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## **Bilingual Education for China's Ethnic Minorities**

### **A Key Question in Minority Education: Language of Instruction**

The language of instruction is the medium through which knowledge is transmitted during the educational process. Because of this, the issue of what language the teachers use when giving lectures and what language is used to compile the text materials they adopt becomes a core issue in educational development for any multiethnic, multilingual country.

### **Chinese Language: The “Interethnic Common Language” of the People of China**

Looking at life and social interaction throughout our entire country, rather than one small area of it, the most practical and widely used language of all is Chinese [*Hanyu*]. Because among some nationalities (Muslim, Manchu, Hezhen, Tujia, Xibe, and She), an overwhelming majority views

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Chinese as their own language, and among other ethnic minorities (Mongolian, Zhuang, Sala, Miao, Yao, Dongxiang, Tu, Baoan [Bonan], Jiang, Mulao, and Bai) a considerable number of cadres and ordinary citizens generally use Chinese to communicate, whereas among other ethnic minorities a majority of educated people and cadres are familiar with Chinese, the Chinese language, whether throughout several thousand years of cultural development or through the process of modern social development, has, objectively speaking, become the “lingua franca” [*tongyong yuyan*], the “common language” [*gonggong yuyan*], or the interethnic common language [*zuji gongtong yu*] of the Chinese; consequently, it is no longer possible to take a superficial look at the historical background and name of the language and think of the Chinese of today as “the language of the Han-Chinese nationality.”

In China, throughout history and in recent times not only have the classics of culture and the results of scientific research been published in Chinese on a large scale, but large numbers of foreign literary and scientific works have been translated into Chinese and published as well. Even a majority of the research of minority-nationality scholars has been presented or published in Chinese. Of the publications in China during 1993, for example, 99 percent were in Chinese, which means that in China those who have a good mastery of the Chinese language could utilize 99 percent of the information available nationally, a vast resource for which there is no substitute. Having a good grasp of this resource is extremely important, whether for one’s own individual development (this naturally includes members of minority groups) or for the development of the work unit or project team in which one is working. A minority student who learns Chinese is not merely able to communicate with Han Chinese people but also with members of many other ethnic groups as well. If learning English allows people to go anywhere in the world, then learning Chinese allows people to go anywhere in China. From one end of the country to the other, universal familiarity with Chinese Mandarin [*Hanyu putonghua*] is a major trend in the development of society—not a transformation moved forward by human will, but something that will certainly happen sooner or later.<sup>1</sup>

Because Chinese is one of the five working languages of the United Nations, the number of people outside China who are learning Chinese is increasing, and this includes not only students but also those who are involved in diplomacy, trade, and academic research and the 22 million people of Chinese ancestry who live dispersed over the five major con-

tinents of the world.<sup>2</sup> In a number of internationalized metropolitan areas, Chinese is also helpful in interpersonal communication. So, from the standpoint of international interchange, the usefulness of Chinese will continue to increase in the future.

### **Changes in Language Utilization in China**

Policies put into effect by our government since liberation (1949) have primarily stressed the political equality of all China's nationalities, with ethnic minorities' languages a basic political right of minority peoples and having equal and legitimate status with regard to usage. In order to implement this the government mobilized its resources to help each minority develop or create a writing system for its own language. There are ten minorities in China for whose languages' writing systems were invented by linguists from central government organizations during the 1950s.

Analyzed in terms of trends in world language development and changes in the usefulness of languages, the creation of writing systems by the government for ethnic minorities that previously had had none just after the founding of the People's Republic of China shows that political equality for all ethnic groups was a main consideration, but this policy may have been somewhat short-sighted when viewed in terms of long-term language development. Forty years later, what is the situation with regard to these "new writing systems"? Putting the results of several decades of utilization together with the problems that have been discovered along the way to sum up the results of that project is extremely important, because the results of such a study can help us predict future trends in the utilization and development of minority languages.

We use our study of the situation with regard to language in Inner Mongolia as an illustrative case. There we discovered that language utilization is tilted almost entirely in one direction, that is, whereas Mongolians primarily develop proficiency in Chinese, very few Han Chinese learn Mongolian. In Lhasa the situation is the same, with Tibetans learning Chinese but Han Chinese not learning Tibetan, and, even though Chinese and Tibetan are both considered official languages, the language actually utilized for interaction is most often Chinese. This sort of phenomenon reflects the role played by practical value in changing language utilization for processes involving social interaction, production, trade, science, culture, health, and education.

In 1985 we studied the language competence of 2,089 heads of household in forty-one natural villages in Chifeng. Our study showed that 96 percent of the Mongolian heads of household spoke fluent Chinese, whereas 34 percent of Mongolian heads of household were no longer able to speak Mongolian. In the pastoral areas, however, 47.2 percent of the Han Chinese could speak at least some Mongolian, with 26.8 percent able to speak Mongolian well, whereas among the Mongolian heads of household, 73.2 percent had mastered Chinese. This shows that in the agricultural areas Chinese is the “lingua franca”; virtually no Han Chinese learn Mongolian while learning Chinese, and less than half of Mongolian residents use the Mongolian language. Among the Mongolians in the pastoral areas, however, Mongolian is still the main language, and interchanges between Mongolian and Chinese residents are carried out equally in Chinese and Mongolian, so one finds both Han Chinese learning Mongolian and Mongolians learning Chinese. Because Mongolians from pastoral communities need to communicate when they are in the cities or agricultural communities, they must know Chinese, thus in the pastoral areas the Mongolians are much more highly motivated to learn Chinese than Chinese are to learn Mongolian.

Of the fifty-five ethnic minorities in China, one-third function in Chinese as well as in their own language, six of the nationalities have converted mainly or entirely to using Chinese, and a majority of the members of forty of the nationalities can use Chinese as a second language. Consequently,

based on the actual extent to which Chinese is used by each of the various nationalities, use of Chinese as the medium of educational instruction or implementation of bilingual education using both Chinese and the minority language can both be considered scientific and enlightened alternatives. . . . The future economic development and prosperity of minority peoples, particularly in relation to reform, openness, and moving toward modernization, is linked to the extent to which they have mastered Chinese. . . . Educational instruction in the minority language and educational instruction in Chinese should not be mutually exclusive or replace one another, but rather, they should complement and reinforce each other. . . . The two must be emphasized equally, without favoring one over the other or showing bias. (Xie Qihuang and Sun Ruoqiong 1991, 114)

Article 20 of the “Guidelines for Implementing the Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China in the Tibetan Autonomous Region,” promulgated in 1994, provides that:

the Autonomous Region will progressively perfect a system of bilingual educational instruction which uses Tibetan as the principal language of classroom instruction. The schools should insure that the ethnic minorities students give priority to mastering the writing system used locally in their own language while at the same time mastering the Chinese writing system. On all occasions when the Chinese language is used, the school will promote and use both Mandarin, which is spoken throughout the nation, and standard Chinese characters. (*Xizang zizhiqu zhengfu* [Tibetan Autonomous Region Government] 1994, 3)

To a certain extent this shows an awareness among the minority people of the importance of mastering Chinese (China's common language, Mandarin, and standard Chinese characters). Some studies have carried out systematic classification of the situation with regard to language of instruction for each ethnic minority group,<sup>3</sup> and it is worth noting that these studies clearly point out instances of "having already abandoned use of the original language of their ethnic group and converted to Chinese, and mainly studying Chinese" (De Sha 1989, 447). This sort of attitude actually shows a concern for the practical value of language.

In the process of carrying out the policy of reform and openness, schools serving Han Chinese communities in the interior of China are making efforts to improve their English-language instruction in order to train students to interact at the international level and absorb knowledge from abroad after they graduate. Some people in China have suggested that perhaps members of minorities should learn English without learning Chinese. Without a doubt, each of our country's ethnic minority group needs people who are trained in English, and minority students in college should be studying foreign languages just as the Han Chinese students do. However, for purposes of providing basic education to the masses, priority should be given to learning their own ethnic languages and Chinese, which is the interethnic common language of China's peoples and the language that the broad masses of minority students will find most widely applicable and most beneficial in daily life and work after they have graduated from primary and secondary school.

### **The "Pattern of Unified Diversity" in the Utilization of Language**

Adopting the long-term historical perspective and a macro-level view of society, we can apply the "pluralist unity" [*duoyuan yiti*] approach (Fei

Xiaotong 1989) to our analysis of language utilization. The promotion and popular dissemination of Chinese as the interethnic common language embodies the *unified* aspect of this pattern, with “unification” [*yitihua*] being the major developmental trend over the long term, although this does not preclude *diversity* during the present phase or even for certain ethnic groups that may retain their own language and writing systems for a fairly long time.

In [the U.S. Congress] there are three perspectives on language policy: The first holds that America is a single-language country, and using a single language benefits everyone, so bilingual education should be discouraged. The second recognizes that there are students (or adults) in America whose mother tongue is not English, and their speaking their original language is a temporary phenomenon, so for them bilingual education is a way to build a bridge that will lead to the use of English. The third recognizes that bilingualism is a fact of life that is good for America, and linguistic diversification is just as essential as other kinds of diversification (Simpson and Yinger 1985, 401).

After [the U.S. Congress] passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, the official policy toward language was similar to the second perspective above. Considerations of financial resources and curriculum design, as well as worries about separatism, however, led to differences of opinion in some states regarding the implementation of bilingual education, while at the same time in society at large there was a growing resistance to bilingual education (Simpson and Yinger 1985, 400). Because of this, there was a shift from the second perspective toward the first perspective.

Generally speaking, of the perspectives described above, our country’s language policy is closest to the third perspective, though at different times and with different political moods it has shifted back and forth somewhat. During the first years of the People’s Republic minority languages were accorded extreme importance and respect, so that some minorities that had no writing system of their own and had already put the Chinese writing system into use had the government create a new writing system—that no one could read—for them, an effort that amounted to artificially forcing the aspect of diversity onto people. During the Cultural Revolution, however, there was contempt for the languages and writing systems of minority peoples, and bilingual education was rejected, whereas political movements and administrative measures were used to force the aspect of “unity” onto people. After order had been restored, the problem of overcorrecting past mistakes crept into

the implementation of minority policies, and in some minority areas Chinese-language education met with rejection. In a small number of locations there were even instances of primary schools going back to Manchu-language instruction, even though except for a very small number of specialized researchers who need Manchu to do research on Qing dynasty history, one can say that the Manchu language has very little practical significance in contemporary Chinese society. So it seems that during the current historical period there are isolated instances in which diversity has been artificially forced on people.

### **Issues Regarding Bilingual Instruction in China's Minority Education**

#### *The Bilingual Instruction System*

The Chinese constitution has two provisions concerning language: Article 4, which specifies that each of China's nationalities has the freedom to use and develop its own language and writing system, and Article 19, which specifies that the national government will promote a common language to be used throughout the country. Article 6 of the Compulsory Education Law specifies that "schools should promote the use of Mandarin, the common language which can be used everywhere in our country." In a 1980 publication, "Opinions Concerning Improving the Work of Minority Education" [*Guanyu jiaqiang minzu jiaoyu gongzuo de yijian*], the Ministry of Education and the China State Ethnic Affairs Commission required that "every ethnic group that has its own language and writing system should use that language for educational instruction and master its own language while also learning spoken and written Chinese." These laws and policies took into consideration both the equality of all groups' languages and the need for the groups to communicate with each other, while also considering what was practical within the language environments of the minority areas, which reflects a scientific approach focused on objective results.

When governmental educational authorities were planning, arranging, and developing bilingual education, the principle they had in mind was to:

take the local language environment as the basis, while also taking into account the social and economic development needs, pedagogical benefits and the wishes of the masses. In principle, in places where there is

only a minority language environment, basic education should be carried out by giving instruction mainly in the minority language or by beginning with the minority language and steadily converting to instruction which is mainly in Chinese. In areas where there is a certain degree of bilingualism in the environment or where certain local indigenous languages are spoken, basic education should be carried out by giving instruction principally in Chinese while simultaneously setting up a system of instruction in the ethnic minority languages. (Zhou Wangyun 1989, 31)

The point is also made that “implementing a bilingual system of instruction that both connects to the linguistic foundation of minority students and also is consistent with the national language environment is a precondition for guaranteeing that educational activities will proceed normally, education will become universal, there will be a widespread increase in the quality of instruction, and pedagogy will be effective” (Tian Qingyu 1989, 10). Policies and formulations such as this basically reflect the unified diversity approach by taking both the diversity that actually exists (local use of minority languages) and the unity (the language environment at the national level) into account in order to avoid having the government make biased judgments concerning the practicality of languages or having policies that waver back and forth (by imposing artificial diversity or unity). They also make special mention of the need to respect “the will of the masses” at the local level, which is an extremely important point when it comes to actually accomplishing the tasks at hand.

Each district set a specific policy regarding the issue of bilingual education according to the situation in the district. For example, in 1984 Yunnan province determined that:

in minority areas where Chinese is not understood, instruction in the local language will be vigorously promoted. In primary schools in minority areas where Chinese is not understood and there is a writing system for the local language, textual materials in the local language should be used for the early grades while, at the same time, Chinese should be progressively introduced. For the upper grades textual materials should be in Chinese, with the local language playing a support role in instruction. In primary schools where Chinese is not understood and there is no writing system for the local language, the local language should be used to explain the texts and play a supporting role in instruction. For middle and primary schools serving ethnic groups that understand Chinese, instruc-



tion can generally be carried out in Chinese. In areas where Chinese is understood and there is a writing system for the local language, the wishes of the local people will be respected regarding whether to create local-language teaching materials. (State Education Commission 1995, 362)

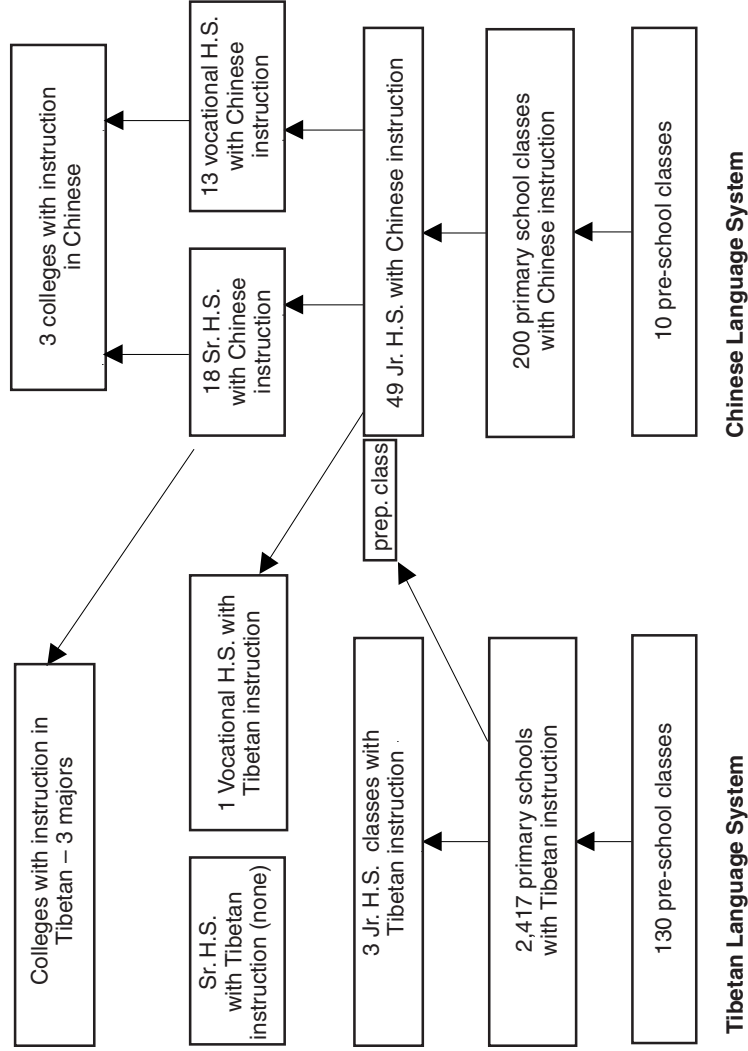
Sichuan province is also planning to finish converting the system of instruction for primary and secondary schools in Yi and Tibetan minority areas from exclusively Chinese to bilingual by the year 2010.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 illustrates the present system of bilingual education in Tibet and the pattern of articulation among schools that give instruction in the two languages. We can see that among the graduates of 2,417 primary schools in which classes are given in Tibetan, only three classes can go on to junior high schools in which instruction is in Tibetan, whereas the overwhelming majority are channeled into preparatory classes for entrance into junior high schools in which instruction is in Chinese. During the late 1980s, this was the only route through which Tibetan students could go on to junior high. At present, even though there may be senior high schools that use Tibetan for instruction, their numbers and quality still require a long period of upgrading.

### **Minority-Language Textual Materials and Minority Instructors**

“The two instructional systems that coexist within bilingual education, particularly where the approach emphasizes the minority language, must be developed at a pace that matches the creation of appropriate teaching materials and recruitment of appropriate teaching talent” (Zhou Wangyun 1989, 31). The main problem with the use of minority-language materials in primary and secondary schools in minority-area towns is the lack of minority-language teaching materials for all subjects that are complete and of good quality. Taking the Tibetan Autonomous Region as an example, beginning with the establishment of an ethnic teaching materials compilation group in 1960, primary and middle-school materials began to be translated, step by step, into Tibetan, so that by 1963 primary school texts were available in Tibetan for Tibetan language, Chinese language, mathematics, basic natural science, and geography. From 1972 to 1979, new translations for texts in every subject area were made using the Beijing City five-year system primary school texts as a model. Around 1980 the entire set of Tibetan language materials for primary,

Figure 1. Tibetan Education System



Source: Liu Qinghui (1989, 500).

junior high, and senior high school were re-edited. In 1982 a leadership group for cooperation on Tibetan language instructional materials in five provinces was established, and by 1991 materials in Tibetan for every subject area in primary and junior high school were complete, along with senior high materials, which were basically complete (Dan Zeng and Zhang Xiangming 1991, 336–39). By the 1990s, after years of untiring effort, Tibet had, for the first time in its history, a complete set of instructional materials for primary and secondary schools compiled in Tibetan.

Having instructional materials, however, did not mean that the problem of quality had been solved. We can imagine that, from the 1920s on, Chinese instructional materials for the full range of primary and middle school subjects took the concentrated effort of several generations, including millions of teachers and scholars from every branch of learning familiarizing themselves with foreign teaching materials and consolidating China's long experience of classroom instruction before we could finally develop the materials we use today in primary and secondary schools. Imagine trying to introduce the vocabulary of modern science so that it fits properly into the languages of several dozen large and small minority groups so that one could compile complete sets of texts for subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, and history and then see these texts through to "maturity," and this will give an idea of the difficulty of the project. Considering how difficult compiling teaching materials in a minority language was for the Tibetans (a large minority considered very important by the central government), compiling complete sets of such materials for other minorities that were smaller and live dispersed over wide areas would not only be questionable in terms of practicality but would also be problematic with regard to inputs of time and human capital. In order to compile such materials one would first need at least a generation to train scholars and effective teachers from the ethnic group in question, after which they would take charge of compiling and editing the materials. Efforts over the past fifty years have allowed us to train a few effective teachers for some of the minorities, but this still falls short of the high standards of modern educational development.

Another factor that affects the quality of teaching in minority languages is the lack of an adequate number of minority teachers, especially for mathematics, physics, and chemistry. As a result, even if we have proper materials, the problem of minority-language instruction will

still not be completely solved. A good teacher must have an in-depth understanding of the material and ample experience in the classroom, backed by an advanced degree and training that meets the norms of the profession. The quality of teaching staff among all the minorities needs to be raised as quickly as possible.

The structure of language usage in schools of all levels in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1991 was such that in primary school 80 percent of the teachers taught in Tibetan, 20 percent in junior high taught in Tibetan, and only 3 percent in senior high taught in Tibetan. At present the key concern in development of education among Tibetans has shifted from compilation of specialized texts in Tibetan to the training of Tibetan teachers for mathematics, physics, and chemistry. This sort of shift in emphasis with regard to teaching materials and teaching talent is also taking place among several other minority groups.

### **The Wishes of the Masses Concerning the Choice of Language of Instruction Among Minority People**

In deciding whether bilingual education is being implemented in accordance with local requirements for social, economic, and cultural development in specific areas or among specific minorities, the wishes of the masses should be an important point of reference. Some studies reflect the fact that:

a number of ethnic Tibetan cadres, staff members, and ordinary agricultural and pastoral workers pay lip service to the importance of the Tibetan language while their actual behavior shows a bias toward Chinese language. As specified in 1987, all first-year students in Tibetan-minority schools are required to take classes taught in Tibetan, but implementation of this has met with stiff resistance, and the majority of schools have not complied. A number of ethnic Tibetan cadres and people's congress delegates have said in the open forum that they actively support the learning and use of Tibetan language. When it comes to the education of their own children, however, they refuse to enroll them in classes given in Tibetan, doing whatever it takes to enroll them in classes conducted in Chinese or in schools that are in China proper. . . . The main reason for this is that in actual work situations the Tibetan language imposes certain limitations. (Liu Qinghui 1989, 502)

When we were doing our research in Tibet in 1988, heads of household and school principals alike told us that there were many Tibetan

parents who were hoping that their children could attend classes conducted in Chinese and felt unhappy about the fact that the government was forcing ethnic Tibetan students to attend classes conducted in the Tibetan language (Ma Rong 1996, 386). When setting up a system of bilingual instruction and deciding on ways of implementing it, we must take the wishes of the masses into consideration.

There are two tendencies at present in bilingual education. Analysis of the state of ethnic education in Sichuan, for example, reveals that “ethnic Yi and ethnic Tibetan cadres and the general public have differing desires concerning instruction in minority language or in Chinese, with some favoring the former and some favoring the latter” (Hua Xun 1989, 117). Those who want to emphasize minority-language instruction stress the idea that when minority students who have no understanding of Chinese are put in a situation where they must start learning it directly, the results are not good, and, moreover, “grades in Chinese among those for whom a Chinese class in their own minority language was set up are much higher than Chinese grades among those who had no such class available” (Ma Zhiqiang 1989, 236). This point makes sense. In another instance, while doing research in the Jinping Miao Yao and Dai nationality Autonomous county, Yunnan province, we discovered that rural minority children (Miao, Yao, or Dai) usually could not speak Chinese before beginning primary school, and they were in at least second grade before they could understand lectures and third grade before they could express themselves in Chinese. This had a negative effect on the scholastic performance of these minority students, even though “the local people raised no objection to this process of ‘sinicization,’ quite the contrary, they believed that learning Chinese would help the students with future academic testing and finding employment, which made it a basic condition for personal development. Here we have not yet seen any ethnic group intent on rejecting Chinese-language instruction in order to defend its own traditions” (Yu 1999, 590).

Some studies point out a tendency to impose minority-language instruction artificially in some areas, mentioning that some people believe it necessary to raise the people’s awareness of the “importance” of minority-language instruction, saying “we should put effort into our work, . . . make the cadres and herdsmen in the pastoral areas especially aware of the real importance of learning and using minority languages” (Sun Ziqiang et al. 1989, 75). These people acknowledge that the actual situ-

ation is such that “in minority areas there are teachers, parents of students and even students themselves who believe that since placement examinations, especially college entrance examinations, are not written in the minority language, nor is the minority language one of the subjects on the examinations, then, rather than being like ‘the blind person who only wastes wax by lighting a candle,’ it is better to invest the time allocated for learning the minority language in studying mathematics, physics and chemistry” (Su Keming 1989, 49). There are people, however, who view this common wish on the part of the masses as an aberration that needs to be corrected and find fault with it. What they are actually finding fault with, however, is the way the masses take the practical value of knowledge into consideration, and that is something that defies criticism.

Some propose a new view of bilingual instruction. Some areas (e.g., Sichuan) take the establishment of bilingual instruction in secondary schools as a goal to struggle for, whereas others believe that “the bilingual system is only appropriate for primary school and should not be promoted or used at the junior-high level. This is because at the junior-high level the students’ language patterns establish themselves, so continuing to use bilingual instruction would interfere with the normalization of the students’ command of Chinese. . . . Minority language instruction ultimately plays only a transitional role in modern education, functioning as a linguistic ‘crutch’” (Yang Xuezheng 1989, 426). Here the stress is on the importance of having the minority students get a firm mastery of standard Chinese, and it is made clear that the most important and useful language for the future modernization of the country and for the students’ own individual development is definitely Chinese. This way of stating it, however, overlooks the disparity in practicality among the languages of our more than fifty minority groups; these are terms that are too absolute. As far as minority groups who originally did not have a writing system or whose language and writing system have a limited sphere of usage are concerned, perhaps minority-language instruction should only serve as a linguistic “crutch,” but where minority groups with larger populations whose language and writing systems have a certain practical usefulness (e.g., Korean and Mongolian), the minority language would not serve merely as a crutch, and its use in secondary school does not need to be subjected to rigid regulation.

A similar situation exists with respect to using minority languages to eliminate illiteracy. If the writing system is one that is newly created

using letters of the alphabet, then learning the letters and how to read them in words is not difficult. If elimination of illiteracy is measured in this way, then the standard is fairly easy to achieve, although this has very little practical value in relation to real life and production. However, if the minority language involved is one that has real practical value, then using it to eradicate illiteracy will give good results. Thus when we discuss minority languages and bilingual instruction, we must guard against making facile generalities and trying to implement policies that apply a single solution to a wide range of situations.

### Notes

1. Among the Han Chinese there also exists a problem with promoting Mandarin. The local dialects have long, distinguished histories, which, combined with the existence of local theater, give people an emotional attachment to these dialects, even though social development requires that Mandarin become universal, because those who do not learn Mandarin will undoubtedly find their future opportunities for development somewhat limited.

2. People residing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau were not included in this calculation (see Ma Rong 1998).

3. See De Sha 1989, part 2, 447.

4. There are, however, also instances of minority languages that are not the mother language being used as the language of instruction, for example, “In the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan, when Tibetans who use the Jiarong language or the Jiang language begin school, they all learn Tibetan, which they could not understand before they reached school age” (Sun Ruoqiong 1990, 286). This does not fit in with major national trends in language development.

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