DOI 10.3868/s110-004-015-0009-9

China's assimilationist language policy: The impact on indigenous/minority literacy and social harmony. Gulbahar H. Beckett and Gerard A. Postiglione (Eds.). Abingdon, England and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. xiii + 231 pp., (hardcover), \$165.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-59605-3.

The author of this review recently flew to North America from Beijing. Sitting beside him were three young men speaking amongst themselves in English, Chinese, and another language. I could not contain my curiosity and asked them about themselves. They turned out to be Uyghurs from Xinjiang, who had recently completed senior secondary school in a Chinese-medium school. Their families had recognized the value of Mandarin Chinese in contemporary Xinjiang and hoped to help them compete in the linguistic marketplace. To my ears, their Chinese sounded very proficient. Indeed, they told me they had been able to do well in most of their exams, but could not meet the standard set for the Chinese essay writing exam. Their explanation was that the style of Chinese expected involved use of literary Chinese and idioms, in which they felt particularly weak, despite completing their education in Chinese. Nevertheless, their examination results and English scores were enough to be admitted to study business in the US. Thus, trumped by insufficient proficiency in Chinese, the national language of status, knowledge and power, they sought a higher card to play: proficiency in English, the international language of status, knowledge and power.

Seemingly in response to such situations, Beckett and Postiglione have edited an extremely rich and timely volume on the impact on China's social harmony of language policy for China's minority nationalities, many of whom, they argue, are rightly termed indigenous language groups. The key thesis of the editors and most of the volume's authors is that China's recent language policy is itself assimilationist, constituting an extremely significant change in minority policy from the early years of the People's Republic of China. The book is praiseworthy in its refreshing approach towards a question that has dogged Chinese policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China: the relations among state, identity, and language. This volume provides a critical review of previous and current policy, theory, research, policy and policy-making, arguing for the greater use in public policy formation, implementation, and assessment of disciplined

evidence-based inquiry in a spirit of mutuality and dialogue. The book is divided thematically into three sections, each with several chapters. Part I provides background and a historical review; Part II presents selected recent empirical studies; and Part III discusses theoretical, ideological and legal issues.

Part I begins with an introductory chapter by the editors and a chapter by Zhou Minglang providing an overview of the book's contents and setting it into context, laying out the current challenges of China's language policy for indigenous and minority education as well as the historical origins and developments leading up to the present dilemma. Zhou's chapter in particular discusses the changing approaches to language, culture, identity and the state during the history of the People's Republic of China.

Zhou analyzes treatment of minority nationality communities and their languages over the history of the People's Republic of China, first laying out a conceptual framework derived from literature on citizenship, which in itself says little on language, for an analytical model of "nation-state building." Zhou posits that "linguistic citizenship," "language ideology" and what he calls "language order" should be included in any model of nation-building. Zhou thus sees monolingualism and multilingualism as not only distinctive characteristics of individuals or societies, but as extremes on a sliding scale of state policy options towards languages. Using his broad citizenship framework, and the concepts of language ideology and language order, Zhou divides the 50-year plus experience of policy and practice regarding language(s) in the People's Republic of China into two types: 1) the pluralistic Soviet model, so-called because of its development under Soviet advice in the 1950s; and 2) the Chinese model, which seems to be Chinese in two senses: first, it developed in China without external participation, and second, because it displays a shift towards strong promotion of the Chinese language in minority areas relative to minority nationalities. These types provide a powerful analytic tool that can represent two extremes of policy and practice and can also capture any intermediate policy or implementation conditions allowing detailed comparative analysis across times, and places, and at national, regional or local levels.

Part II focuses on empirical research on specific regions or language minorities in China. The publication of these chapters serves the valuable function of informing an international audience of the range of situations and research approaches to these situations found among researchers in and of contemporary

China. In the first chapter, Ma Rong provides a sympathetic inside view on recent initiatives of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government to replace mother-tongue dominant education for Xinjiang's nationalities with what they term bilingual education, significantly expanding the use of Chinese as a major language of instruction from towns to rural environments where Chinese-speakers are few. What is striking about this model of bilingual education is that it differentiates between languages by subject matter, with humanities taught in minority languages and mathematics and science(s) taught in Mandarin Chinese. Another interesting innovation is the delivery of the Chinese-medium portion of the curriculum by existing minority-language teachers, for whom additional second language training has been provided, thus making it bilingual education in the sense that it is delivered by bilinguals. The chapter lays out the regional government's dissatisfaction with the previous mother-tongue dominant education model from several perspectives: 1) inadequate learning of curriculum content; 2) inadequate average educational attainment; and 3) inadequate development of proficiency in Chinese as a second language. The chapter does not present a detailed explanation of what theoretical and methodological approaches were used to inquire into these results, and what aspects of mother-tongue-dominant education were found to contribute to them, leaving it difficult for readers to independently assess the arguments for the reforms.

Part II continues with a broad survey of empirical research on minority education in China, including, two chapters on the special circumstances and educational challenges of the Dongxiang nationality, an account of bilingual education initiatives in Yunnan, a comparison of higher education of China's Mongolian and Korean nationalities, as well as chapters on mainland Chinese marriage migrants in Taiwan, and sociocultural adjustment of minority students at a university for (minority) nationalities. These chapters all deal with issues of power differentials among language groups and the implications for education, and attempt to lay out challenges to minority language education involving language, illustrating how pervasive the phenomenon of unproblematic language ideologies is among policymakers, educators, the general public and even among minority communities.

The closing section, Part III, deals with theoretical, ideological and legal issues relevant to assimilative language policy in China. The first chapter, by Hu Guangwei, reviews English-medium instruction (EMI) for urban Han

Chinese-speakers, analyzing such programs from the perspective of policy evaluation, first from a normative rights-based approach, second from a feasibility perspective, third from an effectiveness perspective, and finally from a distributive justice/fairness perspective. He finds that while EMI can in principle provide instrumental language rights, the form of EMI is often costly, unfeasible and/or ineffective, diverting expenditure and efforts from other valued initiatives that may be more justifiable, and primarily serving an elite, thereby constituting an educational injustice. Hu extends this general critique of EMI to minority areas, questioning its appropriacy for minority education from a broad policy perspective. This approach to language policy evaluation provides a rigorous approach to policy critique that promises to stimulate debate and inform the policy formation process. Hu's application of this approach to the current mania for English-medium instruction is a splendid example of the insights that rigorous analytic frameworks can bring to a seemingly unproblematic issue. By implication, this critique can be applied to whether China's language minorities should be educated predominantly in their mother-tongue, in Chinese, or in a weak form (transitional) or strong form (maintenance) of bilingual education.

Seonaigh MacPherson's chapter contends that the study of minority language issues in a multilingual country requires suitable theoretical and analytical frameworks. She argues for two frameworks: "critical theory" and "sustainability theory." She notes the irony that, despite critical theory's Marxist origins, it has been little used for social analysis in China. Her sustainability approach to China's languages owes much to language ecology, in particular to those approaches that treat linguistic diversity within an environment as parallel to biological diversity within the same environment, and assumes that greater diversity constitutes greater richness, while greater uniformity is in effect a form of impoverishment. MacPherson argues, however, that each approach is insufficient alone, and a synthesis of the two that she terms "critical sustainability theory" is needed to deal with the multiple dimensions of issues of minority language vitality, maintenance and loss in China's context.

The section, and the book, closes with a chapter by Kelley Loper on minority language rights and China, reviewing the various international conventions that China has signed, though not all have been ratified. She discusses the commitments that signatory nations make under the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial

Discrimination (CERD), the implications of these commitments for minority languages in general and in education in particular. Loper also applies the formula for assessing minority education policy devised by the former special rapporteur on human rights to the United Nations, Katarina Tomaševski, known as the 4-A formula. Education should be: 1) Available; 2) Accessible; 3) Acceptable; and 4) Adaptable, with the key points for non-assimilative minority education being points 3 and 4, that require education to be culturally, linguistically, and philosophically acceptable to the minority community, and adaptable to their varying circumstances. Loper compares these language rights commitments to those enshrined in China's constitution and the law on regional national autonomy, as well as regulations that now promote Chinese language study more strongly than in the past. Loper then discusses the contrast between strong formal minority language rights through international conventions and domestic legislation and regulations and the uneven application of these rights as evidenced in Part II of the book, which she ascribes to other objectives of the state that may override minority language rights. Loper argues that to redress the imbalance between substantive and realized minority language rights there is a need for empirical research that transcends documentation of policy and implementation to understand the processes whereby language policies that are emancipatory on paper can actually have the effect of reducing the enjoyment of the selfsame rights in practice.

The early 1950s mother-tongue-dominant model and the current Chinese models in the book correspond more closely to actual than ideal types. These are only two of a range of models implemented at different times and in different places. Neither corresponds exactly to the two extreme ideal types of mother-tongue only and Chinese-language only education. The actual model implemented during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s to 1970s comes very close to a dominant-language only ideal type. But even here we can distinguish further types: a soft dominant-language model that simply ignores minority languages, and a harsher one that overtly criticizes them. Thus, the Cultural Revolution models, the post-Cultural Revolution models and current models can all be termed "Chinese" models despite their important differences.

Even before the new regulations promoting Chinese language in minority areas, Blatchford¹ found a range of models implemented that vary considerably along the

¹ D. R. Blachford (1998). *Language Planning and Bilingual Education for Linguistic Minorities in China: A Case Study of the Policy Formulation and Implementation Process* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

continuum from mother-tongue to Chinese promotion. Based on fieldwork among local officials charged with setting and implementing local policy following central guidelines that provide wide latitude for interpretation and the application of the principle of 因地制宜, *yin di zhi yi* (adapting to the local environment), she identified three types, those who advocate for central policy to the local population; those who advocate local needs and desires to higher levels; and those who adapt according to the situation². Thus, there is rich potential for the further use of ideal types for conceptual analysis of language policy and implementation, for the empirical description and comparison across time, place, and context.

This sets a considerable challenge for empirical work; the study of policy and practices at multiples sites and places is indeed daunting. However, this can be accomplished more economically through the reanalysis of existing field data, such as the comprehensive series of minority village investigations produced by Yunnan University anthropologists. Dong and Wan³, for example, find that rural Kyrgyz people in Xinjiang have a bilingual ideal of education, valuing both Kyrgyz and Chinese language learning. Moreover, they found that Kyrgyz officials had low Chinese language proficiency and non-Kyrgyz officials had little or no Kyrgyz proficiency. The authors conclude that this language gap may hinder local development, but the research team seems to have not included any Kyrgyz speakers, and has not deeply investigated the language issue. Indeed, the study seems to recommend asymmetrical bilingualism (Kyrgyz learning Chinese), and seems unaware of the previous policy that state employees in minority areas should learn the local minority language. In contrast, the series' Yughur village investigation includes a Yughur-speaker in the research team and explicitly examines language shift among Yughur youth, and the role of dominant-language education in town boarding schools in this language shift⁴.

² D. R. Blachford (1998). *Language Planning and Bilingual Education for Linguistic Minorities in China: A Case Study of the Policy Formulation and Implementation Process* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

³ X. T. Dong & X. Y. Wan (Eds.). (2004). 柯尔克孜族: 新疆乌恰县库拉日克村吾依组调查 [Kyrgyz Nationality: Xinjiang Wuqia County, Kularike Village Investigation]. 昆明, 中国: 云南大学出版社 [Kunming, China: Yunnan University Press].

⁴ X. Y. Zheng & Z. H. Gao (2004). 裕固族: 甘肃肃南县大草滩村调查 [The Yugur: An Investigation of Dacautan Village in Sunan County, Gansu]. 昆明, 中国: 云南大学出版社 [Kunming, Yunnan, China: Yunnan University Press].

Among the other times and places that the book refers to are Soviet language policy and practice, in the Soviet Union, and in China after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The book emphasizes the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy and its resulting approach to the languages of national minorities in forming China's own policy towards its nationalities and their languages. This is a salutary focus, for much Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship in this area neglects Soviet engagement with China, while scholarship on People's Republic of China often touches only briefly on Soviet nationalities policy and their approaches to language. However, just as language policy in China has not been static, Soviet policy has shifted over time from accommodating minority nationalities and their languages strongly with the so-called indigenization policy (in Russian *korenizatsiia*, коренизация, literally: "putting down roots") which existed in the 1920s during Lenin's lifetime and the collective leadership after his death, which was replaced by an ever greater emphasis on the Russian language and nationality afterwards. Paradoxically, Soviet advisors to China were recommending an accommodationist early "Soviet" nationalities policy for China, exactly when the Soviet Union itself was following a later Soviet policy, strongly promoting the Russian language and its speakers⁵. The gradual drift of early Soviet language policy to a more Russian-dominant language policy suggests the early policy was as much Leninist as it was Soviet. Kreindler⁶ suggests that early Soviet accommodationist policy partly derives from Lenin's experience in the multinational, multilingual Volga region where his father was inspector of Tatar-Russian bilingual schools.

This is a very fruitful avenue for future research which will require much careful compilation of local and international scholarship in multiple languages. One significant aspect of such research will be to understand the relation of language policy, nationalities policy, dissatisfaction, and protest movements in the latter years of the Soviet Union. Some analysts have justified China's shift to

⁵ Y. Bilinsky (1981). Expanding the Use of Russian or Russification? Some Critical Thoughts on Russian as a Lingua Franca and the "Language of Friendship and Cooperation of the Peoples of the USSR." *Russian Review*, 40(3), 317–332; P. A. Blitstein (2001). Nation-Building or Russification? Obligatory Russian Instruction in the Soviet Non-Russian School, 1938–1953. In R. G. Suny & T. Martin (Eds.), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (pp. 253–274). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press; E. G. Lewis (1972). *Multilingualism in the Soviet Union: Aspects of Language Policy and its Implementation*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton.

⁶ I. Kreindler (1977). A Neglected Source of Lenin's Nationality Policy. *Slavic Review*, 36(1), 86–100.

assimilationist policy as grounded in an understanding of the reasons for the breakup of the Soviet Union caused by too much accommodation of non-Russian languages and nationalities and too weak promotion of ethnic Russians and the Russian language in the non-Russian republics and autonomous territories of the Soviet Union. This possible working hypothesis is brought into serious question by literature on and by members of non-Russian nationalities which shows clearly the steady weakening of commitment to non-Russian languages over time, and the increasing focus on promoting Russian in the republics of the Soviet Union. Most works on Russian-non-Russian bilingualism ignore the asymmetrical nature of bilingualism in the national republics of the Soviet Union, where in non-dominant groups learn the language of the dominant group, and members of the dominant nationality rarely learn even the rudiments of the non-dominant languages of their neighbors and co-citizens for whom the national territory is named. More important is the asymmetrical nature of late Soviet scholarship, which examined how and why non-dominant language speakers did or did not learn Russian, but ignored the question of how/why Russian-speakers so seldom learned so little of their neighbors' languages⁷. An important corrective to asymmetric scholarship is work that considers not only outsider but insider views. Dziuba's *Internationalism or Russification*⁸ takes an insider's socialist/Ukrainian perspective on assimilationist policy and argues for a return to Leninist policy, citing Lenin's warnings that Great-Russian chauvinism was the greatest threat to Soviet unity.

The shift to a "Chinese" model of language policy is exemplified in the chapter on bilingual education in Xinjiang. This is a major change in educational philosophy; indeed the author states that his own views have changed sharply over the last decade, but does not explain his own reasons for this change. Rather this major shift in philosophy of education in the region is presented as an obvious solution to obvious shortcomings of the mother-tongue dominant educational model. Indeed, the chapter assumes the quality and appropriacy of the national curriculum for children of all nationalities and regions of China, locating the problem within local languages, cultures and communities, thereby

⁷ S. Bahry, S. Niyozov, & D. Shamatov (2008). Bilingual Education in Central Asia. In J. Cummins & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (2nd ed., Vol. 5, pp. 205–221). New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media LLC.

⁸ I. Dziuba (1968). *Internationalism or Russification? A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem*. London, England: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

adjusting children to school, rather than adjusting the curriculum to the particular circumstances that these children find themselves in. This is interesting, considering that central educational reforms have established three levels of curriculum authority, school-based, local, and national curriculum in place of a single unified curriculum and recommend greater reflection of student experience and interests and inclusion of local content in the curriculum, largely in response to the national curriculum's relative inaccessibility.⁹

Section II itself can be examined using Ruiz's¹⁰ language planning orientations framework, which breaks down attitudes of planners (and others) into three types: 1) a language as right orientation; 2) a language as problem orientation; and 3) a language as resource orientation. Many programs investigated in Section II take a language as right orientation towards the learning of Chinese and a language as problem orientation towards minority languages. Rather than investigating learning as such, they investigate learning taught in Chinese, assessed through Chinese. Minority languages are often included in the education process not for the intrinsic value of developing rich mother-tongue proficiency and literacy, but primarily as a tool to support development of Chinese language and proficiency and literacy. These chapters say little about minority languages as valuable in themselves, nor of the potential of seeing languages as resources, for the development of additive bilingualism and literacy in *both* minority language *and* Chinese, and do not critique the using of test results in students' second, often weaker, language as measures of general language proficiency and academic performance. Cummins¹¹ cautions that evaluating language minority students via performance in their weaker language confounds second language proficiency and the constructs of interest and is an invalid measure of cognitive and/or academic potential. In Niger, West Africa, a

⁹ P. Yang & G. Q. Zhou (2002). 谁来决定我们学校的课程: 谈校本课程的开发 [Who Should Decide our School Curriculum? A Discussion on School-Based Curriculum Development]. 北京, 中国: 北京大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Peking University Press]; M. J. Zhu (Ed.). (2002). 走进新课程: 与课程实施者对话 [Entering the New Curriculum: A Dialogue with Curriculum Implementers]. 北京, 中国: 北京师范大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Beijing Normal University Press].

¹⁰ R. Ruiz (1988). Orientations in Language Planning. In S. L. McKay & S. C. Wong (Eds.), *Language Diversity: Problem or Resource?* (pp. 3–25). New York, NY: Newbury House.

¹¹ J. Cummins (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters; J. Cummins (2001). *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

comparison of experimental indigenous-French bilingual education with French-only instruction tested students in mathematics and reading comprehension in both the mother tongue and in French.¹² Students from both programs scored higher on both tests when tested in their stronger language, in this case, the mother tongue.

The volume exemplifies the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to questions as broad and complex as minority language policy in a country as diverse as China. Applying insights and methods from sociology and sociolinguistics clarifies many persisting issues in the study of China's nationalities and their languages. Linking its arguments to educational reforms that deal with the learning challenges of China's rural children by increasing local participation and content¹³ and to international scholarship on quality education of marginalized students¹⁴ would further strengthen the volume's contribution.

Also highly relevant to related to the questions dealt with by this volume is applied linguistics research on first and second language learning, in particular the distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism¹⁵ and the distinction between conversational and academic language proficiency¹⁶, which contribute to an understanding of the seeming paradox of how Chinese-language submersion education can lead to increased proficiency in conversational Chinese without reliably producing sufficient proficiency in academic Chinese for study in senior secondary and post-secondary education in Chinese.

Beckett and Postiglione have edited a highly significant volume that should

¹² M. Hovens (2002). Bilingual Education in West Africa: Does it Work? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 5(5), 249–266. doi: 10.1080/13670050208667760

¹³ P. Yang & G. Q. Zhou (2002). 谁来决定我们学校的课程: 谈校本课程的开发 [Who Should Decide our School Curriculum? A Discussion on School-Based Curriculum Development]. 北京, 中国: 北京大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Peking University Press]; M. J. Zhu (Ed.). (2002). 走进新课程: 与课程实施者对话 [Entering the New Curriculum: A Dialogue with Curriculum Implementers]. 北京, 中国: 北京师范大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Beijing Normal University Press].

¹⁴ J. P. Farrell (2008). Community Education in Developing Countries: The Quiet Revolution in Schooling. In F. M. Connelly (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction* (pp. 369–389). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

¹⁵ W. E. Lambert (1974). Culture and Language as Factors in Learning and Education. In F. E. Aboud & R. D. Meade (Eds.), *Cultural Factors in Learning and Education* (pp. 91–122). Bellingham, WA: Fifth Western Symposium on Learning.

¹⁶ J. Cummins (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and Theoretical Status of the Distinction. In B. Street & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (2nd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 71–83). New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media LLC.

stimulate a spring flowering of research on and from China on its language minorities. It draws attention to important work on key issues facing 10% of China's population and points towards strengthened policy analysis, formation and evaluation through disciplined, interdisciplinary theoretical and empirical enquiry regarding linguistic and cultural assimilation of China's minority nationalities. Assimilationist policy can result of course from an underlying assimilationist purpose: for those who desire a linguistically and culturally uniform nation-state the volume may have little to say. Nonetheless, assimilationist policy can also result from lack of knowledge: this volume makes great strides in increasing awareness in this sphere, which in itself has great potential to influence research, policy and practice, particularly if made available in Chinese.

Stephen A. BAHRY
University of Toronto
E-mail: s.bahry@utoronto.ca