

**Issues Facing Ethnic Minority Education in the  
Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China:  
Expectations for English Language Education and the  
Crisis of Mongolian Language Education**

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# Issues Facing Ethnic Minority Education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China: Expectations for English Language Education and the Crisis of Mongolian Language Education

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## Abstract

With a focus on ethnic Mongolian education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China, this paper explores the issues that facing to ethnic Mongolian education, which has already fallen into headed for decline, after English Language Education became compulsory from the elementary levels through New Curriculum Reform in 2001. This paper reviews on the existing policy, the actual situation and the problems concerned with in the ethnic Mongolian education. It attempts, and give to analyze these issues through the theoretical perspectives of Multiculturalism and Trilingualism.

**Key words** : bilingual education, China's ethnic minority education, English language education, ethnic Mongolian schools, trilingual education

## Introduction

In 1978, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter, China) adopted a policy of Reform and Opening to open up the country. The country moved away from its socialist economic organization, towards a free-market economy. In 2001, China joined the WTO, and its rapid industrialization continues unabated. However, the sudden economic boom has caused wide gaps in regional wealth throughout China, and figures from 2004 show that of the 31 province-level administrative regions in China (23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions = [ethnic minority regions] and 3 municipalities), a ten-fold gap had opened up between the per capita GDP of the richest, Shanghai, and the poorest, Guizhou<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, looking at total output, four of the five Autonomous Regions are in the bottom ten regions, excluding only Guangxi. These Autonomous Regions are at a geographical disadvantage in terms of poor trading locations, and this issue of the widening economic gap with other regions is thus a serious one. In recent years the problem has only accelerated, as the coastal areas continue to enjoy booming economic growth. Areas predominately populated by villagers, and by ethnic minorities, are being left behind; some have not even managed to achieve universal compulsory education. By contrast, urban areas are developing an ever more competitive education system, and high-level English

language education is being introduced into the school curriculum from elementary level, as a necessary skill needed to participate in global economic competition. This suggests that such regional gaps will only increase exponentially in the future. This paper will examine the case ethnic Mongolian schools in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Before English language education<sup>2</sup> became compulsory in all junior secondary education, in 1992, most of these schools had carried out no foreign language education. Despite this, in 2001 it was determined that elementary schools children in grades 3 and upward should also learn English at school. Much hope has been placed on the potential that learning English will have for economic development in the regions. At the same time, however, the native Mongolian language is suffering a decline in popularity within the Autonomous Region; the scope of opportunity to use Mongolian has narrowed, and more and more Mongolians are moving away from ethnic education. This paper seeks to clarify the details of the dilemma that exists between language education - posited as an effective tool in narrowing economic gaps - and ethnic education, and examine the situation of ethnic minorities today, and the issues that they face, whilst maintaining a focus on the retrenchment of ethnic minority education that can already be seen.

## 1 Locating the Issue

### 1-1 English Language Education in China today

English was first taught in China in 1862, when the first specialist foreign language school was opened. Until then, English was taught in a limited number of urban schools, until the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. As this meant the advent of a socialist system, most foreign language education focused on Russian, although English was re-introduced to urban junior high schools in 1958, as a means of learning science and technology. During the Cultural Revolution the use of foreign languages was strictly limited, meaning that English was no longer taught. After the Cultural Revolution, however, and with a series of reforms seeking to open China up to the outside world, English language education experienced a boom in popularity. In 1980, Shanghai, Tianjin and Beijing all introduced English into their elementary curriculums in quick succession, and in 1992, as part of the reforms designed to ensure nine years of compulsory education for all Chinese, foreign languages were introduced as a compulsory part of the junior high school curriculum. Although the languages could be chosen freely, in reality there was a strong focus on English. In 2001, as part of the New Curriculum Reforms, English teaching was introduced into the elementary school curriculum, and at present China is home to an extremely high level of English language teaching (Okihara, Azuma: 1999, p. 45-51). For an example we can turn to data from the 1980s, examined by Kurihara (2005), which compared the average number of English words used in English textbooks used in China and in Japan. Whilst the average total for the 6 Japanese textbooks considered was 13,307<sup>3</sup> words, the Chinese textbooks featured three times that number, at 40,929. Moreover, since 2000, would-be Chinese university Students have been required to gain at least level 4 in the Colledge English Test (of which there are 6 levels in total, 6 being the highest) in order to graduate. If students wish to continue to Graduate School, or to study English as a major, they are required to attain the highest level<sup>4</sup> possible. Throughout university education in general, the learning of languages is considered important, and many students opt to take English classes, studying for around 300 hours a year, and taking classes taught in English (Kasuya, 1999).

However, as noted previously, it is certainly not the case that anyone and everyone is able to enjoy this kind of high level English language education. In the Autonomous Regions, which we will look at next, greater emphasis is placed upon learning Chinese, which functions as a common language between ethnic

minorities, than on other 'foreign' languages. Many regions have no history of foreign language education, and are in a stage of development when compared with urban schools, many of which have over 50 years of accumulated know-how on teaching English.

### 1-2 The Dilemma of Ethnic Minorities

China is an ethnically diverse country, with around 55 different ethnic minorities making up 10% of the population. Regions home to large bodies of ethnic minorities are designed as autonomous areas, of which there are 5 autonomous regions, 30 autonomous prefectures, and 120 autonomous counties and banners. These autonomous areas are granted freedom in their choice of religious practice, and the writing and language that they use. Such areas will also have ethnic minority schools.

In the schools in the Autonomous Regions, bilingual education has been practiced since the 1950s, when the 'Bilingual Education Policy' was introduced, which facilitated teaching in both the Chinese and the relevant ethnic language. In addition to this, then, 2001 saw English language education added to the elementary curriculum. One of the political objectives sought by 'Bilingual Education Policy' was to encourage greater unification throughout China through a common language, thus making it easier for central government to manage and control ethnic minorities. Much previous research has highlighted the difficulties of bilingual research in autonomous regions (Okamoto 1999, Ogawa 2001, Shoji 2003, Haserdeni 2005), but it is not possible to deny the benefits of learning the Chinese language. There is much of merit to ethnic minority populations in learning Chinese, and it can bring about closer communication and exchange with other regions, thus assisting in economic development. Proficiency in English can, in the same way, contribute to the development of Autonomous Regions, and has the potential to become a useful tool in facilitating greater participation in the global economic market. Were the teaching of Chinese and English in schools to be abolished in favor of conserving the ethnic language alone, then these ethnic minorities would remain trapped in the position of a "minority," making a backlash likely. For ethnic minorities, obtaining practically very useful linguistic skills represents an important chance for social improvement. Equally, however, prioritizing economic development above everything else, and focusing only on those languages which will be effective in enhancing that development, could well lead to these ethnic minorities, faced with the difficulties of maintaining their own traditional culture, losing their very 'ethnicity.' This is the dilemma that all ethnic minority communities share. As we shall see in the next section,

the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is already facing a crisis of ethnic culture.

## 2. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region today

### 2-1 The Superiority of Han Chinese people

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region was established in 1947, and its total land area is a massive 1.183 million km<sup>2</sup>. In 2005 its per capita GDP is 9,037 yuan, putting it at 14<sup>th</sup> out of the 31 province-level regions. 2005 saw the national per capita GDP average break the 10,000 yuan mark for the first time, standing at 10,488 yuan, slightly more than that of Inner Mongolia.

The total population is 23.32 million, of which the majority is Han Chinese (79%), with Mongolians next<sup>5</sup> at 17%. The area is also home to other ethnic groups, such the Manchu, the Hui, Koreans, the Daur, the Ewenki, the Oroqen and the Tibetan, but recent years have seen a sudden shift in population, with an ever increasing number of Han Chinese. In parallel with this population shift, the scope in which the Mongolian language is used has declined, and already 12% of the ethnic Mongolian population is not able to speak Mongolian (Hurelbaater 1997). The 'Inner Mongolia Project for the Mongolian Language' was established in 2004 in an attempt to improve the conditions of Mongolian, but according to a report published by the 10<sup>th</sup> Inner Mongolia Standing Committee in November 2007<sup>6</sup>, the situation for Mongolian has not improved. Rather, it detailed the following, grave situation :

- 1) The regional government's Mongolian Translation Bureau has decreased in size, and now employs only 23 full time translators.
- 2) The number of students attending ethnic Mongolian schools has dropped from 360,000 in 1986 to 240,000 in 2006.
- 3) The number of Mongolian language school textbooks published has dropped from 68,600 in 1992 to just one third of that total - 22,500 - in 2006.
- 4) The circulation of the Mongolian language edition of the Inner Mongolia Daily has dropped from 13,800 in 1992 to just 6000 in 2006.

### 2-2 The Increase in Universal Education Levels and the Decline of Ethnic Minority Education

China's education system is centralized, and is unified throughout the country in a 6-3-3-4 year system. The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, therefore, also follows this system. The level of universal education is high compared to other regions, with figures showing that 365,000 children were enrolled in elementary school in 2003, an increased of 43,000 from the previous year. The enrolment rate for elementary

school is around 98%, and the drop out rate just 0.04%. 99% of elementary school students continue to junior high school, which is higher than national average levels. Half of students who graduates from junior high school continue onto high school, and 14% of these students will attend university or vocational college. The region has two major types of schools : Chinese schools, for Han Chinese children, and ethnic Mongolian schools, designed to cater for the Mongolian population. Of all the ethnic Mongolian schools, 7% have adopted a "Extra Mongolian Language Classes' policy. The popularization of education is an issue of national concern, and Inner Mongolia - which has a comparatively low level of unenrolled children - is no exception to a trend which has seen the rapid establishment of Chinese schools, which are able to secure both teaching staff and teaching materials quickly and easily, in an attempt to increase the number of students going onto the higher levels of education. Policy measures have indeed managed to encourage growth in the enrolment ratios, the flip side of this seems to be a drop in levels of interest in, and loyalty to, education taught using the Mongolian language.

According to 2003 figures<sup>7</sup>, the children attending Mongolian schools made up for 44% of the total ethnic Mongolian population, and over half of these children were not being taught any classes in Mongolian. At present, more and more Mongolian children are opting to attending Han Chinese schools, for such reasons as the burden of a bilingual education in both Mongolian and Chinese, the lack of scope for using the Mongolian language, and the overwhelming dominance of the Chinese language at the junior high and high school stages. We can only expect, therefore, the proportion of Mongolian children not receiving any education in their ethnic language to increase (Hurelbaater, 1997). Learners are determining that, since the importance of Chinese only increases the longer they are in school, they should only learn Chinese in the first place. Indeed, the subjects taught in Mongolian at higher education levels are extremely limited, with almost opportunity in the natural sciences. As such, it seems that learners who are keen to progress to further education would do well to equip themselves with proficiency in Chinese from the earliest stages.

### 2-3 The Issues of English Language Education

In 1992, education in foreign languages was made compulsory in all Chinese junior high schools. With few exceptions, however, almost no ethnic Mongolian schools had undertaken any such foreign language teaching until that point, their focus having been firmly on Chinese language education. As a result, the schools had no qualified teaching staff or relevant

teaching materials, which meant that, as an interim measure, English language came to be taught in these schools via the students' second language of Chinese. If students are to be taught English in Chinese, then it is inevitable that children attending Chinese schools will be in a better position in terms of mastering English, and this could in turn lead to their enjoying more employment opportunities in the future than their peers who graduated from ethnic Mongolian schools. In 1993, the Inner Mongolia Education Bureau established experimental courses for ethnic Mongolian students in the Foreign Language Faculties at the Inner Mongolia Normal University and the Tongliao Ethnic Normal College (now Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities), and the courses were recognized officially in 1997, constituting therefore the establishment of the first English Language Teacher Training Course. Despite this, the number of teaching staff capable in English remains insufficient, and English language education in most Mongolian schools is carried out - by necessity - in Chinese, meaning that the popularization of English language education in villages and the plains is falling behind.

Together with this delay in the establishment of an infrastructure for English language teaching, such as securing sufficient teaching staff and developing appropriate teaching materials, there remains another issue for the learner: namely, an overburden of language education. In ethnic Mongolian schools, classes on Mongolian and Chinese had taken up around 30% of the overall school timetable, but with the addition of English this bias towards language learning has become even more pronounced, with around 40% - 50% of all class time being used for language education. Many ethnic Mongolian schools have taken to securing the number of hours needed for bilingual education by reducing class time spent on the Mongolian language.

### **3 Towards the Realization of Trilingual Education**

#### **3-1 Issues with Education in Mongolian**

In the previous section, we examined how the Chinese language is rising to ever greater dominance in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and that ever more Mongolian children are studying at Chinese schools. English language was introduced to the school curriculum without ethnic Mongolian schools having the opportunity to make the necessary preparations, and they are finding themselves unable to teach it properly. In order, however, for ethnic Mongolian schools to function as educational institutions that are equipped to face the two biggest problems facing the region - namely the regional economic gap and the conservation

of ethnic identity - they will have to embrace trilingual education in Mongolian, Chinese and English. In the subsections below, we will consider the prerequisites for the realization of such trilingual education. One of these is a common appreciation of the importance of Mongolian language education, and the other is the development of methods to successfully implement such trilingual education.

#### **3-2 Prerequisites for the Realization of Trilingual Education : (1) A Shared Appreciation of the Significance of Mongolian Language Education**

Firstly, let us examine the question of the significance of Mongolian language education. Bilingual education usually involves learning a minority language and a majority language. There are significant differences in motivation, however, in those cases where both are majority languages (as is the case with Chinese and English), and those cases where one is a minority language. In the former case, learners can fail to see any compelling reason to learn another major language as a second language, and in the latter, learners may find it hard to perceive any reason to continue learning their own native language. It is said that the clearer the purpose for learning a language, the easier it is to be successful in acquiring that language. In the US, bilingual education has been available to immigrants since the 1960s, and whilst the face of bilingual education has changed over the years, moving from a focus on maintaining the native language to obtaining the second language, the US has a firm policy of supporting the bilingual capabilities of all school children, including the children of English speaking majority. As Suefuji puts it, however, "it is a major difficulty for the majority to recognize the significance of learning minority languages" (2002, p.84), and the bilingual education of majority children can thus be hard to achieve. For Chinese ethnic minorities, over 50 years has passed since the implementation of the 'Bilingual Education Policy,' and the Chinese language ability of the ethnic population has shot up, which appears to have generated a skepticism towards the significance of minority populations learning minority languages, considering the overall dominance of the Chinese language. Suefuji (2002) refers to the "recovery of humanity" that learning one's mother tongue can engender. Equally, the Education Committee of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress has given "valuing oneself" "self-esteem," and "sense of pride" as reasons for learning one's native language (Cummins, 2005). This represents the significance of a native language for an immigrant population, and is certainly convincing in terms of actions to counteract the identity crises that first and second generation immigrants may feel as outsiders, but it hardly represents an equally clear

motivation for ethnic minorities living in an ethnically diverse nation. As the generations pass, immigrants will begin to associate their identity with their adopted home, more so than any links with the place of their birth (Chen 2001). In these cases also, then, skepticism is likely to arise at the idea of maintaining a native language, just as it has done amongst the Chinese minority communities. In Thailand, for example, there are Chinese language schools which cater for those children whose native language is Chinese. More and more children, however, are opting not to attend these schools, and Suzuki gives the following as a reason: "it would be difficult to argue how emphasizing an ethnic culture to second or third generation children who have Thai nationality, and were born and brought up in Thailand, is appropriate to the situation that they are in" (1996, 123). In the same way, Chinese schools in Japan had also been experiencing a steady decline in student numbers in the 1990s. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for this decline is the fact Chinese language ability was not seen as a useful skill to have by Chinese residents in Japan (Huang 2005). Recent years, however, have seen a revival in their popularity, brought on by the fact that such schools allow children to acquire three languages with global and general versatility - Chinese, Japanese and English (Huang 2005, Inada 2007)<sup>8</sup>. From this revival in the popularity of Chinese schools in Japan it is possible to see how, for many ethnic schools, fluctuations in the number of students are dependent on the economic value apportioned to their ethnic language, and that, therefore, it is not enough to simply appeal to the fact that the language concerned is a native one.

In order, therefore, to improve the situation in ethnic schools today, the reasons for ethnic minorities to maintain their native language skills need to be made clear. Interventionist policy designed to help conserve native languages needs to be introduced at an early stage, having consulted cases studies in which ability in native language has been successfully maintained.

### 3-3 Prerequisites for the Realization of Trilingual Education : (2) Developing Methods for Trilingual Education

Even if there is a shared appreciation of the importance of education in one's native language, without effective trilingual education there is the danger that schools will produce children proficient in any language. In order to avoid such an eventuality, we can say that a framework for effective trilingual education needs to be built. The teaching undertaken at ethnic Mongolian schools today is based on a nationally unified foundation, to which certain subjects, unique to ethnic schools, have been added, such as the Chinese

language. As such, learners can easily feel overwhelmed. It is not, however, the case that trilingual education per se is impossible to achieve. If implemented systematically it can stimulate the cognitive development of learners, and other benefits can include increased abilities to empathize with other cultures. There has long been debate in the field of bilingual research about whether second and third languages should be introduced only after the first language has been acquired, or it is most effective to teach multiple languages concurrently, and there is no sign of a conclusive resolution any time soon. Neither argument, however, looks to deny the value of multilingual capability. Moreover, as Cummins has indicated, it is said that bilingual students are quicker to acquire a third language than monolingual students a second (2005, p. 88-p. 90). What this seems to imply is that trilingual education in ethnic Mongolian schools could represent a number of potential advantages. At present, however, the realization of trilingual education in ethnic Mongolian schools looks unlikely, given their current curriculums. What is needed are measures to adapt the education system in order that trilingual education might be effectively realized, and the development of appropriate teaching methods.

## 4. Conclusions

As we have seen over the course of this paper, the general climate in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is seeing a decline in the scope of usage for the Mongolian language, and an increasing focus on the English language, both within the context of an environment dominated by the Chinese language. The need to maintain Mongolian language skills is thus being called into question. This phenomenon, then, of the voluntary forfeiture of ethnic language as seen in this paper, is likely to continue as long as economic success in the free market economy continues to be valued above everything else, and it is thus conceivable that a similar phenomenon will be seen across the world, not just amongst Mongolian people. The objective of multiculturalist policies has not been to assimilate the minorities into the majority, but rather to create a framework of education in which minorities can maintain and conserve their own cultures. Multiculturalism, however, may have overlooked the desire for assimilation into the majority that some minorities may have. The positions on this desire for assimilation are split within multiculturalist research. Sekine, for example, suggests that, within multiculturalism, "cultural belonging" and the "freedom not to belong to a culture" should both be recognized, and that "we should accept those persons who desire assimilation" (2000, p 213). Matsuoka, on the other hand, argues that whilst such

a desire for assimilation amongst minorities may appear voluntary, it is in fact little more than “a reflection of the cultural strategy that the oppressed (=minorities) have internalized” (my brackets), something which “creates a cycle in which oppression is reproduced” (1996). An examination of the question of what mechanism might bring about such a desire for assimilation amongst minority populations goes beyond the remit of this paper, but what is certain is that, on occasion, minority communities will opt for assimilation with the majority rather than conservation of their own ethnic culture, and that this trend is likely to increase in the future. There is, therefore, an ever greater need to consider the voices of young ethnic minorities in the future, as it is they who will be responsible for continuing their cultural traditions.

Effective trilingual education, that can both encourage economic development amongst minority communities and preserve the unique characteristics of ethnic communities, is necessary if we are to ensure the survival of diverse ethnic cultures. Research into trilingual education is a very new field, but it is already being carried out in over 30 regions throughout EU member countries, using a combination of ethnic language, national language and English, as part of efforts to both respond to newly multilingual environments and revitalize inter-state movement (Beetsma, 2002 : p. 11). Experiences in teacher training, language curriculum and the development of teaching materials in the EU should be of use to other children in environments where trilingual education is being carried out, such as Inner Mongolia. Together with the insights gained in this paper, we would like to collect more qualitative data on the current situation in trilingual education in ethnic Mongolian schools, and examine more detailed proposals for policy in this area, keeping a firm eye on other international examples of trilingual education.

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(Notes)

- 1 See China Statistical Yearbook, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2004. The per capita GDP for Shanghai was 36,533 yuan (1 yuan = 15 yen), and for Guizhou was 3,504 yuan.
- 2 The system allows schools to teach other foreign languages. Since, however, the vast majority of schools opted for English, this paper refers to 'English language education.'
- 3 These figures represent recalculations of data first used by Kurihara (2001).
- 4 See Overview of English Language Policy in Universities, Education Department, 2000.
- 5 See the results of the 5<sup>th</sup> National Census (2000).
- 6 See the Inner Mongolian News Net, one of the national

news agency ([www.nmgnews.com](http://www.nmgnews.com)).

7 See An Overview of Statistics on Elementary Education in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 2002/2003, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Education Bureau

8 As the economic value of Chinese increases in Thailand also, movement has been seen to promote Chinese language education, and there is the possibility that Chinese schools will regain their former popularity.

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