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Multi-Culture and Chinese Minority Education at the Turn of the 21st Century

Most countries in the world are multi-ethnic. According to the 2004 United Nations Development Programme (2004) human development report, out of nearly 200 countries, two-thirds have at least 10 % of their population comprised of ethnic or religious minority groups (p. 2). China is a multi-ethnic nation, with 56 officially identified ethnic groups. Among them the largest is the Han, and the other 55 are known as ethnic minorities, given their much smaller populations. China conducted its fifth national census on November 1, 2000 and found that its total population was 1,265.83 million (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan). Of this, the Han ethnicity comprised 1,159.4 million, or 91.59 % of the national total, and that of the 55 ethnic minorities amounted to 106.43 million, or 8.41 % of the national total (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001). Though the population of ethnic minorities was less than 10 % of the total population, their distribution across the country was very broad, spread across 64 % of the total land territory (Wang, 2004). Minorities and their education is a key governance issue for pluralistic societies. For ethnic minorities in multi-ethnic countries, receiving education in the school system is not only a means of entering mainstream society and gaining social status, but also an effective way of preserving and inheriting traditional culture.

Before the “Eastward spread of Western learning” (西学东渐) at the end of 19th century, minority ethnic groups in China usually imparted their history, beliefs, and characteristics to their children through family stories, rituals, and court schools. The Han imparted Confucian knowledge through private schools, colleges, and national schools with the purpose of “moralizing and cultivating people to be the best” (Tu, 1997, p. 359). Sometimes, the Han set up a united regime, founding official schools in minority area, or recruiting minority students into official schools in rural areas while minority groups conquered the “Central

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Plains” (中原) and set up their regime, they always accepted and integrated with the Han culture education on the basis of preserving their own traditional culture or established a multicultural education system. The Opium War in 1840 changed the historical direction of the development of China and pushed it roughly towards modernization and globalization. Along with the Han majority, ethnic minorities turned to modern education. Globalization and nationalism affected the concept and practice of ethnic education in China. Since 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was established, the system of regulations for autonomous regions began to be implemented in ethnic minority areas. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was founded in 1947, and the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture was established in 1952. Since then, many minority administrative systems and ethnic schools were established in these areas, and minority languages were taught at schools. Chinese minority education entered an era of multiculturalism in the context of globalization and nationalism. Since the reform and opening period began in 1978, China has embarked on a market economy and a journey toward urbanization. These reforms and changes have brought with them challenges and difficulties for minority education based on multiculturalism. Among these difficulties, language and cultural maintenance, academic achievement, and mental health problems of left-behind children are three big issues that minority education policies and practices need to address in the 21st century. In this special issue, we have four papers on these topics: (1) Trilingual Education and Mongolian Ethnicity by Naran Bilik and Has Erdene, (2) Minority Language Issues in Chinese Higher Education: Policy Reforms and Practice among the Korean and Mongol Ethnic Groups by Weiyan Xiong, W. James Jacob, and Huiyuan Ye, (3) Student–Faculty Interaction: A Key to Academic Integration and Success for Ethnic Minority Students at a Major University in Southwest China by Wu Mei, Forrest W. Parkay, and Paul E. Pitre, (4) Alienation of Tibetan Adolescents in Rural Boarding Schools by Gazang Cao.

More than 7,000 languages exist worldwide, but more than half of them are at risk of extinction. Of the 55 ethnic minorities in China, 53 ethnic groups have their own languages (Ha & Teng, 2001). Language is closely related to education. Language is not only the medium for education and teaching, but also an important element of education in itself. In the field of ethnic education research, minority language education is a hot issue. Ethnic minority bilingual and trilingual education not only relates to the integration of minorities into mainstream society, but also to the social status of ethnic minorities, and to the

maintenance of minority languages and the inheritance of minority cultures. Globalization and nationalism mean that minority languages in multi-ethnic countries face a double challenge. Ethnic minority students either learn three languages at the same time, or make a trade-off between foreign languages, the national language and their mother tongue. In their paper *Trilingual Education and Mongolian Ethnicity*, Naran Bilik and Has Erdene discuss three linguistic ideologies of Chinese-Mongolian-English trilingual education in Inner Mongolia: instrumental, essentialist, and assimilationist. The first two ideologies are held by Mongolian elites while the third one is shared by Han elites. Mainstream nationalism has meant that “Inner Mongolians find themselves in a dilemma: Give up their own language and culture completely or partially for the sake of advantages that assimilation may bring; or keep their language and culture at the cost of such advantages” (p. 437). Ethnic minority trilingual education reflects the tension between ethnic identity and national identity or Mongolian ethnicity and mainstream nationalism. The future of trilingual education in Inner Mongolia will depend on ethno-national relations and is a great measure of artful negotiating skills, necessary compromise, and strategic thinking among different linguistic ideologies.

In China, both Korean and Mongolian Chinese are commonly regarded as the models for promoting the development of ethnic education and preserving ethnic languages and cultures among ethnic minority groups. At the turn of the 21st century, the Korean Chinese population had already begun to decline, and Korean primary and secondary schools have closed due to falling student enrollment. As a result, Korean Chinese students have had to attend Han schools, losing the chance to study the Korean language and Korean culture. As for Mongolian, the number of Mongolian-medium schools and the number of Mongolian-medium students has also been decreasing. Mongol community-based rural schools are disappearing and being combined into town schools with the onslaught of urbanization. What has happened to their language instruction in higher education? Weiyang Xiong, W. James Jacob, and Huiyuan Ye in their paper *Minority Language Issues in Chinese Higher Education: Policy Reforms and Practice among the Korean and Mongol Ethnic Groups* compared Korean Chinese with Mongolian Chinese regarding their language preservation and educational experiences at the higher education level, investigating differences and similarities between Korean and Mongolian minorities’ language issues.

There are five key factors facilitating ethnic minority language and culture preservation: (1) supportive government policies; (2) strong perceptions of ethnic language and culture; (3) formal and informal education programs; (4) environments that incentivize the use of ethnic languages; and (5) public opinion on ethnic language and culture preservation. At the same time, there are four key factors hindering the preservation of minority languages and culture: (1) elements from mainstream culture (e.g., discourses of modernization); (2) governmental promotion of Mandarin as the country's single lingua franca; (3) lack of policy and financial support for ethnic minority education and related research; and (4) a combination of weakened ethnic identity and the decreasing populations of certain ethnic minority groups.

China officially has 55 ethnic minority groups, and each ethnic group's history and culture is very different. In China, minority education has made great achievements, but compared with the Han, there is still a big gap. Even within an ethnic group different levels of academic achievements and learning outcomes have been observed. Some scholars take gaps in education development level between minorities and the Han majority to be a major issue in the field of ethnic education research. Compared with regular school students, ethnic minority students who grew up in ethnic minority communities, regardless of cognitive development, or personality characteristics, are very different. Ethnic educational administrators, teachers and scholars should study this difference, so as to see this difference as a resource for development. On the other hand, it will help them improve ethnic minority students' cross-cultural adaptability and promote their academic achievements and learning outcomes. Wu Mei, Forrest W. Parkay, and Paul E. Pitre's paper *Student-Faculty Interaction: A Key to Academic Integration and Success for Ethnic Minority Students at a Major University in Southwest China*, examined the academic performance of ethnic minority students in a leading university in Southwest China, finding these students to have significantly lower grades, lower class ranking, and higher rates of course failure than majority Han students. In terms of student-faculty interaction, although this form of interaction may have little influence on minority students' academic performance itself, through its improvement, minority students are likely to more actively engage in their college community, increase their sense of belonging and as a result see improved academic performance.

The Chinese State Council issued a *National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020)* in 2014, calling for 60 % of the country's nearly 1.4 billion strong population to live in cities by 2020. The construction of this new-type urbanization means that the population flow will increase, presenting a two-way flow tendency. The population of the ethnic minority areas will flow into large and medium-sized cities in inland areas, and the large mainland population will also flow into large and medium-sized cities in ethnic minority areas. This will inevitably lead to educational problems of floating ethnic minority populations. The problem of minority education in inland cities and the issue of minority left-behind children's education in ethnic minority area cities will become increasingly prominent. Along with large-scale population migration, especially in ethnic minority areas, there has been a large number of children left behind in small-sized towns or ethnic minority communities. Poor quality education and teaching facilities and limited resources in these areas mean that these left-behind children have a worse quality of education, and this results in mental health and personality developmental problems. Special policies or measures to promote equalization of compulsory education for ethnic minorities, and establish a management system and dynamic monitoring mechanism for the education of left-behind children is needed, so as to reduce dropout rates and improve enrollment rates. Against a backdrop of urbanization, Tibetan society goes through changes in economic production, ways of living, policy and culture. Gazang Cao in her paper *Alienation of Tibetan Adolescents in Rural Boarding Schools* that uses the Adolescent Students' Alienation Scale to measure social alienation, interpersonal alienation, and environmental alienation of Tibetan adolescents in boarding school due to their parental mobility analyzed the scale of the problem on the basis of in-depth interviews. The result shows that over one in three of the students sampled recorded high levels of alienation, and a correlation between the adolescent student's level of alienation and parental mobility. It demonstrates that Tibetan parental mobility is an underlying social cause of their children's level of alienation at boarding school.

In short, trilingual education in the context of globalization and nationalism, academic performance in non-ethnic minority higher educational institutions and the mental health of left-behind children in the context of urbanization are three frontier problems and hot topics for minority education research in China at the beginning of the 21st century. The four papers offered in this issue present a

variety of results and suggestions from their respective perspectives, and while their research may have certain limitations, they lay a useful foundation for further research in the field.

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