

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE CHINESE EDUCATION SYSTEM TODAY AND ITS POTENTIAL REFORMS

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This paper questions, primarily through secondary research, whether the current affirmative action for ethnic minorities in the Chinese education system is able to serve its expected function; it then proposes amendments to the current collection of affirmative policies. This paper also adopts an analytical method that inquires into the challenges faced by policymakers and the likelihood of success of the proposed changes. Policies for ethnic minorities in China are under close scrutiny today, especially when ethnic conflicts intertwined with terrorism and separatism are on the rise, and the underlying tension between the majority Han and minorities over issues such as equality and religion is still simmering insidiously. The Chinese government has had a long history of offering the ethnic minorities affirmative action spanning across the rights to reproduction, education, religion, finance, and employment. Of all the supposedly favorable policies for the minorities, educational affirmative action is expected to fundamentally elevate their socio-economic status, and unite and stabilize the country. Although some educational affirmative action has benefited the minorities, others have actually hampered their advancement up the economic ladder, created reverse discrimination against the Han majority, and exacerbated the hostility between the Han majority and the minorities. This research discovers the inadequacy of current affirmative actions and advocates for educational policy changes and a related reform of the hukou (household registration) system.

Introduction

Ethnic minorities make up 8.49% of China's population, the rest of which is made up of Han majorities.¹ The same report points out that the minority population has grown at a rate of 6.92% since the last decade, higher than the growth rate of 5.74% of the Han majority. The faster growth of the minority population emphasizes the long-term significance of affirmative action in the unity and equality of Chinese society. Each minority group faces drastically different situations due to their varying sizes and distributions. The largest four groups with populations over ten million account for 42.8% of the total minority population, while the smallest group has only 3,556 members. The minorities generally reside and mix across the entire country, with some regions having a high concentration and variety of minorities. Some of these regions are institutionalized as autonomous administrative divisions due to the high density of minorities.

Various educational affirmative actions have caused unexpected unfavorable consequences, including unintentionally further depriving minorities of educational resources through artificial language barriers, creating new inequalities between the majority and the minority and even among different minorities, as well as encouraging ethnic segregation instead of harmony. This essay is concerned about the three main categories of

¹ "2010 年第六次全国人口普查主要数据公报(第 1 号)," *National Bureau of Statistics of China*, last modified April 28, 2011, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428_30327.html

affirmative action in the current education system. Firstly, minority students enjoy preferential admission into high schools and universities. Some of the benefits include quotas, financial aid, and bonus points in standardized school admission tests, including Zhongkao (high school entrance exam), and arguably the most important Gaokao (university entrance exam). The extent of the preference for minority students and the applicability of this policy varies widely across provinces and minority groups. Secondly, in regions of high minority population density, minority students are offered a choice between a bilingual education (ethnic language and Mandarin), where the ethnic language is usually the language of instruction and the study of a third language (usually English) is optional, and a trilingual education (ethnic language, Mandarin and a foreign language), where the study of a third language (usually English) is compulsory. Both streams are available for minority students from primary and tertiary education. The students receive bonus points if they opt for the trilingual stream.² Lastly, there are special schools designated for minority students in minority communities, as well as inland boarding schools or classes for minority students to study together with the Hans.³ Such schools have special quotas, funding, and financial aid for the

² Zhao Zhenzhou, "Part III. 11. The Trilingual Trap: 'Imagined Empowerment among Ethnic Mongols in China,'" in *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*, eds. James Leibold and Chen Yangbin (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 239-57.

³ Liu Chun, *Selected Works of Liu Chun on the National Question*. Vol. 2 (Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2000).

students, aiming to achieve ethnic integration and political stability.⁴

Policy Analysis

China's educational affirmative action intends to facilitate the individual development of the students, whose contribution to their local communities could benefit the local economy as well as integration. Lower admission requirements into higher education institutions have compensated for minority students who are usually from distant and impoverished regions with inadequate educational resources. However, the difficulty in designing and implementing affirmative policies often renders them less effective, sometimes even harmful, for both the minorities and the majority Hans, prompting a rethinking of the policies.

Some of the most harmful policies impose extra burdens and hindrances on minority students deprived of educational resources and opportunities, placing the minority in a dilemma with no easy solution. Since the early days of the Republic of China, the central government has mandated that primary and secondary education for the minorities should be conducted in their ethnic languages, and the study of Mandarin should be on a voluntary basis.⁵ The central government has gone on to standardize the written ethnic languages for minorities as only the verbal ethnic languages, such as to enable their use as languages of instruction. Although the policy preserves ethnic minorities'

⁴ Chen Yangbin, *Muslim Uyghur Students in a Chinese Boarding School: Social Recapitalization as a Response to Ethnic Integration* (Laham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

⁵ Xia Shiwu, *Zhongguo Shao Shu Min Zu Jiao Yu* (Beijing: Wu Zhou Chuan Bo Chu Ban She, 2007).

cultural roots and respects their autonomy, it actually limits the educational resources for minority students and hinders their participation in the economy. The number of minorities who have received higher education is relatively small compared with the Han majority, very few Hans can speak ethnic languages, and very few trained teachers are capable of teaching in ethnic languages. This severely restrains the quality of teaching and the individual attention each minority student can get from their teachers. Moreover, the sheer number of identified minority groups in China makes it formidable and unrealistic to implement separate curriculums and school systems for each minority group that commands its own ethnic language. Since primary and secondary education is mostly conducted locally, the local government could still adopt the main local ethnic language as the language of instruction to cater to the local communities. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible for tertiary education to provide tuition in the respective ethnic languages of different minority students, as universities admit students of all ethnicities across the country. Those who are educated in ethnic languages are, therefore, unable to attend mainstream universities.

Per Nye's theory of the three faces of power,⁶ the minorities are deprived twice, economically and educationally, by the majority of the society. Many minorities come from distant and less privileged communities. They have less economic and political power to gain educational resources and opportunities comparable with those enjoyed by the Han majority who reside in more economically prosperous regions. Researchers in the past have also attributed the unequal educational

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Foreign Policy," *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011): 9-24.

opportunities for the minorities to the uneven distribution of wealth, human resources, and political power,⁷ which corresponds to the constraints in the first face of power faced by the minorities. By prioritizing ethnic language learning over Mandarin in primary and secondary education while not providing the same affirmative action in most universities, the government essentially excludes the minorities from entering higher education in China with the second face of power. The economic and educational challenges faced by minority students taught in ethnic languages collectively exert a third face of power on them, making Mandarin appear to be the only useful and convenient language to learn. By utilizing the third face of power, the government could accelerate the minorities' integration into the Han-dominated economy and civil society in the long term. However, students who are compelled to give up learning in their own ethnic languages could find the education institutions coercive and exclusive. In addition, a new Mandarin speaking generation of minorities might have generational and cultural fissures with their families, creating a new type of social tension.

The high cost of transferring from one language stream to the other also locks in those who have already studied in the ethnic language stream. If a minority student chooses to opt into the same stream as most Han students, a third language becomes compulsory, and he or she would have to finish within three years the third language curriculum that their Han counterparts finish within 6 years. The heavier course load impedes not only

⁷ Rong Xue Lan, and Tianjian Shi, "Inequality in Chinese Education," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 107.

the language learning, but also diverts students' attention away from the other subjects tested in the standardized exam. Although the applicability of a third language in their future life and career is questionable, minority students have no choice but to go the extra mile in order to compete with Han students in the national standardized tests. As Pierson has stated in his work,⁸ once one proceeds in a certain path, a high cost of reversal and path changing would cause path dependence and compel one to continue in the same direction. On a similar note, the minority students who started off in the bilingual stream are likely to stay, fearing the daunting curriculum, and get rejected by the higher education system; those who find themselves already in the trilingual track would have to deal with the seemingly impossible competition from the majority, or forfeit their opportunities of higher education.

Also harmful is the policy of preferential admission toward minorities, which exacerbates hostilities between the majority and the minority, and causes unfair treatment across different minority groups and even within minority groups. The Ministry of Education of China (MOE) has revised its guidelines for preferential admission to release the responsibility of making preferential admission policies to each local government.⁹

⁸ Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 251.

⁹ “关于进一步减少和规范高考加分项目和分值的意见,” *Ministry of Education of China*, last modified

Therefore, across provincial districts, minority students enjoy different extents of preference. Within each provincial district, minority students would also enjoy different preferential policies depending on where their home addresses were registered. For example, in Hebei Province, minority students with home addresses registered in autonomous counties receive twice the bonus points compared to one living in a Han community.¹⁰ The difference in treatment is arbitrary, because home address is not a satisfactory indicator of the educational resources one has received. The arbitrarily different treatment among the minority students creates new inequalities across different minority groups. Assuming residents from the Han communities are monolithically more privileged - despite the fact that some underprivileged minorities indeed reside in Han communities - the distribution of affirmative action based on home addresses unintentionally dissuades minorities from living among the Han. This policy encourages ethnic segregation, and perpetuates the image of poor and uneducated minorities. On the other hand, bestowing all minority students with preferential admission regardless of their family income and educational resources risks overcompensating minorities that are better off than their peers. This gives the well-off minorities an unjustified edge in the competition with the Han majority. Leibold observes that this policy has caused wide discontent

<http://old.moe.gov.cn//publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s4559/201412/181754.html>

¹⁰ Wang Tiezhi, "Preferential Policies for Minority College Admission in China: Recent Developments, Necessity and Impact," in *Affirmative Action in China and the U.S.A Dialogue on Inequality and Minority Education*, eds. Minglang Zhou and Ann Maxwell Hill, 1st ed (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71.

among the Han majority and a Han nationalistic backlash.¹¹ The policy not only fails to identify and benefit the target recipients with the imperative need for affirmative action, but is also against the fundamental principles of fairness, unity, integration, and societal stability.

The last category of affirmative action, inland classes for minority students, is less harmful for the students, but has also been unsuccessful. Most of the minority students are still taught separately from Han students due to differences in Mandarin and academic proficiency. After class, minority students live on campus, while most of their Han school mates do not.¹² The disparate cultural backgrounds and limited shared educational experience is not conducive for communication and understanding between the majority and the minority. In fact, the inland classes foster a distinctive identity. The inland class students are said to feel intellectually superior to minority students in the bilingual stream from their hometown, while feeling more rooted in their ethnic culture than those in the trilingual stream from their hometown.¹³ The inland minority

¹¹ James Leibold, "Han Chinese Reactions to Preferential Minority Education in the PRC," In *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*, eds. James Leibold and Yangbin Chen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 279.

¹² Chen Yangbin, *Muslim Uyghur Students in a Chinese Boarding School: Social Recapitalization as a Response to Ethnic Integration* (Laham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 5.

¹³ Chen Yangbin, "Towards Another Minority Educational Elite Group in Xinjiang?" In *Minority Education in China: Balancing Unity and Diversity in an Era of Critical Pluralism*, eds. Chen Yangbin and

students, thus, become a lost community that is unable and unwilling to fit in either the majority or the other minority communities.

Challenges in Policy Making

The current problematic policies present challenges in policymaking that arise from China's multi-ethnic reality. Future proposals have to address the problems by acknowledging and tackling these challenges.

The most fundamental challenge is that the diversity of ethnic groups and the large size of China lead to high administrative costs when formulating and regulating affirmative action policies in the education system. Each of the 55 minority groups has its unique needs, including but not limited to an ethnic language curriculum. Larger ethnic groups seek the preservation of their ethnic culture, while smaller groups with populations of only a few thousand require the facilitation of integration alongside anti-discrimination efforts. In addition, each group is not monolithic either; some members dwell together in ethnic autonomous districts that are usually distant and less affluent, while others spread all over China and reside in Han communities that are often more accessible and affluent. Although the power of making particular affirmative policies resides in the local governments, such that they could attempt to tailor their policies to best accommodate the actual needs of the local minorities, this decentralization compromises proper regulation, coordination, and fairness across different provincial districts.

James Leibold (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 201.

Another challenge arises from the rationale behind affirmative action. There is often a gap between what the policy makers consider beneficial for the minorities and what the minorities really want. The largely unsuccessful attempt of the current trilingual education policy epitomizes the tough choice for minorities between participation in the economy and their cultural roots. The extra educational resources and options provided by the government to aid the minorities ironically turn into burdens and academic barriers for the students. Any new policy has to either align the interests of development with cultural preservation, or find a middle ground between the two demands.

The problems in China's controversial educational affirmative action cannot be understood in isolation as a purely ethnic issue. It has roots in China's imbalanced regional development and social stratification along ethnic and geographical divisions. The more economically developed provinces along the east coast coincide with small minority populations, while the less economically developed inland provinces near the border have larger and more diverse minority populations. For example, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, the two provinces with the highest GDP per capita in 2014,¹⁴ have extremely low minority population percentages of 0.33% and 0.86% respectively in the Fifth National Population Census.¹⁵ On the contrary, Gansu and Guizhou, the two provinces with the lowest GDP per

¹⁴ "2014 National Data," *National Data*, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://data.stats.gov.cn/>

¹⁵ "第五次人口普查公报—江苏," *National Bureau of Statistics of China*, last modified May 15, 2001, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/dfrkpcgb/200203/t20020331_30354.html

capita in 2014, have higher than average minority percentages of 8.69% and 37.85% respectively.¹⁶ The difference in affluence, in Max Weber's theory of class, leads to different market situations and, therefore, different life chances for the minority and the majority.¹⁷ The life chances include the opportunities of receiving higher education and entering schools with bettering standing. Weber's theory suggests that the inequality might be unsolvable. Different market situations stratify the majority and minority into different classes that adopt different lifestyles, and keep them in the same class through marriage. If minorities cannot develop economically in step with the Han majority, they would face a perpetual inadequacy of educational resources despite affirmative action.

Proposed Policy Change

The proposed new policies seek to build on and modify the current affirmative action policy, tackling specifically the challenges identified in this paper. The different policies will interact with each other to achieve an equal education system and a united society.

The top priority in reforming the affirmative action is to privilege the learning of Mandarin, while implementing ethnic culture appreciation programs at schools from ethnic autonomous districts. Providing unique curriculums in ethnic languages is not sustainable considering the large number of minority groups with their own language, and the limited number of qualified teachers who can facilitate such education. A commonly practiced language is a foundation of a united and fully

functional dynamic society. Even if the government could implement an ethnic language education program, the job market in China lacks the appetite for a workforce that is not conversant in Mandarin. The lack of proficiency in Mandarin has been preventing minority students from receiving a fair amount of resources, accessing higher education, and participating in a more and more delocalized economy in the future. Mandarin should be used as the primary language of instruction in schools across China, while the study of a third language should be optional for the minorities who used to study in their ethnic languages. Those who choose not to study a third language should receive a waiver and be considered for admission into higher education institutions on the basis of their results for the other subjects of the standardized test. However, this is a temporary measure. The long-term goal of this policy is to make both Mandarin and English compulsory subjects of study for all, in order to equalize education for all, and enable both the majority and the minority to participate in the economy. At the same time, ethnic languages will recede to a supplementary status comparable to that of a dialect. Schools from autonomous districts could utilize the funds that were used to provide unique curriculums to implement non-academic local ethnic culture appreciation programs. Since the preservation of ethnic languages is motivated more by respect for the uniqueness of minority culture than a practical purpose, ethnic languages should not become a barrier in the personal development of minority students. This policy unifies the language path for all students, thus eliminating the high cost of shifting between streams that stems from path dependence.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Foreign Policy," *Journal of Political Power* 4, no. 1 (2011): 9.

Inland classes for the minorities could be maintained, but their implementation has to be more conducive to interaction and integration between the majority and the minority. This policy builds on the success of an all-Mandarin curriculum. When the minority students have already built a strong foundation of Mandarin and a third language in their native land, they do not have to be allocated into the same special classes to attend supplementary language courses. Hans and minorities studying in the same class would allow more interaction and mutual understanding among students. Moreover, early exposure to Mandarin and English would remove hindrances in studying other subjects taught in Mandarin. This allows an equal expectation of academic performance from both the Hans and the minorities, reducing the likelihood of discrimination based on academic performance.

The high administrative cost and unfairness of coordinating preferential admissions based on ethnicity, coupled with how class and ethnic issues intersect, determine that preferential admission should be abolished in the long term. If the previous two policies have been successfully implemented, minority students would be under a largely identical educational framework as the majority. A sweeping preference for the minority would no longer be applicable in this case.

Having said that, an equal educational framework does not guarantee equal opportunities and resources. Market forces should be wielded to enhance the development of minority students and the unity of society. This could be realized by reforming the “hukou system” (the household registration system that localizes one’s welfare, education and medical benefits) to facilitate the free movement of the minority population, that is willing and able to move, into regions and communities

that offer better education. A larger population could then enjoy a higher standard of education in the short run. In the long run, the spill-over effect of an over-demand for educational services in these regions could speed up the upgrade of educational resources in neighboring regions to benefit a larger population. Meanwhile, the central government should make a concerted effort together with the local government to redistribute wealth regionally through the transfer of payments, in order to improve educational resources and opportunities in distant and impoverished autonomous districts, thereby addressing their urgent need for a higher standard of education.

Conclusion

The current collection of educational affirmative action policies for minorities in China has not completely leveled the playground for students with different background and educational resources. Meanwhile, it has created new social challenges, such as a language barrier for minorities in tertiary education and unfairness across regions and different minority groups, and even within minority groups. In addition, the current sweeping preferential policy risks further ethnic segregation and hostility between the ethnic majority and minority.

China is a large state with many legally identified minority groups. Educational affirmative action in China is complex and is intertwined with unbalanced economic development across regions. The resulting uneven distribution of educational resources determines that a sweeping preferential policy is neither feasible nor justified in the long term. The successful implementation of Mandarin as the standard language of instruction across China can have the immediate effect of opening up tertiary education opportunities for the minority, although

the successful implementation would require trained manpower and support from minority communities which are inadequate at the moment. In the long run, the education and exam system must be separated from the hukou system to encourage the movement of minority students for access to better educational resources. The free movement of students would raise the demand for premium educational resources. The spill-over effect of the higher demand is expected to incentivize the upgrade of educational resources in regions nearby.

The effect of the proposed new policies could be evaluated by collecting data every ten years of minority students' performance in national standardized tests, teacher-to-student ratios in autonomous districts, and the percentage of minority students in tertiary education institutions, and by surveying both the minority and majority students on their understanding and closeness to each other. The data could be compared with data collected before the implementation.

There should be a realistic expectation of the time frame for the new policies to function. This is due to the diversity of China's ethnic groups and the complexity of intertwined economic and ethnic inequalities. A realistic expected period for the most foundational change in language policy to function should be a complete cycle of primary and secondary education, which amounts to 12 years. Subsequently, the effect of the other changes to affirmative action could be evaluated. The ultimate resolution of inequality in education and the social gap between the majority and the minority cannot be achieved without coordinated reforms in the "hukou" system and regional development. This extends the time frame for the new policies to function fully.

The proposed changes have not answered two underlying philosophical questions of affirmative action, however: firstly, how might we balance the interests of society and the individual? Secondly, should the beneficiaries of affirmative action be obliged to give back to the education system? Future studies should address these questions and suggest how beneficiaries could be more accurately targeted to overcome the diversity of the minority groups.

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