Ethnic Minority Identity and Educational Outcomes in a Rising China

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Glossary

Gini coefficient – A measure of statistical dispersion most prominently used as a measure of inequality of income distribution or inequality of wealth distribution.

Harmonious society – A political and educational campaign of the Chinese Communist Party to address indications of growing social instability and focused on the coordination of economic and social development, promote social equity and justice, and to strengthen social affairs management and services.

Nationality autonomous regions – The five provincial level areas of the country associated with an ethnic minority and recognized in the constitution as having a number of rights not accorded to other provinces.

Preferential treatment policies – The policies meant to provide advantages to ethnic minorities. In education, it might include financial subsidies for schools, bilingual education, and points added to university entrance-examination scores.

Introduction

Despite China's meteoric rise, little international scholarly attention has focused on its 110 million ethnic minority population who occupy half of China's land mass and 90% of its border regions (Gladney, 1991; Harrell, 2001; Mackerras, 1994, 1995). China's centuries of experience with ethnic intergroup processes and how it navigates its global economic integration in an increasingly multicultural world add up to a Chinese ethnicity on the move, and one with potentially far-reaching international implications. Already, there is an apparent clash of East–West cultural perspectives on the plight of Tibetans in China.

China presents itself as a multiethnic state but promotes cultural assimilation (Heberer, 1989). Educational institutions in ethnic minority regions become civilizing agencies to transmit mainstream Han Chinese cultural capital. The aspiration to become an economic power, and also to restore its status as one of the world's great civilizations – especially following the nineteenth-century humiliations at the hands of the Western powers – drives

national ethnicity. While its economic rise is a promising start for this restoration, China remains highly sensitive about the presentation of its twenty-first-century civilization to the larger global community.

Thus, reconciling ethnic minority cultures within the vision of its national civilization is a major undertaking. China is moving with trepidation toward embracing a Western-style multiculturalism. Yet, it is aware that many of its overseas families – still considered patriotic and Chinese by blood – have become integrated into Western multicultural countries. Unlike the United States with a large population of voluntary migrants, China is a land of indigenous minorities who are not likely to migrate and therefore more akin in this respect to Native Americans (Ogbu, 1978). While several of China's ethnic minority groups sustained their own slave societies into the early twentieth century, these differed in key respects from the slave experience of African Americans. The American government's concern with a Hawaii separatist movement pales in comparison with China's intense focus on its territorial unity – still a major theme in its ethnic minority discourse and foreign policy. For these and other reasons, the Chinese education makes national unity a central focus. With most of its overseas students and future leaders having studied in the United States, China has come to view the United States as a nation that has successfully used education to build a staunchly patriotic nation. (Like the United States in earlier times, China has used the term nationalities to refer to what is now rendered in English as ethnic groups (the term, in Chinese, for nationalities (*minzu*) and ethnic groups is the same), although there has been a growing popularity among Chinese anthropologists (Bilik, 2000) to use the word *zucun* for ethnic group.)

This article argues that China contributes to the global picture of ethnicity by having sustained the longest history of state-sponsored preferential treatment policies in education, and the manner in which it uses education to navigate its current phase of critical pluralism within its emergent global integration.

Ethnic Minority Education Policy

Most – though not all – of China's ethnic minorities occupy western regions of the country which are poorer and more remote than China's prosperous east-coast

urban areas. Many ethnic minority families have only just entered their first generation of literacy and schooling. Moreover, since most ethnic minorities live in concentrated communities called autonomous regions, their educational opportunities are far lower than what would be available to those in China's prosperous cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. In fact, China's pace of economic development has exacerbated, rather than alleviated, social inequality. According to the Gini coefficient – which is used to measure the degree of inequality within a country – China's Gini coefficient of 0.47 makes it the most unequal country in Asia following Nepal. Nevertheless, of the 55 officially designated ethnic minorities of China, several groups (i.e., Koreans, Tatars, Daur, Russian, Xibe, Bai, and others) have educational achievement levels near or above the national average. It is also notable that socialist China had much earlier instituted a set of comprehensive preferential treatment policies that are still in effect.

These preferential policies provide subsides for minority schools, bilingual education, school textbooks in minority languages, curriculum reforms, ethnic minority teachers training, and boarding schools. In higher education, the most notable policies are those that provide preferential access to college and university through both admission quotas and points added to scores on the national entrance examinations, as well as remedial classes during the first year of college and university (Xia et al., 1999).

These policies are widely believed to ensure educational opportunities for economically and educationally underserved ethnic minorities, especially under the increasing impact of marketization. While these policies have been successful in reducing inequalities by raising the numbers of ethnic minorities attending school and university, most ethnic minority groups still have lower rates of access and educational achievement, especially at university level.

The Sociology of Ethnic Minority Education in China

Research on ethnic minority-education underachievement in China has moved ahead in recent years. The focus has been on multiple factors – ranging from language and religion, cultural transmission and family background, migration, and politics (Iredale et al., 2001; Hannum, 2002; Lee, 1986, 2001; Stites, 1999; Lam, 2005; Zhou and Sun, 2004; Mackerras, 1999; Gladney, 1999; Lin, 2005b; Harrell and Ma, 1999; Hansen, 1999; Tsung, 2003; Nam, 1996; Yu, 2009; Cheung, 2003; Chen, 2004). While there are several works that focus on university students, most focus on ethnic identity in provincial or special universities (Lee, 2001; Trueba and Zou, 1994; Clothey, 2003) rather than

ethnic minority access to and achievement at China's top universities (Sautman, 1999). There is also a growing literature on specific groups. For example, in the case of Tibetans, literature has increased in recent years (Nyima, 1997, 2000; Upton, 1999; Bass, 1998, 2008; Zhang et al., 2008; Seeberg, 2006, 2008; Bangsbo, 2008; Wang, 2007; Yi, 2005; Wang and Zhou, 2003). While the literature on ethnic minority achievement in education is multidimensional, most of it is focused on school rather than university access (Chapman et al., 2000).

Among mainland-based Chinese sociologists and anthropologists, the literature has also grown rapidly. For example, Teng Xing established a research institute for ethnic minority education at the Central University of Nationalities and edits its *Journal of Research on Ethnic Minority Education* (*Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu*) (Teng, 2002). More recently, in a special issue of *Chinese Education and Society*, Ma (2007) has examined one of the stickier issues in the sociology of ethnic minority education – bilingual education and sees an increase in support for Chinese as the medium of instruction in ethnic minority schools. While he favors giving ethnic minority parents a choice of either native language or Chinese as medium of instruction, a market economy prods parents to choose the language of the job market, irrespective of the educational benefit. Zhao (2007) has examined the ethnic minority cultural dimension and concludes that minority culture is marginalized at universities. Zhu (2007) explores how minority students in state boarding schools construct ethnic identities and the specific modes used by individual students. Qian (2007) examined how the hidden curriculum creates discontinuities within cultural traditions and ethnic identities. Ba (2007) – a member of the Yugur ethnic minority of Gansu province – studied how schools disseminate both ethnic minority and modern culture, and argues that there is an estrangement and disjuncture between the culture of the classroom and the community – a result of the choice to absorb the national plan of instruction. Finally, Wang (2008) examined how the children of rural migrants from minority regions who try to settle in Beijing experience double discrimination – as migrants and as ethnic minorities – as they strive for urban membership.

Case Studies

Recent case studies have improved understanding of the processes at work in China's minority education. Although the 1990s saw an increase in the amount of useful quantitative data available, it was unable to capture detailed processes at work as minority students construct meanings and identities from state schooling or to explain why minority children have higher dropout rates. The following section contains the case studies of the education of minorities like Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongols, Naxis,

and Koreans in China. While the themes of these studies are about national integration, ethnic and national identity, and cultural recognition, a common concern in all of these studies is equal opportunity in educational access and achievement.

Zhu (2007) studied the challenge to Chinese education posed by Tibet. Tibetans have had a written language for over 1500 years – one that is in common use across a territory as large as the continental United States. Despite a rich cultural heritage, Tibet has the lowest educational levels of any provincial level entity in China. Doubtless, this has something to do with poverty and remote geographical location. Therefore, schools and classes for Tibetan students were relocated to Chinese cities beginning in 1985 where better school facilities and trained teachers could be used to foster talent to drive Tibet's economic development. In the first year, one-quarter of all primary school graduates were sent to relocated schools in China for 4 years of junior secondary education and 3 years of senior secondary or vocational education. Zhu provides a grounded view of what actually happens in these schools through the eyes of Tibetan students. He also illustrates the contestation over the meaning of Tibetan culture, who defines it, and how students innovate in constructing their identities around that definition. While the school attempted to assign a desired identity in accordance with the state ideologies, the Tibetan students were able to assert a Tibetan identity expressed through the representation of Tibetan culture, as well as influenced by their experiences on and off their school campus.

Chen (2008) examined how Uyghur students in the so-called Xinjiang Classes (Chinese boarding schools located outside of the home province of Xinjiang), respond to the school goal of ethnic integration. Guided by the theoretical framework of social capital analysis, the study's findings suggest that Uyghur students' response to the goal of ethnic integration can be viewed within a series of analytical levels, including the history of the Uyghurs within China, the Xinjiang boarding schools as a formal organization, Uyghur students' social networks, communal norms and sanctions, and Uyghur students' social actions in the Xinjiang Classes. The study finds that the Uyghur students have created bonding social capital within the social practice of their ethnic norms and sanctions. Their social practice draws ethnic boundaries and demonstrates resistance to the school goal of ethnic integration. The students have also created a linking social capital to tap into the resources of peers, as well as staff and teachers, that improves their academic performance and helps them adapt to life in the boarding school. Nonetheless, they lack bridging social capital which connects them with students and teachers of other ethnic groups, thus making the goal of ethnic integration more difficult to achieve. The study explains the Uyghur students' responses as a form of social recapitalization. While boarding-school life limits the acquisition of social capital from their families and communities in Xinjiang, they develop new forms of social capital among ethnic peers on campus to help facilitate their academic success.

Zhao (2009) examined ethnic minority cultural recognition at universities through a multicase study focused on the Mongol undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions. She examines the institutional obstacles to cultural recognition in higher education – despite the state and university discourses of equal access to learning through preferential admission policies. Zhao reports on three particular institutions: the Inner Mongolia Normal University (governed by a Mongol nationality autonomous region), Beijing Normal University (governed by the State Ministry of Education), and the Central China University of Nationalities (governed by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission). Zhao expresses doubts on the extent to which the universities recognize Mongol culture. She asserts that Mongols are a "decorated culture," marginalized within the context of university life and few Mongol students speak Mongol language on campus. She also notes the complex layering of identity between *minkaomin* and *minkaohan* students – the former who enter university by taking the examination in their native language and the latter who take it in Chinese. Not unexpectedly, Inner Mongolia Normal University gives more attention to Mongol culture than Beijing Normal University because the former is within the Inner Mongol Autonomous Region. However, even in the Central China University of Nationalities, ethnic culture is marginalized. Zhao acknowledges that preferential admission policies help Mongol students, but concludes that the lack of cultural recognition on the part of universities limits meaningful access to higher education in China for its ethnic minorities, thereby sustaining their patterns of underachievement.

Yu (2009) studied state schooling and Naxi minority-identity construction. She examined Naxi secondary school students' experience, as well as the role played by Naxi intellectuals', as an asset in student-identity resurgence since the 1980s. The changing roles of school, community, and family in the identity construction suggest that Naxi students retain a strong Naxi identity, by inheriting the knowledge, values, and worldview of their ethnic group, while also managing to fit into mainstream culture. Three forces affect identity construction of the Naxi students: the state and the school; Naxi intellectuals; and socialization in the family and community. As an institution of the state, the school conveys national ideology and instills a sense of ethnic unity and an understanding of the culture of the Chinese nation. While the school takes an active role in ethnic identity construction of the Naxi students, Naxi intellectuals – through their research publications – respond to policies and activities so as to revitalize Naxi culture. The Naxi process of identity construction is characterized by a relatively harmonious

and creative engagement with ethnic and national identity. Two factors contributed to this harmonious identity construction. First, since the late 1970s, the identity of ethnic minority groups has been gaining strength and recognition in China, while – at the same time – market forces have been creating assimilationist pressures. The minorities have taken steps to revive the use of their native languages, and to demand that their native cultures are taught in the public schools. Second, the Naxi already have a long historical tradition of integrating well into Han Chinese culture. Their traditional education is heavily influenced by Confucianism and interactions over several hundred years with Han Chinese. The study contributes to an understanding of why Naxi students adapt generally better than many other ethnic minority groups in China to state schooling.

Gao (2008) studied ethnic Koreans in China, a group widely recognized as a model minority primarily for their academic success rates which are above the national average in China. This research examines how Korean elementary-school students construct meaning out of the model minority stereotype in the context of their school and home experience, and how the meaning construction impacts their educational aspirations and strategies in peer networks. Through comparative analysis, Gao notes that, in a variety of cultural contexts, ethnic Koreans survive as a distinct group that participates in the mainstream without being completely assimilated. Koreans in China and the United States are believed to pull themselves up by their cultural predispositions. This research points to the continued need to modify the model minority stereotype that tends to essentialize ethnic Koreans as a homogeneous group with academic attitudes and success. Research results argue that the model minority stereotype may reinforce the cultural deficiency argument about the academic failure of backward minorities, silence the disadvantages suffered by ethnic Koreans, and lead to no active intervention to remedy them.

China's Ethnic Pluralism

Thus, pluralism is as important as harmony in conceptualizing ethnic intergroup processes in China, and has been the source of much cultural vitality throughout China's history. Yet, this pluralism has not been free of ethnic conflict as in imperial times during the Mongol and Manchu Eras when intergroup processes included both harmonious acculturation and conflict-prone impact integration (Dikotter, 1992).

It is helpful to understand the background themes that guide education of ethnic minorities in China (Dreyer, 1976; Fei, 1980). For much of its history, China was a highly pluralistic society in the world and guided by a culturalist tradition that assimilated many groups into its cultural center. At about the time of the incursions of the Western powers into China in the nineteenth century, this began to change, and, by the twentieth century, China began to adopt the policies of former USSR. This amounted to a more politicized set of themes which led to the establishment of national autonomous regions. There are a number of scholars in China who now suggest that China should draw upon that characteristically culturalist position so as to strengthen national identity among its ethnic minorities (Ma, 2007a, 2007b). In fact, ethnic minority-education policies and practices since the founding of the People's Republic of China have paralleled the changing political climate.

Following the revolution in 1949, the government worked with ethnic minority elites to integrate diverse territories into the national fabric (Dreyer, 1976). Ethnic minority groups were identified and minority languages were recognized and supported. However, political campaigns that stressed class struggle resulted in less generous policies toward cultural vitality of the ethnic minority. The Cultural Revolution wrought havoc on cultural traditions of ethnic minorities. This was followed by a national effort to redress past wrongs, and accompanied by a resurgence of ethnicity. Since 1978, China's economic reforms and its opening to the outside world have greatly increased the interactions between different ethnic communities. This has contributed to a critical pluralism in education in which national patriotism and ethnic minority cultural autonomy have to keep pace with market forces and globalization.

The decision of the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in December of 1978 to launch economic reforms and open China to the outside world continues to have major implications for ethnic minority education. In China's new market economy, competition has become part of the national ethos – making preferential policies for minorities less popular among the majority ethnic group. Moreover, as restrictions on population movement are lifted to fuel the labor market for increased economic growth, both ethnic minorities and Han Chinese migrate to urban areas where they increasingly interact and compete. Many Han Chinese also migrate westward to ethnic minority autonomous areas for work and, often, outcompete local ethnic minorities for jobs. This is especially true for jobs in national infrastructure projects linked to the central government's western development project. The same is true for many small-scale businesses that serve the growing population of Han Chinese from other parts of the country.

Within the ethnic minority autonomous regions, interethnic interaction and competition for jobs has increased. The resulting increase in inter-ethnic animosities is viewed as part of the reason for the government's nationwide harmonious society campaign. (While this campaign focuses on ethnic minority regions and minority–Han relations, it is also related to growing urban labor, urban

migration for jobs, rising costs in rural areas, relocation of households due to urban development, and other social problems.)

The underlying theory of ethnic relations in China since the launching of the economic reforms and the opening to the outside world is Fei Xiaotong's *duoyuan yiti geju*, also rendered in English as plurality within the unity of the Chinese nation (Fei, 1986, 1991). This assimilationist theory has floundered in the arena of globalization and market forces. Rather than move China's ethnic minorities toward cultural assimilation, economic globalization and state schooling have also made ethnicity more salient and intensified ethnic identities.

As the reform period unfolded, China's ethnicity entered a period of critical pluralism. This phase of increased interethnic contact, resurgence, and saliency of ethnic identity occurred along with discontinuance of the job-allocation system, market competition for jobs, compulsory mass schooling that stresses a unified national identity, and telecommunications that make it easier for remote ethnic communities to sustain and extend ethnic solidarity. The increasingly critical nature of ethnic pluralism has placed Chinese ethnicity at a crossroad. Ethnic intergroup antagonisms and misunderstandings can foster a nation of plural monoculturalisms in which ethnic groups emphasize their cultural identities above those of the nation and limit their potential to take on a multiple role in national development. The other direction for Chinese ethnicity is toward a harmonious multiculturalism. This would coincide more closely with the state's campaign for a harmonious society. However, the Chinese state has been unwilling to fully embrace multiculturalism. How educational institutions handle the current phase of critical pluralism may determine whether it generates a national society of plural monoculturalism or harmonious multiculturalism (Sen, 2006). If China is to head in the direction of harmonious multiculturalism – in which conflictual tendencies that characterize interethnic relations are viewed as positive opportunities for building increased mutual understanding, then education has a role in transmitting multiculturalism in three ways: first, by making the curriculum of state schools more relevant to the cultural vitality of ethnic communities; second, by stressing multiculturalism and critical thinking skills; and, third, not only by sustaining preferential treatment policies that increase access to higher education but also increasing ethnic minority cultural recognition on campus so as to foster more meaningful access and academic success.

Conclusion

Ethnic diversity in China rivals that of anywhere else in the world and is the source of much of the nation's vitality.

This not only includes diverse cultural traditions and practices, but also the differing social, economic, and political statuses. While the majority Han Chinese culture and Confucian education heritage exert a significant influence on East Asia and beyond, the cultural traditions and practices of China's ethnic minorities are not widely recognized in China's school curriculum. Nevertheless, they are in the family and community through linguistic, religious, and social practices. Religion is central to the lives of most of China's minorities and the Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion (Mackerras, 1994, 1995). However, there is a strict separation between schools and religious institutions. All but two of China's 55 officially designated ethnic minority groups have their own languages. Some have more than one, and at least 21 ethnic minority languages are used in schools, either taught as a subject or used as a medium of instruction. Since 90% of China's border regions are occupied by ethnic minorities, schooling is expected to ensure that national identity is strengthened enough to ensure social stability, especially in the case of Tibet and Xinjiang where the government has identified separatist movements. Therefore, educational policies are challenged to strike a balance between local and national interests so that the dual construction of ethnic and national identities can take place simultaneously.

See also: Affirmative Action and Higher Education in Brazil; The Education of Indigenous Students; The History of Education: Race and Education.

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