

# *An Overview of Bilingual Education for Ethnic Minorities in China*

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**Abstract:** The advancement of science and technology has brought people closer. The globalized world has not only made bilingual education increasingly popular but placed demands on more bilingual or even multilingual talents. As a multilingual and multicultural country, China has 55 ethnic minorities spread out in different provinces and regions across the country. The studies on bilingual education mainly focused on English and other global languages (e.g., Spanish, French), with few studies focused on Mandarin Chinese and ethnic minority languages in China. Aiming to provide more insight into the current situation of bilingual educational practices in China, the study offers an overview of the research landscape on bilingual education of ethnic minorities in China, so as to provide references for bilingual educational practices in China and other countries and intrigue new research possibilities.

**Keywords:** Bilingual Education, Ethnic Minority Education, Ethnic Minorities in China

## 1. Introduction

Bilingual education has become the standard practice in language education policies in multi-ethnic countries worldwide. As a multilingual and multicultural country, China has 55 recognized ethnic minorities spread out in different provinces and regions across the country, including Uyghur, Tibetan, and Mongolian. In 1949, the People's Republic of China established the principle that ethnic minority languages have equal legal status with the official language - Mandarin. Bilingual education for ethnic minorities in China refers to a pattern of schooling in which Mandarin and ethnic minority languages and both taught or used as mediums of instruction. As an official education policy, bilingual education works as an essential part of the government-led educational campaign to improve the bilingual competencies of ethnic minorities and their overall literacy development. The ultimate goal is to enhance ethnic minorities' economic and social positioning, and unite ethnic minorities to achieve the goal of a Chinese national community, as declared by the 19th Communist Party of China National Congress.

After nearly seven decades, China's bilingual education policies and practices have shown remarkable achievements. However, there has also been a common misunderstanding about the "equal status" of Mandarin and ethnic minority languages in bilingual education, resulting in

insufficient attention on ethnic minority language education. The official language policies put great emphasis on the nationwide use of Mandarin, especially in formal settings and official affairs. Ethnic minority languages can only be used in informal contexts; thus, their value has long suffered neglect and disrespect. Serious concerns about protecting ethnic identities have also grown stronger over the years. Aiming to provide more insight into the current situation of bilingual educational practices in China, the study offers an overview of the research landscape on bilingual education of ethnic minorities in China, so as to provide references for bilingual educational practices in China and other countries and intrigue new research possibilities.

## 2. Bilingual Education Policy in China

The existing literature has typically divided the development of bilingual education policies in China into three phases [1, 2]. The first pluralistic phase was from 1949 to 1965, during which the Chinese government emphasized all the ethnic groups' equal rights in a political context and adopted pluralistic ethnic minority policies. The Constitution stated that "all ethnic groups have the freedom to use their own ethnic minority languages." The policy discourses support and promote the use of ethnic minority languages in education. As a result, bilingual schools increased significantly in ethnic minority regions in China. The second phase, i.e., the Mandarin-monopolistic phase, was from 1966 to 1976, when bilingual education was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution's prevailing assimilationist ideas. Thus, there was a severe regression in bilingual education development, including making the use of Mandarin compulsory for ethnic minority language speakers and consequently suppressing all ethnic minority languages and cultures. During this period, minority schools were forced to use Mandarin as their only medium of instruction. After the Cultural Revolution ended in the late 1970s, bilingual education for ethnic minorities was revived. Constitutional revisions in 1982 reaffirmed the legal right of ethnic minorities to use and develop their own ethnic languages and cultures. The Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy and Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China also explicitly demonstrated the legitimacy of ethnic minority students to receive education in their own ethnic minority languages. Followed by the legalization and promotion of bilingual literacy, the use of ethnic minority languages in examinations was increased, bilingual curricula were adopted, and bilingual teachers were valued and rewarded for multiple teaching competencies in school practices. However, some scholars have pointed out that although official language policies during this period de-emphasized assimilative orientations, other legal documents still promoted the role of Mandarin as the official language. For example, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Common State Language and Script states to promote the nationwide use of Mandarin, especially emphasizing its use in the "public domain", namely formal settings and official affairs, including state education. In this way, the language policies made Mandarin "the common language for economic and cultural exchanges and daily contacts among all peoples in China". Ethnic minority languages can only be used in informal contexts, which indicated "China's official position on bilingualism in society" [2]. The debate over this issue has been continuously in progress.

Bilingual education was a "simple label for a complex phenomenon" [3]. Over the past four decades, research on bilingual education for ethnic minorities in China has flourished, involving language education policy and planning, bilingual schooling and teaching strategies, family language practices, sociolinguistic linguistics, etc. Many studies revealed that bilingual education in China often adopted the model of assimilation or transition into the mainstream education system, consequently raising the increasingly prevailing concern about the ethnic minority language maintenance and "balanced" bilingualism. Many obstacles remain despite the apparent achievements of bilingual education in China.

### 3. Research Focuses

#### 3.1. Practical Problems of Bilingual Teaching

Many relevant studies have shown that the practical problems of bilingual teaching in schools of China's ethnic minority areas mainly lay in three aspects—teaching materials, teachers, curriculum and regulations. In addition, there is an urban-rural gap in the development of bilingual education within ethnic minority areas. Research demonstrated that bilingual teaching materials for ethnic minority students in China have problems in both quantity and quality. On the one hand, existing literature revealed a lack of ethnic languages used in the teaching materials across ethnic groups [4]. Ma indicated that due to the various subjects and heavy workload, translating and compiling textbooks in minority languages required a considerable investment of time and human capital. Lin also suggested that printing costs increased greatly because of the longer texts in ethnic minority languages than the Mandarin versions after translation [2]. However, publishing companies were not allowed to set sales prices higher than the national pricing, while the subsidies provided by the government were insufficient to make up for the price differences. As a result, publishing textbooks in minority languages became a loss-making business, which often led to the delay or even cancellation of publishing textbooks in ethnic minority languages.

On the other hand, the quality of minority language textbooks is usually unsatisfactory, specifically in the contents. Many textbook translators and compilers lacked regular and practical training [2], having little to no knowledge of the life and teaching practices of the ethnic minorities. As a consequence, the content they compiled was far from practical situations. Students usually have difficulty finding connections of the content in the textbook to their daily lives, and therefore, hardly have interest in the content [5, 6], which consequently impaired their learning outcomes. However, the Chinese-version textbooks for ethnic minority students can be difficult and beyond their understanding. For instance, the textbooks used for the Chinese subject for ethnic minority students include lots of ancient Chinese classics that are too difficult for them to understand, since Chinese is their second language, not their first language. As a result, ethnic minority students need "dual translation" to understand the content presented in textbooks. While the literal meanings could be understood by interpretation, comprehending the cultural meaning was another challenge [7].

The lack of high-quality bilingual teachers was another obstacle that impeded the development of bilingual education for ethnic minorities in China. Many research findings indicated that the quantity and quality of bilingual teachers could hardly meet the needs for teaching ethnic minority students [6]. The characteristics of bilingual education also placed particular demands on teachers. Ma suggested that qualified bilingual teachers should have knowledge of specific subjects and practical bilingual teaching methods and be proficient in two languages, which required regular and applicable teacher training. He further proposed that insufficient financial support resulted in both the lack of training and the poor training results. Those poor results could also be attributed to trainers' incompetence, and inappropriate training methods [7]. Besides, owing to the shortage of qualified teachers, existing bilingual teachers are often burdened with heavy workloads. However, they are not given correspondingly more income or remuneration. Little social and economic return, poor transportation, relatively underdeveloped economic and educational levels in ethnic minority areas were unfavorable for recruiting qualified teachers.

Bilingual education curriculum and teaching regulations for ethnic minorities in China are also problematic. Lin's research findings showed that all bilingual schools were required to follow a centralized curriculum designed by the State Education Commission [5]. She also found that all ethnic minority students were required to use the same set of teaching materials and were supposed to learn at the same pace. She further suggested that such a top-down approach within the state-controlled education model left local instructors and schools little flexibility. In terms of teaching

regulations, by conducting field research of bilingual education practice in XUAR, Ma found that due to the neglect of regional differences, the Experimental Scheme of Bilingual Teaching issued by the Xinjiang Education Bureau encountered implementation problems in certain regions [5]. He further assumed that the lack of reasonable standards for teaching evaluation could not guarantee teaching effectiveness and would lead to a confusing teaching situation.

Although the development of bilingual education in both urban and rural ethnic minority areas suffers from the obstacles above, the development of bilingual education in rural areas is more significantly affected by insufficient teaching resources, and therefore, is less effective compared with that in urban areas. An investigation by Tsung and Cruickshank showed significant disparities in the availability of teaching resources and Mandarin-speaking teachers between an urban and a rural bilingual school in XUAR. Similarly, research in Tibetan bilingual education by Zhang and Tsung in Qinghai, China, also implied that rural schools usually lacked funding, teaching resources, and qualified teaching staff in sharp contrast to urban schools [4]. Urban bilingual schools are usually better-resourced, indicated by a greater number of qualified teachers, adequate teacher training, and more access to computers and multimedia classrooms. Hence, lack of access to abundant teaching resources tends to negatively affect students' academic performance in rural schools.

### 3.2 Unbalanced linguistic and social capital of languages

According to the Constitution, the goal of bilingual education policy in China is to protect the equal linguistic and cultural rights of ethnic minorities while promoting Mandarin's use throughout the country. Many official documents claimed the goal for bilingual education in China to be "Min-Han Jian Tong", i.e., ethnic minorities should be proficient in both Mandarin and ethnic minority languages. Although ethnic minority languages are legally given equal status with Mandarin, the unequal political and economic development between the Han group and other ethnic minority groups has resulted in the marginalization of ethnic minority languages in education [2]. The unbalanced bilingual ideology that governments and schools generally accepted in practice has exacerbated the social disadvantage of ethnic minorities in China.

In the pursuit of improving social capital, the argument for prioritizing Mandarin and Han culture frequently arises, and mastering Mandarin is considered a compulsory measure to prepare members of ethnic minorities for future careers and promote their regional development. Mandarin is often regarded as privileged to be positively linked with economic and cultural capital as the official language. In contrast, ethnic minority languages are relegated as limited value and low social status. The discrimination led to the common trivialization of these languages by local government, schools, and the public. It has become a common belief that gaining good Mandarin proficiency can bring more benefits to their educational and employment prospects [4]. Out of the "pragmatism mentality", people have become increasingly reluctant to receive education in the schools that use ethnic minority language as a medium of instruction [2]. Thus, mandarin schooling has gradually replaced bilingual teaching to become prevailing or dominated in ethnic minority schools. While some local primary schools still adopt bilingual educational practices, the effectiveness of bilingual education has faded in secondary schools and higher education. Postiglione et al.'s study on "Neidiban" (a kind of class set for ethnic minority students to receive education in Han communities) in Tibetan high schools found that the teaching of Mandarin outweighed that of the Tibetan language in the program. Tibetan students in Neidiban considered the Tibetan language a minor subject that was not worth learning since it was not considered for college admission. Shen and Luo also pointed out that Yi language had no role to play once students entered higher education institutions and started learning every subject in Mandarin.

The prevalent notion that ethnic minority languages are "outdated and useless" in language education policies and schooling practices has led to the deterioration of bilingual competencies in the new generations of ethnic minorities in China. However, many studies showed that ethnic minority languages played essential roles in academic research and job markets in ethnic minority regions. Zhang and Pérez-Milans pointed out that Tibetan language education added values and competitiveness for academic competitions and increased students' opportunities for higher education. Many researchers also revealed that ethnic minority languages are equally or even more critical compared to Mandarin in career development. People who are proficient in both Mandarin and ethnic minority languages and understand native cultures and social contexts can better serve people in ethnic regions [4]. Consequently, there has been a prevailing call that instead of blindly elevating the importance of Mandarin in school education, the government and market should offer alternative career opportunities that need both Mandarin and ethnic minority languages to enhance the linguistic and cultural capital of ethnic minority languages, so as to build a "balanced" bilingual education that truly achieves its goal of empowering ethnic minorities.

### 3.3. Bilingual Education, Minority Identity and Cultural Diversity

The development of bilingual education has a lot to do with the construction of ethnic identity and the preservation of cultural diversity. Many researchers suggested that the "unbalanced" bilingual education that attached more importance to Mandarin, to some extent, undermined ethnic identity and cultural diversity [9]. The "unbalanced" bilingual education tended to marginalize the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities, and attached "primitive, inferior and dispensable" stereotypes to them [7]. Under such circumstances, ethnic minority students were likely to develop strong feelings of linguistic and cultural inferiority, belittled the values of their languages and cultures, and even hid their minority identities to fit into the "mainstream" culture. For example, many university students of ethnic minorities rejected to wear their ethnic groups' costumes or deliberately dropped their "minority" accents in Mandarin, so that they would not be "recognized" and looked down upon [2]. Furthermore, research has shown a positive correlation between minority college students' Mandarin proficiency and their self-esteem, i.e., the more they were assimilated into the Han culture, the higher their collective self-esteem became. Based on the fieldwork of bilingual education for Dai-ethnic people in Yingjiang, Yunnan, Wang suggested that considerable native language and culture resources were inadequately utilized or simply neglected. From a long-term perspective, such a situation poses a threat to cultural diversity preservation and inclusive development of China's ethnic minorities.

Despite the disappointing findings above, certain ethnic minority groups had realized the importance of protecting their languages, identities, and cultures, while admitting the practical necessity of mastering Mandarin. For example, based on the interviews with 16 Tibetan parents in Qinghai, Zhang and Tsung found that they strongly supported the Tibetan language-based bilingual teaching model because of their emotional attachment to Tibetan culture and identity [4]. From most parents' perspectives, the Tibetan language was essential in constructing their collective ethnic identity. Similarly, Rehamo and Harrell examined the bilingual educational practice of Nuosu (a sub-group of the Yi) in Liangshan, Sichuan, and found that most Nuosu teachers and students had strong emotional attachment to the Nuosu language [6]. They believed learning Nuosu could inherit their culture and strengthen their ethnic self-esteem. Students wanted to continue Nuosu language learning and did not consider it useless for their future career development. Baranovitch suggested that many Uyghur academics had expressed their opposition to the unbalanced bilingual education, which preferred Mandarin and neglected the Uyghur language [10]. For instance, Uyghur scholar Teklimakani, has repeatedly expressed his concern and anxiety about the Uyghur language and

culture's disappearance in his articles and further advocated Uyghurs' determination and practical actions of protecting and promoting their language [10].

## **4. Implications**

### **4.1. Solving the Existing Problems in Bilingual Educational Practices**

Based on the discussion above, improving bilingual education for ethnic minorities in China requires sufficient and high-quality teaching materials, qualified teachers, a flexible curriculum, applicable regulations, and the narrowing of urban-rural gap. To be specific, considering the current shortage of teaching materials in ethnic minority languages, the government should provide more financial support for their compilation and publication. Meanwhile, to ensure the standard quality of bilingual teaching materials, compilers should gain more knowledge of ethnic minorities' lives and cultures, and develop textbooks that are of interest to the students. It's advisable to recruit more compilers from ethnic minority groups. Various online bilingual learning resources and extracurricular resources from communities and families should also be developed to enrich bilingual educational resources. Besides, more qualified bilingual teachers familiar with ethnic minorities' cultures and situations should be cultivated. In order to improve teachers' communication skills and reduce cultural misinterpretations in teaching, teachers' colleges can provide them with more sufficient, regular, and effective training [2]. More importantly, as Wan and Liu suggested, bilingual teachers should develop an open and inclusive mind towards multiculturalism. To recruit enough qualified bilingual teachers for schools in ethnic minority areas, local governments are expected to increase bilingual teachers' salaries and improve their living and working conditions.

Furthermore, in light of the various situations among different ethnic minority areas, more flexibility should be granted to local education departments or schools in terms of curriculum and instructional design. The Ministry of Education can develop standardized and adaptive teaching regulations concerning the practical situations of different regions. Local education departments should regularly evaluate schools' management, teachers' teaching, and students' learning, and make prompt adjustments to promote better teaching effectiveness. Measures should also be taken to narrow the urban-rural gap in bilingual education development. For instance, the government can improve rural schools' teaching environment and facilities and attract qualified teachers by providing policy and financial support, which helps guarantee equitable education and development opportunities for rural ethnic minority students.

### **4.2. Promoting the Preservation and Development of Ethnic Minority Cultures**

The development of bilingual education has a strong correlation with the social perceptions towards ethnic minorities' languages and cultures. Many studies have shown that the biased stereotypes of ethnic minorities' languages and cultures, such as "outdated" or "impractical", have led to a significant underestimation of their values, which also impaired the development of bilingual education. To improve the situation, the whole society should be aware of ethnic minority languages and cultures' contributions to China's cultural diversity, so that ethnic minority languages and cultures can be treated with equal respect as Mandarin and the Han culture.

Various stakeholders, including government, media, institutions, schools, communities, families, etc., should cooperate to achieve the ultimate goals above. The government can build up the economic and political capital for ethnic minority language speakers. For example, the government can create more suitable job opportunities, such as bilingual teachers, civil servants, social workers working in ethnic minority areas, and researchers of ethnic minority language/literature for ethnic minorities, which can encourage them to take bilingual education. Besides, various media, such as

newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet, can be used to introduce and promote ethnic minority cultures, which is conducive to fostering respect and cultural understanding towards ethnic minority groups throughout the country [2]. Moreover, the preservation and development of ethnic minority languages and cultures can be promoted by establishing specialized institutions, creating text corpora, and cultivating relevant researchers. Furthermore, ethnic minorities should gain confidence in their native languages and cultures and raise the awareness to preserve and develop them. As Feng suggested, they should act interculturally by being confident in their ethnic identities, languages, and cultures, and willing to interact with the "majority" language speakers, i.e., Mandarin users. Finally, the prosperity of China's bilingual education for ethnic minorities can be promoted by combining bilingual school education, bilingual community activities, and family language practices.

## 5. Conclusions

Studies on bilingual education of ethnic minorities in China have shown a surge in quantity since the 1990s, and this research topic remains of a strong interest in academics. In terms of research methods, the studies have shown the characteristics of plurality since they include theoretical and empirical studies, qualitative and quantitative studies, and textual analysis and surveys. However, in general, the number of quantitative studies is relatively small, and the sample size chosen for quantitative studies is limited. In terms of research topics and objects, the existing studies include research on the overall situation of bilingual education and national policy development in China and fieldwork and case studies on bilingual education for Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic minorities. However, the analytical perspectives mainly focus on policy analysis and pedagogy, while anthropological, sociological, and linguistic perspectives and related studies are lacking. In addition, bilingual educational practices of some ethnic minority groups, such as Tujia and Zhuang, have not yet been studied. Furthermore, existing research mainly examined bilingual educational practices in a specific ethnic minority region at a certain time. Long-term longitudinal studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of bilingual education and its lifelong influence on ethnic minority students. More diversified analytical perspectives and research methods should be adopted for further research, and researchers shall pay more attention to investigating the bilingual educational practices of China's less-populated ethnic minority groups in the future.

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