

BOOK REVIEW:

Preferential education policies in multi-ethnic China: National rhetoric, local realities

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Naomi C. F. Yamada. (2021). *Preferential education policies in multi-ethnic China: National rhetoric, local realities*. Abingdon. ISBN 978-036-749-1406. pp. 222 (6 B/W illustrations). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044758>

Yamada Naomi conducted fieldwork in western China's Qinghai Province and, using an ethnographic approach, assessed the efficacy of preferential education policies for addressing the educational needs of ethnic minority groups in China. *Preferential education policies in multi-ethnic China: National rhetoric, local realities* was initially written as a PhD dissertation at the University of Hawai'i and argued preferential policies are essential for providing educational equality in China, despite their inconsistent implementation.

The Chinese government created a set of preferential policies targeting ethnic minorities to facilitate their progress because disparities in economic conditions across regions have caused an uneven distribution of educational resources, including the quality of instructors, the condition of school facilities and equipment, funding and literacy rates. The government employs four primary approaches to special consideration of ethnic minorities: 1) preferential access to universities, 2) ethnic educational programs, 3) reduced requirements for entry, and 4) bonus points in National University Entrance Exam. Although the government claims its preferential policy for ethnic minorities in higher education has achieved great success, policymakers, academics and the public in China and the West debate their efficacy. The implementation of the preferential policy is a complex and polarising issue. On the one hand, the policy is essential for fostering national solidarity, inclusion and development. On the other hand, it may be seen as 'unfair' treatment towards ethnic majorities like the Han Chinese.

At the beginning of Chapter One, Yamada details her fieldwork observations and then delves into China's conception of an 'educated person', shaped by the government according to the pre-existing Han majority notion of an educated person. Since the state primarily dominates the education system, minority communities have had minimal or no influence on the curriculum, and their diverse cultures are often overlooked. Yamada also explores the history of the preparatory program (or *yuke ban* 预科班) and a preferential policy designed to help minority students prepare for admission into regular undergraduate programs at university.

Chapter Two interrogates the higher education system for ethnic minorities in its present form in China, ranging from the policies and measures it has in place, the international scrutiny it has faced, the disparities between its universities, and strategies for improvement. Yamada also notes impediments in the higher education system. By highlighting the various pathways for ethnic minorities and Han students, the chapter illustrates how students manoeuvre legal provisions, loopholes, and regulations to their advantage. She furnishes specific cases to bolster

her views, such as higher education policies in Qinghai Province and educational opportunities for Tibetan students.

In Chapter Three, Yamada argues that policymakers and educators face several challenges when balancing standardisation and a locally relevant curriculum for ethnic minorities. She delves into the problem of social contradiction in the following chapter. While ethnic discourse in China stresses respect, autonomy and unity, the insinuation, made both implicitly and explicitly, is that ethnic minorities are entangled in ‘backwardness’, and reform needs to avoid measures that could lead to tensions. Transitional programs and preferential policies are meant to close the gap by assisting minority students, the long-term aim being to generate structural change over time. However, classroom content and testing mechanisms tend to be Han-centric regarding role models, methods and examples. Furthermore, navigating the delicate equilibrium between respect, autonomy and unity in ethnic preferential policy can be challenging, as seen in tensions in how policies are implemented, with some policies emphasising assimilation and others diversity. Minority policy discourse can also be used to justify discriminatory practices or even human rights abuses against minority groups.

China’s ethnic education systems have changed, and Chapter Five sheds light on these transformations. In the past, access to higher education was limited to privileged groups and competent high school graduates. Higher education access was a driving force behind China’s economic and social development. However, the current emphasis has shifted towards more equitable and comprehensive growth through neoliberalism. Unsurprisingly, any plan for advancement will likely face challenges and criticisms, and addressing these issues requires thoughtful consideration of the specific context and needs of those involved. Yamada carefully documents minority preparatory programs by recording her conversations and group interviews with teachers and students. She discusses the internal contradiction revealed during her field trip in Qinghai. The minority preparatory program was initially designed to support disadvantaged students facing economic hardship. Formerly, the programs were mainly financed by the government; now, they are primarily funded by students themselves. If she had expanded the scope of her field trip beyond the western part of China, she would have discovered a more complex and arguably representative set of student discourses, experiences and inferences. Such an endeavour would have provided a more comprehensive and representative picture of the rationale behind the policy shift of funding.

In her conclusion, Yamada highlights the gap between the objectives of minority education and preferential policy measures and the shortcomings of their implementation. She argues that the policy rationale is rooted in a contradictory logic—the education is structured to promote ‘pluralistic unity’ which results in outcomes. Although her argument sounds convincing, my ongoing research reveals a more nuanced picture. Based on responses to more than 200 questionnaires and 50 in-depth interviews in the eastern part of China during 2021–2023, I conclude that, while the policy provides more educational opportunities to ethnic minority students, it cannot achieve equality of opportunity for every student because of resource limitations and granting special treatment to a few students caused controversy and resentment among many more students (Zhuang, work in progress).

In sum, Naomi Yamada’s book is a valuable ethnography on the key issues confronting multicultural education in China and elsewhere. It is an invaluable addition to the literature and indispensable for those eager to comprehend the struggles and difficulties encountered by minority students in China.

Reference

Zhuang, Z. (in progress). *China's ethnic minority educational preferential policy at the crossroads* (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Australia).



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