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Language policy and ethnic conflict in China

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Written by Wenfang Tang.

Ethnic conflict has been on the rise in recent years in China, despite Chinese media portrayals of

ethnic harmony. One commonly cited reason for such conflict by Western observers is economic inequality between the Han majority and the ethnic minorities. However, such inequality and the subsequent ethnic tension are a result of China's state-sponsored affirmative action programs, and particularly the failure of its language policy.

Many Western observers take China's cultural chauvinism for granted and frequently condemn China's ethnic policies, among them forcing minority students to learn Chinese. Yet my observations based on travels in recent years in Xinjiang and Tibet, combined with other evidence collected in the course of my research, suggest that China's ethnic language policy is far from being too restrictive. For instance, during a recent trip to an elementary school at the Base Camp of Mt. Everest in Dingri, Tibet, I noticed that the math class was taught in Tibetan. The principle of the school told me that Mandarin was supposed to be the teaching language but it was not enforced because the school did not have enough teachers who spoke Mandarin. The 2010 Chinese General Social Survey conducted by Renmin University found that the levels of education for Han and Uyghur respondents were the same: Both groups had an average of about 7 years of school education. But the Uyghurs' Mandarin proficiency was only 20% compared to the Han average of 100%. In other words, my inference is that while both groups were equally educated, the minorities were being educated in their own languages for the most part.

In addition to the shortage of Mandarin speaking teachers, another reason for minority regions' Mandarin deficiency is the problem of bureaucratic turf war. For example, in the Education Law, all schools are required to use Mandarin as the language of instruction, while the Ethnic Autonomy Law encourages the use of ethnic languages in education. The inconsistency of language policy is also reflected in China's policy toward the written form of the Uyghur language. In 1959, China decided to implement the use of the English alphabets in Xinjiang. Such a policy provided a common ground for Mandarin and Uyghur speakers, at least in the form of pinyin. In 1982, in the wave of reversing many of the Mao's policies in the Cultural Revolution, China decided to abandon the English alphabets and return to the Arabic script. This policy temporarily satisfied some Uyghur intellectuals' desire for ethnic equality but planted another seed for ethnic separatism.

Similar to many other multiethnic regions in the world, China also has a bilingual education policy. But in China's bilingual education, ethnic languages are the teaching language and Mandarin is the second or foreign language, which is often neglected when the resources are limited. In contrast, in a country like Singapore, English is the language of instruction and ethnic languages such as Chinese, Tamil and Malay are taught as the second language.

The failure to teach Mandarin has created a serious barrier for minority students to get ahead in an economic environment dominated by the Mandarin speaking population. The emphasis on ethnic language education strengthened the group identity by ethnic minorities, who are accustomed to the idea of ethnic equality under the official propaganda. When they can't find jobs, they naturally attribute such failure to being a member of their ethnicity and blame the government and society for discrimination. In contrast, in a market economic environment that encourages individual competition, people blame themselves for not having the necessary skills to succeed. Due to their Mandarin language deficiency, minority students are disadvantaged when they graduate from high

school. They typically spend at least one extra year in college to catch up with their Mandarin proficiency, further falling behind their Han counterparts. In the labour market, they face the same difficulty in getting well paid jobs. In one recent trip to Turfan in Xinjiang, I met a Uyghur young man who just graduated from China Agriculture University in Beijing, majoring in meteorology. He complained to me in not very fluent Mandarin about not being able to find a job at the local meteorology bureau because, according to him, he was discriminated against. It is impossible to say if that is the case or not, but certainly he would have had a better chance if his Mandarin was more fluent.

In summary, China's overly lenient language policy has resulted in minority students being less likely to go to college and to find good jobs. Their income is lower than the Han majority. Consequently, they become angry and blame the problem as discrimination. To solve this problem, promoting Mandarin education should be the first step. Admittedly, such a solution will face more fury from those who are already critical of China's ethnic policies. Ultimately, it is a tradeoff between keeping ethnic language and cultural identity and improving the economic opportunities and conditions for minorities.

Wenfang Tang is Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa and the author of [Separate but Loyal: Ethnicity and Nationalism in China](#). Image credit: CC by Ian Lamont/Flickr.



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Michael Reilly

February 13, 2015 at 10:27 am

An interesting argument but based on my own travels in Xinjiang and Tibet I'm not convinced. For example, visiting Kashgar last October, it was striking how few Han Chinese there were. This is an overwhelmingly Uighur city. The English language ability of Uighurs – at least those we met – was also good, suggesting that learning a second language per se is not an issue. But it was also striking how positions of authority or importance were filled almost exclusively by Han Chinese. In our discussions with Uighurs, language was never cited as a reason for this. The most common reason given was cultural/religious: local government officials for example are not allowed to fast during Ramadan and are forced to eat pork and drink alcohol at official banquets. Uighurs also told us that preference was invariably given to ethnic Han applicants for all but the most menial jobs. The hotel we stayed in in Kashgar appeared to be exclusively staffed by Han, many of whom spoke no English (in a supposedly international business hotel). Discussing our visit with officials back in Beijing, they privately

admitted that central government resources going into Xinjiang favour Han Chinese rather than Uighurs – if one visits secondary schools or vocational colleges in Xinjiang, for example, the difference between facilities in Chinese areas and in Uighur ones is striking. In short, Chinese attitudes and policies are redolent of 19th century colonial behaviour and in this lies the root of the current problems.

[Reply](#)



Khamai Anderson

February 14, 2015 at 5:28 pm

Actually, worldwide research, in China and elsewhere, shows that ethnic children with a strong foundation in their mother tongue do much better at learning second languages such as Mandarin. Ethnic minority kids need more of their mother tongue in school, not less. Also, in Singapore Chinese, Tamil and Malay are the FIRST languages taught to students from those ethnic groups, not second. Interested persons should consult <http://www.asiapacificmle.net/tag/unesco/> to learn why UNESCO is so supportive of mother tongue policies. It seems counter-intuitive, but the research on this issue is very clear.

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