchange opinions or discuss those issues with Mandarin speaking colleagues who are the majority in the circle. The function of language as communicative tool becomes very important.

Although above problems exist, the minority school system operated well and made progress in China in the past. The government policies in favor of minorities still act today. But since the 1980s when “system reform” started, the social system in China has changed a lot. The changes raise new challenges to the minority education systems in China.

III. New Issues Faced by the Minority Education in China since the 1980s.

Besides above issues, there are some new issues emerged since the 1980s. The Chinese government launched the “system reform and opening door” campaign in the early 1980s. All administrative, economic, and social systems in China have experienced fundamental reforms and changes. China today is still in the process of a transition from a central-planning system into a market-system. These changes certainly have some impact on minority education system.

1. The government emphasizes “economic development” and this policy leads to rapid increase of labor force in China.

In the series of social reforms, communes in rural areas disintegrated, state-owned enterprises in industrial and transportation sectors have been diversified, universities started to recruit students, and these changes made China’s economy developed fast. In the past 20 years, the annual growth rate of GDP of China has been around 8-10 percent. The size of the labor force increase rapidly. The total labor force in non-agricultural economic activities increased from 186.86 million in 1985 to 273.31 million in 2005 (State Statistical Bureau, 2006: 125), increased about 1.5 times.

The development of China’s economy increased the opportunities of rural youths (including those from minority groups) to get urban jobs. At the same time, the traditional employment system has also been changed in the process of reform. Under the system of central planned economy, the trained laborers (including university/college graduates, specialized secondary school graduates²⁵) would be assigned jobs as government employee and they usually entered non-agricultural sectors. Ordinary high school and junior middle school graduates in rural areas would return to home village to become farmers or herdsman. The people in one channel could not get into another channel of employment in the past.

When all non-agricultural enterprises became private, stock companies, joint venture enterprises, the official channel barrier was broken. Rural junior middle school graduates and high school graduates became the major body of total –urban temporary migrants who work in construction, transportation, industrial production, services, and all kinds of jobs in cities. There was estimated that about 118-120 million temporary migrants or “floating population” in China in 2005 (Research Group of the State Council, 2006: 3), and most of them came from rural areas.

Some minority graduates also joined this wave and spread into coast areas. For example, the Tibetan population lived outside traditional Tibetan areas (Tibet,

²⁵ In Chinese educational system, university education offers 4 year study after high school, college education offers 2 year study after high school; specialized secondary school offers 3-year training programs after junior middle school.

Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan) were 6,896 in 1982, then increased to 18,095 in 1990, and to 81,481 in 2000. Therefore, the system reform increased the opportunities for minority students, and the employment channels are now more flexible.

2. University enrollment increased rapidly

High education in China increased very fast since the reform. The year of 1977 was the first year to recruit university students after the “Cultural Revolution”. Universities and colleges recruited a total of 0.281 million students in 1980, they recruited 2.206 million in 2000 and 5.045 million in 2005 (State Statistical Bureau, 2006: 800). The freshmen of universities and colleges increased 7.85 times in the period of 1980-2000, or 18 times in the period of 1980-2005. Someone calls “the Great Leap Forward” of the China’s high education. The rapid growth of university students certainly causes several problems. First, the university facilities (dormitories, classrooms, equipments, etc.) will be a great shortage. Second, the issue of shortage of qualified teachers will become more serious. Third, there will be much more serious competition among graduates in job market.

Table 3 presents the percentage change of high education for 18 minority groups with a population above 1 million. Except Koreans who already be advanced in high education, all minority groups, all other 17 groups increased their percentage more than 5 times during 1982-2000.

According to the official statistics, there were only 1,300 minority students studying in universities in 1950, and the number increased to 42,900 in 1980, then increased to 953,200 in 2005 (Bureau of Economic Development of State Commission of Ethnic Affairs, 2006: 517). There was a 22.2 times growth during 1980-2005. In Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, there were only 6,455 minority students studying in universities in 1980, the number increased to 75,744 in 2005 (Xinjiang Statistical Bureau, 2006: 524), increased 11.7 time in the 25-year period. We can imagine when university graduates increased over 10 times while jobs do not increased at the similar speed, what would happen in job market.

Table 3. Percentage of “receiving high education” in total population above age 6 for several minority groups in China

	1982*	1990	2000	1982-2000*		1982*	1990	2000	1982-2000*
	*		0	*		*		0	*
Zhuang	0.26	0.65	2.0	7.7	Dong	0.24	0.70	2.1	8.8
Manchu	0.94	1.91	4.8	5.1	Yao	0.17	0.60	1.9	11.2
Hui	0.80	1.77	4.1	5.1	Korean	2.18	4.82	8.6	3.9
Miao	0.14	0.46	1.4	10.0	Bai	0.48	1.23	2.9	6.0
Uygur	0.39	1.10	2.7	6.9	Hani	0.05	0.20	0.7	14.0
Yi	0.10	0.30	1.1	11.0	Li	0.19	0.56	1.3	6.8
Tujia	0.18	0.82	2.3	12.8	Kazak	0.56	1.52	4.1	7.3
Mongol	0.95	2.19	5.2	5.5	Dai	0.12	0.34	1.0	8.3
Tibetan	0.24	0.52	1.3	5.4	Han	0.69	1.63	3.9	5.7
Buyi	0.16	0.45	1.3	8.1	China	0.68	1.58	3.8	5.6

* The numbers in this column is the time increase during the period of 1982-2000.

** The data for 1982 includes “graduated with a degree and without a degree”.

Source: Census Office, 1985 : 240-243 ; 1993 : 380-459 ; 2002 : 566-567.

3. Employment system and mechanism in China changed

Under the planned economic system, all graduates of universities and specialized secondary schools were guaranteed jobs as employees of the government and they would never be fired until their retire age. Those who were from ethnic minorities usually were assigned jobs as government officers. Under the state economic accounting system, state-owned institutions did not need to worry about working efficiency and cost of their employee firing. And sometimes, employment of minority graduates was carried out as a political task: the implementation of the government policies towards ethnic minorities.

But under the new policies of transitions from planned economy into market economy, state-owned enterprises were turned into private enterprise, joint venture, or stock companies. These reformed enterprises practice market principles as main mechanism in their management and employment. Now, enterprises recruit and dismiss their employees at their own discretion and laborers have no way to keep their “life-long jobs”.

Enterprises will take on or discharge their employees according to their own needs and the ability of their employees, regardless of whether they are from minorities or Han. The minority students who entered universities under the favorable policy of the government are likely to be confronted with employment difficulties if they are lack of competitiveness in their professional ability after graduation. Even though they have been recruited, there is still a possibility for them to get fired under the competition mechanism of evaluation. Therefore, the competition in labor market of non-state-owned economic sector that minority students have to face is very intensive, mainly due to their poor professional foundation, working ability and language barrier.

At the same time, the government reduces the size of their employees in the similar process of reform. It means that government cannot recruit many new employees as before, and some who are already hired might be fired.

4. Administration and government plans has limited impact on job market

In job market, the traditional favorable policies enforced by the administration towards minority graduates cannot faction as before. We were told that a lot proportion of minority university graduates could not find jobs after graduation in their autonomous areas. Han students graduated in Xinjiang may find jobs in coast areas and other provinces. In comparison, the Uygur students who cannot speak Mandarin well face a language barrier outside Xinjiang, even in the cities within Xinjiang where Mandarin capacity is also a required communication skill for daily work.

During our interviews in Xinjiang in 2003 through 2006, we were told that over 80 percent of university graduates who are unemployed in Xinjiang belong to minority students who have studied in minority schools (“*min kao min*”). Then, teaching language became the key factor in minority education. How to design and enforce a bilingual education is the most important key issue in minority regions in today’s China.

5. The capacity of Mandarin is more required in job market than before

Compared with the pervious planned economy, the new market economy changed employment system in many ways. First, administration has limited or no impact on job assignment; second, enterprises now have the power to hire or fire their employees based on evaluation not by their political status (Party members) or ethnic status (minorities). Third, the resource of enterprises to hire their employees would

not be limited to local communities as before, and they openly recruit new employees in public job market. As the result of above factors combined, enterprises in minority regions now have more employees of Han from eastern China, and then Mandarin becomes the major language of communication.

In the past, local minority laborers might be consisted of significant proportion of industrial employees in minority areas. The new market economy and the national “Developing the West” projects attracted many enterprises from the eastern China to move into western minority areas such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Yunnan, and they became important business partners of local enterprises and even play a key role in local economy²⁶. Therefore, the capacity of Mandarin is more required in job market than ever before, even local companies owned by minority businessmen prefer to hire ones who speaks fluent Mandarin.

This situation raises the challenge to present bilingual education system, in which minority students learned most courses in their mother tongue and many of them cannot speak fluent Mandarin.

6. Educational Cost Increased

Before the reform, all universities and colleges did not collect tuitions from students. In general, dormitories were provided to students with no charge. In the process of reform, universities started to ask for tuitions. Although the amount is not high by western standards, about 6,000-8,000 yuan (RMB or about US\$ 800 -1,000 in 2005) annually, but considering the average annual income in rural China is quite low, the tuition becomes a heavy burden of many families. In Xinjiang, the total annual income of rural households was 4,605 yuan and “pure income” (total income minus the cost of productive materials and utilities such as seed, fertilizer, electricity, etc.) was 2,482 yuan in 2005 (Xinjiang Statistical Bureau, 2006:216), the 6,000 yuan is almost the total income of a household of three. Some rural families borrow money or loans to support their children to attend university.

By the experiences in the past, parents usually think university graduates would be guaranteed a “government job” in cities with pensions and all welfares. It was true before the “Cultural Revolution”. Therefore, they consider to support their children to study in university is a guaranteed “investment”. When universities increased their size of admission, their children obtained the chance. But when their children cannot find government jobs with all welfare or high salary jobs in companies, they feel that their “investment” did not receive the reward. “Investment-reward” framework lead many graduates unemployed because they cannot be recruited by government and they refuse to work for private enterprises or temporary jobs, which might be only employment opportunities left in market competition.

The “tradition” that a large proportion of the minority university graduates became cadres before the 1980s have some impact on the attitude of minority university graduates towards job searching. The minority students are more hesitate to take or looking down jobs in market because their expectation to become a government cadres. In comparison, Han graduates do not have such high expectation,

²⁶ Many industries in Chinese economy (such as railway, post, air companies, river-sea transportation, energy, communication) are still managed by large companies in a monopolized way. These companies are used to be key state-owned enterprises, and recently reformed into stock companies and the government holds a large proportion of their stocks. These companies have their headquarters in Beijing or Shanghai, and their branches in autonomous regions follow all the rules and regulations of their headquarters.

and they are more willing to work in private companies or temporary jobs with low payment and limited welfare, and they are willing to work in another province if a job available.

In our field studies in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, the wishes of minority students want to have a government position was very strong. Uygur and Kazak students also have the same attitude. Besides, they usually prefer to work near home, partly because they have more social network activities among relatives and friends, partly because they have Muslim customs that make some inconvenience in Han areas.

7. Readjustment of previous bilingual education system

Because the poor capacity of Mandarin among the Uygur and Kazak students and their difficulties in job market, the government of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region decided to adjust the bilingual education system in Xinjiang since 2004.

The major bilingual education system since the 1950s has been structured as follows: all courses are taught in minority languages, plus Mandarin course as the second language (4-5 hours per week), Uygur, Kazak, Tajik, Kirgiz students attend the schools in this model. By the end of 2005, 97 percent of minority students (1,189,456 students) still study in the model.

The second model has designed for Xinbo and some Mongolian students. The mother tongue is used in primary school plus Mandarin course, the Mandarin is the teaching language in middle and high schools. By the end of 2005, only 0.1 percent of minority students (1,271 students) enrolled in this model.

The third model has been in practice since 2004, a group of course in humanities (language and literature, moral education, history, geography) is taught in mother tongue, another group of courses (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and English) is taught in Mandarin. By the end of 2005, about 2.9 percent of minority students (35,948 students) enrolled in this model. But this new model has been enforced by the government and can be expected to develop in the future.

The main goal of this model is to improve the Mandarin capacity while learning basic modern knowledge and work skills in Mandarin in order to meet the requirement in job market. During our field survey in late 2007, the rural Uygur households in Kashgar Prefecture we interviewed showed their positive attitude towards Mandarin leaning in school. They understand very well that learning Mandarin will greatly help the employment and future career of their children, and they showed their enthusiasm to send their children to schools practice new bilingual model, even to schools in Han areas²⁷.

Under the similar pressure of unemployment of the minority graduates, Tibet and Inner Mongolia also consider adjusting their bilingual education systems. This new phenomenon needs our special attention and might have some impact on the language use pattern of China in the future. A parallel trend in China is the rapid growth of English learning at all levels of the schools. The score of English examination has becoming a basic part for school admission at all levels, from junior middle school, high school, university, to Master and Doctoral programs. The adjustment of bilingual education system to strengthen Mandarin and the requirement of English capacity at all levels of education represent a same signal: the instrumentality of languages as communication tools are becoming more and more important in the process of

²⁷ Since 2000, State Council of China decided to enroll minority students in high schools in coastal cities from Xinjiang (*nei gao ban*). The total students were around 20,000 in 2007. All courses are taught in Mandarin in these schools.

internal integration of nations and the process of globalization.

Summary

Minority education as a system is a model for combining the interests of ethnic minorities for their cultural heritage and the interest of national development and integration. The interests and concern at both group level and national level (a “pluralist-unity” pattern) should receive equal attention and they should be kept in balance. Since there are great variations among the ethnic minorities in China regarding their language tradition and their desire to maintain their traditional language, more research should be carried out in minority regions to study the problems and to search for more alternatives in their educational development in the future. The short-term concern and the long-term interests should also be put in balance. Ignoring the current desire of minority groups to maintain and develop their language and cultural tradition will lose their support for the public school system, and lead to more serious obstacles for minority groups to develop in the future.

Education of ethnic minorities has been a very complicated issue in human societies. Designing a system according to actual situations by region and group and adjusting it according to the changes in society over time might help us to learn from practice. Deng Xiaoping had two phrases, one is “crossing river by searching the stones in river bed”, another is “evaluate a cat by whether he can catch mouse not by his color”. This pragmatic attitude has helped China to reform its economy and society, and it will help to reform and adjust its minority education.

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