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China's Ethnic Dilemma: Ethnic Minority Education

Guest Editor's Introduction

China adopted the concept of nationality in the late nineteenth century. Since then, China has experienced two ethnic categorizations that served different projects of nation-state building. The ethnic landscape shifted from an obscure classification of five peoples (Han, Manchu, Mongol, Tibetan, and Muslim) in the Republican era to a politically legitimized recognition of fifty-six nationalities after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949. Two "facts" have remained unchanged during the process: (1) the Han constitute the majority; and (2) a complete picture is framed by "the Chinese nationality" (*Zhonghua minzu*), a term coined by Liang Qichao in 1903. Formation of the Chinese nationality was the result of a process interpreted by Fei Xiaotong as "ethnic pluralism within the organic configuration of the Chinese nation" (*duoyuan yiti geju*)1 in the 1980s (Postiglione 2009b).

Did the CCP effectively resolve the issue of cultural diversity and national unification? The question makes better sense if posed from another perspective: How do ethnic groups move between cultural autonomy and cultural assimilation? This is the focus of this issue of *Chinese Education and Society*. Our focus is education, because schooling has been an essential means of transmitting, through history, the self-asserted cultural superiority of the Han.

Choice for a Minority

Ethnic categorization is like a jigsaw puzzle, and the players (usually the authorities) can purposely piece together any picture they want as a useful representation of reality. For the Chinese government, the most desirable image is of ethnic groups maintaining cultural distinctiveness while displaying loyalty to the Han-dominated state. Originally, the effort to weave diversity into unity was to transplant the "autonomous republics" system borrowed from the Soviet Union. Thus, ethnic groups are constructed as "political units," ethnicity becomes institutionalized, and a separate education stream for ethnic language instruction is established nationwide on account of autonomy. Distinct from a mechanical integration by political-ideological ties (Sovietism or communism) in the Soviet Union, the CCP organically strengthens the national identity of Chinese by cultural bondage—the imaginary "common" blood and soil of "the Chinese nation" (Dikotter 1992; Ma 2007). This was especially obvious after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some Chinese intellectuals have proposed depoliticization by replacing "nationality" (*minzu*), a word closely related to "nation-state" with the culturally oriented term "ethnic groups" (*zuqun*) and mainstreaming minority group members rather than isolating them into a separate education stream (Ma 2007; Teng and Ma 2005).

The seven papers in this issue suggest that the choice of assimilation is also an expression of cultural autonomy. Facing the tension of cultural autonomy and assimilation, the preferred choice among non-Han ethnic students is to receive the same education as the

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Han majority—at least as part of their education experience. For an ethnic-language-speaking, rural, non-Han ethnic Chinese citizen, assimilation can mean a good life, prosperity, and accumulation of cultural capital. Yangbin Chen's case study of dislocated Uighur students in a predominantly Han city suggests how families and ethnic communities positively engage in such an endeavor. The papers by Fang Gao, Wuyuncang Ojijed, Zhenzhou Zhao, and Haibo Yu illustrate the aspirations of ethnic Korean, Mongolian, and Naxi students for learning Chinese. The authors use different terminology, e.g. upward social mobility, instrumental orientation, and empowerment, for discussing how ethnic students apply their individual philosophy in reconciling two seemingly exclusive choices between cultural autonomy and assimilation.

The state believes that minority members are able to develop "double consciousness" (Young 1990). In other words, it is thought they can preserve their ethnic culture while assimilating into the Chinese nationality. Yet this reduction of identity shaping decontextualizes individual ethnicity, which actually draws on identities from a multiplicity of social positions, such as socioeconomic status, rural-urban division, and geographic space, as they perceive power inequality embedded in these social positions and seek ways to reverse the power asymmetry.

Is the choice of assimilation made because of the CCP's public policies and thereafter cultural autonomy and competition payoff? To some extent, the answer may be yes. Policies of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities and affirmative action (also called "preferential policies") often become skewed in practice. For example, the law requires that the government head in any autonomous region/prefecture/county be an ethnic minority member, but his or her political power is secondary to the CCP secretary, who is usually a Han Chinese and assigned by the central government. Population mobility offers another example. The flow of Han Chinese cadres and masses marginalizes ethnic cultures and languages in minority autonomy areas and further disadvantages minority members, particularly in urban areas. Although considered illegal, the Han still can find ways to change their ethnic identities as minority members to benefit from preferential policies.

Bilingual educational programs, which include instruction in ethnic languages, and for which textbooks and examinations are translated from the Chinese language, are available from kindergarten through higher education. But it is widely known that these instruction programs fail to promise the same future for minority members as mainstream programs (Zhao 2010). Besides, student choices often start in primary school, even kindergarten, and can hardly transit between the two streams. Unsurprisingly, minority citizens often make "rational" choices to select the latter. As Bulag has observed, "minorities are often forced to turn against their collective interest and pursue an individual survival strategy" (2003: 760). But in this issue, the five case studies focusing on four ethnic groups from the east (Koreans), the west (Uighurs), the north (Mongols), and the south (the Naxi group), and the two papers on policy and population analysis give a more complicated answer.

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Zhiyong Zhu argues that one-fourth of non-Han Chinese students are admitted to universities expressly for ethnic groups or their preparatory courses. This type of higher learning institution gives priority to ethnic language studies and liberal arts, which may influence graduate job seeking in the mainstream market as well as long-term economic development in ethnic regions. Moreover, compared with their Han peers, ethnic students have fewer opportunities for access to key or upper tier universities, most of which are state funded.

Yanbi Hong explores how speaking an ethnic language as a mother tongue at home influences the educational attainments of ethnic students, based on a population analysis. Comparative analysis is performed that focuses on ethnic members who speak Chinese versus those who speak ethnic languages, urban versus rural regions, and the northwest versus the southwest region of China. The findings reveal the interplay of ethnicity, language, urban-rural residence, and socioeconomic status. In general, the ethnic, non-Chinese-speaking students inhabiting rural areas suffer from multiple disadvantages. Another interesting finding is that the government-sponsored bilingual education system is conducive to expansion of educational opportunities of ethnic students and erosion of the inequality between the Han and non-Han, but the establishment of this government intervention shows disparity between northwest and southwest China.

Yangbin Chen discusses the choices faced by Uighurs, the second largest Muslim group in China, when moving from traditional Muslim religious education to modern secular education. Based on a qualitative inquiry of dislocated children in a boarding school, the author suggests that the mobilization of family social capital orients toward maintaining strong loyalty to the ethnic community, on one side, and assimilating into the Han community, on the other. Similar to the findings of other papers in this issue, the driving forces are economic benefits and upward social mobility.

Grounded in a historical narrative of the Naxi, a minority group in southern China, Haibo Yu examines the role of education in integrating the Naxi with the Han. Although most Naxi people can speak fluent Chinese, they still keep a sense of ethnic differentiation. The author shows that assimilation is an autonomous and tacit choice led by the ruling class and intellectuals but does not serve as an ultimate end for pursuing group survival and cultural distinctiveness.

Both Wuyuncang Ojijed and Zhenzhou Zhao use the case of ethnic Mongols to discuss trilingual language use (Mongolian, Chinese, and English) on university campuses. They investigated a bilingual university in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and two universities that were established for the Han majority and ethnic students, respectively. The findings show different functions of the three languages in day-to-day practices among students. Chinese and ethnic languages display unequal capital distribution in the linguistic market. Ojijed's and Zhao's papers suggest that the national policies of linguistic unification (Chinese and English) may exacerbate ethnic inequality. Trilingualism facilitates non-Han ethnic members to envision empowerment behind the backdrop of the government's internationalization project but does not provide a systematic remedy.

Fang Gao's study of a bilingual Korean school gives voice to ethnic teachers and provides detailed evidence that the school curriculum in designated schools for ethnic groups in fact ignores their ethnic culture and traditions and gives some attention only to the most pronounced markers of ethnic culture, that is, language. This finding mirrors Ojijed's and Yu's respective case studies of Mongols and the Naxi.

Why does a system designated to give cultural autonomy fail to gain popularity among non-Han ethnic individuals? In this issue, we will argue that China faces a dilemma when the state establishes, essentializes, and staticizes differences of group culture, while at the same time operating a dynamic process of assimilating minority individuals. We refer to this as the "China ethnic dilemma."

China's Ethnic Dilemma

Can a culture be preserved like foodstuffs placed in an icebox? Waldron reminds us of the dangers of such an effort, because it ignores the most fascinating feature of culture: the "ability to generate a history" (1995: 110). "Cultures live and group, change and sometimes wither away; they amalgamate with other cultures, or they adapt themselves to geographical or demographic necessity" (109).

According to Waldron, to preserve or protect a culture is only to preserve part of a favored snapshot version of it and also to "cripple the mechanisms of adaptation and compromise (from warfare to commerce to amalgamation) with which all societies confront the outside world" (1995: 110). The problem of the Chinese government was to assume a staticness of culture with institutional arrangements to sustain a distinctiveness and exclusiveness of ethnic groups.

The China ethnic dilemma is an embodiment of "the dilemma of difference" observed by Young (1998): oppressed and disadvantaged groups have to deny any essential differences from others in exchange for inclusion in any institution or position, but they also have to affirm group-based differences to redress the disadvantages. This dilemma becomes complicated in the Chinese context on grounds that the state plays a dominant role in controlling and manipulating the process. Chinese authorities establish, essentialize, and staticize cultural differences between groups, and at the same time also facilitate individuals to deny differences for social solidarity and national unity. That combines communitarian and liberal models of ethnic minority citizenship, informed by an ideology of state multiculturalism (Zhao and Postiglione 2010).

A communitarian approach to citizenship implies that ethnic members have an obligation to defend their group culture. However, the dual affiliations to two communities (ethnic group and Han-dominated country) and the dual obligations for two cultures (ethnic culture and the constructed "Chinese nationality") create confusion and conflict. As a solution that compromises these two obligations, the state promotes a liberal approach in which ethnic individuals *supposedly* enjoy personal freedom in choosing their language as the main instructional language in school.

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Yet the liberal choice of non-Han ethnic individuals is subject to two official discourses: emancipation (the Mao era, 1949–76) and development (the post-Mao era, 1978 to the present). In the emancipation discourse, cultural superiority of the Han is reinterpreted and reinforced in terms of Marxist theory, differences are branded as inferior, and minority citizens are encouraged to change the backwardness of their ethnic groups to an "advanced" and "modern" society—that is, the society of the Han. In the development discourse, minority individuals are mobilized to envisage and pursue "a good life," which is actually defined by the public media and state education system. Thus, the "rational" choice among minority members is to break ties with their original community group and enter another social relationship pattern in which the Han play as a principal actor. As revealed in this special issue, ethnic individuals develop their own philosophy in dealing with this state-created dilemma and reconcile cultural autonomy with assimilation through education. They challenge the state-centric approach of identity shaping and pave the way for determination of self and furthering the group.

About This Issue

This issue is a collection of original papers examining the vertical and horizontal contours of the China ethnic dilemma. The first three papers show that the choice of assimilation, when trapped by the dilemma, is structurally and historically constrained. The final four papers suggest that the means for transforming the dilemma and making choices of assimilation turn into expressions of cultural autonomy, that is, mobilization of family social capital and empowerment.

In the first two papers, Zhu and Hong jointly show the structural mechanisms of the ethnic dilemma in China, such as the urban/rural division, the socioeconomic gap between eastern and western China, the establishment of bilingual instruction systems for non-Han people, preferential policies for ethnic groups, and poverty issues.

A historical perspective is posited in the third paper. Yu's paper on the Naxi shows that the choice of assimilation into the Han is (a) a process of temporality starting during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and continuing to the present; (b) a process of dynamic intergroup interactions, with the Naxi group's self-determination as a survival strategy to balance threatening forces of Tibetans, the Bai group, and the Han; and (c) an internal hierarchical process, from the dominating class (the Mu family) to the subjugated ordinary. This illuminates that the China ethnic dilemma is a dilemma not only for the Han state but also for non-Han groups. Education, under the control of the ruling class and the state, becomes a tool of political and cultural domination and affirms the contradiction between assimilation and cultural autonomy. Thus, choices for ethnic individuals are limited.

The establishment of boarding schools for dislocated ethnic children by itself is an explicit indicator of the ethnic dilemma: the state purposely moves Tibetan and Uighur children from their original ethnic communities to cultivate national consciousness, at the same time segregating them in separate classes at host schools to maintain group

distinctiveness and identity (see also Postiglione 2009a). Chen's paper demonstrates how family social capital is mobilized by Uighur families and children to resolve the dilemma.

The final three contrasting papers by Gao, Ojijed, and Zhao discuss how non-Han people employ empowerment to transform the dilemma. These papers focus on ethnic language issues because mastery of the mainstream language appears to be the most direct and efficient way to transform the unequal power relationship between Han and non-Han groups. Their findings, based on different spatial contexts (ethnic autonomous regions and Han-dominant areas) and educational levels (primary, secondary, and higher education) reckon that multilingual competency may become an opportunistic asset, but language itself cannot remedy structural injustice.

These seven papers illuminate micro and macro manifestations of the China ethnic dilemma. They also share a key theme: choice among minority group members is for the individual rather than the group basis, because individual human agents are what change social fabric—and history.

Note

1. There are variations in the translation of this theory, for example, "a pluralistunity structure" (Ma 2007), "Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese Nationality" (Gladney 2000), and "pluralistic unitary structure" (Jenner 2001).

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