

Chapter 2

Reconceptualizing Ethnic Multilingual Learners in China

*All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They.
And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But-would you believe it?—They look upon We
As only a sort of They!*

—Rudyard Kipling

2.1 Ethnic Multilingual Education in China and Yunnan

The constitution of the People's Republic of China defines China as “a nation of multiethnic” (National People's Congress 1982). This claim is not only a statement concerning a demographic feature of China, but also a political consideration because the designations of the 56 ethnic groups are the “constructs of the state for managing its perceived policy and nationality policy” (Goodman 2004, p. 329). Since the founding of the PRC, the central government has issued a series of top-down laws and policies to legitimize and promote the multilingual competencies of ethnic minority learners. For example, the Constitution of the PRC (1982) declares that “all ethnic minority groups have freedom to develop their languages” (National People's Congress 1982). The 1982 Constitution of China reemphasizes the rights of ethnic minority groups in 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 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. The state helps the areas inhabited by minority nationalities speed up their economic and cultural development in accordance with the peculiarities and needs of the different minority nationalities. Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy. All the national autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People's Republic of China. The people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and

develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs.

(National People's Congress 1982)

The national constitution establishes the legitimate status of ethnic minority groups in China and paves the way for later bilingual education in ethnic minority areas. The newly issued Outline of China's Mid-long Term Educational Development reiterates that "the right to use and learn native languages and cultures shall be respected and protected" (The State Council of the PRC 2011). At present, the concept of bilingual education has been put into practice within the territory of China and guaranteed by various laws and regulations¹ formulated by central and local governments and legislation. The rights and interests of ethnic minority groups are protected by the granting of regional autonomy to ethnic minority groups, by the creation and reform of ethnic minority scripts, and by the establishment of bilingual education schools, to name just a few.

As a national policy, promoting the prosperity and development of ethnic minority groups has become a sustainable agenda for successive governments in China. For example, ex-Premier Wen Jiabao (2008) stated in the 2008 People's Congress that: "China is a unified, multiethnic country. We must promote unity among all ethnic groups and make a concerted effort to achieve prosperity and development for all."

This observation that China is a state of *Duoyuan Yiti*, "ethnic diversity within national unity" (Fei 1989), suggests that stakeholders at the top level believe national unity and ethnic diversity are the cornerstones of China's socioeconomic development and political stability.

2.2 Multilingual Education Policies in China

Since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government has proposed and implemented trilingual education policies, except for the short-term suspension during the "Cultural Revolution."² As Adamson and Feng (2008) observe, the PRC has initiated educational language policies to "foster trilingualism in ethnic minority areas with three goals: to enhance literacy, to assure internal stability and to allow knowledge transfer in order to strengthen the nation" (p. 9). To achieve these goals,

¹The laws and regulations concerned include the Guidelines for Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities in PRC (1952, 1982); Opinions Concerning Improving the Work of Minority Education (1980); The Law of Autonomy of Ethnic Minority Groups, (1984); The Regulation of Illiteracy Elimination, (1988); The Higher Education Law (1999); The General Language and Script Law (2000); The Law of Compulsory Education (2006); Outline of China's Middle and Long Term Educational Development (2010).

²The Cultural Revolution Campaign (1966–1976) was a violent, disastrous mass movement, which led to social, political, and economic upheaval in the People's Republic of China. It has been blamed for around 10 years' nationwide chaos and economic disarray and stagnation.

the PRC has issued trilingual policies³ separately at different historical periods. These policies include promoting Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) and bilingual education since the 1950s and introducing a third language, English, into the secondary and tertiary curricula in the 1980s.

In 2001, English was introduced into the primary school curriculum, and schools with the necessary conditions are required to teach English starting from primary Grade Three. At present, English is not only a required subject at almost all levels of curricula, but also a yardstick for talent selection and quality evaluation for higher learning institutions. In this sense, being multilingual in China is not only an important personal choice for ethnic multilingual learners (EMLs), but also a reality reflecting the state's political will and national interests.

2.3 Demographic Features and Language Policies in Yunnan

China is a country consisting of 56 officially identified ethnic groups. Yunnan is a frontier province in Southwest China with a great diversity of language, culture, and ethnicity (see Fig. 2.1). With a territory of 3,940,000 km² and a population of 45,966,239 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011a, b) Yunnan is home to 25 officially identified ethnic minority groups.⁴ Among those groups, 15 can be found exclusively in Yunnan and 16 are cross-border ethnic groups.⁵ The largest ethnic group, the Han, makes up 66.02 % of the population, while the other 25 ethnic minority groups constitute a combined 33.98 % of the total population of Yunnan. Now Yunnan has 8 autonomous prefectures and 29 autonomous counties. These cover 70.2 % of the territory and are inhabited by 48.08 % of the provincial population.

Yunnan is famous for its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. The 25 ethnic minority groups in Yunnan speak 26 languages and use 22 scripts (Dao 2005). Here 25 officially identified ethnic minority groups live together in a pattern of “*Dazaju Xiaojuju*”⁶ (大杂居、小聚居 big dispersion and small concentration). This

³English was formally introduced into junior secondary school curricula in 1980. Before that some junior and senior secondary schools in China adopted other influential foreign languages such as Russian or Japanese as school subjects.

⁴These 25 ethnic groups are ethnic minority groups with populations of more than 5000. There are also some ethnic minority groups with small populations that have not been officially identified by the state. Mang People and Kemu People are cases in point.

⁵Although the numbers seem contradictory but they are in fact reasonable for some groups are overlapping. Some ethnic minority groups are exclusive to China and can also be found in the neighboring countries. That is why the sum is not 25. More than 16 ethnic minority groups live in the cross-border areas and have frequent language and economic contact with their friends and relatives on the other side of the border.

⁶According to Zhu and Blatchford's observation (2006), some of China's ethnic minority groups are highly dispersed, whereas others are highly concentrated in certain peripheral areas. The former



Fig. 2.1 The map of Yunnan and China (Lin 2015)

demographic feature has further contributed to the integration of some ethnic minority groups into the mainstream Han and other neighboring ethnic groups throughout history. Take Yunnan for example. Sixteen ethnic groups live in the cross-border areas where different ethnic people mix, and 22 ethnic groups speak 28 languages⁷ (Tsang 2005). This is because some people can speak more than one language due to frequent interethnic contacts.

Given the differences in living environment, population size, community distribution, and socioeconomic development, the language use of ethnic communities is very diversified and complicated. According to the *Records of Ethnic Minority Language and Script, a volume of Record of Yunnan Province*, (Yang 1989), there are four types of language users in Yunnan: monolinguals, who speak the native language with community and non-community members (such as the Lisu, Dai, Tibetans, Jingpo, etc.); bilinguals,⁸ who live in the flat lands or cohabit with other ethnic communities (such as the Bai, Naxi, Zhuang, etc.); trilinguals, who have

(Footnote 6 continued)

always live with the Han or other ethnic minority groups, whereas the latter usually live together as a community in the frontier areas.

⁷Many cross-border ethnic groups are multilingual due to frequent language contact with the neighboring ethnic communities. Thus, 22 ethnic minority groups can speak 28 languages.

⁸In the ethnic minority areas, bilingual education mainly refers to the instruction of native language and Mandarin Chinese, while in the Han dominated areas, bilingual education usually refers to the instruction of Chinese and English.

frequent contact with neighboring communities (such as the De'ang, Pumi, Bulang, etc.); and transitional language users, who have given up their native languages and adopted new languages (such as the Hui, Man, Shui, etc.). Before the 1990s, the need for trans-ethnic communication was very limited because of geographic isolation and slow socioeconomic development. Therefore, quite a large number of people (about 6.5 million) in Yunnan could not communicate in Putonghua. *The Survey of Language and Script Use in China* (2006) suggested that in Yunnan, only 37.84 % of the provincial population could communicate in Putonghua, which is lower than the national level of 53.06 %. Among the ethnic minority groups, only 12 % can communicate in Putonghua.⁹ Take the Dulong for example: 85.99 % of its population does not understand Putonghua at all (Tsang 2005). Therefore, minority people like the Dulong will be at a disadvantage in seeking better education and working opportunities.¹⁰ Thus, bilingual education in the school curriculum is essential as it “contributes to enhanced mutual understanding, respect as well as political and economic equality” (Teng and Wen 2005, p. 268).

To promote the literacy of some ethnic groups in Yunnan, especially those who could not understand Putonghua, in 1995, the Yunnan provincial government issued a transitional bilingual education policy, arguing:

In minority areas where Chinese [Putonghua] 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 grades¹¹ while, at the same time, Chinese should be progressively introduced. For the upper grades,¹² 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 schools¹³ serving ethnic groups that understand Chinese, instruction 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, as cited in Ma 2007, p. 15)

Echoing the instructions of the provincial government, some prefectural governments have also issued their own bilingual education policies, according to their local needs and special circumstances. For instance, in 1987, the Eighth People's Congress of Dehong Prefecture passed the Regulations of Self-autonomy of the Dai and the Jingpo Nationality. Clause 56 prescribes:

⁹They cannot communicate effectively with outsiders in either written or oral Chinese.

¹⁰A good command of Putonghua has become an essential qualification for migrant workers seeking employment in the nonethnic minority areas. Putonghua is also the dominant medium of instruction at all public educational institutions in China.

¹¹The early grades usually refers to K1–K3 in elementary school.

¹²The upper grades usually refers to K4–6 in China.

¹³Primary school in China refers to K1–K6, while middle school refers to K7–12.

Within the autonomous prefecture, the ethnic primary schools which mainly enroll ethnic students should adopt *Shuangyuwen* (bilingual and bi-literacy) education. At the same time, the common language—Putonghua shall be used in schools. The native language courses should be offered for ethnic minority classes in the general secondary schools or technical schools. Within the whole prefecture the native language shall be tested and the score shall be documented in the final scores in the unified examinations.

(Dehong People's Congress 2005)

To sum up, bilingual education in China is a government-led educational campaign and policy, aimed at developing the multilingual competence of ethnic minority learners, improving the overall literacy of ethnic minority students, and achieving progress in national socioeconomic development through the public school curriculum (Wang 2011). The bilingual learning experience will not only help to develop the early literacy of some ethnic groups, but it also will provide them experience in acquiring new languages and access to equal educational opportunities.

2.4 Challenges for Ethnic Minority Higher Education

After over 30 years' reform and opening to the outside world, the transition of China from a planned economy has resulted in differing consequences for China's diverse populations. In particular, the reform in higher education and health care "has exacerbated the negative impact of economic reforms, widening the gap between China's eastern, coastal region and the less-developed western region, between the urban and rural population, and between the Han majority and those living in China's minority areas" (Hill and Zhou 2009, p. 3). The abolition of free higher education and government-guaranteed employment of university undergraduates since the late 1990s has resulted in a stricter screening of talents in an ever more competitive labor market. At the tertiary level, ethnic minority students are expected to master not only generic skills, but also multilingual proficiency at least in the national language—Chinese—and sometimes in English. However, the language, culture and socioeconomic gaps¹⁴ between the majority Han and the minority ethnic groups place the latter at a great disadvantage.

Before 1949, there were no special higher learning institutions for ethnic minorities in China, and the number of students from ethnic groups in higher education was just 1285 (Ha and Teng 2001). Some ethnic groups like the Ji'nuo were unable to receive even basic education. However, since the founding of the

¹⁴Over 30 years prioritized policies for the eastern and coastal China have made these areas more developed. These policies have largely bypassed China's central and western regions inhabited by the largest number of ethnic minority groups. The different socioeconomic development leads to different levels of Putonghua acquisition and some culture gaps. These gaps are partially due to the culture differences and linguistic distance, resulting from the language and education policy imposed on minority groups.

PRC, especially since mass education was introduced in 1998, higher education for ethnic minority groups has developed at a great speed and scale. Now there are 16 minority higher education institutions in China running undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The number of ethnic minority students in ethnic minority universities amounts to more than 200,000 (Lei 2010). The rapid development of ethnic universities can be seen in their enrollment numbers and their efforts to catch up with mainstream institutions in order to be considered “world-class.”

Table 2.1 shows that higher education has developed dramatically since 1998, along with ethnic higher education. Currently, higher education in China is in a transitional period from elite education to mass education, from building more universities to building “world-class” universities. It can be seen that from 1998 to 2005, the number of ethnic students at the tertiary level increased by 321 %. However, this figure is lower than the national increase rate of 358 %. On the other hand, the ratio of ethnic students in schools fell from 6.6 % to 6.1 % during the same period, which implies that the chances of ethnic minority students receiving higher education decreased. Zhang’s (2008) study of college ethnic minority students in Yunnan also supports this assumption. Zhang’s (2008) investigation indicated that the proportion of ethnic minority students in higher educational institutions in 2001 was 19.51 % of the university population, while the ethnic population in Yunnan accounted for 35 % of the provincial population in the same year. At a national level, the population of ethnic students was 5.81 % of the national school population, while the ethnic population was 8.41 % of the national population. The provincial and national figures demonstrate the unequal opportunities for ethnic groups’ access to higher education in that the number of ethnic students in various schools is underrepresented in terms of the ethnic population ratio.

For example, the proportion of ethnic minority students at the tertiary level has not increased dramatically with the expansion of higher education. Instead, the proportion of tertiary ethnic students has been decreasing most years. Take Yunnan University of Nationalities (YUN) for example. In the 1950s, the ethnic population accounted for over 90 % of the total enrolled student population, whereas in 2010 the figure was just 41 % (Yunnan University of Nationalities 2011).

Furthermore, among the ethnic minority students themselves, the degree to which they receive public education varies. Tan and Xie’s (2009) study showed that there was a gradual decrease in the ethnic population at the postgraduate level, but the population at the undergraduate level was gradually increasing (see Table 2.2). Yang (2009) pointed out that the higher the educational institution, the fewer female students enrolled. At the primary and secondary levels, the decrease in the number of female students is much higher than that of male students.

Choi (2010, p. 170) argues that “economic development and educational reform efforts currently underway in China have altered student demographics and created the potential for dramatic changes in the mission and identity of minority universities.” She points out that these challenges are due to the “drastic social, cultural, economic and demographic changes for the ethnic community” (Choi 2010, p. 173). This observation helps to explain the rapid decline in the number of

Table 2.1 The number of ethnic minority students in higher education institutions of the PRC1998–2005 (Tan and Xie 2009)

Year	Number of ethnic tertiary students (10,000)	Number of tertiary students (10,000)	Ratio of ethnic students (%)	Ethnic increase rate (%)	National increase rate (%)
1998	22.63	340.9	6.6	NA	NA
1999	24.77	413.4	6.0	9.5	21.3
2000	31.99	556.1	5.8	29.1	34.5
2001	40.97	719.1	5.7	28.1	29.3
2002	52.39	903.4	5.8	27.9	25.6
2003	65.52	1108.6	5.9	25.1	22.7
2004	75.59	1333.5	5.7	15.4	20.3
2005	95.32	1561.8	6.1	26.1	17.1

NA means the data is not available

Table 2.2 Higher education in 2006 (MOE)

Type	Total tertiary students (10,000)	Ethnic tertiary students (10,000)	Proportion (%)
Postgraduate	110.47	5.14	4.65
Doctoral degree	20.80	0.89	4.26
Master's degree	89.66	4.25	4.74
Bachelor's degree	524.88	107.55	6.19
Associate degree	212.03	64.84	6.87

minority students in minority higher learning institutions and the rapid increase in the number of nonethnic students.

On the one hand, globalization and China's rapid economic rise as a world power call for highly competitive individuals who can make contributions to nation-state building at the global, national, regional, and local levels. To enhance the global competitiveness of the Chinese nation and meet the needs of the "knowledge economy", it is necessary to improve the educational level of the Chinese population, including ethnic minorities. However, the traditional academic strength of ethnic minority universities lies in traditional disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology, sociology, ethnic languages, and culture. With curriculum focusing on ethnic studies, it is difficult for graduates from ethnic higher education institutions to compete with graduates from comprehensive universities who are trained according to the needs of the labor market. Therefore, how to reform the traditional curriculum so as to meet the needs of a market economy is an emergent issue. The state economic transition, first to a market economy and later to a global economy, requires the adjustment of goals in higher education for ethnic minorities.

In response to the call for China's higher education reform, a national higher education evaluation system was introduced starting in 2003. The Ministry of Education (MOE) established a five-year cycle system to evaluate regular higher education institutions.

The National Higher Education Evaluation Center (NHEEC) is an organization attached to the MOE. The NHEEC was established with three aims: (1) to improve teaching quality in higher education institutions; (2) to strengthen macroeconomic management and guidance; and (3) to enhance international communication and cooperation.

To achieve the three objectives, the NHEEC has established seven basic standards, an additional unique item, 19 extended standards and 44 observational positions. The results are evaluated according to four categories: "excellent," "good," "qualified," and "unqualified". The guiding principles for higher education evaluation are to "evaluate to enhance improvement" (*Yiping Cujian* 以评促建), "evaluate to facilitate change" (*Yiping Cugai* 以评促改), "evaluate to strengthen management" (*Pingjian Jiehe* 评建结合), and "evaluate to emphasize management" (*Zhongzai Jianshe* 重在建设).

In 2007, Minzu University of China¹⁵ (MUC) received the national undergraduate teaching quality evaluation and was ranked as a "university of excellence." Through the national undergraduate teaching quality evaluation, MUC clarified its thoughts as to future directions, reformed its curriculum and pattern of talent development, highlighted its academic strength, and found its weaknesses.

The MUC case suggests that it is necessary for ethnic minority universities in China to rearticulate and reconceptualize their missions and characteristics for future development. Clothey (2005) argues that higher education in China serves economic and political purposes. The former purpose is to provide professional leaders with high-level technical skills, and the latter is to contribute to ethnic unity, national stability, and patriotism. As for YUN, a representative local university for ethnic groups, questions to be clarified are as follows: Should YUN serve the nation or serve the local population? Should it develop highly skilled professionals or produce agents of social transformation? Should it integrate with mainstream culture or maintain ethnic features? Should it pursue short-term benefits or seek sustainable development? Should it aim to become a world-class comprehensive university or remain a prestigious local university with ethnic features?

Under the national higher education evaluation system, ethnic minority universities face historic opportunities as well as challenges. On the one hand, university infrastructures, such as land, libraries laboratories and the internet access have been improved or newly constructed. More teachers holding high degrees are being developed and recruited. On the other hand, the unified and authoritative evaluation standards, which were mainly designed for comprehensive universities,

¹⁵Minzu University of China refers to what was once known as the Central University of Nationalities. It replaced the term Nationalities with Minzu to highlight the distinctive features of Chinese ethnic groups.

are forcing ethnic higher educational institutions to lose their distinctive features in order to catch up with the mainstream national universities (Bai 2005; Lei 2010; Zhang 2010a, b; Ou 2011).

2.5 Policies, Curriculum, and Power Relationships: A Discussion of the Paradox

Globalization and China's rapid modernization, benefiting from a market-driven economy, has encouraged China's stakeholders to introduce more policies regarding language, culture, ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic development so as to achieve the "great revival of the Chinese nation" (Jiang 2002). Now the wish for a "great revival of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing* 中华民族的伟大复兴) is being realized through the policies for socioeconomic development in the whole of China, including the frontier provinces inhabited by ethnic groups. The preferential policies for ethnic minorities not only fit the reality of contemporary China, but also coincide with the international practices concerning ethnic rights and development. For example, the rights to equal access to education are also addressed by such UN documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (1979); the Declaration on the Right to Development (1986); the World Declaration for Education for All (1990); the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992); and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Culture Rights (1994).

According to both international and national laws and conventions, ethnic minority learners in China should have the right to equal education, to enjoyment of the benefits of China's socioeconomic development, and to revitalization of their native languages and cultures. These rights are legitimized by national policies on language, education, ethnicities, and socioeconomic development.

Although some preferential policies, such as bonus marks, do provide ethnic minority students with more opportunities for higher education (Zhang 2008, 2010a, b), the prospects for ethnic minority students are still uncertain. For instance, to ensure that minority learners have fair access to higher education, the central government of the PRC has introduced a variety of preferential policies to lower the "threshold" for entering into higher education for certain ethnic learners and for Han students living in minority areas. For example, Article 8 of the Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that:

The State, in light of the characteristics and needs of the ethnic groups, assists and supports the development of higher education in regions inhabited by ethnic peoples for the purpose of training senior specialists among them.

(National People's Congress 1999)

However, the lower “threshold” for access to higher education has not brought about the desired learning outcomes or guaranteed the postgraduation employment of ethnic minority students in the increasingly competitive labor market. Since China has embraced a market economy, its talent selection system has become more and more decentralized. As a result, the national preferential policies on ethnic minorities can function only in governmental sectors and public educational institutions. In other words, it is difficult to persuade state-owned enterprises or private companies to employ ethnic university graduates unless they have high credentials (first-class degrees) or certificates (such as certificates of foreign language proficiency or computer literacy). As Feng and Cheung (2010, p. 257) observed, “The reform from a planned economy to a market economy has fundamentally affected the enforcement of these special policies (preferential policies).”

However, due to the limitations of preuniversity education and poor learning resources, the attainment of ethnic minority students at university is usually lower than that of their Han peers. Thus, it is quite difficult for them to compete with the Han students in the labor market.

Furthermore, the bi/trilingual policies are sound in theory, but are often problematic in their implementation. As for ethnic minority learners, the requirement of mastering three languages is considered critical for their educational and occupational development, and for national security (Lam 2007; Wen 2009). Accordingly, the top stakeholders have tried to adopt a “collaborative policy” (Cummins 2000) to maintain the positive development of bilingual education while strengthening the promotion of Putonghua. For example, in the Law of Autonomy of Ethnic Minority Groups (1984), Article 37 specifies that:

Schools where most of the students come from minority nationalities should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the medium of instruction. Classes for the teaching of Chinese (the Han language) shall be opened for senior grades of primary schools or for secondary schools to popularize Putonghua, the common speech based on Beijing pronunciation.

(National People’s Congress 1984)

The spread of English in China and its introduction into all levels of the curriculum, together with the above-mentioned policies on promoting bilingual education, have led to a trilingual education policy for ethnic minority learners.

Current national language policies in China have three goals: to enhance literacy, to assure internal stability, and to acquire scientific knowledge so as to strengthen the nation and withstand foreign aggression (Lam 2007; Adamson and Feng 2008). As a result, ethnic minority learners are expected to acquire three languages: their native language, Chinese, and English. These goals are presented as a collaborative policy (Cummins 2000) in the development of trilingualism. However, the implementation of these policies faces great challenges. For example, at the primary level, the introduction of English to ethnic students is influenced by various factors such as teacher availability, curriculum organization, sustainable financing, technical support, and local attitude. Unlike the policies promoting Putonghua and ethnic minority languages, which are enforced by legislation, the teaching of

English as a compulsory subject at primary school is only a proposal of the MOE (Lam 2005), which is applicable to schools only when the teaching conditions permit. Research shows that the English curriculum at the primary level has not been completely implemented even in some developed areas, such as Zhejiang and Guangdong (Yang 2006a, b; Hu 2008). Therefore, the degree and effect of English education for primary school ethnic learners need further observation and evaluation.

In contrast to students in primary schools, where there is little pressure to learn English, most ethnic minority students in tertiary institutions face real challenges in acquiring English as a third language in comparison to Han students who only need to master two languages (Putonghua and English). These challenges can be detected in minority students' English foundation, impact of negative language transfer, culture shock, tension with the curriculum and psychological problems, to mention just a few. These challenges are further discussed later.

English is a compulsory course for all undergraduates at university. Minority students face more challenges than their Han peers, especially when the minority students' first language is not well developed¹⁶ and their second language is used as the medium of instruction. Starting in the third grade, most minority learners study English in classrooms where Putonghua is the dominant medium of instruction. When teachers explain the difficult language points in Putonghua, students struggle with textbooks that have explanations or translations in standard Chinese. Through the whole process of learning, ethnic minority students have to mentally retranslate the text into their mother tongue (Feng 2005a, b). To some extent, the dominant curriculum, which was developed mainly for the majority Han, marginalizes those ethnic minority learners with poor Chinese language proficiency. Chinese proficiency is considered crucial as a support for learning English in China.

Additionally, the exposure of minority students to the English language comes far later than that of their Han peers, who usually start to learn English at the beginning of or even before primary school. This can be attributed to the lack of resources, which are critical for the development of English proficiency in ethnic minority communities (Feng 2005a, b; Li and Zhou 2005; Yang 2005; Jiang et al. 2007). Moreover, ethnic minority children from the financially disadvantaged families are often absent from school in busy seasons helping their parents with the farm works. As a result, few minority children have any chance to study a foreign language (English) in primary schools, or secondary schools (Ju 2000; Li 2003).

Even if minority students are admitted to tertiary institutions with the support of preferential policies in the matriculation examination, preferential policies terminate at university admission, and the minority students often fall back to a disadvantaged position. For example, after admission to tertiary institutions, except for the

¹⁶Some ethnic minority students leave their hometowns for urban cities for better life opportunities when they are still very young. As a result, their first language (mother tongue) is not well developed due to the limited L1 acquisition at home and less chances of using L1 in the new environment.

*Minkaomin*¹⁷ students, all other minority students like their majority Han cohorts are required to sit for the College English Test (CET) or the Test of English Major (TEM), which are compulsory national tests for all university students in China. In order to obtain the CET or TEM certificates, many minority learners take the daunting test again and again, and often become more and more frustrated each time. This causes them to feel increasingly inferior to others (Yu 1997). Ironically, it seems that the “positive discrimination” policy, which lowers the benchmark of admission¹⁸ may end up with “negative discrimination and the loss of sense of worth and identity” (Feng 2005a, b) among those it is intended to help. As a result, EMLs are at a disadvantage in the labor market.

Those universities that enroll minority students also confront big challenges. For instance, minority learners must be admitted to higher learning institutions according to the national policy for ethnic minorities. As a result, these institutions have to enhance the English proficiency of ethnic minority students within two to four years so that they can meet the requirements of the new curriculum and graduate regularly. However, given the gap between the “low threshold” of college admission and the “high threshold” of graduation, both ethnic students and the tertiary institutions are left embarrassed. The well-intentioned affirmative action policy may disappoint both sides.

The gap between the national curriculum and the poor English proficiency of minority students constitutes a big paradox. First of all, as Adamson and Feng (2008) noted, “There are serious social, pedagogical and logistical issues to overcome before a degree of trilingualism can be achieved that matches national policy goals” (p. 2).

Because of the limited social and cultural “capital” of their native language, many minority children, except for those from some large ethnic groups, are losing enthusiasm for learning their mother tongues as they begin to see Chinese as a pathway to social mobility and personal development and English as a passport to the globalized world. For example, Adamson and Feng (2008) reported that some local Zhuang and Yi cadres showed strong resistance to the teaching of their native languages or paid only lip service to native language teaching.

Due to the concern over national stability, some local administrators in Xinjiang have adopted a “coercive policy” of insisting on Putonghua as the primary or sole medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools (Adamson and Feng 2008). These two contradictory mindsets of local cadres and parents toward ethnic minority languages combined with the low social status of some ethnic languages make the promotion and revitalization of ethnic languages a real challenge.

¹⁷*Minkaomin* refers to the ethnic minority students who usually go to minority secondary schools and receive bilingual education before they are admitted to tertiary institutions. These students then continue to study and use their native language after their university enrollment.

¹⁸Ethnic minority students from groups with very small populations and Han students who live in the frontier area with their parents assigned by the government to offer socioeconomic support in the frontier areas will be awarded 20–30 points in the national matriculation examination.

Furthermore, some ethnic groups have a small population and do not have written scripts, which makes native language teaching an even thornier mission. A case in point is textbook writing. Ma (2007) once pointed out:

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 (p. 19).

In addition, trilingual education aims to achieve *Sanyu Jiantong* 三语兼通 (a mastery of three languages) or *Duoyu Yitong* 多语一通 (multilingual ability with strong competence in only one language) as the general objectives. This notion is based on and developed from the concept of *Minhan Jiantong Xianmin Houhan* 民汉兼通、先民后汉 (a mastery both native language and Chinese at the same time, with the native language being acquired first). However, this slogan raises certain questions. *Minhan Jiantong* is an idealized conception or aspiration that reflects the notion of “perfect bilinguals,” who hold “bicultural identities—own minority identity and cultural identification with the Han majority and, more importantly, political allegiance to the nation state” (Feng 2007, p. 259). In reality, *Sanyu Jiantong* (三语兼通 trilingual proficiency) is difficult to realize. First, for most ethnic minority communities in China (except for very few well-educated ethnic groups like the Koreans in Northeast China), their first language is introduced in primary school as a subject in the curriculum. In other words, the mother tongue is just like Math and Social Studies. The ethnic minority learners, if they choose to leave their hometowns for education or employment reasons at a young age, will have a very slim chance later to learn and develop their ethnic minority languages. Even in bilingual schools, in which L1 is used as a medium of instruction, children study their first language for no more than six years unless they are later enrolled in bilingual secondary schools, which are usually few in quantity and poor in quality. Limited L1 learning experiences contribute little to L2 and L3 development and may even exert a negative influence on L2 and L3 learning. This may result in the danger of negative language transfer and ethnic identity loss.

Some scholars in Yunnan have pointed out that the bilingual experiences of ethnic minority learners seem to contribute little to English education. Their research suggests that the English learning outcomes of ethnic minority students are unsatisfactory and that positive attitudes and motivation need to be cultivated (Hu 2007; Yuan 2007). These findings agree with Yang’s argument concerning the impact of L2 learning on multilingual learning: “Such a positive second language influence on multilingual learning does not seem to apply to many of China’s minority students” (Yang 2005, p. 26). *Sanyu Jiantong* (trilingual proficiency) is even more challenging for EMLs who have to struggle with English acquisition in an EFL context even when their L1 and L2 are not fully developed due to short-term mother tongue education or early migration to nonnative communities. Hu (2007, p. 53) described multilingual learners in Yunnan as follows:

[They] encountered a dilemma that bilingual education has been mainly adopted only in primary schools, and once students are in secondary schools and universities, all learning in their own languages stops. This discontinuity causes minority students to be deficient in both languages.

If Hu and Yang's observations are true, it can be assumed that the inadequate bilingual education in China may not help, but may hinder, multilingual acquisition if EMLs' L1 and L2 literacy are not adequately developed. The argument is also supported by researchers who have studied the negative language transfer of multilingual learners in English classes (Yang 2003; Yang and Song 2006; Hu 2007; Jiang et al. 2007). Hu's assumption is supported by the "Threshold Hypothesis" (Cummins 1999, 2000), which argues that the level of L1 and L2 proficiency of bilingual children may affect their cognitive growth in other domains. However, Cummins' Threshold Theory should be reexamined, for the bilingual superiority only lies in idealized balanced bilinguals. For the less balanced or the limited bilinguals, the advantageous cognitive effect is difficult to achieve.

The gap between the top-down policies and the reality of their implementation also brings multilingual learners in China other challenges such as cultural discontinuity (Ogbu and Simmons 1998; Zhang 2008), identity conflict (Hu 2007; Huang and Yu 2009), and psychological problems (Li 2007), to mention just a few. Therefore, it is necessary to reconceptualize EMLs in the ever dynamic discourses of contemporary China by evaluating current policies and curriculum from a critical perspective.

2.6 Summary

Given the national policies on language, ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic development, it is necessary to reconceptualize ethnic minority learners in the ever changing sociocultural discourse of contemporary China.

At the tertiary level, minority students are required to acquire English as a third language in a mostly Han dominated learning environment. Their teachers usually instruct them in the same way as they do Han students, without considering the difference in linguistic context and distance (Stern 1983; Ytsma 2001). As a result, EMLs have to struggle to negotiate their identities under the tension caused by the highly demanding curriculum and unfamiliar learning environment.

To understand the problems of EMLs in China, it is necessary to deepen the research on them so as to be in an informed position to further develop a curriculum to meet their needs in the twenty-first century. It is argued that the study of EMLs, through and beyond the lens of multilingual education policy and practice, will lead to a better understanding of EMLs' aspirations and experience. Such a study will reveal the strengths, weaknesses, and coping strategies of EMLs in China. This information can make a solid contribution to the design of more relevant language policies, teaching practices, and learning resources. This will help pave the way for future in-depth research.

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