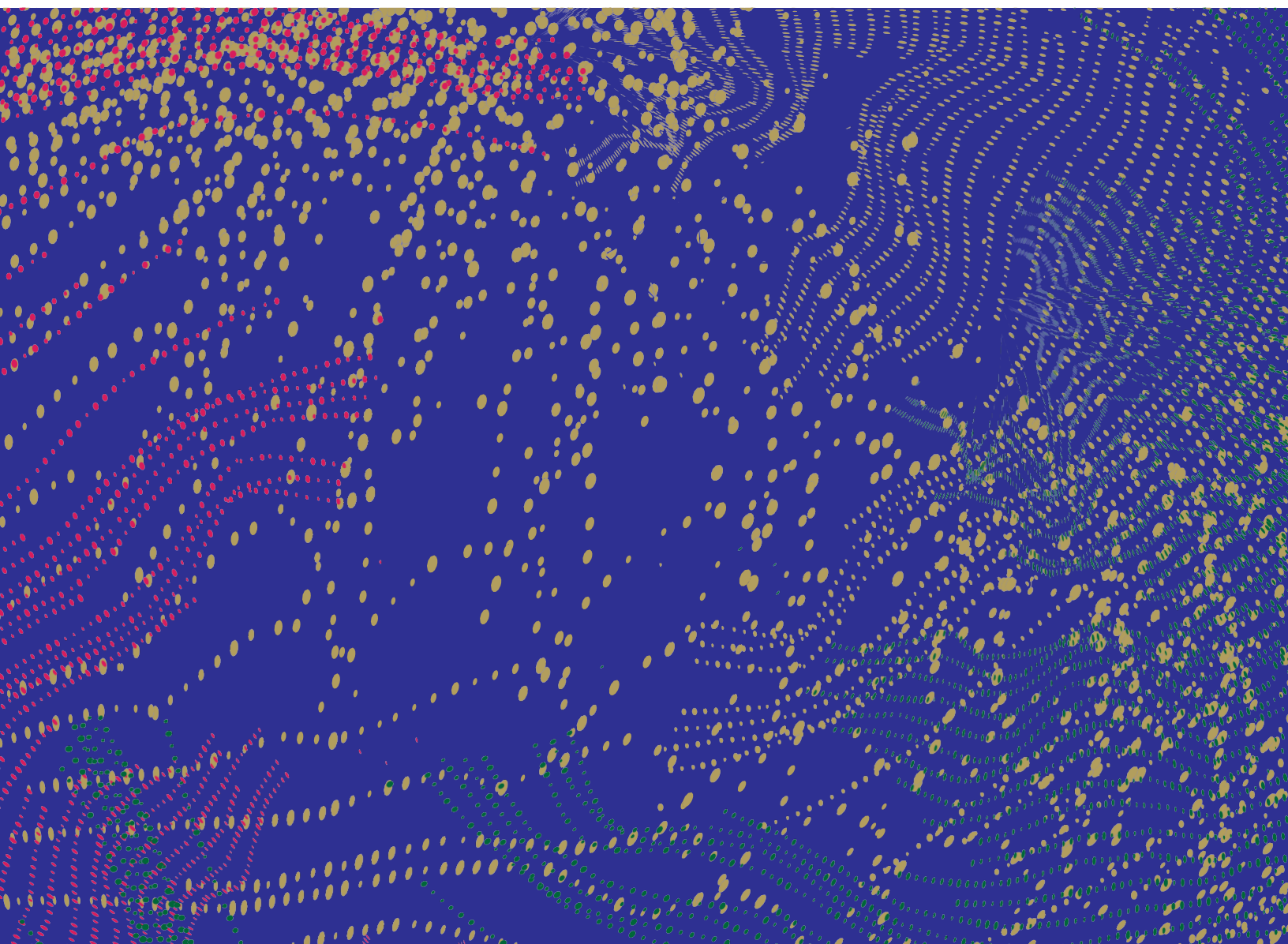


The World Humanities Report

Bilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Areas in China

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Bilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Areas in China

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Bilingual education often stirs controversy. It is sometimes seen as a teaching method, sometimes an educational system, and sometimes even as a broader sociopolitical movement or a component of a movement. In this essay, bilingual education refers specifically to those social settings in China that have been set up specifically to develop learners' bilingual competencies since the establishment of the modern schooling system. Although sociocultural anthropologists often point out that empirical research shows that education does not equal schooling, people continue to talk about education and schooling as one thing. Thus, when we talk about bilingual education, we are often talking about bilingual education in schools.

Bilingual education in China has been around for centuries, but modern bilingual education differs from the past in that now it serves disadvantaged minorities and linguistic minorities whereas before the Second World War it served the elite and mainstream society. In the history of global education, 1954 is the "great year" that led to the dramatic expansion of public education globally in an effort to include socially and politically marginalized minorities into school education. In China, Article 4, of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, promulgated on September 20, 1954, states: "All ethnic groups of the People's Republic of China are equal. The state shall protect the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic minorities and uphold and promote relations of equality, unity, mutual assistance, and harmony among all ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are prohibited; any act that undermines the unity of ethnic groups or creates divisions among them is prohibited. The state shall, in light of the characteristics and needs of all ethnic minorities, assist all ethnic minority areas in accelerating their economic and cultural development." Article 94 further stipulates: "Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall have the right and the obligation to receive education." In the United States the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* of

May 17, 1954, overturned the 1896 decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which declared racial segregation (“separate but equal”) to be legal. *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that the separation of educational facilities based solely on the principle of racial segregation was “inherently unequal” and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, thus beginning the Black civil rights movement that lasted more than a decade.¹ Writers and scholars in the English-speaking world often credit the Black civil rights movement in the United States for the adoption of bilingual education to meet certain needs of linguistic minorities, granting it a positive and progressive symbolic meaning. This view, however, is blind to contemporaneous Chinese aspirations and practices and represents a limited, Western-centric point of view.

In China “bilingual teaching” and “bilingual education” are specific technical terms that emerged and became popular only after the reform and opening up in 1978. Until the twenty-first century, bilingual education in China was basically referred to as minority language–Chinese bilingual education for students from ethnic minorities and ethnic areas. However, since the twenty-first century, foreign language–Chinese bilingual education (mainly English–Chinese bilingual education) for students from all ethnic groups in the mainland (the majority of whom are Han Chinese) has been “identified” as a type through the continuous efforts of the academia and the market. Thus, bilingual education in today’s Chinese context includes two types, namely, minority language–Chinese bilingual education, which exists mainly in ethnic areas, and foreign language–Chinese bilingual education, which exists mainly in the interior. This essay addresses only the former, which is a much more complex educational phenomenon than the latter.

Policy Changes in Bilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Regions

Language policies and laws and education policies and laws since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 combine those developed from the previous policies and practices of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and those the CCP and Chinese government at all levels have innovated, adjusted, improved, and systematized in response to new sociohistorical conditions and economic and political circumstances. In November 1931 the First National

¹ Zhu He, *The End of Racial Segregation in American Public Schools* [in Chinese] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Education Press, 2014), 4–5.

Congress of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Soldiers' Deputies adopted the Resolution on the Issue of Ethnic Minorities Within the Borders of China. It proposed that "schools, editing houses, and printing bureaus must be set up for the national minorities in the country with full application of their own language and script, and the use of the language and script of their own ethnicity must be permitted in all government organs."² In October 1938 in his report "On the New Stage" Mao Zedong added: "Respecting the culture, religion, and customs of the ethnic minorities, not only should they not be forced to learn written Chinese and spoken Chinese, but they should also be helped to develop cultural education in the languages and scripts of their own ethnic groups."³ In April 1945, in his political report to the Seventh Communist Party Congress, Mao Zedong discussed minority issues and again emphasized that "their languages, scripts, customs, habits, and religious beliefs should be respected."⁴

Although the CCP's ethnic policy changed from "national self-determination" to "regional ethnic autonomy" in 1949, the principle of ethnic equality remained consistent and evolved into a provision that is still followed today: "Each national minority has the freedom to develop its own language and script and to maintain or reform its own customs and religious beliefs." This is the provision of Article 53 of the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which was adopted by the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on September 29, 1949, and has the status of a "substitute constitution." The aforementioned 1954 Constitution inherited this provision, which has not been changed to date.⁵

The constitution is the fundamental law of modern China, and its provisions are self-explanatory in regulating language and education policies. However, the specific policies of bilingual education in China after 1949 have been constantly changing with national economic and political life, as well as with the actual needs of economic and political construction and cultural and educational development in ethnic areas. The changes began from the perspective of training goals, generally divided into two stages: cultivating qualified cadres, which was mainly for political construction before the reform and opening up,

² United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Compilation of Documents on Ethnic Issues* [in Chinese] (Beijing: Party School of the CPC Central Committee Press, 1991), 170.

³ United Front Work Department, *Compilation of Documents*, 595.

⁴ United Front Work Department, *Compilation of Documents*, 743.

⁵ Dai Qingxia, "Overview of China's Ethnic Language Policy (Preface)" [in Chinese], in *Review of China's Ethnic Language Policy and Law* (Beijing: Nationalities Press, 2007), 1–16.

and cultivating qualified talent after the reform and opening up. Cultivating qualified cadres, especially cadres of ethnic minorities, was one of the goals of ethnic policy established by the CCP before 1949 and was systematically strengthened through the development of education after the founding of New China. For example, the Instructions from the State Council of the Central People's Government on the Distribution of Graduates from Ethnic Minorities, issued on November 9, 1952, pointed out that "following the development of ethnic work, there is an urgent need for cadres, especially ethnic minority cadres, in the various ethnic minority areas." Half a month later, on November 24, the Trial Program for Preparing the Central Institute for Nationalities, approved by the 60th Meeting of the State Council, stipulated that the first of three tasks for the Central Institute for Nationalities was to "train senior and midlevel cadres for the implementation of regional autonomy and the development of the policy, economy, and culture of national minorities in China."⁶ Since the reform and opening up, the focus of ethnic education training objectives, including bilingual education, has rapidly shifted. For example, the "Report of the State People's Committee and the Ministry of Education on the Basic Summary of the Work of Ethnic Minority Colleges and the Future Guidelines and Tasks," submitted to the State Council on October 6, 1979, pointed out that "ethnic minority colleges are new socialist universities that mainly train ethnic minorities to be political cadres and professional and technical cadres," and "now that China has entered a new historical period, the ethnic minority colleges must shift their focus to socialist modernization, resolutely carry out the tasks of the party and the state for the work of the ethnic minorities in the new period, and vigorously train political cadres and professional and technical personnel with communist consciousness needed for the Four Modernizations, so as to serve the socialist modernization of the minority regions." One year later, on October 9, 1980, the Opinion of the Ministry of Education and the State People's Committee on Strengthening Ethnic Minority Education emphasized that "the construction and prosperous development of ethnic minority areas require a large number of construction talents, and it is necessary to develop all kinds of school education."

As a classification of educational activities, the fundamental problem of bilingual education is how to coordinate and standardize the "bilingual"

⁶ Si Yongcheng, *Selected Ethnic Education Policies and Regulations* [in Chinese] (Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 2011), 3–5.

relationship between teaching and learning activities. From the perspective of language relations, the watershed event in the evolution of bilingual education policies and laws in China was the adoption of China's first special law on language and writing, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Common State Language and Script. Adopted at the 18th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on October 31, 2000, it went into effect on January 1, 2001. Before the law, the fundamental tone of bilingual education policy was to give priority to the educating minority language–Chinese bilingual speakers. After the law, while the teaching of the minority languages was guaranteed, the national common language—Putonghua (Mandarin) with standardized Chinese characters—was gradually strengthened. Key aspects of the of the Common State Language and Script Law include the following:

Article 3: “The State promotes Putonghua and standardized Chinese characters.”

Article 4: “All citizens shall have the right to learn and use the standard spoken and written Chinese language. The State provides citizens with the conditions for learning and using the standard spoken and written Chinese language. Local people's governments at various levels and the relevant departments under them shall take measures to popularize Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters.”

Article 8: “All the nationalities shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages. The spoken and written languages of the ethnic peoples shall be used in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution, the Law on Regional National Autonomy and other laws.”

Article 10: “Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters shall be used as the basic language in education and teaching in schools and other institutions of education, except where otherwise provided for in laws. Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters shall be taught in schools and other institutions of education by means of the Chinese course. The Chinese textbooks used shall be in conformity with the norms of the standard spoken and written Chinese language.”⁷

⁷ Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language. Translations from this text are adapted from <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=6233>.—Trans.

The propagation and implementation of the law in ethnic areas did not happen overnight but went through a process of gradual promotion and gradual strengthening.

Over the long-term evolution of bilingual education policy and practice, there have been different focuses at different times, but the ideal model that consistently runs throughout is the goal of educating minority language–Chinese bilingual speakers. This “ideal model” has not only been born in accordance with the real situation of China, but it has become a basic tool to balance the different demands of the state, market, and society.

Changes in the Types of Bilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Areas

China is a country rich in linguistic education and sociocultural diversity, and the continent of Asia, where China is located, is home to the most languages. Nevertheless, too many have a stereotypical and crude understanding of its bilingual education. For many foreigners, Chinese minority language–Chinese bilingual education refers only to bilingual education in the three autonomous regions of Tibet, Xinjiang Uygur, and Inner Mongolia. And for the majority of mainlanders, minority language–Chinese bilingual education refers only to bilingual education in areas with large concentrations of northern ethnic minorities, such as Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Yanbian where Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur and Kazakh, and Korean, respectively, are spoken are spoken more frequently. In fact, the types of minority language–Chinese bilingual education and the modes of bilingual education are very diverse.

Bilingual education in minority areas refers, literally, to language education activities in which learners in minority areas learn both the national common language and minority languages (scripts). These are often minority children and youths, but in some areas, such as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, there are also a small number of Han children and youths. From the practical point of view, however, bilingual education in minority areas is not only diversified but also rich in content. If we take into account the patterns of meaning and practical explorations that people have made in pursuit of a richer language life, we can say that bilingual education in minority areas is also one of the keys to unlocking the mystery of “economic growth and the rise of a great power” in China.

How to define and classify bilingual education is an international challenge. Since the 1970s the international academic community has been rapidly deepening and expanding its understanding of the concept and categorization of bilingual education. The focus of language learning in these two types of bilingual education is different. If the focus of transitional bilingual education is learning the national language well, then the focus of maintenance bilingual education is learning the ethnic minority language well.⁸ At the risk of oversimplification, in the case of China, bilingual education in minority areas with a large minority population, relatively concentrated residence, and high frequency of minority language use (such as the Uyghur population in Hotan, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) is basically transitional bilingual education. Those areas with small minority populations, a relatively dispersed population, and high frequency of use of their own languages (often without their own scripts) are also basically transitional bilingual education. In contrast, those with small minority populations, relatively scattered settlements, and endangered use of their own language (often without their own script), such as the Yugur population of Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, Gansu Province, is basically maintenance bilingual education. With the comprehensive development and quality improvement in teaching the national common language, there is a clear trend of transition to retention-oriented bilingual education in ethnic minority areas.

According to the statistics of the 2010 national census, China's ethnic minority population is characterized by a larger absolute number but a smaller relative share, and there are more significant interethnic differences. On the mainland, there are three ethnic minorities with a population of 10 million or more and six ethnic minorities with a population of less than 10,000. The Chinese government has adopted a new term—"less populous ethnic groups"—to classify ethnic groups, and one of the highlights of its ethnic policy is the adoption of a series of policies to "support the development of less populated ethnic groups." The term "less populous ethnic groups" is a new term, referring to twenty-two ethnic groups with a population of less than 100,000 before June 2011 and twenty-eight ethnic groups with a population of less than 300,000 thereafter. With the advancement of modernization, most of the languages of the less populous ethnic groups are endangered, and development of maintenance bilingual education has been prioritized in the areas where they are

⁸ Ba Zhanlong, "Eliminating Two Typical Misconceptions about Ethnic Minority Bilingual Education" [in Chinese], *Chinese Ethnic Education*, no. 5 (2016): 14.

concentrated, with the basic goal of learning the local ethnic minority languages and implementing the language policy of “scientific protection of the languages and scripts of all ethnic groups.”

China has its own local terminology for the minority language–Chinese bilingual education model: the type I model and the type II model. These two different types of bilingual education models are based on the sociolinguistic environment of the community in which a minority language is spoken, its linguistic ideology, and the conditions of the school, especially the teachers. Schools are classified according to the teaching terminology used. The type I model refers to schools that use the ethnic minority language as the language of instruction and use ethnic minority language script materials. At the same time, they teach an additional course in the common national language. The type II model refers to schools that use the national language as the language of instruction and adopt national language textbooks with an additional course in the ethnic minority language.⁹

In terms of exposure rate and attention rate, Tibet’s, Xinjiang Uygur’s, and Inner Mongolia’s ethnicity-based bilingual education is better known, but the complexity and facility value of region-based bilingual education in places like Yunnan Province is little known outside the area. In general, areas that implement “ethnicity-based” bilingual education are relatively homogeneous, and language is often a distinctive manifestation of ethnicity with little internal variation. This provides a practical basis for cross-regional collaboration in bilingual education, such as the establishment of Mongolian teaching materials in eight provinces, Tibetan teaching materials in five provinces, and Korean teaching materials in three provinces. The social structure of “regional” bilingual education areas is relatively complex, and language is often only one of the many manifestations of ethnicity, but the internal differences are large, so the policy arrangements and modes of practice of bilingual education in different schools in the same county can be different, and the realistic basis for cross-regional bilingual education collaboration is extremely weak. After generations of hard work and diligent efforts, bilingual education was a distinctive component in Yunnan’s 2019 ethnic education system. It established a teaching material system that enriched the bilingual education medium by including nineteen

⁹ Teng Xing, *Cultural Change and Bilingual Education: Fieldwork and Textual Writing in the Anthropology of Education in the Liangshan Yi Community* [in Chinese] (Beijing: Education Science Press, 2001), 50–51.

scripts from fourteen ethnic groups, produced electronic audio and video teaching materials for five ethnic scripts, and finalized preschool teaching materials for thirteen scripts and “wall charts” with audio for eighteen scripts.¹⁰

The scale and achievements of bilingual education in ethnic minority areas are remarkable. According to the Ethnic Education Development Center of the Ministry of Education, as of 2018, 6,521 primary and secondary schools in China carried out minority language–Chinese bilingual education, with 3,093,000 million students receiving bilingual education and 206,000 full-time teachers of bilingual education. Bilingual education is also carried out in ethnic minority colleges and universities and in some vocational and higher education schools in ethnic autonomous areas. Bilingual education has cultivated myriad high-quality talents from ethnic minority regions who are “both of their minority and Chinese.”¹¹

Conclusion

With the completion and expansion of an efficient and dense transportation network marked by high-speed railways, China has entered an “era of great mobility” with a large and frequently mobile population and unprecedented demand for communication across cultures and across time and space among different language groups based on the tools and platforms of mobile communication and the internet. The situation has created an urgent need for quality public services, especially the promotion and popularization of the national languages, which are the basic tools of communication for all. This is the historical backdrop for the promotion of universal access to the national common language, including in ethnic areas.

Most countries in the world are multiethnic and multilingual, and building a multilingual society that is sensitive to and tolerant of linguistic and cultural diversity has always been one of the ideals pursued by humanity. Bilingual education is the main means to achieve this goal. China is a unified multiethnic country created by fifty-six ethnic groups, with fifty-five minority groups among which all but two still use their own languages (the Hui and the Manchu have generally switched to Chinese). The country’s inhabitants speak more than eighty languages with thirty kinds of scripts; twenty-two ethnic groups use

¹⁰ Ji Zheng, “The Initial Formation of the National Education System” [in Chinese], *Yunnan Daily*, August 22, 2019.

¹¹ Guo Yan, “Remarkable Achievements in Education for Ethnic Minorities in the Past 70 Years since the Founding of New China” [in Chinese], *China Ethnic News*, November 26, 2019, 5.

twenty-eight native scripts. For a long time, bilingual education has been regarded as an integral part of the socialist education system with Chinese characteristics and the ethnic minority governance system.

A widely influential view in Chinese social science circles holds that the cost of implementing bilingual education in ethnic areas, no matter how high, is lower than the cost of not implementing bilingual education.¹² However, there is a gap between the ideal and the reality of bilingual education. This discrepancy is not just a Chinese but a worldwide problem, and it is almost always caused by the contradiction between the ideal of effective governance of social risks and the reality of limited rationality of social policies.

Bilingual education in China's ethnic regions is also particularly challenged by two overly short-sighted perspectives. The first sees ethnic minority languages as a burden or a liability for the development of ethnic minority regions and thus understands the relationship between teaching the national common language and ethnic minority languages in bilingual education as in conflict. In fact, the relationship between the teaching of the ethnic minority language and national common language may be a synergistic and mutually constructive one, and the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity is in the long-term interest of sustainable development in China and the world. A wealth of social science research supports this claim, and I will not repeat it here.

The second view is that, because bilingual education has become a regular cudgel that so-called Western democracies use to attack China as an "authoritarian" regime, social integration should be strengthened with unprecedented efforts or that bilingual education should not be mentioned publicly. First of all, in recent years, certain Western countries in the so-called free world have been trying to put bilingual education in China's ethnic regions in the global media spotlight, but the Chinese government and people should refute these attempts with the truth. Second, China has become a major force in initiating and promoting economic globalization, and the reality of economic trade and cultural exchange requires that national education, including ethnic minority education, cultivates multilingual rather than monolingual people. At the same time, China has become one of the responsible powers in such international affairs as climate change and biological and cultural diversity conservation, and it is a direct reflection of China's national strength that it can train more multilingual minority people, making an example for the world of the preservation of human

¹² Teng Xing, *Cultural Change and Bilingual Education*, 258.

linguistic and cultural diversity. China should hold up bilingual education in ethnic minority areas to show the world the effectiveness and excellence of the Chinese government and Chinese people's comprehensive concept of human rights, which realistically and fully integrates the right to independence and autonomy of the state with the right to survival and development of its citizens, based on the basic principle of ethnic equality. Third, in the face of the grim reality of excessive social division and wide disparities between classes, urban and rural areas, and regional development, it is necessary to take such powerful measures as poverty alleviation, industrial restructuring, and the development of fair and quality education to strengthen social integration. It is a fallacy to correlate the acquisition and use of a language with the construction and consolidation of an identity, and practices based on this fallacy are harmful. In sum, the Chinese government and people should understand, plan, and implement bilingual education in the context of China's long history and civilization, the socialist road with Chinese characteristics, and the community of human destiny.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hull

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