

## Minority Language Policy and Practice in China: The Need for Multicultural Education

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In this article, we examine minority language policy and practice in China and discuss the large gaps between what is stipulated by law and what occurs in practice. Based on a literature review and findings from our study, we contend that adopting multicultural education in China would help law makers and local officials value and respect minority languages and culture and help teachers design culturally relevant curricula. The overall purpose for multicultural education in China would be to create a culture and language environment for minority students to improve academic achievement and to address social injustice.

### Terminology

#### Minority Language Policies

#### Factors Hindering the Implementation of Minority Language Policy

#### Minority Languages: Individual Rights or State Rights?

#### The Impact of the Dominance of Mandarin Chinese

#### Minority Languages and Culture in School Textbooks

#### A Critical Need for Multicultural Education in China

#### References

China is a multi-ethnic country with 55 minority groups, representing approximately 110 million people (National Minority Policies and Its Practice in China, 2004). Han, the dominant group, comprises about 92 percent of the total population (Governance in China, 2005; Veek, Pannell, Smith, & Huang, 2007). Most minority groups have their own mother tongues, except for Hui and Manchu people who speak Mandarin Chinese (Zuo, 2007). There are about 120 mother tongues in minority regions (Sun, 2004), among which only 30 minority languages have written scripts and 20 languages have less than 1,000 speakers (Zuo, 2007). The nationwide promotion of Mandarin Chinese as a national language in 1956 (Rohsenow, 2004; Zhou, 1999), the provision of Mandarin Chinese starting from Grade 3 in minority regions (Hu & Seifman, 1987; Zhou, 2004), and the popularity of Mandarin Chinese because of globalization and China's trade relations with the world have created unfavorable positions for minority languages in China (Zhou & Ross, 2004). We believe that it is urgent to examine China's minority language policy and practice to discover the discrepancies between its minority policy and practice and to take measures to protect minority groups' language rights.

In this paper, we review terms that the Chinese government uses in its minority language policy and practice. Discrepancies between language policies and practices are examined in terms of minority language rights and minority language and representation in school textbooks. We contend that multicultural education may provide a framework to assist Chinese law makers, teachers, and officials in developing ways to respect and value minority cultures and languages, reduce discrimination, and terminate the assimilation approach. Finally, we suggest strategies to implement multicultural education in China.

### Terminology

China has its own policies and practices related to minority language, culture, and rights (He, 2005; Kymlicka, 2005). In order to better understand these policies and practices, we analyze terms used by the Chinese government to describe its policies and practices in minority affairs. The Chinese term *minzu*, nationality, refers to the 56 nationalities present in the nation. Han, the dominant nationality, comprises about 92 percent of China's population of about 1.3 billion (Governance in China, 2005); the other 55 nationalities are minorities, representing approximately 110 million people (National Minority Policies and its Practice in China, 2004). Almost half of the territory in China is occupied by minority nationalities (Dessaint, 1980). Tibetans and Uyghurs constitute a majority in the Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang province, respectively, in western China. Fifty-three nationalities have their own language; Manchu and Hui people speak Chinese (Zuo, 2007).

In Chinese governmental policies toward minority groups, *Ronghe* (meaning fusion or amalgamation) is frequently used to refer to the long historical process of communication and cultural exchange, which has caused the disappearance of minority languages, cultures, and knowledge (Mackerras, 1994). *Ronghe*, therefore, is not a policy that promotes multiculturalism. The Chinese government officially states that minority languages and cultures are valued and respected and that minority groups have the right to use their languages and practice their cultures and religions (Zuo, 2007); this was stipulated in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1982. *Zizhiqu* (meaning autonomy), which officially predicates the right to each nationality group to develop its own culture and language (Quan, 2003), to exercise self-government, and to determine the use of natural resources and course of development, is what China maintains it now practices in minority regions.

### Minority Language Policies

China's minority language policies experienced several stages: support of minority languages in the early and mid-1950s, suppression of minority

languages during the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and tolerance of minority language starting from the late 1970s (Zhou, 2000, 2004). In the 1950s, the Chinese government established autonomous governments in minority regions and helped eliminate illiteracy in the minority regions. Both the Han officials and local minority officials were trained in minority languages (Zhou, 2000). In addition, policies for creating writing systems for minority groups who had no written language systems were developed. Mandarin Chinese was introduced in schools where minority groups had no written language system. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in 1956 stated that minority groups had the right to use their home language and that Mandarin Chinese should only be mandated for the Hans (Zhou, 2000).

During the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, minority language policy changed direction. Mandarin Chinese became the official language in school instruction in minority regions, and assimilation became the goal of minority education (Lin, 1997; Zhou, 2000). Requests for bilingual education and minority curriculum were regarded as challenges to ideological correctness and as opposition to socialism (Nelson, 2005).

From the late 1970s on, the Chinese government has enacted laws and policies for the stated purpose of protecting minority groups' rights to language and culture. In order to protect their rights and interests in multiethnic China, the 1982 Constitution of the PRC stipulates that:

All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession are prohibited.

In the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities enacted in 1984, six articles address minority groups' rights and those of language use (Zhou, 2004). Article 37 states:

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

Local governments also set up policies to promote minority language learning and education in school. In 1984, for instance, Qinghai province proposed the use of minority languages and Mandarin Chinese for ethnic elementary and secondary schools. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region also set forth the principle of using their minority languages for basic education and learning Mandarin Chinese as a

second language with the goal of fluency in both languages after secondary school graduation (Dai & Dong, 2001). However, there are discrepancies between minority policies and practices (Lin, 1997; Wan, 2004; Zhou, 2000).

### **Factors Hindering the Implementation of Minority Language Policy**

Although minority groups are officially guaranteed the use of their native languages in ethnic autonomous regions, discrepancies between policy and practice are significant when these laws and policies are interpreted in schools (He, 2005; Zhou, 2004). Because of poverty, a lack of qualified bilingual teachers who can appropriately implement bilingual education to minority classroom instruction (Xing, 2001), and discriminatory views toward minority language and culture from local government officials (Nima, 2001), minority students' language learning and language rights are not realized. Poverty greatly hinders minority students from receiving an education in general and, in particular, minority literacy education. Poverty issues in minority regions in China are complicated because of the unbalanced development of the Chinese economy and the shifting landscape: "According to statistics, by 1994 the impoverished parts of the ethnic minority areas were mainly located in Western China, including 5 autonomous regions, 20 autonomous prefectures, and 49 autonomous counties" (The Development-oriented Poverty Reduction Program for Rural China, 2004). Minority citizens suffer from poverty; more than 80 percent of those who lack basic food and clothing are from minority areas (Sautman, 1999). Many minority children have no money to attend school, and few families in the remote rural areas can support their children to attend colleges and universities (Wang, 2003). Minority children have a higher dropout rate from school than the majority Han Chinese children do, and their illiteracy rates are also generally higher (Kwong & Hong, 1989; Mackerras, 1994). These conditions require interventions at policy, institutional, and school levels; as in other countries, multicultural education could provide a platform to begin discussion to address these issues.

Elementary education in minority areas faces challenges due to a lack of funding and quality teachers (Bass, 1998; Postiglione, 1999) and the increase in students' dropout rates (Pepper, 1990; Yang, 2005). The following figures from a survey of schools in western rural areas, conducted by the State Education Department Research Center in 2003, show that these schools lacked even basic resources: "37.8 percent do not have enough desks and stools; 22.3 percent have unsafe classrooms or offices; and about 32.5 percent do not have enough funds to buy teaching aids, ink, chalk, and other supplies" (Yang, 2005, p. 20). Although the central government has tried to solve these problems by enacting the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, which mandates nine years of compulsory education from elementary through junior high school, many rural areas and minority regions are unable to implement the law because of a lack of funding from both local and central governments (Pepper, 1990; Yang, 2005). Villages in rural areas that implemented nine-year compulsory education have

suffered huge financial deficits and resulting repercussions. As Yang (2005) stated, "In many places, creditors blocked local government buildings, sealed off school gates, and even violently beat up teachers and principals" (p. 20).

Furthermore, minority parents do not trust state school education and they are reluctant to send their children to state schools to receive literacy education (Postiglione, 1999; Zhou, 2004). There is a 69.4 percent illiteracy rate for Tibetan children aged 15 or older compared with 21.5 percent for the Han children of (Zhou, 2000). This demonstrates the failure of language policies in Tibet (Nelson, 2005). The implementation of Mandarin Chinese instruction in Tibetan schools after the 1959 rebellion made Tibetans believe that education was the imposition of the Han people's ideology and beliefs (Nelson, 2005). The language policies in Tibet have had a dramatic side effect on language use in Tibet: teachers who cannot speak Tibetan can teach in Tibetan schools and those who can speak Tibetan are not qualified to teach in Tibetan schools (Zhou, 2000).

Moreover, what is stipulated by law is often undermined by practices of local Han officials whose stereotypical and discriminative views have a negative impact on the enactment of official policy about minority culture and language. Nima (2001), for example, found that some local Han officials in minority regions interpret minority language and culture as "backwardness" and Han language and culture as "civilization," even though Article 53 in the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities in 1984 states, "Autonomous government should ... encourage officials and masses of all ethnic groups to respect each other's languages and scripts" (as cited in Zhou, 2004, p. 78).

### **Minority Languages: Individual Rights or State Rights?**

It is interesting to note that the Constitution in 1982 stipulated that all nationalities are equal and minority rights are protected although unity is emphasized; anything that damages national unity is prohibited. The same is true in the case of the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities enacted in 1984, which guaranteed the language rights of minority students, despite the fact that minority students are required to learn Mandarin Chinese. Zhou (2004) used the distinction between individual rights and state rights to examine whether minority groups have their individual language rights and whether the minority individual has any means of asking the state to fulfill its commitment to minority groups in terms of language rights. Zhou concluded that minority groups' language rights stipulated by law empower the state rather than minority individuals; in effect, state rights are weightier than individual minority rights.

In China, national unity and stability are considered top national priorities for which any right can be sacrificed (He, 2005; Mackerras, 1994). Any individual rights or policies that are regarded as threats to national unity must be abandoned. In Tibet, for example, the Tibet Autonomous Regional People's

Congress developed a plan for Tibetan language use and respect for Tibetan culture in 1987. Special regulations were made about the exclusive use of the Tibetan language in school textbooks and classroom teaching. This plan, however, “has been abandoned as part of the post-1989 crackdown on ‘separatism’ and almost all subjects are now taught in Chinese” (He, 2005, p. 72).

The National College Entrance Examination, which is held twice a year, in summer and winter, is administered in Mandarin Chinese. Six minority language versions of the National College Examination are also available, in Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, Korean, Kazakh, and Kirghiz. What about other minority languages? Why do all other minority students have to take the Chinese version of the National College Examination? Because speakers of these six minority languages are located at the key border areas in China, the Chinese government gave them special privileges for the purpose of winning their support in case of war (Mackerras, 1994).

### **The Impact of the Dominance of Mandarin Chinese**

The dominance of Mandarin Chinese is the paramount negative influence on minority language rights. The promotion of Mandarin Chinese as the official language in Mainland China started at the county and higher government levels in 1956 (Zhou, 1999). Article 19 of The 1982 Constitution of PRC (in contrast with Article 37 of the Minority Nationalities Law mentioned above) stipulates, “The state promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua [Mandarin Chinese] (common speech based on Beijing pronunciation).” In effect, Mandarin Chinese is nationally promoted and minority languages are not (Zhou, 2004). Because of China’s strong economic development, Mandarin Chinese has become essential in national and global contexts. Also, importantly, researchers have found that speaking Mandarin Chinese guarantees not only better employment opportunities but also “the option of entry into the identity of being Chinese” (Nelson, 2005, p. 26).

Mandarin Chinese pervades all minority areas and all aspects of public life; for example, Nima (2001) found that Mandarin Chinese permeates Tibet: from government documents to telegrams, from electrical appliances’ instructions to technical concepts used in work environments, from businesses to schools. This massive use of Mandarin Chinese in Tibet has had devastating effects on Tibetan language learning, maintenance, and use; in effect there is a loss of the minority heritage language. Many multicultural theorists who focus on language issues have made similar claims about minorities losing their language heritage in the United States (Cummins, 1989).

Some Tibetans believe that learning Chinese is the only way to improve their life by “getting government jobs after graduation” (Nima, 2001, p. 95). Moreover, Tibetan students who have graduated from all-Chinese language

elementary schools more easily find and adapt to education in secondary schools, which are Chinese dominant in both teaching and curriculum (Stites, 1999). As a result, “some Tibetans are actually working against those who advocate Tibetan-language education, punishing lower officials who do so” (Nima, 2001, p. 98) for fear of conflicts between Tibetan officials and Han officials.

Because of the influence of Mandarin Chinese, many minority languages are endangered or will be endangered. There are 22 minority languages that have less than 10,000 speakers, most of whom are seniors (Xing, 2003). Younger people speak Chinese because they migrate to cities in the Han dominant regions and work there. Xing (2003) also finds that minority languages’ structures are replaced by Mandarin Chinese as well as Chinese vocabulary, and phonological and grammatical systems. Eventually, endangered minority languages will become extinct. Zuo (2007) discusses the extinction of minority languages in China during the last 50 years and suggests that measures should be taken to protect these languages by promoting minority language teacher training, bilingual education, and the learning of minority knowledge. These same measures are advocated by multicultural scholars in the United States and Canada concerned with minority students’ loss of heritage languages, cultures, and knowledge (Banks, 2007; Cummins, 1989; Gay, 2000).

### **Minority Languages and Culture in School Textbooks**

From Grade 3, minority students in autonomous regions are required to use the national uniform curriculum (Zuo, 2007). This mandated curriculum features Han knowledge as the norm and Mandarin Chinese as the official language. Thus the national curriculum makes it possible for the dominant Han group to manipulate school knowledge. Researchers contend that the national curriculum causes minority students to lose access to their minority languages and cultures; this can result in minority students’ identity loss (Gladney, 2004). Banks (2007) has brought forward the same ideas in multicultural education research in the United States.

In an analysis of elementary textbooks in Mainland China, Wang & Phillion (in press) found that minority knowledge, language, and culture are under-represented or non-existent. Since minority students do not encounter minority knowledge and culture in textbooks or curriculum, they have few role models and do not study material related to their daily life. Many minority parents thus decide to send their children to temples and mosques for an education since literacy education is provided in minority languages, and content and knowledge are related to their culture (Bradley, 2001; Hansen, 1999). In his research, Wang (2003), building on work done by Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) and Banks (2007), theorizes that the exclusion of minority groups’ knowledge, language, and culture from school textbooks conveys the message to both minority and Han

students that minority knowledge, language, and culture are not important and not worth learning.

Not only do Han knowledge, language, and culture dominate school textbooks but also, when represented, minority knowledge, language, and culture are constructed solely from the Han perspective. Wang & Phillion (in press) found few texts written from minority groups' perspective or languages. Few texts discuss minority experiences or concerns; none addresses struggles with poverty or economic and education inequalities. "Respect for Minority Culture" (2006), an article in a school textbook on moral education, described one education plan that the Chinese Communist Party provides for Tibetan students. Every year about 1,000 Tibetan middle school students are sent to schools outside of Tibet for an education in an exclusively Han Chinese school environment (Wang & Zhou, 2003; Zhu, 2007; Postiglione, 1999). They are taught in Chinese; only Han culture and values are instilled in these Tibetan students. Because the students described in this article were far away from their home in Tibet, they usually stayed and spent Tibetan New Year at the school in the dominant Han region. However, the article in the textbook indicates that Tibetan students were happy due to the help of and blessings in Chinese from the Han principal, Han teachers, and Han students (Respect for Minority Culture, 2006).

The former paragraph illustrates how the dominant Han group interprets minority students' feelings and needs from their own point of view rather than from the perspectives of minority students. The article does not discuss how Tibetan students missed their parents at the traditional time of family union or how the students felt about learning Chinese, speaking Chinese, and living in a Han dominant cultural environment. Rather, the text portrayed the Han people as having the responsibility to make Tibetan students happy by providing them with festival foods and decorations and by making them learn Han language, culture, knowledge and ideology (Gladney, 1999).

Again, building on Apple and Christian-Smith's (1991) work and Banks' (2007) work, we contend that the purpose of these educational practices is to take away minority students' home language, culture, and identity. Through the selection and construction of knowledge and the teaching of dominant Han knowledge in Chinese, the dominant Han group legitimates Han knowledge and Mandarin Chinese. The dominant ideology, as a result, is reproduced and instilled in minority students. Han knowledge, Han culture, and Mandarin Chinese represent advancement, science, and truth; minority knowledge, culture, and language, on the other hand, are represented as backward, unscientific, and not worth learning (Nelson, 2005). Despite provisions in the Constitution and laws enacted to protect minority rights, the dominant group, the Han, determines what knowledge, culture, and language should be included and excluded from school curriculum and school knowledge in China; through this determination, hegemonic control is maintained and minority groups' knowledge, language, and culture are subjugated. The treatment received by Tibetans and other minority groups resonates with the treatment received by Native Americans in the United States and Indigenous people globally: e.g., loss of language and culture,

removal of children from homes and placement in dominant culture environments, loss of cultural identity, and, in many cases the complete eradication of Indigenous tribes (Smith, 1999).

The gaps between minority language policy and practice demonstrate that minority language rights become meaningless when they are seen as detrimental to national stability and national unity (Mackerras, 1994; Nelson, 2005). Furthermore, because minority language rights are group rights (Zhou, 2004), it is less possible that minority students' requests for their home language rights will be granted. Moreover, the uniform curriculum and under-representation and misrepresentation of minority knowledge, culture, and language in elementary school textbooks demonstrate the hegemonic control over minority language, culture, and knowledge and the imposition of dominant ideology, language, culture, and knowledge on minority students. Therefore, as a resistance, minority parents send their children to mosques and temples to receive literacy education, which is related to their daily life (Gladney, 1999; Mackerras, 1994; Postiglione, 1999). Early dropout rates and high illiteracy rates (Zhou, 2000), which can also be seen as another form of resistance, are a result of few role models and little representation of minority language, culture, and knowledge (Mackerras, 1994; Postiglione, 1999).

### **A Critical Need for Multicultural Education in China**

Through our literature review, our examination of China's minority language policy and practice, and review of textbooks, we contend that a large gap exists between China's minority policy and its practice (Lin, 1997; Wan, 2004; Zhou, 2000). The provisions stated in the Constitution of the PRC and in minority law are absent from the daily life of minority groups. Minority groups' languages and cultures are facing challenges from poverty in minority regions, the lack of qualified bilingual teachers, and the powerful influence of official Mandarin Chinese and Han culture. Minority language rights are subordinate to the CCP national policy of stability and unity. Because the CCP controls all the institutions, the instillation of dominant Han ideologies, reproduction of the dominant Han culture, and maintenance of national unity (Postiglione, 1999) are part of the practices of the CCP. Therefore, multiculturalism in China has its own distinct characteristic: tolerance of minority cultures and languages on the condition that they do no damage to the national stability and national unity (He, 2005).

Multicultural education in Western countries has forcefully advocated providing culturally and linguistically inclusive instruction and curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to minority students, which helps maintain their home language and culture, construct their identity, and improve their school achievement. Though multicultural education from Western countries may not be a panacea, multicultural education may help minority students examine inequity and the factors that prevent them from enactment of their language and cultural rights.

Banks' (2006) five dimensions of multicultural education could be used as a guideline for Chinese policy makers, school administrators, and teachers to address language and culture issues regarding minority students: 1) language and culture inclusion in school curriculum; 2) curriculum knowledge constructed from the perspectives of minority groups; 3) teaching approaches adapted to minority students' needs in order to promote minority students' academic success; 4) prejudice reduction through the inclusion of minority perspectives; and 5) creation of an empowering school and social culture. These principles may provide minority students with a language- and culture-friendly environment in which they can experience success and critically examine social injustices. The principles may also increase Chinese policy makers' sense of respect for minority cultures and languages.

In practice, Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching, which have been well-researched in the United States, will also help Chinese teachers take minority students' language, culture, and knowledge into curricula and class teaching so that minority students will feel that their language, culture, and knowledge are respected. They will see minority role models and learn the content related to their life. Culturally responsive teaching will provide a supportive environment for minority students, as it takes minority students' learning styles into consideration. As a result, culturally responsive teaching is expected to help improve minority students' academic achievement. Banks' (2006) theory and Ladson-Billings' (1994) and Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching may provide a framework for the implementation of multicultural education and equal education to minority students in China.

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