Bilingualism for the Minor or the Major? An Evaluative Analysis of Parallel Conceptions in China

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This paper is an analysis of two conceptions of bilingualism that exist in parallel in China. One is traditional bilingualism referring to the use of a native minority language and standard Chinese by minority groups and the other, seen as bilingualism with modern characteristics, is a modern-day phenomenon in which the majority Han group aspire to produce bilinguals with a strong competence in mother tongue Chinese and a foreign language, primarily English, by using Chinese and the foreign language as mediums of instruction in teaching school subjects. The focus of the analysis is on the latter for the simple reason that current literature on the new phenomenon is mostly available only in Chinese. An equally important aim of this paper is to explore the impact of the new phenomenon on minority education and to examine the reason why this impact is largely ignored in bilingualism discussions, despite obvious consequences with respect to ethnic identity, personality development and academic performance of minority students. Thus, the traditional conception is briefly reviewed at the start.

Keywords: additive bilingualism, 'favour' policies, linguistic fusionism, minority education, partial immersion, superior–inferior mentality

Introduction

In its history under the communist government since 1949, China has engaged its 50 or so minority groups in bilingual education with the official aim of producing bilinguals with a strong competence in '*Putonghua*' or standard Chinese (Chinese spoken by the majority Han nationality) so that they can communicate with and assimilate into mainstream society and culture while at the same time maintaining their indigenous languages and cultures. Bilingualism by this definition therefore has a long association with minority groups and bilingual education has undergone trials, hardships and revival in response to the political realities of the country. To the Han majority group that comprises about 92% of the total population, however, bilingualism was largely a remote notion[1] and it hardly, if ever, appeared in their literature of education.

In the last few years, this situation has drastically changed. Bilingualism is widely seen as a useful tool by the Han majority for improving foreign language education, particularly English teaching, and for developing human resources with both specialised knowledge and skills in foreign languages. In the whole country, particularly in major cities and special economic zones such as Shenzhen, a school system is rapidly being developed in which English as well as standard Chinese are used as the languages of instruction. From

kindergartens to tertiary institutions, bilingual education has become part of the everyday vocabulary not only of educationists but also of ordinary people. Catalytic factors, such as China's firm belief in its 'open-door' policy, membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 and the successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in the same year, have helped to promote bilingualism and to reshape China's education system as a whole. Although substantial literature exists in English on foreign language (primarily English) learning and teaching and on language policies in China (e.g. Adamson, 2001; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002; Maley, 1995; Ross, 1993; Zhou, 2004), the literature on the new phenomenon is for the most part only accessible in Chinese.

For this reason, while this paper presents an analysis of the parallel conceptions of bilingualism, it puts an emphasis on the new trend, aiming to examine the notion of bilingualism for the majority as conceptualised by educationists and language scholars. The response from the general public and impacts on all stakeholders of education are also examined. Above all, based on the evaluative analysis of the parallel conceptions, the paper discusses the interrelationship of the seemingly separate phenomena, i.e. the impact of this new movement on minority education of the country.

Bilingualism for the Minority

In China, the Han nationality is the absolute dominant group comprising about 92% of the total population. The official language spoken by this majority population is called Putonghua, Mandarin Chinese or standard Chinese, which is based on the Beijing dialect. The standard Chinese that the Han people speak, therefore, may vary from one region to another. This majority Chinese-speaking population has further expanded in recent decades to include about 30 million people from minority groups such as Hui and Manchu nationalities who have gradually given up their own languages to use Chinese as their first language. Nowadays, according to estimate, only about 5–6% of China's population speak minority languages (Bao, 1995). However, this population still numbers about 60 million, forming 50 or so minority groups scattered in five autonomous regions and other provinces that cover more than half of the total area of the country and border on a dozen or so neighbouring countries. Minority education is clearly important for the government as well as for these groups in terms of national unity and political stability. Official education documents often state explicitly that the main purpose of minority education is to maintain political stability and unity of all nationalities.

Bilingual education has had a long history for ethnic minorities in the five autonomous regions and other provinces. Some historians trace the notion of bilingualism back to the 3rd century when the country was united in the *Qin* Dynasty and the Han majority began to colonise remote areas of the country (Dai & Dong, 1996). Frequent civil wars and migration inevitably led to small numbers of bilingual individuals acting as mediators between the minorities and the majority or between minority nationalities. Formal bilingual schooling did not start until the turn of the 20th century when the late *Qing* government

officially opened some bilingual schools both in major cities and minority regions, which were attended by the social elite of the minority groups.

The first decade under communist rule (the 1950s) saw an increase in bilingual schools in minority regions and the recognition of minority languages in education. In response to a stipulation in the first Constitution of the PRC passed in 1952 that 'every nationality has the freedom to use and develop its own language', writing systems of 14 minority languages were created on the basis of verbal forms by linguists and minority language educators. During those years, Dai and Dong (1997) note that educators in minority regions were given the opportunities to develop their own models of bilingual education. The period from 1958 until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977, however, saw a serious setback with the move from bilingual education to 'linguistic fusionism', which involved imposing the Han language on speakers of minority languages and even the suppression of all minority languages and cultures (Teng, 1996b). Minority schools were forced to use standard Chinese as the medium of instruction from the very start of schooling. This resulted in serious detriment to children's learning of curriculum subjects and the demise of some minority languages.

The end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s led to the revival of minority bilingual education and research in bilingualism. Official stipulation of the freedom to use and develop other languages and cultures was reiterated in the 1982 Constitution. Since then tremendous efforts have been made in minority regions in terms of language policy, indigenous language research and revival and bilingual schooling (Dai & Dong, 1997). In the last couple of decades, survey findings and statistical data evaluating the effectiveness of bilingual education in various minority regions have rapidly increased (Guan, 1995; He, 1998; Ouyang & Zhou, 1994; *Zhongguo Shaosu Minzu Shuangyu Jiaoxue Yanjiuhui*, 2002; Zhou, 2000, 2001). A review of the literature reveals that while accomplishments in terms of policy, teaching methodology, textbook publication, and teacher training and levels of literacy are evident, particularly in statistical terms, there are still many challenges and barriers in bilingual schooling and research. There is a general consensus that favourable policies are important but in no way do they guarantee the effectiveness of bilingual education.

Sociopolitically, for example, Article 19 of the 1982 Constitution states that 'the state promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua (standard Chinese)', a statement which is elaborated in a decree issued recently by the central government (*The Decree . . .*, 2000). Stites (quoted in Lin, 1997: 197) comments that this provision provides 'the legal and ideological context of China's official stand on *societal bilingualism*'. Standard Chinese is thus reserved for formal and official transactions, while ethnic minority languages are at best used only in informal domains. Commentators such as Lin (1997) argue that, as standard Chinese is the avenue to economic opportunities and social acceptance, minority children are bound to be disadvantaged socioeconomically if they do not master the majority language.

In the last two decades, policies and official publications have placed a high premium on the notion of '*Min-Han Jiantong*', literally master of both the home language and standard Chinese, as the ultimate goal of bilingual education for

minority groups. For example, 'Zhuang-Han Jiantong' (Master of *Zhuang* language and standard Chinese) is stipulated in regional policy documents as the final aim for the largest minority group in China (*Zhuang* nationality in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), '*Zang-Han Jiantong*' for the Tibetans and '*Yi-Han Jiantong*' for the *Yi* nationality in Sichuang (Dai & Dong, 1997). On the premises of official stance of societal bilingualism as described above, the notion of *Min-Han Jiantong* is often perceived as individuals who know well their own languages and cultures and who can even develop the merits of their own cultures. At the same time they are expected to be linguistically competent in standard Chinese and culturally capable of thinking and conceptualising in the language (Yang, 1998). Only in this way can bilinguals truly maintain and develop their own cultural traditions and keep up with development in the wider society (Teng, 1996b). This 'idealised' conception of bilingualism is evidently prevalent in policy documents and seems to be unquestioned in the literature in China.

   This concept of idealised bilinguals has long been challenged internationally. Scholars such as Fishman (1971), Grosjean (1985) and Baker (2001) argue that rarely can any bilingual be equally competent across all situations. Bilinguals should be judged as a complete entity, as they tend to use their languages for different purposes in different domains of language use. What is more arguably interpreted is the fact that the notion of *Min-Han Jiantong* goes beyond idealised bilingualism to include bicultural identification. As indicated in Yang (1998) and Teng (1996b), it is the bicultural identity and hence the political allegiance to the nation state that are actually embodied in this notion. This is an area under serious debate internationally. Some multiculturalists seem to hold the view that an individual can hold two or even more cultural identities. Enough evidence shows that a bicultural identity is only possible where there is much commonality between two cultures, where there is a high degree of acceptance by each other's culture and when socialisation into the two cultures starts at a very young age (Byram, 2003). It is extremely difficult to become a bicultural with two set of values, beliefs and behaviours, where primary socialisation, the first socialisation an individual undergoes in childhood through which he/she becomes a member of a society (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966), takes place in a monocultural environment (Byram, 2003; Hoffmann, 1989; Paulston, 1992). This is obviously the case with many minority students, particularly those living in autonomous regions in China. It becomes apparent that, in bilingual education, it will be detrimental to minority children if the notion of *Min-Han Jiantong* is applied as a top-down policy to all situations.

   A major criticism of the notion results from the lack of effective bilingual policies and curricula to support it. Based on both a literature review and their empirical work, Ma and Xiao (2002a, 2002b) argue that there is enough evidence to show that minority children often suffer from 'cultural disconti-nuities' and thus a fear of learning standard Chinese as a result of inappropriate bilingual planning. National textbooks in standard Chinese contain literature on the Han culture of course. While grammar of the language may be acquired through instruction, its cultural meaning is arguably more problematic. Minority children transferring from learning in

their home language to subject learning in Chinese often feel that they are reading '*Tianshu*' (heavenly books). Many children drop out of school at an early age particularly when this *Tianshu* effect is coupled with minority educators' tendency to label minority children as 'slow learners with low IQ' or blame minority groups for 'their traditionally isolated cultures' that tend to reject anything alien including the Han culture (Qian, 2002; Zhang, 1999). Ma and Xiao maintain that it is the inappropriate policies, curricula and negative attitudes that are the true barriers and challenges in bilingual education for minority groups. They further argue that measures should be taken to adapt the content of learning materials so as to ease the negative impact on learners during transition as irrationally imposing Han language and culture on minority children is detrimental to their cognitive development.

What is presented by the critics of minority education here is clearly a case of what Cummins (1996, 2000) calls the coercive relations of power, i.e. the exercise of power of a dominant group to the detriment of a subordinate group. The society dominated by a powerful group tends to 'blame the victims' for their 'genetic inferiority' instead of seeking for the true cause of the school failure of subordinate group children (Cummins, 1996). In an earlier discussion, Cummins (1986) also argues that a minority child may become academically 'disabled' if the language and culture of the child are excluded, minimised or quickly reduced in school. The 'cultural discontinuities' and the '*Tianshu*' effect identified in Ma and Xiao's (2002a, 2002b) study reflect precisely the cause (exclusion of the minority language and culture) and the effect (academic disability of the minority child) as argued by Cummins.

Educators such as Lin (1996, 1997) talk in terms of the 'great-Han mentality'. People with this mindset perceive minority groups as primitive, intellectually underdeveloped, economically dependent and thus covertly or overtly marginalise them. In education, this mindset is often reflected in exclusionary and assimilationist orientations which aim to make minority students invisible and inaudible or overlook them (Cummins, 2000: 45–52). This approach is sometimes evident in official documents. A recent Ministry of Education Circular on *Hanyu Shuipin Kaoshi* (HSK, the Chinese proficiency test) used for minority students (*Jiaoyubu . . .*, 2002) admits openly that these HSK tests are in fact intended for foreigners learning Chinese. They overlook the experience of minority students and therefore new tests have yet to be designed. In an article that appears in the official flagship newspaper for education, *Zhongguo Jiaoyubao (2003)*, the author, a senior scholar cum policy maker, explicitly claims that the mainstream language in bilingual education in minority regions *must* be the Han Chinese.

The 'great-Han mentality' is also reflected directly or indirectly in local educational policymaking and practice. Despite the fact that the language of minority students is officially encouraged in bilingual education in minority regions, Jiayang (1999) reports that in some schools and regions head-teachers and leaders openly express their dislike of the Tibetan language and argue, regardless of circumstances, against adopting a truly bilingual model of bilingual education which allows the use of the minority language as the medium of instruction. In discussing bilingual education in *Yi*-dominated regions, Shen and Luo (2001) point out that measures such as translating

Chinese science textbooks and nationwide exam papers into the *Yi* language are clearly effective in facilitating their academic study and exam results. Nevertheless, once they enter a tertiary institution their mother tongue has no more role to play and they are forced to study all subjects in Chinese. Many simply cannot cope and lag behind. As a result, the enrolment of *Yi* bilingual schools keeps dropping year after year. Many so-called bilingual schools in fact adopt a Chinese-only approach similar to that of the structured immersion programmes in the USA (Brisk, 1998) in which school subjects are taught in the majority language to a homogeneous group of minority children with little native language support (August & Hakuta, 1997). *Yi* is often only symbolically offered as an optional school subject or taught as a subject only before the school-leaving exam as a mechanism for raising student marks.

In her research on two minority communities in south-west China, Hansen (1999) observed that, while equality of nationalities is preached constitutionally, the so-called deficiencies in minority students' academic achievement are often either explicitly presented as objective facts or implicitly understood through positive evaluation of cases of cultural change in the direction of the Han. This generates strong feelings of cultural and linguistic inferiority in minority students. In teacher training, Mackerras (1994, 1995) noticed, during a visit to a teacher training school in Guizhou, that while half of the students there were Miao, 30% Dong and only 20% Han, the teacher trainers were mostly Han and there was very limited Miao or Dong content in their teaching. He furthermore pointed out that modernisation can be an even bigger factor than education in the shift from minority to majority language and culture.

An overview of the literature of minority education suggests that minority education in many areas, particularly in south-western China, is conducted within a national context that places a premium on standard Chinese and the Han culture. The predominant forms of minority education in these areas are the submersion approach as mentioned above and the *transition model* where the home language is used as the medium of instruction only at the initial stage and gradually or quickly gives way to standard Chinese as the language of instruction for all school subjects. These forms are what Garcia (1997) and Baker (2001) categorise as *weak forms* of bilingual education, which essentially aim to assimilate minority groups into the monolingual mainstream society. However, *strong forms* such as the maintenance or heritage bilingual model with emphasis on the home language of the minority students do exist in some regions such as Xingjiang and Inner Mongolia.[2] The bilingual schooling practised in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in north-eastern China, for example, is widely reported as the most effective (Lin, 1997; Zhou, 2001). Nevertheless, in most other regions, insufficient societal effort in developing learning and teaching materials for minority students and teachers, limited job opportunities locally and the difficulties minority graduates face in the larger job market often hamper the development of strong forms of bilingual education. For these reasons, Bao (1995) and Lin (1997) note that in minority regions it is common that parents, including local government officials, have become increasingly reluctant to send their children to minority schools where the minority language is used as a medium of instruction.

Bilingualism for the Majority

The notion of bilingualism seems to have grown a pair of wings in the last few years and flown from the territory of minority education to capture the attention of an entirely different group of people, this time the majority Han people, particularly those living in political and economic centres such as big cities, coastal areas and special economic zones. The bilinguals desired are not the *Min-Han Jiantong* individuals as described before but people who are competent in a foreign language, primarily English, as well as mother tongue Chinese. The purposes of the two kinds of bilingual education are therefore quite different. Linguistically, the former can be said to develop in minority students a strong competence in the majority language, namely standard Chinese, while maintaining the mother tongue language and the latter to improve foreign language competence and particularly the English learning experience of the majority. Sociopolitically, the purpose of the former is, as discussed before, to create a bicultural identity (minority cultural identity and political or citizenship allegiance to the state) whereas the latter is not intended to change the identity or political allegiance of the learners but rather to be a more efficient way of learning languages. To differentiate these two conceptions of bilingualism, some scholars call the former traditional bilingualism and the latter modern bilingualism (Ye, 2003).

The recent growth of interest in bilingualism has arisen mainly from ever-increasing exposure to the outside world, which has created a need for more individuals who can communicate with outsiders, and partly out of general dissatisfaction with traditional teaching of English as a foreign language. There is a general belief among scholars and policy makers (Jiang, 2003a, 2003b; Wang & Wang, 2003) that bilingual teaching by using English as well as Chinese as the languages of instruction in nurseries, schools and universities is an effective and perhaps the only way to produce enough bilinguals to satisfy the needs of the contemporary society and to respond to the perceived challenges of globalisation and internationalisation. Yi (cited in Jiang, 2003a) remarks that the current notion of bilingual teaching is based on the deeply rooted Chinese culture of learning and quality education. It provides a sound theoretical base for the development of an effective system and models of foreign language education that suit the Chinese context.

As mentioned earlier, bilingual teaching is now an established feature in economically privileged areas. But, how is the current notion of bilingualism defined? What is the response to this new phenomenon from the general public? What approaches or models are adopted by schools and universities in their implementation of bilingual teaching? What impact do these developments have on policy making, school curricula, classroom practice, teacher training, or on the education system in general? The following pages attempt to give answers to these questions.

How is the concept of bilingualism defined?

The most cited definition in the Chinese literature is the one given by Richards *et al*. (1998) that bilingualism is the use of at least two languages either by a group of speakers or by an individual. However, there is a general

consensus that the ultimate aim of bilingualism in the modern Chinese context is to produce bilinguals with specialised knowledge in technical, scientific and academic fields and who can, when needs arise, use English to communicate with native speakers, especially specialists and professionals in that language (Wang, 2003a). These bilinguals are officially called *Zhuanye Waiyu Fuhexing Rencai* (talents with integrated skills in specialisation and a foreign language) and are desired by the country for its social and economic development (He & Deng, 2003; Zhu, 2003). Thus, according to Wang, unlike in multicultural societies such as Canada and the USA, the bilinguals thus defined are not expected to assimilate into any other culture as they do not find themselves in a multicultural environment; and the language the bilinguals acquire is an additional language that has only utilitarian values. It is also worth reiterating that these bilinguals are totally different from *Min-Han Jiantong* bilinguals aimed for in minority education and expected to assimilate into the mainstream culture or have a bicultural identity.

Wang argues that this notion is closely related to *additive bilingualism* as defined by Western bilingual scholars such as Cummins (1986) and Lambert (1980), for the obvious reason that the acquisition of English does not replace or displace mother tongue Chinese and culture. It is only a plus. This characteristic is important from the ideological point of view of Chinese policy makers, because for decades the impact of foreign cultures on learners in learning a foreign language has been the major concern of ideologues (see Chapter 3 in Hu & Gao, 1997 for an overview). This concern was recently expressed in strong terms by the flagship newspaper for education, *Zhongguo Jiaoyubao* (2003), in an article in which the author states that in bilingual education, 'the mainstream language must be Chinese. Only when we "put us at the centre" and when we focus on promoting the Chinese national spirit and consciousness, can we deal *correctly* with the relationship between our mother tongue and the foreign language under study' (my translation and italics). It should be noted that this author is the same academic cum policy maker who claims in the same article that the main medium of instruction in minority education *must* be the Han Chinese (see review on bilingualism for minority groups above). In other words, it is this political position that conceptions of bilingualism for both the majority and minorities should be based on.

The distinctive definition of (English and Chinese) bilingual education, that is, additive bilingualism with Chinese language and culture as the 'centre', reflects the long concern of the ideological impact of foreign cultures on learners and helps explain why official responses have been so far supportive, as evidenced in policy documents promulgated at different levels. In sharp contrast to the notion of *Min-Han Jiantong* for minority education, which implies biculturalism as discussed before, additive bilingualism thus perceived is clearly ethnocentric and it ignores the cultural dimension in foreign/second language education that is so widely acknowledged in the literature both in- and outside China (Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003; Hu & Gao, 1997).

How do the general public respond to it?

In sharp contrast to the lack of enthusiasm faced by minority educators in many minority regions as reported earlier, in the past few years reports related to English and Chinese bilingual schooling in mass media and academic journals leave no doubt that the general public in cities, coastal areas and special economic zones where the majority dominate have responded enthusiastically. In these economical and political centres, enthusiasm is perhaps most evidently reflected by the rapidly growing rate of bilingual nurseries, schools and higher institutions. *Xinwen Chenbao* (2003) reported that Shanghai is the first metropolitan area to promote large-scale experiments with bilingual primary and secondary schooling. Such is its popularity that, in two years, about 45,000 pupils in some 260 primary and secondary schools participated in an experiment in which English is used as the medium of instruction for most school subjects such as science, mathematics, music, geography, arts and crafts, PE, etc. except for Chinese. By 2010, it is projected that half a million pupils will 'benefit' from bilingual schooling. In the nearby city of Suzhou, with a much smaller population, 61 schools have been involved in bilingual schooling experiments and the numbers of such schools are increasing at a rate of 15% per year. Large- or small-scale surveys of the attitudes of the general public and educators, for example in Shanghai (*Xinwen Chenbao*, 2003) and in Chengdu (Cou & Lu, 2003), show that the great majority of the respondents from all walks of life respond positively to bilingual education in nurseries and schools.

In newspapers, there is never a shortage of anecdotes, as exemplified below, showing enthusiasm and favourable attitudes towards bilingual schooling in particular and studying English in general:

- Gao (2003) cites a nursery education specialist's advice on how to teach English to babies of 0–12 months old and reports that there is a large market providing teaching materials and resources for teaching English to babies.
- Lin (2003) describes how a county school attracted more than a thousand people queuing for about a hundred places to enrol their children in 'bilingual experimental classes'. Some were from distant cities; some rich people hired labourers to queue for them.
- A nationwide Oral-English Competition in 2002 attracted more than half a million primary and secondary pupils from 23 regions and provinces and lasted for more than six months (*Zhongguo Qingnianbao*, 2002). Enthusiastic educators and parents saw this as a showcase to demonstrate the success of their bilingual children.
- At the tertiary level, according to Cai (2002), the official goal is to teach 5–10% of university courses in English by 2005. Fudan University in Shanghai has already acquired more than 7600 course books from Harvard University in the USA and plans to gradually introduce them into their classrooms. In the same spirit, Guangdong education authorities require their university teachers under 35 to offer all courses in English by 2010.

Many other reports such as parents' hot pursuit for bilingual Filipino maids, sending their children abroad to learn English and making large 'donations' in order to enrol their children into reputable bilingual schools are of course strategies that can only be adopted by the socially and economically privileged. However, many parents, rich or less privileged, are willing to invest at all costs in the best education for their children and this is currently believed to be bilingual schooling. On one level this attitude could be seen as a reflection of traditional Confucian belief in the best possible schooling (*Weiyou Dushu Gao*, the most important thing in the world is nothing but schooling). At the economic level, Lin (2003) quotes a parent as saying that material gains and other social privileges for bilinguals who are proficient in English and Chinese are clearly the driving forces behind this campaign for bilingual schooling. This new societal phenomenon provides evidence to reproduction theories developed by scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), who assert that language education is a form of cultural capital, a historically accumulated social advantage, and that schools play a major role in the reproduction of social elites through language education.

What models are adopted in bilingual schooling?

In the absence of central government policy, bilingual nurseries and schools adopt different approaches to bilingual teaching. Models range from total immersion taught by native speakers using solely English as the medium of instruction (Wang, 2003b; *Xinwen Chenbao*, 2003) to *ad hoc* classroom teaching with occasional input of English vocabulary or expressions (Cou & Lu, 2003). Immersion programmes used (or experimented with) in schools are reported as the most effective way in terms of developing learners' linguistic competence in the target language (*Xinwen Chenbao*, 2003). Early total immersion at nursery level is reportedly officially banned in some cities such as Shanghai (*Xinwen Chenbao*, 2004). As discussed before, ideological concerns in language education are most likely the real motives for this stance. For this reason, the model widely used and promoted for schools is typically *partial immersion*, in which both English and Chinese are used as the media of instruction. This is clearly very similar to the partial immersion programmes seen in many countries, such as those in Eastern Europe (Duff, 1997) and South-East Asia (Jones *et al.*, 1993).

Some research into this model involving both Chinese and foreign bilingual scholars has been reported in recent years. Qiang and Zhao (2000) discuss the findings of a joint research programme conducted with two Canadian universities. In that programme, experimental classes in eight nurseries and five primary schools in Xi'an underwent a 'partial-immersion bilingual programme' in which children were immersed in English language environments for about 15 hours per week. They claimed that the children in the experimental groups performed significantly better than those in control groups, not only in English proficiency but also in terms of creative thinking, cognitive and affective development and so on. This project was highly acclaimed by the education authorities and vigorously promoted in the region.

The success of such immersion education experiments in China is hardly surprising, of course, with the rich experience gained in Canada, since the St Lambert experiment in the mid-1960s (Cummins, 1991; Lambert & Tucker, 1972), and in many other places in Europe, Africa and Asia (cf. Baetens Beardsmore, 1993; Johnson & Swain, 1997). Most of the studies on immersion education yielded positive results and helped establish models of immersion education. The Xi'an project reported in Qiang and Zhao (2000) proved that second language acquisition occurs in partial immersion education through the language being used as a medium of instruction in the Chinese context. Strangely, however, many schools such as those in Shanghai claim that they adopt a 'transitional bilingual model' in their classrooms in which English is used as the main medium of instruction for subjects such as science, biology, ICT and geography and Chinese for social science subjects such as history and language (*Xinwen Chenbao*, 2003). It is transitional in the sense that, as the subjects are usually taught by Chinese bilingual teachers, these teachers presumably use more Chinese than English in classroom instruction at lower levels and move progressively to teaching the subjects using more or solely English as the medium of instruction at higher levels. Zhang (2002) proposes progressive use of English from 30% of school subjects for preschools, 40% for primary schools, 50% for junior secondary to 60% for senior secondary. At the tertiary level, though universities may offer many courses using authentic English texts (Pan, 2003), Chinese versions of the textbooks are often made available to beginning students (Yu *et al*., 2002). The actual use of English by teachers in giving lectures and by students in doing assignments and taking exams is also increasing proportionately with the decrease of use of mother tongue. Wang and Wang (2003) explain that the gradual progression from occasional use to frequent use of the target language in learning and teaching features the transition of using English as a foreign language to bilingual teaching and learning in tertiary institutions.

This 'transitional bilingual model' needs to be distinguished from the usual reference to transitional bilingual education, which refers to those pro-grammes that allow use of a minority language at the initial stage and gradually move to the use of the mainstream language in the classroom. These programmes are commonly found in North America (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Saunders, 1999) and are often critiqued as being assimilationist, with majority language monolingualism as its real aim (Baker, 2001). Such transitional programmes are also common in minority education in China, as discussed before. The distinctive use of 'transitional bilingual model' to refer to English and Chinese bilingual schooling by Chinese educators and policy makers is again most possibly politically determined; as total immersion is rejected officially in major cities such as Shanghai (*Xinwen Chenbao*, 2004), the term, immersion, is avoided altogether.

In the past few years, some models seem to have developed along *laissez-faire* lines. Jiang (2003a, 2003b) experimented with what he called the Infiltration Approach for primary schools in Shandong in which schools are given freedom to increase subject or content teaching in English according to their own situations as long as the increase is gradual. Feng (2002) and Tang (2002) reported a similar idea developed in Guangdong, the Integrated English

Education model, which, as the name suggests, is basically an integration of teaching approaches in foreign/second language teaching such as total physical response (TPR), phonics, the direct approach and the oral- and audio-lingual methods. In Feng's words, in essence it encourages teachers to be innovative and uses whatever theory, methods or material that prove effective in bilingual classrooms. A practical handbook by Lu (2002) for using this model in primary schools is available.

To what extent does this campaign impact stakeholders in education?

As mentioned earlier, the country longs for *Zhuanye Waiyu Fuhexing Rencai* (talents with integrated skills in specialisation and a foreign language) and this notion is reflected in education policies and in school curriculum reform. Feng (2002) states that the improvement of foreign language teaching, particularly English, has become a priority issue for educational authorities of all levels. Quality English education is thus viewed as a key to success after China's membership of the WTO and a prerequisite for general education and human resources development, with a direct effect on a person's career, the reputation of schools and even happiness of a family. It is in such a context that bilingualism is keenly discussed by all stakeholders in education. The implications for education philosophy and practice, therefore, can hardly be overestimated.

A re-examination of human resources for classroom teaching is perhaps the most widely acknowledged consequence of bilingual schooling which, as defined by many scholars such as Wang (2003a), theoretically concerns teachers of all subjects. Because *Zhuanye Waiyu Fuhexing Rencai* are the desired outcome of education, in recent years English language competence has become a main concern for the initial and in-service training of teachers and for recruiting teachers, particularly in major economic centres. Some local education authorities at the tertiary level, such as Guangdong, explicitly require all subject teachers under the age of 35 to achieve a given level of teaching in English by the year 2010, either through self-instruction, further organised professional training or formal postgraduate study programmes (Cai, 2002). In a major recruitment fair for secondary school teachers in Shanghai, certificates of CET 6^3 and computing were required by many schools (Xu, 2003). Needless to say, for recruitment in most bilingual kindergartens, nurseries and primary schools in economically developed regions, a university degree or a teaching certificate should usually be accompanied by a qualification in and/or evidence of English language competence. Qualified educators from preschool up to tertiary levels now need to be bilinguals who can teach their subjects in a foreign language, particularly English, as well as in Chinese. Current numbers of bilinguals of this kind are widely perceived as far from sufficient.

The impact of the new policies on EFL teaching is perhaps the most direct. In the last two decades, College English, a nationwide programme taken by the vast majority of tertiary level students, except for English majors and a small percentage of students taking other foreign languages, has enjoyed a leading role in China's efforts to reform education. It has been believed to be

the foreign language teaching programme adapted to the needs of Chinese learners (Feng, 2000). The driving force is of course the ever-increasing awareness of the importance of English as an international language. A second crucial factor is the associated nationwide tests, CET 4 and CET 6, which have impacted on all stakeholders in education, particularly students in terms of degree certification and job opportunities. Despite occasional criticisms of the negative effects on students, these tests are regarded as valid and reliable assessment systems which have contributed greatly to the overall improvement of students' competence in the English language (H.Z. Yang, 2003). However, in recent years, the tests and the programme have become the subject of serious debate and the principles are increasingly criticised for undue emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and for producing students who simply cannot communicate in the target language. A complete revamp of this programme now looks unavoidable (Cai, 2002). The focus of the debate is clearly moving from whether to reform to where and how to locate College English in the evolving notion of bilingual education in terms of teaching philosophy, methodology, material development, teacher training and language assessment (Wang & Wang, 2003).

Though teachers seem to be the main party affected by this campaign, the students can face even greater challenges. Recent literature suggests that the impact is currently felt most by students at the tertiary level. As many universities are enthusiastically promoting bilingual teaching, students often have no choice but to cope with certain academic subjects offered in English. As a result, a considerable number of students give up in the middle of the courses, mainly because of lack of proficiency in English (Bi & Huang, 2003; Yu *et al*., 2002). From a psychological point of view, Hou (2000) asserts that many students feel intellectually underprepared, with course content poorly presented by largely incompetent bilingual teachers. However, success stories are occasionally reported. In a key university in Guangzhou, a mathematics module was offered to freshmen by an English native speaker professor using authentic texts. After less than two months of 'heavenly learning' experience, the students began to appreciate authentic English teaching and gained both linguistically and intellectually (Li & Xia, 2002). On the basis of his research into the attitudes towards bilingual teaching in his secondary school chemistry class, Qiu (2003) managed to stimulate students' interest in studying the subject bilingually and achieve the desired outcome with his self-designed curriculum, materials and teaching methodology. Nevertheless, as Feng (2002) points out, in a monolingual society where the target language is only studied in the classroom, it is hard to imagine if pupils can become bilinguals without a strong societal and parental pressure and strong personal motivation.

Discussion

As stated in the introduction, while the literature documenting bilingual education and bilingualism for minority groups in China is extensive and accessible to international readers in English, accounts of the recent campaign for bilingual education for the country's majority group are for the most part available only in Chinese. The present paper is intended to bridge the gap.

The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that most scholars in bilingual education put too much emphasis on the practical aspects of the phenomenon. With this paper, the author wishes to provoke further examinations of the phenomena and in-depth discussions of theories underpinning the parallel concepts. For example, key notions such as *Min-Han Jiantong* (master of both the home language and standard Chinese) and *Zhuanye Waiyu Fuhexing Rencai* (talents with integrated skills in their specialisations and a foreign language) represent the official stand of individual bilingualism for the minority and majority respectively. Empirical research into the attitudes towards, and perceptions of, these notions held by stakeholders in education rarely exists and the implications of these notions are hardly ever examined in relation to the specific contexts of bilingual education for either the minority or the majority groups. Further research into these issues and conceptual discussions will no doubt give rise to more insights into the concepts and underpinning principles for policy making, curriculum planning and pedagogy.

Other issues raised in the literature include bilingual learners' cognitive and intellectual development (Chen, 2004; Hou, 2000), bilingualism in a monolingual society (Feng, 2002) and educational equity (Qian, 2002). These issues, as many scholars argue, are crucial for theoretical development in bilingualism but rarely researched. Wang (2003b) remarks that discussions on English and Chinese bilingual schooling are valuable but remain at the level of reporting experiences and experiments that have only limited significance in the understanding of the phenomena. Research studies and insights of theoretical significance are yet to be published.

What is clearly absent from the literature but urgently requires discussion in the context of the debate on bilingual education in China is how the parallel notions of bilingualism are inter-related. In other words, there is an urgent need to explore how bilingualism as currently conceptualised by educators of the majority group impacts on the traditional concept and practice of bilingualism for minority groups and how this impact could be addressed in sociocultural, political and educational terms. History repeatedly shows that any sociopolitical changes or movements initiated by the majority group are bound to affect minority groups, if not *vice versa*. In what seems to be a natural response to the English and Chinese bilingual movement, some educators such as L.P. Yang, (2003) have proposed the policy of *trilingualism* for minority education (*Sanyu Jiantong*). Guo (2000) is optimistic that trilingual education in Inner Mongolia will succeed on the basis of student pass rate at HSK (Chinese proficiency test) in that region. These educators seem to suggest that acquiring a third language (in this case a foreign language that is not used in any domain in minority regions) is as simple as the arithmetic calculation, 2 (home language and standard Chinese) + 1 (foreign language) = 3. The initial response from these educators appears spontaneous and rational but it oversimplifies the concept by ignoring the numerous contextual factors that are crucial to trilingualism and its implications for linguistic minority children.

Trilingualism is by no means an unusual phenomenon and proves an important concept in many countries in Europe, Africa and Asia. Cenoz and Genesee (1998), in a review of the concept in relation to bilingualism, remark that the latter helps the acquisition of a third language rather than hindering it.

Cenoz and Jessner (2000) and Cenoz *et al*. (2001) further researched and discussed the cognitive advantages and metalinguistic awareness of bilingualism in third language acquisition from pedagogical and psycholinguistic perspectives. The theoretical discussions and case studies reported by Cenoz and colleagues and more recently by Hoffmann and Ytsma (2004) suggest that, for meaningful and effective trilingual education, the pupils' experience of acquiring a second language is crucial and, more importantly, trilingual programmes need to be planned and implemented with a full understanding of the educational, geographical, sociolinguistic and political dimensions.

For trilingual education to be effective in China, according to these experiences and studies, minority educators need first of all to address the following outstanding issues. The first is, as mentioned before, the issue of unsmooth transition from early schooling in their mother tongue to learning school subjects in standard Chinese at a later stage. As the experience of acquiring standard Chinese is not always smooth, some even drop out of school at an early stage. A second issue in acquiring a foreign language is the fact that a large percentage of minority children rarely or never have any chance to study a foreign language in primary schools or even in secondary schools often because of lack of resources (Ju, 2000; Li, 2003). Those who manage to continue may not start learning a foreign language until they reach senior high school (16–18 age group). The exposure of minority students to the English language is in no way comparable with that of their majority counterparts, most of whom start at primary school and sometimes even earlier.

A third issue is the Chinese language that minority students have to depend on in foreign language learning. Wu (2002) points out that in fact, in most cases, the EFL textbooks minority students use are standardised nationwide. These textbooks carry explanations or translations in standard Chinese. This greatly increases the difficulty of learning the foreign language because the 'intermediary language' they have to depend on to learn the foreign language is in fact an assumed native language of which they are not native speakers. Many of them have to mentally retranslate it into their mother tongue in the learning process. In addition to these outstanding problems, common difficulties encountered in minority education include a shortage of qualified standard Chinese and EFL teachers, the unfavourable economical conditions that keep minority children out of classrooms to help parents in busy seasons, the struggle for those pupils living in remote areas to study two new cultures (the Han majority culture and a foreign culture), and inappropriate management or policies in minority education.

The experience of minority students at the tertiary level can be even more detrimental to their academic and even personality development. As minority children find it difficult to follow the school curriculum and to gain access to higher education, most of them, according to Wu (2002), rely on 'favour policies',[4] a kind of positive discrimination, for a university place. Once in university, these students are placed in the same exam system and their pass rate is found to be eight times lower than their majority counterparts in English exams such as CET 4, which is compulsory in most universities.

So many of them have to re-sit for English exams repeatedly for certification. This has dire consequences in terms of self-esteem, confidence and overall school performance. Yu (1997) found that many of her minority university students consider themselves inferior to others (*Ziren Buru*). Lin (1997) observed that many minority students undervalue their own cultures and languages and took great pains to hide their ethnic identities by not wearing their ethnic clothes and by changing their home accents.

Loss of sense of worth and identity as observed by many educators clearly runs counter to the aim of bilingual education argued for by many specialists in bilingualism and bilingual education. At the heart of minority education, as educators and policy makers agree, are the notions of equity (Qian, 2002), mutual understanding and mutual respect (Teng, 1996a), and the appropriate management of relationships between pluralism and inclusion (Fei, 1989; Schmidt, 2000; Teng, 1996b) and language as a right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999) or ethnic identity (Teng & Zhang, 1997) and national unity. One of the essential tasks for minority education therefore is to empower the students, i.e. to help develop in them a secure sense of identity and self-esteem and to enable them to participate competently in the education process (Cummins, 1986, 1996, 2000). The outcome of minority education should be academically and personally empowered individuals who acquire control over their own lives and their immediate environment (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991) and transformation from a superior–inferior mentality to collaborative power relationships with the majority where their identities are affirmed (Cummins, 2000).

If these aims for minority education are to be achieved and if trilingualism as mentioned above is to be implemented in minority education, the implications that arise from this concept need to be debated from different perspectives with a view to the unique context of the country. Urgent issues to be addressed include:

- In view of cognitive development of minority students:
  - What can we do to help minority children achieve a smoother transition from early mother tongue teaching to subject teaching first in standard Chinese and later in a foreign language (English)?
- From the viewpoint of empowerment and ethnic identity:
  - How can we ensure that minority languages and cultures play a significant role in trilingual education at all levels?
  - How can we help the students move from the 'superior–inferior mentality' to collaborative power relationship with the majority through the schooling system in general and trilingual classrooms in particular?
- In terms of balancing between equity and 'favour policies', pluralism and inclusion, and language as a right and national unity:
  - What justification is there for providing minority students with the same curriculum and textbooks and making them take the same nationwide exams?
  - Does respecting language as a right affect national unity?

Conclusion

This paper evaluates two conceptions of bilingualism with a focus on the concept for the majority and the impact of the contemporary English and Chinese bilingual campaign on minority students. It is important to reiterate that the issues critically raised in the discussion above do not suggest that the author argues against trilingualism as proposed by educators such as Guo (2000) and L.P. Yang, (2003). Trilingualism is clearly an inevitable and promising response to the language needs of minority students. In fact, it has already proved effective inside China, in the north-eastern Yanbian Prefecture where Koreans concentrate. Zhang (1998) finds evidence to indicate a 'positive transfer' from the bilingual experience of Korean and Chinese students to the process of learning a third or even fourth language such as Japanese and English. In the Korean case, Lin (1997) points out that favourable geographical, economic and historic factors play a crucial role in motivating learners. In acquiring a third or fourth language, many Korean students demonstrate great efficiency because they have experienced the process of restructuring languages. Their experience further proves the theories on cognitive advantages of bilingualism in third or fourth language acquisition developed by Cenoz and Jessner (2001) and Cenoz *et al*. (2001). This, however, does not suggest that trilingualism is a ready recipe for all who need it. The argument presented here is that in conceptualising trilingualism if children's experience in acquiring the mainstream language and contextual factors, geopolitical, cultural or psychological, are not taken into full account, children of minority groups are likely to be further disadvantaged, with a superior–inferior mentality enforced and their identity undermined.

The absence of debates and discussions on the $2+1=3$ (trilingualism) formula, i.e. on the impact of the majority concept of bilingualism on minority groups itself, may well be a reflection of the 'great-Han mentality' (Lin, 1997), or the 'assimilation mindset' (Teng, 1996b), picturing minority languages and cultures as primitive, inferior and thus dispensable. The presence of discussions on the issues raised here, on the other hand, will help shed light on theories of trilingualism, and in practice will lead to greater awareness of these mentalities among the general public, academics and policy makers in China, and lead to a situation where stakeholders of education join forces and take initiatives to develop minority education programmes that value minority children's linguistic and cultural capital and help empower them while addressing the social and political context of the country.

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Notes

1. There are always exceptional cases for this of course. Many minority regions are in fact mixed communities and the Han people living in these communities are mostly bilingual. Among them are a large number of local government officials of Han nationality who are bilinguals purposefully trained in institutions for minorities (Liu & Zhang, 1994). However, there seems to be little literature recording and examining the experience of this population.
2. There are five minority groups, namely the Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan, Kazak and Uygur, that have their own writing systems in active use and a relatively complete bilingual minority education system from primary up to tertiary levels (Qumutiexi, 1998; Zhou, 2001). This makes possible a heritage model with an emphasis on the home language of the students.
3. CET 6 (College English Test-Band 6) and CET 4 (College English Test-Band 4), which is also discussed in the paper, are both English proficiency tests administered nationwide biannually for all university undergraduates except for English majors. Those who score 60 or more out of 100 in the tests are awarded Certificates of CET 6 or CET 4. While CET 4 is taken by almost all undergraduates, for it is stipulated by most universities as mandatory, CET 6, the highest level test, is attempted only by high-flyers. So the certificate of the latter is considered more prestigious.
4. The 'favour policies' refer to those preferential measures usually taken by a regional- or provincial-level government to ensure enrolment of a reasonable number of minority students into tertiary institutions according to the specific context of that region or province. One of the most important measures is to lower the aggregate marks of the nationwide entrance examinations in order to give more minority students an opportunity to enter tertiary education. Qian's (2002) paper is an interesting discussion about this issue. He points out that while the policies are politically made in favour of minority students, they often lead to biases and discriminations against these students in their own institutions or in job markets because of the 'labelling effect' which tends to tag all minority students as academically lower quality students who are there because of these favourable policies. These policies, Qian argues, are in effect not fair for the minority students and for the society at large. Ma and Xiao (2002b) take a different stance.

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