

## **Education for ethnic minorities in China: a policy critique**

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### **Introduction**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a unified country with multi-nationalities. Besides the Han nationality, there are 55 other nationalities, with a population of 104.5 million, which accounts for about 8.41% of the total (National Bureau of Statistics, 2001, 28 March). The populations in the ethnic regions are designated officially in China as minorities, referred as to *shaoshu minzu* in Chinese (Clothey, 2005), despite the fact that they are often the majority locally. Although China always claims that most of its ethnicity issues are domestic, these issues could certainly exercise great impacts on China's internal stability and international relations, as demonstrated clearly by the most recent events in Xinjiang and Tibet (Zheng, 2009).

Education for ethnic minorities has been high on China's education policy agenda ever since the PRC was founded in late 1949. Before 1949, most of the regions with large ethnic minority populations were relatively underdeveloped, socially and economically. Some of those communities were primitive, and even still slave societies, with daily events recorded only by marking on wood or tying ropes. There had been no modern schooling in most of the ethnic areas, with the instructions provided by religious institutions as their main form of education. More than 80% of the ethnic population were illiterate. By 1950, among the total number of students in institutions of higher learning, secondary and primary schools, those of ethnic minority origins accounted for only 0.9%, 0.4% and 0.2% respectively (Chen, 1999).

After more than half a century's development, China's education for ethnic minorities has achieved remarkably at every level, with some ethnic regions even having higher development rates than the national average. Institutionally, a comprehensive educational system from kindergarten, primary and secondary to vocational and higher education has been established in China's ethnic minority regions. By mid-2002, 98% of school age children in the regions where ethnic minorities predominate had been enrolled in schools, equal to the national average. The regions included the least developed areas such as Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Tibet and parts of Guizhou, Yunnan and Gansu provinces. Since the 1990s, the government has added 4 billion yuan to the annual education budget of ethnic regions to assist education in the areas.

In sharp contrast to the situation in 1949, ethnic students in schools of all levels in 2004 totalled 21.35 million. The numbers of ethnic students in primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions were respectively 10,97; 6,76 and 0,8 million: this represented respectively 9,76%; 7,78% and 5,7% of the national total (Ministry of Education, 2005). There are now 100 000 elementary and 12 000 secondary schools and about 100 institutes of higher learning in China's ethnic minority regions (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 2002).

Nevertheless, education in ethnic minority areas lags far behind that of most other regions in China in almost every major aspect of educational development. There are

many reasons for such differences. In addition to the well-recognised historical, socio-cultural and economic reasons, policy is another contributing factor that has received relatively little attention.

### **Policy Preferences and Privileges**

Since the founding of the PRC, China's ethnic minorities have enjoyed preferential treatment and policy privileges. The policies have had a great impact on many aspects of the lives of ethnic minority individuals, covering from family planning (exemption from minimum marriage age and one-child strictures), employment (incentives for hiring and promotion of government officials), business development (special loans and grants, exemption from some taxes), to political representation. In education, they include preferential admissions, lowered school fees, boarding schools, and remedial programmes (Sautman, 1999, p. 174). The Chinese government has given priority to the development of ethnic education in the minority areas, based on a consideration of the special natural, historical and social situations in the development of ethnic education (Wang, 2007).

As a variant of a concept pioneered in the former Soviet Union (Gittelman, 1990), the policies date back to the inception of the Chinese state (Dreyer, 1993, pp. 364-365), with an intension to narrow the economic and social gap between Han and ethnic minority people. As of 1995, preferential policies for ethnic minorities encompassed 9% of China's population, or about 110 million people (Sautman, 1999, p. 173). Administrative organs have been set up specifically in the educational departments at the central and local levels to take charge of implementing China's stated principles and policy goals in the education for ethnic minority populations and studying and solving related issues and problems. For years, ear-marked funds have been appropriated to meet the financial needs of ethnic minority education.

The PRC has paid much attention to the development of education for ethnic minorities. The Chinese Constitution, the Law regarding Ethnic Regional Autonomy and the Law regarding Compulsory Education of the PRC contain clauses that clearly stipulate principles for supporting and helping the ethnic minority populations develop education. For example, Articles 10 and 56 of the Education Law of the People's Republic of China, promulgated by the President of the PRC on 18 March 1995 and effective as of 1 September 1995, have the following contents (Ministry of Education, 1995):

The state shall help all minority nationality regions develop educational undertakings in light of the characteristics and requirements of different minority nationalities.

The State Council and the local People's government at different levels shall establish specific funds for education and lay special stress on supporting compulsory education in remote border areas and poverty-stricken areas and minority nationality regions.

For example, since 1985, the Tibetan government has provided every child of compulsory education age from families of local peasants and herdsman with meals, accommodation, learning materials and stationeries. More than 260 000 children have benefited from such a policy. At the national level, Tibetans have enjoyed preferential

university enrolment policy for many years. The admission score into regular higher education institutions in Tibet has always been substantially lower than those in other provinces. In Tibet, students of ethnic minority origin enjoy further preferential treatment, in the sense that requirements of the same institutions and programmes are substantially lower for them than for local Han students. Catriona Bass (1998, p. 189) reported that in 1985, the minimum pass mark required for admission of minority students into Tibet University was 210 (Humanities) and 170 (Science); while for non-minority students at general universities it was about 400, and that Han students in Tibet needed 250 points for admission in Tibet.

One of the most important preferential policies dealing with education, concerns admission into institutions of higher education. A major aim of this policy is to increase the number of trained personnel in minority regions. Since 1980, measures have been taken to accelerate the expansion of higher education for ethnic minorities. In terms of policies of preferential treatment in higher education, China is indeed ahead of most countries. Based on his research, Barry Sautman (1999) concludes that “[t]he PRC has one of the oldest and largest programs of state-sponsored preferential policies for ethnic minorities” (p. 173), and that the policy is “one of China’s most valued of ‘positive discrimination’ measures accorded” (p. 193).

Preferential admissions for ethnic minorities have had an evident impact on educational development in ethnic minority areas. By so doing, recipients of higher education in Tibet grow fast. By 2005, 1 139 out of every 100 000 people had received higher education, which was better than other provinces with relatively concentrated ethnic minority populations, such as Qinghai (905), Yunnan (904), Guizhou (838) and Guangxi (993), and even better than some inland and coastal provinces such as Henan (1 119), Hainan (1 133) and Anhui (1 110).

Similarly, Sautman (1999, p. 193) reports that Han students admitted to Xinjiang universities in 1986 averaged 435 points in science and 440 points in liberal arts; whereas minorities averaged 300 points in science and 245 points in liberal arts. In 1987, Han students from Xinjiang admitted to national key universities averaged 472 points in science and 445 points in liberal arts; minority students averaged 313 and 269 points respectively.

In order to accelerate the development in ethnic regions, China has adopted various special measures. Ethnic education is treated differently in the goal-setting, contents approaches and evaluation, in consideration of its unique actuality. Such policy privileges are not found in Han population areas. Their major aspects include that special attention be paid to the development of textbooks of ethnic languages and cultures and to the training of ethnic teachers, so that a variety of schools can be built up to meet the needs of their local ethnic situations. These needs include targeted enrolment of local people of ethnic minority origin to train the much-needed personnel for local communities. Such privileges are based on the following legal regulations:

Organs of self-government of autonomous areas determine the educational plan, the establishment of schools, school system, the forms by which schools are run, curricula, language of teaching and method of enrolment, in accordance with principles concerning

education and legal provisions of the state. Public ethnic primary and middle schools that provide boarding and allowances to most students are established in pastureland and mountainous regions where families normally have financial difficulties and live in scattered locations to ensure that the students can complete their compulsory education. Schools (classes) and other educational institutions whose students are predominantly from ethnic minority families should, if possible, use textbooks printed in their own languages, and lessons should be taught in those languages. Chinese language courses shall be offered at different times of the primary school period, depending on the particular situation, to propagate the use of Putonghua (standard Chinese) (Article 37, Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China; Legislative Affairs Commission, National People's Congress, 1987).

The Chinese language, both oral and written, shall be the basic oral and written language for education in schools and other educational institutions. Schools or other educational institutions which mainly consist of students from minority nationalities may use in education the language of the respective nationality or the native language commonly adopted in that region (Article 12, Education Law of the People's Republic of China; Ministry of Education, 1995).

In consideration of the fact that the majority of ethnic population inhabit far remote mountainous regions and pastoral areas, and that their households are scattered and inaccessible, which makes going to school a great difficulty, the Chinese government started during its early days to build various types of convenient primary schools to offer teaching with the purpose of developing basic education for ethnic children. These schools included herdsmen primary schools, tent primary schools, horseback schools or other adopted mobile forms, and Kang end schools. *Kang end schools* were used in the early days in some rural areas in northern China where winter weather could be extremely tough and heating facilities were lacking, and where school children therefore often gathered at the home of one family, usually the teacher's, where they were taught on a heatable brick bed which is called *Kang* in the local dialect. Starting in the late 1950s, ethnic regions continuously built a number of boarding schools according to their own region's specific needs and actualities. Governments at all levels appropriately ear-marked funds to cover the costs related to ethnic students' study and daily living, teachers' salaries, improvement of school-running conditions and school management.

Building boarding schools for primary and secondary education in ethnic minority regions has advantages for concentrated administration and teaching administration, for improving education quality, and for concentrated utilisation of human, financial and material resources to improve school-running condition. It facilitates students to expand their vision and promotes their all-round development. The development of boarding schools has greatly increased the enrolment and retaining rates, which have made primary and secondary education for ethnic students in mountainous and pastoral areas much more popular. At present, boarding schools for ethnic students had been further developed: close to 100 000 boarding schools or classes for 4 729 000 ethnic primary or middle school students had been built in 18 provinces or

autonomous regions, with more than one million students in total. Classes and preparatory classes for ethnic students are run in schools at all levels (Xia, 2004, p. 7).

In order to train qualified civil servants and other kinds of qualified personnel and to speed up the development and construction in ethnic minority regions, in addition to the establishment of schools of all levels and all categories in the areas, China has set up special classes in other provinces and municipalities for ethnic students. These classes have adopted the approaches of targeted enrolments, specialised training and directional assignment. Ethnic students whose literacy level is not up to standard are first enrolled in preparatory classes to receive one or two years' upgrading training. After passing the qualifying examinations, they are transferred to the special classes. Specially-designed curricula and textbooks are used according to the traits of ethnic students, including their living habits, religions and ritual festivals. A management system in line with the traits of ethnic minorities has been gradually formulated regarding enrolment, teaching, management and assignment.

There are over 100 institutions of higher learning nationwide running such classes, with an attendance of about 9 000 students; and 86 ethnic classes and preparatory classes in inland secondary schools, with more than 10 000 students in total. 7,142 students of ethnic minority origin were admitted into 98 higher institutions nationwide in 1998. With the expansion of higher education in China, the number totalled 13 000 in 2001 (Song, 2002, p. 19).

These ethnic classes and preparatory classes of all levels and all categories have become an important base and cradle for training personnel of ethnic minority background. For instance, during 1985-2007, the classes for Tibetans in 28 schools located in 24 provinces and municipalities have trained 14 000 professionals of various sorts for Tibet (Zhao, 2007).

Creating institutions of higher learning for ethnic minorities is another important measure for training highly specialised personnel for ethnic minority areas, on the following legal basis:

The state shall have set up institutes of nationalities and, in other institutions of higher education, nationality-oriented classes and preparatory classes that enrol only students from minority nationalities. Preferred enrolment and preferred assignment of jobs may also be introduced. In enrolment, institutions of higher education and secondary technical schools shall appropriately set lower standards and requirements for the admission of students from minority nationalities. (Article 65, Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China; Legislative Affairs Commission, National People's Congress, 1987).

China has set up about 20 universities for ethnic minorities in 11 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (Huang, 2000, p. 208). These universities only enrol students of ethnic background and offer special disciplines and subjects according to the actuality and needs of ethnic regions. They also provide civil service training and preparatory classes. They adopt special teaching and administrative approaches and have formed special training modules. In 2003, there were 101 000

students and 6 100 teaching staff in these universities (Zhou, 2004, pp. 1-3). A large number of qualified personnel with various specialised skills have been trained. They have played an important role in speeding up the economic development and educational cause in ethnic regions.

One major feature of China's special treatments in ethnic education policy is to make good use of the powerful central state to do things for ethnic minorities. For example, the Chinese government worked out a "trial plan for training teachers of ethnic origins" in 1951. The plan required that nationality-normal schools of different levels be opened according to the need of educational development in ethnic regions. In the regions where the conditions for running schools were not met, teaching classes for ethnic trainees had to be added in general normal schools or general senior secondary schools. Since then, in Inner-Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet, Guizhou, Yunnan, Qinghai provinces or autonomous regions, the country has set up more than 100 nationality-normal universities, normal colleges, two/three years teacher training colleges, and more than 100 colleges of education and schools for in-service teacher training. At the same time, China set up departments for ethnic teacher training in some nationality colleges and comprehensive universities.

Furthermore, in order to train ethnic teachers in respectively the northwest and southwest regions in China, the Northwest Ethnic Teachers' Training Centre and the Southwest Training Centre for Ethnic Teachers of English have been established. Upon the needs of the regional educational development, these centres have offered training for senior teachers of ethnic origins on rotational basis. In the Northeast Normal University, Southwest Normal University, Central China Normal University, Shanxi Normal University, East China Normal University and Beijing Normal University and other key normal universities, ethnic classes have been offered which are open to the ethnic regions and enrolling teaching personnel of ethnic origins. After nearly 60 years' commitment, there are about 1 025 700 teachers of ethnic origin nationwide: about 380 times more than in 1949 (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Another example is the support to and cooperation with the ethnic minority education by the central and other provincial governments. In order to support the educational cause in ethnic regions, China has organised the economically developed regions and schools inland to take multiple approaches to assist ethnic education and cooperate with ethnic minority areas. A great number of teachers and university graduates from inland universities have been mobilised and assigned to work in ethnic minority regions. More than 100 universities inland have formulated partnerships with universities in provinces and autonomous regions including Xinjiang, Inner-Mongolia, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet, Guizhou, Qinghai, Gansu. Through many types of assistance, such as targeted enrolment of ethnic minority students, provision of teacher training for those of ethnic minority origin, sending inland experts to participate in teaching and research programmes in universities and colleges in ethnic minority areas, donation of teaching facilities and library materials, and experience exchange and sharing, the inland universities have helped to train urgently needed personnel and to improve school-running conditions and teaching quality in ethnic minority regions.

Taking Xinjiang and Tibet as examples, coordinating meetings geared at assisting Xinjiang between inland universities and universities in Xinjiang were held, where it

was decided that 50 inland universities (more than 110 specialities) would enrol 7 000 students and train 800 teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). Assistance to Tibet has been another key project for the Chinese government. Classes for Tibetan students in inland schools received 19 444 students in total from 1985 to 1998 on an accumulated basis. In-job training has been provided for ethnic regional officials and teachers by inland provinces and municipalities. Some teachers of high calibre from inland schools have been selected and sent to provide guidance to ethnic regional schools. Some projects which might be mutually benefiting have been developed in joint efforts. School enterprises have been built with the help of inland partners. Loans are provided to improve teaching equipments and library collections with the condition of paying interest by means of deduction. Such assistances by inland universities have greatly promoted educational reforms and development in ethnic minority regions.

Realising the uniqueness of the education for ethnic minorities, the central government has established some research institutes and information centres for the studies of ethnic education at national, local and institutional levels, especially for policy-making purposes. Besides one national institute, some provinces and autonomous regions concerned have built up their own research institutions. In addition, ethnic education research institutes have also been set up in the Central Nationality University, the Southwest Nationality University, Yunnan Nationality College, Qinghai Nationality College, the Northwest Normal University, Xinjiang Normal University, Qinghai Normal University, and Inner-Mongolian Normal University. These institutes conduct their research particularly on their own localities to provide provincial and local policy makers with specific options and suggestions. In order to exchange information and facilitate communication within the circle of ethnic education, national journals such as *Ethnic Education in China* and *Ethnic Education Research* have been published. There are a few local and institutional newspapers or newsletters as well, including *Ethnic Education Newsletters*, *Sichuan Ethnic Education Daily*.

The system of preferential treatment is complex and dynamic. Policy preferences and privileges provide benefits to broad sections of the minority population, particularly with regard to education. In higher education, preferences are aimed at creating a reliable minority elite and are deemed essential to the drive for prosperity and increased state legitimacy in the nearly two-thirds of China's territory that is officially designed as autonomous areas. While preferential policies have been quite successful in general and are set to stay in the foreseeable future, they cannot suffice to solve many longstanding problems caused by the unique social, cultural and economic factors in ethnic minority areas. For instance, although preferential admissions have proven to be a success in creating minority educated elites, the percentage of minority students still lags significantly behind that of minorities in the general population of China (Sautman, 1999, p. 175). In practice, it is difficult to implement special treatments based on policy preferences and privileges, and this leads to a number of issues and problems in China's ethnic education development.

### **Policy Difficulties with regard to Religions and Languages**

The unique features of China's ethnic minority languages, together with the historical traditions of the religious beliefs of the ethnic minority groups, have a complex relationship with modern schooling. This is indeed a longstanding knotty issue in China's ethnic minority education policy.

### **Religions and Modern Schooling**

Most of China's ethnic minorities have a strong religious tradition. Religion has pervaded their cultures and has played a profound role in shaping their ideologies, lifestyles and social behaviours. Among China's ethnic minorities, there are many groups that are entirely committed to a religious belief. For example, the Tibetans and Mongols believe in Tibetan Buddhism; Huizu and Uygur are adherents of Islam; and Oroqen and Ewenki are adherents of the Shamanist faith. Some non-local religions have also been indigenised, such as Catholicism and Protestantism in certain Miao and Jingpo areas.

Religion has traditionally been the main form of organised education outside of the family. Among the Daizu in Yunnan, where Hinayana Buddhism is widely practiced, a necessary way for every boy to acquire knowledge and skills is to become a monk for a certain period of time. When boys stay in monasteries to study their religion, they also learn their ethnic language, culture and socially appropriate behaviours. Only after gaining such an experience can an individual obtain social respect within the community. Similarly, much education is offered in Mosques in the Islamic communities, and the education provided by the Tibetan Buddhism is a complicated system with much real-life knowledge of Tibetan language and medicine, astronomy, calendar calculation, painting and other branches of knowledge, in addition to Buddhist learning (Zhu, 1990, p. 2).

In terms of challenges to state schooling, the government is more concerned about minority religions than about minority languages. While religion has always been free in theory, the policy of Chinese communist government toward religion has changed significantly during the past 60 years. After the founding of the PRC, freedom of religion was guaranteed in the new constitution. During the early years of communist rule, Mao Zedong argued that religion should not be prohibited; only restricted. Religion even shares certain social concerns with communism that permit mutual cooperation in some circumstances. Religious leaders have joined educators and officials in efforts to eradicate illiteracy (Teng, 1989).

With increasingly profound opening and reforms in China, ethnic minority groups are granted more and more autonomy in the area of religion, although only state-sponsored religious organisations are permitted. There has been more and more freedom since the 1980s, together with an increasing pragmatism of policy toward religion in the Chinese society. At the present, state schooling has been expanded at the same time that minorities are experiencing a religious revival. The clergies of the minorities are experiencing great success in gaining recruits to their ranks and in finding educational and social ways of keeping religion alive in the minds of the next generation, especially among the Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist minorities (Mackerras, 1999, p. 47). With official bodies set up by the state to try to control religious activities, the Chinese people are also realistic. Common sense dictates that theoretical contradictions can be somehow accommodated if that is the most practical solution toward co-existence and social harmony (Pas, 1989, p. 22). In daily practice, both the government and most ordinary people go out of their way to avoid giving offence to minorities' religions.

There have been different interpretations of the situation. For example, Mackerras (1999, p. 53) argues that, while there are plenty of cases of religious conflict, it generally occurs despite, rather than because of, official policy or Han provocation. Others consider such a view as biased and one-sided. They point to the substantial degree of “Han provocation” that goes beyond restriction towards harsh state control of religious freedom that continues to threaten the relationship between the state and ethnic minority groups, which in turn indirectly impacts on the religious education of ethnic minority groups. For example, the Chinese government controls the appointment of archbishops of the Catholic Church in China, in violation of the prerogative of the Holy See (the Pope) to make such appointments. Similarly, the Chinese government tightly controls the appointment of the upper layer of the clerical hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism. According to them, religious education of ethnic minorities in China has been strongly controlled by the state in violation of the human rights of the affected ethnic minority groups. Overall, the Chinese authorities have remained quite successful in keeping religion out of the secular education system among minority groups.

After 1949, modern schooling has gradually become the formal main form of education in ethnic minority areas. Ethnic groups are drawn from traditional religious institutions to modern schooling. In some regions, especially in the communities where the entire society is committed to one specific religion, however, the education provided by and in religious institutions remains significant. Religious education and state education do different things. State schooling sometimes runs counter to religious teaching (Gladney, 1994), and have to compete with religious education for attendance rates, as well as financial contributions and support from families. Ethnic minority attendance rates in state schools are still low and parents often support religious institutions more than schools (Hansen, 1999, p. 250). Even some of those already enrolled in state schools choose to leave for religious education.

The relationship between religion and modern schooling is complex in ethnic minority areas. While religious education could play a constructive role in carrying forward ethnic cultural traditions, and to some extent in training ethnic talents, religious education alone cannot suffice in a highly technologised society with dramatic social transformations. Reducing the possible affect of religion on ethnic education relies not only on all of those involved in the development of ethnic education, but also on the improvement of its policies and legal basis.

### ***Languages and Schooling***

Another major challenge relating to ethnic minority culture and schooling is language. By 1949, only 19 ethnic minorities had developed their own written languages. After coming into power, the Chinese government formulated regulations in the Constitution and the law regarding Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities, which stated that every nationality had the freedom to use and develop its own national written language. The state has also helped all ethnic minorities develop education by using their own written languages and has helped more than 10 nationalities, including the Buyi, Yi, Miao (4 languages), Naxi, Li, Lisu, Dong, Hani (2 languages), and Wu, to create 14 languages. In addition, it has also helped the Uygur, the Kazak, the Lahu and Jingpo nationalities reform their languages. Except for the Hui and Manchu minorities that generally use the Han Chinese language, 53 other ethnic minorities all have their own languages now. The Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur,

Kazak, Kirgiz, Sibo, Korean, Miao, Zhuang, Buyi, Dong, Hani, Bai, Yi, Naxi, Jingpo, Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Dai, and Uzbek nationalities have been conducting teaching in their own languages (Postiglione, 1999, p. 8).

Language is essential for achieving the goals of state schooling. The implementation of minority languages as a medium of instruction can increase attendance rates and strengthen socialisation into national ideologies, as Stites (1999, p. 124) points out: "What the Chinese party/state wants and needs is a bilingual education system capable of producing people who are both 'ethnic and experts'." Indeed, with a clear recognition of such a need, China has endeavoured to develop a viable bilingual system of education. The Chinese state has gone to great lengths to accommodate minority languages. This has been the case especially since the beginning of the open and reform era. National minority languages have been increasingly emphasised (Postiglione, 1999). Minority language textbooks and teaching materials are available, more so than the United States (Stites, 1999).

Janet Upton makes the following remarks based on her empirical research in China:

Contrary to the rhetoric that often surfaces in Western and Tibetan-exile reports about the Tibetan language curriculum in the PRC, the textbooks in use do contain a fair amount of material drawn from Tibetan sources and relevant to Tibetan cultural life in the broad sense. (p. 307.)

However, she also points out that,

View of Tibetan history that is presented in the formal curriculum under the current political and cultural regime is far removed from the 'real history' that so many Tibetans at home and abroad currently crave. (p. 307.)

In order to train personnel of ethnic background who can not only meet the demand of regional development, but also are capable of learning information and technologies from other parts of the country, schools and classes for ethnic students of all levels and of all categories have extensively offered bilingual language teaching. Those schools using Chinese textbooks also use an ethnic language as an assisted teaching language. For instance, ethnic language and culture courses are taught in ethnic languages while general disciplines are lectured in Chinese. Nationwide, there are about 10 000 schools which offer teaching in 2 languages, with the attendance of about 6 million students (Wei & Xiong, 2006). Furthermore, against a background of globalisation, there is an unmistakable vision among ethnic minority communities that long-term survival entails gaining competency in three completely different languages: the native, the national (Chinese) and the international (English) (Postiglione, 2008, p. 5).

Publishing houses for ethnic education and ethnic language teaching coordinating organisations have been established for the purpose of editing and translating ethnic language teaching materials. Ethnic education publishing houses or ethnic teaching materials' publishing houses have been set up in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Jilin, Qinghai, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi provinces or autonomous regions,

ethnic languages translating and editing organs have been established in 8 provinces and autonomous regions. In addition, coordinating groups have been formed for primary and secondary school textbooks in Mongolian, Tibetan and Korean languages. In 2006, for example, 3 500 kinds of textbooks of primary and secondary schools (about 100 million volumes) were produced in 29 ethnic languages for students in 21 ethnic minorities (Wei & Xiong, 2006).

Language policy is closely related to the preferential treatment given to ethnic minorities. For example, in order to increase success rates in higher education, minorities may opt to take the university entrance examination in their own language. When the examination is taken in standard Chinese, these students usually receive bonus points. However, as a result of the many languages in use, students from different ethnic minorities attend different schools. Ethnic segregation is so common that many educators are very concerned about it, and there are calls for school desegregation (Postiglione, 1999). The Chinese government is doing much to support mother language education for ethnic minority groups, but although China has done fairly well in certain respects in the way it has handled minority language issues, there is always much more to be done, especially according to the perceptions of those of ethnic minority origin, for instance what most Tibetans want or expect (Upton, 1999).

### **Policy Dilemma and Challenges**

Like most countries in the world, China is multiethnic and faced by challenges of multicultural education. The Chinese government has always prioritised ethnic minority education, and both the central government and the Han-dominated provinces and municipalities have contributed constantly and tremendously, at least in financial and personnel terms, to educational development in ethnic minority regions. For example, by 2007, other provinces had donated 576 million yuan to Tibetan education and had sent more than 2 000 teachers and officials to help Tibet with its educational development (Zhao, 2007). With such strong support, China's ethnic education has made remarkable achievements within the past 6 decades.

Nevertheless, while the provision of education for ethnic minorities at all levels has been increasing, most minorities are below the national average at every level. The gap between minority and Han achievement in education has been especially apparent in higher education. In contrast to the fact that ethnic minorities make up 8,98% of the Chinese population, only 6,8% of university students came from minorities by the end of the 1990s (Huang, 2000, p. 205). In order to ensure national integration, ethnic minority participation at the highest level of the education system will have to be increased. Although it is fair to note that Chinese national policies have attempted to correct this situation and have met with varying levels of success, it remains true that the overall level of illiteracy of the national minorities remains higher than that of the Han.

Meanwhile, the notion of ethnic pluralism has been carefully proscribed, and multiethnic education remains a sensitive issue. The Tibetan experience (Postiglione, 1999) in particular illustrates that China's ethnic education policy still faces a longstanding dilemma, namely that education in a multiethnic country like China is essentially mono-cultural. China's school curriculum policy has been highly centralised, and therefore based overwhelmingly on Han Chinese experience only. With nationally unified course contents, syllabuses contain only limited material

about the cultures, histories, geographies, literature and arts of the ethnic minorities. While there has been much recent progress, including increasing curriculum decentralisation, more representation of ethnic minority cultures, and further introduction of locally-based textbooks, the national situation that university entrance examination dominates the orientation of primary and secondary education has largely gone unchanged, if not further enhanced. Educational quality of an overwhelming majority of schools nationwide is still measured by higher education enrolment rate.

China's policy towards ethnic minority culture has always been criticised for being unbalanced in terms of representations of ethnic minority cultures (Gladney, 1999). Along this line, one contemporary Chinese scholar advocates a dialect between unity and diversity in China's ethnic education policy (Teng, 1996). The dialect, however, has not been well reflected in policy, even less in practice. The unquestionable multiculturalism that is based on China's multiethnic actuality is sometimes in conflict with China's national curriculum policy and the assessment approaches associated with it. Ethnic minority children constantly need to initiate a process of negotiation to deal with conflicting sets of norms. The lack of representation of ethnic cultural traditions in school curriculum prevents ethnic cultural traditions from being carried forwards. There is an urgent need for more recognition of ethnic cultures as an integrated part of the Chinese culture, not only at the legal level, but more importantly by education policy makers (Kelly, 2002, p. 1).

A related issue is that for the previous half century China's ethnic education has been designed to serve the elite in ethnic minority regions. The shortage of traditional ethnic cultures and histories has led many ordinary parents of ethnic minority background to a decision not to send their children to state schools, despite there having been various policy preferences and privileges to encourage them to do so. This explains at least partially why school drop-out rates in ethnic minority areas continue to be high. On the other hand, modern schooling in China's ethnic minority regions often does not prepare culturally marginalised people for higher education and neither focuses on their traditional ethnic lifestyles. This is partly the reason why some parents choose to send their children to their religious institutions to receive education, instead of keeping them in state schools.

However, it is important to point out that despite the authoritarian character of state schooling in China, a great deal of diversity continues to exist. This diversity derives from the vast variety of cultural traditions and practices that continue to flourish, especially with regard to religion and language. Yet, the diversity that exists among China's ethnic minority population does not appear to be fully reflected in the content of schooling, even though minority languages are emphasised in many regions (Postiglione, 1999). This is a cause for concern, as more people of the Han population are entering ethnic minority regions due to market and economic reasons, and chances of cultural misunderstandings will increase.

The concern increases in a context of intensified globalisation and China's rapid introduction to the global market in most respects of society. Ethnic cultural diversity is under unprecedented pressure, and China's current educational reforms are in line with those in economic sector. The prevailing orientation has been to form close links between education and the market, together with decentralisation in finance and management in the reform of education (Yang, 2006). In this policy context, many

previously isolated ethnic minority areas now interact increasingly and more intensively with other parts of China and the world; and the market requires them to use Chinese and English as a means of communication. Against such a socio-economic background, the preservation of China's ethnic cultural traditions, especially through appropriate school curricula to facilitate students with knowledge of indigenous, national and global mainstream societies, remains an arduous task, echoing the current situation in many other countries.

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