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Language power and hierarchy: Multilingual education in China. Linda Tsung. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 244+ xx pp. (hardcover), £75.00. ISBN: 978-1-4411-4235-1.

I feel compelled to begin with the critical question that Dr. Tsung poses at the end of her book: Is China in the twenty-first century a “melting pot,” in which differences are suppressed or vanishing, or a common homeland in which diversity is celebrated and all the minority languages are a source of wealth and a bridge to solidarity and mutual understanding? (p. 210). Dr. Tsung has prepared readers for this captivating question with rich detail and insights accumulated over decades of field work and searches into archives on multilingualism in China. The book contains enthralling accounts of challenges faced and efforts made for sustaining, reviving, and promoting minority languages such as Tibetan, Mongolian, Uyghur, and Zhuang in a rapidly changing sociocultural context where these minority languages are positioned as “inferior” to the national standard languages.

The book opens with a substantial chapter describing multilingualism in international contexts, and reviewing different models of multilingual education in a range of contexts. This groundwork helps Dr. Tsung develop a framework for evaluating various types of multilingual education program adopted in different parts of China. She engages with the issue of multilingual education from both historical and contemporary perspectives in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 has some key statistical information about different ethnic minorities and languages. It informs readers that the development of multilingual education has been closely associated with the Chinese government’s efforts to identify different ethnic minority groups. The rich statistical data that Dr. Tsung includes in the chapter predict the challenges that have likely undermined efforts to promote, sustain, and revive these minority languages.

Dr. Tsung has devoted one chapter each to the practices of multilingual education in five autonomous regions and provinces, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Guangxi (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, & 7). Chapter 3 focuses on the fluctuating use of the Mongolian language in Inner Mongolia. In Xinjiang (Chapter 4), the language issue underlies rising ethnic tensions and conflicts between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. In Qinghai (Chapter 5), efforts have been made to promote Tibetan as a medium of instruction, but many Tibetan elites

seem more willing to send their children to attend Chinese medium schools. A similar phenomenon was observed in Yunnan also (Chapter 6), where hundreds of minority languages are in a crisis with the vanishing of multilingualism in recent decades. Chapter 7 gives an account of how the government has promoted new Zhuang literacy based on the newly developed Cyrillic and Latin based script. In the final chapter, Dr. Tsung points out that there is a desperate need for the Chinese government to address the issue of linguistic equality given the current language policy and practice.

While echoing the praise of the book as a data-rich “ground-breaking study” on China’s multilingualism, expressed by several strong endorsements on the back cover, I must also point out that this excellent book has some minor problems. For instance, sources of data in many tables in Chapter 2 have not been stated (e.g., Table 2.3, Table 2.4, etc.). References cited in the text do not follow a uniform practice; in some instances full names are used while elsewhere only surnames are used. The text occasionally refers to sources such as “Interview, 2013” on page 37, but there is no further information about these interviews. It seems the author could have included some information on methodology in the introductory chapter to clarify these issues.

Having said this, the significance of the book should not be questioned. I have read the book with great interest as I myself have been preoccupied with the soul-searching questions that Dr. Tsung asked at the end of the book. Though I have been largely concerned about the future of regional varieties of Chinese or “dialects,” I do believe Dr. Tsung offers a possible solution to the problems that have concerned me as well. We very likely agree that the current challenges can be resolved only if the political leaders in China truly promote multilingualism and create “a harmonious society with diversity” (p. 210).

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