

# Multilingual Education

Volume 31

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Lubei Zhang • Linda Tsung

# Bilingual Education and Minority Language Maintenance in China

The Role of Schools in Saving the Yi  
Language

 Springer

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# Foreword

This brilliant book addresses several major dilemmas. Two of them stand out. One is the challenges involved in the dichotomy between policy and implementation. The other concerns the big questions of language survival among China's ethnic minorities and especially how the education system can help to keep ethnic languages alive.

China's policy toward the languages of the ethnic minorities is to help them survive. However, the reality is that they are not doing well and most are already no longer used.

This book concerns the Yi people of southwest China, especially Sichuan and Yunnan. The Yi people are important among China's ethnic minorities, because they have traditionally had very strong feelings about their own language and culture. There is even a school of Yi historiography that regards the "primitive Daoist cosmological ideas about the tiger held by the Yi" as having given rise to Chinese culture itself (Liu Yaohan, quoted in Stevan Harrell and Yongxiang Li, "The History of the History of the Yi, Part II," *Modern China*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2003), p. 368). What this tells us is that at least a part of the Yi cultural elite are so proud of their culture that they regard it not only as worth defending for itself but as the origin of the whole of Chinese culture. This makes the Yi an exceptional minority among China's ethnic groups.

The title of the book raises the question whether schools can save the Yi language. That brings the issue of the status and effectiveness of schools within society. It also raises questions about the strength of ethnic cultures in a context where the dominant Han culture is very powerful and getting more so in the contemporary world. Even if they are sponsored by government money, can ethnic languages cope with the realities of inadequate policy implementation?

I admire this book because it combines theory and practical experience. It shows a deep understanding both of language and ethnic theory and also takes up case studies of the Yi, showing what life is actually like in selected Yi communities. It shows how policy is implemented on the ground. I found the interview material among the Yi extremely interesting, because it shows just what Yi people think about their livelihood and identity. For example, one teacher is quoted as saying "As

a language teacher, as a school educator and manager, keeping the Yi language is essential, that is our Chinese dream: our own language cannot be allowed to disappear.” Yet the decline of Yi languages is precisely what the research in this book suggests is what is actually happening, and the possibility of eventual disappearance cannot be ruled out. Some people are very keen to keep the language strong, but there are many others who do not care much. It just is not particularly useful to keep a rather rare ethnic language alive in the modern world. It does not help much in getting good employment or in advancing one’s career or status within society. And many interviewees think that they can retain their Yi ethnic identity even without the language.

Linda Tsung is a friend and colleague of mine. I very much admire the work she has undertaken on language policy and implementation among China’s ethnic minorities up to now. Her track record is remarkable and shows no sign of decline. Lubei Zhang, Linda’s very talented co-researcher, has also done much work on China’s ethnic minorities. They have collaborated on much research on issues regarding minority education in China. I expect that this contribution on the Yi will further strengthen their already good reputation. They certainly deserve that it should.

Professor Emeritus, Griffith University  
Brisbane, Australia  
March 2018

Colin Mackerras, AO, FAHA

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