

# Critical Insights into Ethnic Minority Education Policies in the People's Republic of China: A Study of the Dai Language Curriculum

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Article information	Abstract
<b>Article history:</b>	<i>This paper investigates the implementation of the Dai language curriculum within a culturally diverse school setting in Xishuangbanna, China.</i>
Received: 3 Dec 2023	<i>Employing a qualitative research methodology, including semi-structured</i>
Accepted: 23 Dec 2024	<i>interviews, observation, and document analysis, the study examines</i>
Available online: 24 Dec 2024	<i>three key aspects: curriculum implementation, diverse perspectives, and</i>
<b>Keywords:</b>	<i>the influence of Chinese Preferential Policies (CPPs). Originating from a</i>
Dai language curriculum	<i>2017 directive by the Xishuangbanna Office of Education emphasizing</i>
Culturally diverse school	<i>bilingual education in Dai and Chinese Mandarin, the curriculum's</i>
Chinese preferential policies	<i>inception and execution are analyzed. After conducting interviews and</i>
Qualitative research	<i>observations with various stakeholders, including Dai and non-Dai</i>
Curriculum implementation	<i>students, educators, parents, and community leaders, we discovered</i>
	<i>that Dai students have a strong connection to their cultural heritage.</i>
	<i>Moreover, non-Dai students are interested in exploring their own languages</i>
	<i>and cultures. Additionally, the study highlights the significant influence</i>
	<i>of CPPs on curriculum implementation, underscoring its role in facilitating</i>
	<i>development and community engagement. However, the paper argues</i>
	<i>that while CPPs-driven language education may benefit dominant ethnic</i>
	<i>groups, it may inadvertently hinder cultural inclusion for non-dominant</i>
	<i>groups within the educational framework. This paper contributes nuanced</i>
	<i>insights into the complexities surrounding the implementation of ethnic</i>
	<i>language curricula in culturally diverse educational settings, shedding</i>
	<i>light on both opportunities and challenges inherent in CPPs-driven</i>
	<i>educational policies.</i>

## INTRODUCTION

China, home to 56 recognized ethnic groups, has implemented affirmative action policies, known as "preferential policies", since 1949 to address diversity (Hoshino, 2019). These

policies aim to bridge socioeconomic and cultural gaps between the Han majority and ethnic minorities (Wan & Bai, 2008; Wang & He, 2000), enhancing opportunities while preserving ethnic heritage. Measures include preferential treatment in admissions and quotas in teacher education, alongside additional funding for minority-populated regions. Government representation quotas also ensure ethnic minority inclusion. Preferential policies in education promote bilingualism and ethnic cultural education, revitalizing minority heritage. Initiatives like the Yugur language curriculum in Gansu (Wang & Gao, 2023) and Miao music education in Guizhou (Du & Leung, 2022) exemplify these efforts, fostering ethnic diversity in education.

Numerous studies have extensively documented the complexities surrounding ethnic language policy and language education in schools. However, there is a notable gap in exploring these issues in settings where ethnic minorities form the majority, and the Han population constitutes a smaller proportion. Additionally, limited examination of these issues within the context of CPPs, which aim to preserve and revitalize the linguistic and cultural heritage of ethnic communities while fostering social cohesion and national identity, is evident. For example, while Wang and Phillion (2009) shed light on disparities in minority language policies, their focus primarily revolves around Han-dominant educational settings. Similarly, Wang and Gao's (2023) study on multicultural curricula lacks exploration in less Han-dominant contexts. Du and Leung's (2022) investigation into multicultural music education primarily focuses on regions with Han dominance. Zhang (2017) advocates for inclusive approaches, but his study mainly addresses issues within Han-dominated educational systems. Despite efforts to incorporate minority cultural elements, persistent challenges such as teacher shortages (Du & Leung, 2022; Wang & Phillion, 2009), unequal resource distribution (Du & Leung, 2022), and the shortage of bilingual teachers (Wang & Gao, 2023) hinder progress in promoting cultural sustainability in educational settings. Additionally, factors such as poverty (Wang & Gao, 2023) and Han cultural hegemony (Wang & Gao, 2023; Zhang, 2017) further complicate the effective implementation of ethnicity-based cultural and language initiatives in schools or education systems. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive strategies to address systemic issues and ensure the success of multicultural education programs.

A lot of research is available on CPPs for ethnic minority education (Bao, 2017; Hoshino, 2019; Hu & Zou, 2016; Huang, 2014; Liu, 2020; McCarthy, 2009; Wang, 2020; Zhou, 2013). Some studies have questioned the effectiveness of these preference policies. For instance, Ma (2014) argues that while these policies historically benefited disadvantaged groups, they may perpetuate bias against certain citizens. Similarly, Hoshino (2019) acknowledges their advantages but highlights their potential role in creating divisions between autonomous and non-autonomous regions. Calls for reassessment and amendments to laws governing ethnic minorities highlight ongoing discussions and political sensitivity (Hoshino, 2019; Liu, 2020).

This study investigates the implementation of the Dai language curriculum within a school environment characterized by ethnic diversity, specifically in a primary school in the Dai autonomous city of Xishuangbanna. It seeks to answer critical questions: How is the Dai language curriculum introduced and implemented in such a diverse setting? What are the viewpoints of stakeholders regarding this curriculum? Additionally, it explores the impact of CPPs on the implementation process. Positioned within the context of CPPs, this research aims

to gain insights into stakeholders' experiences, perspectives, and concerns related to the Dai language curriculum. These insights can inform curriculum design, implementation strategies, and policy-making efforts to promote cultural diversity and linguistic equity in education. The study contributes to fostering multicultural engagement and shaping educational policies by addressing these inquiries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Chinese preferential policies (CPPs) for ethnic minority: Bilingual education**

Chinese Preferential Policies (CPPs) represent affirmative action initiatives rooted in ethnicity, promoting bilingual education and ethnicity-based educational programs. These policies aim to instill pride in ethnic minorities while fostering national unity and stability. Oversight and implementation of bilingual education policies for China's ethnic minorities fall under the purview of the central government and related agencies, guided by Article 4 of the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of China. This constitutional provision underscores the freedom of ethnic groups to develop and utilize their languages, scripts, and cultural practices, shaping specific policies in bilingual and citizenship education.

Meanwhile, language is a potent instrument the state wields to disseminate its ideology, foster citizen development, and propel socio-economic progress. However, perceptions of language are multifaceted and contingent on its usage. According to Yao et al. (2022), language can be simultaneously regarded as a 'right', a 'resource', and a 'problem'. The 'language-as-problem' perspective views minority languages as obstacles, while the 'language-as-right' viewpoint considers language an inherent human entitlement. Conversely, the 'language-as-resource' approach sees language as a valuable asset that enriches society at the individual, regional, and national levels. In the Chinese context, ethnic minority languages are recognized as both a constitutional right and a cultural resource (Yao et al., 2022). However, tensions arise as these languages are also perceived as problematic in various language-related policies and bilingual programs, illustrating the complexities of managing linguistic diversity within the nation's education system. These tensions underscore the multifaceted nature of language within society.

However, research findings on the impact of CPPs on bilingual education initiated nearly four decades ago in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, highlight significant challenges. As documented in previous studies, these challenges include shortages of qualified teaching staff and instructional materials (Gu, 2014; Ye et al., 2017). Regional disparities in implementing bilingual education policies have also been observed, particularly in remote ethnic minority regions like the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region, where smaller populations and limited opportunities for inter-bilingual interactions pose obstacles. These challenges call for nuanced, region-specific bilingual education policies to ensure equitable benefits for all ethnic minority groups.

Studies by Ma (2014) and Hoshino (2019) suggest that while CPPs for bilingual education has historically benefited disadvantaged groups, sustainability concerns arise due to inherent biases against citizens within smaller populations. Moreover, projects often prioritize teaching the languages of significant ethnic minorities, potentially exacerbating ethnic conflicts and regional divisions (Wang, 2014). Recommendations include diversifying the bases on which ethnic policies are developed and implemented and re-evaluating laws concerning ethnic minorities to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness (Hoshino, 2019).

Despite these challenges, there are success stories, such as the bilingual teaching program at Shilong Elementary School in Jianchuan, Yunnan Province, documented by Wang and Zhang (2016). This program, focusing on Bai language bilingual teaching, led to significant improvements in student learning outcomes over a decade. It was pivotal in building teacher learning resources and preserving Bai ethnic culture through bilingual publications, folk songs, and cultural events. Nevertheless, critical inquiries raised by various studies, including those by Bao (2017), Hoshino (2019), and Wang (2020), question the effectiveness and implications of CPPs in the context of bilingual education. Additionally, research on bilingual education within Han-dominant or single-ethnic schools offers valuable insights. For instance, Wang and Phillion's (2009) research sheds light on significant disparities between China's minority language policies and their actual implementation, highlighting challenges such as poverty, a shortage of qualified bilingual teachers, and the dominance of Mandarin Chinese and Han culture. However, their focus primarily revolves around educational contexts where the Han population holds dominance. Wang and Gao's (2023) case study on Yugur middle schools in Gansu province provides insights into the complexities of implementing multicultural curricula within Han-dominant educational settings. Despite addressing challenges such as the prioritization of the national core curriculum and a shortage of bilingual teachers, their study lacks exploration of these issues in contexts where the Han population is less dominant. Likewise, Du and Leung's (2022) investigation into multicultural music education in Guizhou Province underscores tensions between preserving minority cultures and the influence of Han cultural hegemony. While they acknowledge persistent challenges such as teacher shortages and unequal resource distribution, their study primarily focuses on regions where the Han population holds dominance. Lastly, Zhang's (2017) analysis of ethnic music education emphasizes the pivotal role of curriculum design in shaping students' perceptions of cultural diversity. While advocating for a more inclusive approach that challenges hegemonic Han cultural norms, his study primarily addresses issues within educational systems dominated by the Han population.

Based on the existing literature, there is a notable gap in research regarding bilingual education within the context of schools existing among diverse ethnic groups and its implications regarding CPPs. Future exploration in this area is warranted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and effectiveness of bilingual education policies in diverse educational settings.

### **Critical pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy, originating from the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School, posits that knowledge is socially constructed and reflects the interests of the dominant class (Kincheloe,

2008). This perspective views education as a tool that perpetuates the dominant ideology and reinforces social hierarchies through mechanisms of control (Zhang & Hou, 2015). Central to critical pedagogy is examining the curriculum's role in shaping knowledge production and cultural politics. McLaren (1998) argues critical pedagogy seeks to scrutinize and transform the interaction between classroom instruction, knowledge creation, institutional structures, and broader socio-economic contexts. Scholars such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren have embraced critical pedagogy to investigate the curriculum and advocate for alternative educational approaches. They assert that the curriculum mirrors and perpetuates power imbalances rooted in factors like race, class, gender, and other identities, thereby perpetuating social injustices (McLaren, 1998).

Grounded in critical theory, critical pedagogy scholars view the curriculum as a battleground where prevailing narratives and ideologies are contested and examined (Kincheloe, 2008). They advocate for a more inclusive and equitable curriculum encompassing diverse perspectives, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering critical thinking and social justice. From this perspective, it becomes imperative to equip students with the knowledge, literacy skills, critical thinking abilities, social responsibility, and civic courage necessary to actively advocate for a sustainable and just society (Giroux, 2016).

Critical pedagogy also finds application in multicultural education, particularly in critical multicultural education, to address diversity, discrimination, and oppression issues by confronting entrenched power structures in society. The current study centers on implementing the Dai language curriculum in a school catering to a diverse ethnic population. It seeks to explore the perspectives of individuals directly and indirectly involved in the curriculum's implementation. The study analyzes the power dynamics inherent in introducing an ethnicity-based curriculum through the lens of critical pedagogy.

## METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm, which delves into social phenomena within natural settings using various data collection techniques (Krathwohl, 2009) and focuses on individuals' interpretations of the world around them (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The study aims to understand the Dai language curriculum within the context of an ethnically diverse school and its relevant stakeholders. It aims to grasp the viewpoints of teachers who implemented the Dai language curriculum, Dai students who were taught and using it, and those who were not exposed to it. Within the interpretive paradigm, the emphasis lies on participants' understanding and interpretation, scrutinizing their experiences with the Dai language curriculum. This analytical framework facilitates a nuanced exploration of how China's multicultural policy is perceived and experienced on the ground level, contributing to broader discussions on cultural inclusion and educational practices. The study took place from 2020 to 2021. The internal review board approved this research project for human subject research.

## Research site

The study was conducted at a multicultural primary school in Xishuangbanna, Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, established in 1958. Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, located in Yunnan Province, is home to 13 officially recognized ethnic groups, each with its own language. The main ethnic groups include the Dai (32.8% of the population), Hani (20.7%), Yi (10%), Lahu (5%), Blang (4%), Jinuo (3%), Yao (2%), Hmong (2%), Wa (2%), and Zhuang (2%). Collectively, ethnic minorities account for 70.89% of the total population, with the Dai being the largest group. While the Dai language is used primarily within the Dai community, Mandarin serves as the lingua franca for communication between the various ethnic groups, highlighting the region's linguistic diversity. For the sake of anonymity, the primary school under study shall be referred to as "Long Primary School". By 2020, the school had 440 students, including 240 Dai, 65 Lahu, 62 Hani, 50 students from other ethnic minorities, and 23 Han students. The school employed 13 administrative and teaching staff members, with a distribution of 4 Dai, 4 Hani, 4 Han, and 1 Yi. Long Primary School was chosen for its ethnic diversity, student and staff composition, and implementation of the Dai language curriculum alongside other ethnic groups. The primary subjects in Long Primary School's curriculum include Mandarin Chinese, Mathematics, English, Physical Education, Technology, Music, Local Studies, and Morality and Law, in line with federal government educational requirements, utilizing textbooks produced by the central government in Beijing.

## Informants

The study involved the participation of 29 key informants, divided into three distinct groups, each intentionally selected to align with the research objectives (Krathwohl, 2009). Four individuals, including the school principal and two Dai teachers, were chosen based on their demonstrable roles in Dai language curriculum development and implementation and their Dai ethnicity. Moreover, ten students representing diverse ethnicities—2 Dai, 2 Hani, 2 Lahu, 2 Yi, and 2 Han—were included in the study. The inclusion criteria were based on the participants' ethnic backgrounds, with Dai students selected based on their experiences with the Dai language course. In contrast, non-Dai students were chosen if they had not undergone the Dai language course. Among these students, Dai, Hani, and Lahu are proficient in their mother tongue and Chinese, while Yi students are not. The gender distribution consists of six male and four female students, mostly between 11-12 years old. Ten parents representing diverse ethnicities—2 Dai, 2 Hani, 2 Lahu, 2 Yi, and 2 Han—were included in the study. The inclusion criteria were based on the participants' ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, six Dai community representatives, encompassing teachers and cultural leaders, were actively engaged in the research process. Their selection criteria were contingent upon their notable contributions to Dai language education or preservation initiatives and their authoritative positions within the Dai community. Their selection was based on their ethnic background and their involvement or experience related to the Dai language curriculum or preservation efforts.

## Data collection

Aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed three distinct data-gathering methods. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including

the principal, teachers, students, parents and Dai community representatives, utilizing various interview protocols. These interviews aimed to reveal their experiences and viewpoints, particularly concerning their exposure to the Dai language curriculum. Additionally, they sought to contrast the perspectives of Dai and non-Dai students. Secondly, document analysis was employed to scrutinize lesson plans, textbooks associated with the Dai language curriculum, and official documents outlining Chinese multicultural policies. Lastly, non-participant observation was utilized to witness the teaching methods, activities, and student engagement within the Dai language class.

### **Data analysis**

The study's data underwent rigorous analysis employing contextual analysis, a method that contextualizes data within their natural environment and explores their relationship to the research inquiry (Chen, 2000). The analytical process unfolded as follows. The data collected through the three methods underwent careful sorting, organization, and coding. Interview recordings with participants were transcribed verbatim and subjected to coding using an open-ended approach to identify recurring themes. Additionally, documents, including lesson plans and textbooks pertinent to the Dai language curriculum, were collected and examined thoroughly to extract relevant information, which was then coded to unveil underlying patterns. Observation notes from classroom sessions were also scrutinized to validate insights from interviews and documents. This comprehensive analytical approach facilitated a thorough examination of the data, enhancing our understanding of the research phenomenon.

## **RESULTS**

The study's main objective is to examine the implementation of the Dai language curriculum in a culturally diverse school in Xishuangbanna. Using an interpretative stance, it employed semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, observation, and document analysis. The findings are categorized into three main themes.

### **Embracing diversity: The implementation of the Dai language curriculum**

Implementing the Dai language curriculum was just one of the responses to the 2017 directive from the Xishuangbanna Office of Education, aimed at promoting bilingual education in Dai and Chinese Mandarin within the school system. Alongside introducing the Dai language curriculum, Long Primary School embraced various initiatives to fulfill this directive comprehensively. These efforts included cultural activities such as Dai and Hani ethnic dance, Dai drum music, and other educational initiatives to preserve and promote the Dai cultural heritage. While there were significant numbers of other ethnic groups, such as the Hani, only the Dai language curriculum was introduced and implemented in such a diverse setting. The Hani, who accounted for a considerable number of student population, were included in newly set up courses such as Hani dance and music. However, the Hani language was not incorporated into the curriculum.

Initially, the Dai language curriculum encountered challenges due to the need for more relevant Dai language textbooks. The six textbooks the Xishuangbanna Education Office provided were deemed inappropriate for students, primarily because of the complex new typefaces and the content's focus on Han rather than Dai culture. In response, the Dai school principal and language instructors took the initiative in 2018 to construct textbooks using the traditional Dai typeface. Educational materials were curated with the assistance of Dai community leaders, artists, musicians, and local experts. The Primary School Center and the Office of Education in Xishuangbanna provided funding for textbook production. The curriculum covered Dai scripts, history, contemporary livelihood, and daily traditional practices. This course exemplified a model of multicultural education, aiming to restore surface-level ethnic minority culture while refraining from challenging hierarchical power relations between the center and the periphery.

The Dai language curriculum at Long Primary School in 2019 marked a positive stride toward fostering diversity and inclusion. The curriculum, intended to promote bilingual education, initially exclusively enrolled Dai pupils from the fourth-grade class, offered every Tuesday and Thursday with sessions lasting approximately 40 minutes. Among the 48 students, 23 were Dai; the remainder comprised Han, Hani, Lahu, and Yi; only Dai students were eligible for enrollment. Thus, the Dai language and culture course catered to 23 children, 11 boys and 12 girls.

Observations revealed a classroom adorned with bilingual Dai-Chinese sentences, the Dai alphabet, palm-leaf manuscripts, and depictions of Dai culture. During a session, 23 Dai students presented their community's history, traditional culture, lifestyle, folklore, and wisdom, critically engaging with official knowledge found in Dai and Han textbooks. Furthermore, the school organized various ethnic culture-based activities throughout the year, notably celebrating the Dai New Year and Songkran festivals. The significance of the Dai language curriculum was underscored by the Dai principal's assertion that it preserves the Dai language and cultural heritage for the next generation (Interview on June 5, 2020).

### **Diverse perspectives on the Dai language curriculum**

One of the study's objectives is to capture the perspectives of teachers who implemented the Dai language curriculum, Dai students who were taught using it, and those who were not exposed to it within the framework of an ethnically diverse school. The research identified distinct viewpoints: those from the Dai ethnic group and those from non-Dai ethnic groups.

The significance of offering a Dai language course is acknowledged, as evidenced by the school principal's statement that it transmits the Dai language and cultural heritage to the next generation of Dai youths. Interviews with two Dai students support the validity of such crucial claims enrolled in the curriculum. Dai Student A expressed enthusiasm, stating, "I find it very interesting and enjoyable. Through this course, I can pass on our Dai culture, and I have also learned how to pronounce and write in Dai." (Interview on August 19, 2020). Another Dai student, identified as Dai Student B, reminisced about their experience, saying:

When I was in grade 4, I used to study the Dai language. I like studying very much. I feel that I was very happy when I studied the Dai language. Sometimes the teachers let us tell our friends about the situation in my village. ... Because we can speak our own language in this subject. And we can also learn about the culture of Dai. (Interview on January 15, 2021).

By learning to write and pronounce words in Dai, students like Dai Student A can better understand and appreciate their cultural identity and connect with their cultural roots. This underscores the social construction of knowledge, supporting Giroux's (2016) argument that curricula and instruction serve as contested areas that challenge dominant narratives, empowering students with critical literacy skills and social responsibility.

Non-Dai students shared both similar and divergent perspectives. Common among them was an expressed interest in learning their own language and culture, akin to what was offered for Dai students. Hani Student A voiced this collective desire, "Ethnic minorities have their own languages. We want to learn our own language and culture like Dai students" (Interview on September 10, 2020). Han Student B said, "I want to learn the Hani language so I can chat with my friends. There are many Hani students in my class, and I want to understand what they are talking about. I want to learn the Dai language." (Interview on September 15, 2020). Lahu and Yi students also expressed interest in attending language classes for their respective ethnicities, underscoring the potential benefits of language and culture classes in promoting mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for diverse cultures. This aligns with the scholarly discourse emphasizing the personal growth and societal benefits of offering such classes to students (Banks, 2013; Chen, 2017; He, 2016). Language and culture classes contribute to individual development and foster a diverse and tolerant society.

School teachers, parents, and community leaders advocate for teaching ethnic language and culture in diverse schools, emphasizing its role in preserving identity and fostering mutual understanding. For instance, Dai Teacher A emphasizes the importance of such education, stating, "Teaching language and culture to ethnic students can preserve ethnic identity and knowledge. When students understand their ethnic identity, they will embrace their cultural heritage." (Interview on June 10, 2020). Yi Parent B underscores the significance of learning the Dai language and culture, expressing:

I want my child to attend the Dai language classes offered by the school. We live in Xishuangbanna, and learning the Dai language and culture to foster communication and understanding is essential. I hope the school will also offer courses on Yi language and culture to prevent their loss. (Interview, January 12, 2021).

Similarly, Hani Mother A emphasizes the value of language learning, stating:

I wish for my son to attend school if it offers courses on ethnic language and culture. When community leaders speak Dai at meetings, we feel left out. It is crucial for our son to learn various languages to enhance his opportunities. (Interview, January 25, 2021).

A Dai culture expert stresses the need for cultural exchange, stating, "Schools should provide language and culture courses for all ethnicities. I am willing to teach if invited. It is essential for children to learn about different cultures to foster mutual understanding." (Interview, July 14, 2020). Additionally, a local leader of the Dai ethnic community highlights the importance of learning the Dai language and culture, expressing, "Our community encourages children to study Dai language and culture. If schools offer such courses, it would be beneficial for understanding our heritage and promoting harmony among different ethnicities" (Interview on July 24, 2020).

### **Implementation of CPPs on the Dai language curriculum**

Implementing the Dai language curriculum, guided by CPPs, takes shape through various channels. Examining Long Primary School as a case study, the study reveals that the execution of the Dai language curriculum is shaped by preferential policies spanning from the national to the local level. This involves the development of the Dai language curriculum, modest allocations of budgetary resources, teacher training programs focusing on bilingual instruction, and the production of Dai language textbooks facilitated by the Dai community.

Between 1950 and 2006, China established 20 education and language initiatives for ethnic minorities, including policies, declarations, and national conferences. These policies spanned three levels: 17 at the national level, one at the Yunnan provincial level, and two at the local Xishuangbanna level. Examples include ethnic leadership training in 1950, approval of ethnic calligraphy and improvement plans in 1957, national ethnic education conferences in 1951, 1956, 1981, 1992, and 2002, and a 2009 proclamation supporting establishing a cultural environment in primary and secondary schools. These policies address various topics, such as organizational formation, research, funding, calligraphy, textbooks with an ethnic focus, musical instruments, and intangible cultural heritage. The primary state agencies formulating and implementing these policies include the National Council, the Ministry of National Education, the National Ethnic Affairs Committee, and the State Council.

CPP, specifically the Autonomous Region Regulations of 1987 and the Education Regulations of Xishuangbanna Autonomous Region of 1987, have impacted the development of the Dai language curriculum in Long Primary School. This finding was supported by interviews with experts, including a Dai school principal and state educationalists involved in ethnic education. The Dai school principal stated that the Xishuangbanna Office of Education informed the school to offer bilingual education (Dai–Chinese language) and wished to make the school a model bilingual school. Similarly, one of the Dai language teachers mentioned that the local government ordered the school and teachers to organize multicultural activities in compliance with state guidelines. In interviews, state education specialists expressed that local education offices and the government endorse providing full support for teaching and learning in ethnic languages, with Yunnan Province having dedicated teaching departments and opportunities for growth. They also mentioned the expectation for more language courses for ethnic groups and the combination of language and culture courses in some schools.

CPPs are pivotal in facilitating the realization of the Dai language curriculum, primarily through financial support. National policies have prioritized budgetary support for ethnic education, as evidenced by its mention in significant conferences such as the 1st National Ethnic Education Conference in 1951, the 2nd National Ethnic Education Conference in 1956, and the 5th National Ethnic Education Conference in 2002. For example, in 1951, the First National Ethnic Education Conference outlined the budget for ethnic education in ethnic areas, mandating that governments at all levels allocate funds for standardized education. According to an interview with the school principal on June 5, 2020, the school's supervising agency provided funding when Dai textbooks were taken to the printing shop, supplemented by financial support from the Xishuangbanna district. Teachers also confirmed this, highlighting additional allowances for teaching the Dai language. Dai Teacher A mentioned on June 10, 2020, that teaching Dai language entailed an extra allowance of 2500 yuan per person, while Dai Teacher B, in an interview on June 18, 2020, noted the provision of a special allowance for teaching Dai language. This underscores the crucial role of financial assistance from supervising agencies and district authorities in bolstering the curriculum's implementation.

The CPPs further motivates teachers to attain proficiency in ethnic languages and teaching. For instance, Article 15 of the 2013 Regulations for the Promotion of Ethnic Education Policy of Yunnan Province underscores support for training bilingual teachers, mandating governmental levels establishing training systems for them. This encourages teachers to learn ethnic languages, with proficiency acknowledged and rewarded in their teaching efforts. Moreover, ethnic language educators benefit from enhanced opportunities for academic advancement. Testimonials from Dai language teachers highlight compulsory annual training in Chiang Rung, leading to significant knowledge acquisition. Dai Language Teacher B shared, "I have attended four training sessions. I find this training very beneficial. It equips us with formal teaching methods and invites cultural experts to teach us traditional ethnic culture, covering topics such as Dai scenery and Dai pottery" (Interview on June 18, 2020).

Furthermore, policies extend invitations to produce Dai language textbooks facilitated by the Dai community. This involvement of village cultural experts in cultural preservation activities through schools fosters a sense of community participation and heritage preservation. A Dai folk artist was willing to contribute, stating, "I am ready to teach in schools if invited. It is crucial for everyone to understand their own culture and learn from every ethnicity" (Interview on July 14, 2020).

However, challenges persist in the implementation of bilingual education in Xishuangbanna. Government Official A of the Xishuangbanna Education Bureau highlighted the discrepancy between national and local policy implementation, stating, "Education policies are smooth from the national to provincial levels, but they face challenges at the local level. The importance given to them diminishes locally" (Interview on July 7, 2020). Moreover, bilingual teachers often lack professional training and are instead subject-matter teachers familiar with the ethnic language and culture. Government Official B of the Xishuangbanna Education Bureau explained, "All our bilingual teachers work part-time at the moment. It is essential for them to teach as long as they understand the language" (Interview on July 6, 2020). Additionally, strict government control over minority language textbooks poses a challenge to their

publication. Government Official A highlighted, "After issues arose with textbooks in Xinjiang, the state tightened its control considerably. Although we have several sets of ethnic language textbooks edited by teachers, none have been approved yet" (Interview on July 7, 2020).

In conclusion, CPPs-driven policies shape the Dai language curriculum nationally and locally. While they foster curriculum development and community involvement, challenges like policy implementation discrepancies and lack of professional training for teachers persist in Xishuangbanna.

## DISCUSSION

The study explored the implementation of the Dai language curriculum in a diverse school in Xishuangbanna. Using interviews, observation, and document analysis, it examined curriculum implementation, diverse perspectives, and the influence of CPPs. The study traced the origins of the Dai language curriculum to a 2017 directive issued by the Xishuangbanna Office of Education, which emphasized the importance of bilingual education in Dai and Chinese Mandarin. The study uncovered distinct viewpoints among various stakeholders. Among Dai students, there was a palpable sense of enthusiasm and pride in embracing the Dai language curriculum, illustrating a deep-rooted connection to their cultural heritage. Conversely, non-Dai students also expressed a keen interest in exploring their own languages and cultures, reflecting a universal desire among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to reconnect with their heritage. Furthermore, the study illuminated the significant influence of CPPs on implementing the Dai language curriculum. CPPs-driven policies were crucial in facilitating curriculum development, fostering community engagement, and providing financial support for ethnic education initiatives. The study offered detailed insights into the complex dynamics of implementing the Dai language curriculum in a culturally diverse educational environment. It emphasized the crucial role of language education in preserving cultural identity and fostering inclusivity. It also sheds light on the ongoing efforts and challenges in navigating CPPs-driven educational policies and practices within ethnically diverse settings.

This study sheds light on the importance of the Dai language curriculum implemented at Long Primary School, attributing its emergence to the influence of CPPs. This finding resonates with earlier research by Du and Leung (2022), Wang and Zhang (2016), and Wang and Gao (2023), all of whom underscored CPP's role in advancing ethnic language and cultural education. The Dai language curriculum at Long Primary School is designed to nurture an understanding and appreciation of Dai language and culture among Dai students, aiming to deepen their connection to their linguistic heritage. Similarly, Wang and Gao (2023) investigated the implementation of a school-based multicultural curriculum focusing on Yugur language and culture in Gansu, China. Their findings highlighted how local authorities in Sunan County introduced supportive measures in line with the national policy for bilingual education. These measures facilitated the development of the Yugur language and culture curriculum, integrating local knowledge and providing Yugur students with access to their cultural heritage. This incorporation of local perspectives contributed to fostering a sense of belonging within the Yugur community. Furthermore, Kong and Yu (2019) examined bilingual education initiatives

aimed at promoting harmonious multiculturalism among ethnic minority students in China. Their study consistently emphasized principles of equality and national unity over the past three decades, alongside efforts to enhance support for bilingual education programs and improve the quality of bilingual teaching staff. Moreover, the perspectives of local Dai teachers and stakeholders align with the broader objectives of CPPs, viewing the preservation and development of the Dai language as crucial for individual Dai students and the broader Dai community. This alignment underscores CPPs' commitment to preserving and fostering the linguistic and cultural diversity of ethnic groups in China, contributing to overall cultural richness and heritage preservation.

The study also raises important questions regarding the inclusiveness of the Dai language curriculum at Long Primary School, prompting reflection on who benefits from the curriculum and who may be left out. This issue is relevant in a diverse school environment where students from various ethnic backgrounds coexist. Non-Dai students, such as those from Hani, Lahu, and Yi ethnic backgrounds, desire similar ethnic-based language curricula to enhance their multicultural linguistic skills and understanding across different ethnicities. These students encounter cultural suppression from two fronts: the Han-centric mainstream education system and the dominance of Dai language courses and activities within the predominantly Dai-speaking school environment. This concern about inclusivity and cultural representation is echoed in the findings of other studies, such as that of Yu and Zhang (2016), who examined the multicultural education landscape in the Miao-dominated areas of south Sichuan province. Their research emphasized the importance of addressing the needs of both Miao and Han students through appropriate teaching materials and ethnic and cultural courses. Furthermore, they advocated for the integration of fundamental concepts of multicultural education to foster values of tolerance, open-mindedness, and independence among students.

As Giroux (1992) asserts, educational scripts and curricula must acknowledge the diverse cultures of social classes, ethnic groups, genders, religions, and other segments of society. While commendable efforts are made to preserve the Dai language and culture, the local Dai principal must transcend mere "cultural immersion" and cultivate a broader understanding of diverse cultures. This inclusive approach lays the foundation for multicultural integration, promoting cross-cultural communication skills and ethnic identities among all minority students. An inclusive language environment should not only prioritize the revitalization of minority languages in education but also enhance the intercultural communication skills and sense of national identity of minority students (Zhong & Jiang, 2018).

Implementing the Dai language curriculum may perpetuate unequal power dynamics among different ethnic groups, particularly favouring the dominant group within the school and autonomous city. Since the 1950s, China's CPPs for ethnic minority education has been based on principles of fairness, equality, and harmony. This study highlights how Long Primary School benefits from national, provincial, and local policies supporting the implementation of the Dai curriculum and cultural courses. However, it also reveals a significant gap between policy intent and school-level practices. Despite government policies guaranteeing the rights of ethnic minorities to use their mother tongue, these provisions face challenges in translating into daily school life. This resonates with Hinton's (2011) observation that clauses in the Chinese

Constitution regarding ethnic minorities' rights have not been effectively implemented in their daily lives. Yao et al. (2022) propose that language can be viewed as simultaneously a 'right', a 'resource', and a 'problem'. In the Chinese context, ethnic minority languages are recognized as both a constitutional right and a cultural resource. However, tensions arise as these languages are also perceived as problematic in various language-related policies and bilingual programs. The findings from the Dai language curriculum confirm this perspective, highlighting those ethnic languages such as Hani, Lahu, and Yi in Long Primary School are not yet fully acknowledged as rights and resources.

These findings highlight the crucial need to prioritize inclusivity within school curricula. Catering to the diverse linguistic and cultural requirements of students from various ethnic backgrounds is vital for fostering an environment that celebrates diversity, nurtures understanding, and promotes harmony among different ethnic groups within the educational setting. Ensuring a balanced curriculum content is essential to guarantee that all students feel respected, acknowledged, and empowered in their educational journey. Therefore, it is imperative to revise CPPs, which are heavily based on ethnicity and population size, as suggested by Hoshino (2019). This involves diversifying the bases on which ethnic policies are developed and implemented and re-evaluating laws concerning ethnic minorities to ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness. Failure to do so may perpetuate inherent biases against citizens within smaller populations (Ma, 2014; Hoshino, 2019) and continue prioritizing the teaching of languages of significant ethnic minorities, potentially exacerbating ethnic conflicts and regional divisions (Wang, 2014).

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study effectively captures diverse viewpoints on the Dai language curriculum, emphasizing cultural preservation and identity. However, it overlooks the challenges of implementing such programs in diverse schools and lacks strategies to address them. Its confinement to a single-school setting limits generalizability and fails to explore long-term impacts on academic performance and cross-cultural competency. Future research should address these gaps with a longitudinal approach involving a broader range of schools.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of the Dai language curriculum in a culturally diverse school in Xishuangbanna, China. Various aspects were examined through interviews, observation, and document analysis, including curriculum implementation, diverse perspectives, and the influence of CPPs.

Originating from a directive issued by the Xishuangbanna Office of Education in 2017, the Dai language curriculum reflects efforts to promote bilingual education in Dai and Chinese Mandarin. The study revealed distinct viewpoints among stakeholders, with Dai students demonstrating enthusiasm and pride in embracing their cultural heritage through the

curriculum. Similarly, non-Dai students expressed a keen interest in exploring their own languages and cultures, underscoring the universal desire among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to reconnect with their heritage. Moreover, the study highlighted the significant influence of CPP in facilitating curriculum development, fostering community engagement, and providing financial support for ethnic education initiatives. However, it also raised concerns about the potential perpetuation of unequal power dynamics among different ethnic groups, particularly favouring the dominant group within the school environment.

The findings highlighted the importance of prioritizing inclusivity within school curricula to foster an environment that celebrates diversity, nurtures understanding, and promotes harmony among ethnic groups. Addressing the challenges identified, such as the gap between policy intent and school-level practices, requires revising CPPs to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness in educational policies and practices. In essence, this study contributes valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the implementation of ethnic language curricula in culturally diverse educational settings. It emphasizes the crucial role of language education in preserving cultural identity and fostering inclusivity. It also highlights the need for policy revisions to address existing biases and promote equitable educational opportunities for all students.

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