

“Genocide” or “Vicissitude”: A Study on the Effects of Language Education Policies Shift for Uyghur in Xinjiang, China

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Abstract: Language education has profound implications for multiple dimensions of society. Zooming into one of the most populous ethnic minority groups within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, this study examines the reciprocal effects of language education policy on the social role of Uyghurs based on several crucial policy documents. Influenced by multiple factors, including political, societal, cultural, and historical aspects, education on the Uyghur language for the Uyghur people has mainly been weakened. Instead, Mandarin studies became mandatory as part of the minority education system. This study was conducted with methodologies of onsite ethnographic study and interviews to approach the question from a qualitative perspective. Following the macroscopic perspectives, findings reveal that the policies positively impacted Uyghurs economically but raised difficulties for them in inheriting their ethnic cultures. At the same time, implications are discussed following the microscopic perspectives. Finally, concentrating on an individual's self-construal and social identity establishment, it argues the high possibility of the young generation of Uyghur falling under a self-identification crisis when not mastering their mother tongue, the Uyghur language.

Keywords: Uyghurs, Ethnic Minorities, Minority Language Education, China

1. Introduction

China is a nation known for its multiethnicity, with most of the population being of the Han ethnic group and the rest of the population belonging to 55 officially defined minority ethnic groups. According to the seventh national census, conducted in 2021, the population of all 55 ethnic minority groups accounted for 8.89 per cent of the total population of China [1]. The vibrant lives of those ethnic minorities represent their own unique culture with distinctive mother tongues. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”, Ludwig Wittgenstein said. Therefore, language should be perceived as a significant carrier of a culture -- it not only holds communication values but also plays crucial social functions that foster feelings of group identity and solidarity. Hence, constructive language education policies enable ethnic minorities to realize their economic, social, and cultural potential. In contrast, incomprehensive policies may also lead to controversial effects.

The Uyghur language is a Turkic language written in an Uyghur Perso-Arabic script, mainly spoken by Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China. As the

region's official language, along with Mandarin, more than 11 million people speak the Uyghur language as their mother tongue [2]. In addition to the Uyghur inhabitants of Xinjiang, the Uyghur language has also been widely used and spoken by many people in other areas, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. However, indigenous cultures are growing dim in the contemporary world, especially under the prevailing dominant culture. With the expansion of mainstream Han culture, the status and situation of the Uyghur language in Xinjiang have been raised to a challenging position. Following several important historical milestones, the language education system in Xinjiang has experienced shifts multiple times. The most recent development has made Mandarin replace the Uyghur language as the primary language used in schools for adolescents. Except for teenagers, Uyghur adults would also attend “night school” to receive Mandarin education organized by the village committee. However, is the dominance of Mandarin in the language education system a good thing for Uyghurs? It is critical to examine the more potent and double-edged effects of those policy shifts on Uyghurs from economic, cultural, and psychological aspects.

2. Literature Review

In 1759, the Qing military conquered the vast territory of today's Xinjiang and incorporated it into the empire. Initially, it was a region where many ethnicities lived in compact communities. The establishment of the proper education system began after the founding of the People's Republic of China. It is fair to say that the language education system in Xinjiang has experienced several significant shifts [3].

In 1951, the first national conference regarding minority language education was held, deciding that subject courses in minority areas must be taught through the medium of minority languages while Mandarin courses are not mandatory [4]. However, the use of minority languages was discouraged during the periods of the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. As a result, many traditional scripts of Uyghur and Kazak have been destroyed, leading to a devastating effect on the education system in Xinjiang. Around 1978, with the implementation of economic reform and opening-up policy, the concept of “minkaohan” gradually became widely popular in Xinjiang. “Minkaohan” is a term generally referring to Uyghur students taking college entrance examinations (“Gaokao”) in Mandarin. At the same time, “minkaomin” means Uyghur students are taking the examination in their mother tongue Uyghur language. Uyghur students choosing the “minkaohan” routes must take all school courses in Mandarin.

At the same time, a new program has been launched in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In 2004, the Xinjiang Ministry of Education promulgated the policy to promote “bilingual education”, which has encouraged more schools to open bilingual classes for Uyghur [3]. Authorities in Xinjiang announced the overall ¥430 million funding allocation to the program over the next five years to support bilingual education in different prefectures, aiming to target 85% of the ethnic minority children to attend two years of bilingual preschool education by 2010 [5]. Governments also announced various benefits for students who volunteer to enrol in the program, including subsidies for living expenses and preferential treatment when entering the market [5]. As shown, local and national authorities have invested significant funding, man powers, and material resources to support the program. However, under such an education system, Mandarin has been placed in primacy while the Uyghur language is used as an auxiliary language.

In some cases, schools only relegate the Uyghur language as the instruction solely in language and literature classes [3]. In recent years, the status of the Uyghur language has been weakened as policies stipulated that all schools in Xinjiang should undertake Mandarin as the primary language used in the education system. Many ethnic minority schools merged with ethnic Han schools around 2014, and the language of instruction has been converted to Mandarin only [4].

In addition, according to the newest Gaokao policies launched by the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Office of Education, all test takers must take their college entrance examination in Mandarin. For students who chose “minkaomin”, the only test paper taken in the Uyghur language is the Uyghur language and literature subject, while other courses all applied with Mandarin paper [6]. The pattern of language education policy shifts in Xinjiang presents the dramatic reduction of the Uyghur language in the education system while Mandarin comes to dominant status.

Regarding such changes, scholars have proposed different viewpoints. While Duan proposed that such shifts should be considered under the compelling reason of the lack of job prospects for Uyghur students, Li argues that such shifts were built based on the aim of promoting national and ethnic unity and narrowing the gap between Xinjiang and other developed inland areas in China [7]. Opposing views have also been raised by Skutnabb-Kangas, saying that when a dominant alien language is used as the primary or only medium of instruction for minority language speakers, it poses threats to the inheritance of their mother tongue [8]. This essay will evaluate the impacts of those policy shifts on the local Uyghur people.

3. Research Methodology

To address the research questions, this study combines an onsite ethnographic study with interviews in Kashgar of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in August 2021. The methodologies approach the topic of the language education policy shift in Xinjiang and its impact on local Uyghur citizens from a qualitative perspective. I chose the site of Kashgar mainly due to its representativeness and uniqueness. Kashgar is an oasis city situated in the southern part of Xinjiang, known as one of the areas with most Uyghur people live. With a total population of 4,496,377 in Kashgar areas, the Uygur population has surpassed 2 million in Kashgar, according to the 2020 national consensus [9]. Located at the foot of Pamirs Mountain, Kashgar has served as the trading post and crucial market city on the Silk Road. With an overall GDP of 83.7 billion RMB in 2017, Kashgar experienced real GDP growth of 6.1% between 2016-2017 [10]. The development of Kashgar in recent years makes the city the central Asian trading hub as it is close to the border of Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Geographically, demographically, and anthropologically make Kashgar a highly suitable site for field research.

Following the ethnographic methods, I conducted undisguised participant observation as part of my field study, where I fully immersed and exposed myself to the daily life of Uyghurs to better understand the participant's point of view. While entering places such as local villages, bazaars, Kashgar Old City, local industrial park, and Id Kah Mosque, I got in touch with concrete Uyghur people from a microscopic yet touching perspective. Positioning them in the natural environment, they are most familiar with. I got the chance to observe their most authentic culture and life, which enabled me to understand the research question from an in-depth and comprehensive angle. In addition to the participant observation, I used ethnographic interviews as a qualitative data collection method, which held one-on-one discussions with around 20 Uyghurs to achieve the most authentic research outcomes. I directly approached different Uyghur interviewees from various stakeholder groups when conducting onsite field research. These include local students, villagers, bazaar vendors, factory workers, etc. To achieve data diversity and avoid biased outcomes, interviewees' background ranges from distinctive age groups, occupations, genders, educational backgrounds, and social statuses.

4. Analysis of the Impacts of Language Education Shifts

4.1. Macroscopic Perspectives

From a macroscopic perspective, we examine the effects of language education shifts by considering economic and cultural aspects. With both positive and negative influences considered, it is straightforward for readers to see how Uyghurs benefit from the current language education system and some societal challenges raised regarding cultural inheritance issues.

4.1.1. Economic Development

With the popularization of Mandarin education, actual improvements in financial and living conditions are considerable. Employment plays a significant role in protecting people's rights of labour, enhancing people's livelihood, and assuring harmony and stability in society. As more and more Uyghurs get access to Mandarin learning resources, they generally have higher employment opportunities. Since the founding of the PRC, multiple national congresses on Xinjiang-related issues have been held. Many Han populations from different provinces and fields have migrated to Xinjiang for partnership support. Hence, more and more industries have been immersed in the dominance of the Han people and the Mandarin language.

Although Mandarin does not become inevitable for seeking job opportunities, it often helps people get work with higher pay when they master Mandarin. As stated above, to provide more employment opportunities for local Uyghurs, the national government sent many Han entrepreneurs from other provinces to Xinjiang and opened multiple industrial parks containing different enterprises doing manufacturing work, such as clothing companies and household electric appliance companies. In such a way, more and more Uyghur villagers became workers in those factories and received large salaries that could improve their living conditions. For these Uyghur factory workers, proficiency in Mandarin can lead to more promotion opportunities. Furthermore, as most of the management layer consisted of Han people, employees who are more proficient in Mandarin have a better chance of becoming team leaders, which also leads to higher salaries.

"The salary of standard level employees and team leaders varies, while the salary of team leaders generally ranges between ¥2500-3000 per month, the salary of normal workers is only about ¥2000 per month. If I cannot speak Mandarin, it is extremely challenging to learn new skills and have a scarce opportunity for promotion." (Male, a factory worker working at a garment enterprise in the Kashgar industrial park)

From a technical level, employees with proficient Mandarin could easily understand some manual scripts about the operation of the machines and thus be able to master the techniques more quickly, so as more easily to obtain the technical management team leader position. From the communication level, the group leader is often responsible for two-way communication between the enterprise manager and the staff in the group. They report the working progress to the management in Mandarin, assign tasks to employees using the Uyghur language, and act as a translator to help Han technical masters give training to the Uyghur grassroots staff. Therefore, a group leader needs to be skilful in Mandarin communication.

Furthermore, the silk road trade route linking China and the Middle East that passed through Xinjiang since ancient times created a legacy: trade markets named Bazaar in Xinjiang. There are multiple iconic International Grand Bazaars over different regions of Xinjiang, such as Urumqi and Kashgar. In the overall trend, vendors with better Mandarin typically earn more profits.

"Vendors with proficient Mandarin can earn about ¥10000 per month during the preferable condition. Even during difficult periods, ¥6000 earned per month by vendors familiar with Mandarin can still be guaranteed in most cases. However, vendors with limited Mandarin skills can only earn

about ¥5000 per month.” (Male, a vendor who opens a silk scarf store in the Kashgar Middle Xiya International Trade Market)

As notable tourists attractions, many of the local Uyghurs seek out commercial opportunities by becoming a vendor at the local Bazaar that sells different types of souvenirs to tourists. In such cases, vendors with proficient Mandarin can broaden their market resources. As the younger vendors typically received Mandarin education during their school time, they generally seized more business opportunities than older Uyghurs vendors. With better Mandarin capacity, vendors could often promote their products using both the Uyghur language and Mandarin, thus expanding their customer group from only Uyghurs to many Han tourists. In addition, since lots of vendors purchase their goods from other areas of China, such as Hangzhou and Inner Mongolia, mastering Mandarin skills would help them to communicate better with their suppliers. On the other hand, many older Uyghur vendors usually need a translator when encountering Han customers and suppliers, which vastly reduces the efficiency of business transactions and lowers the opportunity for successful business transactions. In addition to merchants who can benefit from Mandarin education, local Uyghur farmers may also learn more advanced agricultural techniques, expand marketing channels and increase agricultural production. Unfortunately, many books or other resources that contain contents of progressive and scientific planting methods only have the Mandarin version, which can hardly be used for Uyghurs that have not received any education in Mandarin. However, with proficient Mandarin skills, Uyghur farmers may master more scientific planting techniques, thus increasing both the quantity and quality of the output while significantly increasing market competitiveness.

“After reading books and manuscripts about plantation methodologies written in Mandarin, I earned more. Right now, I earn more than ¥7000 per 0.0006667 km² of land, while other farmers without obtaining that knowledge only earn less than ¥1000 per 0.0006667 km² of land.” (Male, a local farmer living in the 18th village of Baixiang, Kashgar)

Also, local Uyghur farmers must deal with the seasonal feature of their agricultural products. Therefore ones without proficient Mandarin skills often face the challenges of reducing the selling price for unmarketable goods that could not be sold. Nevertheless, Mandarin communication skills may help Uyghur farmers to contact Han wholesalers in other cities to sell agricultural products in a larger market at a higher price, hence earning more profits.

Thus, Mandarin education is indispensable in helping local Uyghur citizens achieve better employment opportunities, business transactions, markets, and agricultural productions. Overall, Mandarin education enhances the general living conditions of local Uyghur people, which should be regarded as beneficial.

4.1.2. Culture Preservation

Despite economic development, it is reasonable to argue for more awareness of the considerable adverse effects of Mandarin dominance in today's Xinjiang education system on the preservation of Uyghur indigenous culture. Though most of the documentation nowadays well-recorded more injustice and historical challenges faced by indigenous groups mainly due to settler colonialism in areas such as Australia and North America, indigenous people in Asia mainly encountered the same issues with settler societies. As a result, it was marked by socio-economic disruption, marginalization, and political turmoil, which, directly and indirectly, led to the loss of countless cultural expressions in history. Possessing the same scruple, the following passage will analyze the research topic considering concerns in indigenous culture preservation.

Following the current condition of language education in Xinjiang, Mandarin has become the only and primary language in most Uyghur schools, resulting in a substantial decline in the proficiency of Uyghur ability for many Uyghur students.

"Our teachers at school always encouraged us to use Mandarin to communicate, and the use of Uyghur has been abandoned in some cases. However, as Mandarin has become the main teaching language in school, we are also more used to communicating with each other in Mandarin instead of Uyghur." (Female, a grade 8 student in Kashgar)

Uyghur children receive their education in Mandarin at a very young age during kindergarten and primary school. That is to say. Most Uyghur children now face the condition of not mastering the reading and writing skills in their mother tongue at all. Although the young generation still has a good grasp of Uyghur speaking skills, it is more due to family factors that they must communicate with their elder in the Uyghur language. To state it more clearly, if the language education system for Uyghur continues to follow the current pattern, the endangerment of the Uyghur language would only be a matter of time. As Mandarin becomes the mother tongue for future Uyghur generations, the Uyghur language will likely be growing from endangered to extinction. Therefore, more language preservation policies need to be implemented to prevent the fade away of indigenous culture.

4.2. Microscopic Perspectives

As mentioned earlier, language is intrinsic to the expression of a culture. Therefore, zooming into a more microscopic perspective, language education predominantly affects a person's self-construal and social identity establishment.

4.2.1. Self-construal

An Individual's initial self-construal is usually derived from societal expectation, whether implicitly or explicitly, rather than the beginning of self-reflection. Therefore, when an individual start to possess ethnic affiliation, they define themselves by incorporating the expectation of their ethnic group, which has been found crucial in self-concept among ethnic minority groups. Ethnicity is an essential value in the self-control of ethnic minority groups, which may affect choice-making and other behaviours when activated [11].

The new generation of Uyghur has increasing exposure to and contact with Han cultures and languages. While cross-culture communication could be considered an inevitable result of globalization, the dominance of the national language, Mandarin, has posed challenges for the young generation of Uyghur regarding the self-identification crisis. In this way, although they are born as Uyghur ethnic, they consider themselves with no differences from Han ethnicity. Gradually, being an Uyghur becomes a fact instead of an identity.

The weakening value of ethnicity in an individual's mind, primarily influenced by the dominance of the mainstream Han culture and Mandarin, disincentivizes local Uyghurs to raise more awareness of their ethnicity.

4.2.2. Social Identity

Ethnic identity, one type of social identity, incorporates both individuals' understanding and knowledge of their ethnic membership and the values and emotions attached to that membership [11]. Compared with the ethnic identity of the majority group, the ethnic identity of the minority group relates more to its group's common imagined origin and culture. As constructivists claimed, ethnic groups are products of historical and political processes. With that stated, ethnic groups are social constructions with identifiable origins and histories of amalgamation and division instead of fixed entities with precise traceable time and space. Experiencing several times diaspora and migration, language becomes a crucial factor in reconstructing and maintaining a group's ethnic identity.

Since language largely contributes to building and preserving cultural identity, mastery of the Uyghur language is essential for Uyghur to establish their ethnic identity. When an individual loses

the ability to speak their ethnic mother tongue, it is difficult for them to engage with their own minority culture. Mother tongue education connects an individual to their culture and ensures better cognitive development. Language is the most direct tool to connect and unite people and give them a sense of belonging. Therefore, when the young generations of Uyghurs generally possess poor ability to use and understand the Uyghur language, it is very highly possible for them to forget the importance of their ethnic identity.

5. Conclusion

The current tendency of language education for Uyghur in Xinjiang should be perceived as a double-edged sword, with benefits and challenges.

Analyzing from a macroscopic perspective, the emphasis on Mandarin education in current education for Uyghur in Xinjiang has propelled economic development and living quality for Uyghur no matter the industry. However, it also leads to potential risks in indigenous culture preservation as the primacy of Mandarin in the current education system in Uyghur broadly weakened the position of the Uyghur mother tongue. This led to microscopic issues related to an individual's ethnic identity. The paper discussed how current policy shifts influence Uyghur's self-construal and social identity construction, especially for the new generation. Potential problems and risks include self-identification crisis and lack of ethnic awareness.

For future implications, I argue that mother tongue-based multilingual education should be considered a more comprehensive system, which encourages contextually relevant learning through the children's first language and allows for mastery of the national language in later years.

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