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Trilingualism and Uyghur Identity in the People's Republic of China

Mamtimyn Sunuodula, Anwei Feng and Bob Adamson

Abstract

There are 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups in the People's Republic of China. One such group, the Uyghurs, is made up of Turkic people living in North West of the country, predominantly in the province of Xinjiang. Historically, this group has never been strongly assimilated into the majority Han culture; indeed, the political, economic and social policies of the central and regional governments have engendered tensions—at times violent—between the Uyghurs and the Han in Xinjiang, as some Uyghurs have perceived the policies as threatening the integrity of their culture and language. However, to characterise the relationship between Uyghurs and Han as uniformly and mutually hostile would be a misrepresentation of a far more nuanced reality. This chapter (co-authored by a Uyghur, a Han Chinese and an Englishman) explores the complexities and tensions surrounding language and Uyghur identity. Language issues are particularly sensitive and, as a result, instructive of the broader attitudes and practices relating to identity. The Uyghur language forms an essential part of ethnic identity, while Chinese—which is promoted for national unity—offers opportunities for educational, economic and social advancement. English provides international connectivities that enhance and complexify notions of identity. The

chapter explores language in education policies in Xinjiang to reveal official attitudes and practices, and the attitudes and practices of Uyghurs regarding their self-identity.

Trilingualism and Uyghur Identity in the People's Republic of China

Mamtymyn Sunuodula, Anwei Feng and Bob Adamson

Introduction

Contrary to popular impressions of homogeneity held outside of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there are 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups in the country, in addition to the majority Han. These ethnic groups are very diverse in terms of history, culture and language. They number some 113.79 million people (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011) living in 155 ethnic autonomous areas, many of which are located near the country's borders to the southwest, west, northwest, north and northeast. All ethnic minority groups are subject to the same central legislature and laws as Han Chinese and enjoy the same constitutional rights. However, decentralisation of some aspects of state policy (such as the provision of education) has led to considerable variation in the relationship between individual minority groups and the local, regional and national government (Schluessel, 2007). This relationship has also varied over time, as state policy has veered between coercive assimilation to acceptance of diversity. To some extent, this variation can be attributed to socio-political and cultural factors, such as the prevailing political climate, as well as the historical tendency of individual minority groups towards or away from

assimilation with the Han, and their sense of identity and linguistic vitality (Adamson & Feng, 2009).

Language issues are particularly sensitive and, as a result, instructive of the broader attitudes and practices relating to cultural identity in the PRC. Chinese and minority languages are accorded different status (Adamson & Feng, 2009). Chinese is “the language of power and access to economic well-being” (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009, p. 550) while minority languages tend to be “limited in use and of low social status” (Lin, 1997, p. 196). In recent decades, the rise of English in the PRC (Adamson, 2004) has resulted in the phenomenon of trilingual education in minority regions, with the minority language being taught in primary schools in an effort to maintain the students’ sense of cultural identity, Chinese being taught for national unity and access to life chances in mainstream society, and English for preparing citizens to cope with the demands of globalisation and economic modernisation (Adamson & Xia, 2011).

This chapter explores the complexities and tensions surrounding language and the identity of Uyghur people in Xinjiang, north-west China. Xinjiang is a vast region with thirteen ethnic groups living in mixed communities, mostly in towns and cities, or in remote isolated areas where minority groups, mostly Uyghurs, dominate. Located at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent, Xinjiang was strategically placed on the ancient trading routes from Asia to Europe, known as the famed Silk Road. It was not only goods that were transported and exchanged along the Silk Road towns and cities of ancient Xinjiang. A continuous flow of ideas, cultures,

religions and languages between different peoples and continents were also an important part of the exchange between individuals and communities over many centuries. Twenty-four different scripts, used for writing seventeen ancient languages, have been unearthed from the Tarim and Turpan basin oasis cities. Further, some of the Turkic manuscripts recovered from Buddhist caves in Dunhuang are written in multiple languages and scripts, indicating the existence of a high degree of linguistic exchanges and multilingual populations, at least in some sections of society (Kamberi, 2005).

Historically, the Uyghurs have never been strongly assimilated into the majority Han culture; indeed, there has existed considerable tension, which has occasionally been expressed and repressed in a violent manner, between the two groups over the central and regional governments' political, economic and social policies in Xinjiang. However, to characterise the relationship between Uyghurs and Han as uniformly and mutually hostile would be a misrepresentation of a far more nuanced reality, which this chapter seeks to convey by looking at the interrelationships of the three languages.

The Uyghur Language

Uyghur belongs to the southeastern branch of Turkic languages. Today, the Uyghur language is used by over 10 million people in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China (XUAR Census Office, 2012, p. 197) and an estimated further half a million people outside China, mainly in the neighbouring Central Asian countries (Becquelin, 2000).

Uyghurs can trace their history to the Uyghur Empire that ruled a vast region from modern day Central Asia to the shores of Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan, between 744 AD and

840 AD (Mutii, 1982; Rudelson, 1997). The Uyghur language evolved through the centuries as the primary spoken and literary language of the Turkic people living in eastern Central Asia. By the time of the Mongol conquest of the region in the 13th century, the Uyghurs had developed a sophisticated literary and oral culture and Genghis Khan adopted the Uyghur script as the imperial writing system throughout the expanding Mongol Empire. Many Uyghur literati were recruited to work as court scribes, historians, diplomats, technologist and advisors in the Mongol court and throughout the Empire (Brose, 2005) . Later, through the Mongols, the Uyghur script was also adopted by Manchus, who ruled China from 1644-1911 (Nolan, 2002).

After the second half of 14th century, Uyghurs adopted a modified version of the Arabic script for their writing and a pan-Central Asian Turkic *lingua franca* called Chaghatay was used as the literary language. This was in line with Uyghurs' conversion to Islam and closer cultural integration into the wider Muslim Central Asian and Turkic-speaking world. Chaghatay was used until the early 20th century, when attempts were made to formulate a modern Uyghur language that reflected the emergence of Uyghur identity, as part of the Muslim reform movement in Central Asia and the expansion of Russian power into western Central Asia (Bögü, 2002, 1–2).

The modern Uyghur literary language began to evolve in late 19th and early 20th centuries (Baran, 2007). This coincided with two major historical events. The first was the

establishment of a unified and independent Uyghur state in Xinjiang in 1862 centred in Kashgar and its subsequent defeat by the Qing Dynasty in 1877. In 1884, the region was incorporated into the Chinese administrative structure as a formal province of the Qing Empire. Han people from the eastern part of China were encouraged to settle in the region. A Confucian education system was introduced, which favoured the learning of Chinese and memorisation of classical works (Millward, 2007). The second event was the fall of western Central Asia under Russian rule in the 1860s and the subsequent Russification and later Sovietisation of Central Asia. The rise of modern geographical and political boundaries separating the Turkic-speaking Russian Central Asia from Xinjiang made physical and cultural exchanges increasingly difficult (Bregel, 1992; Clark & Kamalov, 2004; Šilde-Karklinš, 1975).

A poem attributed to Qutluq Shawqi, who was at the forefront of the new educational movement in the early part of 20th century, entitled “Mother tongue” is widely quoted by Uyghurs who want to see the preservation of Uyghur mother tongue education and promotion of Uyghur language in society. The short poem was also a hit song for a contemporary Uyghur folk singer, Abdurehim Heyit (Heyit & Shawqi, 2012). An English translation of the poem is as follows:

I salute the people who speak my mother tongue,

I am willing to pay in gold for the words they speak,

Wherever my mother tongue is found, be it Africa or America,

I would go there, whatever the cost and expense,

Oh, my mother tongue, you are the sacred bequest to us from our great ancestors,

With you, I desire to share my pride in you in the spiritual world.

Teaching and Learning of Chinese by Uyghurs

The relative status of Uyghur and Han languages had been a point of contention between the local Uyghur elite and the Han Chinese ruling class in Xinjiang before the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Two of the eleven point demands brought to peace talks with the Chinese government by the leaders of the Three District Revolution, a revolutionary movement that established an independent multi-ethnic government in northern Xinjiang in 1944, concern the use of Uyghur (referred to in the document as “the Moslem language”, as this is the predominant religion of the Uyghur people). Point 3 demanded that the “language of the Moslems would be used for all official and social affairs” and Point 4 demands that “primary schools, middle schools and secondary schools, and the university would all use the Moslem language, and national minority education would be expanded.” The eleven point peace agreement signed between the two sides on 2 January 1946 stated:

- Individuals could use their native written language to produce documents for state and private organisations documents;
- Primary and secondary schools will use the language of the local nationality, but in secondary schools, Chinese will be a required subject. At the university level,

Chinese or Moslem language(s) will be used, according to the needs of the course.

(Benson, 1990; 58, 185–186)

This agreement showed for the first time that a conscientious effort was made by both the Three District Revolutionary authorities, which represented the local population, to raise the status of Uyghur language in politics, education and society in Xinjiang and the central government representative to emphasise the importance of learning Chinese by the local population as part of an official agreement. Meanwhile, Chinese-speakers remained as a small minority of the total population concentrated in northern Xinjiang, mainly in urban centres and often in separate quarters from the local population (Clark, 2011; Toops, 2004).

After Xinjiang was incorporated into the PRC in 1950, the Uyghurs were recognised as one of the 55 minority nationalities in China and, in 1956, Xinjiang was named the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, one of four provinces in the country to be designated as an autonomous region, in recognition of the dominant demographic position of the Uyghur population (Communist Party of China Central Committee Archives Research Office & Communist Party of China XUAR Committee, 2010). The Uyghur language was legitimised as an official regional language, along with Mandarin Chinese. Large-scale linguistic surveys were conducted between 1955 and 1957 to establish a standard variety of the language to be used as the official dialect and literary language. The Central dialect, spoken by 90% of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, was chosen as the basis for the new standard language. The

Xinjiang Provincial Language and Scripts Steering Committee was set up in 1950 and was headed by the Provincial Governor, Burhan Shahidi. The Committee was responsible for coordinating the implementation of the national and the regional language policies as well as standardising Uyghur and other ethnic minority languages by producing standard orthographies, dictionaries and guidance on the official language use in public domains, and so on. Unusually high-level regional government and Communist Party officials headed the Committee in subsequent years underlining the importance of its work and high stakes involved in its decisions (XUAR Local Gazettes Editorial Commission & “Annals of Xinjiang, Language Section” Editorial Board, 2000).

Until the 20th century, the majority of Uyghurs, like the Han and other ethnic groups in China, were monoglot and illiterate. After 1950, two parallel types of education systems were created across Xinjiang, based on the language of instruction, in line with the requirements of the National Minority Regional Autonomy law and policies (Xia, 2007). In Uyghur language schools, Uyghur was the medium of instruction for all subjects except Chinese, from primary and secondary school education, as well as at university level for the majority of disciplines. Most Uyghurs came to regard mother-tongue education as their inalienable right guaranteed under the Constitution and other relevant national and regional legislation (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2009). The Regional authorities were permitted to produce tailor-made textbooks for Uyghur and other ethnic minority languages (Xia, 2007). At universities and

professional and technical colleges, classes were divided according to the language of instruction (XUAR 50th Anniversary Organising Committee & XUAR Statistical Bureau, 2005).

The Regional government approved a local law in 1988 regulating the use of Uyghur and other ethnic minority languages in the XUAR, giving specific guidance on all major areas where the ethnic minority languages must be used alongside Chinese. The law was aimed at improving and protecting the status and the use of minority languages in public institutions and privately run business and other professional organisations. Inspectors worked along with the local Industries and Commerce Regulatory Authority to monitor the use of languages on shop signs, institutional name placards, official pronouncements, and other public documents with the authority to impose fines for any non-compliance (Sugawara, 2001). While the actual implementation was far from smooth, it nonetheless symbolised an important recognition for the Uyghur language, and in turn the Uyghur people's status as the titular minority nationality in the XUAR (XUAR Local Gazettes Editorial Commission & "Annals of Xinjiang, Language Section" Editorial Board, 2000). While this initiative has helped to preserve and develop Uyghur cultural traditions, language and literature, as well as ethnic and religious identity, it also conflicted with the ever-increasing pressure to become proficient in Chinese. In 1992, the Regional authorities issued another legal document, entitled "XUAR Provisional Regulation on the Usage of Chinese", which appear to counterbalance the

previous document by stressing the importance of promoting the learning of Chinese by ethnic minorities (XUAR Local Gazettes Editorial Commission & “Annals of Xinjiang, Language Section” Editorial Board, 2000).

In the first decade prior to 1959, most primary school pupils followed the system of learning Uyghur and using it as the medium of instruction. Chinese was not taught till they reached secondary school (Ouyang, 2008). In 1959, it was decided by the regional education authorities that Chinese would start from Primary 4. Students who entered tertiary institutions had to take a one-year pre-session course. After 1959, more official documents further enhanced Chinese in primary and secondary school curricula. After the Cultural Revolution in 1977, the regional government stipulated that ethnic minority schools should provide Chinese as the compulsory second language school subject from Year 3 of primary school until the end of secondary school. No foreign language courses would be provided (Sunuodula & Feng, 2011).

Policies related to language provision for minority groups issued since 1977 have further stressed the importance of teaching Chinese to minority pupils. Against the backdrop of the restoration of the traditional Uyghur written script and a relatively liberal period for bilingual education after the death in 1976 of the former paramount leader, Mao Zedong, a document issued in 1985 asserted that within five years school teachers and administrators in the region

were required to use Chinese in all formal domains, such as classrooms and meetings. All secondary school leavers were required to have competence in Chinese. A 2004 document on “bilingual education” goes further by asserting that Chinese should be made the main or sole language of instruction in primary and secondary-school classrooms (Feng & Sunuodula, 2009). The most recent document with specific aims for bilingual education for pre-schools, primary and secondary schools issued in 2010 by the XUAR Government specified that bilingual education would develop through three stages. The first stage mandated that, by 2012, 85% of pre-school children would receive bilingual education. The goal of the second stage was to universalise bilingual education in primary and secondary schools by 2015. Ultimately, the third stage aims, by 2020, to enable students after senior secondary school to demonstrate oracy and literacy in Chinese (Chen & Teng, 2012). The aim of the last stage is telling, revealing that ‘bilingual education’ has come to mean the promotion of Chinese through an education system in which Chinese is taught both as a school subject and used as the medium of instruction for other subjects, regardless of the special status of Uyghur as a minority language (Office of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bilingual Education Steering Group, 2012; Schluessel, 2007; Feng, 2005).

This conceptualisation of “bilingual education” has posed unprecedented challenges to the position of the Uyghur language in political, economic, social and cultural spheres and for the

Uyghurs living in Xinjiang who use Uyghur as their primary language. The most directly affected have been the students and staff at minority language medium schools and other educational institutions. They are now required to become fluent (or near fluent), within a short space of time, in both spoken and written Chinese. The teachers also have had to switch from Uyghur to Chinese in conducting their teaching (Ma, 2009). The symbolic effect of this change on Uyghur ethnic, social and cultural identity is just as great as the economic and tangible impacts.

The policy has been rigidly implemented. For example, in Khotan County, where 96.4% of the population is Uyghur, a document from 2004 on the official Khotan Education website states that students must be proficient in Chinese by achieving Level 4 in the Chinese standard proficiency test by the end of compulsory education. Specific levels of proficiency in Chinese are also listed for teachers of minority background who work in schools. The document calls for those who fail to reach those levels within the set timeframe to be replaced or forced out of the teaching profession (Khotan County CCP Committee, 2004).

Research and scholarship related to language provision for minority groups in Xinjiang correspond to the tone articulated in the policy documents. Recent publications on bilingual education focus on the importance of Chinese and how Chinese could be effectively

promoted in Xinjiang schools. The most representative of the kind is an officially sanctioned collection of essays published by Xinjiang Education Press (Liu, 2008). The volume, in Chinese, is titled ‘Chinese and Bilingual Education in Xinjiang Primary and Secondary Schools’ and includes a collection of 29 essays. All these essays, analyses of policy documents, survey reports, textbook writing and classroom practice, concentrate exclusively on the teaching and learning of Chinese. Many essays have the term “bilingual” in the title, but the role of minority languages is ignored throughout.

English in Xinjiang

China, like the rest of Asia, has felt the impact of the English language over the past two centuries. The expansion of maritime trade and subsequently colonialism provided the initial contact and, in more recent decades, the role of English as a global language has increased the pressure on China to engage with the language. Engagement was initially restricted as China sought to maintain cultural integrity. When the European traders arrived in the late 18th century, Chinese authorities confined them to a small area of Guangzhou in southern China and severely limited the interactions between foreigners and locals. Only a few Chinese businessmen were permitted to trade with their foreign counterparts, assisted by "linguists", who were despised by their compatriots for acquiring a very basic knowledge of English terms for commodities, numbers, weights and measures (Feng, 1863, cited in Teng &

Fairbank, 1979, p.51). As trade and opportunities for employment increased in the territory seized by foreign powers (such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Tianjin) and missionary activities grew in remoter areas, interest in learning English increased among the Chinese populace. At the same time, state officials called for the strategic study of English—albeit with gritted teeth—as a means to access Western science and technology in order to strengthen China's capacity to resist further territorial and cultural incursions. The first *Tongwenguan*, a college for this very purpose, was established in 1861. The reform agenda of the Self-Strengtheners held sway at the turn of the 20th century and English became an official subject on the school curriculum from 1903. However these attempts at modernising China were not achieved without resistance, often violent, as manifested in anti-foreign movements such as the Boxer Rebellion.

While English was introduced to much of the Chinese hinterland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century through the activities of missionaries and merchants spreading out from the treaty ports on the eastern coast of the country, the language entered Xinjiang mainly from the west. The cities of Kashgar and Turpan are located on the ancient Northern Silk Road that connected the former Chinese capital, Chang'an (modern Xi'an) with Europe, Persia and Arabia. The region was also embroiled in the "Great Game" of geo-political manoeuvring between Britain and Russia, as the former sought to contain the threat to India of the latter's

expansion in Central Asia in the late 19th century. In the early twentieth century, English teaching was undertaken in Kashgar by Swedish missionaries arriving from the west (not from the Treaty Ports on the eastern and southern seaboard of China). Although they mainly taught students from the Han majority, the classes included Uyghurs, and local Muslims were inducted as teachers in the school (Fallmann, 2003). The new education movements that were initiated in late 19th century, and formed the foundation of modern Uyghur education and identity formation, advocated the study of languages such as Russian and Turkish. But, until the 1950s, only a small number of Uyghurs had learned Chinese, Russian or any other languages (Clark 2011; Fuller & Lipman 2004, 334).

The teaching of English in China went through stormy periods after it was introduced into the formal school curriculum in 1903, as part of the Qing Dynasty's attempt at modernisation programme known as the Hundred Days Reform. Teaching was strongest in the cities, where teachers could be trained and access to native speakers was easier. The provision of English in minority areas has very often been piecemeal or non-existent due to the lack of resources. During the 1930s, there was a backlash against English teaching, as it was seen by some academics and politicians as detracting from the development of patriotism, and the Japanese invasion and subsequent civil war in the 1940s further reduced the status of the language in the education system. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, English was only offered

sporadically in schools, given the failure of countries such as the USA, Great Britain and Australia to recognise the new nation. Attention was focused on a major campaign to boost standard Chinese, while Russian, the main language of the cooperative partners from the Soviet Union, was preferred as the foreign language. English was boosted by the Sino-Soviet schism in the early 1960s, as there was greater emphasis on China's economic and political engagement with the rest of the world, but the development of English in the country was greatly curtailed by the political upheavals of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. At this time, many teachers of the language were vilified, imprisoned or even murdered (Adamson, 2004). English only started to recover after the visit to China by the US President, Richard Nixon, which ushered in a period of détente and pingpong diplomacy.

The rise of Deng Xiaoping to the post of paramount leader in 1978 introduced an era of modernisation that has resulted in China becoming a major world economy today. In modern China, English is widely used in science and technology, mass media, commerce, tourist industry, academia, formal and informal education systems, postal services, customs, the law and other settings (Gil & Adamson, 2010). The role and status of English have accelerated to the extent that:

A vast national appetite has elevated English to something more than a language: it is not simply a tool but a defining measure of life's potential. China today is divided by class, opportunity, and power, but one of its few unifying beliefs—something shared by waiters, politicians, intellectuals, tycoons—is the power of English ... English has become an ideology, a force strong enough to remake your résumé, attract a spouse, or catapult you out of a village. (Osnos, 2008)

This appetite has spread to Xinjiang in recent years and is reflected in the life stories of some prominent Uyghurs. For example, Kasimjan Abdurehim was the founder of a well-known language centre after becoming a businessman after leaving school at the age of 12 and becoming a businessman. He learnt English and gained entrance to Xinjiang University. He won numerous awards for his English ability, including third place in the China Central TV Cup University Student English Speaking Contest. In 2010, he was named as the “Young Entrepreneur of the Year” in Xinjiang. Abdurehim expressed his philosophy as follows:

“In order to create an advanced culture, we need to be equipped with advanced thought, advanced viewpoints and advanced worldview. In order to equip ourselves, we need to have the language.” (Abdurehim, 2012)

The study

In order to understand how these policy changes and the changes in the wider linguistic landscape are affecting Uyghurs and how Uyghurs perceive these changes, we conducted empirical research in Xinjiang with selected university students and their lecturers. A university in Urumqi, the regional capital and the largest city in the province, was chosen as the research site. This is due to a relatively liberal political atmosphere for research in the city, the concentration of the region's most universities and other higher education institutions and relatively easy physical and transportation access to the city. The university where the research participants were based had an even distribution of student numbers from Uyghur and Han ethnicities.

The students and the lecturers were selected primarily on the basis of their membership in the Uyghur linguistic group, experience of learning and practising Mandarin Chinese and English languages (Lanza, 2008). All the student participants received their primary and secondary education at schools where Uyghur language was the language of instruction, with Chinese language as one of the core school subjects, prior to their university education. Most came from predominantly Uyghur populated areas of Xinjiang where there is strong ethnolinguistic vitality (Landry and Bourhis, 1997) and much of the verbal and written communication within the speech community (Gumperz, 2009) is conducted in Uyghur. They had also completed a one-year compulsory pre-university Chinese language programme before being

allowed to proceed to their specialised subjects at university level, which were solely taught in Mandarin Chinese. At the time of the fieldwork, the vast majority of Uyghurs studying at tertiary level educational institutions had been educated in their mother tongue at school prior to their university study (Sunuodula and Feng, 2011), though the situation has been in flux and changing in recent years in favour of strengthening the position of Mandarin Chinese. Thus the students can be regarded as learners of Mandarin Chinese as a second language (Richards and Schmidt, 2010) and English as a third language, rather than trilinguals with a similar level proficiency in all three languages. Despite the overwhelming influence of English language in education and society nationally, the number of Uyghurs who had had the opportunity to study English was very small and it was often the case that this was done through informal and private education. The formal education for Uyghurs at primary and secondary level, unlike many other regions in China, did not include the teaching of a foreign language and, even at the tertiary level the provision appears to be patchy and unsystematic, as reflected in our participant interviews.

The relevant sampling frames or lists of trilinguals at the research site was hard to come by, if they existed at all, making it difficult to identify all of the individuals in the population, which is necessary for a random sampling method. Thus the method of sampling research participants and conducting research interviews has to be flexible to offset the difficulty in

identifying the participants as well as selection of interview questions due to the sensitive political situation regarding politics of language. The political sensitivity involved in the investigation into language policy and practice at the research site was one of the major considerations in the research design which influenced the approach we adopted in choosing the participants, the research site and the interview questions. Ten tertiary students were chosen for two rounds of interviews which involved a first round of minimally structured interviews followed by a second round of semi-structured interviews with a focus on emergent themes from the first round. The research design adopted the purposive sampling method, where individuals selected from a group or community are judged suitable by the researcher, on the basis of participation observation of the group or community. This was supplemented by a quota sampling where participants' gender, subject speciality, the level of study and place of origin were used as added dimensions (Lanza, 2008; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 96). The interviews were conducted in Uyghur, the first and primary language of all the research participants for which they expressed a preference as the interview language and in which they felt most comfortable in expressing themselves. It is also the first language of the interviewer (Sunuodula), which gives the advantages of insider access to the research participants' meaning making and establishing trusting partnerships so that the relevant questions can be discussed relatively freely. Our focus is on their perceptions of Chinese and

English in relation to Uyghur, their willingness to invest in these second and third languages, and the process of social identity negotiation and transformation.

The qualitative research was followed by a quantitative research project, which was carried out between July 2010 and May 2011 at four sites: two senior secondary schools in Uyghur-dominated locations in southern Xinjiang, a junior secondary school class in a Han-dominated city in northern Xinjiang, and a class in a boarding school for Uyghurs located in a city in eastern China where the Han make up the absolute majority. The research sites for quantitative investigation were chosen on the basis of linguistic demography, language ecology, socioeconomic conditions and access to resources which are relevant to the acquisition of second and third languages.

One of the two schools in southern Xinjiang was originally a Uyghur language medium school and the Uyghur students form the majority. The language of instruction has recently been changed from Uyghur to Mandarin Chinese but the students used Uyghur language as their primary language of communication and reported difficulty in understanding the instruction given in Mandarin Chinese in the classrooms. The school is located in a county level town where educational resources are scarce and there is a shortage of qualified teaching staff, especially for foreign languages. The second school has always been a

Mandarin Chinese medium school and the curriculum followed the nationally set standards. Although Mandarin speakers of Han ethnicity are in the majority, it has seen big a jump in Uyghur student enrolment in recent years. The Uyghur students at this school are bilingual speakers proficient in both Mandarin Chinese and Uyghur. The school is located in a prefectural city where the socioeconomic conditions are more favourable and there is a significant international tourist presence and vibrant foreign economic activities. The school has access to greater state funding and had a supply qualified teaching staff for foreign language instruction. The other two schools are Mandarin Chinese medium schools where special Uyghur boarding classes were set up as part of a government scheme (Chen, 2010). The Uyghur speaking students at these two schools are a small minority and the linguistic ecology of the places where these two schools are located is dominated by Mandarin Chinese. These two schools have better access to educational resources, including highly qualified teaching staff, compared with the schools located in Uyghur areas of southern Xinjiang. The curriculum standards for the special Uyghur classes are the same as those for Han students and follow the national standard curriculum. A total of 190 students completed the questionnaires. Two teachers and four policy-makers were selected as key informants for further interviews. This chapter presents some of the findings that are reported in greater detail in Adamson and Feng (2009), Sunuodula and Feng (2011) and Sunuodula and Cao (forthcoming).

Perceptions of “Bilingual” Education

Our interview data suggest that many Uyghurs are zealous in their efforts to use and maintain their language and offer considerable resistance to efforts to change the status quo. Uyghur ethnic, cultural and social identity is deeply embedded in Uyghur language and most Uyghurs take pride of their language and cultural traditions:

“I do not worry about the threat to Uyghur language and culture. Uyghur culture and language are well advanced and deeply rooted among the Uyghurs.” (Student 1)

“Uyghurs possess a well-developed tradition of commerce and trading. This is also very important for preserving the Uyghur identity.” (Student 2)

“I am confident that Uyghur language will survive in future and my aim of learning other languages is to learn the valuable aspects of other cultures.” (Student 1)

Many others, however, spoke of fears for the future of Uyghur in the face of the dominant position of Chinese in education:

“I am very concerned about the overwhelming influence and pressure to learn Chinese.”
(Student 1)

“Some classes are taught in Uyghur but the textbooks and the exams are in Chinese. I am concerned about the future of Uyghur language and culture and worry that they may disappear.” (Student 3)

For most people who reside in the countryside where more than 80% of the Uyghur population live, Uyghur is the only language they know and use. Uyghur still is used extensively in private and public domains by Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Some students questioned the government’s overwhelming drive to push Chinese as the dominant language at the expense of Uyghur language in education as well as in economic, political and social spheres. They were mainly critical of what they see as the marginalisation of their language, the rushed way the measures to promote Chinese were introduced and the disregard for the symbolic and historic value of Uyghur language for the Uyghur ethnic identity and culture:

“Han people see their language as the dominant language. The Han officials in the countryside will always talk to Uyghur farmers in Chinese, despite knowing that the farmers don’t understand Chinese.” (Student 4)

“Recently, a Tajik benefactor to the University gave a speech to a group of Han students who were in their third year specialising in Uyghur language. The Han students

demanding to have a Uyghur-Han translator to translate it. The President of the University reminded the Han students that the Uyghur students face the same problem almost everyday but don't get translators." (Student 5)

Any attempt to weaken the use of the language and its social and political importance is perceived as a threat to Uyghur cultural, ethnic and historic identity. The same student mentioned a sense of defiance:

"Imposing Chinese and culture on Uyghurs will not succeed. Most children and their parents are opposed to having their children taught in Chinese.... Some students are resisting learning Chinese." (Student 4)

They were dubious about their prospects:

"Learning and using Chinese has become a norm as most lectures are delivered in that language. We are being told that Uyghur language is not advanced enough and holding us up against economic and social development. We are also being told that is why we should be proficient in Chinese. ... If they are genuinely helping us to develop and better ourselves, why don't they provide us with the same opportunities to learn as the Han people? We don't get a job for being proficient in Chinese. There are many Uyghur university graduates who have graduated from top universities in the east using Chinese

and they are still unemployed.” (Student 2)

“There seems to be a trade-off between producing a student with subject knowledge and a student with Chinese fluency as the educational outcome. The current “bilingual education” policy and practices disregard the natural and scientific educational development. I disagree with the bilingual education practices which only stress the importance of Chinese.” (Student 4)

Uyghur students also expressed concern about their lack of knowledge and skills in Chinese and its effect on their educational, economic and social prospects:

“I went to Uyghur school and all subjects except Chinese were taught in Uyghur. I am good at written and reading Chinese but not good in oral and listening skills.” (Student 2)

“Uyghurs are the least knowledgeable in Chinese compared with most other minority nationalities in China.” (Student 1)

“I learned Chinese with great motivation and enthusiasm at school but that has now faded due to the majority in the class having a poor command of the language.” (Student 3)

“There is a conflict between Chinese learning and learning subject knowledge and individual creativity. My Chinese bilingual education started in 2001. It was very difficult to understand lectures in Chinese for me and it is still not enjoyable because I don’t have sufficient knowledge of the language... I used to be able to compose poetry and short stories in Uyghur and had a lot of creative imagination when I was at school. My mother tongue is the essential tool for me to think and create and it can never be replaced. I am now becoming a passive learner because I lack proficiency in Chinese and I am not able to think creatively in Chinese. I am losing interest in the subjects as I am not able to understand, digest and internalise the knowledge I have learned using Chinese.” (Student 4)

“Chinese is a difficult language to learn. I am required to write my dissertation in Chinese. There is little originality and creativity in it because I don’t have deep enough knowledge of Chinese to fully express myself.” (Student 5)

“I used to be able to compose poetry and short stories in Uyghur and had a lot of creative imagination when I was at school. My mother tongue is the essential tool for me to think and create and it can never be replaced. I am now becoming a passive learner because I lack proficiency in Chinese and I am not able to think creatively in that language. I am losing interest in the subjects as I am not able to understand, digest and internalize the knowledge I have learned using Chinese.” (Student 5)

Findings from the quantitative questionnaire data also point to the fact that the respondents perceive the role of their mother tongue in formal education as very important to them, with 84% expressing support for further strengthening of Uyghur in schools. Nonetheless, there was agreement and recognition among the majority of the students interviewed for the need to learn and become sufficiently proficient in Chinese. They recognised the economic, political and practical value of learning the language:

“Chinese is the official language of China and we must learn it for employment. Learning Uyghur, Chinese and English will provide greater employment opportunities.”
(Student 2)

“Uyghurs must learn Chinese despite the poor quality of teachers and pressure to learn. Chinese can also help in learning English. Some students who did not reach the required

level of Chinese proficiency after the pre-sessional language year have been expelled from the University.” (Student 4)

A significant majority of respondents (80%) to the questionnaire supported the strengthening of Chinese language learning in their school curriculum. Based on the interviews and responses to open-ended questions on the student questionnaire, it can be observed that Uyghur students show strong extrinsic orientations towards learning Chinese:

“Chinese is very important for me to find a job.”

“I want to be a teacher in the future. It is a must that I learn Chinese well.”

“My parents want me to learn Chinese well.”

“Chinese is our national language. We have to learn it to communicate with others outside Xinjiang.”

“I will take the College Entrance Examination in Chinese, so I will need to study it hard.”

All four policy makers interviewed are very supportive of the forceful promotion of Chinese in Xinjiang. They believe that teaching Chinese to Uyghur students will lead them to better employment and greater economic benefit. The Uyghur language is also important, but ranks lower than Chinese. As one official at the Xinjiang Education Department put it:

“It is a choice between development and culture. If Uyghur people hope to raise their incomes and improve their living conditions, they must learn to speak Chinese. It is a basic tool for them to participate in the country’s economic development. It is unavoidable that the minority language and culture will be affected to some extent. But they have to make the choice.”

Perceptions of English

The majority of interviewees for the qualitative project expressed enthusiasm for the potential employment and educational opportunities, as well as economic benefits, accruing from learning English. As this student explains:

“I am very positive about having the opportunity to be educated in a bilingual (English-Uyghur) or trilingual (English-Uyghur-Chinese) environment. I am currently learning English by myself. English is the world language. Trade and commerce is becoming globalised and computers use English for programming. Many fashion brands and well-known products originate from English-speaking countries and many famous cosmetic brands are also from these countries. ... Knowledge of English has also become important for finding employment and being able to use computers.” (Student 6)

“English is an important language. It is a world language. Uyghurs learn English spontaneously. It is important to know English for learning new and cutting edge academic knowledge and scholarly exchange. Many Han scholars publish their work in English. English dominates the academic literature published.” (Student 6)

For some Uyghur students, learning and using English language is associated not only with cultural or economic benefits—it is also an ideological and political act:

“Uyghurs love their freedom and we are open to the wider world. Uyghurs are more interested in the international news than the Chinese domestic news; we are more inclined to be integrated into the wider world than just being confined to the borders of China. This is one of the reasons why Uyghurs are so interested in and motivated to learn English. Learning English and learning things in English can allow opportunities for the Uyghurs to be integrated into the wider world.” (Student 6)

“I very much welcome the opportunity to study the subjects in English. This will provide both Han and Uyghurs with the same starting point and equal footing and the Han student will get the taste of how it is like to learn subject knowledge in a foreign language. If a lecture is delivered in English and other factors being equal, Uyghurs can compete with the Han students. In the oral English language classes that I have recently

attended, most Uyghur students perform better than their Han counterparts attending the same class, despite the fact that the Hans would have studied English at least seven or eight years longer than the Uyghurs.” (Student 5)

The respondents to our questionnaire survey all showed strong willingness to invest in learning English and confidence in themselves to be successful in achieving better results than their Han counterparts, providing that they are given the same opportunities in education. Two thirds of our questionnaire respondents strongly supported the improvement of English language education in their schools and 90% agreed with that proposition, which is the highest level of support for any of the three languages in question.

Discussion

The perceptions of stakeholders set out in this chapter illustrate the intrinsic relationship between language education and politics, especially the politics of identity. For the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the Uyghur language forms an essential part of their ethnic identity, while Chinese and English offer opportunities for educational, economic and social advancement. However, the current situation does not suggest that a win-win-win form of trilingualism is being fostered in the school system. Indeed, there is a strong perception on the part of many Uyghurs that, despite some supportive policy measures, their language and sense of

distinctive identity are regarded as collateral damage in the drive for modernisation and engagement with globalisation. Out of the three languages (Uyghur, Chinese and English), Chinese reigns supreme. This is evident in the mass media and policy documents as well as in long-standing or recent discourse on bilingual or trilingual education and bilingualism and trilingualism for minority groups. The importance of Chinese is recognised by all stakeholders including parents and students for the economic opportunities it provides, but with considerable reluctance, given the political threats to the sustainability of the Uyghur language and cultural identity. However, the tensions arising from the predominance of Chinese and the increasing settlement of Han in the XUAR are not reflected in attitudes towards English. The latter tend to be more positive, as English is not seen as endangering Uyghur—the relationship between the two languages is viewed as one of peaceful coexistence—and competence in the language is one area in which Uyghurs, given sufficient access to English language learning resources, might compete on a level playing field with the Han.

Why does the language policy for schools fail to promote the Uyghur language? The policymaker quoted earlier views the issue as a stark choice between economic modernisation and backwardness. There may also be a superiority complex on the part of some Han officials when dealing with Uyghurs, as well as some political concerns that learning the language

might inflame Uyghur passions and encourage the separatists to escalate their campaign against the Chinese state. There is a risk to this approach of creating a sense that assimilation is the only option, which reduces the chances of a more harmonious accommodation of the Uyghur people within the nation state that a promotion of a stronger model of trilingual education might provide.

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