

## **Formal Education in China: A Call for Genuine Multiculturalism**

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### **Abstract**

*Formal education in China serves as a means to reinforce national integration, and schools exhibit limited tolerance for cultural diversity, which significantly disadvantages students of ethnic minorities. On the one hand, minority cultures are to a large extent excluded in the curricula; and on the other hand, an assimilative approach is applied with a view to eliminating cultural differences. Since one of the major goals of multicultural education is to promote equity by celebrating minority cultural heritage, I suggest that the exclusive approaches should be terminated, and school education should embrace multiculturalism.*

Comprised of 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, China is considered a multicultural country. However, school education often neglects differences in ethnicity, and exhibits limited tolerance for cultural diversity (Leibold & Chen, 2014; Yi, 2008). China's formal education not only equips students with knowledge, skills, and attitudes, but also undertakes a "political task" (Yang, 2014, p. 16), which is to reinforce unity and cohesion of the nation. Thus, education becomes the major avenue through which the goal of integrating people of all ethnic groups into the state can be achieved (Hansen, 1999; Yang, 2014; Yang & Nima, 2015).

With a view to cultivating a strong attachment to the shared identity, school curricula address the common history of people who inhabit the state's territory (Hansen, 1999; Leibold & Chen, 2014). However, problems brought about by the political propaganda are salient in the state-supported educational system. On the one hand, minority cultures that contradict the dominant group's values and beliefs are largely excluded from schooling; and on the other hand, an assimilative approach, which can best be illustrated by the bilingual policy adopted in formal education, has been promoted in schools (Hansen, 1999). Since the exclusion and assimilation of minority cultures significantly disadvantage students of ethnic minorities, I suggest that a multicultural approach should be adopted in formal education.

### **Multiculturalism in Education**

The "melting pot" theory, which aims at eliminating cultural differences by assimilating minor groups into the dominant culture, was the major goal of school education in the United States during the 1960s (Banks, 2006). Multiculturalism, which allows students to maintain cultural ties to their communities, rejects the melting pot approach by honouring cultural heritages of different ethnic and cultural groups. The concept of multiculturalism in education originated from the Black Civil Right Movement in North America during the 1960s and 1970s, when the Western countries were highly diverse in race and ethnicity (Banks, 2009). This movement brought about the appeal of marginalized groups seeking recognition and equal rights in societies, where the cultures of the dominant groups were privileged.

Even though China has been historically multi-ethnic, the notion of multiculturalism is not familiar to many Chinese scholars since it is not a part of the Chinese tradition (Leibold & Chen, 2014). Understanding the features and challenges of China's education calls for an examination of how minority cultures are represented in formal school settings. I suggest that since the marginalization of Chinese minority cultures seriously disadvantage ethnic minority students, it is urgent to terminate the exclusive and assimilative approaches, and embrace multiculturalism in formal school education.

## Education for Ethnic Minorities: Features and Challenges

Education for China's ethnic minority students exhibits two major features: ideologically, much emphasis has been put on maintaining unity of the nation; in practice, minority education is separated from the mainstream educational system. While strengthening national unity contributes to the marginalization of minority cultures, separated school education enables the practice of an assimilative approach. The termination of ongoing cultural exclusion and assimilation has been the major challenge of China's formal education.

In China, education for ethnic minorities is out of the need to avoid division of the Chinese nation, since geographically, more than half of the ethnic minority communities reside in the west and areas close to the broader within the Chinese territory (Yi, 2008). Even though the Minister of Education supported the celebration of cultural diversity ostensibly, the adoption of genuine multiculturalism, which may lead to political discrepancies by addressing ethnic identity, is deemed as getting in the way of a harmonious society (Cissé, 2018; Hansen, 1999). However, a highly oppressive environment against cultural diversity can serve to alienate ethnic minorities from the Chinese nation. As a result of the negotiation between genuine multiculturalism and "monoculturalism," China's formal education exhibits features of both unity and diversity—even though diversity can be tolerated to a limited level, unity remains the utmost priority for the government (Leibold & Chen, 2014, p. 6).

Another feature of education for ethnic minorities is the separation of minority education from the mainstream educational system (Yang & Nima, 2015; Yi, 2008). In theory, dividing "standardized education" from "ethnic education" aims to eliminate inequity among different ethnic groups by implementing different educational policies that cater to the needs of students (Leibold & Chen, 2014, p. 6). In reality, nevertheless, this segregation only gave rise to the formation of a double standard between minority and majority students in academic criteria and employment market: since the education for ethnic minorities is regarded as backward and inferior to mainstream education, even though students of ethnic minorities manage to receive the same level of education as the students of the dominant group, they are deemed as less competitive in the labor market (Yi, 2008). While maintaining unity justifies cultural exclusion, and the separate educational system for ethnic minorities perpetuates inequity.

### Cultural Exclusion in Formal Education

The exclusion of minority cultures in formal school education is reflected in two major facets: the limited space for instruction, and the tokenized and politicized representation of minority cultures in the curricula. Cultural exclusion not only significantly decreases the mainstream students' opportunities for learning ethnic cultures, and distorts their perceptions about ethnic minority people, but also greatly disadvantages students of ethnic minorities.

In China, formal school education in China is often criticized for offering only "skin-deep knowledge" about ethnic minorities (Postiglione, 2014, p. 30; Shen & Qian, 2010, p. 48; Yi, 2008, p. 53), such that minority cultures are regarded as ornaments of mainstream cultural life (Yi, 2008). Additionally, minority cultures that contradict the dominant group's values and beliefs are not allowed to be transmitted in schools (Hansen, 1999), and the representation of ethnic minorities in formal school education is largely based on the mainstream group's perspective, which is not open to discussion. As a result, students of the dominant group have limited knowledge about China's 120 million ethnic minority people, due to the lack of opportunities to learn about their cultures (Postiglione, 2014).

School education also gives little play of minority cultures and history, unless the topic of how the endeavors of all ethnic groups contributed to the establishment of the single united Chinese nation is discussed (Yi, 2008). Besides, school teaching content associated with minority cultures is adopted as a tool for the dissemination of the political propaganda, and is always subject to changes in governmental policies. With a view to addressing national unity by

highlighting harmonious relationships among different ethnic groups, minority cultures are represented in a stagnant and distorted manner. In school teaching materials, ethnic minority people are often portrayed as colourful, exotic, religious, and always happy (Yi, 2008). In this respect, there is no room for the transmission and appreciation of their authentic cultural heritages. Minority cultures are reduced to a limited number of symbols, which leads to distorted perceptions and ethnic stereotypes. The limited space for the transmission of minority cultures, coupled with the tokenized and politicized representation in the curriculum, cultivated among students false images about the ethnic minority people.

Furthermore, cultural exclusion causes difficulties of cultural adaptation and poor academic performance by ethnic minority students. For these students, receiving formal education means breaking cultural ties with their home communities, since school education provides students with only abstract knowledge, void of teaching content and pedagogies pertaining to their backgrounds (Shen & Qian, 2010). While school culture conflicts with the students' community cultures, difficulties with adaptation put students of ethnic minorities into a dilemma. The exclusion of minority cultures not only limits the mainstream students' opportunities to encounter new cultures, but also fosters distorted images about the ethnic minority people among them. The huge gap between the students' home cultures and the school environment contributes to difficulties with adaptations by minority students.

### **Assimilative Approach in Education for Ethnic Minority Students**

The bilingual policy, which features the adoption of both Mandarin and minority languages for instruction, can best illustrate the government's assimilative ideology in education. In theory, the bilingual policy aims at facilitates the learning in schools for students of ethnic minorities. However, in practice, the bilingual policy puts minority students into difficulties caused by language barriers, and leads to the elimination of cultural difference.

With a view to "modernizing" the alleged backward ethnic minority communities (Postiglione, 2014), the bilingual policy was created to enhance academic achievement of ethnic minorities by providing students with opportunities of using their own languages in formal school settings (Yi, 2008). However, in practice, minority languages are largely excluded from schooling, and Mandarin was adopted as the major language from instruction (Hansen, 1999). The implementation of the bilingual policy is often undermined by the lack of financial support and trained teachers (Hansen, 1999; Postiglione, 2014). Some schools located in the areas where minority communities live refused to adopt a bilingual approach for instruction, due to the absence of qualified teachers and financial support. As Mandarin became the mandatory language for instruction in these schools, students whose first languages were different were seriously disadvantaged owing to language barriers (Cissé, 2018).

While schools adopted Mandarin as the main vehicle for delivering knowledge, minority languages became inferior, and were considered worthless (Hansen, 1999; Zhao, 2010). Even though minority languages are encouraged by policy, the opportunities for using these languages in society has decreased significantly (Yi, 2008; Zhao, 2010). Meanwhile, the bilingual policy facilitated the popularization of Mandarin, and accelerated the pace of assimilating ethnic minorities into the culture of the dominant group (Leibold & Chen, 2014; Yi, 2008). Therefore, on the one hand, Mandarin is popularized; on the other hand, due to the lack of qualified teachers and financial support, the absence of minority language for instruction seriously disadvantages students of ethnic minorities. Since Mandarin becomes the only language adopted for instruction, its status as the dominant language is reinforced.

### **Conclusion**

Education in China serves as a means of integrating people of all ethnic groups into the state. However, mainstream education excludes cultures of ethnic minorities with a view to

maintaining unity of the nation, and an assimilative approach is reflected in the bilingual policy, which privileges Mandarin. Cultural exclusion and assimilation seriously disadvantage students of ethnic minorities, and limit opportunities to learn about minority cultures for the mainstream students. Since one of the major goals of multicultural education is to empower students of diverse ethnic groups by promoting recognition and equity, I suggest that the exclusive and assimilative ideology should give way to multiculturalism in education.

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