Short Term Policy Brief 78

Bilingual Education in China’s Minority and Non-Minority Areas

January 2014

Author: Ondřej Klimeš

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of ECRAN and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

This project is implemented by a Consortium led by Steinbeis GmbH & Co. KG für Technologietransfer
Executive summary

According to its own Constitution, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a unitary multiethnic state where non-Han ethnic minorities comprise 120 million (8%) of the total population and inhabit 2/3 of the state’s territory, mostly in geopolitically important borderlands abundant with natural resources. The top priority of China’s ethnic policy is integration of minority ethnic groups and their territories, largely relying on an exclusively top-down approach with insufficient consideration for the interests of ethnic minority populations. China’s ethnic policy is inspired by traditional Chinese treatment of non-Chinese subjects prevalent since the early beginnings of ancient Chinese statecraft in the second millennium BC, by Marxist ideological principles, by Soviet nationality policy from the 1920s to 1950s, and by the specific contemporary context in China’s minority regions. In Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the uncompromising manner of ethnic policy implementation has engendered ethnopolitical tension and violence.

“Bilingual education” policy is an important instrument of China’s ethnic policy that has been implemented in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia since the mid-1990s. Despite its name and in contrast to PRC legal provisions which guarantee ethnic minorities’ right to education in their mother languages, the “bilingual education” policy seeks to establish the so-called common language (also known as the Han language or Mandarin Chinese) as the dominant medium of instruction in regional minority schools. The state asserts that Han language proficiency is indispensable for ethnic minorities to gain access to economic development, which reveals the underlying persuasion that Chinese language and culture is the exclusive intermediary of prosperity and civilization. The policy also enables the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to indoctrinate ethnic minorities with the political ideology of the party-state.

The policy is problematic mainly from two angles. While increasing Han language capabilities of ethnic minority students, it also prevents them from mastering their mother language. In practice, the policy creates a monolingual ethnic minority population prone to cultural assimilation, language loss, identity disarray and social displacement. At the same time, due to massive state-stimulated Han immigration to Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the improvement of Han language skills of minority population per se does not substantially increase their access to economic resources. It is therefore worth asking whether the primary goal of “bilingual education” policy is assimilation of ethnic minorities rather than improvement of their economic possibilities. If the influx of Han immigrants into minority regions continues, the “bilingual education” policy will be unlikely to improve the disadvantaged position of the ethnic minority population in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, and will rather be likely to exacerbate existing ethnopolitical tensions.

To find a responsible and sustainable solution benefitting both the non-Han indigenous population and the Han-dominated state, the EU should urge China to reevaluate its ethnic policy in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. This reevaluation should include policies to regulate Han immigration, to grant the non-Han ethnic groups indigenous status, to institute a genuine system of self-government for ethnic minorities, to facilitate their economic growth simultaneously with their cultural development, to alleviate the pressure on ethnic minorities to trade their ethnic identity for economic progress, to ensure that the “bilingual education” policy factually abides by valid legislation, to ensure that ethnic minority students are able to acquire top quality education in their native language and home location, to depoliticize the education system in minority areas, to include courses in ethnic minority history, religion, literature, culture, folk customs and other fundamentals of ethnic identity into the curriculum, and to protect traditional lifestyle of non-Han communities in accordance with ecologically sustainable development.
Main points:

• Due to the geopolitical importance and natural wealth of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the People’s Republic of China seeks to linguistically assimilate its population into the Chinese polity.

• “Bilingual education” is an important device of ethnic policy which seeks to establish Han language as the dominant medium of instruction in minority schools. Overt policy objectives are improving ethnic minorities’ access to economic opportunities and strengthening their loyalty to the state.

• The policy leads to emergence of a monolingual ethnic minority population, as well as to cultural assimilation, language loss, identity disarray and the social displacement of non-Han ethnic groups.

• The policy does not alleviate the economic disparity between Han and non-Han populations, which is caused by the preferential treatment of large numbers of Han immigrants.

• While the state has declared the policy a success and promises its future expansion, it is likely that the policy will not solve the critical issues in minority regions and will instead aggravate the strained relations of its ethnic minorities with the Han population and the state itself.

• The PRC should fundamentally reformulate its ethnic policy in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, namely to regulate Han immigration, to institute a system of genuine self-government for non-Han ethnic groups, to discontinue their marginalization, to ameliorate the “bilingual education” policy and to ensure minorities’ access to economic values while simultaneously protecting their ethnic identity.
Background Briefing: Bilingual Education in China’s Minority and Non-Minority Areas

1. Driving dynamics of “bilingual education” policy

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a unitary multiethnic state inhabited by approximately 1.2 billion Han (also called ethnic Chinese), who comprise approximately 92% of its population. The remaining 120 million (8%) are made up by 55 officially recognized non-Han ethnic groups who are indigenous to some 2/3 of the PRC’s territory and inhabit geopolitically important borderlands abundant with natural resources. Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the primary ethnic policy objective is integration of ethnic minority territories into the Han-dominated Chinese state.

The PRC’s ethnic policy stems from ancient Chinese states’ perceptions of themselves as the cultural pivot of the world, as well as from perceptions of non-Chinese subjects as culturally inferior and in need of cultivation by the superior Chinese civilization. Such views were embraced at the very early beginnings of Chinese statecraft in the second century BC and further developed after consolidation of the Chinese empire under the Western Han (221 – 206 BC) dynasty. The civilizing mission aimed at cultural, linguistic and political assimilation of non-Chinese peoples into Chinese imperial domain, and relied mainly on inculcation of Confucian values and Chinese language in vassal states’ ruling elites. In 19th century, this approach gradually transformed into a more complex treatment of non-Han ethnocultural entities within the Chinese empire. Another source of ethnic policy is the Communist solution to the nationality question as formulated in Marxist classics and later perfected in the Soviet Union in Joseph Stalin’s views on ethnic issues and their practical implementation from 1920s to 1950s. Communist ethnic policy follows a seemingly paradoxical assumption that accommodation of minority peoples’ identities will lead to the eventual dissipation of their urge to claim distinct political and cultural rights, and to the rise of an amalgamated Communist society devoid of ethnic divisions. Accommodation of ethnic rights also functions as an important legitimizing measure for Communist revolutionaries, which enables them to acquire the loyalty of oppressed minority nationalities and to secure control over their territories.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has drawn on the two models to craft a Communist ethnic policy with Chinese characteristics. On the one hand, there exist numerous and significant legal provisions for autonomy of non-Han ethnic groups. On the other hand, policy implementation aims at integration of minority territories, assimilation of non-Han peoples and upholding the political monopoly of the CCP. These objectives are closely pursued, especially in sizeable and valuable regions, which have a history of independent statehood and are inhabited by indigenous peoples whose language, religion and culture differ significantly from majority Han. These characteristics are particularly applicable to Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, whose importance for China’s central government is reflected by the fact that they are officially granted the status of an autonomous region (along with two other large minority territories – Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region). Forceful top-down policy implementation centered on the pursuit of state interests without sufficient consideration for the rights of indigenous non-Han peoples has since 2008 led to the escalation of existing ethnopolitical tension into protests and violence. The current security situation in these regions therefore constitutes another source of the PRC’s ethnic policy.
2. Policy objectives

Education and language policy are among the most effective ethnic policy instruments for creating inter-ethnic cohesion and a unified linguistic community. As regards education and language issues in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, state organs assume a dual approach of simultaneous accommodation and assimilation of non-Han ethnic groups. On the one hand, the PRC’s ethnic theory recognizes that a distinct language is one of the fundamental components of ethnic identity without which an ethnic group cannot exist. The Constitution of the PRC, the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy and other norms stipulate that ethnic minorities living in ethnic autonomous areas exercise the right to self-government and manage their own internal affairs, such as educational, religious and cultural practice. Such provisions include the right to determine the language of instruction at ethnic minority schools and specifically state that ethnic minority educational institutions should use the particular minority language in school instruction.

In contrast with formal provisions, the state has since mid-1990s consistently implemented a so-called bilingual education policy, which seeks to establish Han language as the dominant language of instruction at ethnic minority schools in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. China’s policy makers argue that Han language skills provide ethnic minorities with access to economic development and social modernization. Proficiency in Han language and social practice has in recent years indeed become an essential means of survival for non-Han ethnic groups. It is largely the growing number of Han immigrants who are benefiting from complex state investment and assistance programs, while the indigenous non-Han population has become a marginalized social stratum in their home regions. Such exclusionary growth engenders economic disparity between the Han immigrants and non-Han population, and has in recent years become a potent cause of ethnopolitical unrest. Top Chinese policy makers, whose decisions are implemented through the Xinjiang regional government, see the solution as increasing the compatibility of the non-Han indigenous population with the Chinese milieu, which is officially claimed to be culturally more advanced and modernized than minority languages and cultures. “Bilingual education” policy thus implies that only through linguistic and cultural assimilation can ethnic minorities achieve economic progress. Because of the close correlation between language spoken by an individual and the way he/she cogitates, the “bilingual education” policy also enables the Han-dominated party-state to more easily inculcate its values into the mindset of non-Han peoples and to indoctrinate them with political and ideological principles such as cohesion of the political nation of China, territorial integrity of the PRC and the political leadership of the CCP.

Despite its title, in practice the “bilingual education” policy strives to introduce Han language as the dominant medium of instruction for the overwhelming majority of classes, except mother language and literature courses. As a result, ethnic minority students often fail to master their own language in speech and script beyond a basic degree. The policy thus presses non-Han ethnic groups into exchanging a key attribute of their ethnic identity for access to economic possibilities, and facilitates the emergence of monolingual, Han-speaking ethnic minority population sympathetic to the values of the Communist party-state and Han cultural milieu. The policy thus aims at cultural assimilation, language loss, identity disarray and social displacement, and disrupts rather than facilitates the harmonious coexistence of China’s minority and majority population.

At the same time, the policy does not substantially increase the chances of non-Han graduates to find employment. Due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of employment possibilities is tied to Han-dominated administrative and commercial subjects, non-Han employment seekers educated in the “bilingual education” system are still at a disadvantage in comparison to Han applicants who
naturally possess perfect language proficiency. Han applicants moreover greatly outnumber non-Han indigenous candidates in minority areas, and discriminatory hiring practices do exist. It is therefore questionable whether the actual purpose of the “bilingual education” policy is improving the economic performance of non-Han ethnic groups as the authorities claim, or whether it is rather the linguistic and cultural assimilation of the minority population. The controversial “bilingual education” policy has in recent years provoked opposition and protests in ethnic minority regions, and is a significant cause of discontent for the Uyghur, Tibetan and Mongolian population.

3. Implementation in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia

**Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region** (XUAR) is officially inhabited mainly by approximately 10 million Uyghurs (who form 42% of the region’s total population) and 8.5 million Han (39%). In accordance with legislation, the state has since the late 1970s established a dual education system: Han schools with instruction in the Han language and minority schools with instruction in non-Han languages (besides Uyghur these also include Kazak, Kyrgyz, Mongolian, Sibe and Russian). Preferential policies have also been introduced for non-Han students, such as compulsory quotas for students admitted to universities, bonus points in university entrance examinations, financial subsidies and stimulus measures to study at Han schools.

The system started to undergo a gradual shift since mid-1990s, when a certain proportion of classes at selected experimental minority schools started to be taught in the Han language. After 2000, the Han language has been introduced as the only language of instruction at a growing number of minority schools. At the end of 2012, 67% of ethnic minority students from preschool through secondary level were receiving education in the Han language (55% under the “bilingual education” policy in minority schools, the rest at Han schools). Universities in Xinjiang commenced a shift to instruction exclusively in the Han language in 2002. Implementation of the “bilingual education” policy accelerated in reaction to violent unrest in July 2009 and the subsequent assumption of power by the CCP secretary Zhang Chunxian in May 2010, who openly recognized that economic disparity between the Han and non-Han population of Xinjiang was one of the main sources of unrest. Xinjiang regional authorities plan to achieve universal use of Han language in the entire educational system by 2020 and also expect the policy to accelerate building of a new model of socialist ethnic relations, as well as to strengthen cohesion and centripetal forces within the Chinese political nation. The implementation of the “bilingual education” policy nevertheless does not improve the economic disparity between Uyghurs and Hans. Although Xinjiang regional government states that the urban unemployment rate was 2.77% in the first half of 2013, the unemployment rate among Uyghurs is believed to be in the double digits and is regarded as one of the most pressing issues in Uyghur society.

**Tibetan areas** are experiencing an analogous trend. There are approximately 3 million Tibetans inhabiting the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), where they officially comprise 93% of the population. There are furthermore 1.2 million Tibetans living in Qinghai province (21%), 510,000 in Gansu province (2%), 1.2 million in Sichuan (1.5%) and 185,000 in Yunnan (0.3%) provinces, totaling over 6 million Tibetans living in the PRC. In comparison to Xinjiang, Tibetan language remains represented in greater proportion in the school curriculum. The policy is implemented chiefly in the TAR, where the authorities declared that 97% of primary school students and 90% of middle school students have been receiving a certain amount of instruction in the Han language in 2012. The policy is implemented less forcibly in Tibetan areas outside the TAR, but nevertheless it sparked student
demonstrations for the preservation of Tibetan language rights in Qinghai province in October 2010 and November 2012, which were specifically in reaction to official claims that “bilingual education” is to assist Tibetans in promoting their culture and progress. Informal initiatives to preserve the Tibetan language have formed in reaction to the policy in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan province during 2013, which were all suppressed by the authorities. State organs nevertheless regularly praise the “bilingual education” policy in Tibetan areas as successful and promise its expansion in the future.

In Tibet and Xinjiang, a mechanism of in-land class exists. This preferential policy seeks to enhance the Han language proficiency and study skills of minority children by selecting top-ranking students from minority schools in poor rural areas in the TAR and XUAR and dispatching them for a four-year study program at designated schools in inner China. The program is financially attractive for minority parents because it includes state coverage of tuition, room and board, transportation, allowance and all other living expenses. Besides language skills, the young non-Han elites are also educated in state political doctrine. The project of inland classes was started in the TAR in 1985. In 2012, there were 1927 Tibetan students enrolled in inland universities, 3000 students in senior high schools, 1540 students in junior high schools and 3036 students in vocational high schools. In Xinjiang, the inland classes program was launched in 2000; there were 8330 Xinjiang students enrolled in inland senior high schools in 2012 and 9900 students in inland vocational schools in 2013. The inland class project nonetheless sometimes generates an effect which is contrary to its original goal. After experiencing intensive contact with the Han environment away from their family and home cultural milieu, minority students often become increasingly aware of their ethnic identity and realize the importance of their own language and culture. Many also grow disillusioned with Chinese mainstream society as they experience disrespectful treatment by their Han peers or even teachers. While they experience loss or deterioration in mother language proficiency, the level to which they master Han language remains insufficient for them to compete at the employment market. The authorities in the TAR and XUAR nonetheless regard the project as a success and vow its future expansion.

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) is inhabited by approximately 4.2 million (17%) Mongols, of whom an estimated 25% speak only the Han language. Due to protests by Mongols in 1990s against implementation of the “bilingual education” policy, the program of education in Han language has been previously labeled by different terms. Over the past decade, Mongolian schools have undergone a merging process. In the first step, elementary schools on the lowest administrative level were merged into each other, which on the one hand led to a decrease in the number of Mongolian schools, but on the other hand sometimes improved material conditions in the remaining schools. In the second step, Mongolian middle schools were merged with Han schools in towns or cities, which are often too expensive for village students to commute to or reside at. As a result, the Mongolian students are often left with no other choice than to study in the Han language. Official sources nevertheless portray the implementation of “bilingual education” policy in Inner Mongolia as effective and insist that the Han and Mongolian languages play an equal role in the IMAR education. Although the government passed several regulations promoting Mongolian education and allotted large financial resources to the initiative in 2005-2006, the actual situation in the region is that the opportunities for Mongols to acquire education in their mother tongue are decreasing.

Similarly to Xinjiang and Tibet, there is a correlation between Mongolian language identity and political stability of the IMAR. During the anti-government protests in the IMAR in May 2011, which were sparked by the killing of a Mongol herdsman by a coal truck, the authorities locked down several secondary schools and universities with sizeable Mongol student population. At the same time, the tension was a result of official and commercial pressure on the traditional Mongol nomadic
lifestyle and of sedentarization policies, which aim to prevent Mongol nomads and herders from grazing their livestock on grasslands and pastures. While such measures are officially enacted due to environmental concerns, the pasture lands are simultaneously being exploited for mining and agriculture, and settled by Han immigrants. Besides the IMAR, similar policies are being implemented also in the TAR and other Tibetan areas inhabited by Tibetan nomads and herders. Sedentarization of nomads erodes their traditional way of living and has a damaging impact on their ethnicity, including their cultural, religious and language identity. Exploitation of grassland pastures for mining and agriculture simultaneously aggravates the desertification process and has a damaging impact on the natural environment and climate that affects not only the PRC. Traditional lifestyle, language policy and global ecological balance are thus tightly interrelated issues which have to be approached in a comprehensive way. Prioritizing economic development alone cannot secure sustainable development and the survival of bio-linguistic and bio-cultural diversity in human social and broader biotic communities.

4. Assessment of future developments and policy recommendations

The PRC authorities have on numerous occasions declared the “bilingual education” policy to be a successful strategy of social modernization of non-Han societies and announced plans for future continuation and expansion of the strategy. It is therefore likely that in the future the policy will accelerate the trends and phenomena in the non-Han regions which are discernible today. On the one hand, the policy is likely to aggravate the trend of linguistic assimilation and identity loss among non-Han ethnic groups. Simultaneously, as long as the state continues to stimulate the current massive influx of Han immigrants into minority regions, it is unlikely that improved Han language skills of non-Han employment seekers *per se* will upgrade their access to economic resources. There are concerns that without addressing the root causes of ethnopolitical crisis in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the continuation of “bilingual education” will only exacerbate the ongoing conflict, potentially leading to its violent escalation. “Bilingual education” policy is only one of several problematic issues in the above regions, which together show the need for considerable reevaluation of the PRC’s ethnic policy priorities.

While the EU acknowledges the principle of non-interference into the internal affairs of sovereign countries, it also seeks to initiate a qualified and constructive dialogue with the PRC authorities on a wide variety of issues. Although the cultural and political landscape of Europe and the PRC differ in many ways, the EU can point to language legislation and practices in Belgium or Switzerland as examples of policy in stable multilingual societies. Protecting the equal rights and status of all ethno-linguistic segments of a multiethnic society leads to enhancement of their mutual respect for each other and their common willingness to participate in building a polity that is able to secure its population’s psychological well-being and economic growth. In regards to “bilingual education” and other policies in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the EU can suggest to the PRC leaders and policy makers that they find responsible and sustainable alternatives to the current situation that would be beneficial for the non-Han indigenous population, for Han immigrants and for the state. Such an approach should particularly include:

- regulating Han immigration into non-Han areas in order to protect the local population’s distinct cultural identity, recognizing respective non-Han ethnic groups’ indigenous status in these areas, discontinuing their marginalization, crafting a genuine system for their self-government and facilitating their economic prosperity simultaneously with their cultural development;
- abandoning the assumption that Han language and culture is the exclusive bearer of civilization and instituting a model of economic development for minority areas which does not press non-Han
ethnic groups into opting for linguistic and cultural assimilation in exchange for improvement in living standards;

- altering the “bilingual education” policy so that it does not lead to language loss and cultural assimilation, but to emergence of bilingual abilities and the equal status of both non-Han and Han populations of non-Han areas;

- combining the inland classes project for non-Han ethnic groups with substantial improvement in the quality of minority schools and ensuring that non-Han students are able to acquire top quality education in their mother tongue at their home location;

- depoliticizing the entire education system in non-Han areas and instituting curricula which feature courses in the mother tongue on minority ethnic groups’ history, religion, literature, culture, folk customs and similar essentials of ethnic identity; and

- promoting ecologically sustainable development of non-Han ethnic areas and protecting the traditional lifestyle of non-Han communities.