CHAPTER 6

EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY IN CHINA:
RESPONDING TO GLOBALIZING AND LOCALIZING FORCES

Stephen Bahry, Patrick Darkhor and Jia Luo

In recent years, the question of globalization has come to the fore in discussions of political, economic, cultural and economic change, a debate in which China is no bystander. Indeed, many within China see the recent educational changes as in part responses to globalization. China requires a “world-class curriculum” with national educational objectives (Wu, 2003), and so the Ministry of Education (2002a) justifies the latest curriculum reform in China as a response to three major global forces: 1) the rapid rise of the information economy, 2) the intensification of global economic competition, 3) and the increasing degradation of the natural environment. In this light, the Education for All (EFA) campaign co-sponsored by UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank has led to more countries passing regulations, as China has done, on compulsory primary and junior secondary education (UNESCO, 2000).

To what degree has universal basic education spread to China? On quantitative measures of the achievement of EFA objectives such as enrollment, attendance, dropout and completion figures, China made huge strides in spreading basic 9-year education; however, when these measures are disaggregated by gender, region and ethnicity, the picture is much more complex, for there remain significant disparities in completion of basic education between male and female students, among regions and ethnicities (UNESCO, 2000).

This chapter deals with the complexity of change in education in China and its responses to local, national and global influences. The first section draws on the results of the most recent national census to illustrate the complex interaction of region, ethnicity and gender on educational attainment throughout geographic and social space in China. Next the chapter addresses two contrasting conceptions of quality education in China’s national curriculum that lie behind recent curriculum reforms that include limited decentralization of curriculum authority to the local and school level. A review follows of approaches to linguistic, cultural and environmental diversity within China through bilingual education, multicultural education and environmental education.
Finally, a comparative perspective on approaches to diversity in Chinese education is provided, drawing parallels and contrasts with North American education.

We draw on their field research in China on culturally relevant local curriculum for Tibetan-speaking areas in rural northwest China (Jia Luo), on stakeholders’ perceptions of the role of the mother-tongue and bilingual education in the revitalization of an endangered minority language in rural northwest China (Bahry), and of teachers’ perceptions of development of school-based curriculum for environmental education in urban northeast China (Darkhor). In addition, they discuss relevant primary documents and statistics published in Chinese and secondary research published in English and Chinese.

EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY IN CHINA

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China embarked upon a radical mass-education policy, which was achieved in several ways: by the opening of many non-formal “people-run” schools using unqualified or partially qualified teachers, which greatly increased access to schooling particularly at the village level; by restricting the practice of holding back students who performed poorly on tests; by rescinding the use of entrance examinations to control promotion from primary to junior secondary and from junior to senior secondary education (Hawkins, 1992; Lewin, Xu, Little & Zheng, 1994; Pepper, 1990; Price, 2005). According to Suzanne Pepper, China’s intellectuals opposed the populist approach to education, which in their view, sacrificed quality for the sake of valueless quantity, summing up this viewpoint as “no school was preferable to a low-quality school” (1990, p. 31). Thus, Pepper argues, educational policy after 1977 was radically reoriented from a “mass education” model to an “elite education” model. As a result of this policy shift, many schools were closed and the numbers of youth not continuing in school increased (Pepper, 1996).

Statistics from the 2000 census permit a concrete illustration of scale of the reduction of the secondary level education. As is evident from Table 6.1 below, which displays the percentage of each 5-year age cohort from 1936-40 to 1981-85 who were able to complete junior and senior secondary school, fewer students in the 1966-70 cohort completed secondary education than the previous cohort. The drop was particularly stark at the senior secondary level, 8% for males and 5.2%. Indeed, by 2000, male senior secondary completion levels had still not reached the completion rates achieved during the 1970s.

Of course, this begs the question: what is a good school, a good teacher, a good student? The answer of Chinese society at large is that the central criterion is high scores on the GaoKao national college entrance examination (CEE), which is the measure of student quality, teacher quality and school quality. This powerful influence of entrance examinations on curriculum and pedagogy extends down the line: a good junior secondary school prepares students well to pass key senior secondary school entrance examinations, etc. (Epstein, 1993; ‘Harmful key school system’, 2006; Huang, 2004; MOE, 2002a).
Table 6.1 Population with Complete Junior and Senior Secondary Education (2000 Census) (Percentage of 5-year Age Cohorts from 1936-85)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Born</th>
<th>Age in 2000</th>
<th>Junior Secondary</th>
<th>Senior Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-40</td>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>1949-55</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-45</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>1954-60</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-50</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>1959-65</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-55</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>1964-70</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-60</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>1969-75</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-65</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>1974-80</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-70</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>1979-85</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-75</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>1984-90</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-80</td>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>1989-95</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: calculated from China (2002)
Furthermore, quality of schools and education depends on financial resources, which vary considerably among regions, as illustrated in Figure 6.1 above, which displays the Gross Domestic Product Per Capita (GDPPC) for 2003 by province and region. As might be expected, educational attainment in China varies greatly according to where students live. City residents complete more schooling than town dwellers, who in turn receive more education than those in township centers and villages (See Figure 6.2 below). Similarly, there is broad variation in years of schooling by region, as is evident from Figure 6.3 below, which indicates average total years of schooling by province. Clearly, although areas of low income and low educational attainment do not coincide exactly, there is considerable overlap between the two.

Beyond rural-urban and provincial disparities, educational attainment also varies considerably among ethnicities. As can be seen from Figure 6.4 below, most minority languages in China are found in south-western, north western and north eastern China, again showing a considerable amount of overlap with Figures 6.1 and 6.3. Mean figures averaging educational attainment figures for all minorities together fail to capture the complexity of the situation. For example, while from 1990 to 2000, the mean proportion of China’s population aged 6 and above with higher education rose from 2 to 3 percent, when China’s ethnic groups are compared, there is a great deal of diversity. For example, the average proportion of the population with higher education in 1990 and 2000 among Koreans was well above average, 5.25% and 8.38% respectively; among Tibetans, 1.68% and 1.34%, well below average; and among the majority ethnicity, the Han, 2.03% and 3.82%, close to the national average (China, 2002).
Figure 6.2 Educational attainment and residence: Cities, Towns, Countryside (China 2000 Census)
Source: calculated from China (2002).

Figure 6.3 Average years of schooling completed in China by region and province (2000 census)
Source: prepared by authors from China (2002).
This variability becomes even more complex when we disaggregate statistics on educational attainment by gender. Relative gender balance exists for primary education, where universal completion has now been virtually achieved, and the gender gap in senior secondary completion is decreasing (UNESCO, 2000; China, 2002). Nevertheless, gender, region, ethnicity and attainment interact, not necessarily in the same way at each level of schooling or for each ethnicity. From Figure 6.5 above, it is evident that educational attainment is greater in most regions for males than females, but the gap in most regions is fairly small. However, there is considerable variation among regions, such that females’ educational attainment levels in one region may be as high as or higher than male attainment levels in another region.

Similarly, among most ethnicities educational attainment levels are higher among males than females, but that is not to say that female educational attainment is uniformly low. In fact, educational attainment for females of one ethnicity may be higher than those of males for another ethnicity. For example, as can be seen from Figure 6.6 above, as of 2000, completion rates are higher for Korean females than Han males and for Han females than Tajik males. This suggests that cultural attitudes toward the importance of state education for males and females are not uniform in China, but may differ among ethnicities. Hansen (1999) found that among the Dai of southwest China, for example, a traditional Buddhist education was highly valued for males and not for females, so that many boys would drop out of government schools at some point to attend a monastery school,
Figure 6.5 Educational attainment of population aged 6 and higher by region and gender (%)
Source: calculated from China (2002).

Figure 6.6 Educational Attainment: Interaction of Ethnicity and Gender (2000 Census)
Source: calculated from China (2003).
whereas for girls state schooling was the only means to continue their formal education.

For higher levels of schooling, residence may take priority over gender. As is evident from Table 6.2 below, town females more often complete junior and secondary schooling than do countryside males; similarly, city females more frequently graduate from junior and secondary schooling than do town males.

**CURRICULUM REFORM IN CHINA: WHAT IS QUALITY EDUCATION?**

The Ministry of Education (2002a) has recently produced a strong critique of the élite model of Chinese education in force after 1977, calling this approach both *examination-oriented education*, in reference to its overdependence on examinations to determine curriculum and pedagogy, and also *promotion-oriented education*, due to the overemphasis of promotion to the next level of the education system as the main measure of quality of schools and pedagogy. It is argued that *examination-oriented education* aimed mainly at college preparation for urban students, focusing excessively on intellectual development, and neglecting the development of other important qualities of students. The Ministry of Education has proposed instead, *education for essential qualities*. By *essential qualities*, they mean innate and acquired characteristics of students. The aim of this reform is to foster students’ “all-round development”, which is explained as balancing the development of not only knowledge, but also practical skills and positive attitudes: providing not only intellectual training, but also physical, moral, esthetic and labor education. Learners are no longer expected simply to receive and faithfully reproduce knowledge from authoritative sources, but are also expected to show practical problem-solving skills, creativity, innovation ability, independent learning skills and positive attitudes towards learning, all areas that *examination-based education* is said to have neglected.

The MOE (2002b) has also criticized the *uniformity* of knowledge in the single unified standard curriculum for all China oriented mainly to large urban centers on the east coast. This centralized curriculum presented lessons that were far from the experience of most Chinese, failing to connect to the curriculum the prior knowledge of the majority of the country’s children, who live in rural areas. Under *examination-based education*, the majority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Complete Primary (%)</th>
<th>Junior Secondary (%)</th>
<th>Upper Secondary (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All China</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towns (Zhen)</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townships and Villages</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.3 New national basic education curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Junior secondary</th>
<th>% of 9-year Total Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>20-22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>13-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arts, or Music &amp; Fine Arts</td>
<td>9-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>Physical Education &amp; Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character &amp; Life</td>
<td>Moral Character &amp; Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science, or Biology, Physics &amp; Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>6-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Local and School-based curriculum</td>
<td>10-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Practice Activities</td>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours/week</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual hours</td>
<td></td>
<td>910</td>
<td>910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Of China’s students were “failed” students, who not only did not succeed in the college-bound curriculum, but also failed to learn any practical knowledge and skills useful in their local area outside school, seriously affecting their ability to find suitable employment and to make a positive contribution to their local community. As a result, the MOE has introduced three levels of curriculum management: the national curriculum, local curriculum and school curriculum, and requires up to 10-12% of classroom time be spent on local and school curriculum, and 6-8% of time be spent on comprehensive practical activities decided at the local and school level. Local and school-based curricula are intended to compensate for weaknesses of the national curriculum in the local context (Ministry of Education, 2002a, b; Huang, 2004; Su, 2002; UNESCO, 2000). Table 6.3 above summarizes the new curriculum in tabular form.
ADAPTING CURRICULUM TO LOCAL LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY:
BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

Article 4 of China’s constitution has enshrined “the right to use and develop minority languages in minority communities” (Zhou, 2004, p. 79). Article 36 of the PRC Regional Autonomy Law for Minority Nationalities states that “schools mainly enrolling minority students should adopt textbooks in minority languages and scripts when available and use minority languages as the medium of instruction; in upper grades in primary schools or in secondary schools Chinese courses should be offered and Mandarin should be used”. Article 36 applies, however, only in special territories granted limited autonomy to protect minority culture and language (China, 1998, cited in Zhou & Sun, 2004, p. 78). Further, since Article 36 states a preference rather than requirement for minority language schooling, it leaves the choice of implementation mode to local authorities, producing a wide range of practices.

Zhou (2004) concludes that local interpretation of policy depends on contingent factors, arguing, for example, that minorities with established traditional scripts generally receive mother-tongue or bilingual education, since they strongly resist Mandarin-only education, whereas for ethnicities without traditional scripts, Mandarin-only education is pervasive. Zhou (2004) also argues that ethnic minorities are more likely to receive bilingual education if their population is numerous and located in strategic border areas. Thus, while central language-in-education policy is the same for all China, implementation of policy for language minority children is manifested in a range of possibilities as can be seen in Table 6.4 below. The models range from monolingual Mandarin instruction, to five different forms of bilingual education.

Thus, China’s policies include both rights-based elements (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006), in that the possibility of minority language education is enshrined in laws and regulations, and norms-based elements (Patten & Kymlicka, 2003), in that standard Mandarin-medium education is treated as the norm, with compensatory policies and programs provided for minority learners who have difficulty in mainstream schooling. Compensatory policies that focus on reducing minority difficulties in college admission include:

a) the option to write college entrance exams in a minority language
b) lowered CEE cut off scores for college admission for minority applicants, and
c) quotas for minimum numbers of minority students to be admitted (Sautman, 1999).

Chinese minority language-in-education policy also follows both a “territoriality principle” and a “personality principle” (Patten & Kymlicka, 2003, p. 22), in that while the right to use a minority language is granted to all without limitations as to location (personality principle), minority language schooling is only granted in designated areas of concentrated minority population (territorial principle). Thus, outside of these territories, minority language education is unavailable, for example, in urban centers. Like Ogbu’s “voluntary minorities” (1991), migrant minority parents do not
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Function of Mandarin</th>
<th>Function of Minority Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mandarin Submersion</td>
<td>All formal curriculum, textbooks &amp; instruction in Mandarin</td>
<td>No support for minority language; local environment may support minority language use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Minority Language + Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin taught as subject only</td>
<td>Mother-tongue Education Medium of instruction for all subjects except second language subject class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mandarin + Minority Language</td>
<td>Medium of instruction for all subjects except mother tongue subject class</td>
<td>Minority language taught as subject only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mixed Bilingual Education</td>
<td>Formal instruction in Mandarin</td>
<td>Informal oral explanation to supplement Mandarin instruction and explain what was not understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Transitional Bilingual Education</td>
<td>Subject in early grades; later shift to main / exclusive medium of instruction</td>
<td>Medium of instruction in early grades; later occasional use; rarely used in senior secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Maintenance Bilingual Education</td>
<td>Medium of instruction for some subjects throughout schooling (usually sciences)</td>
<td>Medium of instruction for some subjects throughout schooling (usually humanities)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

expect the state to provide their children to be taught in their heritage language (Iredale, Bilik & Wang, 2001).

**DEBATES WITHIN CHINA ON IDEAL MODELS OF LANGUAGE(S) OF INSTRUCTION**

According to Ma (2007), there are two main schools of thought among officials in ethnic minority areas and minority parents about language of instruction for minority children:

Those who want to emphasize minority-language instruction stress the idea that when minority students who have no understanding of Chinese are put in a situation where they must start learning it directly, the results are not good. …There are some teachers, parents of students, and even some students themselves who believe that since placement examinations, especially college entrance examinations, are not written in the minority language, nor is the minority language one of the subjects on the examinations, rather than being like ‘the blind person who wastes wax by lighting a candle,’ it is better to invest the time allocated for learning the minority language in studying mathematics, physics and chemistry (Ma, 2007, pp. 20, 22).

Badeng Nima (2001), and Teng and Wang (2001), for example, argue for the first view, criticizing transitional bilingual education for shifting prematurely to all Mandarin-medium instruction. He claims that too early introduction into exclusive Mandarin instruction leads to low literacy in both the minority language and Mandarin. This argument has considerable support in bilingual education research outside China, which has found that maintenance bilingual education typically leads to higher proficiency in both the first and second language than does transitional bilingual education (Willig, 1985; Cummins, 2000, 2001; Baker, 2001; Pattanayak, 2001; Hovens, 2002; Benson, 2004; UNESCO, 2005; Abadzi, 2006).

Supporters of the second view reason from several “common sense” assumptions about the nature of language, learning, education and society: that Mandarin is more important than mother tongue proficiency to minority children’s life chances, that effective learning of Mandarin, requires maximum exposure to a Mandarin language environment, and that mother tongue learning interferes with Mandarin learning, and that modern knowledge is best learned through Mandarin (Jiang, 2002; Ma, 2007). This line of reasoning, based more on “folk psychology” and “folk pedagogy” (Olson & Bruner, 1998) than research, leads one to see minority languages as hindrances to minority children’s learning, which further leads to favoring transitional over maintenance bilingual education; early over late transition to Mandarin, and even to a preference for second language submersion over bilingual education.

Such differing attitudes towards language have been named “Language as Problem” and “Language as Right” and the more positive “Language as Resource” view (Ruiz, 1990). Where language is seen as right and problem, linguistic diversity itself is seen as a problem, “Language X is a child’s right; but Language Y is a problem, barring access to Language X.” Thus, one group sees Mandarin as a problem for minority
children to be able to access their right to their native language; the other sees minority language as a problem blocking minority children’s right to learn the common lingua franca of China, Mandarin. Neither view is informed by the language as resource view supported by current research that suggests that minority children can develop strong proficiency and literacy in two languages using maintenance bilingual education (Cummins, 2000, 2001).

The view of Mandarin as right and minority language as problem together with the low average educational attainment and Mandarin-proficiency levels of many minority children have led to the proposal that minority children can benefit from being sent to boarding schools in urban Mandarin areas. Wang and Zhou (2003) and Postiglione, Jiao and Manlaji (2007) have studied Type 3 programs for Tibetan children in an urban Mandarin environment, where students studied one course on Tibetan language and the remainder of the curriculum in Mandarin. Both studies found that these programs led to increased Mandarin proficiency, but to moderate oral and low written proficiency in Tibetan, such that graduates have insufficient Tibetan proficiency to work in their communities, except as teachers of Chinese and Mathematics, commonly taught in Mandarin (Postiglione, Jiao & Manlaji, 2007; Wang & Zhou, 2003).

Wan and Zhang (2007) moreover, conducted a study in a Tibetan-speaking district of Gansu province that found no significant differences between students’ mean scores on tests of Mandarin and Tibetan proficiency in Type 2 Tibetan-dominant and Type 3 Mandarin-dominant bilingual education programs. Wan and Zhang found, however, that scores on mathematics tests were significantly higher in the Mandarin-dominant program, which the authors ascribe to the better conditions in Mandarin-dominant schools.

Discussion of dual language maintenance bilingual education, in which students study in two languages during their secondary education and even into higher education, is noteworthy by its absence from the literature, although such programs do exist in China (Zhou, 1991, cited in Stites, 1999, p. 108). Perhaps, as Ding Wenlou argued in 1990 (cited in Stites, 1999, p. 110), lack of implementation of quality bilingual education is due to a lack of social consensus on its value either socially, culturally or educationally.

ADAPTING CURRICULUM TO LOCAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY: LOCAL AND MULTICULTURAL CURRICULUM

National primary curriculum promotes pan-Chinese identity, emphasizing love of the land of China, its nationalities, the responsibilities of citizens towards each other and to the state, and the importance of becoming a builder of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The model of pan-Chinese identity (Zhonghua minzu) presented to children is based on Fei Xiaotong’s concept of duo yuan yi ti, or, diversity in unity, with every ethnic group, including the majority Han, seen as participating together equally in a larger organic whole, in which all are valued, and none need give up their individual ethnic identity. China is likened to a flower garden, where each bloom is unique in size, color and fragrance, yet contributes to a beautiful and harmonious whole (Wang
& Wan, 2006; Zhou, 2003). Wang and Wan further note the similarities of the view of Chinese society as a flower garden to the western image of a diverse society as a cultural mosaic, in contrast to views of cultural fusion that stress uniformity, such as the traditional American concept of the melting pot.

Nevertheless, in practice curriculum and pedagogy in minority areas frequently emphasize the whole (unity) more than its parts (plurality), so that curriculum lacks relevant local content, and is not reflective of the social reality in the area for which it was designed (Chen, 2004, p 11-12; Wang & Wan, 2006).

The national curriculum, even when delivered in the mother tongue, is difficult for children, and even for many teachers, in remote minority areas to understand. National textbooks for example contain none of the distinct flora and fauna found in mountainous or regions or grasslands. In response, Wan Minggang, Badeng Nima and Jia Luo (1999) and Jia Luo (2003) have prepared Tibetan-Mandarin bilingual textbooks that attempt to reflect the local environment and culture, incorporating for example traditional riddles and language games as means to stimulate creativity and advanced oral literacy. Surveys of local teachers, parents and students where these textbooks have been used report a generally positive response to this approach (Jia Luo, unpublished field notes).

Another line of research has begun to explore how the schooling experience influences minority children’s development of identity, utilizing the concept of the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Apple, 2004). Qian (2007) applies this concept in a qualitative comparative case study of students from the Baoan, Salar and Yughur minorities of northwest China and finds that boarding school students removed from their families and familiar cultural environment drop out more often than students who travel from home to school. A Yughur researcher, Tiemuer, (2006) sums up the experience of a minority child in a minority district in a Mandarin-only program,

> everything you study and come into contact with is from an extremely different culture; for more than ten years of education, the teacher will not say a single word about your nationality, language, history or culture. Thus, this kind of lopsided education fosters students whose spirit and individuality are similarly lopsided (2006, p. 41).

Some researchers have investigated how minority students engage with views of their culture encountered in schools. Building on Ogbu’s “folk theories of success” (1987), Harrell and Ma (1999) argue that in some cases minority students construct an identity in which they have as much chance or even more chance of educational and career success as any other ethnicity. Zhu (2007) similarly explores how Tibetan students in boarding schools in Mandarin-speaking regions negotiate their identities, sometimes accepting, at other times resisting stereotypes they may encounter in schools about their minority.

The MOE recommends close study of the local community, its beliefs and cultural practices in the preparation of school-based curriculum (MOE, 2002b). Chen (2004) extends this argument to multilingual, multiethnic districts, and concludes that multicultural education is needed in China. Chen argues that multicultural education has several benefits in a multiethnic society such as China: it strengthens minority students’ school achievement and sense of their own ethnic identity, and can lead
students of different ethnic backgrounds to develop increased mutual understanding and respect.

Similarly, Wang and Wan (2006) provide a critical appraisal of multicultural education programs in USA, Canada, UK and Australia, and an assessment of its utility in the Chinese context, particularly the northwest, which is more multiethnic than China’s eastern and central regions. Wang and Wan note that despite more than twenty years of debate and experiment in multicultural education, social prejudice and inequities in education continue. They feel that a major challenge in adapting this approach to China’s education is its insufficiently clear meaning: does it focus on minorities, and not the mainstream; does it differ from bilingual education? Nevertheless, Wang and Wan conclude overall that this approach has great potential to inform curriculum development in China, as long as it does not blindly follow foreign models. In fact, what they call for is sinicization of multicultural education on the national scale, combined with localization.

Wan (2003), however, points out the formidable obstacles in developing a multicultural education approach in poor minority areas of China, where the gap between western, central and coastal regions exists not only in economy and ecology, but is also embodied in society, culture and education. The key issue in western China is how to simultaneously rapidly reduce poverty, develop the overall school system and develop minority education. Wan raises for discussion the study of models of compensatory education implemented earlier in the UK and USA that provided extra investment to subsidize educational development within disadvantaged regions and social group, such as western China and its minority areas.

Zheng (2003) similarly points out that successful implementation of the national policy of developing China’s western regions economically requires putting minority education in these areas in first place in order to develop local human resources to assist in the development strategy. However, for most minorities in western China, the entire way of life is closely integrated with the physical environment, and thus a culturally sustainable education for minorities must also incorporate environmental education.

ADAPTING CURRICULUM TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIVERSITY: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

Understanding of China’s environmental problems is mounting among international policymakers at the highest level, and so is the pressure, both nationally and globally, to fix them. In industrial and urban areas in the central and eastern regions, the single most serious problem is air pollution from factories and vehicles (Lee & Tilbury, 1998). Pan Yue, China’s Deputy Head of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), views air pollution as a “bottleneck constraining economic growth in China” (Xie, 2004). At the same time, in western China, a major threat is environmental degradation: water shortages, erosion, and desertification of agricultural and pasture lands. Rising temperatures have led to glaciers shrinking by about a meter a year increasing desertification, with 10-20% of
grasslands used for grazing livestock, the traditional economic activity there, considered degraded in one minority county in Gansu (World Bank, 2003, p. 7; Yin, Clinton, Luo & Song, 2008, p. 95). Environmental education (EE) in China is a local response to environmental threats, and was introduced during recent education reforms, partly modeled on EE curricula in the United Kingdom. However, the national, provincial and local materials that were produced following international EE curricular models proved unsuitable not only for younger students, but also for many teachers in China. EE ‘s innovative curricular organization required schools to prepare practical activities synthesizing theoretical knowledge from many disciplines with practical local problem-solving activities and subject teachers to incorporate EE in their lessons so that EE would permeate the entire curriculum (Lee & Tilbury, 1998).

One approach to this integrative approach at the school level is the Green School movement, which originated as a practical response to the immediate school environment: school grounds were bare and needed landscaping, but given limited resources, so children were involved in planting and caring for their own “adopted” trees in the schoolyard, while at the same time, participating actively in practical learning about the environment. Now children in Green Schools learn about animals and plants native to their communities through class research and group projects featuring environmental hands-on activities, integrating knowledge from diverse sources and applying them in actively solving concrete local problems. The local and school-based Green School approach to EE provides an active, experiential inquiry-based component lacking in “examination-based education” and supports recent MOE goals of fostering problem solving skills and creativity, and so it encourages the spread of this movement by granting Green School certificates to any schools that meet their EE guidelines (MOE, 2002a; Jiao, Zeng & Song, 2004; Sterling, 2004).

Nevertheless, implementing local EE remains a challenge for teachers, who are required not to transmit knowledge from one discipline, but facilitate students’ activity-based learning of knowledge integrated from several disciplines and application of this knowledge to the solution of practical problems in the community, which requires them to take on roles for which their teacher education does not prepare them. Thus, teachers may retain an earlier orientation towards teaching and learning. In a large industrial city of northeast China, traditional teacher-centered instruction was still dominant in Grade 7 and 8 and geography lessons, which closely followed national textbooks that ignored the role of individual teachers and students in environmental protection and local decision making (Darkhor, 2005). Thus, while there is evidence that students respond positively to new EE approaches to their learning (Niu, 2001, in Darkhor, 2005), the exclusion of EE from major examinations means that EE is marginalized:

Environmental education, if included at all, is usually accorded low priority and [considered] something only to be concerned with after examination courses are ensured (Zhu, 1995, p. 106, in Darkhor, 2005, p. 33).

Thus, many obstacles to innovative curriculum and pedagogies, such as inquiry-based learning, exist, particularly in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2003).
Environmental education in rural minority areas

Rural schools are strongly recommended to integrate knowledge of agriculture, science, the environment, business and management in their curriculum, allotting suggested 10-12% of hours to local and school-based curriculum and 6-8% of hours to comprehensive practice activities (China, 2002). Knowledge about the environment is especially relevant to pastoralist herders, where desertification of grasslands threatens their way of life, and local herders’ ignorance of the consequences of their practices is part of the problem (Yin et al., 2008; World Bank, 2003). Two cultural strategies exist among pastoralists to cope with environmental unpredictability: opportunism and conservatism, with conservative strategies far less stressful on the local ecology (Sandford, 1982). Sandford further argues that where “an ideology of performance and competition in respect of income, wealth or status predominates”, unsustainable opportunistic strategies are more likely, while the aim of maintenance of the group “as a coherent social unit” (p.74), is more likely to lead, not only to cultural maintenance, but also to more sustainable ecological conservatism.

Clearly, for rural minority pastoralists to be able to make informed choices about the care of their herds and the protection of their pastures implies, as Squires (2001) argues, not only indigenous knowledge about the local landforms, flora, fauna, and weather, but also relevant knowledge of modern biology, meteorology, geology, economics, business and management, all of which must be synthesized to allow effective creative problem solving to be applied to the challenges at hand. A curriculum that included all such knowledge would be beneficial in preparing children of minority herders to meet many of the actual life challenges that will face them in their district. At present, national curriculum does not provide enough knowledge relevant to the local surroundings, and the development of local and school-based curriculum, including environmental education, has only recently begun in China. At the same time, EE in China is largely an urban and eastern phenomenon, and is combined in some cases with prestigious English bilingual education programs (Li, L., 2006). While many Green Schools have opened in urban centers throughout the country, none had yet opened at the county level or lower in the entire western region (Jiao, Zeng & Song, 2004, p. 52.). Furthermore, developing environmental education is not a component of expert recommendations for dealing with the problem in recent reports on managing environmental degradation in western China (Yin et al., 2008; World Bank, 2003).

While a well-organized approach to integrating environmental education with local and school curriculum is highly relevant to education in minority areas, particularly in the west, that face multiple environmental challenges, it is also clear that environmental education, multicultural education and multilingual education are not opposed concepts; moreover, they need to interact with each other. Therefore, multiple sources of knowledge are required to be integrated in local and school curriculum: scientific and indigenous knowledge; languages of wider communication and indigenous languages: all have a place and can be mutually enriching.
DIVERSITY IN CHINA´S EDUCATION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

China presents an exceedingly varied linguistic, cultural and environmental landscape comparable in scale and complexity to North America’s complex multicultural societies. Approaches to this diversity in education have, therefore, been diverse and fluid over time and space. Key features are the broad range of: approaches to identity, views of culture, views of language, as well as differing views on the place of diverse perspectives on identity, culture and language in the school, and a lack of consensus on the purpose of education itself. Finally, there is a tension between views of unity deriving from uniformity, whereas others see uniformity as rigidity that weakens society.

Parallels with North American experience exist as well. First, globalizing forces have been seen as threatening to identity. In the late 19th century, modernizers strove to balance traditional and foreign knowledge with the formula, “zhong wei ti, xi wei yong”, “Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for use” (Pepper, 1996, p. 55). Similarly, Zhang (1997) has argued for traditional Confucian values in quality education as a counterbalance to the excessive individualism of recent years. The balance of ethnic and pan-Chinese identity is also debated. Assimilation of minorities to become Han is against policy (Zhou, 2004); however, there are two major interpretations of pan-Chinese identity:

1) ronghe, or fusion, whereby China’s ethnic groups mutually interact, leading to creation of a new, stronger, but essentially uniform identity, formed out of elements from each, but primarily from the majority nationality; this interpretation proceeds from diversity into unity: comparable to the North American melting pot image, and

2) a multiple identity, illustrated by the metaphor of China as a flower garden with many distinct flowers, so all citizens’ identity is simultaneously on two levels, individual ethnic identity plus pan-Chinese nationality; incorporating both diversity and unity at the same time: comparable to the North American cultural mosaic image (Wang and Wan, 2006, pp. 1-3).

As we have seen, more and more scholars are increasingly concerned about the effects on minority children of their exposure to negative stereotypes about their culture and the absence from the curriculum of their culture. Thus, they call for greater inclusion of minority culture(s) in the curriculum, in order to combat feelings of cultural inferiority and to develop pride in unique aspects of minority culture.

Much work has been done on differences in cultural expectations of behaviour and communication among ethnicities in the USA, and how this might affect minority students’ response to pedagogy, such as the responses some minority children have to white middle class teachers’ speech, the cultural use of questions as orders, which some children may understand as choices rather than demands, or as the teacher’s lack of authority (Delpit, 1988). Cummins
(2001), for example, concurs with Delpit that minority students may require direct instruction to demystify such aspects of mainstream sociolinguistic behaviour in order to understand what some majority culture students understand implicitly. A fruitful extension of research on identity construction of minority children in Chinese schools and their responses to would be ethnographic and sociolinguistic investigation of language, culture and interaction in schools in China; to help understand why minority students are labelled as they are and how the process of schooling can be demystified for them. Indeed, it may be that not only do students need to learn about mainstream language and culture, but that mainstream teachers need to learn more about the languages and cultures of their minority students.

In formal terms, minorities have more linguistic rights in China than in the USA. However, in China the right to the use of minority languages is granted in the constitution, but the right to their use in education is granted collectively, within designated territorial limits, and is granted provisionally, where numbers warrant, and where local government authorities consider it worthwhile and feasible. In the USA, access to minority language instruction in state-funded education has been guaranteed by law where it has been deemed necessary in order to provide the more fundamental right of equal access to education (Lam, 2005; Zhou, 2003; Ricento, 1998). Burnaby and Ricento (1998) in a comparison of Canadian and American language policy in education, agree that local implementation of minority education may differ widely from policy pronouncements, just as minority education in China is implemented in many forms, despite the same general policy guidelines for the entire country (Zhou, 2004).

Beyond language policy, there is tension between views about language as neutral instrument of communication or as an essential component of cultural identity. Among some minorities in China experiencing rapid language shift at the same time as great increases in children’s Mandarin proficiency and educational attainment rates, there is an anxiety that ethnic identity will completely disappear if their language is lost (Bradley, 2005).

Chinese debates between uniformity of curriculum and local adaptations to central curriculum parallel debates in the USA, where attitudes towards diversity in the curriculum range from those who believe in educational uniformity, providing the same curriculum content to all; and those who support some form of multicultural education that adapts the curriculum to reflect current social diversity, incorporating both mainstream knowledge and reflective of a broad range of cultures (Cummins, 2000; Duhaney, 2005).

There is great controversy over the use of Black English Vernacular (BEV) (Labov, 1969/2000), or Ebonics (Duhaney, 2005) in the USA. African-American children’s learning can benefit through their greater potential comprehension and comfort with bidialectal instruction, but this approach is rejected by many whites and African-Americans as socially inappropriate in school, and without socioeconomic utility (Delpit, 1988). The Ebonics debate parallels the case of those minority languages in China with no historical script and written literature of their own, hence without a tradition of formal literacy-based schooling in their language, and whose oral languages and newly devised scripts are seen as not suitable for the school setting (Bahry, field notes; Zhou, 2003).
Many minority parents in China are influenced to send their children to monolingual dominant-language programs rather than mother-tongue or bilingual programs by “facts”, such as the apparent greater number of graduates of dominant-language schools who continue to higher education. In this situation, research methods that can control for differences in conditions between programs are needed; otherwise, it is difficult to know whether the “superiority” of one program or another is related to the program itself or extraneous factors, such as better resources and conditions of mainstream schools. One of the first attempts to conduct such a comparative evaluation is Wan and Zhang (2007). Evaluation based on examination scores may be invalid, as well, since the content of these examinations may also exhibit cultural and linguistic bias that favors students in mainstream schools and groups (Cummins, 2000, 2001; Wang & Wan, 2006).

Banks (1994) argues that multicultural education is for all ethnicities, majority and minority alike, and that majority students are enriched educationally by greater inclusion of diversity of knowledge and culture in the classroom. Wang and Wan (2006) agree with Banks that multicultural education in China should be intended not only for minority students, but also for majority Han students. Moreover, research on bilingual and trilingual education suggests that two or three languages of instruction can be used in a school successfully, where all students take some courses in another language (Cummins, 2000). However, although majority Han settlers in minority districts often develop some oral proficiency in minority languages (Hansen, 2005; Ma, 2007), there is little precedent for majority students using a minority language as the medium of instruction, which could be a barrier to developing two-language maintenance bilingual education in China (Baker, 2001).

In recent fieldwork in a minority district of China, when stakeholders were asked about their attitude towards the inclusion of minority knowledge, culture and language in local and school-based curriculum, there was broad support among parents and teachers, regardless of ethnicity, for greater local minority cultural content studied through Chinese. Moreover, there was also broad agreement in principle that minority language instruction was useful for minority students. However, many adults, regardless of ethnicity, when asked whether minority language instruction would be interesting to students of other ethnicities, replied that it was only useful for children of that group. Yet when primary school children were asked whether they would like to learn stories and songs in a local minority language, most children of all ethnicities responded that they would be interested (Bahry, unpublished interview transcripts). Ultimately, educational research alone cannot completely settle debates about diversity in education, but as Grant and Millar (1992) point out in the context of the USA, scholarship can make major contributions toward strengthening inclusive approaches to language and culture in education (1992).

As Wang and Wan (2006) and likeminded scholars forcefully argue, the plurality in unity concept of Chinese identity, although fruitful, and even necessary for the harmonious development of China, particularly in its most linguistically and culturally diverse western regions, presupposes much greater devotion of resources toward research, curriculum and materials development, teacher development, program implementation and evaluation related to approaches to education which embody diversity. Increased dialogue of educators,
education scholars and policy makers both within China and internationally will assist the process of deliberation, experimentation, and implementation of models of education in China that can both maintain and revive minority language and culture, while permitting participation within the broader society that does not involve the loss of their language and culture, and simultaneously enriching mainstream education by broadening its perspectives (Chen, 2004; Feng, 2007; Wang & Wan, 2006).

Such change implies a complex process involving much discussion, disagreement and some resistance, particularly if changes reflecting diversity in education are perceived as weakening students’ chances to succeed in the mainstream national curriculum with the ultimate goal of passing the CEE and being admitted to college. However, while local and school curriculum are less valued by many, due to their perceived lack of relevance to this educational goal, this same lack of connection to the CEE should permit local and school curriculum development greater flexibility to experiment with diverse knowledge perspectives and pedagogies that will support stronger forms of bilingual education and multicultural education as well as the integration of indigenous and scientific knowledge relevant to local environmental challenges. However, research on bilingual education in China deals more with prestigious Mandarin-English bilingual education programs in the urban east than minority-Mandarin bilingual education in the rest of the country (Feng, 2005).

Squires’ advice in dealing with desertification among indigenous populations seems equally apt as a prescription for educational renewal among a culturally diverse population in environmentally fragile areas of China:

Knowledge should simultaneously flow to and from rural communities. A new relationship has to be built between those who create and use scientific knowledge and those, who support and finance it, and those concerned with its application and impacts. Efforts should be made to sustain traditional knowledge systems through active support to the societies that are keepers and developers of this knowledge, their ways of life, their languages, their social organization and the environments in which they live, and fully recognize the contribution of women as repositories of a large part of traditional knowledge. Governments should support cooperation between holders of traditional knowledge and scientists to explore the relationships between different knowledge systems and to foster inter-linkages of mutual benefit (2001, p. 258).

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is clear that many educational debates in China resemble global debates on education. First, while China’s unity has traditionally been emphasized through uniformity of curricula, there is increasing recognition among the MOE, Chinese and international scholars of the extent of China’s social, geographic, cultural and linguistic diversity, and the relationship of this diversity to continuing differences in educational participation and achievement within China that hinder the quantitative achievement of the goals of universal basic education, and also have consequences for students’ qualitative experience. As the national curriculum responds more to global forces, for example, by expanding the space in the curriculum for English, these gaps between curriculum needs of urban coastal China, increasingly strongly integrated into a global economy, and the central and western regions, may widen. Globalization or modernization is increasingly seen as
leading to the weakening of traditional local knowledge, culture and values. This perception can be found everywhere in China, but is more common in rural areas, minority districts and interior provinces, since their experience is farthest from global knowledge and culture. One factor leading to resistance toward education is the external imposition of uniform knowledge and values without local participation or adaptation, without which youth may become alienated, whether they stay in school or not. In this situation, the new division of curriculum authority into three levels: national, local and school are a welcome response to the above challenges. While all students should have access to national and international knowledge and skills, it should not need to come at the expense of local culture and identity; at the same time, preservation of local culture and identity should not imply a romantic turning to the past and refusal to engage with modernity and the outside world.

Nevertheless, many well-intentioned and potentially beneficial reforms worldwide have withered on the vine. Thus, the new curriculum system requires a good deal of support of various types: first, research on similar cases and successful models of sustainable locally relevant education: for poor rural areas, there are multigrade and non-formal education models found in Escuela Nueva schools in rural Colombia, and village schools for girls in rural Bangladesh (Farrell, 2007; Stromquist, 2007); for pastoralists, there are models of education that adapt to nomadic lifestyles and the grassland and mountain environment (Krätli, 2000); for linguistic minorities, there are many examples of successful models of maintenance bilingual education to draw on in China and abroad (Benson, 2004; Cummins, 2001; Feng, 2007; UNESCO, 2005).

Furthermore, the research toolkit in China is broadening to incorporate a broad range of methods including qualitative research, ethnography and educational anthropology as well as greater use of experimental and quasi-experimental methods to enrich perspectives on education. Nevertheless, research needs to interact with practice, practitioners, and communities. MOE encouragement of teachers to take on roles as curriculum developers is a welcome step, particularly if education researchers work in tandem with local stakeholders, although the recent reform is a case of top-down empowerment of the lower levels of the school system, not necessarily desired by local educators: the attitude toward school-based curriculum initiatives was expressed by one educational administrator of a minority county as “not to encourage, nor to oppose or to concern ourselves [with this]” (Li, D., 2006, p. 262).

Clearly, the success of local and school-based curriculum reform requires considerable attention to developing research capacity and teachers’ professional development. Yet, the financing of education and educational research is insufficient to provide such support, while education financing is imbalanced with key schools better funded than general schools; urban than rural schools; schools in coastal provinces more than in central and western provinces; mainstream Mandarin-medium education more than minority language education (Postiglione, 2006). Funding based on a per capita formula according to number of students regardless of location or type of school would go a long way to providing general schools, rural schools, remote schools and minority schools with resources to support the greater needs of students in these areas.

Wan (2003) and Wang and Wan (2006) go farther than this, invoking cases from UK and USA of special compensatory funding programs for education among groups and in areas where low achievement and high drop-out rates were frequent to argue that equitable financing is not sufficient to improve education in poor, remote and minority areas in China, but that compensatory
financing is required. The final word goes to Yang (2006) who cautions against uncritical globalization of Chinese educational research by western research methods and paradigms, advising that Chinese educational researchers:

need to develop their unique perspectives and values based on rich local experience and an awareness of their local society and culture. This is to grasp the meaning of locality in the situation when nation-states experience transnational destabilisation. Such a sense of locality would allow them to seize the initiative in identifying the real needs of their local societies and in setting up their own research agendas and targets (p. 218).

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