

Trilingualism or Bilingualism or Else?

Language Use and Provision for Ethnic Minorities in China

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Abstract:

The guiding ideas officially preached for language provision to ethnic minorities in China seem unambiguous owing to the language rights mandated in the Constitution to minority groups. Despite regional differences in pedagogical models, *Minhan Jiantong* (mastery of ethnic home language and Han Chinese or Mandarin Chinese) has been for the last two decades or so the catchphrase used most frequently in official documents as the ultimate aim of bilingualism and bilingual education. Provision of foreign languages has, however, hardly ever been taken as a relevant issue in the literature on minority education. Since the turn of the 21st century, English has been most robustly promoted as a strategically important foreign language in all schools due to various forces of globalisation. Policy documents explicitly stipulate that schools start English teaching at primary level. How do minority education policy makers, commentators, researchers and teachers respond to this challenge? What are the sociopolitical, linguistic and pedagogical implications of this new situation for the notion of *Minhan Jiantong*? Will this nationwide promotion of the English language further marginalize minority groups or provide them with opportunities for equality education? This paper sets out to answer these questions. The major part of this paper is a study of three cases, namely Xinjiang, Guangxi and the Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, which consists of an evaluation of official documents, published research and discussions related to the cases and an analysis of empirical data collected from these three minority regions.