

Examining Preferential Policies for Ethnic Higher Education in China's Multi-Ethnic Society: Impacts and Challenges in the Realm of Multicultural Education

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Abstract: This article analyses three preferential policies in higher education for ethnic minorities in China, and claims several challenges and perspectives for these policies. It focuses on the status of the application for multicultural education in ethnic higher education of China and highlight the limitations and recommendations of the award bonus points and reduction of admission score range policies, the ethnic minority preparatory policies, and the ethnic minority class policies. In addition, it identifies the deficiencies of the current preferential policy in terms of access, process and outcome and suggests some improvements.

1. Introduction

China is a multi-ethnic society with 56 ethnic groups^[1]. Ethnic education for Chinese is centred upon a plural education system, which permits national minorities have their own schools while maintaining the chance for them to attend general public education schools^[2-3]. In the 1990s, multicultural education theories were imported into China, which led Chinese academics to begin paying attention to the study of diversity in culture^[4]. Unfortunately, multicultural programmes are currently only available in elementary and junior high schools in several national minority autonomous regions^[5]. For high education of ethnic minorities, preferential policies, such as bonus points policies, represent a key component of safeguarding the right of ethnic minorities have to education^[6]. Instead, there is an arrangement of distributing the access to higher education based on the proportion of the population of minorities in comparison with that of the dominant ethnic group, with the purpose of realising educational equity, which has been developed in a similar direction to that of the original purpose of multicultural education in Western societies^[7].

However, there exists various limitations of the present preferential policies^[8]. For instance, education development in China varies tremendously, and such variations not only exist between different ethnic groups, but also often appear within the same group. In addition, for the Han (the dominant ethnic group), in which some basic education services are lacking in resources, such preferences might be regarded as a privilege for minorities^[9]. Hence, there is a heated debate on whether these preferences would help promote national equity^[10]. In this paper, it will analyse how preferential policies for higher education of ethnic minorities work in diverse societies in China, as

well as general perspectives on them.

2. Ethnic Higher Education in China's Society

China, as a multi-ethnic country with a significant population, comprises 56 ethnic groups, among which 55 are ethnic minorities and one is the dominant Han ethnic group. In 2020, ethnic minorities constituted 8.9% of the population, while the Han population accounted for 91.1% ^[1]. Furthermore, ethnic minority groups in China primarily reside in border areas, which tend to be economically and educationally underdeveloped ^[11]. This is attributed to the fact that during the establishment of the People's Republic of China, some ethnic minorities were still transitioning from primitive to class societies, resulting in a generally low basic cultural level among many ethnic minority groups ^[9]. For instance, in the mid-20th century, approximately 94% of individuals residing in the fifth districts of a county in the Miao Autonomous Region in western Hunan were unable to read or write ^[12].

Accordingly, in order to construct an education system for ethnic minorities, Chinese government approached the issue by assisting in the collation of ethnic minority languages and scripts, offering courses on ethnic cultures, and executing bilingual education ^[6]. Simultaneously, the expansion of higher education opportunities for ethnic minority students has been a significant focus of ethnic education initiatives ^[13]. As of 2018, China boasted 15 ethnic higher education institutions and 204 regular universities located in ethnic minority autonomous regions ^[14]. However, the existing disparity in the quality of basic education leaves ethnic minority students at a disadvantage when competing for higher education opportunities compared to their Han Chinese counterparts ^[15]. For instance, in 1950, out of 117,000 students enrolled in Chinese higher education institutions, only 1,300 were ethnic minority students, representing approximately 1.1% ^[16].

In the early 20th century, in a bid to ensure equal educational opportunities for all ethnic groups, China introduced a series of preferential policies, including bonus point awards, reduction of admission score ranges, ethnic minority preparatory programs, and ethnic minority class policies. These policies, which will be further explored in Part III of this article, have significantly contributed to fostering equality of opportunity in education. By 2020, the higher education growth rate for 37 ethnic minorities surpassed both the national average and that of the Han Chinese population. Similarly, preferential policies have played a pivotal role in nurturing ethnic regions and fostering national unity ^[17]. In ancient Chinese society, various ethnic groups often faced discrimination and oppression, leading to inter-ethnic conflicts. However, the implementation of preferential policies has ensured the legitimate rights of ethnic minorities and fostered harmonious ethnic relations, enabling diverse groups to coexist and develop together on the basis of equal rights.

3. Theories and discussions on multi-ethnic education

3.1 Multicultural Education

Multicultural education has been conceptualised in various ways ^[18]. According to Banks (2021), it encompasses three key aspects: a concept, a movement for educational reform, and an ongoing process aimed at providing equal learning opportunities for all students, irrespective of their social class, ethnicity, race, cultural background, gender, or sexual orientation. It promotes respect for diverse cultures and aims to ensure that all students feel equally valued in their educational experiences, such as incorporating case studies of scientists from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities into the curriculum ^[19].

This concept originated from the recognition that certain students are 'privileged' in educational settings due to these characteristics, resulting in unfair advantages over other students ^[20]. However, some critics view the emphasis on cultural diversity as divisive, exacerbating racial, ethnic, and social

class divides and undermining national unity. Degaga and Mekuria (2023) argue that the demand for recognition of marginalised groups' identities could potentially escalate social conflicts. Additionally, there are concerns regarding the perceived cultural relativism of multicultural education, as articulated by Bloom (1987), who suggests that it may lead to a decline in educational quality.

Despite these criticisms, Doucette et al. (2021) highlight the positive potential of multicultural education, asserting that it not only strives to ensure equal access to education for all students but also enhances students' knowledge by valuing diverse cultures. Research by Akcaoğlu and Arsal (2022) demonstrates that teachers trained in multicultural education can create more enriching educational experiences for students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, critical multicultural education emphasises the equitable distribution of power and aims to establish inclusive educational environments, recognizing that social structural imbalances and empowerment disparities significantly contribute to educational inequalities.

For example, Kozol (1992) exposes inequalities in the American educational system, highlighting unequal educational rights and opportunities stemming from socioeconomic disparities. Consequently, multicultural education is dedicated to reforming educational institutions to create equitable learning environments for all students.

Overall, multicultural education represents an ongoing reform process striving for educational equality. While complete eradication of all forms of discrimination may not be attainable, continual reform efforts contribute positively to the development of a multi-ethnic society.

3.2 Assimilation

In the realm of multicultural studies, the concept of assimilation is commonly understood as a process whereby one culture is subjugated or absorbed and subsequently transforms passively to adapt to its surroundings. Faulkner (2011) regards assimilation as a significant means for immigrants to integrate into society, echoing historical perspectives that perceive assimilation as a mechanism for immigrant communities to shed inferior characteristics and advance. However, these perspectives are at odds with those of multiculturalists, who argue that assimilation represents a phenomenon wherein minority groups are compelled to embrace the dominant culture to fit into their environment. For example, African American and Latino American students attending schools in Europe and the United States are often exposed to a mainstream curriculum and taught predominantly by educators of European American descent, necessitating their adaptation to the dominant cultural milieu. Yet, this adjustment can prove detrimental to the academic performance of minorities, as the mainstream culture may not align with their native culture or language, posing challenges to their learning process. Such assimilatory tendencies, wherein minority cultures are engulfed by the mainstream culture, have elicited criticism from multiculturalists. Ignatiev (2009) offers a critical perspective by denouncing the assimilation of the Irish by white Americans as a form of racial oppression, highlighting the incongruity faced by assimilated Irish individuals who, despite striving to enter the middle class, find themselves adopting roles that are foreign to their cultural identity.

In light of the aforementioned discourse, assimilation is generally construed as a negative term signifying hegemony within the multicultural sphere, indicative of the dominant culture's encroachment upon and deprivation of other cultures.

4. Preferential Policies for Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Higher Education

China's ethnic minority populations are predominantly situated in border regions and economically underdeveloped areas, leading to a disparity in educational quality that renders ethnic minority students less competitive in terms of academic achievement compared to their Han Chinese counterparts. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government

recognised the importance of fostering higher education opportunities for ethnic minorities and aimed to ensure equal access to higher education for ethnic minority students as afforded to Han Chinese students. Consequently, China implemented preferential policies designed to facilitate the enrollment of ethnic minority students in mainstream higher education institutions located in non-ethnic regions, thereby legally supporting minority students and safeguarding their right to education. Three preferential policies, which are flexibly applied based on specific circumstances are as follows.

4.1 The Award Bonus Points Policies

In 1950, the Ministry of Education in China introduced a regulation stipulating leniency in admissions for special groups, which was implemented within the framework of the unified national college entrance examination. Subsequently, following the proposal of this policy, the allocation of bonus points for ethnic minority groups was determined by individual regions. For instance, in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the bonus point system includes 20 additional points for students belonging to 10 specific categories of ethnic minorities, ethnic autonomous regions, and border areas, 10 points for minority students in 22 mountainous areas, 5 points for minority students in 5 urban areas, and 7 points for minority students in remaining areas.

4.2 The Ethnic Minority Preparatory Policies

Preparatory education represents a specialised form of higher education tailored for ethnic minority students with inadequate foundational education. The preparatory policy entails admitting students from ethnic minority backgrounds with lower admission standards, followed by one or two years of foundational literacy education before their enrollment in higher education institutions. This approach aims to narrow the knowledge gap among ethnic minority students. The curriculum primarily focuses on high school-level subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry, alongside enhancing proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. By undergoing preparatory education prior to formal enrollment in higher education institutions, ethnic minority students not only acquire foundational knowledge pertinent to their future academic pursuits but also acclimate themselves to the higher education environment beforehand.

Moreover, the preparatory policy entails significantly lower admission score requirements on the national college entrance examination for ethnic minority students. In certain regions, the discrepancy between the admission score levels for ethnic minority students and those for regular Han Chinese students can be substantial, exceeding 100 points or more. For example, in 2009, data from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region indicated that the admission score for the first batch of general science subjects was 501 points, whereas the admission score for the same batch under the preparatory policy for Mongolian-taught ethnic minority students was merely 383 points, representing a disparity of 118 points.

4.3 The Ethnic Minority Class Policies

The ethnic class policy represents an expansionary initiative aimed at establishing segregated classes for ethnic minority groups within mainstream higher education institutions. This policy was conceived to create new avenues and opportunities for ethnic minority students to pursue higher education. In 1980, China introduced a trial implementation of ethnic minority classes at select national key higher education institutions, including prestigious universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University, as outlined in the Notice on the Trial Establishment of Ethnic Minority Classes in Part of the National Key Higher Education Institutions. Under this trial policy, 150 students from six ethnic minority provinces were enrolled. Some higher education institutions

have supplemented this initiative with a one-year preparatory program preceding admission to ethnic minority classes.

5. Discussion in Challenges and Perspectives of Preferential Policies

5.1 Challenges

5.1.1 Inequality of Educational Opportunities within Ethnic Minorities

As the economy develops and the social structure of ethnic minority regions improves, the issue of educational inequality within ethnic minority communities becomes increasingly apparent. Ye and Xiao (2019) conducted an analysis focusing on educational access, highlighting that disparities in higher education among ethnic minorities are not solely attributable to ethnic identity, but rather stem from differences in social class and between urban and rural areas. Furthermore, apart from variations in basic education levels, the exorbitant tuition fees for higher education and the expenses associated with preparatory programs pose significant financial challenges for many ethnic minority families. Additionally, the resulting lack of confidence in pursuing higher education contributes to higher dropout rates at the primary education level in ethnic minority regions. Consequently, the current preferential policies fail to account for the influence of ethnic minority family income, social class, and parental education levels on ethnic minority students' access to higher education. This oversight may exacerbate the trend of educational resources disproportionately flowing to the upper echelons of society within ethnic minority communities.

5.1.2 Inequality of Opportunities for Education between Ethnic Minorities and Han Chinese

Firstly, it is evident that certain ethnic minority groups have not yet attained the targeted levels of higher education attainment despite the implementation of preferential policies. Specifically, as of 2020, the average years of education for 14 ethnic groups, including Yi, Hani, Nu, Wa, Brown, Baoan, Lhoba, De'ang, Lisu, Menba, Lahu, Salar, and Dongxiang - have failed to reach the educational levels achieved by the Han population in 2000. Consequently, the objectives of preferential policies have not been fully realised, and these underperforming ethnic minority groups should be prioritised as the primary beneficiaries of future policy interventions.

Furthermore, the presence of preferential policies may be perceived as a form of reverse discrimination among Han Chinese students. For instance, a case in an ethnic minorities region illustrates that when a Han student and a Uyghur student obtained identical scores, the Han student was only admitted to a local general university, while the Uyghur student benefited from preferential policies and gained admission to a prestigious university in Beijing. Despite both students receiving equivalent educational resources in the same environment, preferential policies resulted in their enrollment in vastly different institutions with significant disparities in educational quality. This discrepancy highlights the misalignment of the beneficiary groups targeted by preferential policies. Moreover, it indicates that the equality of ethnic higher education in China is limited to providing opportunities among various groups, thereby contradicting the principle of equality for all students as outlined in Article 9 of the Education Law of the People's Republic of China. Additionally, while some provinces have extended preferential policy benefits to Han Chinese candidates from ethnic minority areas, certain issues persist. For example, the policy in Province H segregates the beneficiary group into ethnic minorities and Han Chinese residing in ethnic areas. Under this policy, bonus points are allocated based on an application system, where candidates submit their applications for review by multiple departments, including education and public security. However, for Han Chinese candidates eligible for policy benefits, the application process may prove overly complicated, thereby

hindering the equitable provision of preferential treatment to students in genuine need.

5.1.3 Inequality in the Education Process

In non-ethnic regions of China, higher education curriculum predominantly reflects mainstream culture, with minimal attention dedicated to the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. Moreover, a significant shortage of teachers proficient in ethnic minority cultures has resulted in the erosion of certain ethnic cultures. This phenomenon bears resemblance to assimilation processes observed in Western societies and could be perceived as disadvantageous to ethnic minority cultures. Notably, the integration of multicultural education into the Chinese educational system primarily occurs within primary and secondary schools situated in ethnic regions, mirroring its application in basic education within Western multi-ethnic societies. Consequently, a research gap exists concerning the construction of knowledge related to multicultural education at the higher education level.

Furthermore, ethnic minority students pursuing higher education in non-ethnic regions encounter dual cultural disruptions, presenting a significant challenge. The first disruption occurs when they leave their hometowns, interrupting their engagement with traditional culture. Subsequently, upon graduating and returning to their hometowns, they are confronted with another interruption as they navigate the mainstream culture.

5.1.4 Inequality in Educational Achievements

Due to linguistic and cultural disparities, ethnic minority students enrolled in mainstream universities in non-ethnic regions experience heightened academic pressure compared to their Han Chinese counterparts, with some facing challenges in completing their studies successfully. Additionally, these students encounter obstacles in securing employment opportunities in non-ethnic areas, as employers often exhibit a preference for hiring Han Chinese students, expressing concerns regarding the capabilities of students who have benefited from preferential policies. Furthermore, upon graduation, certain ethnic minority students exhibit reluctance to return to their remote hometowns, contributing to a significant brain drain dilemma in ethnic minority regions. Despite the existence of targeted employment programs aimed at dispatching graduates to work in ethnic areas, their numbers remain insufficient to meet the economic development needs of these regions.

In summary, current preferential policies have primarily addressed admission opportunities for minority groups, yet the employment challenges faced by minority students in non-ethnic regions and the emerging trend of brain drain in ethnic minority areas pose significant concerns.

5.2 Perspectives

5.2.1 Defining the Groups Benefiting from Preferences from a New Perspective

In 2020, the proportion of ethnic groups such as Russians, Herzhe, Tatar, and Oroqen with access to higher education had already surpassed the national average, indicating the successful attainment of the goals set by preferential policies in certain ethnic groups. Therefore, for those ethnic groups that have achieved educational parity and are no longer economically disadvantaged, the continuation of preferential policies may lead to potential reverse discrimination against Han Chinese students. For instance, Fujian Province has announced plans to gradually phase out bonus point policies for ethnic minorities. Conversely, for ethnic groups that still lag behind the national average in higher education attainment, an extended duration and scope of preferential policies are warranted until these groups have narrowed the educational gap.

Furthermore, the categorization of preference groups could be redefined based on regional criteria, eliminating distinctions based on ethnicity. This shift acknowledges that preferential policies are

intended to address disparities in basic education levels, which are largely uniform within specific regions. Thus, ethnicity should not serve as the sole basis for granting privileges. However, it is crucial to recognise that groups within the same region may still face unequal access to educational resources due to economic disparities, social class differences, and other factors. Addressing these disparities presents an important avenue for future research.

5.2.2 Enhancing Policies and Regulations

Firstly, addressing the disparity between the abilities and qualifications of ethnic minority students upon graduation requires an adjustment of the threshold for preferential policies to ensure the quality of students. One effective approach could involve incorporating examinations in ethnic languages or cultures to enhance the equity of preferential policies. By integrating such measures, the policies would better reflect the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of ethnic minority students, thereby promoting fairness and accuracy in their assessment.

Secondly, the current framework for ethnic higher education policy operates within the broader context of higher education policy without specific legislative provisions to guarantee the implementation of preferential policies. Therefore, enacting dedicated legislation for ethnic higher education is imperative to facilitate its development. Such legislation would not only establish standardised implementation guidelines for policies but also serve as a safeguard against instances of ethnic identity falsification aimed at exploiting these policies for personal gain. By formalizing the legal framework for ethnic higher education, the legislation would ensure accountability, transparency, and the effective enforcement of preferential policies, thus fostering the advancement of ethnic minority students in higher education.

5.2.3 Creating Multicultural Curriculum in Universities

In order to ensure an equitable learning experience for minority students, mainstream universities in non-ethnic regions of China should consider incorporating courses related to minority cultures into their curriculum. Given the vast diversity of ethnic minorities in China and their rich cultural heritage, the development trajectory of multicultural education in Western countries could serve as a valuable reference point. This approach typically begins with the introduction of optional courses, gradually evolving into broader curricular reforms. While it may be impractical to fully integrate the multitude of national cultures of China into the curriculum, multicultural education is an ongoing process of reform aimed at fostering an educational environment that promotes equality for all students. By embracing this process of continuous improvement, universities can strive to provide a more inclusive and enriching educational experience that respects and celebrates the diverse cultural identities of minority students.

5.2.4 Targeted Employment in National Areas

Firstly, the expansion of ethnic class programs, coupled with targeted employment contracts, offers a potential solution to the issue of brain drain in ethnic areas. By implementing directional employment contracts, these programs can effectively retain skilled minority talents in relevant fields, thereby addressing the workforce shortages in ethnic regions and supporting their economic development needs.

Furthermore, specialised employment guidance initiatives tailored for minority students enrolled in non-ethnic classes could be established to provide clear career development pathways. Such guidance programs would equip students with the necessary tools and resources to make informed decisions about their future employment prospects, enhancing their chances of successful integration into the workforce.

Additionally, for students opting to pursue employment opportunities in non-ethnic areas, counseling services and policy assistance should be readily available. These support mechanisms aim to address any challenges or barriers minority students may encounter during their job search process, ensuring their smooth transition into the workforce and facilitating their professional development.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of ethnic education policies in China has made significant strides in advancing the educational opportunities for ethnic minorities and fostering economic development in ethnic regions, thereby addressing longstanding disparities in access to higher education^[3]. However, there remains considerable room for improvement and optimization of these policies. Multicultural education represents a promising avenue for enhancing higher education in China, including the construction of curriculum content. Nonetheless, the sheer diversity of ethnic cultures in China poses a considerable challenge in developing multicultural curriculums that adequately represent all ethnic groups. While preferential policies have been instrumental in fostering the development of ethnic regions and promoting national unity^[17], it is imperative to acknowledge and address their limitations. These policies must be carefully optimised to mitigate issues such as reverse discrimination, mismatch between student abilities and qualifications, and brain drain in ethnic areas. In light of these considerations, ongoing research and evaluation are essential to identify opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness and equity of preferential policies in higher education for ethnic minorities in China. By addressing these challenges and embracing diverse perspectives, China can continue to advance its efforts towards creating a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

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