MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION POLICY IN CHINA: FACTS AND PRACTICES

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OUTLINE

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CHINA’S LINGUISTIC MAP

Map 2b: Chinese and Non-Chinese Language Groups

Language Families

- Sino-Tibetan
  - Chinese
  - Tibetan
    1. Amdo
    2. Khams
    3. Dbusgtsang
- Tai
- Miao-Yao
- Indo-European
  - Tajik
- Altaic
  - Mongolian
  - Turkic
    1. Kazakh
    2. Uyghur
    3. Kirghiz
- Austro-Asiatic
- Manchu-Tungus
- Korean
- Mon-Khmer
The government’s first constitution, ‘Common Guidelines of the PRC’ in 1949, declared that ‘all minority nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own languages and scripts, and to maintain or reform their customs and religion.’

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party’s language policies effectively gave minority languages official status in legal proceedings, administrative duties and educational instruction.
In 1951, at the Twelfth Plenary session of the National People's Congress, a policy was laid down that minority nationalities had the right to use their own languages in court cases and that the People's Court should provide interpreters when required.
LANGUAGE EQUALITY

The 1982 Constitution of China re-emphasized the rights of ethnic minority groups to language use, sociocultural development, and regional autonomy by claiming in Article 4 that:

“All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity, and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities…”

(People’s Daily online, 2004)
The discourse on minorities’ non-obligation to learn Chinese, for example, is well represented in the PRC Ministry of Education’s two point decision on language education for minorities in 1951 (China, 1991, 28–40):

1. In minority communities with commonly used languages, such as the Mongol, Korean, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazak, etc., primary and secondary schools should use native languages as the medium of instruction for all courses;

2. Minority communities without writing systems or with imperfect ones should begin to create or reform their writing system, and at the same time adopt Chinese or a customarily used language as the medium of instruction on a voluntary basis; and Chinese should be offered only on demand and on a voluntary basis in schools in minority communities.”
FIRST GENERATION ETHNIC POLICY

• Promoting multilingual education in 1949-1965 (1st 15 years); and 1979-1987 (2nd 8 years)
• Promoting ethnic and language equality
• “Pluralist unity” by Fei Xiaotong (1980, 1989), 多元一体 (multiple origins, one body)
DISCUSSION POINTS:

• What language policies have been conceived and implemented in the past 3 decades?
• What kind of multilingual education programs have been operating in minority regions?
• What kinds of linguistic capital and advantage does competence in standard Chinese and minority languages generate?
DATA

• Case studies
• Ethnographic investigations of multilingual education practice
• Linguistic landscape
• Classroom observations
• Interviews with key stakeholders, teachers, and parents
CASE STUDY 1: INNER MONGOLIA
The ‘Government Guidelines’ in 1947

To promote Mongolian newspapers and books, to research Mongolian history and disseminate Mongolian language textbooks in schools and develop Mongolian culture (IMAR, 1947).
PROMOTING MONGOLIAN LANGUAGE

“On 1 May 1957, Ulanhu spoke in support of Mongol development and culture. He read Cyrillic scripts in the Mongolian language in his speech. Many Mongols were moved to tears and could not forget his speech even after Ulanhu’s death in late 1988. They interpreted his speech, delivered in Mongolian, as being in defiance of the Han Chinese onslaught against Mongol culture.” (Bulag, 2003)

This indicates the strength of the emotional bond between language and identity.

Ulanhu used the Mongolian language as political capital to win support from his people by giving speeches in Mongolian.
THE TOURISM BOOMs IN INNER MONGOLIA
MONGOL PRIMARY (MP) AND MONGOL SECONDARY (MS) SCHOOLS 1980–2010
DISCUSSION 1

• The Mongols have lost this Mongolian language race. Mongol elites encouraged the use of more Mongolian language for the benefit of identity, knowledge, and learning; but learning Chinese was promoted for its economic and career benefits, which seemed more attractive to parents who were concerned with their children’s future.

• The main factor causing the fast decline of Mongolian language education is lack of parental support. Many Mongolian parents have lost interest in this elite-driven movement.

• They ‘see little benefit in sending their children to Mongolian schools and opt for Chinese education for their children, hoping that this will lead to a brighter economic future.’ (Interview data, 2012)
Cross-border exchanges between Mongolian people in Outer and Inner Mongolia have raised the status of the Mongolian language. But there is a barrier in the Mongolian written language.

Language can unite people or divide them.
THE MONGOLIAN LANGUAGE MARKET

There is no bilingual requirement for any government job, such as civil servants.

Ulanhu used to tell Han cadres: “How do you serve the Mongolian people if you do not speak their language”?

There are not many employment opportunities for tertiary graduates who have good levels of spoken and written Mongolian but possess weak Han skills. Careers in Mongolian language newspapers and radio stations are limited, and so are careers in research into the Mongolian language.

Those Mongols who are educated in Mongolian find that their university level knowledge of Mongolian is no different to illiteracy. If they are unable to speak Chinese, they cannot find jobs; almost all jobs are controlled by Chinese, even in the lower-level Mongolian administrative counties. (Bulag, 2003)

Language and Economy (Coulmas, 1992).
CASE STUDY 2: XINJIANG
OFFICIAL SIGNS IN URUMQI
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN XINJIANG

- Minzu schools: Mother tongue instruction for Uyghur, Kazakh, Mongolian, Xibe and Kirghiz.
- Han schools
- Minzu-Han schools
BILINGUAL EDUCATION POLICY SINCE 2000

- **Model 1**: major subjects in Putonghua, non-major subjects in mother tongue.
- **Model 2**: All subjects in Putonghua, except for music and the minority language and literature.
- **Model 3**: Putonghua is used for all subjects and a mother tongue is a subject.
PRIMARY SCHOOLS BASED ON LMI BETWEEN 2005 AND 2009 IN XINJIANG
Before the 1980s, Chinese schools offered Uyghur lessons to Han students from Year 3. So Han students could speak the Uyghur language, and thus Han and Uyghur children would play together. It was good for them to have this language exchange and mutual understanding. It is different now. After the opening-up policy, Han parents are only interested in their children learning English, and schools have replaced Uyghur language lessons with English lessons. Han students don’t learn the Uyghur language any more. After school many Han parents send their children to English or mathematics tutoring classes. Han and Uyghur children no longer play together. (Interviewee data)
DISCUSSION 2

- It is clear that language education policy in Xinjiang has changed dramatically over the past ten years from ‘self-determination’ to ‘government determination’.
- Bilingual education aims to replace mother-tongue instruction.
- Language is one of the barriers to integration between the Han and Uyghur young generations.

The linguistic and cultural capital accrued by learning Uyghur during the early years of schooling offers diminishing returns in higher education, economic benefits and careers.
CASE STUDY 3: YUNNAN
NAXI DONGBA AND LANGUAGE

Dongba performing a funeral ceremony in the 1950s

During the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s
OFFICIAL MULTILINGUAL SIGNS
MIXED MULTILINGUAL SIGNS
PUBLIC BILINGUAL SIGNS
DISCUSSION 3

- UNESCO’s intangible / non-material cultural heritage recognition and the rise of the tourism industry has increased recognition of some small minority languages.
- The tourist boom has given rise to ‘a Naxi cultural fever’ and empowered their language.
- Eg. 15 million tourists visited Lijiang in 2012.

Economic resources and cultural capital of minority languages
CONCLUSIONS

• China’s multilingualism is a powerful asset, not only as a linguistic, economic, and cultural resource but as political capital in which the CCP has been seen to be a supporter of ethnic equality.

• In the last 30 years, the Chinese government has invested heavily in the promotion of Chinese, especially Putonghua, as soft and hard power across the nation and globe.

• The shift of language ideology and policy has significantly devalued minority languages. This is in spite of growing recognition of the value of minority languages in China for cross-border relations, as well as for economic resources, as applications for UNESCO’s intangible / non-material cultural heritage recognition.
LANGUAGE POWER

• Linguistic power directly relates to multilingualism in the education domain, where the government at all levels possesses more power regarding learning and teaching a language and the medium of instruction in schools.

• Power asymmetries affect language-learning attitudes and indicate a close relationship with cultural ideology. Many minority languages receive less positive interpretation, which appears closely related to the symbolic power of Putonghua and the Chinese written language.
LANGUAGE POLICIES CONCEIVED AND IMPLEMENTED IN THE PAST THREE DECADES

Policy Shifts From:
- **Minzu schools**: mother tongue as the language of instruction (LoI):
  - Tibetan, Uygur, Mongolian, Korean, Kazakh etc.

To:
- **Bilingual schools**:
  - Mother tongue as LoI, Chinese as a subject (Mode 1)
  - Chinese as LoI, minority language as a subject (Mode 2)
  - Hierarchical curriculum: Chinese as LoI for main subjects and minority languages as LoI for music, sports etc.
THE LANGUAGE POLICY SHIFTS TO HIERARCHY

• The evolution to a language hierarchy has affected those languages within each ranking and affects institutional support, such as education, administration and media, in local, regional, and national contexts.

• Putonghua has the highest value and prestige because the government has made it the de facto national language. Together with the Chinese written language, Putonghua is used in any official situation such as the legal system, education, media, all administration and almost every workplace.
THE PYRAMID OF LANGUAGE HIERARCHY IN CHINA

National
Putonghua/Guoyu and Chinese characters

Regional
Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian and Zhuang in four autonomous regions

Local
Languages in 30 autonomous prefectures, 120 autonomous counties and 1,173 autonomous townships
WHAT KINDS OF LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AND ADVANTAGES DOES COMPETENCE IN MINORITY LANGUAGES GENERATE?

Minority languages

- Political capital: Identity marker, Rights
- Economic capital: Resources, Education, Careers
- Cultural capital: Values, Religions
- Social capital: Mobility, integration, Community networks
THANK YOU!

Q and A