

Ethnic Minority Education's Influence on Yi Language Use of Yi People in Xichang City

Tang Ye^{1,2}, Soon Chiow Thai^{1*}

¹ The Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah,
Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

² Xichang University, Xichang, China

* Corresponding Author: soon@ums.edu.my

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Abstract: *There are 55 ethnic minorities in China, and the Yi are the sixth largest ethnic minority in China. The Yi in Sichuan mainly live in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, which is the largest Yi autonomous region in China. Xichang City, the state capital, is home to a large population of mixed Yi and Han Chinese. The Yi have their own language (Yi language) and script (Yi script), but the use of the Yi language is not favorable. The number of Yi students who do not know any Yi at all is gradually increasing as a proportion of their age, and more and more Yi youths are not learning Yi. This is not conducive to the use and protection of the Yi language. In this study, we focus on the implementation of local minority education policies, especially bilingual education. The researcher discovered a discrepancy between the outcomes and objectives of the bilingual education policy, resulting in inadequate implementation. This, in turn, leads to a cognitive bias among students and teachers towards bilingual education, thereby impacting the use and transmission of the Yi language.*

Keywords: minority education, Yi language use, influence

1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic country with a total of 56 ethnic groups, including 55 minorities, such as the Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Mongolian, and Yi. The Yi is the sixth largest ethnic minority in China, with about 9 million people. The Yi are mainly found in Yunnan Province, Sichuan Province, Guangxi Province, and Guizhou Province. There are two Yi Autonomous Prefectures in China, one in Yunnan Province and the other in Sichuan Province. The Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (hereinafter referred to as Liangshan), located in Sichuan Province, is the largest Yi Autonomous Prefecture in China (Liu, 2017).

Twenty-four of the 55 ethnic minorities have distinct national languages, totaling 128 languages. This is the number that linguists have so far obtained through field surveys. Why is the total number of languages greater than the total number of nationalities? This is because some ethnic minorities speak multiple languages, even two. For example, the Yao ethnic group uses three languages: Mian, Bunu, and Raja, and the Jingpo ethnic group uses five languages: Jingpo, Jawa, Langshu, Lechu, and Bola.

According to Sun (2015), China's minority languages are broadly classified into three types:

- 1) Languages and scripts with a long history, unified norms and independent systems, and widespread influence. Some languages and scripts are the same as those used in independent mono-ethnic states, and these include Mongolian, Korean, Tibetan, Kazakh, and Uyghur, etc. These minorities centralize the use of their own languages and scripts in the areas where they live.
- 2) Although they have traditional scripts, there is no unified norm, and their dialects vary greatly. Their languages are not so widely used in society. Although they also have patches of settlement areas, the range of script use is very small, and a common language common to the whole nation has not yet been formed. These ethnic languages include those of the Yi, Dai, Zhuang, Jingpo, and other ethnic groups.
- 3) There is only the ethnic group's language, but there is no script that is consistent with that language. The language of their own ethnic group is used only within their own ethnic group and in daily life, while the languages of other ethnic groups are used in social life and school education. These peoples primarily use Chinese as their written language, and sometimes they also use the languages of other minorities.

Language is both a tool of human communication and thinking, as well as a carrier of people's cultural identity. As a cultural carrier, language is the cultural bond and spiritual pillar that sustains a people, accumulating and containing rich cultural phenomena. The stories, myths, legends, fables, poems, riddles, plays, and other kinds of literature preserved in the language rely on the language for their expression. Each language reflects the people's unique understanding of the world and individualized experience, as well as their unique values (Rehamo & Harrell, 2018).

The Yi people have their own language, Yi, and a script to record their language, Yi script. Due to the vast distribution of the Yi people, there are six dialects of the Yi language, which vary greatly from place to place, and the scripts used to record their sounds also vary from place to place. The Yi dialects share about 30% -50% of the same vocabulary and grammatical structures. The glyphs and pronunciation of the ancient Yi script are not uniform (He & Jiang, 2018). In order to make the Yi language better serve the general public, in 1975, the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province formulated the Trial Programme for the Specification of the Yi Language, using the Xide phonetics as the standard pronunciation. The Working Group on the Yi Language selected 819 Yi characters as the standard characters from the practical need to fully express the standard tone of the basic dialects of Liangshan. At the same time, they designed the 'Yi Pinyin Symbols', which are easy to learn by phonetic notation and have been widely used in the Yi areas of Sichuan (Liu, 2017).

Xichang City is the country's capital, with the largest concentration of Yi people. The Yi language is not only used as necessary in the execution of official duties by the self-government organs but also widely used in the social use of characters. Not only the plaques of party and government organs, commercial plaques, and banners use both Yi and Chinese characters, but also public places, public toilets of famous buildings, and tourist attractions use Yi signs. The Liangshan Slave Society Museum, located in Xichang City, is the world's only museum that reflects the form of slave society. A total of 18 Yi traditional arts and crafts have been listed in China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (Du, 2018).



Figure 1: Signs with Yi language (Photographed by researcher)

Language, as a cognitive system, is a direct reflection of a people's way of thinking and contains its cognitive system of the objective world. Therefore, the usage and evolutionary trend of each language are closely related to its history and current characteristics, as well as its development. Liu (2017) found through practical research that classroom teaching in schools helps the inheritance, promotion, and protection of the Yi language. Minority education has an important influence on the use of Yi language. Research on minority languages is crucial for their preservation and inheritance.

2. Background of the Study

The Yi language not only reflects the emotions and deep connotations of the Yi people but also plays an important role in passing on their culture and ideas. The Yi in Liangshan have strong feelings for their mother tongue. As the mother tongue of the Yi, it is also the main communication tool for the internal communication of the community. To the Yi, Yi language has a natural affinity. Speaking Yi can bring them closer to each other, express their deepest feelings, and pass on their culture. In Liangshan, the Chinese serve as an important tool for external communication and exchange. Du (2018) found that the Yi people are very active in learning Chinese, especially the young Yi people, who attach importance to Chinese language learning and hope to improve their Chinese language ability through continuous learning. Learning Chinese well can provide favorable conditions when looking for a job in the future. These characteristics fit well with China's language policy. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China clearly stipulates that all ethnic minorities have the freedom to use and develop their own languages and writing systems. This provision covers both the freedom to learn and use their own languages and scripts and the freedom to learn to use the language and script commonly used in the country. In other words, Chinese law recognizes two facts: that all ethnic groups are equal and that every member of an ethnic minority has the right to learn their own mother tongue (Xi, 2020). Therefore, China's promotion of bilingual education in ethnic minority areas is in line with the actual development. Bilingual education is an important

feature of China's minority education, as well as an important content and form of ethnic education. It is also an important content and form of ethnic education in China. Bilingual education is of enormous significance in ensuring the fairness of education for ethnic minorities, improving the quality of ethnic education, as well as the inheritance and development of ethnic minority cultures (Qi & Hou, 2021). By the end of 2018, there were more than 30 million ethnic minority students in all levels and types of schools in China, accounting for about 11% of the total number of students in schools nationwide, a 30-fold increase over the number of ethnic minority students in schools in 1951 (Wui & Yang, 2021).

The implementation of bilingual education is a major initiative in China to cultivate bilingual talents who are fluent in both minority languages and Chinese, with extensive and far-reaching social benefits (Xi, 2020). At present, there are two modes of Yi-Chinese bilingual education in Liangshan, i.e., Teaching Mode I and Teaching Mode II. This provides an important guarantee for the harmonious and stable development of Yi-Chinese bilingualism. In order to protect minority languages and cultures and allow minority students to better integrate into society, the fundamental purpose of bilingual education is not only to improve the quality of learning but also to promote interactions and cultural exchanges between ethnic groups and to promote the common prosperity of the cultures of all ethnic groups (Sun & Hou, 2020). However, the main problem with ethnic minority education in China is that it focuses more on learning and mastery of mainstream culture and developing the ability to enter mainstream society. There is a large gap between the implementation of minority education and the goals of minority education policies, which neglect the learning and transmission of minority cultures.

The data in the most recent 'Questionnaire on the Popularity of Putonghua in China' shows that, among the nearly 5 million people in Liangshan, the proportion of those who have mastered the Putonghua is about 34 percent. While Putonghua is being successfully promoted, the Yi community should also be aware of the gradual decline of the Yi language in Liangshan. Sun (2011) also found that the use of the Yi language is not objective, and the Yi language is gradually falling into an endangered language. Language and writing are carriers of culture, and the loss of national language and writing will lead to the disappearance of national culture. Spolsky (2019) points out that any policy will encounter diverse changes in the process of implementation, which is expected. Now, the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity needs to call on more Yi poles to protect their language and writing and ethnic culture and to pass on their ethnic bloodline.

Therefore, there is now a need to pass on the country's mainstream culture through minority education and to endeavor to improve the ability of members of ethnic minorities to adapt to life in mainstream society. At the same time, the transmission and development of the outstanding traditional culture of ethnic minorities through ethnic minority education needs to be balanced, so that ethnic minority education cannot be used only as a bridge and a means of implementing Han Chinese education for ethnic minority students, much less to the extent that ethnic minority cultures are lost in the process of integration.

3. Problem Statement

In 2000, China published a total of some 140,000 books, with 2,598 books in minority languages published in the same year. Books in minority languages accounted for approximately 1.8 percent of the total number of books published. Moreover, these books were published with the support of the state's subsidy policy, and most of them were government

documents and policy propaganda readings (Ma, 2010). Thus, it can be seen that there is a huge information resource of books published in Chinese in China.

China's current ethnic education policy contains little on the preservation and development of the traditional cultures of ethnic minorities, and is more concerned with the ability of ethnic minority students to learn and master the Chinese language. For example, it is stipulated that Chinese language courses should be offered from the first grade of primary school in ethnic secondary schools and primary schools that use ethnic minority languages for instruction, the Chinese Language Teaching Programme for Full-time Ethnic Primary and Secondary Schools, the Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for Full-time Ethnic Minority Primary and Secondary Schools, and the Circular on the Pilot Implementation of Chinese Language Proficiency Examinations for Ethnic Minority Students in the Relevant Provinces and Districts. None of these provisions address ethnic minority students learning and using their own languages and scripts.

As China's largest Yi minority area, Liangshan used to be a place where Yi children used to communicate in Yi language for a long time and started to contact Chinese only after they started primary school, so the language barrier seriously affected children's academic performance, and they were also prone to anorexia. In light of this situation, on 30 July 2018, China's Ministry of Education issued the Circular on Carrying Out the Action of 'Learning Putonghua in Preschool', which sets out the requirements for popularizing Putonghua among preschool children in ethnic minority areas (Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang). The goal of the policy is to achieve, through efforts over a period of about three years, that ethnic minority children aged 3 to 6 with normal learning abilities are able to communicate in the national common language and form habits of mind in the national common language before they receive compulsory education (China has nine years of compulsory education, including primary and lower secondary schooling).

In 2015, the Chinese government decided to implement the 'One Village, One Child' pilot program in Liangshan. This policy aims to understand, speak, dare to speak, and use Mandarin, with the hope that over a three-year period, preschool children between the ages of 3 and 6 will be able to communicate in the national common language (Ministry of Education of China & National Commission for Language and Literature, 2018). After the implementation of the one village, one child program, there were 3,059 village-level ECE sites in Liangshan by the end of 2017 (Liu, 2018).

In July 2019, the pilot initiative was fully implemented in Liangshan, covering 3,895 kindergartens and 269,600 preschool children across the state (Du, 2018). In September 2021, there was a significant improvement in the Mandarin proficiency of preschool children in Liangshan Prefecture. The Mandarin pass rate of children entering primary school that year was assessed to be 99.23 percent, and later a third party assessed the language development level of a sample of pilot children after they entered the first grade of primary school, and the pass rate was 99.03 percent (Ministry of Education of China & Poverty Alleviation Office of the State Council, 2018).



Figure 2: Slogans promoting the learning and use of Putonghua (Photographed by researcher)

Porter and Gordon (2023) identified seven characteristics of intractable problems in minority education, namely, lack of definitions, no molded rules, no solution quizzes, each intractable problem is unique, each intractable problem is a symptom of another intractable problem, definitions and solutions are linked, and decision makers do not have the right to be wrong. Sleeter and Zavala (2020) proposes that in minority education, classroom education is of great value in relation to minority languages and research. China's education model is divided into 2 types; one is the general high school teaching model. Students of any ethnicity are welcome to participate in this model. In this model, all students learn and use Mandarin. With the exception of English classes, all teachers conduct their lessons in Mandarin. The other is the bilingual teaching model for ethnic minorities. The China Institute for Educational Policy Research (2016) states that the term bilingual in bilingual teaching refers to minority languages and Putonghua.

There is a mismatch between theory and practice in the education of ethnic minorities in China. Eberle et al. (2020) found that ethnic minority linguistic diversity has an impact on the process of urbanization and urban concentration, as well as on economic development. However, this impact can be moderated through policies. The researcher believes that China should continue to strengthen the promotion and use of the national common language and script on the premise of fully ensuring that students of all ethnic groups learn their own languages and scripts, and that China's education for ethnic minorities should always be clear about one purpose, which is to provide ethnic minority populations with the opportunities for education that the constitution provides for and to guarantee that ethnic minorities can enjoy equal This is the solid foundation for the common prosperity of all ethnic groups in China, which is to provide them with the knowledge and abilities they need to participate fully in the country's modernization process, with full respect for their right to choose their language of instruction. Therefore, it is essential to correctly grasp the education of ethnic minorities. This has a significant impact on the formulation and implementation of Yi education policies, as well as the use of the Yi language. In this study, the researcher adopts Mwaniki, and Wiley's (2017) definition: minority education refers to education that takes minority ethnic groups as its main target, minority culture as its important content, and minority language and Chinese language teaching as its important form, and fosters the unity of the national identity and ethnic identity of the educated.

4. Research Methods

Qualitative research methods were used in the theory and research on the existence of education for ethnic minorities in China to interview teachers and administrators at a boarding ethnic school in Liangshan as the site of investigation. After the interviews, the data collected were collated and analyzed using NVIVO.

5. Conclusion

In Chinese policy literature, minority education is equated with education in minority areas or defined as education for 55 ethnic minorities other than the Han (Zhuang, 2022). This differs from the core and purpose of ethnic minority education. This statement is neither clear nor does it reflect the attributes of minority education. Currently almost all schools in China have more than one ethnic minority, but not all education in all schools in China can be called ethnic minority education. It is also inappropriate to equate minority education with education in ethnic areas. This is due to the fact that education in ethnic areas includes both minority education and general national education. However, in ethnic areas, general national education does not fall under the category of minority education. Long (2020) points out that the deviation in the understanding of the concept of ethnic minority national education leads to a gap between the formulation and implementation of China's ethnic minority education policy. This is also an important reason why the relevance and effectiveness of China's ethnic minority education policies are not up to standard and why the development of ethnic minority education is lagging behind.

Liangshan has implemented a bilingual education policy for Yi and Chinese, taking into account the actual characteristics of the area and the accumulation of many years of practical experience. However, the bilingual education policy has deviated from the policy results and policy objectives in the implementation process, resulting in poor policy implementation. The researcher found that although the national policy requires bilingual education, in the actual implementation process there are only two different teaching modes, not real bilingual education. There are two different modes of bilingual education, namely, Teaching Model I and Teaching Model II. These two different teaching modes adopt different teaching forms in the teaching process. As shown in the figure, the Teaching Model I adopts the teaching mode in which the Yi language and Yi script are the main subjects and a Chinese language course is added; the Teaching Model II adopts the teaching mode in which the Chinese language and Chinese script are the main subjects and a Yi language course is added. Teaching Model II of Yi-Chinese bilingual teaching adopts a teaching mode in which the Chinese language is the main language and a Yi language course is added.

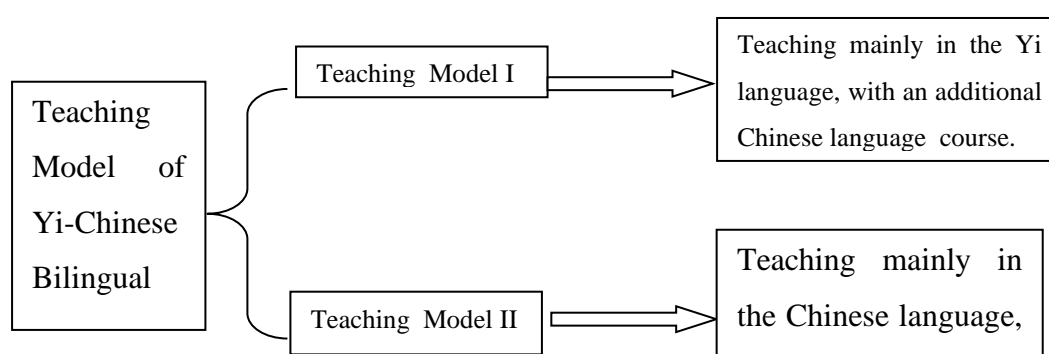


Figure 3: Liangshan bilingual teaching model

Secondly, the state strongly advocates for the use of the national common language and writing system, which has led schools and teachers to pursue improving students' Putonghua proficiency. The focus on students' learning has also changed, and they have gradually lost their motivation and confidence in learning the Yi language. Most of the teachers in local schools are not of Yi ethnicity and are not fully proficient in the language and writing of the Yi ethnicity, so in teaching, they cannot really implement the Yi-Chinese bilingual teaching, which leads to the situation that local minority students do not understand what they are taught

in class is very common. When students don't understand what the teachers are saying, they lose interest in the classroom and eventually become bored with school or even drop out of school, which leads to the low effectiveness of local schooling and poor quality of education. On the whole, ethnic minority education in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture suffers from a weak foundation of preschool bilingual education, an imbalance in the layout of ethnic primary and secondary schools, a large gap in office funding, a shortage of students, lagging behind in information technology in teaching and learning, and schools neglecting bilingual education. At the teacher level, there are problems of irrational professional structure, lack of high-quality teachers, teachers' biased understanding of bilingual education, insufficient teaching ability of bilingual teachers, weak foundation of bilingual teachers in ethnic languages, shortage of bilingual teachers, and high mobility of teachers. At the student level, there are problems with the weakening of Yi students' mother tongue ability, insufficient motivation to learn, lack of interest in learning, and low frequency of use of the Yi language.

Minority education should focus on national identity, unity, and integration. However, China's current minority education suffers from good top-level design and distorted local implementation (Hou & Su, 2022). Minority education is the best way to respond to the linguistic needs of ethnic minorities (Moreira, 2023). In the process of policy formulation and specific research, the promotion and use of the national common language and script should continue to be strengthened on the premise of fully ensuring that students of all ethnic groups learn their own language and script. In the actual educational process, national policies should be strictly enforced. For example, Article 37 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy stipulates that 'Schools enrolling predominantly ethnic-minority students shall, where possible, adopt textbooks in ethnic-minority scripts and give lectures in the ethnic-minority languages; and, depending on the circumstances, offer Chinese-language courses from the lower or upper grades of primary school and promote the nationally accepted Putonghua and standardized Chinese characters. As Mallinson (2024) suggests, by paying attention to minority languages, minorities will be able to make full use of their linguistic resources and recognize their linguistic abilities, thus enabling them to succeed in education. By giving full play to the role of minority education and using Yi language teaching to protect and pass on the Yi language, the Yi language can be effectively prevented from being lost and the diversity of the language and culture can be maintained.

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