Multilingual Socialization in Communities and Schools in Southwest China: Possibilities, Tensions, and Vulnerabilities

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The importance of English in the Chinese education system has received considerable recent attention. Much less attention has been paid to the other languages in China competing for recognition, validation and sometimes survival in the midst of compulsory English language education, particularly in minority borderland regions, and the role of Mandarin language and literacy as the national lingua franca. This paper is based on a longitudinal qualitative study examining socialization into and through English language education, ideologies, and practices within the multilingual ecology of Yunnan Province in southwest China, home to 25 minority groups (e.g., Bai, Naxi, Tibetan). While many Yunnanese speak minority languages in their everyday lives, those languages are generally not part of their formal education. Therefore, once students encounter Mandarin and English through formal schooling, especially past the primary years, and migrate to towns and cities, language shift to Mandarin is often inevitable. Students gain Mandarin and English as powerful languages of higher education, social mobility, and international communication; however, they risk losing the languages and literacies of their families, their local indigenous cultures, and communities. We describe the multilingual repertoires, ideologies, and socialization of a subset of Chinese (minority-background) English teachers and students in the larger study. Data are drawn from (1) English classroom observations; (2) interviews with Chinese teachers from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds regarding their own multilingual life histories and socialization; and (3) interviews with a subset of minority-background secondary students who also wrote essays on their multilingual, multicultural lives, losses, and desires in relation to English and their other languages. The study uncovers possibilities, tensions, and vulnerabilities in multilingual socialization for learners from these minority backgrounds.

Keywords: language ideologies, multilingualism, language socialization.