MLE policy in China: facts and practices

By Linda Tsung

China is one of the most multilingual countries in the world. The government of the People’s Republic of China promotes the country as a harmonious and unified nation with 56 distinct ethnic groups who speak more than 400 languages. The government has not only legally recognized multilingual education (MLE) but, through its written education policy, has also publicly encouraged a climate in which the teaching and learning of non-dominant languages can flourish. The implementation of these policies has not delivered the intended result and has, in fact, pushed minority language development in the opposite direction. Official statistics show that nearly 20 percent of China’s minority languages are on the edge of extinction and another 40 percent are showing signs of endangerment.

This presentation aims to explore gaps between the government written language education policy and school language practices. These gaps have been instrumental in a shifting in language power and linguistic hierarchies in China at a time when President Xi Jinping is defining the national goal as the Chinese dream. The study is based on empirical research and a number of case studies in multilingual regions and provinces. The findings indicate that modern standard Chinese (Putonghua) continues to be a powerful factor in both consolidating and probing educational, cultural, social, and political discourse, while social changes have created a linguistic hierarchy reflected in the use of languages among diversified ethnic groups, accelerating inequalities and widening tensions. China’s multilingual education faces a great challenge: it is not static and its movement in one direction or another is a result of many influences which can be at a macro or micro level and may include political, economic, and social factors.