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"WHAT"MINORITY EDUCATION IN CHINA CAN TEACH Us ABOUT MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE US"

MaryJo Benton Lee, Ph.D.
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"Flexibility, cohesiveness and inclusiveness are umbrella terms that capture, in shorthand form, much of what is good about minority education in China and much of what can be learned by the United States."

The author spent three months at Yunnan Normal (Teachers) University in southwestern China studying minority education. Her research culminated in the publication of a book entitled Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment (forthcoming from Ashgate Publishing in December 2000). This presentation grows out of that research. Ample research has been done previously on underachievement among minority students. This research and this presentation take a different tack by focusing on minority college students who do well in school.

Nine percent of the population of the People's Republic of China is comprised' of ethnic minority people, people with cultures (particularly languages and religions) that are distinct from the majority (or Han) Chinese. Ethnic students in the PRC, like ethnic students the world over, face considerable obstacles to getting a good education and being admitted to college. This presentation centers around the tiny segment of ethnic youth who successfully make the long journey from poor minority village to major Chinese university. Certainly overwhelming historical and political differences exist between China and the United States. Nevertheless, there are important lessons to be learned from the Chinese history of minority empowerment as it has been assured through education.

Ethnic students in China are educationally disadvantaged from birth. At the family level, disadvantages include parental income (low), parental attitudes (unfavorable toward schooling) and parental education (limited due to their minority status and to the Cultural Revolution). Ethnic students usually grow up in remote, rural villages and generally enter public education unfamiliar with those mainstream experiences valued by schools. Adequate schools and qualified teachers are few and far between in minority areas. Finally, and most importantly, minority students often grow up in homes where minority languages are spoken, while schooling is conducted primarily in Mandarin Chinese. Not surprisingly, in the past, only a tiny percentage of Chinese ethnic students managed to beat the odds and win college admittance.

To help more minority students overcome obstacles to academic achievement, the PRC has developed an aggressive program of preferential policies. (These preferential policies of the PRC are roughly equivalent to affirmative action in the United States.) China's preferential policies are allowing record numbers of minority students to participate—and succeed—in education from the primary through the tertiary levels. These policies

include:

* the creation of special schools and classes especially for minority students;
* an emphasis on training teachers especially for minority youth;
* an increase in financial support for minority education; and
* additional points awarded on national examinations to minority candidates.

The presentation ends with some remarks on what American educators can learn from their Chinese counterparts about enabling minority students to enter and succeed in college. The concluding section of the presentation is organized around the themes of flexibility, cohesiveness and inclusiveness. Flexibility, cohesiveness and inclusiveness are umbrella terms that capture, in shorthand form, much of what is good about minority education in China and much of what can be learned by the United States.

Presenter:

MaryJo Benton Lee is diversity coordinator for the College of Engineering at South Dakota State University. She holds a Ph.D. in Rural Sociology with a minor in Asian Studies from South Dakota State University. In 1991 she served as an exchange professor at Yunnan Normal University in the People's Republic of China. She returned to China in 1997 to do further research on minority education. That research culminated in the publication of a book entitled Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment: Identify Construction Among Minority Students in Southwestern China (forthcoming from Ashgate Publishing December 2000). Her current research focuses on the construction of ethnicity and the sociology of education.