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# ‘Bilingual’ education and discontent in Xinjiang

ERIC T. SCHLUESSEL

*ABSTRACT* Efforts to promote and impose Mandarin Chinese as the language of instruction in ethnic minority schools in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, aimed at further integrating the state and raising regional educational and economic quality, have had mixed success. The 2004 plan to consolidate Han Chinese and minority elementary and middle schools and to make Mandarin the universal language of instruction in those schools is fostering an immersive second-language environment without prior preparation for students, bringing native speakers of Mandarin into unfair competition with non-native speakers. The increased focus on Mandarin has already had grave consequences for ethnic relations, especially in urban Uyghur schools, where the project is focused, while the mandate for change in educational curriculum and methodology has also been poorly planned and remains under-resourced, negatively impacting educational quality. The Chinese government has available to it other language policy solutions that are both more workable and friendlier to minority sensibilities.

## Introduction

This paper critically examines the efficacy of current Mandarin-language education policy among the non-Han ethnic minorities of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), focusing on the region’s titular Uyghur ethnolinguistic group. In the case of Xinjiang and of China in general, ‘bilingual education’ is a euphemism for the mandatory increase in the use of Mandarin in minority-language-speaking children’s school environments in place of the languages that are those students’ everyday medium of communication. Recently, the PRC government has begun to more aggressively pursue its policy of ‘bilingual education’ in minority areas, explicitly hoping to strengthen ethnic minorities’ use and acceptance of Mandarin Chinese as a national common language and as a language of everyday interaction. This has included the abolition of minority-language schooling in some cities and the wholesale replacement of state-mandated minority-language education with

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Mandarin-only education. Whatever the motivation for the greater focus on Mandarin for minorities, it appears that, rather than increasing opportunities for minorities and more fully integrating them into the greater Chinese state, the shift to more Mandarin in the classroom has actually hindered these goals, provoking resentment among some groups, particularly urban Uyghurs, and has, by creating an environment conducive neither to language learning nor to learning in general, slowed the spread and acceptance of Mandarin and the integration of minorities into Chinese society as a whole.

Following from the arguments of language education and minority language rights theorists both inside and outside China, and drawing on data<sup>1</sup> concerning the attitude of Uyghurs and of other individual members of minorities towards the new bilingual education policy and the learning of Mandarin in general as ascertained through information from both published sources and interviews, this paper demonstrates that the current bilingual education policy is fundamentally misguided. The recent increase in Mandarin-language education (MLE) and in instruction through the medium of Mandarin in other subjects seems to have led to more resentment than acceptance, primarily among Uyghurs living in Xinjiang's cities, and this trend is likely to continue. Furthermore, poor implementation has led to a general decrease in educational quality. Decisions made in and since 2002 to include more Mandarin in minorities' education are founded upon normative views of language use and philosophy, or 'language regimes', which presuppose the instrumental superiority of Mandarin, denying more than tolerance-oriented institutional support for minority languages. This paper will propose some solutions to the problems of MLE and ostensibly 'bilingual' education for minority people in Xinjiang.

### **Language planning in Xinjiang**

The ideology of PRC language planning has its roots in both late Qing Dynasty language reform and the Stalinist philosophy of language. Both emphasize a goal and, in the Stalinist case, an inevitable and morally desirable future of linguistic convergence and unity. In the absence of overt Han nationalist rhetoric since 1949, Stalin's ideas of language use have justified the maintenance of a linguistic hierarchy that places Mandarin speakers and, thus, ethnic Han in a position of high status.

It has been claimed that the majority of modern language planning initiatives in the PRC carry on the work of the late-Qing 'language innovation movement'.<sup>2</sup> Certain Chinese intellectuals, drawing on the models of Europe and Japan, published pamphlets, beginning in 1892, presenting a learnable standard language based on the Beijing dialect to the majority Han, as well as various new systems of sound representation different from the traditional Chinese characters. This led in turn to the movement, exemplified by such authors as Lu Xun, to produce literature and other documents based on everyday Chinese speech, rather than the classical language.<sup>3</sup> This was a repudiation of the increasingly delegitimized Qing Dynasty's policies of cultural pluralism and segregation and an assertion

by a group of intellectuals of Han identity upon what they had begun to see as their state and their nation. At the time, this idealized place did not, for the most part, include the minority peoples of the Qing.

The Qing government itself also attempted to spread the Beijing dialect through education.<sup>4</sup> In 1903, the Qing began a program of public education that was to take the Chinese of Beijing as its communicative standard. The mandate, however, went entirely unsupported, receiving neither funds nor guidance from the government. Furthermore, the Beijing dialect did not, at that time, enjoy the high status to which it was later elevated. Indeed, later efforts under the Republic of China attempted not to spread one contemporary language, but to create a new 'blend' of everyday speech and 'historical' elements.<sup>5</sup>

Though modern writers on PRC language policy within China deny a connection between the language policy of the pre-1949 Republic of China and current practice, calling the Republic 'incapable and inactive',<sup>6</sup> language planning did take place, even in Xinjiang, and it is enlightening to examine its practice. In Xinjiang, a series of Han and Hui warlords imposed restrictions on language and language education in an attempt to retain control of the region.<sup>7</sup> Yang Zengxin, Governor of Xinjiang (1912–1928), like his 'predecessors',<sup>8</sup> sought to accentuate regional and national differences in order to better manipulate his domain. One way of closing off Xinjiang from the outside world was to control education, including banning all but Qur'anic schools, placing restrictions upon the teaching of Russian, and requiring Chinese language instruction.<sup>9</sup> It is doubtful that knowledge of Chinese would have been of any use to or held much appeal for a populace whose movement outside of Xinjiang was restricted and of whom no more than 5 per cent were ethnically Han.<sup>10</sup> It must be concluded that, like many of his other policies, this was intended to increase governmental control of the overwhelmingly non-Han and non-Chinese-speaking population of Xinjiang.

School curricula under Sheng Shicai, nominally in control of Xinjiang from 1933 through 1944, were based on a Soviet model that emphasized ethnolinguistic differences and attempted to increase the political penetration of the state through native-language education.<sup>11</sup> Sheng's schools, staffed by professionals trained mostly in the Soviet Union, competed with those set up by newly formed ethnic and religious educational associations.<sup>12</sup> These focused instead on native-language instruction by teachers trained in intensive programs at the associations' colleges. Between 1934 and 1937, the associations' schools outnumbered those of the government five-to-one, while their student enrollment was about double.<sup>13</sup> In 1938, students in association-run schools accounted for 73.2% of all Xinjiang students, falling only to 66.4% in 1942, while, in the same period, the total number of students in those schools rose by 80.19%.<sup>14</sup> Students in association elementary schools were overwhelmingly identified as Uyghurs, totaling 199,300 out of 266,035 in 1943, followed distantly by Kazakhs (29,543) and Han (20,010). This seems to indicate a strong preference among Uyghurs, however identified at this time, for schools that catered to their specific ethnolinguistic identities and needs.

Increased emphasis was seen in 1945 on ethnic particularism in education in southern Xinjiang under the East Turkestan Republic.<sup>15</sup> Schools were set up for specific ethnolinguistic groups, as conceived of by the ETR government. Later, following the establishment of a united Xinjiang provincial government, that government published in 1947 the 'Report on the Examination of Standards for the Xinjiang Provincial Middle and Elementary Schools', which established a language regime in education based on ethnicity that favored Turkic and Persian peoples and languages.<sup>16</sup> Under this system, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, Tatar and Taranchi elementary school students would be taught in their mother tongue and also spend 6–8 hours a week learning Mandarin, though only through lower middle school, while other groups would receive instruction through their native language and later learn Uyghur or Mandarin. A 'foreign language' component was also an important part of the curriculum.

Since 1949, the rationales for the education of Xinjiang minorities in Mandarin have followed an ethnically and linguistically chauvinistic pattern of argument common in discussions of minority languages. A major and oft-cited justification for the teaching of Mandarin in minority areas is the improvement in the 'quality' of minorities.<sup>17</sup> Such prejudice and condescension is reflected elsewhere in Chinese attitudes towards and treatment of minorities, both in government and in the larger society, a matter well enough documented elsewhere to require no further discussion here. Minority or non-'standard' languages are labeled insufficiently modern and, thus, unsuitable for development,<sup>18</sup> capitalism,<sup>19</sup> or even the 'Internet Age'<sup>20</sup> on account of their supposedly inferior communicative power.<sup>21</sup> Wang Lequan, Party Secretary of the CCP in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), himself stated that 'minority languages in Xinjiang contain only limited amounts of information'.<sup>22</sup> This is a linguistic fallacy based on a sense of superiority on the part of the (mostly Han) officials and scholars who make these statements. All instantiations of language in a mature and healthy individual are equally able to communicate; the lack of a formally codified word for, for example, 'computer' does not indicate the inability of a language or a speaker of that variety to conceptualize and communicate ideas about a computer.

Before 1949, the CCP did not have a definite position on language policy; rather, most prominent voices in the Party called for regional language autonomy.<sup>23</sup> However, the PRC immediately adopted a language policy upon its founding in 1949, and its language planning efforts have since taken Stalinist ideals of national unity, which assert that language is above all else a political tool, as their ideological foundation: 'Without a language understood by society and common to all its members, that society must cease to produce, must disintegrate and cease to exist . . . . In this sense, . . . while it is a medium of intercourse, it is at the same time an instrument of struggle and development of society.'<sup>24</sup>

In this paradigm, societal survival is inherently tied to the ability of all members of that society to communicate. This is the main motivation in the PRC for all forms of language planning, both 'external' or 'status' planning and 'internal'

or 'corpus' planning, which is after all a variety of status planning.<sup>25</sup> This is to say that the process of selecting or creating a linguistic variety does not consist simply of writing a dictionary and a grammar. Rather, these varieties are meant by language planners to fulfill certain social roles and carry a particular status. As such, ideas of linguistic correctness and the relative status of pre-existing forms deeply affect the corpus planning process.

It may also be argued that language planning is, on some level, a program, whether overt or covert, in which any state is necessarily engaged. Authors both inside and outside of China cite a long tradition of language standardization in the Central Plains States, attributing it inside China to a general historical tendency of unity<sup>26</sup> or to the chauvinism and condescension<sup>27</sup> that comes almost universally to ruling elites. It has been stated that 'Chinese language study in Xinjiang has an ancient historical tradition' and, therefore, precedent dating back to 138 BCE.<sup>28</sup> However, the story of MLE in Xinjiang, whenever its misty narrative origins, starts necessarily with the establishment of PRC political power in the region.

Since its incorporation into the PRC, politicians and planners have seen language planning and education in Xinjiang as crucial to regional stability.<sup>29</sup> A language planning office, now the Xinjiang Language and Script Committee, was established in Ürümchi, the capital, almost immediately after 'Liberation', though this concerned itself primarily with orthographic reform, which the PRC has always given disproportionate emphasis in its language policy. Lexical reform, standardization, and 'modernization', including the introduction of loan-words from Chinese, became the primary task of this committee, which has since moved more visibly into the public sphere.<sup>30</sup> Early PRC minority MLE policy in Xinjiang was quite liberal, apparently due in part to warmer relations with the neighboring Soviet Union; officially, members of recognized non-Han ethnic groups had the option to study either Chinese *or* Russian, while Han had a similar choice of Uyghur *or* Russian.<sup>31</sup> It is, however, doubtful that much second-language instruction whatsoever was possible, given the resources available. In the early 1960s, Chinese grew in official importance, gaining first an important part of minority university education in 1960 and of basic education in 1961. The establishment of stable and relatively readily-available education in Xinjiang and of the education and rise of a Uyghur educated class, however, began only in 1978, following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the Reform Era.<sup>32</sup> This was followed by roughly a decade of promising advances, from a minority language rights point of view, in minority-language planning and policy, particularly in education, with nominally preferential policies for minority students and languages, per the 1982 Constitution and the 1984 *Law on Regional Autonomy*, revised in 1985.<sup>33</sup> This included lower requirements for university admissions for minorities, seen as economically disadvantaged, and a 'separate-but-equal' system of education with separate schools for Mandarin-language instruction and for instruction in '*minzu*' (ethnic minority) languages.

Peculiarly, '*minzu*'-language instruction necessarily meant that classes would be taught in Uyghur, even to non-Uyghur minority students, as Uyghur was the

language ascribed to the region's titular majority. In Uyghur-language schools, Mandarin was taught as a second language, with approximately four hours of instruction per week, while students in Mandarin-language schools in 'Uyghur-speaking areas' officially received 4 hours of Uyghur language instruction per week. The system of affirmative action, however, reinforced majority Han perceptions of the minorities as 'backward' and 'younger' ethnicities in need of assistance, and the separate-but-equal system resulted in the unequal allocation of funds and an overall decrease in the quality of minority education. Minority schools were especially poorly funded and the instructors lacked extensive training.<sup>34</sup> The liberalization of education, however, did lead to an increase in the freedom of minority cultural expression. Dwyer proposes that it was this development that triggered the subsequent tightening of control over minority education in Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup>

However, it can also be seen that an effort to expand MLE in minority areas was already underway in 1982, when the same Constitution that guaranteed minorities the 'freedom', if not the right, to use and develop their own languages and writing systems also stated explicitly that Mandarin should be used by all minorities.<sup>36</sup> In 1980, new textbooks were introduced that were meant to make minority students proficient in Mandarin as a second language between the fourth grade and the end of high school—those grades attended mostly by minority children from well-to-do families in the cities.<sup>37</sup> These books were to teach 2000 characters and 3500 words, with accompanying grammar. A 1982 policy statement declared Mandarin 'key' to improving education. In 1984, the XUAR Communist Party decided to expand MLE throughout the educational system, setting the goal of making every middle school graduate communicative in Mandarin by 1995.<sup>38</sup> This meant that minority students, who were mostly beginning Mandarin in middle school, started learning it in the third grade, as well as receiving further instruction later in high school and university. The goal was to teach students 3000 characters and 6000–9000 words between the third grade and the end of high school.<sup>39</sup> Teachers who spoke Mandarin as a native language were likewise exhorted to learn *minzu* languages well.<sup>40</sup> A 1985 law required all city and town-level schools to teach Mandarin in elementary schools and stated that all schools for nomads should develop the facilities to do so by 1987.<sup>41</sup> A further declaration in 1987 required no less than 300 Chinese-language majors from high-level schools and 700 from medium-level schools per year. Clearly, Mandarin gained significant official status in education throughout the 1980s, even when hopes for its propagation were unrealistic.

In 1987, perhaps because of a realization that widespread MLE was unlikely to come about in Xinjiang at that time, a commission was established to investigate the viability of 'bilingual education'. 'Bilingual education' does not mean the same thing in China as it does in, for example, Canada, where it suggests preferential treatment for the mother language of any given individual inclusive of instruction in a second language; rather, Chinese 'bilingual education' at first meant that the minority language of a given area was to be used as a transitional language and a language of instruction in the humanities before students began

instruction in Mandarin.<sup>42</sup> Departing from the more egalitarian policies of the 1950s, no corresponding expectation was placed on Han students, despite the Han ethnic group being a minority population within Xinjiang. In September 2002, Xinjiang universities began using only textbooks and instruction in Mandarin, the only exception being Chaghatay classes. Xinjiang University, originally founded as a truly bilingual institution with instruction in most fields available in Uyghur, was forced to switch to all-Mandarin instruction, despite widespread protest.<sup>43</sup>

A new effort got under way in 2004 on the part of the national, regional, and local governments to make Mandarin the primary or sole language of instruction in elementary and middle school classrooms. The July 2004 policy statement 'Concerning the Decision to Vigorously Promote 'Bilingual' Education Work',<sup>44</sup> reproduced and distributed by local government organs, unambiguously states the Party and government's goal of making every non-Han high school graduate communicative in Mandarin. The document states that using Mandarin in elementary and middle school classes, rather than minority languages, is the key to breakthroughs in educational quality necessary for China's socialist market economy. Minority languages in schools are to be relegated whenever possible to use in the study of those languages themselves. The explicit goal of bilingual education is to promote Mandarin Chinese among non-native speakers.

A related document on implementing the new policy from the Khotan Regional Bureau of Education is even clearer.<sup>45</sup> Here, the Bureau states that, over the course of 5 years, minority-language educators should be almost entirely replaced by Mandarin-language education. Minority teachers in central elementary and middle schools, to begin with, should be replaced with native Mandarin speakers or *minkaohan* (minorities educated in Chinese) teachers.

The implementation of this policy change has taken an extreme form, sometimes running ahead of schedule. 'Bilingual education' has now come to mean, in some areas, MLE beginning in the first grade, with at least six 40-minute blocks of instruction per week.<sup>46</sup> In other places, it has meant that the major part of instruction is in Mandarin, while the mother tongue of minority students is taught as a second language, and that minority students must still take an extra six lessons of Mandarin language per week. Minority teachers at all levels are required to pass the Chinese Language Proficiency Test, normally used to test foreigners' Mandarin language abilities. If their level of Mandarin is deemed insufficient, they are either forced to retire early or to take extra classes in Mandarin. Teachers in Khotan were given up to two years, starting in 2004, to become proficient in Mandarin.<sup>47</sup>

In 2004, 50 minority and Han schools were 'consolidated', their students taught in the same classrooms in Mandarin with no transitional period for non-native speakers.<sup>48</sup> In 2005, all *minzu* and Han schools in most of the major cities in Xinjiang, including Ürümqi, Tacheng, and Ili, previously administered under separate systems, were brought together into the same system, effectively eliminating independent minority and minority-language schooling altogether. Instruction is now in Mandarin, with some extra classes being

taught in Uyghur; indeed, some classes are duplicated, with minority students taking four blocks of mathematics in Mandarin and four more blocks of mathematics in Uyghur at a lower level.<sup>49</sup> In 2006, it was declared that children in seven agricultural prefectures would begin Mandarin-only education in kindergarten; their families and teachers will receive subsidies unavailable to those in ‘bilingual’ programs.<sup>50</sup> There can be no doubt that Mandarin is now given almost complete preference over minority mother languages in the Xinjiang school system.

County-level versions of ‘Concerning the Decision to Vigorously Promote “Bilingual” Education Work’, such as that adopted in Khotan, also lay out a plan for the development of bilingual education in the future.<sup>51</sup> The percentage of first-year elementary and middle school classes (student groups) to be taught ‘bilingually’ is to increase gradually per year, remaining highest in the city or regional center: In 2005, 50 per cent of city, 30 per cent of suburban, 20 per cent of plains and 10 per cent of mountain-area classes were to be ‘bilingual’. This is to rise progressively until 2011, when all classes are taught with a ‘bilingual method’.

Mandarin is now receiving extra promotion in the XUAR through professional education and development programs, particularly in rural areas. According to newspaper reports, several villages and counties have set up industrial skills training programs for rural workers that emphasize knowledge of basic Mandarin.<sup>52</sup> These workers are sent *en masse* to China’s interior to work in factories. It may be argued that such a move turns non-Han workers, members of autochthonous minorities in Xinjiang, into members of migrant minorities in China’s East, thus greatly increasing their rate of native-language loss.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, *minkaomin*, non-Han educated in a minority language, are now eligible for a subsidy not exceeding 300 RMB for Mandarin-language training.<sup>54</sup> This is hardly sufficient to fund more than a few months of language learning, but the availability of this subsidy shows the government’s new willingness to use more direct economic incentives—rather than simply economic rhetoric and the threat of poor job prospects—to encourage the learning of Mandarin.

This paper speaks in fairly vague terms about the agency behind the language policymaking process in the PRC and the XUAR. This is because it is difficult to ascertain exactly who is responsible for such decisions as they are manifested on the ground, save that a massive and impersonal bureaucracy translates central directives and policy initiatives into regional programs of implementation.<sup>55</sup> A September 2004 policy document from the Xinjiang People’s Government further detailing the new push for ‘bilingual’ education simply attributed the decision to the ‘Autonomous Region Party Committee and Autonomous Region People’s Government’s decisions regarding vigorously moving “bilingual” education forward’ and addressed itself first to the ‘Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture’.<sup>56</sup> The details of implementation appear to be negotiated on a local basis, but the degree of actual local autonomy is unclear. Nevertheless, there is a clear periodization of MLE policy seemingly based on the priorities of the Central Government at a given time, suggesting that control essentially rests with Beijing.

**The alienation of MLE's 'target market'**

This paper finds itself in the peculiar position of arguing both for and against bilingual education. Studies since the 1960s have consistently shown that children educated well in two or more languages early in life consistently have an advantage later on, a fact acknowledged by Chinese authorities on language instruction.<sup>57</sup> However, it is possible to carry out any educational program, however well-meaning, poorly enough for it to become self-defeating and alienate those whom it is intended to help, in this case the Uyghurs of the XUAR. Recent changes in policy and its implementation have made Mandarin in schools not a choice, but an imposition, one that ignores a number of relevant issues by invoking ethnicity-blind economic theory and which unintentionally triggers a reaction of resistance and resentment in a populace wary of Chinese political and cultural dominance.

A command of Mandarin is seen by Uyghurs as an economic and professional advantage. This is not surprising, as Uyghurs who do receive education in Mandarin have much greater prospects for advancement later in life.<sup>58</sup> However, survey data<sup>59</sup> and interviews<sup>60</sup> show that Uyghurs prefer to maintain their own 'mother tongue' and keep Mandarin as a tool for the professional realm and for communication with non-Uyghur speakers. Indeed, Uyghurs see the use of Mandarin outside that realm as shameful and uncomfortable. *Minkaohan*, non-Han educated in Chinese, receive a certain stigma among their co-ethnics, as they are unable to communicate fully in Uyghur.<sup>61</sup> This analysis is supported by other studies of Uyghur culture and maintenance of ethnic boundaries. These data, however, also show that, given the opportunity, Uyghurs would prefer instruction not in Mandarin, but in Uyghur, supplemented by MLE, as well as instruction in another second language, preferably Russian, English or Japanese. This reminds one of the general state of minority education in Xinjiang during the Reform Era, when MLE was restricted to at most 4 hours a week, already a large amount of second-language instruction compared to that received by students in other countries.

Dwyer<sup>62</sup> suggests that school choice during this Reform Era was a 'myth'. Minority-language instruction in Xinjiang meant Uyghur-language instruction, which, although Uyghur was and is the *lingua franca* of non-Hans in Xinjiang, drove many members of non-Uyghur minority groups, such as the Kazakh, to send their children to Chinese-language schools. Uyghurs educated in these schools were and are seen by many other Uyghurs as acting less like Uyghurs and more like Han, losing their Uyghur-language abilities and cultural knowledge. This is a source of shame to those educated in a Uyghur-language environment who often sacrifice a higher quality of education for mother-language instruction.<sup>63</sup> Interviewees and various sources suggest that such a conversion does not have to take place, that Uyghurs educated in Han schools can sufficiently separate their professional and home identities and, indeed, work equally well in two environments, conducting themselves professionally in Uyghur, but this seems to be an exception rather than the norm. One reason for this may be the fact

that most minorities who do attend university go on to work not as academic or other professionals, but as officials in the government or Party. Furthermore, minority schools consistently receive poorer funding, training and supplies than Han schools.<sup>64</sup> Mandarin-language-based education is of a higher quality and, thus, preferable to those minority individuals willing to sacrifice or risk their cultural identity.

With the merging of minority and Han schools in major cities in Xinjiang in 2005, minority-language schooling in these places has disappeared. From the attitudes just discussed, it is possible to infer that, though this may be seen by officials and many academics as a good economic move in the service of integration and for the 'Great Opening Up of the West' project,<sup>65</sup> it is very threatening to the sense of cultural boundaries maintained by many Uyghurs, who often emphasize language as a distinguishing feature of their ethnic identity<sup>66</sup> and, indeed, one specifically in opposition to the language and identity of the Han Chinese.<sup>67</sup> The illusion of school choice for Uyghurs, the importance of which was often mentioned in interviews, has disappeared entirely, as there is factually no choice of language of instruction.

It is precisely this micromanagement of the linguistic situation that has raised concerns of 'linguistic genocide' among many Uyghurs, some of whom perceive an assault on their group language. Nor have these concerns gone unnoticed among certain Chinese intellectuals, for example Sun Hongkai,<sup>68</sup> who notes that, if the Chinese worry about the dominance of English and the death of Mandarin, the Uyghurs and other minorities have every reason to worry that Mandarin will somehow destroy their own mother tongues. Indeed, the aggressive expansion of dominant-language teaching in minority areas is a significant cause for consternation among those minorities, who already perceive their submission and fear extinction.<sup>69</sup>

### **Implementation of language planning and bilingual education policy**

In 1991, Zhou Qingsheng developed a typology of bilingual education in the Chinese context.<sup>70</sup> Bilingual education, he perceptively argued, had a unique meaning in the PRC, where its purpose was to aid certain political goals. To this end, he borrowed and reworked the standard 'Western' terminology of bilingual education to create this descriptive system of possible bilingual education plans based on various emphases on Han or minority languages:

1. 'Maintenance type'
  - a. Mother tongue as main medium of instruction, with MLE as a separate subject introduced in the second or third year of elementary school. Well-suited to minority areas with sufficient resources.
  - b. Mandarin as main medium of instruction, with the mother tongue taught as a separate subject in the second or third year of elementary school.

- Well-suited to areas of northern China (i.e. Inner Mongolia) where minority students have lost or are losing their mother tongue.
- c. Mother tongue instruction for some subjects, Han language instruction for others. Best for areas with few qualified minority teachers in certain subjects.
2. 'Transitional type'
    - a. 'Three-phase style'. Minority language texts used for first two years, then bilingual texts for two years, then shift to more Han language instruction for two years, and finally the realization of full Han language instruction using national texts in Mandarin starting in the seventh grade. Good for bilingual fluency and combating variation in the minority language.
    - b. 'Two-phase style'. One bilingual or mother tongue phase, then one Mandarin phase.
    - c. 'Tapered' or 'pagoda' style. Gradual phasing out of minority language in instruction after the first grade.
  3. 'Expedient type': also the 'abnormal' type. Violates constitutional right of mother-tongue usage for minorities. Minority language only taught briefly at the end of elementary school. Good for increasing test scores, where the minority language carries little weight. In some of the Chinese second language education discourse, this is equivalent to 'maintenance type' (1b).

Zhou was wise to recommend that the first permutation of 'maintenance type' bilingual education be carried out, as it was at the time, in minority areas with sufficient resources. Such a system was widely implemented for minority education in Xinjiang in the 1980s and was well received by students and concerned academics. It appears to have been more or less successful, though Uyghur learners of Mandarin show certain consistent variations from the standard Mandarin norm<sup>71</sup> that could be 'corrected' through greater exposure and better teacher training. Despite shortfalls in financial support, the program of MLE was effective in providing the population with a general proficiency in Mandarin, subject to later variation according to opportunities for communication in Mandarin, while leaving sufficient time for instruction in other topics. This is all that can be expected of a second-language education program.

However, the recent shift in bilingual education policy and implementation has shown a shift to the second permutation of the 'maintenance type', whereby Mandarin is the main medium of instruction, though MLE and instruction through Mandarin now both begin in the first grade. This program would be defined in the regular parlance of bilingual education theory as a basically monolingual 'sheltered immersion' program, in which native language (L1) students are immersed in a second language (L2), but have extra instruction in L2 or classes in L1.<sup>72</sup>

Where these programs appear in L1 areas, they are typically fairly effective for three reasons. First, the teachers are themselves fully bilingual and can communicate with their students in the native language when the need arises.

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Second, the teaching materials are culturally appropriate to the students. Finally, L1 students are not in competition with L2 students. Interestingly, this type of program as it is now enacted in Xinjiang breaks all three of these guidelines: The teachers are generally monolingual in Mandarin or are Uyghur speakers with poor Mandarin.<sup>73</sup> The teaching materials, which are of poor quality,<sup>74</sup> are almost all created and published in Beijing and are tailored to Han sensibilities.<sup>75</sup> Finally, L1 and L2 students often share classrooms, leading to unfair classroom competition.

Since 1978, this type of education has normally been reserved for Han-majority areas with significant minority populations. Arguably, that is precisely what the major cities of Xinjiang and, indeed, Xinjiang itself, are becoming as a result of the government's policy of encouraging Han immigration from central China to Xinjiang.<sup>76</sup> This is a fact of which Uyghurs are aware and which many resent, as it encroaches on what many see as their ethnic space. This space is defined in many ways by patterns of association determined, in part, by medium of communication; Mandarin-speakers and Uyghur-speakers tend not to associate with each other, apart from, as noted above, in the workplace, partly for linguistic reasons. There is little overlap between the two groups. Therefore, to conduct classroom instruction in the language of outsiders is to reinforce the sense of dominance by that group and the feeling of being 'colonized'. This practice also shows significant parallels to colonial situations in the past, where colonized groups, such as the Australian aborigines, Hong Kong Chinese, or Hindustanis, would be instructed in the language of their overlords, in these cases English, as part of a 'civilizing mission'. Indeed, Dwyer<sup>77</sup> suggests that just such a 'civilizing project' is the object of 'covert' language planning in the PRC.

Almost universally, such missions engender resentment among the newly 'civilized'. Some have argued that the government of the PRC is aware of this and, thus, has maintained silence about the actual rationale for such policies until very recently in order to avoid giving the restive minorities reason for discontent.<sup>78</sup> In the past few years, however, the government seems to have become more confident that it has entered a new stage of this mission's progress, one wherein success is so well assured that there is no more need for such secrecy. This shift in implementation of language policy has coincided with other more candid statements of Chinese policy towards minorities and minority areas.

Even assuming that the PRC government has no ulterior motive and is simply trying to act in the minorities' best interests, this new plan of 'bilingual education' is unproductive in that it does not provide minority children of school age with a firm command of Mandarin and hinders their general education. Immediate total immersion in a second language, even before the end of the 'critical period' in which a child can acquire language fluently, has been conclusively demonstrated to be less effective than a gradual introduction of the second language.<sup>79</sup> Although it is normal for a school environment to require a different genre of speech, the use of a language radically different from that used in other environments is an impediment to the effective learning of non-linguistic subject matter. This may be the reason why children in Tacheng, for example, have two mathematics

classes, one in Uyghur and one in Mandarin: the PRC, which has repeatedly stated its educational focus on the physical sciences, may want to be certain that its minorities have a firm grasp of mathematics as well as Mandarin. The message sent to minority students, however, is that their language is somehow more 'primitive', as has been stated explicitly before, and unsuited to the discussion of the sciences.<sup>80</sup> Such a proposition, though linguistically dubious, is socially powerful.

Indeed, experience in Xinjiang has already shown that early immersion in Mandarin is ineffective for both language learning and education in general. Between 1958 and 1970, this kind of 'sink or swim' Mandarin immersion was offered to minorities in elementary school, where it was almost completely unsuccessful.<sup>81</sup> Policymakers and education specialists should know better than to try this again.

Uyghurs who were educated during that period remember the way they were taught in school and the prevailing attitudes towards minorities of the time. The use of a Han-style 'maintenance' model of language instruction suggests to Uyghurs that the goal of education in general is no longer, or perhaps never was, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but rather assimilation into the greater Chinese society through intensive MLE.

Realistically, the government cannot expect the teaching staff currently available to Xinjiang to be capable of teaching classes in Mandarin. In 1993, there were 4978 minority elementary schools and 857 minority middle schools in Xinjiang. These had, in total, only 4737 Mandarin-language teachers, a mere 585 of whom had advanced degrees, attending to 1,616,211 students. The regional teacher-student ratio is thus 1:341, far too high for effective language teaching leading, presumably, to communicative fluency.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the level of MLE quality varies considerably in different parts of Xinjiang, since these teachers are mostly concentrated in the cities and in places where native Mandarin speakers with the ability to teach Mandarin were available. For example, facilities in southern Xinjiang are far poorer than those in the North,<sup>83</sup> and the South has witnessed the gradual *lessening* of Han teachers.<sup>84</sup> Far better pedagogical facilities are also, of course, more readily available in urban centers.

As a solution to this problem, the XUAR government simply encourages these teachers to 'share experiences'. Such poor training has led to 'conservative teaching practices', such as rote recitation, that impair the learning of Mandarin.<sup>85</sup> Often, Mandarin teachers are poorly trained Uyghur educators made to teach Mandarin as part of the government-mandated curriculum. They have little knowledge of Mandarin, having spoken or written very little of it, and tend to 'draw', rather than 'write', the ideographs they teach.<sup>86</sup> These educators are also spread very thin, with no more than a few hundred active in a given region, though their numbers may be expanding.<sup>87</sup> Also, the government regularly sends inspection teams to minority schools to check on their Mandarin progress, a practice that may squelch pedagogical innovation.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the strong political focus on Mandarin-language and 'bilingual' education, there is no reason to believe that thousands of new Mandarin-language

teachers have been trained and are now attending to the language-learning needs of the doubtlessly increased number of minority students attending these schools. The XUAR government's stated goal of 1985 to make every middle school leaver communicative in Mandarin by 1995 was certainly not realized, nor could it be under such conditions.<sup>89</sup>

Kang Jian's report on MLE in Xinjiang gave grave figures for its availability and quality.<sup>90</sup> She stated that of 'ten thousand' *minzu* schools in Xinjiang, only 2 per cent had sufficient Han-nationality Mandarin teachers, and, in the south, only 1 per cent. Furthermore, most of the available teachers themselves spoke little or poor Mandarin, their pronunciation deviating far from the standard. For example, even in a city such as Khotan, 14.3% of the 1370 Mandarin teachers are 'non-standard' in some unspecified aspect of their Mandarin language.<sup>91</sup> News reports explicitly bemoan the lack of qualified Mandarin-language instructors in primary education, especially in rural areas.<sup>92</sup> The end result of these general deficiencies is that only perhaps 6 per cent of minority students can achieve a passing score on the HSK. According to Kang, the remarkably low quality of teaching is the root of the problem at hand, and the inefficacy of MLE in Xinjiang. Her suggested solution is a total reform of the *minzu* school system, though precisely what this would entail is left unstated.<sup>93</sup>

This problem is related to a general lack of funding in the past for high-minded rural education programs that seem able to provide either materials or teacher training, but not both, to rural schools.<sup>94</sup> The XUAR and national governments, however, have recently begun a widespread renovation and reform of schools, especially in rural areas, under the Eleventh Five-Year Plan and the 'Two Basics' education reform and strengthening plan,<sup>95</sup> but it is unclear what effect this will have on the quality of MLE. Officially, the 'Two Basics' plan includes the training of new 'bilingual' teachers. In 2006, the government spent 160 million RMB on renovating rural schools and building new boarding middle schools, as well as 250 million RMB on promoting Mandarin in rural areas.<sup>96</sup> Between 2007 and 2009, the XUAR plans to invest another 20 million RMB in poor urban and rural schools.<sup>97</sup> However, it is unclear just how this funding is allocated, particularly to bilingual education, and how much of it has reached and will continue to reach its destination. There is also the question of training effective Mandarin teachers, which cannot be done through money alone, and of those teachers' willingness to work in poor and unfamiliar areas. One solution implemented in the past year has been to send pedagogical university students to the countryside as part of their training.<sup>98</sup>

However, the integration of minority and Han schools in major cities in the XUAR may in fact have served to solve this problem without a need for real reform, not only by putting minority students into an immersive Mandarin-language environment, but by giving them more access to teachers with a knowledge of Mandarin sufficient to teach those students properly. Given the enormous potential cost of training a new generation of Mandarin teachers, of whom at least 20,000 would be needed for any progress to take place, the

XUAR government, acting on the mandate of the central government's encouragement of Mandarin, decided on a solution that is, in the short term, more economically viable, and which seems on the surface to be the 'expedient' (or perhaps, to reference Zhou's model above, 'abnormal'). However, judging by the reactions it has induced in the affected minority population, the decision may cost that body more in support and legitimacy among its supposed constituency. More importantly for the actual success of such a plan, immersion in an unfamiliar language could have long-term negative effects on students' education.

### Justification for MLE in Xinjiang

The justifications and rationales put forth for increased Mandarin-language education in Xinjiang, even when supported by statistical data, are dogmatic in nature and do not hold up to scrutiny. They are typical of a nominally 'pragmatic' or 'realistic' mode of discourse that attempts to justify the dominance of certain languages and the disappearance of others, primarily through pseudo-economic arguments. They argue that increased teaching in the dominant language will improve the market through increased economic and societal integration and, thus, serve a general self-interest. Such a line of reasoning ignores important factors, such as identity, that are crucial to an understanding of language politics.

The most commonly advanced reason for the promotion of 'bilingual education' in Xinjiang is that it will benefit the economy. Kang Jian offers a revealing syllogism:<sup>99</sup>

For a long time, Xinjiang has been relatively backward, simply because its economy is not developed. The reason the economy is not developed is that *minzu* education cannot keep up, and the main reason *minzu* education is behind is that the *minzu* and Han languages cannot communicate, and the quality of Han language teaching in schools is low.

Therefore, Xinjiang's economy is underdeveloped because Mandarin is not being taught well enough there. The logical connection is not obvious, but there are a number of presuppositions wrapped up in this statement. First, that communication between the Han and the minorities is necessary for development; it would be impossible for development to take place without a Han or other Mandarin-speaking presence. Presumably, Uyghur, called the *lingua franca* of Xinjiang,<sup>100</sup> would be insufficient for common communication. Rather, this assumption rests on the notion that the Han, as it is often stated, are 'more advanced' than their 'brother' *minzu* and that they have a 'leading position' in their multiethnic nation, showing the way towards a more developed and civilized future.

Second, we see encoded in this syllogism the belief that communication between the Han and the minorities is the path to a higher-quality education. Because many textbooks and other learning materials are now translated from Mandarin and published in Beijing, rather than produced locally in minority areas,<sup>101</sup> one may infer that this communication is one-way, with Han expertise

and cultural values enlightening a benighted and backward people incapable of properly educating itself through the medium of their mother language. Indeed, it has often been stated that non-Han languages are unequal to the task of teaching the hard sciences, a belief reflected in the Xinjiang educational system, wherein only Mandarin has long been used for the teaching of those subjects. Once again, one may see the signs of a ‘civilizing mission’; this is simply ethnic and linguistic chauvinism, a preference for Han-style education over minority-style education. The ‘economic’ argument loses credibility as it loses its objectivity.

Third, better education is assumed to improve an economy. Such a proposition is not without merit—indeed, it has been demonstrated countless times that education leads to increased mobility and the diversification of a society and its economy. Even taking the impoverished view that language is a tool or instrument, the utility of having more than one is obvious. Proper bilingual education provides a student with complete competence in more than one language, sacrificing the quality of neither, and, according to many studies, lends cognitive benefits to the bilingual individual. However, there is no reason to believe that immersion in Mandarin entails a ‘better’ education in anything but Mandarin—indeed, immersion as it is now practiced in the unified minority and Han school systems in parts of Xinjiang is the ‘least effective’ approach to second language education.<sup>102</sup> This same approach, as noted above, was shown to be counterproductive and fruitless long ago, leaving no excuse for its revival.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, Xinjiang already possesses its own qualified non-Han academics and teachers, despite the pressures placed upon and damage done to its educational system over the past century. Their mobilization would enable expanded education in minority mother languages. Many of these teachers, however, have now lost their jobs because their level of Mandarin is considered too low, precluding the possibility of true bilingual or mother tongue education for minorities.<sup>104</sup> New statistics would thus show a general dearth of minority educational talent in Xinjiang, supporting the argument that more expertise from the interior and from ethnic Hans is needed. The result is, arguably, bad for the economy: poorer education in general, insufficient education and possible hostility to Mandarin, and, as a byproduct of the language policy’s implementation, the unnecessary retiring of many of Xinjiang’s qualified academics.

Another common argument for increased MLE for minorities springs from a common belief, the idea that majority languages, in this case Mandarin Chinese, are inherently more ‘modern’ and instrumentally useful than those of minorities. Recall the statement by Wang Lequan, Party Secretary of the CCP in Xinjiang, that ‘minority languages in Xinjiang contain only limited amounts of information’.<sup>105</sup> In an effort to increase the amount of ‘information’ in a given idealized monolithic standard language’s lexicon, there has been a concerted effort since 1949 to add new words to minority languages, either by inventing new words within the language’s system or by loaning them directly from Mandarin.<sup>106</sup> At one point, state media boasted that over 100,000 new words had been created in

Tibetan between Liberation and 1975.<sup>107</sup> This is a preposterous figure, but it suggests the political importance attached to the 'modernization' of non-Han languages. While these languages 'progress', it is suggested that Mandarin should be used as the national common language, as it supposedly has a higher communicative ability than other languages. However, despite all reforms, the predicted 'modernization' of minority languages has apparently never been achieved, as their use is still and increasingly precluded in academia, in particular in the hard sciences. This suggests that these languages were never meant for use in high-status domains of discourse.

Finally, it may be argued that the task of providing educational materials, such as textbooks, to minority learners in their mother tongues sufficient for a complete education in all areas is simply too much of an economic burden or undertaking. This is a poor excuse. The PRC government has shown great enthusiasm for the production of new textbooks whenever it makes a politically-motivated and superficial change to a minority's standard language or script.<sup>108</sup> Clearly, the resources are on hand.

The rationale for this nominally pragmatic standpoint in PRC policy and academia is a common and predictable one, mirroring the arguments taken up by those outside China who argue against efforts to preserve linguistic diversity.<sup>109</sup> New multiethnic states in search of nationhood in the modern world consistently choose the language used in an earlier colonial or otherwise dominant administration, still used by the native intellectual class, as the status language of government on the grounds that it has a greater 'instrumental' utility for modernization and national development. Although there is debate as to the colonial nature of the Qing or the PRC administration in non-Han areas, Mandarin's place in modern Xinjiang is clearly that of an elite language like those of many of these post-colonial states.<sup>110</sup> The languages of the native populace are assigned a primarily 'sentimental' value and, though often held up as national treasures and an important part of the new nation's cultural heritage, do not find currency in government or education.

Indeed, even when Chinese academics sympathetic to minorities talk of preserving minority languages, they speak not of spreading or encouraging their use, but only of slowing down their death.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, the debate has no reason to begin. The demise of minority languages and cultures is inevitable, a view supported by the Marxist and Stalinist historiographical paradigm that dominates the Chinese discourse. The identification of language as a key element of ethnicity, along with a 'common land', 'common economy' and 'common psychological characteristics realized in common cultural practice', acknowledges its importance to an identity that is necessarily ephemeral. Language is an academic interest or an exotic curiosity, but, as is regularly stated in discussions of language in the PRC, it must ultimately serve a political purpose. Chinese discourse on language even at its very root displays a patent disregard for linguistic diversity and difference, suggesting that minority mother tongue education, at best, serves a political purpose of minority appeasement contrary to the PRC's long-term economic interests.

The PRC position, however, cannot be said to be so simple as the analysis above would suggest; in terms of the international debate on minority language rights, PRC language and ethnicity policy plays on both sides. The problem of ‘mobility’ is often invoked to justify the imposition of a majority language on a minority, the claim being that a speaker of a minority language has only a limited range of social and economic movement.<sup>112</sup> From this standpoint, a minority individual should have access to the majority language in order to better serve his or her own self-interest. Supporters of this viewpoint note with some disgust the supposed attempts of language preservation efforts to turn minority languages and their speakers into timeless museum pieces and, indeed, this is the exotic aim of some who engage in this work. This is the view taken by the dominant sect of PRC policymakers and academics. However, the effort to categorize the ethnonational groups or *minzu* of the PRC in terms of their characteristics and developmental tendencies is precisely this kind of project. Chinese language and ethnicity policies have created groups that supposedly have low social mobility because of who they are—indeed, because of their inherent linguistic characteristics—and then encouraged them to learn Mandarin for precisely those reasons. This is self-contradictory and suggests once again that a chauvinistic ethnic teleology, rather than a logical and considered economic policy, is at the root of Chinese language policy. Furthermore, the relocation of minorities—particularly Uyghurs—from Xinjiang’s border areas and their replacement with ethnic Han, allegedly to improve security through racial gerrymandering, demonstrates that the PRC has no interest in increasing minority individuals’ ability to move around and settle where they choose.<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, this discursive focus on mobility in a market society has come at a time when communism has lost ideological merit in China, supplanted by a governmental and popular focus on ‘competition’. Policymakers seem to have borrowed a page from the book of Laitin and Reich,<sup>114</sup> who assert that ‘those who speak a minority (or dominated) language are more likely to stand permanently on the lower-rungs of the socio-economic ladder’. Once again, China is creating its own problems, first by forcibly placing a group on those lower rungs through restrictions on language use and language education, then compelling any member of that group to navigate its way up that ladder on a specific route, for example by requiring that foreign languages, such as Russian and English, be taught through the medium of Mandarin, which must first be well-studied.<sup>115</sup>

This ideological motivation for increased MLE in Xinjiang ignores the desires, demands and language attitudes of the population concerned. Dwyer<sup>116</sup> calls this a ‘tension’ between a ‘codifying imperative’ and the ‘dynamic force of speaker identity’, an inherent conflict between a normative, syntagmatic view of ethnic identity and the real changeability thereof. First of all, it is clear that Mandarin, despite a long period of dominance, still has a generally low status among Uyghurs, who generally refer to it as *hanzuhua*, or the ‘Han speech’,<sup>117</sup> or, even more derogatorily, *qitayce*. The level of Mandarin spoken by Uyghur academics can be very low and even traders in Han-dominated Ürümqi may speak poor

Mandarin. It is well documented that there is a wide gap between the two speech communities and that neither sees the other's language in an especially positive light.<sup>118</sup> Uyghurs interviewed have suggested a preference for learning Russian, Japanese, or possibly English. Anecdotal evidence suggests the particular popularity of Japanese, as the Japanese are seen as a sympathetic ethnic group. Indeed, images of Xinjiang are quite popular in Japan today. Were the Uyghurs in general to feel more motivated to learn Chinese for reasons of perceived cultural status or of self-interest, levels of Mandarin competence would probably increase.<sup>119</sup> As this does not appear to be the case generally, MLE does not have the high status PRC policymakers have long insisted it does.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, it has been acknowledged both by researchers and some politicians, such as Xinjiang CCP chairman Wang Huaiyu, that minority students feel little motivation to learn Mandarin.<sup>121</sup> Many students feel that they have no use for Mandarin beyond the classroom.

There is reason to believe, however, that Mandarin and Uyghur are not mutually opposed linguistic institutions and that there is room for accommodation. While urban Uyghurs, living in closer quarters with newly arrived Han Chinese, feel the strain of the PRC's language regime, rural Uyghurs and other non-Han seem to regard the Chinese language quite highly.<sup>122</sup> This is evidenced by rural workers' apparent enthusiasm for learning Mandarin in pursuit of economic opportunity.<sup>123</sup> Also, some multi-cited survey work has shown that Uyghurs and Han, despite ethnic tension, view each other's languages in an overall positive light.<sup>124</sup>

### **Positive directions for future language planning and MLE**

'Language grief', concern over 'actual or anticipated language loss', is a significant contributor to many situations of ethnic conflict.<sup>125</sup> Certainly, no more threats to stability are needed in the already contentious Xinjiang, particularly among the Uyghurs, whom the Chinese government already views as suspect as a whole. However, the forcible increase in the use of Mandarin in minority education has already produced a significant outcry, as in 2002 when Xinjiang University was made to begin conducting its formerly bilingual programs entirely in Mandarin.<sup>126</sup> The more recent move towards almost total immersion in Mandarin for the youngest students suggests that a similar quarrel with the new policy and a renewed hostility towards Mandarin, expressed emphatically in interviews and already boiling under the surface during earlier studies, is probably in the making.

Or is it? Surveys suggest a very clear resentment on the part of urban Uyghurs, especially the well educated, towards the imposition of Mandarin in education. However, ethnographic research on rural Uyghur society suggests that those who live in smaller, more ethnically homogeneous settlements far from cities, particularly those settlements which have seen little Han immigration, harbor less suspicion of and ethnic hatred towards Han Chinese.<sup>127</sup> Rural workers seem inclined to learn Mandarin in pursuit of economic opportunities otherwise

unavailable to them. However, it is important to make a distinction between the instrumental use of a language, such as Mandarin, as a tool for achieving employment and prosperity and taking on a language as a mark of identity, a distinction not made in the Chinese literature on bilingual education. Uyghurs and others, given free choice, tend to learn Mandarin. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that learning Mandarin is part of acquiring a pan-Chinese identity. This reason is the one least cited in studies of non-Han people's motivations for learning Mandarin, at least in the cities.<sup>128</sup>

The ability of language planning and policy to affect the way people use and think about language is directly related to a government's penetration into its governed society.<sup>129</sup> This penetration is contingent upon that government's legitimacy, which is in turn dependent on identities subscribed to by individuals. As these identities are multiple and varied, as well as contextually expressed, they are not always clearly visible to a state organ focused on the creation of a mass identity based on language. This relates directly to the question of identity among the Xinjiang Uyghurs: Urban Uyghurs tend to have an identity, possibly a pan-Uyghur identity, constructed largely in opposition to that of Han Chinese, resulting in their rejection or instrumental acceptance of the Chinese language as 'a practical convenience only'.<sup>130</sup> Rural Uyghurs preserve strong local identities, reinforced by cultural and economic patterns of movement such as village endogamy.<sup>131</sup> This may hinder the formation of geographically broader social identities, including pan-Chinese identity, based on language, but does allow the instrumental use of Mandarin.

There remains the problem of language policy and planning and discontent when such state action runs counter to ideals of its objects. It has been said that 'It would seem . . . naïve to believe that a world that does not guarantee the majority of its inhabitants basic human rights will be able to assure them those of the specifically linguistic variety'.<sup>132</sup> In the case of the PRC, which in practice denies its population basic individual human rights, though claiming to uphold collective rights, it would be foolish to put forth the arguments of those who eloquently articulate language rights, including a right to education in the mother tongue, as human rights and expect such an argument to be respected.<sup>133</sup> Rather, it behooves a critic of China's language education policy to offer some perhaps more workable solutions to language-based conflict and tensions and the revelation of a wiser path to harmony and economic prosperity. These suggestions include: the return to the Reform Era plan of MLE in Xinjiang; a shift, though not a complete shift, towards a system of personal linguistic autonomy; the opening up of the 'language market' in Xinjiang; and, finally, improved funding of minority schools.

The preceding discussion of Mandarin language education in Xinjiang has shown that the current system of MLE is both ineffective and alienating to many members of its intended target group, specifically urban Uyghurs. A reversion to the older system of MLE, perhaps with some structural adjustments, would both find increased favor with the Uyghurs in general and improve pedagogy overall. First of all, as has been shown within China and elsewhere,

the current method of near-immersion in Mandarin from the first grade in many minority schools in Xinjiang produces poor education both in Mandarin and in other subjects.<sup>134</sup> The 'maintenance type' of education formerly practiced in all minority schools in Xinjiang approximately from 1978 to 2005, which emphasized the mother tongue but also contained a significant MLE component, however, is built on a model found to be more or less effective for language education and general education elsewhere. At the time, it aided in the production of a 'new class of bilingual men and women'.<sup>135</sup> The problem of such a model, however, was unequal access to quality teaching. Teachers, of which there were few, particularly in the countryside, were poorly trained and unable to properly teach Mandarin. The new immersion-based model has solved the access problem, but the general quality of teaching for minority students is lower. The solution, perhaps, is to acknowledge that not every student in Xinjiang needs Mandarin and that teaching it poorly is perhaps worse than not teaching it at all, because poor language pedagogy early in life will inculcate bad habits or inaccuracies that deviate from the PRC's own ideals of standard language. This would free up more resources, including teaching staff, allowing a general improvement in the quality of MLE in certain areas and of education in Xinjiang overall. Wang *et al.*<sup>136</sup> likewise argue variously for a liberalization of the minority educational system, in particular where 'bilingual' education is concerned, consistent with the reality of the educational situation in Xinjiang.

The PRC response would be that learning Mandarin is necessary for national unity and the development of Xinjiang. As this paper has hopefully shown, however, this argument is without merit—only those who desire to integrate in this way will do so. Increased MLE threatens Uyghur identity through a perceived attack on that identity's associated language through a restriction of the domains in which it is used, either through sharing space with Mandarin or through complete exclusion. Currently, Uyghur nationalist literature does not focus very strongly on the Uyghur language, though it is certainly considered an important mark of Uyghur identity. That may change in response to the new policies, adding ideological fuel to the separatist fire. Forcing MLE, or indeed anything, on an uninterested group will produce, at best, apathy.

Idil Boran<sup>137</sup> proposes a hybrid and asymmetrical model of regional and personal linguistic autonomy as a solution to 'language grief'. The territorial model of autonomy in other political matters has thus far been only nominally implemented in the PRC, with actual control over ethnic minority areas remaining in the hands of the central government.<sup>138</sup> As Han immigration continues to alter the ethnic map of Xinjiang, diluting the apparent 'purity' of certain areas, actual territorial or regional autonomy will be effectively impossible to pursue, and individuals belonging to ethnic minorities who leave their assigned regions will still be unable to obtain mother tongue education. Thus, the best possible model for linguistic autonomy is what might be termed a 'neighborhood model', wherein members of a given linguistic group, wherever they are, would be able to acquire at least partial mother tongue and culturally appropriate education under state oversight, while exercising some control over school curricula. Such

a system allows both increased mobility throughout the state, as well as satisfying the cultural demands of minorities to a greater degree. It also has the advantage, from the point of view of a security-conscious government, of preventing large minority-only areas from developing on China's sensitive borderlands. Indeed, such a system, incorporating both Han and non-Han schools, is essentially in place in Xinjiang already and has been in some form for almost a century. What is necessary is greater autonomy and more recognition of the diversity of ethnolinguistic identities to be found in Xinjiang localities.

The third suggestion seems radical, but is logical and in harmony with some of the PRC's current ideals of social and economic structure: the opening up of the language 'market' in Xinjiang. This does not mean the privatization of language teaching, but rather a diversification of language-learning options in minority schools. Increased instruction in Russian, Japanese, English and Central Asian languages through Uyghur could make up for much of what is missing in minority schools in terms of MLE. A truly better educated and wealthier minority population, educated to that position by the state, has less reason for grievance against that state and a greater sense of gratitude and obligation to and identification with it. Xinjiang is all too frequently called a crossroads of Central Asia, one with a strategic and economic importance. Those who live there who have the desire to trade with China's neighbors should be encouraged to do so through expanded language education, improving their welfare and the economy of the entire PRC.

Finally, it has been noted that minority schools and classrooms are of the typically 'separate but equal' type; that is, they are separate and unequal, receiving even 'smaller pieces of drawing paper' than their Han counterparts.<sup>139</sup> There is no excuse for blatant racism, especially under the aegis of a government that claims to strive towards an ideal future of equality without borders. An end to systemic prejudice in education will improve at least Uyghurs' view of the Chinese government, as well as their individual livelihoods.

## Conclusion

The expansion of MLE has been called both the best and the worst thing for China's unity and stability, a potentially valuable tool, but also a source of potentially great conflict.<sup>140</sup> Which it will be depends on the implementation of MLE. MLE can either be perceived as one of many valuable gifts freely offered to the Uyghurs in response to their own desire to improve their lot in life, or as an outsider's language forced upon their children at an early age. Right now, it is the latter.

There is nothing wrong with learning a second language, especially one in such common usage that can open so many doors. As MLE is now being implemented in Xinjiang, however, it is doubtful that Uyghur students are learning much Mandarin, while their Han classmates automatically out-compete them. The root of the problem is the way the PRC government approaches language teaching: Mandarin education is one of the three pillars of the Chinese educational system,

one which should not be denied to any citizen. However, to continually push this dogmatic plan is to ignore the reality of the situation and act counterproductively. The very justifications for the recent increase in Mandarin education are based on this untenable position, though they are wrapped in the language of realism and pragmatism. Like most nominally realist arguments, they ignore empiricism and assume an unproven fundamental truth.

If the PRC truly desires to both educate minorities in Mandarin and maintain peace among them, it needs to relax its grip on minority education. Policies made in Beijing pass through several levels of opaque bureaucracy and prejudiced decision-making before being implemented on the ground. Increased autonomy is a workable solution which, though apparently in conflict with the tenets of current CCP ideology, will be necessary in the near future in order to avoid widespread language grief among an already restive populace.

## Notes and references

1. In an effort to provide the most balanced possible picture of language attitudes in Xinjiang, I have drawn on work from both inside and outside of the Chinese academy. Chinese research includes, but is not limited to: Teng Xing, 'An inspection and report on Uyghur-Chinese bilingual education among Uyghurs in Khotan, Xinjiang, China', in Teng Xing and Hu An'gang, eds, *Doctoral Forum on the Development of the West and Educational Development* (Beijing: Minzu Publishing House, 2001), pp 271–291; and Xi Lin and Cai Hao, 'A contrastive study of the bilingual attitudes of Uyghur and Mongol university students', *Journal of Xinjiang University (Social Science Edition)*, Vol 32, No 1, 2004, pp 139–142. Several outside scholars have conducted fieldwork on ethnic relations, paying special attention to language attitudes. These include: Arienne Dwyer, 'The texture of tongues: Languages and power in China' in William Safran, ed, *Nationalism and Ethno-Regional Identities in China* (London: Frank Cass, 1998); Arienne Dwyer, *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse* [Policy Studies 15] (Washington: The East–West Center, 2005); Joanne N. Smith, "Making culture matter": symbolic, spatial and social boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol 3, No 2, 2002, pp 153–174; Herbert S. Yee, 'Ethnic consciousness and identity: a research report on Uyghur–Han relations in Xinjiang', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol 6, No 1, 2005, pp 35–50. I also benefited from conversations with a narrow sample of Uyghurs resident in the USA on the topic of language and language planning and policy.
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119. There is evidence to suggest that more liberal language policies, particularly those with a *de facto*, rather than *de jure*, national language, such as that of Lithuania after the breakup of the Soviet Union, are more effective in spreading the majority language than those which attempt to legislatively impose a national language.
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121. Wang *et al.*, op cit, Ref 28, pp 60–61.
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