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Minority Language Issues in Chinese Higher Education: Policy Reforms and Practice among the Korean and Mongol Ethnic Groups

Abstract The purpose of this study is to compare Korean and Mongol minorities in the People’s Republic of China in terms of their native language preservation and educational experiences at the higher education level, and to investigate differences and similarities between Korean and Mongol minorities’ language issues. Content area experts on Chinese minority education from China, South Korea, and the United States were interviewed for this study. Findings include suggestions for helping to formulate government educational policies regarding issues related to language in Chinese minority education at the higher education level. This information is helpful to better understand and educate others in school and home settings where Chinese ethnic minority students reside. The advancement of Chinese minority education knowledge related to higher education will significantly strengthen and empower individuals, families, and communities throughout the People’s Republic of China.

Keywords ethnic minority education, Chinese higher education, Korean Chinese, Mongol Chinese, indigenous education

Background

The genocide of indigenous languages has become a global phenomenon under the intensifying trend of globalization (e.g., Fernandes, 2012; Landweer, 2012;

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Linn, 2010), a phenomenon that has received much attention in both academic and global governance fields. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, published by UNESCO, indicates that more than half of the existing 6,000 languages in the world are in danger of disappearing (Moseley, 2010). As a multi-national state, China has 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, of which the largest, the *Han* people, comprise more than 90 % of the total population. Among the 55 ethnic minority groups, 53 have their own distinct languages, of which 21 are written languages (Myers, Gao, & Cruz, 2013). China is facing a heavy task in preserving unique minority languages and cultures.

Both Korean and Mongol Chinese are commonly thought of as the models for facilitating the development of ethnic education and protecting ethnic languages and cultures among Chinese ethnic minority groups. Korean Chinese and Mongol Chinese are two major ethnic minority groups in China whose populations are more than one million. Based on China's six censuses since 1954, both groups' populations increased dramatically, especially the Mongol Chinese, whose population in 2010 was nearly six million, four times that in 1954 (see Table 1). After entering the 21st century, the Korean Chinese population began to decline, and it is also the first ethnic minority group with negative population growth in China, which has begun to influence Korean ethnic education (Cui, 2014). Many Korean primary and secondary schools have been closed due to insufficient student enrollment. As a result, Korean Chinese students have to attend *Han* schools, which means they will lose the chance to study the Korean language and Korean culture. Korean Chinese and Mongol Chinese are also known for their great emphasis on education and high educational levels (Jacob & Park, 2011). Table 2 shows that the percentages of populations with a higher

Table 1 Population of the Korean and Mongol Ethnic Minority Groups, 1954–2010

| | 1954 | 1964 | 1982 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Korean | 1,120,405 | 1,339,569 | 1,765,204 | 1,920,597 | 1,923,842 | 1,830,929 |
| Mongol | 1,462,956 | 1,965,766 | 3,411,367 | 4,806,849 | 5,813,947 | 5,981,840 |

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2015). 中国统计摘要 2015 [*China statistical abstract 2015*]. 北京, 中国: 中国统计出版社 [Beijing, China: China Statistics Press]; Population Census Office under the State Council, Department of Population and Employment Statistics. (1982). 中国 1982 年人口普查资料 [*1982 population census of China*]. 北京, 中国: 中国统计出版社 [Beijing, China: China Statistics Press].

Table 2 Korean and Mongol Chinese Postsecondary Education-Level Population and Percentage

| | 2000 | 2010 |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Korean | 158,937 (8.26 %) | 281,656 (15.38 %) |
| Mongol | 278,229 (4.79 %) | 782,492 (13.08 %) |
| National Average | 2,598,577 (2.72 %) | 7,242,845 (7.12 %) |

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2015). 中国统计摘要 2015 [*China statistical abstract 2015*]. 北京, 中国: 中国统计出版社 [Beijing, China: China Statistics Press].

education background in these two groups have increased drastically since 2000, and are much higher than the average level for all China's ethnic groups.

Due to the good performance of Korean Chinese and Mongol Chinese in education, and language and culture preservation, this research selected these two ethnic groups as the objects for study. It is believed—from their respective perspectives in terms of language and culture preservation—that readers can learn from their experiences. First, the facilitating and hindering factors of ethnic minority language and culture preservation are investigated; second, this article examines the governmental role in language and culture preservation; third, the specific practices of bilingual education are examined; and last, the authors identify the key factors that enable ethnic minority students to attend higher education.

The aim of this article is to compare these two ethnic groups: First, in terms of their native language preservation and educational experiences at the higher education level, and second, in terms of the differences and similarities between their language issues in order to learn from their respective and common experiences in language and culture preservation. Finally, this research hopes to help relevant audiences, including ethnic higher education policy makers, administrators, and instructors, to better understand and educate ethnic minority students in school and home settings. The advancement of Chinese ethnic minority education knowledge related to higher education could significantly strengthen and empower individuals, families, and communities throughout China.

Literature Review

Indigenous education, both in formal and informal formats, is an “eternal reciprocal, interactive, and symbiotic learning process” that lasts a lifetime, and its goal for indigenous individuals is to gain knowledge and meaning from their indigenous heritage (Jacob, Cheng, & Porter, 2015, p. 3). Indigenous education is one of the significant ways to preserve the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world (UNESCO, 2016). Regarding the preservation of indigenous language and culture in a multicultural environment where there exists a national dominant language(s), mother tongue-based multilingual education has been increasingly considered the most optimal approach for ethnic minority people to master their mother tongues, and national and international languages (UNESCO Bangkok, 2015a; Jacob, 2016; Wisbey, 2013). Indigenous education has been conducted and studied in most multicultural situations, especially in multi-ethnic nations, such as the United States, China, Mexico, Uganda, and New Zealand (Boshier, 2015; Jacob, Liu, & Lee, 2015; O’Dowd, 2015; Ward & Braudt, 2015).

As a nation with 56 ethnic groups, the People’s Republic of China has been dealing with ethnic language and culture issues since its foundation in 1949. The central government recognized the importance of language and culture to the development and prosperity of ethnic minority groups as well as the whole country. Therefore, it established affirmative action policies for ethnic minority groups, which are based on three principles: equality for ethnic minorities, territorial autonomy, and equality for all languages and cultures (Zhou & Hill, 2009). A series of laws and regulations have been implemented to protect ethnic minority peoples’ equal rights, cultures and languages. All ethnic minority groups are free to use and develop their languages (National People’s Congress, 2004), and in the educational settings of areas where minority ethnic students constitute the majority, the spoken and written language of ethnic groups may be used as the curricular and instructional languages (National People’s Congress, 1995; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 1988). However, it is noteworthy that the policies supporting the use of ethnic minority languages as the medium of instruction are applied only to the 55 designated ethnic minority groups. In addition, the implementation of these policies differs among various groups. In some groups, their mother tongues are used as the medium of instruction from primary school through high school and Mandarin is taught as a second language; while students from other groups start in their mother tongues at school but transfer quickly to Mandarin with the ethnic language being taught

as a subject (UNESCO Bangkok, 2015b). Even in the same ethnic minority group, the situation can vary (Dong et al., 2015).

At the higher education level, ethnic minority students can receive bonus points on the National Higher Education Entrance Exam (*gaokao*), which aims to increase ethnic minority students’ access to higher education (Liu, 2010). Another way of facilitating the development of ethnic higher education is the establishment of ethnic minority higher education institutions (HEIs)¹ within or outside the ethnic minority autonomous areas. Currently, there are a total of 17 ethnic minority HEIs, and 192 regular HEIs in five ethnic minority autonomous regions (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). The number and percentage of ethnic minority students in HEIs have also increased in the past 25 years, especially after the year 2000 (see Table 3).

Table 3 The Number and Percentage of Ethnic Minority Students in Chinese HEIs Enrollment

| Year | Number | Percentage |
|------|-----------|------------|
| 1980 | 42,900 | 3.75 % |
| 1985 | 94,100 | 5.53 % |
| 1990 | 137,900 | 6.68 % |
| 1995 | 187,600 | 6.46 % |
| 2000 | 319,900 | 5.75 % |
| 2005 | 953,200 | 6.10 % |
| 2010 | 1,508,300 | 6.76 % |
| 2014 | 1,992,400 | 7.82 % |

Sources: National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2005). *China compendium of statistics 1949–2004*. Beijing, China: China Statistics Press; National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2015). 中国统计摘要 2015 [*China statistical abstract 2015*]. 北京, 中国: 中国统计出版社 [Beijing, China: China Statistics Press]; Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. (2014). 2014 年教育统计数据 [2014 educational statistics]. Retrieved September 2, 2016, from http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/jytjsj_2014/; State Ethnic Affairs Commission of China & National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2013). 中国民族统计年鉴 2012 [*China’s ethnic statistical yearbook 2012*]. 北京, 中国: 中国统计出版社 [Beijing, China: China Statistics Press].

¹ Ethnic HEI is a unique institutional type in the Chinese higher education system, which aims to cultivate ethnic minority students and Han students to serve as political leaders in ethnic minority autonomous prefectures. They are located outside the autonomous prefectures.

Regarding the effectiveness of those preferential and ethnic minority language- and culture-related policies, there are controversial voices (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). One general policy cannot cover all ethnic minority groups, especially in China with such a diverse ethnic minority situation in terms of geographic locations, ethnic history, population, and the level of economic development. Therefore, due to the different social-political status of various ethnic minority groups in China, their ethnolinguistic vitality is different under the overarching policy, which tries to be balanced between the promotion of linguistic and cultural assimilation and the preservation of ethnic minority language and culture (Feng & Adamson, 2015). To achieve a high sociopolitical status by increasing the economic level, the local governments of ethnic minority areas apply a GDP-driven attitude and interventionist approach that have been a detriment to the preservation of ethnic minority languages and cultures (Zhu, 2014). In addition, ethnic minority groups are free to use their own languages in educational settings; however, the examination system in Chinese higher education focuses more on the mastery of Mandarin and English than ethnic minority languages. The “trilingual” situation has become a heavy burden for ethnic minority students (Dong et al. 2015; Zhang, Wen, & Li, 2015), while it lacks an underlying coherent theory to guide the policy makers to form optimal policies to facilitate trilingual education in China (Feng & Adamson, 2015). Korean and Mongol Chinese groups have made great achievement regarding their language and culture preservation through education. Particularly, the Korean Chinese group has built a comprehensive bilingual education system from kindergarten to tertiary schools for over 60 years, which has influenced the education of other ethnic minority groups in China both in theory and practice (Jin, 2012; Zhang, Wen, & Li, 2015).

Both Korean and Mongol Chinese students have the opportunity to attend ethnic primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools in their native languages (Dong et al., 2015). In Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in eastern Jilin province, Korean Chinese primary students are required to attend Korean schools, and starting from junior secondary school, Mandarin becomes the medium of instruction (Piao, 2004). In Inner Mongolia, students can freely choose between Mongolian and Chinese schools. However, the free choice has led to a decline in student numbers at the Mongolian schools given the various advantages in terms of socioeconomic status of attending Han schools (Iredale et al., 2001; Su, 2009).

At the higher education level, both Korean and Mongol students who graduate from ethnic high schools can attend preparatory courses to be prepared to receive higher education using Mandarin as the medium of instruction. Korean students who use Korean and Mongol students who use Mongolian as their exam language gain 10 bonus points in the *gaokao*, while those using Mandarin gain five points (Dong et al., 2015). It is also worth noting that there are two tracks of native languages and Mandarin in Korean and Mongol higher education institutions for students to choose from. In Inner Mongolia, there are 13 HEIs with over 30 programs and projects using Mongolian as the medium of instruction, which makes it theoretically possible to cultivate students in a completely monolingual form (Dong et al., 2015, p. 28). In Yanbian University, all courses in the School of Korean Studies are taught in Korean (Zhang, Wen, & Li, 2015).

Language vitality and endangerment can exist at different levels (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2003). Korean and Mongolian has a relatively high level of validity among all ethnic minority languages in China (Huang, 2000; Sun, 2006). Even though Korean Chinese and Mongol Chinese have many commonalities in terms of the development of ethnic higher education and language and culture preservation, there are still many differences between the two groups. Additionally, these differences also determine the different challenges and corresponding practices of culture and language preservation. First, the different historical and cultural backgrounds influence the language and culture preservation of the two groups. The Korean Chinese people are a farming group that lived in the form of a community, with a comprehensive educational system since early times. In such circumstances, Korean culture and language were well-preserved (Piao, 2004). The Mongol Chinese people, as a nomadic group, have had a totally different history and living style, which formed a totally different approach to education, as well as the preservation of language and culture (Chen, 2004).

In addition, the economic factor, to some degree, determines the different performances of Korean and Mongol Chinese on language and culture preservation. Even though Korean Chinese and Mongol Chinese have relations in foreign countries with the same origins, Mongolia and South Korea have different economic levels, which greatly determine the effectiveness of language and culture preservation. For Korean Chinese, working in South Korea or South

Korean companies in China will bring more economic benefits than working in local areas or companies, which is a big motivation for them to keep their own language and culture (Feng & Adamson, 2015). For Mongol Chinese, their foci are on finding a job in a society dominated by *Han* people, because the economic benefit of working for Mongolia or its companies cannot compare with the benefits of working for a Chinese company. In addition, the economic capital of the Mongolian language is negatively influenced by the differences between the Mongolian languages used in Inner Mongolia and Mongolia (Dong et al., 2015).

Based on the above literature review on indigenous education, China's policy on ethnic minority education and preservation of language and culture, and the situations of Korean and Mongol Chinese groups, it is clear that as two model groups of ethnic minority education and culture preservation, their experiences provide useful information for other ethnic minority groups, and the differences between them due to their situational conditions will also provide meaningful suggestions to other groups with their own situations and characteristics. In addition, this comparison between these two groups will also make a contribution to the literatures.

Research Design

Data collected for this report followed a qualitative data collection approach with content area experts (CAEs) on ethnic minorities and education in China. Because the focus of the study was on two prominent ethnic minority groups—the Korean and Mongol ethnic groups—many of the participants had significant expertise related to the language, culture, and identity of one or both of these ethnic minority groups. Research team members designed the study in accordance with standard procedures and approval processes of the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board.

Participants

We targeted the 13 higher education institutions of nationalities in China from which we drew most of our initial CAEs. The CAEs consisted primarily of university professors who satisfied at least one of the following three requirements: (1) ethnic studies faculty member, (2) ethnic Mongol or Korean

background, and/or (3) worked in an ethnic Mongol or Korean populated region. To complement this sampling pool, we also included a select number of students from these institutions, as well as professors and students of ethnic studies and/or with related ethnic backgrounds from other world regions.

CAEs were continually added to the initial sample using a snowball sampling method.² Initial CAEs were selected based on an extensive literature review and were asked to be interviewed. Additional CAEs were recruited according to the recommendations of interviewed experts at the onset of the study until our research team was able to find sufficient information that led to a significant conclusion. CAEs were contacted either via phone, email correspondence, or in person by one or more members of our research team. Interviews generally lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were conducted according to the schedule and availability of the researchers and interviewees. In all, 61 individuals participated in this study, which constitutes a 95.3 % response rate.

Instrument

An in-depth ethnographic questionnaire was used in this study, comprising of seven closed-ended questions and 15 open-ended questions. The instrument was designed with a broad scope to help gather information about Chinese ethnic minority education in general, and with a special focus on the Korean and Mongol ethnic minority groups. For the purposes of this paper, we focused our analysis on the following five questions:

- What factors facilitate minority language and culture preservation?
- What factors hinder minority language and culture preservation?
- What role should the government play in the preservation of ethnic minority languages?
- How effective are bilingual education programs in autonomous prefectures in preserving ethnic minority language and culture?

² A snowball sampling technique was used to identify CAEs in this study. This nonprobability sampling method is appropriate when members of a target population are difficult to locate, such as Chinese ethnic minority CAEs. In snowball sampling, the research team members identified some members of the target population based on an extensive literature review and then expanded the list of CAEs by asking those experts identified to provide the information needed to locate other members of that population. "Snowball" refers to the process of accumulation as each located subject suggests other subjects.

- What social factors are essential for minority students to attend higher education?

It is our plan that this huge pool of data will serve the purposes of future studies on this topic, helping to uncover the complex dynamics of higher education for ethnic minorities in China and around the world.

Data Analysis

Digitally recorded data was transcribed, translated (if necessary), cleaned, coded, and analyzed using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. We used a unique code to ensure confidentiality as well as to help us conveniently locate the source of the data. The unique code begins with capitalized letters “KM” which are immediately followed by a double-digit number indicating a certain CAE who has participated in this study. Another double-digit number follows after a hyphen to indicate a certain item in the instrument. As an example, the unique code “KM21-5” helps navigate the researchers to the 21st CAE interviewed as well as the data collected from Question 5 in the instrument.

Five primary codes emerged from the data: (1) factors facilitating minority language and culture preservation; (2) factors hindering minority language and culture preservation; (3) governmental roles in minority language and culture preservation; (4) effectiveness of bilingual education programs; and (5) social factors affecting higher education for ethnic minorities. We then conducted an ethnographic content analysis to descriptively consolidate persistent and emerging themes that may bear upon policy-making in order to improve higher education opportunities for Chinese ethnic minorities.

Findings

Factors Facilitating Ethnic Minority Language and Culture Preservation

The responses suggest that no fewer than five key factors exist in facilitating language and culture preservation for Chinese ethnic minorities. By order of high to low impact, these factors are: (1) supportive government policies; (2) strong perceptions of ethnic language and culture (preferably nurtured from family circumstances); (3) formal and informal education programs; (4) environments

that incentivize the use of ethnic languages; and (5) public opinions toward ethnic language and culture preservation.

Because of the centralized political system in China, the government takes the responsibility for preserving ethnic minority language and culture through issuing policies and laws. In addition, under the administration of the government, formal ethnic education, including bilingual education programs, constitute the major contents of the government policy.

[The] first type of factor is the top-down factor. These would be factors coming from government policy whether it is from central government or local government. For example, the availability of schools in [the] minority language and the availability of media in minority language, whether it is used for the official purposes of the local government level, whether the culture is reflected all in the local curriculums in the schools. I think these are really important factors in curriculum policies. (KM02-1)

At the same time, informal education through community gatherings, activities, and associations is an important way to preserve ethnic language and culture. For instance, the establishment of ethnic tangible and intangible cultural heritage can help educate not only ethnic minority people, but also the whole society to realize their responsibility for preserving culture and languages. As a result, a social environment tolerant of ethnic minority groups can be created, which will be favorable to language and culture preservation.

Several respondents shared that there is a strong desire among ethnic minority people to preserve their indigenous languages and cultures. On one hand, strong family support plays a significant role in cultivating ethnic identity. On the other hand, education focusing on ethnic culture and language can help ethnic minority students form a proper perception of and pride in their native culture and languages.

The core factor is the promotion of confidence education. Ethnic minority people have a weak ethnic identity because they don't recognize the values of their culture and languages, and always think they are low-leveled and need to be changed. Therefore, ethnic minority groups should emphasize greater confidence in education, and connect it to the national identity. Because the country provides them with dignity, they should pay back to the country. (KM21-1)

Besides being cultural carriers, ethnic minority languages are essentially communication tools. If a language loses its communicative function, it will disappear. Therefore, the continuous use of the ethnic minority language is a facilitating factor for its preservation. Modern technology can be applied to broaden the use-range of ethnic minority languages. “Especially with the rapid development and spread of the Internet, people share their ideas and information through Internet communities. I think these activities help minority people a lot to preserve their language and culture” (KM12-1). The economic return attached to the ethnic minority languages is another factor determining if people will use these languages or not. Usually, the higher the ethnic minority group’s economic development level, the higher economic return of its language. Korean Chinese is a good example.

Marketization sometimes helps to preserve, but also conspires to make the cultural extinction go on faster. Take the example of Korean culture. Korean culture has been popular in the form of dramas and what’s going on in South Korea, so the Chinese government works on this advantage to promote the ethnic Korean culture within Chinese borders. (KM08-1)

But the Korean Chinese, as well as the Mongol Chinese, are particular cases because of their ethnic relation to foreign countries, which increases the functional value of their languages.

South Koreans working in China play an important intermediating role in providing a rationale to use the Korean language on a regular basis, so that it is a business functioning language. I think this situation plays an important role, especially for the Korean language to be preserved. (KM25-1)

Therefore, it is worth noting that the facilitating factors are not absolute, and they can serve different roles for other ethnic groups due to their unique situations. In this sense, sharing a common ethnic origin with those from another country can facilitate the preservation of language and culture.

Factors Hindering the Preservation of Minority Language and Culture

CAEs responses suggested four factors are key in hindering the preservation of

minority language and culture: (1) hindering elements from the mainstream culture (e.g., discourses of modernization); (2) governmental promotion of Mandarin as the 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 decreasing populations of some ethnic minority groups.

The inevitable processes of modernization and globalization often lead to the assimilation of diverse ethnic cultures into a unified mainstream culture, which is reflected in the mainstream social perception of ethnic language and culture. A respondent argues that “anthropological education on cultural diversity is missing in the Chinese education system” (KM21-2). Some people even treat ethnic culture and language as barriers to modernization. The influence of the mainstream culture is also reflected in the emphasis on Mandarin in Chinese society, which has greatly influenced ethnic minority people’s choices regarding their children’s education. Ethnic minority parents often choose to send their children to the *Han* schools instead of the ethnic ones because they want them to receive a better overall education.

When parents present their choice, they often choose the Mandarin-dominant model because the teachers will have higher levels of education. They also believe that students generally learn Mandarin and mathematics courses better and will have more opportunities to attend higher education. (KM02-2)

Also, because of its dominant status as the official language of China, Mandarin generally offers more opportunities and economic benefits than other ethnic languages, especially in the job market. “The other factors might be that after graduation, knowing the Mongolian language doesn’t give you many benefits. Whereas knowing Chinese fluently opens up more job opportunities, and ultimately leads to a better future” (KM20-2).

There are relatively few opportunities for many ethnic minority language speakers to use their indigenous tongue. This situation is often exacerbated by insufficient financial and policy support to provide quality ethnic education in classroom settings. Many *Han* schools do not provide bilingual programs. There are many challenges related to offering quality bilingual education programs. For example, there is a general lack of resources, such as being able to field

competent bilingual teachers and provide quality teaching materials. “There is a lack of compensatory investment in the development of mother tongue-based education or bilingual programs, including being able to provide quality materials to teach in the mother tongue” (KM02-2).

Several CAEs responded that many minority groups’ weak support for ethnic identities and the use of indigenous languages dramatically hinder minority language and culture preservation.

In such circumstances, the Mongol Chinese haven’t put enough emphasis on our languages and culture. The government has paid much attention to ethnic languages and culture, but it is ourselves who are ignoring them and don’t recognize their full significance. For example, many Mongol parents send their children to *Han* schools instead of choosing to send them to Mongol ones. (KM34-2)

Besides the subjective reasons, some objective factors for certain ethnic minority groups also hinder language and culture preservation. For example, the decreasing population of the Korean Chinese has led to the closing of some ethnic minority schools; hence, the Korean Chinese students in these contexts are obliged to attend *Han* schools and have lost the chance to be educated in their own language.

The Government Role in Minority Language and Culture Preservation

Regarding the role the government should play in ethnic minority language and culture preservation, some CAEs indicated that it largely depends on the history and political tradition of the government and the country.

I think it depends on the different tradition and ethical practice of minority language and culture. I think it is wrong to have policies forbid minority language learning. If the community approaches the government for support in preserving minority languages, there should be [greater collaboration among] the provincial and local governments and other key stakeholders. I think it really depends on the country’s long-term history [and relationship with ethnic minority groups]. (KM09-3)

Considering the centralized political system in China, most CAEs argued that

the government should play an active role in leading efforts to preserve minority languages and cultures. However, in reference to some government resistance in playing an active leadership role, a few CAEs expressed that the government should play a minor role and provide ethnic minority groups with autonomy in determining their language and culture preservation.

Since as early as the 1950s the Chinese government has endeavored to develop written languages for each of the minority languages with no written form. While this has been helpful, it has also had its drawbacks. Some of these drawbacks include the written language was developed by outsiders and non-native language or cultural experts from within the respective minority groups, and because the written languages were artificial and were not produced from within, they did not receive ownership and implementation as traditional written forms have. (KM13-3)

Other CAEs shared that the government may serve in a facilitating manner to “synchronize and integrate efforts to preserve minority language and culture” (KM04-3). In terms of the specific roles the government should play, some CAEs pointed out that it is important for the government to recognize the value of ethnic minority languages and cultures.

Taking a global perspective, the central government always mentions support for minority languages and culture preservation. For example, for developed nations, like [the] US, Canada, and Australia or in the European case nowadays, indigenous cultures are not regarded as a burden to the society but rather an extra bonus for cultural diversity. (KM26-3)

A significant number of CAEs felt policy making was the major role of the government in preserving ethnic minority languages and cultures, including the implementation of affirmative action to allow ethnic minority groups to have regional autonomy and the freedom to use their native spoken and written (if applicable) languages. In addition, the government needs to provide preferential treatment to ethnic minority groups in education and employment. A few CAEs also mentioned that relevant scholarly research on the preservation of ethnic minority topics should be encouraged by the government.

Even though the Chinese central government has realized the significance and

made laws and policies for ethnic minority groups, policy implementation at the local level too often does not meet expectations due to political reasons.

Local supportive policies are also needed. This is where things break down in China because the local policies sometimes are not supportive of minority languages for political reasons. Sometimes local officials want to keep a lid on any social disharmony, so they will crack down on and discourage the learning of local languages. (KM51-3)

To deal with this situation, some CAEs propose the government should provide organizational support to “establish evaluation systems and institutions to improve the supervision and innovation [in the preservation of ethnic languages and culture]” (KM48-03).

Roughly one-third of the CAEs suggested promoting ethnic minority education was another important role the government should play, including promoting bilingual education programs, training ethnic minority teachers, and designing culture-specific curricula. Educational autonomy was emphasized by several foreign CAEs, who argued that the government should give ethnic groups more freedom to develop their education and curriculum.

I think the best thing they could do would be to allow local autonomy in the creation of curricula so that communities can decide on their own which language they want their educational system to be in or to what extent or how much of the educational experience of their young people should be about education in the minority language and how much should be in [an]other language. So I think first and foremost, autonomy and creation of educational curricula should be high on the list of things government can do. (KM53-3)

In general, in a politically centralized country like China, the government should ideally take a lead role in ethnic minority language and cultural preservation. In addition to making policies and regulations, the central and local governments should also guarantee they are appropriately implemented.

Bilingual Education Programs in Autonomous Prefectures

In response to how effective autonomous prefecture bilingual education programs are in helping to preserve ethnic minority languages and cultures, 22

CAEs expressed positive opinions, 15 negative, four mixed, and 16 were uncertain about how effective they are. It is worth noting that while there were more positive than negative opinions, they were taken from quite different perspectives. For example, one respondent took a student's perspective and said that bilingual education could be effective for non-minority students. "It is definitely effective. However, I want to note that bilingual education is not only for the ethnic minority students, but also all students who are living in the ethnic minority regions for study and life purposes" (KM34-4).

Another respondent took a teacher's perspective and said that bilingual education also has an impact on teachers' academic work.

So when I write about the Horqin region, I use Mongolian. And then I plan to have it published in Mandarin, and even furthermore in English abroad. I wish by doing so people will better understand the culture in the Horqin region, because databases in Mongolian language are much fewer than in Mandarin, to the effect that writings in Mongolian can only be preserved in paper form. And think about it, if I write it in English and get it circulated. (KM35-4)

However, multiple respondents felt that rigorous research on this effectiveness topic is still lacking, evidenced in the responses being based more on opinions and personal experiences than on robust research data.

The effectiveness of bilingual education programs is subject to a few common factors for ethnic Mongols and Koreans. First, the autonomous prefectures for each group are generally located near a neighboring country or a country in close geographical proximity, i.e., Mongolia for ethnic Mongols and South Korea for ethnic Koreans, where the language is shared across the national border. It serves as an additional layer of protection for Mongolian and Korean languages as long as there is mobility across the national borders. Few other ethnic minority groups in China share this unique attribute, evidenced by one respondent saying that:

Only 10 or so people in the entire country still speak fluent Manchu. This is a dying language. Those who can still speak it are very old and will soon die, leaving the language an extinct language. This is very much different from the Mongol and Korean cases where they have strong support from the international locations of Mongolia and Korea. (KM14-4)

Ethnic Mongols and Koreans are also ahead of other minority groups in terms of deliberation on policy implementation that promotes bilingualism. One respondent shared how bilingual education contributes to social justice in Inner Mongolia.

Bilingualism is also projected to enter the legal systems so that we will have prosecutors, justices, and lawyers that are capable of speaking two languages.... The People's Court in Tongliao uses Mandarin to handle lawsuit cases, which could potentially incriminate innocent ethnic Mongols who are unable to defend themselves using proper Mandarin. Therefore, we need to think about it from a perspective that we need to perfect our social structures and institutions by promoting bilingualism in these lacking areas. (KM36-4)

In a similar vein, ethnic Koreans have many active civil associations to complement the existing bilingual education programs, such as the Korean Chinese Network, an association of ethnic Korean students in South Korea, and a number of ethnic Korean writers' societies.

The central and local governments could play a more active role in defining and implementing bilingual education. This is evidenced by a significant number of respondents being uncertain about what an effective bilingual education program should look like. One reason for that is the huge number of ethnic minority groups in China. There are even varieties within one group, which makes it all the more difficult for government policy makers. One respondent raised a concern about the financial stability for these programs.

In Tibet, for instance, there are four distinct dialects. It is a difficult decision for government policy makers to determine which, if any, of these dialects to supplement textbook materials and teachers for instruction. There is not enough money to provide instruction in all dialects. (KM13-4)

Ethnic minority students may find the bilingual education programs they participate in are quite awkward and taxing because the "minority languages" they are learning may not actually be their mother tongues.

The situation is further complicated when English comes in and constitutes a legitimate trilingual reality. What exactly are the two languages when we are

talking about bilingual education? One respondent shared from a higher education perspective and believed that English is definitely not an outlier.

It is hard for them to [learn] both languages at the same time. And the worse situation is that because in Chinese higher education, English is also very important. The problem is not only “bilingual” but also “trilingual.” So the bilingual education in China is that... it is a detriment to the students’ desire and interest because it is hard to study those [languages] for them. (KM31-4)

Nevertheless, trilingual education may well have become a reality for ethnic Mongols and Koreans, with the mastery level of each language highly questionable.

In many cases you need to look at the education of Mongol and Korean people as a trilingual endeavor as they actually learn three languages: their native tongue [Korean or Mongol], Chinese, and English. In most cases where you have trilingual speakers, they are not fluent in any of the three languages. This trilingual education is geared toward helping these students enter HEIs. (KM14-4)

When bilingual education becomes trilingual and is geared toward helping students enter higher education, it potentially increases the value of English at the detriment of minority languages, especially when there are no clear guidelines for protecting the latter in the emerging trilingual education discourse. Will ethnic minority students and their parents consider minority languages a plus? Maybe, if there are preferential treatments in their colleges and the job market and if they are willing to accept them. According to a respondent,

The job market is not very promising for the ethnic Mongols. Therefore, if you don’t arrange something for those people who graduate from universities, then there is no guarantee that they will not switch to Mandarin, English, or other languages [in the place of their minority language] in order to find a better job. (KM21-4)

It is clear that ethnic minorities tend to characterize learning languages more as a question of utility than as a crucial means to preserve their identities and cultures in higher education discourse.

Social Factors Essential for Minority Students to Attend Higher Education

CAEs identified six key factors that are essential for Chinese ethnic minority students to attend higher education. By order of response frequency, the six factors identified include perceptions, government policies, interactions with *Han* Chinese, family financial support, employment opportunities, and geographic location.

The perception of a need for Chinese ethnic minorities to (or not to) attend higher education is jointly shaped by ethnic minority students, their families, and the *Han* Chinese society. Minority students generally perceive higher education as a window to the broader world.

After being exposed to the mainstream culture and society, they [ethnic minorities] found the outside world is much more beautiful, and much better. So they generally want to leave their hometown to live and study in a big city (like Beijing and Shanghai), because through higher education they can realize their dream to have a better life in a metropolitan area. (KM31-5)

Such a perception is generally more manifest among ethnic Koreans who have long been top educational achievers among all ethnic minority groups in China (Ma, 2003; Zhou, 2000).

We know that the percentage of ethnic Koreans being educated is higher than any other ethnic minority group in China. The average education level achieved by ethnic Koreans is also very high. The percentage of them completing their higher education is also high. There is a passion from the bottom up that the ethnic Koreans have in their education, which is unique to this ethnic minority group. There is a consensus within ethnic Koreans that their children should go to school and even attend higher education. (KM47-5)

While cultural and family influences play a positive role in shaping the ethnic Koreans' perceptions toward higher education, other ethnic minority students often find their parents less approving of higher education, especially when they are financially poor, undereducated, and located in rural and remote regions of the country. "Families feel they need their children at home to work and earn

money for the good of the family. They basically cannot afford to give up the labor that their children provide and send them off to get a better education” (KM53-5).

Perceptions are also shaped by the *Han* Chinese society. In general, *Han* Chinese are supportive of ethnic minority students attending higher education in the sense that this benefits not only ethnic minority peoples, but also helps with the overall development of the country.

Due to historical reasons, ethnic minority regions have usually lagged behind. Therefore, the main reason of those students attending higher education is to meet the needs of social and economic development. Colleges/universities for nationalities and other comprehensive universities have helped cultivate a lot of talent among graduates. This has helped with the local economy and social development. (KM18-5)

Although mainstream society is supportive of ethnic minority students attending higher education, supportive central and local government policies often lag behind. In fact, government policies are lacking at various levels. For example, one respondent shared why ethnic Mongols, another top educational achieving group in China, are less passionate about obtaining formal education (including higher education), even if their culture values all types of learning, including in non-traditional and non-formal education.

They are not motivated to open businesses or even think from a business perspective. Rather, they are more driven to think and act from an academic perspective. That is perhaps due to the historical legacy of the Mongolian culture that values learning and wisdom very much. So they are no different from their *Han* counterparts in education where they pursue opportunities for self-realization.... However, that does not necessarily translate into an enthusiasm for higher education for a few ethnic minorities. They still struggle for employment and that somehow connects with the low enthusiasm for higher education. (KM36-5)

While the synergistic finance and employment factors clearly have a sweeping negative impact upon all Chinese ethnic minorities in terms of higher education attendance, secondary vocational degrees seem to have become a preferred alternative. A professor from Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities

indicated, “Some students are very pragmatic in that they pick up vocational skills at a very young age to steer away from higher education. They tend to rely on their vocational skills for their whole professional careers and lives” (KM35-5).

The massification of higher education in China in some ways complicates ethnic minorities’ perceptions toward higher education, because it is now offered to many more people than before. This significantly increases the competitiveness of the job market following graduation, rendering those with higher education degrees somewhat less marketable. While many minority families consider the cost-effectiveness of obtaining a higher education, its market value has depreciated in recent years due to higher enrollments and the increasing number of higher education graduates.

The issue now is whether you can attend a good higher education institution and study a marketable major. There is no question about enrollment rates increasing, especially since 2002 when higher education massification began to allow more students to attend higher education. However, the problem lies in the accessibility of good colleges and universities.... Ethnic Mongol students will easily find a higher education institution to attend within the autonomous prefecture if they prefer. But good institutions and marketable majors are a different story. (KM30-5)

Because most of the nation’s top colleges and universities are generally located outside the autonomous prefectures and further away from rural areas, this geographic distance creates a disincentive for many ethnic minorities to attend higher education. Even if ethnic minority students manage to enter higher education, hindering norms are prevalent in their interactions with the *Han* Chinese. The language of instruction is predominantly Mandarin. Other hindering factors such as some faculty members not being aware that ethnic minority students are on campus, a bit of *Han* Chinese chauvinism, and a general stigma toward religious practices on campus all work together to prevent breaking down negative stereotypes of ethnic minority students. Regarding these additional factors, one respondent shared that:

Some of the research I’ve done is around the Hui minority, and teachers don’t even know that they have Hui students in their classes, as an example. I think they need recognition,

first of all, and then they need support, and if there's any issue around language or something like that, they need programs that would bring their Chinese Mandarin up to speed if that's the language of instruction. (KM57-5)

In summary, ethnic minority students need recognition, support, and proper language skills after entering higher education. But knowing that they may not always have such support only further complicates parents' decisions as they weigh the opportunity costs and the value of a higher education degree in China. Chinese central and local governments have done substantial work in the past to ensure an ethnic minority presence in higher education. However, it is important to understand that higher education is a human right for ethnic minorities just as it is for *Han* Chinese students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Chinese government has been handed the unenviable task of dealing with a country with a huge population and extremely diverse ethnic groups. Higher education for ethnic minorities has become a prominent issue, especially since the massification of the national system. Many ethnic minority students are attending higher education now, but still there are more waiting for their chance and for jobs following graduation. To improve on this situation, we conclude with five policy-level recommendations.

First, the central and local governments should re-envision their higher education policies for ethnic minority students by creating more socioeconomic incentives rather than resorting solely to preferential enrollment. Students who choose and are able to attend higher education will yield better results than those who are planted there because of their ethnic backgrounds. Most of the latter fail to graduate, and are stigmatized as the recipients of preferential treatment (Adamson & Xia, 2011). Given the large number of ethnic minority groups in China and their high population, preferential enrollment is likely to cause inequities without sufficiently improving learning outcomes and employment rates for ethnic minorities. It is also worth noting that preferential enrollment does not necessarily incentivize ethnic minorities to attend higher education if there is no further accommodating policy to help them settle in and transition to employment in order to justify the enormous cost of higher education. The long

prevailing preferential treatment policies, with all their due merits, should be complemented by a new marshalling vision that aims at fostering positive perceptions toward higher education and granting those hopefuls a more level playing field.

Second, the central and local governments should have clear guidelines for mother tongue-based/bilingual education and acknowledge the harsh trilingual reality that exists for many ethnic minorities. As the literature indicates, a comprehensive policy to guide practices of trilingual education for ethnic minority students is missing in China (Feng & Adamson, 2015). Ethnic minority students should not be handed the burden and risk of deciding which two of the three languages—i.e., minority language, Mandarin, and English—they will learn, only to know that a wrong decision will jeopardize their higher education and career opportunities. In this regard, distinctive guidelines for trilingual education should be put forward and implemented. The governments should work closely with content experts and ethnic minority representatives to make a strategic decision between bilingual and trilingual education for each ethnic minority group.

Third, our findings also show that the economic benefits are an overarching topic that connects to both facilitating and hindering factors in ethnic minority language and culture preservation. Whether the ethnic minority languages can bring benefits in life, study, and work determines whether people learn and use it or not. Therefore, in indigenous language preservation, the government and ethnic groups should try to create incentives to encourage ethnic people to learn, use, and promote these languages. The cases of Korean and Mongol Chinese show that ethnic minority groups' sociopolitical status in the country will highly influence their culture and language preservation (Jacob, Cheng, & Porter, 2015).

Fourth, because of the different social, historical, and cultural circumstances wherein Chinese ethnic minority groups are situated, the boundary between the facilitating and hindering factors for language and cultural preservation may be blurred, and a hindering factor for one ethnic group may become a facilitating one for another ethnic group. For example, the modernization of Korean Chinese society tends to help language preservation because of the strong ties that exist with South Korea. But this can be a hindering factor for other ethnic minority groups without such an external relation. Therefore, the government should

carefully consider the context and factors of the specific situations of ethnic minority groups in order to preserve their languages and cultures.

Finally, in a centralized political system, the Chinese government should play a leading role in preserving ethnic minority languages and cultures. While there are many notable accomplishments, there are still many challenges to face. The Chinese central government should continuously reflect on how its policies affect ethnic minority language and culture preservation. A rigorous evaluation system should be established to monitor policy implementation regarding ethnic minority groups at the local level. This point has not been discussed comprehensively in the literature, and is worthy of further investigation. The government should provide ethnic groups greater autonomy to create their own educational materials, as well as highlighting their creative efforts in language and culture preservation.

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