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Politics and policy changes in minority education in China: the case of Xinjiang

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Introduction

The challenge of education for ethnic minorities, no matter which part of the world it is in, has always been an issue for governments as it is closely related to the ever pressing problems of social equality, social mobility, social cohesion and, more broadly, national identity. The provision of education might be an important way in which ethnic minorities can enhance both their personal and professional skills in the labor market, and consolidate their group identity and political status in the broader society. However, it could also be used by the State to establish social control over ethnic minorities by different or even opposite approaches such as assimilative and some versions of multicultural education, aiming to form a certain sense of nationhood, to create loyal or patriotic citizens and finally to maintain national unity. In most societies, both these tendencies are in evidence, as is a tension between them.

Although China has often been seen as a homogeneous society with its 1.3 billion members sharing one culture (i.e. Confucianism) and speaking one language (i.e. Mandarin Chinese) (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.66), it is actually a multi-ethnic society, with the dominant ethnic Han group accounting for about 91% of the total population and 55 so-called “minority ethnic groups” (*shaoshu minzu*) accounting for more than 100 million (about 9%) (Stats, 2010). Located in China’s far northwest corner and bordered by eight countries, Xinjiang, or the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region¹ (XUAR), as it has officially been called in China since 1955, has a heavily multi-ethnic population. According to the official statistics, Xinjiang is home to 13 native ethnic groups, including 8.2 million Uyghur, 7.7 million Han, and other ethnic groups whose populations range from 5,000 (Russian) to 1.4 million (Kazak). Among the 13 ethnic groups, seven of them are Muslim (including Uyghur), and five of them (including Uyghur) speak Turkic Languages. Meanwhile, Mandarin Chinese is widely used among the Han, Hui and Manchu ethnic groups in this region. Therefore, Xinjiang is seen as an especially multi-cultural and multi-lingual part of China², although one in which one particular minority ethnic group – the Uyghur – predominates.

¹ Scholars such as Bovingdon (2004, 2010) argue that the creation of such “autonomous” regions within China does not grant real autonomy to minority ethnic groups and that, particularly in Xinjiang, it has actually contributed to minority ethnic unrest.

² Xinjiang is also bordered by eight countries which are the Republic of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. There are significant number of same ethnic groups living both sides of the border, e.g. Kazaks in both Kazakhstan and Xinjiang.

In recent years Xinjiang has been experiencing a period of intensive ethnic tension which is evidenced by various “terror” attacks and violent inter-ethnic conflicts³. There is no doubt that Xinjiang is now becoming one of the country’s most politically sensitive region, arguably even more so than Tibet. Therefore, Xinjiang has become an important target of China’s nation building project. Indeed, since the Communist Party of China (CPC) first governed Xinjiang in 1949, it has adopted different strategies to integrate this land and its people into the Chinese nation.

So this chapter first reviews the general strategies adopted by the CPC government to integrate its minority ethnic groups and how these strategies have shifted in accordance with changes of political climate in the central government in Beijing. Four periods are identified in this chapter according to the dominant development strategies adopted by the central government - the Socialist period (1949 - 1976), the Modernization period (1976 - 1989), the Patriotic period (1989 - 2008) and the Paradox period (2008 - present)⁴. It analyzes how particular education policies were adopted to support the aim of integration of minority ethnic groups in each of these periods. Important education policies such as “bilingual education” and the “in-land class system”⁵ are particularly examined since they are often seen as two of the most important integration policies that have applied in the education system in Xinjiang⁶.

We argue that, while these policies are presented as facilitating the integration of minority ethnic groups into Chinese society, in practice they do not always constitute genuinely multicultural education. In our view, this should entail intercultural dialogues that respect the cultural identities of all learners. Such an education also needs to provide them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to achieve full participation in society, while fostering respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations (see UNESCO, 2006).

³ More than 10 incidents described as “terror attacks” or “ethnic riots” took place in the five years up to 2014 and the number has escalated subsequently. In the most serious incident, which occurred on 5th July 2009, almost 200 fatalities were reported. At least as significant are various forms of “everyday resistance” identified by Bovingdon (2010).

⁴ Periodization is not an exact science and some scholars prefer a two-phase periodization with a division in the mid-1970s. We anyway identify some shifts in education policy within these broad periods. Furthermore, different approaches to minority ethnic education often co-exist and there is sometimes a return to earlier forms as may be happening now.

⁵ “In-land” normally refers to the region between Chinese western border regions and eastern coast regions where Han are the main residents. The “in-land class” refers to a particular type of boarding school established mainly for minority ethnic students from Tibet and Xinjiang. The difference between a Han boarding school and an in-land class is that, whereas Han children are generally sent to board in the nearest urban center, “minority” students from Tibet or Xinjiang are sent to board in “Han” regions that are both geographically distant and culturally unfamiliar. It was believed that this system would help the government to overcome the obstacle of a scarcity of qualified teachers in minority regions and, at the same time, reduce the cost since it seemed cheaper to construct new schools in in-land than in Tibet where transportation was not so convenient (Wang and Zhou, 2003, p. 97).

⁶ The bilingual education is promoted across China’s minority ethnic regions, including many of regions in southwestern China⁶. The in-land class system is only adopted in the two most controversial minority regions, namely Tibet and Xinjiang. Both policies are an important part of the central government in Beijing’s strategy to integrate minority ethnic groups.

Finally, based on the discussion of policies, this chapter will suggest what might be necessary to achieve genuine multiculturalism in the Chinese education system and potentially reduce ethnic tension in Xinjiang.

The Socialist period (1949 - 1976)

As a political party founded on the ideological base of Marxism-Leninism, and further developed by Maoist thought, it became imperative after the foundation of the PRC in 1949 for the CPC to spread its ideology to every part of China in order to legitimize its authority as well as consolidate its power over all people in China including both the majority Han and the ethnic minorities. To the Communist leaders, it seemed the most effective way that a united new China could be built was by unification of all Chinese people around a common Socialist ideology (Chen, 1981; Hawkins, 1978; Hu, 1974). Arguably, it was the first time in Chinese history that a rather civic idea of citizenship (Communism) was adopted, which at least in theory denies cultural discrimination and promotes equal relations among different ethnic groups in China. Indeed, according to the Article 53 of the Interim Constitution of PRC, a degree of local autonomy in ethnic minority regions was promoted and minority ethnic groups were supposed to have “freedom to develop their dialects and languages, and to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs” (Dwyer, 2005, p.7). Based on this spirit, the CPC government aimed to establish a “a new governance and society”, designed to promote equal relationships between different ethnic groups including between the dominant Han and the various minority ethnic groups (*ibid*).

So in early years of the PRC (prior to 1956), the education policies that were adopted in minority ethnic regions were quite liberal and have thus been considered “admirable” (Dwyer, 2005, p.7), since minorities’ local conditions and their distinct cultures were taken into consideration (Bass, 1998; Bulag, 2002; Hawkins. 1983). In fact, the CPC government offered two types of schools in minority ethnic regions such as Xinjiang. These were “nationality schools” (*minxiao*), which not only used the mother tongue as the medium for instruction but also provided specific curricula for minorities, including minority literature, history, etc, and Han schools (*hanxiao*), where minority ethnic students could learn in a Mandarin environment and study exactly the same curriculum as Han students. Thus, within an overall national education system, minority ethnic students were able to make their own choice of schooling⁷. Meanwhile, Han Chinese students in Xinjiang also had the option to study the Uyghur language as this would help them to work better in the region (Stites, 1999). Also, although most textbooks used by ethnic minorities were translated from Han Chinese books, some special working

⁷ However, those who came through the “ethnic” stream would be effectively excluded from most fields of higher education (apart from the study of “minority” languages and cultures in “minority” colleges/universities). Therefore, in practice, choosing the “ethnic” option meant having less chance of joining the bureaucratic or technocratic elite.

groups were set up to compile textbooks specifically for ethnic minorities in order to respond to their local needs and demands⁸ (Bass, 1998).

This dual school system also reflected a plural language policy which, to large extent, guaranteed minority ethnic groups the right to use their mother tongue in schools. In fact, the report of the first national conference on ethnic minority education held in 1951 claimed that “to ethnic minority groups which have developed their own writing script such as Mongol, Korean, Uyghur, Kazak and Tibetan, all the subjects in primary and secondary schools must be taught in their native language”⁹ (Wang, 2003, p.27). So in early and middle 1950s, local languages were encouraged as medium of instruction in classrooms in Xinjiang. This language policy was seen as “responsive to local condition and arguably one of the more flexible in the world” (1. Executive summary). It was also claimed that this pluralistic language policy was “generally well received by ethnic minority groups” (Dwyer, 2005, p.x).

However, things changed dramatically as a result of political struggles in the central Chinese government. During the Anti-rightist Campaign (1957-1958), Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), indoctrination of Maoist political ideology often became a national priority. The promotion of socialist ideology and class struggle led to a rejection of the cultures of different ethnic groups which, in turn, led to an almost exclusive focus on the idea of “ethnic fusion” (*minzu ronghe*) (Wang, 2003, p.30). As a result, elements of distinctive minority ethnic cultures, such as values, religions, customs, were seen to be against the supposedly culture-free ideology of Communism and they became objects of the “cultural” revolution and were all attacked and seen as needing to be “swept over”¹⁰ (Bass, 1998; Hawkins, 1978).

It was against this background that education in minority ethnic regions became assimilative and the cultures of minority ethnic groups were re-interpreted within the education system. Schools for minority ethnic groups (*minxiao*) were forced to use Chinese as the medium of instruction, while the previous concessions that allowed culturally specific education for ethnic minorities were now abolished. Accordingly, in the education system, textbooks were rewritten again to consist almost entirely of socialist ideological content (Bass, 1998). In fact, characteristics of minority cultures were now typically condemned as “feudal” and were explicitly regarded as “backward and useless” (Wang,

⁸ Bass (1998) also noted that in these textbooks, the minorities’ stories, mythological characters and historical figures were introduced.

⁹ The report also pointed out that to those groups which had not developed their own proper writing script, the government should help these groups to develop and reform their scripts and allow them to choose to use either their own language or Chinese in teaching (Wang, 2003, p.27).

¹⁰ It is observed that, in the periods between these political campaigns, there were effort to rectify mistakes in all areas including minority ethnic education. For instance, the mono-language policy was abandoned and ethnic minority languages were redressed as medium for instruction in schools in various ethnic minority regions (Wang, 2003, p.27).

2003, p.31). As a result of this mono-cultural and mono-linguistic approach to schooling, many ethnic minority students were still “illiterate” even after six or seven years in schools (*ibid*).

After the death of Chairman Mao, the CPC became increasingly aware that socialist ideologies alone were not capable of coping with either the aftermath of the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, or the new challenges posed by the need to improve the “material condition” (*wuzhi tiaojian*) of the Chinese people. The CPC therefore embarked on a shift of priority in national strategy, which would re-justify its legitimacy and authority.

The Modernization period (1976 - 1980s)

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the most urgent task for the CPC was to develop the devastated economy and to achieve the aim of modernizing China. So in the reform period in 1980s, economics came to be regarded as rather more urgent than political indoctrination and became the new emphasis of China’s development strategy. Economic development, however, as seen by the CPC, could only be achieved by high quality human resources. Therefore, the CPC started to re-emphasize education as a means to create experts and mass produce productive laborers (Bass, 1998). The aims of education were now to be largely economically orientated and related to productivity and growth of the nation.

The shift in national policy and ideology towards economic growth and the modernization of China under Deng's leadership also impacted upon the treatment of minority ethnic education in China. In 1981, the “National Conference on Education for Ethnic Minorities” laid down a strategy for readjusting and developing minority ethnic education so that these sectors of society could help meet the industrialization and economic targets of modernization (Bass, 1998). Accordingly, some reform measures which were adopted widely across in-land China were also implemented in minority ethnic regions. These included the introduction of competitive public examinations (such as the *gaokao* - the national examination for university enrolment); the establishment of “key” schools; the expansion of basic education (at least at the beginning of the reform period); and the boarding school program, which was particularly promoted because a large percentage of the minority ethnic population lived in rural and remote areas of China (Bass, 1998; Hawkins, 1983; Murphy, 2004).

Moreover, the CPC issued various policies specifically to upskill the minority ethnic labor force. For instance, minority ethnic students were given preferable treatment such as a lower minimum examination score to enter university. In 1984, a special “in-land class” (*neidi ban*) (a kind of boarding school) was established in secondary schools across in-land China for students from Tibet to enjoy free and high quality education (Bass, 1998; Postiglione, 2009; Zhu, 2007).

The decrease of political indoctrination through socialist ideology in this period also relaxed constraints on the cultural expression of minority ethnic groups and provided more space for them to claim distinctive cultural identities. In 1984, two important laws were enacted - the “Nationality Law” and the “Regional Autonomy Law” - both aimed to protect minority ethnic groups’ rights to cultural autonomy. Therefore, in many ways, minority ethnic groups’ culture and their special needs were acknowledged and respected and it appeared that, during this period, many policies and practices towards minority ethnic groups reflected the spirit of multiculturalism.

This multicultural spirit led to two major changes in education policies in minority regions such as Xinjiang. First, during the 1980s specific minority ethnic cultures were recognized in the education system and a local curriculum was initiated to respond to minority ethnic groups’ needs (Bass, 1998). For instance, traditional minority ethnic literature, which had been previously denounced as “feudal” and “backward”, was now reintroduced and taught in schools. Furthermore, several new unified sets of textbooks were also published and distributed in the 1980s, which included more specific information about the cultures of local ethnic minorities (Bass, 1998; Hawkins, 1983). Second, the new policies reaffirmed the right of minority ethnic groups to use their language in education system. This included the use of their mother tongue as medium for instruction in schools and the compilation and publication of textbooks in minority languages (ibid).

Therefore, during this period, bilingual education was widely promoted in Xinjiang and the major model of schooling for minority ethnic students in Xinjiang was to use their mother tongue (such as Uyghur) in teaching of all subjects in primary and secondary schools except Chinese which was taught as a subject of second language¹¹ (Wang, 2003, p.46). In other words, minority ethnic students were able to mainly use their mother tongue in schools until they reached university and college level. Research (ibid) shows that bilingual education in this period was generally welcomed since it helped minority students to become excellent in “both nationality and Chinese (language and culture)” (*min-han jiantong*) – producing a desired kind of person that the education system was trying to cultivate.

However, the push for the improvement of education quality and the spirit of multiculturalism did not necessarily result in greater equity in education. The rhetoric of “modernization”, though sounding culture-free, still implied an unequal power relationship between Han Chinese and non-Han Chinese

¹¹ There were different models of bilingual education practiced in China during this period. In regions where the population was dominated by minority ethnic groups, minorities' mother tongue was prioritized in teaching throughout primary and secondary schools. It should be noted that even within this model there were differences in the starting age of learning Chinese as a second language: from grade three to six in primary school. In other words, schools could choose when to start to teach Chinese language in accordance with their needs (Wang, 2003, p.46). In other words, there was flexibility about the starting-age. In regions where Chinese was widely used by minority ethnic groups (such as urban settings), Chinese was prioritized and the minority ethnic group's mother tongue was taught as a language subject. There was also a third model, which used both Chinese and the mother tongue of minority ethnic groups to teach different subjects (normally Chinese for science subjects and a local language for arts subjects) (ibid).

groups since the former were regarded as the most advanced in terms of economic development, whereas most non-Han Chinese lived in less developed areas. Therefore, minority ethnic groups were often seen not only as “inferior” compared to the “superior” Han, but also as “backward” or as “vulnerable and in need of help, special consideration and advanced training from their more sophisticated and cultured Han brethren” (Hawkins, 1983, p.194).

There was thus a tension in the policy between an apparent endorsement of the value of diverse cultures and a clear hierarchy among them, at least in terms of their perceived economic value. Although minority ethnic group identities were no longer largely suppressed in the relatively more tolerant political environment, they found that the “modernization” approach did not “solve the real problems of educational and economic inequity between China’s majority (Han) and numerous minorities” (Hawkins, 1983, p.200). While the “modernization” project and its related ideologies of “economic development” continue to be a state priority even until the present day, the CPC had to adopt new strategies in order to cope with the increasing resistance from minority ethnic groups.

The Patriotic period (1989 - 2008)

At the end of the 1980s, the rule of the CPC faced a serious threat resulting from a continuing decline of public faith in socialism. In order to regain legitimacy after the huge anti-government demonstration in Tiananmen Square, the CPC launched a “state-led systematic engineered project” to promote patriotism. This was referred to as the “Patriotic Education Campaign” (PEC) in official discourse (Zhao, 2004, p.238). The campaign was intended for all Chinese citizens of all generations, irrespective of their ethnicity or class and was an intensive undertaking by the CPC during the period 1991 to 1994. Thereafter patriotism became one of the fundamental, intrinsic and core values propagated through the Chinese education system (He and Guo, 2000; Vickers, 2009; Zhao, 2004).

Bass (2006, p.55) and Zhao (2004, p.219) pointed out that the teaching goals of the PEC in the education system were achieved particularly through instruction on China’s unique “long history, flourishing culture, and glorious tradition”, so that students could learn the “idea of the country” (*guojia guannian*) through the cultivation of strong national consciousness (Hughes, 2003; He and Guo, 2000; Vickers, 2009; Zhao, 2004). As a result, there was a shift from the previous domination of a socialist narrative to a nationalist narrative, which now focused more on the distinctiveness of China. Subsequently, not only there was a renewed interest in themes such as “common ancestry” (i.e. the Yellow Emperor) in official and public discourse, but Confucianism, which had been heavily attacked during the Cultural Revolution, was now regarded as the soul of the Chinese culture and the foundation of the Chinese nation, which helped Chinese people to “guard the gates against western decadence” (He and Guo, 2000).

Meanwhile, in order to cope with the increasing separatist feelings among minority ethnic groups in Tibet and Xinjiang, the CPC government adopted an overriding ideology in order to manage inter-ethnic relations - “*minzu tuanjie*”, meaning “solidarity among nationalities”¹² (Bulag, 2002, p.12). Under this ideology of “solidarity among nationalities”, the “multiplesness” of China was now replaced by the focus on “oneness” and therefore minority ethnic groups’ distinctive cultures, which had been tolerated and even promoted in the education system in the 1980s, were once again denounced since they potentially led to multiple ethnic nationalisms¹³ (Zhao, 2004). Instead, links between minority ethnic groups and the “motherland” were strongly promoted in order to stimulate national sentiment among non-Han people. For example, cultural exchange and trade between Han and minority ethnic groups in history were emphasized whereas wars and conflicts between them were downplayed in history textbooks produced in this period¹⁴ (Baranovitch, 2010).

Against this background, bilingual education and the in-land class system, both of which aim to integrate minority ethnic students in Xinjiang, experienced a massive expansion in the 1990s and 2000s (though both of the policies were initiated in 1980s). However, during this period, so-called bilingual education started to move away from a model that prioritized mother tongue of minority ethnic groups to a model that increasingly encouraged using Mandarin Chinese as the medium of instruction in schools in minority ethnic regions. Indeed, not only did the Chinese Ministry of Education (which was called the Education Commission then) announce a plan to implement a regular “Chinese competence test” (HSK)¹⁵ in all minority schools in 1992, but Chinese instruction now began in the first grade of primary school in Xinjiang (Dwyer, 2005, pp.33-37), much earlier than during the previous period. It seemed to some commentators that the government was aiming to make Mandarin Chinese the primary or sole language for instruction in all schools (Schluessel, 2007, p.257).

¹² Although “*minzu tuanjie*” had always been used in official rhetoric to regulate ethnic relations in China, its use has become more widespread now. In fact, as Bulag (2002) has claimed, “*minzu tuanjie*” has become an ideological framework that is used to define Han-minority relations.

¹³ Similar tensions between “multiplesness” and “oneness” have been identified by Taylor-Gooby and Waite (2014) in the case of the UK, where a speech by Prime Minister David Cameron implicitly questioned multi-culturalism for creating social division and then asked commitment from different groups to a British national identity. It should be noted that in the case of the UK, multi-culturalism mainly refers to immigrant minorities who came to the UK in recent years, whereas in Xinjiang the largest ‘minority’ was the majority until relatively recently. Even now, the Han incomers are numerically in a minority, although economically, culturally and politically dominant.

¹⁴ Bulag (2002) also gave a vivid example that forced inter-marriages between Han and minority ethnic groups in history were now celebrated as implicit evidence of blood-links between them, although it had been condemned as humiliation to the Han Chinese in the previous period.

¹⁵ HSK (*Hanyu shuiping kaoshi*) was introduced by the Beijing Language and Culture University in 1990. It was the first standardized text for assessing the Chinese competence of non-native speakers. The test is clearly an imitation of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The HSK test has been put to use largely for the assessment and “encouragement” of non-native speakers of Chinese (Dwyer, 2005, p.33).

In 2000, the CPC also decided to extend the in-land class system to students from Xinjiang. The number of students enrolled for Xinjiang in-land classes has increased steadily from 1,000 in 2000 to 5,000 in 2007 (GOV, 2013). The purpose of this initiative was to improve the quality of education and to produce a more skilled labor force for local economic development. But it should also be noted that this system had become strategically important for minority ethnic education as it also played a significant role in training *patriotic* minority ethnic students. In fact, in the MOE document of the “Regulation of the Xinjiang In-land Class”, “carrying on patriotic education” and “cultivating patriotic citizens” were repeatedly mentioned to highlight the idea of “support the leadership of Communist party, love the socialist motherland and support the unification of the nation and solidarity among nationalities” (MOE, 2000).

However, as noted by Bulag (2002), the concept of “*minzu tuanjie*” (solidarity among nationalities) did not necessarily lead to strong social cohesion and an equal relationship between ethnic groups. Instead, since this “oneness” is largely defined by Han culture and its ideologies, the promotion of unity among ethnic groups inevitably resulted in a hegemonic power relationship between the Han-dominated nation-state and non-Han Chinese peoples, as arguably the welfare of the wider nation state was upheld at the expense of the minority ethnic groups. Under the rhetoric of “*minzu tuanjie*”, the minority ethnic groups’ demands for equality, cultural dignity, and autonomy were perceived as “futile, and jeopardizing”, both to the minority and to the Chinese nation, as claimed by the government (*ibid*, p.9). In other words, although in theory “*minzu tuanjie*” aimed to establish a harmonized relationship between ethnic groups, in reality it helped the state to establish a unified and even homogenized nation (*ibid*).

When non-Han Chinese do not accept and embrace this Han version of “Chineseness”, then the unity and legitimacy of the Chinese nation is seen to be challenged and threatened (He and Guo, 2000). Although, to counter this, the Chinese government has put enormous economic investment into Xinjiang (and into Tibet as well) in recent years, it seems that this approach to integration has not so far reduced resistance from minority ethnic groups, which has become even more intensive recently.

The Paradox period (2008 -)

Since 2008, there has been series of ethnic clashes and so-called “terrorist attacks” across China, which has exposed the serious problem of ethnic relations in China¹⁶. The CPC government

¹⁶ While the majority of the attacks took place in Xinjiang, some took place in other regions of China, e.g. Beijing the capital of PRC itself in October 2013 and Kunming in Southwest China in March 2014. The one in Beijing took place at the Tiananmen Square, a symbolic political center of the PRC. The one took place in Kunming involved knife-attack and caused more than 20 deaths with more than 100 people injured. Many Han Chinese were shocked by this attack because it happened in what they regarded as a “normal” city, rather than in cities in Xinjiang.

immediately responded to these incidents by organizing several important conferences and issuing several significant policies and statements. The conference reports and the policies could be interpreted as signaling a shift of governing strategy in unstable minority ethnic regions – from “leap-forward development” (*kuayueshi fazhan*, which focused more on economic development) to “social stability” (*shehui wending*) (CHINA, 2014a). This adjustment had the implication that the major focus of the CPC’s governance in these regions in future would be on inter-ethnic relations as this would be the key to achieving social stability and social cohesion in such regions. One of the statements pointed out that there is a need to build a “mutually embedded social structure and community” where different ethnic groups are urged to work on “mutual understanding, mutual studying, mutual tolerance, mutual appreciation and mutual help” (Xinhua, 2014). The use of the word “mutually/mutual” here could be read to signal a greater commitment to the spirit of ethnic equality and intercultural dialogues in China in future¹⁷.

Education in particular has been seen as a priority in achieving social stability and cohesion in Xinjiang. Indeed, students from different ethnic backgrounds are now to be encouraged to “play together, study together and grow up together” (CHINA, 2014b). Similarly, during a visit to Xinjiang, President Xi specifically encouraged a Han teacher to learn the Uyghur language in order to teach the students better, an approach that goes beyond prevailing approaches bilingual education in Xinjiang in recent times. Meanwhile, previous education interventions, such as the bilingual education and in-land class system, have also experienced a further expansion since 2009. Bilingual education has now been expanded to kindergarten level and it was reported that more than 92% of minority ethnic children in Xinjiang are studying in bilingual kindergartens (MZB, 2013). The number of students enrolled in the Xinjiang in-land classes reached almost 10,000 in 2015, ten times more than the year 2000 when the program was launched (XJB, 2015).

New education interventions were also introduced at local and central levels. In 2013, the CPC government decided to provide 12 years of free education for children in Kashgar in southern Xinjiang where Muslim Uyghur are the dominant inhabitants (also where many “terrorist attacks” took place), compared to only nine years in most parts of the country (China Daily, 2013, p.8). At the end of 2008 (after the Tibet ethnic clash), the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2008) issued a curriculum guideline to introduce a new school subject called “Education for Solidarity among Nationalities” (*minzu tuanjie jiaoyu*) to be taught in primary and secondary school across China. According to the guideline, the curriculum was to cover areas from basic knowledge about ethnic groups in China, such

¹⁷ Moreover, the National Work Forum on Nationalities, which was held in September 2014, pointed out that any discrimination against minority ethnic groups should be strictly prohibited and corrected (PEOPLE, 2014).

as their customs, festivals, cultures and heroes, etc., to more abstract and complex issues such as Marxist theories of ethnic relations and national policies on the issue¹⁸.

While the above mentioned initiatives all show positive sign of movement towards a more equal ethnic relationship and generally reflect the spirit of multiculturalism, these encouraging shifts in political rhetorical have to be seen alongside reported crackdowns not only on alleged terrorist activity (BBC, 2014), but also on Uyghur cultural practices¹⁹ (Guardian, 2014a). Meanwhile, it seems that the CPC government believes the reason of rise of the “three powers” (*sangu shili*, i.e. the “terrorist”, the “separatist” and the “extremist”) in Xinjiang was due to weak awareness of national identity among minority ethnic groups (Leibold, 2013). Therefore, there has been an overwhelming emphasize on “a shared national identity” in government policies since then.

As Dwyer (2005, p.30) pointed out, the “overarching national identity (Zhongguo ren, “person of China”)” may reduce the cultural and linguistic diversity in China and eventually lead to assimilation of minority ethnic groups. It seems that while, on the one hand, the current policies appear to promote equal ethnic relationships, on the other hand they can be seen to encourage the development of a mono-cultural and mono-lingual Chinese nation. Indeed, although there are a few signs of encouragement to Han Chinese to learn minority ethnic languages, bilingual education in Xinjiang still largely means minority ethnic groups learning Chinese²⁰. The language of minority ethnic groups is further marginalized in the current educational developments, leading to a deterioration of minority student's skills in their mother tongue²¹.

Similarly, the overwhelming focus on the “nation” may also lead to “suppression” or “dilution” of ethnic identities. Dwyer (2005, p.30) noted that there has been increasing use of a new non-ethnic identity, Xinjiang ren (“a person of Xinjiang”) in the media in these years. In fact, not only many Han

¹⁸ It was reported that the knowledge of the new curriculum would be included in the “gaokao” (the national examination for university enrolment), which would definitely give the curriculum a significant status and encourage students to study it.

¹⁹ In May 2014, the Chinese government launched a year-long massive and rigorous nation-wide campaign to eradicate terrorism and within a month, in Xinjiang alone, the government reported that about 32 “terrorist groups” were destroyed and more than 380 suspects of “terrorists” were arrested (ChinaPeace, 2014). In addition, about 21 so-called “illegal religious study centers” were closed (*ibid*). In September 2014, Ilham Tohti, a former Uyghur lecturer at Minzu University, was jailed for life for advocating independence for his home province Xinjiang, even though his supporters insisted that he is a moderate critic (ABC News, 2014). In January 2015, the city of Urumqi, issued a regulation to prohibit the wearing of Islamic dress (jil bab) and veils (hijab) in public areas (PEOPLE, 2015). All these measures constitute stricter regulation of ethnicity and religion at the current time.

²⁰ It is suggested that the CPC government aims to implement the model of bilingual education which requires all school subjects taught through Mandarin except the subject of “Language and Literature” of their own language to all schools in Xinjiang in the future (Zhu, 2013).

²¹ This situation echoes Dwyer’s (2005, p.10) argument that “Establishing and fostering national unity required promoting Standard Mandarin Chinese to a dominant position at the expense of all other languages, including other varieties of Chinese”.

Chinese in the region now call themselves “Xinjiang ren”, but “the large increases in the Xinjiang Han population over the last decade have been prompted debates over whether the ethnonym Uyghur should be deleted from the administrative toponym ‘Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’” (ibid). Moreover, in their reform proposals for ethnic issues, two prominent scholars, Ma Rong and Hu Angang²², advocated the idea of weakening ethnic identity or consciousness and replacing it with “a collective sense of national belonging” (Ma, 2009, cited in Leibold, 2013, p.18) or “a shared sense of civic belonging” (Hu & Hu, 2011, cited in Leibold, 2013, p.21) - both aiming to dilute or remove ethno-cultural identity in future.

This tendency, compared to policies which encourage a more multicultural spirit and equal ethnic relationship, reflects the paradoxical nature of current Chinese governance in minority ethnic regions such as Xinjiang²³. As the current policies are still at their early stage of implementation, it is too early to conclude whether these various policies will pan out and articulate with each other. However, as Leibold and Chen (2014) have pointed out, neither the encouragement of inter-ethnic contact nor the promotion of a shared national identity “address the underlying yet chronic racism in Chinese society”. Indeed, unless such issues of institutional discrimination and inequality within the assumed national framework are widely acknowledged and tackled, the tension within the paradoxical policies will not be resolved easily in future.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly examined policy changes in minority education in China and how the changes responded to wider shifts in the political climate. The case of Xinjiang was particularly discussed as an example of policy intervention in one of China's most multi-ethnic regions. This demonstrated that the Chinese central government had adopted various ways to integrate its minority ethnic population in different periods. Although in some periods education policies (e.g. language instruction and school choice) tended to embrace the spirit of pluralism and multiculturalism, these policies have themselves not necessarily guaranteed equal ethnic relations and educational equality²⁴.

²² Ma Rong is a professor of Peking University and a leading scholar in ethnic relations in China. He has been appealing for ethnic-policy reform for a long period of time but, after the recent series of ethnic clashes, his “once-marginal views are now part of the mainstream conversation with a wide range of academic, policymakers, and other thinkers (across ethnic and ideological spectrums) sharing his concerns with the current approach” (Leibold, 2013, p.xii). Hu Angang is the founding director of the Institute for Contemporary China Studies at Tsinghua University, one of China’s most influential think tanks. He called for a “second generation of ethnic policies” which has triggered fierce debates about this issue.

²³ It should be noted that policies adopted in previous periods also sometimes had the problem of being contradictory. But it is after 2008 that their paradoxical nature becomes so apparent, as shown in this section.

²⁴ Law (2012, p.59) also concluded that Chinese minority ethnic education policies merely recruit “ethnic cadres” to support a strategy of “racial sinicization”. Dwyer (2005) regard bilingual education in China as really

As we have tried to demonstrate, at the core of the problem is the challenge of achieving an appropriate balance between “unity and diversity”²⁵. Other scholars too have suggested that long-standing tensions between various discourses about national and ethnic identity have not really been resolved in contemporary official discourse. Indeed, while China has long been claiming itself as “unitary multi-ethnic nation” (*tongyi de duominzu guojia*), “diversity” has often been seen as potentially threatening to the concept of Chinese nationhood (Dwyer, 2005, pp.30-31). Under the rhetoric of Chinese nationalism, “reducing hundreds of ethnic histories, identities, and languages to the same simple categories and trajectories was seen by the new central government as crucial in building national unity”(ibid, p.21).

When this focus on nationhood and the whole process of “nationalizing” merges with the culture and ideology of the dominant Han group, there is a risk of “great Han Chauvinism” (*da Hanzu zhuyi*) which heavily promotes Han cultural assimilation (or Sinicization) and therefore seriously damages ethnic and cultural diversity in China (Gladney, 1988, pp.226-227).

Therefore, we would argue that there is an urgent need to re-think “Chineseness”, so that the current Han dominant vision of China can be replaced with a new vision of multi-ethnic China. Indeed, it is difficult to envisage genuine education equality among different ethnic groups happening in schools on any significant scale in the absence of wider changes in Chinese society, as it is the wider conception of citizenship in a society that largely defines the nature of nationhood and the position of minority ethnic groups in the national framework. As mentioned before, the CPC established the PRC on the basis of a civic Chinese citizenship predicated on the acceptance of Communist ideology rather than on ethnic background. In theory, then, the Chinese government is anti-racist and promotes equality between ethnic groups in China. This is the doctrine of the 56 nationalities that comprise the Chinese people.

However, some researchers maintain that, in practice, there are elements of racism evident in contemporary Chinese society (Dikötter, 1992; Law, 2012). According to Law (2012), minority ethnic groups such as the Uyghur and Tibetan peoples suffer from institutional racism. He suggests that the social system in China is Han-centric and that minority ethnic groups are not only culturally marginalized, but are also discriminated against economically and politically. It is therefore necessary for scholars and policy makers to address these wider structural issues and understand better how they affect education.

Although it has sometimes been objected by Chinese politicians that racism itself is a Western concept (Dikötter, 1992), building a “unitary multi-ethnic” China must surely involve discussion of

monolingual education in Mandarin Chinese and the in-land classes as essentially assimilationist in effect. Therefore, these policies certainly do not seem to have yet been successful in overcoming inter-ethnic tensions in the region, as evidenced in recent alleged “terror attacks” in Xinjiang itself and other cities in China.

²⁵ A recent western book on minority education in China (Leibold and Chen, 2014), echoes some of the themes of our chapter. Its sub-title also recognizes that one of the biggest challenges in education for diverse groups within a nation is getting an appropriate balance between “unity and diversity in an era of critical pluralism”.

apparently “racial” differences, whatever their provenance. It is noted that there has been no distinctively anti-racist phase in policies with regard to minority ethnic education in China²⁶. Nor has there so far been much evidence of the influence of critical race theory within Chinese educational studies. This approach, which originated in the USA, recognizes the prevalence of racial inequality in society and seeks to demonstrate the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011).

In various parts of the world, discussion of such matters in educational studies and teacher education courses has facilitated a greater awareness of the extent to which the education of diverse ethnic groups is a challenge not just to those involved in the education of minority ethnic students themselves but also those involved in the education of the dominant group in society (Gaine, 1987), in this case the Han majority. In the Chinese context, this means that changes need to take place not only in the education of minority ethnic groups, nor even just in the education of all nationalities in Xinjiang, but also in the education of students of all nationalities throughout China. Only when this is recognized are genuinely intercultural dialogues in education likely to prove possible in places like Xinjiang²⁷.

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²⁶ Race (2012) identifies assimilation, integration, multi-culturalism and anti-racism as the main phases in the UK context.

²⁷ This is, of course, also true of multicultural education in the UK, where the discussion of “British values”, raises some similar issues.

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