

A Review of Ethnic Minority Policy Development in China's Higher Education

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Abstract. Ethnic minority education policy refers to the series of educational systems and measures that national and local governments have continuously formulated, adjusted, and implemented over different historical periods to improve educational opportunities for ethnic minority groups, ensure educational equity, and promote social integration. As scholars delve deeper into policy formulation and implementation, the literature has explored the learning and career development of ethnic minority students under different policies, their social identity, and the allocation of educational resources during policy implementation. This article will review and summarize these aspects, drawing on the literature, analyze the significance of ethnic minority education policy in contemporary society, and the challenges it faces, contributing to future policy improvements.

Keywords: Minority education policy, identity, unequal educational resources, cross-cultural learning

1. Introduction

In an increasingly multicultural world, the provision of equitable educational opportunities for ethnically diverse populations has become a global concern (SDGS 4) [1]. To promote the development of international educational equity, China, as a country with different ethnic groups, languages, and cultures, has always attached great importance to the development of education for ethnic minority students. In China, Han are considered the mainstream group; in addition, there are 55 ethnic groups [2]. These 55 ethnic groups are referred to 'minority nationalities' in the Chinese official discourse. Considering the huge difference in the number of people between the mainstream Han ethnic group and other ethnic minorities, the issue of minority education has long been central to national education policy. Although ethnic minorities account for less than 10 percent of China's population, the Chinese government has always attached importance to the integration and development of multiple ethnic cultures [3]. Therefore, the formulation and implementation of educational policies for ethnic minority students are also crucial in promoting national development. To address structural inequalities and promote social cohesion, the Chinese government has introduced a range of preferential policies aimed at improving access to higher education for ethnic minority students. These initiatives are intended not only to support minority students' integration into Han-dominated academic settings but also to reduce gaps in educational resources and living standards between ethnic groups [4]. In recent years, research on the educational experiences and

identity of ethnic minority students in China has gradually increased. Scholars have explored the issues from different perspectives, including policy, language, identity, and class. This paper critically reviews some key literatures that examine the implementation and outcomes of China's minority education policies, including 'Min kao min', 'Min kao han' and preparatory classes in universities. In addition, the article also summarizes the challenges of uneven distribution of educational resources faced by minority students under these mainstream minority education policies and the identity dilemma in the process of cross-cultural learning.

2. Language policy and identity construction

2.1. The differentiating effects of 'min kao min' and 'min kao han'

Clothey [4] discussed in detail the 'Min kao min' and 'Min kao han' policies, differing primarily in that one provides bilingual instruction and the other monolingual instruction. 'Min kao min' students receive education in schools that use their minority language and take the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) in their minority language. These students typically enter ethnic universities such as Minzu University of China after the Gaokao, with most majoring in their own ethnic language and literature. In the Wang' research, he further introduced in more detail the different models of mixed teaching of Chinese and minority languages.

By contrast, the 'Min kao han' policy is relatively simple. Ethnic minority students receive only Mandarin instruction in Chinese-language schools and take the Gaokao in Mandarin. After entering university, these students are more likely to pursue majors in education, law, economics, and other fields. Clothey [4] and Wang [5] both argue that while 'Min kao han' education can help some ethnic minority students acquire stronger Chinese communication skills, monolingual education forces them to weaken their native language skills and thus marginalizes them within their own ethnic group.

Based on the research of both scholars, we found that the 'Min kao min' policy helps ethnic minority students maintain and strengthen their language skills while also contributing to their cultural heritage. Furthermore, these students can continue to systematically study ethnic literature and history in university. Consequently, they generally believe that studying and living in such an educational environment strengthens their connection to their ethnic group in interviews. However, 'Min kao han' students have more advantages in employment. Their strong Chinese language skills and wide range of majors make them more competitive in the unified academic environment and job market across China.

2.2. The joint influence of language and environment on the identity construction of minority students

In recent years, scholars have generally emphasized the crucial role of language learning in the identity construction of Chinese minority students in a multilingual environment. In particular, the impact of different language education policies on the identity of minority students. Wang [5] compared the two educational paths of 'Min kao min' and 'Min kao han', pointing out that different language education policies have shaped distinct identity recognition patterns among ethnic minority students. For instance, 'Min kao min' students who receive education in their ethnic language often regard language as a core symbol of ethnic identity, emphasizing collective belonging and moral responsibility. Their ethnic identity is endowed by community traditions and culture. On the contrary, 'Min kao han' students who receive education in Chinese construct their ethnic identity

more through personal reflection and choice. Thus, their identity recognition is more fluid and individualized. They often regard their ethnic language as a tool or cultural interest and tend to use Chinese in their daily lives and studies. Different educational models not only affect students' competitiveness in employment and social mobility, but also lead to differences in the use of different languages for learning within ethnic groups.

In fact, scholars have put forward similar views a long time ago. Tsung and Cruickshank [6] pointed out that the state's policy of strengthening multilingual learning for many ethnic minorities since the founding of the People's Republic of China has not alleviated the challenges faced by minority students in their identity construction. Tsung and Clarke [7] also revealed the close connection between language and identity. They found that mother tongue instruction plays a role in maintaining minority language and cultural pride. However, due to insufficient Chinese and English learning resources for exams, minority students generally face disadvantages after entering higher education. Scholars emphasize that language is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of identity and power. In the educational context, Chinese is constructed as a modern and progressive language, while ethnic languages are viewed as traditional and backward. This structural inequality creates contradictions in minority students' identities.

In summary, these studies reveal the complex relationship between language learning and the identity construction of minority students. Choosing which language to use as the mainstream language in their learning and life is a process of continuous self-negotiation and reshaping for minority students. This process involves maintaining traditions or participating in social competition, gaining recognition from the mainstream, or realizing self-worth.

3. Resource allocation and educational attainment among ethnic minorities

3.1. Background differences among minority students and the issue of resource reallocation

In recent years, research on educational opportunities for ethnic minority students in China has gradually shifted its focus to the distribution of educational resources and differences in student backgrounds. Through case studies in ethnic minority regions such as Xinjiang, scholars have revealed that while educational policies narrow intergroup disparities, they also create new inequalities within them.

Han et al. [8] note significant disparities in educational resources across regions and population groups by citing Xinjiang as an example. Urban schools generally outperform rural and pastoral schools in classroom resources and hardware facilities, placing ethnic minority students in remote areas at a disadvantage before even entering higher education. This structural inequality leads to educational stratification even within the same ethnic group, based on differences in family location and economic conditions. More importantly, the state often prioritizes key schools and urban education in its resource allocation to improve overall quality, which in turn exacerbates the gap between urban and rural students. This resource allocation model, while seemingly improving the overall level of education in ethnic minority areas, exacerbates regional inequality.

Liu [2] uses the university preparatory class policy as an example, arguing that preparatory classes give ethnic minorities greater access to higher education through methods such as bonus points and reduced admission scores. However, in practice, educational inequality stemming from uneven resource distribution persists. Empirical research shows that students admitted to preparatory classes are more likely to come from urban areas and economically well-off families, while the proportion of students from remote areas and low-income families is relatively low. Furthermore, significant differences in policy implementation exist among different ethnic minorities. For

example, Uyghur and Kazakh students typically receive up to 50 bonus points, while Mongolian and Tibetan students often receive only 10 points, and other ethnic groups receive even fewer.

Combining scholars' research reveals a dual dilemma facing minority education policies in the process of resource redistribution. First, structural inequality stemming from urban-rural and regional disparities. In addition, uneven benefits across and within groups during policy implementation. Inter-group and intra-group disparities create unequal outcomes among minority students. Those with greater educational and social capital gain a clear competitive advantage. By contrast, although students from rural and border areas are more vulnerable and in greater need of support, they continue to struggle to access equal opportunities. This dual inequality also makes it difficult for the state's compensatory policies for minority students to fully achieve their original objectives.

3.2. The impact of family support on minority students in the cultural capital theory framework

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a powerful analytical framework for the educational development of minority students. Cultural capital encompasses not only the students' own knowledge level but also the implicit influence of their family on their language habits, educational resources, and social networks. These factors play a role in the educational paths of minority students [9].

Yang and Xu [10], through a longitudinal study of a Tibetan girl named Dolma, demonstrated that family socioeconomic status significantly influences the adaptation and empowerment of minority students in educational mobility. Born into a middle-class family in Tibet, Dolma faced intense identity marginalization and academic inferiority during her time studying in an inland class far from home. However, the financial and emotional support provided by her family enabled her to persist in her studies. This case study reveals that the economic and cultural capital provided by a family can help students gain positive financial and psychological support. However, they also found that many Tibetan students from rural and impoverished families are more likely to be marginalized in the same educational environment because of lacking parental educational support and resources.

While Yang and Xu [10] focused solely on the impact of family support within the Tibetan ethnic group on the educational paths of minority students, Chia and Hruschka [11] demonstrated that family support indirectly influences students' educational achievement across multiple ethnic groups. For example, the Manchu ethnic group has developed an educational advantage due to their predominant urban distribution and accumulation of strong social and cultural capital. In contrast, groups such as the Miao and Buyi ethnic groups are concentrated in economically underdeveloped rural areas. These ethnic minority families possess limited capital in terms of language habits, educational expenditures, and social connections, leading to the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage and low income.

Combining the two studies reveals that educational disparities among ethnic minority students stem not only from national policies but are also closely linked to family cultural capital. Middle-class and higher-class ethnic minority families often provide better educational support for their children through various means. However, students from rural and low-income families face disadvantages in the education system due to a lack of learning resources and language skills.

4. The interplay of power, culture, and policy

4.1. The hidden cultural impact of instructional design and educational resources

In China's multi-ethnic education system, instructional design serves not only as a vehicle for knowledge transfer but also as a reflection of national ideology and cultural power dynamics. Recent research has shown that the difficulties faced by minority students in adapting to mainstream educational environments stem largely from the implicit cultural impact inherent in instructional content.

Chu [3] conducted a critical analysis of Chinese primary school textbooks. The findings demonstrate several systematic patterns of cultural representation. These patterns illustrate how the Han, positioned as the mainstream group, exert implicit forms of cultural hegemony over ethnic minority groups. First, there is a power asymmetry between the two sides in the knowledge structure. The Han is naturalized as 'Chinese culture' and are portrayed as helping to educate ethnic minorities, while ethnic minorities are viewed as vulnerable groups in need of assistance. Furthermore, textbooks often focus on depicting ethnic minorities' superficial cultures, such as clothing, customs, songs, and dances. However, contents ignore minorities' true social situations and historical complexities.

In the study of the educational experiences of Hani students in Yunnan Province, Li et al. [12] noted that they encounter cultural hegemony in schooling, stemming from dominant language and institutional arrangements. Mandarin is mandated as the sole legitimate classroom language. In terms of classroom resources, most teachers are Han Chinese or other ethnic minorities from outside the province. Some even believe that Hani language hinders students' ability to learn Chinese and English. The emphasis on Chinese and English in education further marginalizes Hani language. Such language policies and curriculum structures not only undermine the preservation of the Hani language but also pose a potential threat to students' identity and cultural self-esteem.

Combining these two studies, Chu [3] revealed the cultural hegemony against ethnic minorities in Chinese textbook design at a macro level, while Li et al. [12] demonstrated the cultural impact of government-provided educational resources on both individual ethnic minorities and the nation. This suggests that the mainstream cultural standards implicit in instructional design compel ethnic minority students to constantly reconstruct themselves between identity dilemmas and cultural adaptation. This should ensure that ethnic minority students receive not only academic support but also cultural respect and recognition, thereby truly achieving educational equity and social integration.

4.2. Language triggers the integration difficulties for minority students

Most existing research focuses on preferential admission policies for minority students, with only a few scholars addressing the integration of minority students after enrollment. Regarding their integration into higher education, some scholars have analyzed the interplay between students' language proficiency, social environment, and identity construction.

Wang et al. [13] found that the construction of Tibetan identity within the campus environment is a complex and unstable process through a case study of Tibetan students at a non-ethnic university in mainland China, particularly constrained by power relations and linguistic capital. They pointed out that, on the one hand, students must continuously invest in learning Mandarin and English to gain legitimacy and competitiveness in the academic field. On the other hand, they are marginalized by classmates and teachers for using their native Tibetan language and even stereotyped as backward

and violent. Li et al. [12] studied the individual adaptation trajectories of Mongolian students at East China Normal University, revealing the psychological and social impact of this invisible cultural shock on minority students. The researchers found that after entering a Chinese-dominated educational environment, they generally experienced three stages of identity construction: difference awareness, self-doubt, and self-orientation. At different stages, minority students showed different choices and attitudes toward their own language system and identity construction.

A review of the two studies reveals that the integration challenges faced by minority students in higher education are primarily concentrated in non-ethnic institutions. This suggests that these conflicts are not simply a matter of linguistic or cultural differences, but rather the result of the interplay of policy implementation, social power relations, and individual backgrounds. The conflicting use of the mainstream and minority languages in daily life and learning forces minority students to constantly adjust their positions within different contexts. Students need to accept Chinese as the mainstream language to avoid conflict, yet they also hope to resist and reaffirm their identities through cultural practices, such as using Tibetan incense or insisting on communicating in their minority language. Only when policies provide genuine cultural respect and diverse support at the institutional level can minority students achieve true academic and social integration while maintaining their ethnic identity.

5. Discussion

Reviewing the existing literature on minority education policies in China, we find that scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on language policy, resource allocation, and identity construction. First, the government's policies of 'Min kao min', 'Min kao han', and university preparatory classes have broadened channels for minority students to enter higher education. However, they narrow the educational gap between minority students and Han students. Second, research generally emphasizes the role of the language environment in student identity construction throughout the educational process. Students exposed to different policies exhibit significant differences in identity within different learning environments, generally falling into two categories. Furthermore, nationally standardized textbooks and instructional designs convey an implicit cultural hegemony over minority students. This significantly exacerbates the negative impact of Han cultural influence on minority students in their educational environments. Finally, inequality in resource allocation within ethnic minorities cannot be ignored. Urban and economically well-off minority families are more likely to benefit from these policies, while vulnerable groups from rural and border areas face difficulties in receiving genuine support. These differences lead to unequal educational opportunities and unequal educational outcomes for ethnic minority students.

To address these challenges, improvements are required at both national and local levels. Resource allocation must ensure compensatory policies effectively reach rural and disadvantaged groups. Textbook and curriculum reform should authentically represent minority histories and realities rather than symbolic culture. Schools need diverse support systems to facilitate adaptation while preserving identity. Greater family and community support for learning and mental health is essential. Finally, more longitudinal and cross-regional studies are necessary to examine the long-term educational trajectories of different ethnic minority groups under policy influences.

6. Conclusion

Educational policy formulation and implementation for ethnic minorities in China not only profoundly influence the learning outcomes and educational development of minority groups within

the country but also serve as an analytical case for other multiethnic nations worldwide. This article examines the impacts of these policies from three perspectives, including the advantages and disadvantages of different policy models, the identity construction of minority students in diverse educational environments, and the disparities in resource allocation both within and between minority groups. Overall, China's minority education policies have been effective in expanding educational opportunities for minority students and in improving their overall academic performance. However, challenges remain in terms of cultural respect and equitable distribution of resources. Gaps between policy formulation and implementation still exist, which urgently require the attention of all stakeholders. Advancing educational equity and ethnic integration will demand joint efforts from both national and regional levels.

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