

# **Bilingual education among ethnic Koreans in China: Ethnic language maintenance and upward social mobility**

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*The challenge of ethnic minority education in developing countries has become a matter of international urgency. This article brings bilingual policy for ethnic Koreans as an example to explore the implementation of bilingual education in China's reform period. Drawn from an ethnographic research on a bilingual Korean school in Northeast China, the main attention is given to the dilemmas facing Korean bilingual education. Although there is a diversity existing among China's ethnic minorities, what makes one case to be generalized to all minorities is their willingness in education to maintain ethnic language and culture and to obtain upward social mobility.*

**Keywords:** *Bilingual education; ethnic Koreans; ethnic language maintenance; upward social mobility*

## **Bilingual education among ethnic Koreans in China: Ethnic language maintenance and upward social mobility**

### **Introduction – Bilingual education in China**

Globalization shifts our focus to rethinking education for China's 55 ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*). China, in some ways, is a microcosm of globalization. Its diverse minorities with many different languages and cultures have much experience with the push and pull of homogenizing forces and indigenous cultures. Economic growth has fuelled ethnic consciousness of China's minority nationalities (Iredale et al., 2001). Within globalization, it is most likely that the use of non-dominant language becomes an integral part of the empowerment process. Fei Xiaotong's (1991) "*duoyuan yiti geju*" which has been translated by (Postiglione, 2007) into "plurality within the organic unity of the Chinese nationality" with its functionalistic value highlights the national unification and cultural pluralism of China. Managing difference in language is becoming one of the greatest challenges to a pluralist country like China. All of China's minority nationalities have their own languages, with the exception of the Hui and Manchu who use the Chinese language (Johnson & Chhetri, 2000). There are 128 distinct languages spoken among China's minorities (Sun, Hu & Huang, 2007). Some minority groups are bilingual, trilingual, or speak a variety of different languages, some of which are totally unlike each other. When the PRC was established in 1949, there were only 11 minorities (Mongols, Zhuang, Uygurs, Koreans, Kazak, Xibe, Tai, Uzbeks, Kirgiz, Tatar, and

Russians) who had their own written languages (Kwong & Xiao, 1989). Currently, there have been 30 minorities with written forms since the government in 1958 began to create new scripts for minorities. The number and diversity of minority languages are formidable barriers to the popularization of education in minority regions and present a complex array of problems in the provision of education for ethno-linguistic minority children in China (Stites, 1999). In the mid-1980s, the Chinese government began to implement bilingual education (Chinese and minority language). Original aim of bilingual education is to preserve minority cultures and increase their school attendance. Chinese scholars maintain to teach in the language of minority students is

[E]ssential for the development of their intellectual ability, particularly for those living in remote areas who have little contact with the Han culture and who speak only their own native language. (Lin, 1997, p. 195)

There are the immense discrepancies of bilingual practice in the diverse minority regions, both with regard to state policies and local arrangements. For example, the degree to which minority students have classes in their own language varies greatly, from none at all to almost the whole curriculum (Harrell & Erzi, 1999). Zhou (2000) categorizes 128 distinct languages spoken among China's minorities into three types in terms of bilingual education: (1) minority languages with functional writing systems broadly used before 1949 have had regular bilingual education since 1949 including

Mongolian, Korean, Tibetan, Uygur, and Kazak; (2) those minority languages with functional writing systems narrowly used before 1949 have had occasional bilingual education since 1949 such as Dai, Jingpo, Lisu, and Lahu so on; and (3) those without functional writing systems before 1949 have had limited or no bilingual education since then such as Dong, Yao, Tujia, Tatar, and She so on. This typology is, to some extent, compatible with the three forms in terms of language outcomes: bilingualism and/or biliteracy, limited bilingualism, and monolingualism, categorized by Baker (2006). This article is intended to analyze bilingual education among ethnic Koreans in China. The main attention is given to bilingual education for ethnic Koreans after China's economic reform in the end of 1970s. This data was collected from one 12-year Korean school visited during the course of September 2006 to January 2007. This analysis goes through the three aspects: the increasing disadvantages of Korean language teaching; the increasing importance of Chinese language studies; and the ignorance of Korean culture and traditions and emphasizes the importance of bilingualism/multilingualism in education for China's ethnic minorities.

### **Bilingual education among ethnic Koreans in China**

The model to value the learning of a non-dominant language in itself and encourage speakers of that language to continue to use it is known as language maintenance model. One example of language maintenance model tends to use the non-dominant language as a medium of instruction for at least a part of the curriculum (Cummins, 1995). The

bilingual education for ethnic Koreans can be identified as language maintenance model. Korean educational success in China, for the last fifty years, has been achieved mainly through the Mandarin and Korean bilingual education with an emphasis on Korean language as the medium of instruction in Korean bilingual schools (Ma, 2004; Zhou, 2000). In the Korean concentrated regions, Korean bilingual schools (Korean and Chinese) are established from primary to higher education level (Ma, 2004). In these schools, students are given options to be educated and tested in their own language. Korean is the medium of instruction and Chinese is taught as a subject. In comparison with the personal interests in Chinese characters and Confucian culture for those studying Chinese as a second language in non-Chinese speaking countries (“*duiwai hanyu jiaoxue*”) such as in the North America and Europe, even among African countries, teaching Chinese as a second language in China for its minorities has a strong economic and socio-political importance. The increasing economic contacts with South Koreans in the Peninsula need Korean graduates with a higher level of Chinese language skills in order to participate into China’s market economy and South Korean direct investment in China. The Chinese language teaching in bilingual Korean schools originally started from Year One of junior-secondary education in 1948. In 1951, it was taught from the fifth-year in primary education and third-year in 1956. In 1993, Korean schools started teaching Chinese language since the first year of primary education. The number of Chinese characters needed for primary students has increased from 1300 to 2200/2500 in 2002 (1800/2000 for written literacy). In comparison with other languages, Korean

language is more or less unique in its functional significance, especially in China's reform period since the end of 1970s. The increasing economic contacts with Koreans, especially South Koreans in the Peninsula have led to the increasing significance of Korean language studies in China (Choi, 2001; Kim, 2003; Ma, 2004). There is a long history of Korean language teaching in China. Originally, Korean language course was called "yanwen" in 1946. Then it was called "chaoxian yu" in 1951, "chaoxianzu yuwen" in 1959, "chaoxian yuwen" in 1963, "yuwen" in 1969, and "chaoxian yuwen" in 1972. The majority of Koreans are perceived as "literate bilinguals" (Guan, 2001). The bilingual program in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture is often commended as the most successful example of China's bilingual education (Ma, 2004).

## **Methodology**

The study school, the researcher called FLK School was a 12-year bilingual Korean school composed of three-year pre-school and nine-year compulsory education in Liaoning Province (one northeastern province). Over the period of five-month fieldwork (Sep/2006-Jan/2007), teachers and school administrators (principal, vice principal, and office dean) were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews took place in the school meeting room. Each informant was interviewed once and the length of each interview ranged from one to two hours. Each interview was audio-taped and all tapes were transcribed. Each interview was conducted in Mandarin and translation into English involved the interpretative translation through making sense of the meanings that the

interviewees conveyed. Opening focused issues around their perceptions of Korean schooling were used to develop observation, to compare subsequent classroom events with what they said in interview, and to obtain overall understanding of school situations. Interviews with the informants were supplemented by informal, natural conversations with them, and with other non-academic staff.

### **Korean bilingual education in China's reform period**

China's economic reforms and open door policy are creating new challenges to ethnic Koreans as they seek to survive as distinct ethnic groups without completely being assimilated into the mainstream society, while increasing competitiveness in the job market and upward social mobility. There are a set of debates among today's Korean bilingual education, which indicate the conflict between the ethnic language and cultural maintenance and upward social mobility.

### ***The increasing disadvantages of Korean language teaching***

Scholars have increasingly considered the disadvantages Korean schools and schooling face especially in China's reform period since the end of 1970s (Gao, 2009; Jin, 2006; Lee, 1986; Li, 2006; Olivier, 1993; Piao, 2006; Zheng, 2006). These disadvantages generally include (1) the decreasing Korean student intake; (2) the increasing number of Korean students coming from problem families (e.g., *Danqin*: Single-parent family or *Wuqin*: living without parents), which lack necessary educational qualifications or are

physically absent from family education; (3) the shortage of funding; and (4) the shortage of qualified Korean teachers. In 2004's entrance examination to senior-secondary education, Korean students generally achieved lower in almost all of the subjects than Han students. According to the statistics in Yanji (the prefectural capital of Yanbian), there are about 20 or 30% junior-secondary Korean students who are not able to advance to senior-secondary level of education. More and more Korean parents send their children to Han schools instead of sub-standard quality of bilingual Korean schools (Lee, 1986; Olivier, 1993). Many young Koreans who have attended Chinese schools in urban areas have given up using Korean (Zheng, 1996). A frequent concern in the Korean school investigated was that the efforts to preserve the Korean language and culture would not be rewarded with success. The new curriculum design in 2002 gives the equal attention to Korean, English, and Chinese, three of which accounts for 38.4% of the curriculum load. The workload of trilingualism is 11.86% higher demanding than the workload of bilingualism (Chinese and English) in Han schools (Jiang, 2006). This is a rather heavy burden shared by both teachers and students in Korean schools. According to the teacher informants, the newly-published Korean language textbooks were too difficult to the Korean students. At the time of my research, FLK School was using the Korean language textbooks which were published by Yanbian Education Publishing House. "Yanbian publishes the Korean language textbooks according to the proficiency of their students in Korean language," one informant commented. "Our students with a limited competency in Korean language can't catch up with them at all." Most of the Korean autonomous



regions were only made up of a small number of ethnic Koreans. One teacher informant commented, “Korean students always speak Chinese, which prevents them from enhancing their Korean language.” The parental role as supplementing what the school is doing and filling in the gaps is desirable. But at FLK most of Korean parents were considered to fail to do so because of their limited competency in Korean language and involvement in intra-China and international labor export. In addition, the mainstream higher institutions employ Chinese as the medium of instruction. Many Koreans thus believe that the emphasis of the Korean language may not be helpful for Korean students to advance through the education system.

### *The increasing importance of Chinese language*

In Korean education, there is the development of competing school-level politics and practice, namely, diversity for ethnic cultural sustainability vs. modernization for upward social mobility. There is the increasing importance of Chinese language studies in bilingual Korean schools. The party’s nationality policy encourages minorities to preserve and develop their language, yet minorities face serious limitations in the implementation of linguistic policies that contribute directly to the development of ethnic identity (Olivier, 1993). Learning a minority language is most often seen as a transitional measure aimed at facilitating mastery of the Chinese language (Stites, 1999). In addition, the new market economy needs minority graduates with competency in Chinese language skills, which ironically drives ethnic minorities to acculturate into the mainstream language. In the

Korean school, Chinese language studies were paid more and more attention. For many teachers at this Korean school, it was convinced that a command of Chinese stood Korean students in good stead in seeking employment and receiving higher education in the mainstream society. One teacher remarked:

I think I've changed my attitude toward Korean language. In the past, I required my students to have a high competency in Korean language. They were required to speak Korean everyday. However, now I think Chinese is much more important. If they can't speak Chinese, they wouldn't gain status in the social hierarchy of mainstream society.

Students at FLK took lesser hours of Chinese language courses per week. For the informants, this obviously put Korean students in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis their Han Chinese peers. On the one hand, if Korean students would take the national college entrance examination in the Chinese language, they had to learn it well (Lee, 1986; Olivier, 1993). On the other hand, if Korean students took the college entrance examinations in their native tongue, they might have to struggle with the deficiency in Chinese if they passed the examination and entered one of China's universities (Lee, 1986; Olivier, 1993). For a majority of the teachers, a conscious and deeper cultural integration into mainstream Han society committed them to the importance of the Chinese language studies. Learning Chinese was thus justified by arguing that Chinese

was “international” serving the full involvement of ethnic Koreans in the mainstream society within the context of global economy. At FLK, the emphasis on Chinese language studies was thus considered rational. “Learning Chinese well is good enough for our students”, one teacher informant asserted. “If our students are able to know Korean language, it is already good enough. The mainstream decides it, isn’t it?”

### *The ignorance of Korean culture and traditions*

While China’s policy of minority education highlights the preservation of minority language and culture, this policy turns out to be purely at the linguistic level. The Chinese leaders, after the Cultural Revolution reinstated the original minority policy allowing for a degree of ethnic diversity and minority autonomy (Lee, 1986). The Korean minority’s administrative autonomy has facilitated the maintenance of Korean language and the ethnically-based educational system in Yanbian and other parts of China’s northeastern region. Rather, except for the Chinese and Korean language textbooks, the curriculum in Korean schools is almost exclusively the translated version of standard textbooks (Choi, 2004). In other words, students at FLK were learning Chinese history, Chinese geography, Chinese literature, and Chinese politics in Korean. In the process of socializing them and forming their identity, the history and ideology of their ancestral land – Korea – was completely absent. The quantity and quality of ethnically-relevant extracurricular activities in Korean schools have undergone a dramatic decrease because of the shortage of financial resources. For example, in the researched school, a range of extracurricular

activities were not functioned equal. Those high-status extracurricular activities including Math Olympics, information technology, and English classes, were considered to not only confer high status on students, but also promote academic achievement. In contrast, the ethnically-relevant classes including Korean music, dance, and labor techniques (mainly making pickled vegetables – *Kimche*) were lesser attractive. For a handful of families with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, their children's participation into the ethnically-relevant extracurricular activities was not desirable. Despite some success in preserving the Korean language and culture, the new economic mentality in China's reform period has led to the loss of ethnic cultural capital (Olivier, 1993). Some Koreans are opting for a conscious and deeper cultural integration into the mainstream society under the economic liberalization and market prosperity (Olivier, 1993). According to one Korean teacher:

While many Koreans now have lost their Korean membership over generations, we are still proud of our ethnic background and consider ourselves Koreans, rather than pure Chinese. But schooling is a totally different thing. Korean students must learn to be involved in the mainstream. School needs to give some of the Chinese culture to them. Otherwise, they won't have a bright future in China.

### **Conclusion: Bilingualism/multilingualism among China's ethnic minorities**

Language discourse is not simply about language, but is equally about much wider social

processes and practices (Foucault, 1980). The ability to speak mainstream language is a key determinant that allows members of a minority group to share state and market resources with fellow Han citizens (Shih, 2002). In comparison with mainstream language, a few minorities such as Korean, Dai, and Jinpo whose languages also become cross-border languages for business contacts with neighboring regions (Shih, 2002). This article examines bilingual education in a Korean school for ethnic Koreans as a language maintenance model. For the teachers and administrators at FLK, on the one hand, bilingual education discouraged them to preserve Korean language and culture at a time of modernization; on the other hand, the vision of modernization in education advocated the importance of Chinese language studies. The process of formulating school-level politics and practice positioned Korean schooling in the dilemma to provide a high standard of education which not only raises awareness of Korean culture, but also raises Chinese language skills for upward social mobility in China's reform period (Olivier, 1993).

In a multicultural and multiethnic country like China, to believe the preservation of ethnic language and culture is to believe in difference (Choi, 2004). The very survival of a multilingual country not only implies the language pluralism among its ethnic minorities, but also implies the pluralism among its majority people. It is a two-sided acceptance: minority people learn majority language and culture, and majority people learn minority culture and language. For minority children and youth in China, the

fluency in mainstream language is important for their future education and career choice. The English language is vital for them to participate into the global world. The ethnic language as the second/third language with its functional value can become positive forces and strengths that can help to empower ethnic minorities. The existence of bilingual minority schools not only presumes the positive governmental policy toward ethnic minorities in China, but also increases the competition among minority students with the mastery of three languages (minority language, Chinese, and English) in market economy.

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