

# Examining Chinese Minority Education Policies

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**Abstract.** China is renowned for its rich cultural tapestry, diverse ethnic groups, and complex history. While Han Chinese make up the majority of the population, China is also home to a mosaic of 55 ethnic minorities, each with its unique customs, languages, and traditions. While they may share some similarities, each minority ethnic group has their own unique culture and language that differs from other groups and sometimes their differences have caused conflict between each other. Therefore, when writing and implementing policy for minority education, it is important to be adaptable and flexible to local conditions. The Chinese government has increasingly emphasized minority education as an important factor for social unity. In late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Premier Zhou Enlai decided to create written language for minority groups such as the Hani and Bai, while in 2020, Chairman Xi decided to shift promotion to protection by creating an online archive for minority languages and cultures such as folklore and the creation myth. This paper critically examines the effectiveness of China's bilingual education policy, teacher training initiatives, and the mechanisms of two exemptions and one subsidy for minority education in compulsory education schools in Yunnan. The study underscores the laudable intentions behind these policies while shedding light on the numerous challenges encountered during their implementation.

**Keywords:** Chinese Minority Education; Policy implementation; Bilingual Education; Teacher Training; Two Exemptions One Subsidy.

## 1. Introduction

While Han Chinese make up the majority of the population, China is also home to a mosaic of 55 ethnic minorities, each with its unique customs, languages, and traditions. Most of these groups are located in the border areas of China, occupying 65% of the Chinese territory. They may share some similarities, but each minority ethnic group has their own unique culture and language that differs from other groups and sometimes their differences have caused conflict between each other [1]. This paper delves into the intricacies of implementing minority education policy, with a focus on its successes and challenges. The analysis draws from a personal interview conducted in Mengla County, situated within the Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province. Additionally, a collection of case studies from various compulsory education schools (Grades 1-9) across Yunnan province provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of minority education policy.

Mengla County is located in the southeast of Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture. Laos half envelopes it in the east and south; facing Myanmar across the Lancang River in the southwest; close to Jinghong City, the capital of Autonomous Prefecture in the northwest, and adjacent to the Jiangcheng Hani and Yi Autonomous County in Pu 'er City in the north. According to the seventh census data, as of November 1, 2020, the permanent population of Mengla County was 304,950. There are 26 ethnic groups living in Mengla County, including Dai, Hani, Yi, Yao, Miao, Zhuang, and Lahu. The minority population is 182,200, accounting for 74.3% of the registered population, among them, 63,200 are Dai, 60,900 are Hani, 23,200 are Yi and 19,400 are Yao which makes Mengla County a perfect case study [2].

Currently, all school-age children are attending school in Mengla County. Previously, the ability for all children to attend school was a serious difficulty due to poverty and the conditions of the citizens a few years ago. In 2019, due to Chairman Xi and the government's push to alleviate poverty, all 27 poor villages, 27,112 rural poor citizens in Mengla County were lifted out of poverty which

accelerated and encouraged more students to go to school. However, due to the lack of family education and a somewhat large migrant population, although all school-age children are attending school, 5% of students and their families are considering quitting. It has become a pain point for teachers, headmasters and governors as they frequently have to visit the students' families to communicate with and persuade parents and students to continue their education.

While there are other studies done on minority education in rural areas, there is not a lot of research on a county with such a diverse set of minority populations. General research has been conducted in counties where the minority population is mainly from one large ethnic group, rather than 26. This paper aims to highlight the difficulties in implementing education for minority students in China from an administrative perspective and give insights on why, outside of policy implementation, it is culturally hard to promote minority education as well.

## **2. Bilingual Education Policy**

Post World War II, the People's Republic of China mainly promoted the use of Mandarin Chinese (“*Putonghua*”, also called “*Guoyu*”, translated to be “national language”) as the common language of instruction throughout the country [3]. While there was some setback in language education during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, China set its language policy with three goals: to enhance literacy, assure internal stability, and strengthen the nation with the acquisition of scientific knowledge and economic progress. This policy would emphasize bilingualism in English and Mandarin for the Han Chinese, and Mandarin as a minority language for ethnic minorities [4].

### **2.1. Obstacles to Learning Ethnic Languages in Classrooms**

In the case of Mengla County, the headmasters stated that although the current Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy indicates that “Schools and other education institutions that mainly enrol minority students shall, where conditions permit, use textbooks in the languages of minority ethnic group and give lectures in the languages of minority ethnic group” (Article 37), they are not allowed to implement the policy due to direct order from the local Administration of Education and Sport. Other schools in the Yunnan province also share similar problems with no textbooks. In the Mengyue Nine Year school, where the majority of students are Jingpo, the Zaiwa language is taught in the minority language class. However, only grades 4 and 5 have this class and there are no minority language materials for the students. Instead, teachers copy study contents on the blackboard for students to write down [5].

Each case is an example where on paper, bilingual teaching through the use of a minority language is promoted. However, due to their circumstances outside of the school's control, students are not able to have the necessary supplies for their education. This, in turn, slows down the pace at which ethnic minority students can learn not just their native language, but also any subjects taught in that language. Being able to see, write, and understand characters is a crucial part of learning a language. In particular, while the pace of writing is slower, it leaves a more permanent record in the brain, which can encourage cognitive processes and language acquisition. In addition, understanding the written form may help students have a better grasp of precision in their language use [6]. Furthermore, for ethnic minority students who are not familiar with Mandarin, having to use a Mandarin textbook may further set them back compared to their Han counterparts since they are now studying in a language more foreign to them.

### **2.2. Challenges in Enforcing Bilingual Teaching Models in Schools**

To better examine how the bilingual teaching policy is implemented, one can look towards another school in the Yunnan province. The Namu primary school also has a bilingual teaching model. The majority ethnic group is *Dai*, and the *Dai* student population makes up 94% of their 375 students. In general, language teaching methods can be separated into three models. The first model is bilingual teaching, where teachers mainly speak Mandarin and use ethnic language as a tool to explain difficult-

to-understand concepts to minority students. The second is bilingual and bi-script teaching, where students learn both Mandarin and ethnic (in this case, *Daiwa*) language and characters in class. The third is transmitting and inheriting, where teachers teach mainly in the ethnic (*Dai*) language with little to no Mandarin. The implementation challenge for the Bilingual Education policy at this school is due to a disagreement about which teaching model should be used in classrooms. The Education Research Center wants schools to use the bilingual teaching method from preschool, which makes it hard for students to master Mandarin as they are trying to learn two languages at the same time, while the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) members who visited said students should learn mandarin at school since they speak *Dai* at home [5]. On top of the administrative differences between different departments, promoting ethnic language learning at school becomes almost impossible to implement efficiently.

This example, and the previous textbook example from Mengla County, highlights how differences in administrative agendas can cause more negative effects in policy implementations rather than its initial goals. More worrisome is the increased marginalization of ethnic language in the administration's, teacher's, and student's perspectives. A key part of all elementary school exams under the compulsory education system is that the exam is conducted in Mandarin, only testing Mandarin characters. The exams have prompted schools to place greater emphasis on Mandarin characters, with students attaching reduced significance to their native ethnic languages.

From a cultural perspective, this is concerning since language and culture are greatly intertwined. If ethnic language knowledge is diminished, it will lead to an erosion of culture. Language learning allows learners to understand the relationship between language and other cultural phenomena [7], and it gives learners the ability to compare it to other cultures, such as the Han culture. Being aware of the differences and nuances of each culture is integral to communicating, not just in an educational environment, but in any interpersonal interactions. The lack of cultural awareness among its ethnic minority citizens will work against China's goals of "enhancing literacy" and "assuring internal stability." Currently, while the policy has a provision for flexibility and adaptability in bilingual teaching depending on local conditions, there are no standards and regulations set across the board on outcome expectations for each locale. Different higher-level departments in education are also siloed and do not communicate with each other. This has rendered the bilingual education policy ineffective and holds meaning only on paper. To be more effective, clear guidelines and regulations should be set in place, and the power of decision-making should have one line of command, rather than multiple. By adjusting the system to this standard, it would make it easier for schools to focus on what teaching method to use, and also advocate for their students' needs better.

### **3. Teacher Training Policy**

In addition to the Bilingual Education Policy to promote ethnic languages, the state has also adopted several methods to train teachers working in ethnic minority areas. For example, a policy that supports teachers undergoing training is the "Supporting Teachers Through Substituting" program which recruits graduates with a bachelor's degree in education from normal colleges and sends them to serve in mountainous or remote regions as substitute teachers. This allows the full-time teachers to have the opportunity to attend the normal colleges where the substitute graduated from, and further train themselves [8].

#### **3.1. Technological Advancement in Teaching**

Teacher training and support remain a subject on the top of mind for many schools in Mengla County. In the personal interview, all three headmasters stated that there are more retirees than newcomers, and the pressure of teacher shortage is inevitable. On the bright side, due to the rapid development of smartphones and new media platforms such as Douyin (known as TikTok for foreign users), bilingual teachers are not required that much compared to ten years ago. Nowadays, it is common for every Chinese citizen to own a smartphone, and most of the content created on popular platforms such as

Douyin and Kuaishou is in Mandarin Chinese. Thus, Han Chinese values, way of life and language are silently converted into minority ethnic groups, leading to fewer ethnic conflicts in school. It has also become easier for monolingual teachers to perform in school.

### **3.2. Misalignment of Incentives for Teacher Training**

Despite technological advancements, however, the general welfare and satisfaction of teachers working in rural schools aimed at minority students remain low. First, on teacher training – while programs such as the “Supporting Teachers Through Substituting” exist, there is a chronic shortage of substitute teachers. Therefore, even when teachers want to be sent out for training, it is not possible. To apply for training, teachers would have to apply for private leave, which affects their attendance and performance evaluations. In the case of Xishan primary school in Yunnan, where 73% of the student population is a minority (mainly *Jingpo*), the Education Bureau stated that teacher’s salary is based on basic salary and merit pay. Merit pay is deducted from the total monthly payment and then allocated amongst teachers based on student scores and the amount of time the teacher spends in the classroom. This is another example of misaligned incentives. While everyone can agree more training for teachers is good, a deduction of merit pay due to teachers spending less time in the classroom and outside training is counterproductive to cultivating better minority education teachers.

### **3.3. Ethnic Minority Teachers Shortage**

The second factor that affects the welfare and satisfaction of teachers working in remote areas is the lack of management for the demand and supply of teachers in rural areas [9]. When a school needs a teacher, they may have no means of hiring one. On the off chance that a teacher is employed, the newly hired teacher may not be hired according to the needs of the school. This is especially troubling when combined with the opaque guidelines set on teacher funding. For example, according to the No.35 Order of Yunnan Province, 2% of education expenditure shall be used for education research and training. However, as there is no special funding allocated for teacher training, schools are not clear on how much “2%” is [5]. When the already tight budget is used to hire unnecessary teachers, existing teachers are generally going to be discontent with how the administration is running the school. The lack of clarity on funding guidelines in the teacher training policy can further cause bottlenecks in key budgeting decisions within the school, which ultimately will affect student education.

Another substantial contribution to the high teacher turnover rate can be attributed to their modest income, substantial job pressures, and diminished recognition within their teaching roles. Some understaffed schools would have teachers take on additional roles, such as security patrol or gardening, which increases individual teachers’ responsibilities and takes away the time they have to focus on teaching. Even with these extra responsibilities, teacher salary payouts may get delayed, which further causes dissatisfaction among teachers. In addition, some teachers view training as ineffective and believe promotions are given based on interpersonal relationships rather than skills, which further lowers teacher morals. All these factors make for a less efficient teacher, and a worse teaching environment.

### **3.4. New Curriculum Reforms and Teaching Standards**

Finally, new government policies known as the “New Curriculum Reforms” have been enacted to promote “self-learning and exploration” for students. The idea is to push students to think outside the box and develop critical thinking skills instead of just memorizing textbook materials. However, this does not work in ethnic areas since students lack the basic knowledge to explore different topics. In addition, most minority students adopt a more relaxed attitude towards education so instead of pushing themselves to explore new topics, more students slacked off. This has caused teacher motivation to further drop when teaching students who are not serious about their education. New teaching media and new methods of teaching were also introduced as part of the reforms, such as new

technology, media, etc. This has caused consternation especially among older teachers who feel like they cannot catch up with the modern way of teaching [4].

While there are good programs in place to support teachers, the program is still not going to be effective if there are not enough resources, whether it be human or monetary capital, to support it. As of now, there are not guidelines set to address the high burnout rate of minority education teachers. Teachers believe they are being unfairly compensated for their work in remote areas, and urban schools continue to be the most attractive opportunity. In addition, teachers do not feel enough support to help them keep up with the latest requirements and guidelines that the state has set out for them to use in teaching students. In order to train teachers more effectively, it is necessary to align salary benefits to training and development, and also make teachers feel more supported in their role to teach.

#### **4. Two Exemptions One Subsidy**

Another policy that is aimed to decrease the gap between general education and minority education in China is the “Two exemptions, One subsidy” policy. Since most ethnic minority groups live in rural and impoverished areas, this policy is especially helpful for students and families who struggle with the financial burden of education. The two exemptions in the policy mean that eligible students do not have to pay tuition fees for compulsory education, which includes primary and junior secondary education. Additionally, the second exemption, known as “miscellaneous fee exemption,” covers various additional fees associated with education, such as textbook fees, examination fees, and some other related charges. Students eligible for this exemption are not required to pay these fees. The subsidy in the policy refer to the “subsidiary living allowance” that is provided to students from low-income families. It includes financial support for expenses such as meals, transportation, and accommodation, making it easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access education.

##### **4.1. Negative Externalities Due to Subsidy**

While the subsidy does have some success in alleviating the financial burden on families, implementation of the policy can still be improved. In a case study of Fengping middle school in Yunnan Province, where minority students, mainly *Dai*, account for 91% of the school’s student population, students would use subsidy money on games and drinking instead of its intended purpose. The school would also adjust its local policy to only giving subsidies to students with high marks only, rather than all eligible students. In addition, parents also lack the understanding of the subsidy policy, with some not even knowing how much subsidy their child gets per semester (Suda et.al, 2020) [5]. Other negative externalities also occurred with the implementation of the subsidy. Occasionally, when the subsidy gets delayed, it would make life difficult for students who are dependent on the stipend. In addition, students may take the subsidy for granted and develop an attitude where they believe they do not have to work for the subsidy.

The subsidy is good in theory, but there are plenty of problems with the implementation. The baseline of some area in China are already too poor for school. The addition of stipend from this policy would not help families who are already out of the education system due to their financial situation. The policy ought to be more targeted at its beneficiaries. Perhaps a tiered approach based on the financial situation of each family would be more inclusive and help more students afford schools.

##### **4.2. Lacking Parental Understanding About Education Policy**

Moreover, parental involvement and education about the policy should be encouraged. For example, in Mengla County, the local economy is mainly agricultural, with the Rubber tree and Pu 'er tea as its main products. Currently, the cultivated land is government-owned and distributed among the citizens of Mengla County. Those who do not get farmland usually go to larger cities and towns to work part-time due to the lack of local business. Children are usually left to their grandparents to be raised. However, education is lacking among the older generation, especially in rural areas, and the elderly

tend to put less emphasis on the importance of education. The input-output ratio (financial input for children in education and financial outcome from education) of education is not recognized by the grandparents. Many grandparents have the belief that they should save money instead of spending it on their grandchildren's education. Instead, they opt to wait for their grandchildren to reach the legal working age so they can work for those who have farmland or mimic their parents and work part-time in larger cities and towns. While some do acknowledge that ethnic culture will be lost without promotion of it in schools, and it would be a shame if their children could not carry on their culture, they have a "let it be" attitude. In general, parents do not support education and seldom make their children study hard. However, if parents and grandparents were more aware of the financial aid given to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they may be more open to sending their children and grandchildren to school. In order to disburse subsidy money more effectively, it is important to stimulate the desire for education in both parents and students. The case studies show a clear lack of understanding on the parent's part as a beneficiary of the subsidy, and a lack of responsibility on the student's part in using the subsidy. After all, a huge part of the child's attitude towards education and education attainment is influenced by their household [10].

### **4.3. Lack of Quality Assurance in Schools**

As for the exemptions of fees in the policy, it has generally been met with warm reception from parents and families. However, since the program uses recycled textbooks to keep costs down, some recycled textbooks in the program are not in the best condition, with missing pages or being dirtied through use. In cases like this, the school would have to sanitize textbooks before allowing students to use them and students would have missing pages of learning material. This lack of quality assurance and regulation in teaching materials provided through the "Two exemptions, One subsidy" program shows a clear failure in the implementation of the policy. If ethnic students do not have the comprehensive materials they need to study, then it would set them back further compared to students who do have the complete set of study materials. While it is understandable that the policy is implemented this way in order to keep costs down, it is advisable to take more measures to ensure a standard quality of education is being met through the policy.

## **5. Conclusion**

Ethnic minority education in China is characterized by a complex interplay of policies that aim to address the unique educational needs and cultural diversity of China's numerous ethnic minority groups. While there is success in some of the policies, there are a lot more challenges and negative externalities that occurred during the implementation of education policies such as the conflict of interests in the bilingual policy, poor teacher training and support, and financial abuse in the two exemptions one subsidy policy. For the Bilingual Education policy, it is recommended to set clear guidelines and set out a clear chain of decision-making that schools can escalate up to and or follow orders from. For teacher training, it is necessary to align training initiatives to monetary compensation and provide more support for teachers as they shift into the guidelines set by the New Curriculum Reforms. Finally, for the "Two Exemptions, One Subsidy" policy, it is advisable to educate both parents and students about the benefits and use of the financial aid provided and to set out clear regulations on the quality of education across the board for minority students benefiting from this policy.

This research is significant because it shows that both Mengla County, which is ethnically diverse in minority groups and other counties that are more ethnically homogenous in their minority groups share the same problems from an implementation standpoint of ethnic minority education policies. A limitation of this research, however, is that it is geologically focused on the Yunnan province, where ethnic minority groups live all around China's borders. Future studies should focus on interviews in other rural areas of China to get a better understanding of the effects of the education policies nationwide.

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