



Fall 2015

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Wang, G. (2015). Ethnic Multilingual Education in China: A Critical Observation. *30* (2), Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/wpel/vol30/iss2/3>

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Abstract

This paper reviews the ethnic multilingual policies and practices in China in general and Yunnan in particular. It first introduces the demographic features and multilingual policies in Yunnan and then discusses the challenges of ethnic minority education in China from a critical perspective in terms of policy and curriculum. It is argued that it is necessary to re-conceptualize ethnic minority learners in an ever dynamic sociocultural discourse in contemporary China. The author proposes to deepen the research in ethnic multilingual education so as to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of ethnic multicultural learners in the 21st century and to contribute to the design of more relevant language policies, teaching practices, and learning resources, and to pave the way for further in-depth research.

Ethnic Multilingual Education in China: A Critical Observation

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This paper reviews the ethnic multilingual policies and practices in China in general and Yunnan in particular. It first introduces the demographic features and multilingual policies in Yunnan and then discusses the challenges of ethnic minority education in China from a critical perspective in terms of policy and curriculum. It is argued that it is necessary to re-conceptualize ethnic minority learners in an ever dynamic sociocultural discourse in contemporary China. The author proposes to deepen the research in ethnic multilingual education so as to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of ethnic multicultural learners in the 21st century and to contribute to the design of more relevant language policies, teaching practices, and learning resources, and to pave the way for further in-depth research.

Being multilingual is a very common phenomenon in many countries in the world and China is not an exception. As a country with prominent ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, a distinctive feature of multilingual education in China is that the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) makes a series of top-down laws and policies to legitimize and promote the multilingual competence of the ethnic minority learners drawing on a political framework of *Duoyuan Yiti* (ethnic diversity within national unity).¹ The observation and perception of China as a state of *Duoyuan Yiti* (Fei, 1989) suggests that stakeholders at the top level believe national unity and ethnic diversity are the cornerstones helping China to promote its socioeconomic development and maintain stable ethnic relationships.

In this study, the author defines ethnic multilingual learners (EMLs) as ethnic individuals and/or groups who acquire an additional language or additional languages formally or informally after they have acquired their first language in a written or oral form. Here multilingual learners are expected to hold "multi-competence" which is defined by Cook (2001) as "knowledge of more than one language in the same mind" (p. 6).

At present, the concept of multilingual education has been put into practice within the territory of mainland China and guaranteed by various laws and regulations formulated by the central and local governments and legislation. For example, the constitution of the PRC defines China as "a nation of multi-ethnicities" (National People's Congress of the PRC, 1982). This claim is not only a statement

¹ In post-Mao China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takes *Duoyuan Yiti* as a political framework and exercises the ethnic policies featuring "equality, unity, regional ethnic autonomy and common prosperity for all ethnic groups" (The State Council of the PRC, 2009, p. 3). The rights and interests of ethnic minorities are identified and confirmed by policies such as regional autonomy, compulsory education and higher education.

concerning a demographic feature of China, but also a political consideration of national unity and ethnic minority development regarding the 56 ethnic groups. The national constitution sets the legitimate status of ethnic minority groups in China and paves the way for later bilingual and trilingual education in ethnic minority areas.

However, with the further economic reform and opening to the outside world, ethnic minority learners (EMLs) in China are undertaking unprecedented challenges from urbanization, globalization and modernization. Under the continuum of unbalanced power relationships between the ethnic minority and ethnic majority, EMLs are left in a dilemma whether to embrace the curriculum set by the dominant Han² or maintain their linguistic and cultural diversity. At tertiary level, ethnic minority learners are struggling with their goals and means of development. That is to say, should they serve the nation or the local population? Should educational institutions develop highly-skilled professionals, or produce the ethnic minority elites with transformational impact? Should ethnic minority institutions highlight mainstream culture or maintain ethnic features? With these questions in mind, the author reviews the policy and practice concerning ethnic multilingual learners in China and proposes a road map for further study.

Analytic Framework for Multilingual Education in China

Multilingual education refers to the acquisition of more than one language with or without formal school education. The UNESCO Advisory Kits argues that “mother tongue-based instruction is crucial to provide children with early access to education and enabling them to participate in learning processes according to their evolving capacities (UNESCO, 2007, Foreword). Another UNESCO document entitled *Mother Tongue Matters* also argues “using the learners’ mother tongue is crucial to effective learning” (UNESCO, 2008, p. 5). Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000) also propose the continua model of biliteracy to address the significance of attending the less powerful end in terms of context, development media and content. They point out that “inclusion of learners’ voice and agency is the only ethically acceptable solution when it comes to educating a linguistically and culturally diverse learner population” (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000, p. 118). The above assumption is also supported by the *Threshold Hypothesis* (Cummins, 1976, 2000), which argues that the level of L1 and L2 proficiency of bilingual children may affect their cognitive growth in other domains. That is to say, a certain level of the language proficiency may bring about positive cognitive consequences. However, what linguistic level a child must obtain so as to avoid negative effects of bilingualism on additional language acquisition and result in advantageous effects on childhood cognitive development is not clear.

Western scholars (Lam, 2007; Lee, 2001; Trueba & Zou, 1994) argue that power relationships in education may bring about differential consequences for EMLs. Cummins (2009) distinguishes two types of power in education systems: the coercive power and collaborative power. He argues that coercive power is usually exercised by a dominant individual, group, or country and this

² As 92% of the Chinese population, the Han are the dominating ethnic group in China with the largest population and ruling power. They are claimed to be descendants of Emperors Yan and Huang, or Yan Huang Zisun in the Chinese phonetic system.

relationship is detrimental to the subordinated individual or groups for it displays the hegemonic feature of the dominant majority group, while the collaborative power relationship reflects the “sense of the term ‘power’ that referred to ‘being enabled’, or ‘empowered’ to achieve more” (p. 261). Cummins defines the term “empowerment” as “the collaborative creation of power” by arguing:

Power is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others. The more empowered one individual or group becomes, the more is generated for others to share. [Power] enables educators, students and communities to challenge the operation of coercive power structures. (p. 263)

Cummins (2009) and Block (2007) argue that, when power enables and empowers individuals, it works positively; When power constrains or weakens the capacity to act, it works negatively. As a consequence of the latter case, the issues of *resistance* may arise (Canagarajah, 1999).

Cummins’s and Hornberger’s hypotheses on bilingual superiority and power relationships provides a valuable tool to evaluate multilingual education from a critical perspective by implying the significance of reflecting on current research, teaching, and policy making that may empower or disempower multilingual learners.

Multilingual Education Policies in China

Multilingual education policies in China are typically of three formulations: (1) the development of ethnic minority (home) language and Putonghua for ethnic minority groups; (2) the development of Chinese and an additional foreign language (mainly English) for non-ethnic minority groups; and (3) the development of trilingual competence for ethnic minority groups (home language, written and spoken Chinese, and English). Since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government has made and implemented multilingual education policies (1982, 1984),³ except for the short term suspension during the Cultural Revolution.⁴

Adamson and Feng (2008) observe that 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, the PRC has issued multilingual policies for EMLs separately at various historical periods to display the state will. For example, in the 1950s, top-down policies concerning bilingual education were made to promote Putonghua and ethnic minority languages. At the beginning of the 1980s, English was introduced into the secondary school curriculum, and in early 2000s, English became a compulsory course in the national elementary school curriculum from K3. However, the extent of implementation is different for different ethnic minority groups in different locations with a sharp disparity of teaching resources and socioeconomic development.

³ The early multilingual policies are made to address the needs of both ethnic Han and ethnic minorities in China. For the school-age Han learners they are required to master both Chinese and an additional foreign language while for ethnic minority learners, they are asked to master both their mother tongue and Mandarin Chinese.

⁴ The 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’ nation-wide chaos and economic disarray and stagnation.

In 2001, English was introduced into the primary school curriculum, and schools with the necessary qualified English teachers are required to teach English from grade three. At present, English is not only a required subject at almost all levels of school curricula, but also a yardstick for talent selection and quality evaluation of higher learning institutions.

Trilingual education aims to achieve *Sanyu Jiantong* (a mastery of three languages) or *Duoyu Yitong* (multilingual ability with strong competence in only one language) as the general objective. This notion is based on and developed from the conception of *Minhan Jiantong Xianmin Houhan* (a mastery of both ethnic minority language and Chinese at the same time, and the home language should be acquired first). However, this slogan raises certain questions. *Minhan Jiantong* is an idealized conception or aspiration which 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, 2007b, p. 259). In reality, multilingual proficiency is not easy to achieve and a person with multilingual proficiency does not necessarily hold multicultural identities.

To sum up, multilingual education in China is a government-led educational campaign and policy which are 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). It is believed that the bilingual learning experience of EMLs will help them not only develop their early literacy by mother-tongue education but also acquire Putonghua—linguistic capital for equal educational opportunities at advanced levels—as Putonghua has become the dominant medium of communication in many domains of social life such as education and employment. As for the most young ethnic minority people, Chinese is a pathway to social mobility and personal development, and English a passport to the globalized world.

Demographic Features and Language Policies in Yunnan

While China is a country consisting of 56 officially identified ethnic groups, Yunnan is a province bordering Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam in southwest China with the largest diversity of language, culture, and ethnicity. With a territory of 3,940,000 square kilometers and a population of 45,966,239 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011) Yunnan is home to 25 officially identified ethnic minority groups.⁵ Fifteen of the 25 ethnic minority groups can be only found in Yunnan and 16 of them are cross-border ethnic groups.⁶ 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, which cover 70.2% of the provincial territory, inhabited by 48.08% of the provincial population.

The 25 ethnic minority groups in Yunnan use 22 scripts (Dao, 2005). Here, 25 ethnic minority groups live together in a pattern of *Dazaju Xiaojuju* (big dispersion

⁵ These 25 ethnic groups are indigenous ethnic minority groups with a population over 5000. And there are also some ethnic minority groups with a small population who have not been officially identified by the state. Mang People and Kemu People are cases in point.

⁶ Over 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.

and small concentration).⁷ This demographic feature has further encouraged the integration of some ethnic minority groups with the mainstream Han people and other neighboring ethnic groups throughout history. Take Yunnan for example, 16 ethnic groups live in the cross-border areas where different ethnic people mix, and 22 ethnic groups in Yunnan speak 28 languages (Tsang, 2005).⁸

Given the differences in living environment, population size, community distribution and socioeconomic development, the language use in these 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 in terms of geographic distribution: monolinguals, who speak the native language with community and non-community members (such as the Lisu, Dai, Tibetan, Jingpo etc.); bilinguals, who live in the flat lands, or cohabit with other ethnic communities (such as the Bai, Naxi, Zhuang, etc.); trilinguals, who have frequent contact with neighboring communities (such as the De'ang, Pumi, Blang, 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 rather isolated locality and slow socioeconomic development. Therefore, quite a large number of people (about 6.5 million people) in Yunnan couldn't communicate in Putonghua. The Leading Office of 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 really communicate in Putonghua.⁹ Take the Dulong for example: 85.99% of its population do not understand Putonghua at all (Tsang, 2005). Therefore, Many EMLs are at disadvantage in seeking better education and working opportunities¹⁰ for Putonghua, in most cases, is the only medium of instruction at all levels of public educational institutions in Yunnan as well as all parts of China. With the unprecedented domestic migration in China, over 270 million rural migrants are working in the cities where Putonghua is a must for the tertiary industry and a requirement for hiring migrant workers. In the local schools in Yunnan, almost all subjects are instructed in Putonghua while ethnic minority language only serves the purpose of explanation and interpretation. Thus, transitional bilingual education in the school curriculum is essential as it "contributes to enhanced mutual understanding, respect as well as political and economic equality" (Teng & Wen, 2005, p. 268). To promote the early literacy of some ethnic groups in Yunnan, especially those who cannot understand Putonghua, in 1995, the provincial government of Yunnan issued a transitional bilingual education policy, arguing:

⁷ According to Zhu and Blachford's (2006) observation, some of China's ethnic minority groups are highly dispersed, whereas others are highly concentrated in certain peripheral areas. The former always live with the Han or other ethnic minority groups, whereas the latter usually live together as a community in the frontier areas.

⁸ Many cross-border ethnic groups are multilingual due to frequent language contact with the neighbor ethnic communities. Therefore, 22 ethnic minority groups can speak 28 languages.

⁹ According to the survey, they cannot communicate with outsiders in either written or oral Chinese effectively.

¹⁰ So far, a good command of Putonghua has become an essential qualification for migrant workers to seek an employment in the non-ethnic minority areas. Putonghua is also the dominant medium of instruction at all public educational institutions in China.

In minority areas where 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 bilingual education policies according to their local needs and special circumstances. For instance, in 1987, the 8th People's Congress of Dehong Prefecture passed the Regulations of Self-autonomy of the Dai and the Jingpo Nationality. Clause 56 prescribes:

Within the autonomous prefecture, the ethnic primary schools which mainly enroll ethnic students should adopt Shuangyuwen (bilingual or 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)

In addition to multilingual policies, some preferential policies are made and measures are taken by the central government to address the education needs of most ethnic minority learners. Since the founding of the PRC, the central government has made a series of preferential policies for ethnic minority groups which include, for example, bonus marks for ethnic minority applicants in the national entrance examination and postgraduate examination, special quotas for university admission and flexible admissions conditions and tuition waivers. What's more, the Minkaomin policy allows ethnic minority applicants to sit for the national matriculation examinations in particular ethnic minority languages. And ethnic minority universities or Neidiban (minority class in inland comprehensive universities) are established to meet the special needs of ethnic minority students. Furthermore, special arrangements are made to develop advanced specialized minority talents.

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

¹² The upper grade usually refers to K4–K6 in China.

¹³ Primary school in China refers to K1–K6 while middle school refers to K7–K12.

Challenges for Ethnic Minority Higher Education

After over 30 years' reform and opening to the outside world, the transition of China from a planning economy since 1950s to a market economy starting from early 1980s has resulted in differing consequences for China's diverse populations. In particular, the reform in 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 & Zhou, 2009, p. 3). The abolition of free higher education and government-guaranteed employment of university undergraduates since the late 1990s results in a stricter screening of talents by the ever more competitive labor market. At 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 at times in English.

However, the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic gaps between the majority Han and minority ethnic groups place the latter at a great disadvantage due to the requirement of multilingual proficiency, active discrimination policy, and highly demanding curriculum. For example, English is a compulsory course for all undergraduates at university. Thus, minority students face more challenges and difficulties than their Han cohorts, especially when their first language is not well developed and the second language is used as a medium of instruction. Since K3, most minority learners have to study English in classrooms where Putonghua is the dominant medium of instruction for most curricula from secondary school onwards. It can often be seen in a school classroom, where teachers explain the difficult language points in Putonghua, and students struggle with textbooks with explanations or translations in written Chinese script. Through the whole process of learning, ethnic minority students have to mentally re-translate the text into their mother tongue (Feng, 2005b). To some extent, the dominant curriculum, which was mainly developed for the majority Han marginalizes those ethnic minority learners with poor Chinese language proficiency. However, Chinese proficiency is often considered crucial as a support or reference for learning English in China.

Additionally, the exposure of minority students to the English language is far later than that of their Han cohorts, who usually start to learn English at or even before elementary school. This can be attributed to the lack of funding and resources which are critical for the development of English proficiency in the ethnic minority communities (e.g., Feng, 2005a; Jiang, Liu, Quan, & Ma, 2007; Li & Zhou, 2005; Yang, 2005). What is more, the disadvantaged economic conditions of most ethnic minority families make their children absent from school in busy seasons to help their parents with farming work. As a result, few minority children ever have any chance to study a foreign language (English) in primary schools, or even in secondary schools (Ju, 2000; Li, 2003).

Furthermore, even if minority students are admitted to tertiary institutions with the support of preferential policies in the matriculation examination, these preferential policies terminate at university in general, and the minority students often fall back to a disadvantaged position in the university. For example, after admission to tertiary institutions, except for the Minkaomin students, all other minority students like the majority Han cohorts are required to sit for the College

English Test (CET) or the Test of English Major (TEM), which are compulsory national English testing systems for all university students in China. In order to obtain the CET or TEM certificate, many minority learners sit the daunting test again and again, and may become more and more deficient and frustrated if they continue to fail the test, which causes them to feel increasingly inferior to others (Yu, 1997) and more and more frustrated with each attempt. Ironically, it seems that the “positive discrimination” policy which lowers the benchmark of admission may end up with “negative discrimination and the loss of sense of worth and identity” (Feng, 2005b) among those it is intended to help. As a result, ethnic multilingual learners are at a disadvantage in the labor market if they are short of comprehensive competitiveness except for mother tongue.

On the other hand, 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 2 to 4 years so that they can meet the requirements of a new curriculum and graduate smoothly. However, given the gap between *low* thresholds of college admission and the *high* threshold for graduation, both ethnic students and the tertiary institution are left hugely embarrassed because the well-intentioned affirmative 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 ethnic children, except for those in 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.

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

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 reality, *Sanyu Jiantong* (trilingual proficiency) is very hard to achieve. Firstly, for most ethnic minority communities in China (except for very few very well educated ethnic groups like the Korean in northeast China), their first language is only introduced into primary school as a subject throughout the school curriculum. That is to say, mother tongue is only a subject in the school curriculum like math and social studies. The ethnic minority learners, if they choose to leave their hometown for education or employment reasons at a young age, will have very slim chances to pick up or develop their ethnic minority languages. Even in bilingual schools in which L1 is used as a medium of instruction, school-aged children can study their first language for no more than six years unless they are enrolled in bilingual secondary schools, which are usually few in quantity and poor in quality. As for some ethnic minority learners with limited L1 acquisition at school and little chance to use L1 when they grow up, transitional bilingual education may contribute little or even a negative influence on L2 and L3 development, which can be seen in the danger of loss of sense of worth and ethnic identity (Feng, 2005a) as well as lower degree of self-confidence (Hu, 2007; Wang, 2011).

With a longitudinal study of the motivation of multilingual learners and the impact of their L2 on multilingual acquisition of Dai and Hani junior middle school students, some scholars in Yunnan have pointed out that the bilingual experiences of ethnic minority learners seem to contribute little to English education (e.g., Hu, 2007; Yuan, 2007). Their research suggests that the English learning outcomes of ethnic minority learners are unsatisfactory, and that positive attitudes and motivation needed to be cultivated (Hu, 2007; Yuan, 2007). These findings are in line 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. 562). Secondly, *Sanyu Jiantong* is even more challenging for multilingual learners 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 non-native communities. Hu (2007) 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. (p. 53)

If Hu and Yang's observations are true, it can be assumed that the inadequate bilingual education in China may not help, but even hinder, multilingual acquisition if ethnic multilingual learners' L1 and L2 literacy are not adequately developed. In this sense, Cummins' Threshold Theory needs to be reexamined, for according to his theory, the bilingual superiority only lies in idealized balanced bilinguals. For the less balanced or the limited bilinguals, the advantageous cognitive effect is hard 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 culture discontinuity (e.g., Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Xiang, 2009; Zhang, 2007), identity conflict (Hu, 2007; Huang & Yu, 2009), and psychological problems such as

interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, depression and phobia (Li, 2007) to mention just a few. Therefore, it is necessary to re-conceptualize ethnic multilingual learners in the ever dynamic discourses of contemporary China by evaluating current policies and curriculum from a critical perspective.

Conclusion

Given the national policies on language, ethnicity, education and socioeconomic development, it is necessary to re-conceptualize ethnic minority learners in an ever dynamic sociocultural discourse in 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 with Han students without considering the difference in linguistic context and linguistic 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 ethnic multilingual learners, it is necessary to deepen the research on multilingual learners in China so as to be in an informed position to further develop a curriculum to meet the needs of multicultural learners in the 21st 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 their aspirations and learning experience and reveal the strengths, weaknesses and coping strategies of ethnic multilingual learners in China. This information can make a solid contribution to the design of more relevant language policies, teaching practices, learning resources and pave the way for further in-depth research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Nancy Hornberger for her inspiring course of Language Diversity and Education that I audited as a Fulbright Visiting Research Scholar at the Division of Educational Linguistics, Graduate School of Education during the 2014–2015 academic year at the University of Pennsylvania. I would also like to thank the WPEL editorial team and the two blind reviewers of this paper.

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