

A Comparative Study of Policies on Ethnic Minority Languages and Their Protection Between China and the United States

Qianyi Li

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China
Email: cinjat@163.com

How to cite this paper: Li, Q. Y. (2025). A Comparative Study of Policies on Ethnic Minority Languages and Their Protection Between China and the United States. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 98–108. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9080>
Published: 2025-08-28

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the policies on ethnic minority languages and their protection effects in China and the United States. As multi-ethnic countries, both China and the U.S. possess rich linguistic resources, yet there are significant differences in their language policies. China's language policy emphasizes the popularization and standardization of Mandarin, while simultaneously focusing on the protection and development of ethnic minority languages to strengthen national unity and social stability. The United States, while maintaining the central status of English, supports the protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages through legislation, reflecting respect for cultural diversity.

Keywords

China and the United States; Ethnic Minority Languages; Protection Policies; Comparison of Implementation Effects

1. Introduction

Language policy refers to laws, regulations, provisions, measures, and other initiatives related to language (Chen Xinren, 2017). In the academic field, language policy is a key topic that has been discussed for a long time, with its research history dating back at least half a century. With the advancement of modern nation-building, the close connection between language and ethnic identity has become a prominent phenomenon in the context of globalization. As the core component of language management in a country or region, language policy consists of three parts: choices in language practice; choices in language beliefs or language ideology; and language planning or language management (Spolsky, 2011). In current academic discussions, issues such as bilingualism and multilingualism, the extinction and protection of endangered languages, and language education policies have all become research hotspots.

China's language policy emphasizes the popularization and standardization of

Mandarin (Hu Mingyong, Lei Qing, 2005), which is closely linked to China's nature as a unified multi-ethnic country. By promoting Mandarin, the Chinese government aims to strengthen national unity, promote social stability, and provide linguistic convenience for economic development. Additionally, China attaches importance to protecting its native ethnic minority languages, and the Constitution stipulates that "all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages."

As an immigrant country, the United States has a more diverse language policy. It is a typical "melting pot," where ethnic groups and people of different skin colors gather, and its linguistic resources can be described as a "salad bowl." The complexity of its ethnic and linguistic diversity ranks first in the world (Zhou Qingsheng, 2015).

China is a multi-ethnic country with hundreds of languages, and the United States, also a multi-ethnic country, similarly has hundreds of languages. Comparing the planning of ethnic minority language policies and their implementation paths in the two countries is conducive to gaining an in-depth understanding of the differences in their ethnic policies and the inherent nature of their civilizations.

2. Literature Review

Similar to China, the United States is a typical multi-ethnic and multilingual country in the world. Throughout its history, it has adopted language policies that are both relatively stable and complexly variable, which deserve full attention from scholars in the fields of language policy and language planning, especially Chinese scholars. For example, Cai Yongliang (2002, 2007) sorted out the historical changes of U.S. language policy in three stages and discussed the main characteristics of these policies. Hu Mingyong and Lei Qing (2006) explored U.S. language policy from the perspectives of ethnic language policy, immigrant language policy, and bilingual education policy, and conducted multi-faceted comparisons with China's language policy.

Hu Mingyong (2005) compared the characteristics of Sino-U.S. language policies: the United States' common language policy is usually implicit and has restrictive purposes. Instead of designating an official language, the U.S. achieves language universality through unofficial means such as laws, conventions, and cultural traditions. In contrast, China's common language policy is explicit and has normative purposes. Mandarin is China's official language, clearly stipulated by national laws, and its standardization is achieved through education, media, and government promotion.

The United States realizes its common language policy through unofficial means (e.g., laws, conventions, and cultural traditions) rather than designating an official language. In contrast, China's common language policy is clearly stipulated by national laws and implemented through government promotion of Mandarin, featuring

explicitness and standardization (Wang Dan, 2015).

The United States' foreign language policy emphasizes a national security orientation and meets different security needs through diverse language planning. China's foreign language policy is internationally oriented, mainly achieved through the popularization of English education, while gradually increasing attention to other foreign languages (Wu Jinshan, 2015).

Among previous studies, Jian Zhixiang and Ma Rong (2022) put forward a series of achievements in the research on ethnic minority language policies in their paper. They emphasized that in multi-ethnic countries, language policies should not only promote the national common language to strengthen social integration and citizens' political identity but also fully protect and respect the linguistic cultures of ethnic minorities. They argued that establishing the status of ethnic minority languages through laws and safeguarding the rights to use and develop these languages are key to maintaining ethnic diversity and cultural ecology. The paper advocates the use of ethnic minority languages in the education system to support cultural inheritance and ethnic characteristics, and suggests that language policies should be flexible, with adaptive policies formulated based on the actual conditions of different ethnic regions. Furthermore, they stressed that safeguarding the language rights of ethnic minorities is an important part of achieving ethnic equality, calling on the state to take measures to eliminate language barriers, ensure that ethnic minorities can exercise their language rights equally, and thereby promote national unity and social harmony.

China's policy on ethnic minority languages focuses more on protection and inheritance, while the United States emphasizes the formation of a unified national identity in the context of cultural diversity. In previous studies, there have been relatively few direct comparisons between the two countries' policies on ethnic minority languages, leaving some research gaps.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Content

This study mainly explores the following questions:

What are the similarities and differences between China's and the United States' protection policies for ethnic minority languages?

What are the implementation paths of China's and the United States' protection policies for ethnic minority languages?

What are the implementation effects of China's and the United States' protection policies for ethnic minority languages?

The core of this study lies in the in-depth analysis and comparison of the policies and measures adopted by China and the United States to safeguard and promote ethnic minority languages. The study will first focus on the similarities and differences between the two countries' policies, analyzing the underlying policy con-

cepts, target orientations, specific measures, and challenges encountered during implementation. In China, the policy focuses on implementing bilingual education within the education system and ensuring the right to use ethnic minority languages through legal means. In contrast, the U.S. strategy tends to promote the revitalization and documentation of Indigenous languages through funded programs and grants.

Subsequently, the study will evaluate the effectiveness of the two countries' ethnic minority policies, collecting and analyzing data to measure the actual effects of the policies on the protection and inheritance of ethnic minority languages, as well as their contributions to promoting linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism. At the same time, this study will also discuss the difficulties and limitations encountered in policy implementation and propose possible improvement plans, aiming to provide valuable references and insights for the work of protecting ethnic minority languages in China, the United States, and even the international community.

3.2. Research Methods

3.2.1. Comparative Analysis

When conducting a comparative analysis of the ethnic minority language protection policies in China and the United States, the researcher first needs to clarify the research objectives and questions, and select representative policies or practical cases for in-depth exploration. On this basis, the researcher extensively collects relevant data and information on the two countries' policies through literature review, policy document analysis, field surveys, interviews, and other methods. Subsequently, a systematic comparative framework is established to conduct a detailed comparison around key dimensions such as policy background, content, implementation process, and effects.

The researcher also needs to identify the similarities and differences between the two countries' policies and explore the causes of these phenomena, which may involve the two countries' different historical backgrounds, cultural values, political systems, and social structures. Finally, the significance of the comparative analysis results for understanding and improving ethnic minority language protection policies, as well as the experiences and lessons provided for other countries or regions, are discussed.

When writing the research report, the researcher should present the process and findings of the comparative analysis in a logically clear and well-organized manner, ensuring the objectivity, systematicness, and depth of the analysis. At the same time, critical thinking should be maintained to reasonably question existing policies and research, in order to propose practical suggestions and improvement measures. Through this comprehensive comparative analysis, the researcher can not only enhance the understanding of ethnic minority language protection strategies in different cultural and policy environments but also contribute insights to the global

protection of linguistic diversity.

3.2.2. Case Study

When conducting a case study of the ethnic minority language protection policies in China and the United States, the research starts with defining clear research objectives and questions, and carefully selecting representative cases that can reflect the characteristics, challenges, and effectiveness of the two countries' policies. These cases serve as the core of the research, through which the differences and commonalities between the two countries in protecting ethnic minority languages are explored and compared in depth.

When examining the practices of language legislation in China and the United States, the researcher found a common theme: respect for and protection of linguistic diversity. The Chinese government has demonstrated a comprehensive strategy for protecting and developing ethnic minority languages through the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for the Reform and Development of the Cause of Language and Writing. These policies and regulations not only clarify the goals of protection and development but also promote the inheritance and use of ethnic minority languages through specific measures such as standardization, normalization, informatization work, bilingual education, and talent cultivation.

Similarly, the U.S. Native American Languages Act represents a major shift in policy toward Indigenous languages—from an assimilation policy to a stance of active protection and revitalization. This legislative action has not only been widely praised by society but also promoted awareness and respect for the value of Indigenous languages, inspiring states to formulate corresponding protection measures based on local conditions.

China's bilingual education strategy, especially its implementation in ethnic minority areas, demonstrates the country's firm commitment to language and cultural inheritance. This educational model not only improves ethnic minority students' ability to master the national common language but also deepens their understanding and recognition of their own ethnic language and culture. The Ministry of Education emphasizes the goals of improving educational quality, enhancing students' ability to adapt to social development, and cultivating talents proficient in both languages. This integrated learning method combines the teaching of subject knowledge with the cultivation of language skills, promoting the coordinated development of thinking in both languages.

The U.S. Native American Languages Act represents a shift from an assimilation policy to the active protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages. The implementation of the Act has strengthened the education and cultural inheritance of Indigenous languages and enhanced social awareness and respect for the value of these languages. Through financial support and educational programs, the U.S. government has actively promoted the revitalization and use of Indigenous languages.

Through these core cases, the researcher plans to conduct in-depth exploration and analysis of the policy differences and commonalities between China and the United States in protecting ethnic minority languages. This not only involves the comparison of the policies themselves but also includes the similarities and differences in the policy implementation process, as well as how these differences and commonalities affect the evaluation of policy effects. These cases will also help the researcher explore the different strategies and methods adopted by the two governments in protecting ethnic minority languages, and how these strategies and methods adapt to their respective national socio-cultural backgrounds and linguistic ecological environments.

Through in-depth research on these selected cases, the researcher will repeatedly deliberate and compare, striving to comprehensively and meticulously understand the diversity and commonalities of the ethnic minority language protection policies in China and the United States, as well as how these policies promote the sustainable development and cultural inheritance of languages.

3.3. Government-Level Language Legislation in China and the United States

3.3.1. Language Legislation in China

China attaches great importance to the protection of ethnic minority languages and guarantees this protection through legislation. This commitment is clearly reflected in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. Since its adoption by the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on December 4, 1982, the Constitution has undergone multiple amendments (including those in 1988, 1993, 1999, 2004, and 2018) and has consistently reaffirmed this principle. In the Preamble to the Constitution, the People's Republic of China is defined as a unified multi-ethnic country jointly founded by all ethnic groups of the nation. It emphasizes the spirit of equality, unity, and mutual assistance in socialist ethnic relations and aims to promote the common development and prosperity of all ethnic groups. Additionally, Article 4 of Chapter I (General Principles) of the Constitution explicitly states that all ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, as well as the right to preserve or reform their own customs and habits.

The Chinese government not only formulates relevant provisions in law but also implements the protection and development of ethnic minority languages through policy documents and major projects. For instance, the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for the Reform and Development of the Cause of Language and Writing (2012 – 2020) clearly stipulates that it is necessary to properly handle the relationships between the national common language and writing system, Chinese dialects, traditional Chinese characters, and the spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities in accordance with the law, as well as address issues arising in their learning and use. The goal is to create a law-abiding, healthy, and harmonious

social language environment. These policy documents clearly define the objectives for the protection and development of the spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities.

The researcher argues that the Chinese government's legal provisions and the implementation of ethnic minority language protection and development through policy documents and major projects demonstrate the state's high attention to linguistic diversity and cultural inheritance. These measures not only establish clear plans and goals at the national level but also are concretely implemented and reflected at the local level, presenting a top-down systematic protection strategy. First, through policy documents such as the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for the Reform and Development of the Cause of Language and Writing and the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Cause of Language and Writing in China, the Chinese government has clarified the need to properly handle the relationship between the national common language and writing system and the spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities in accordance with the law. It also emphasizes the importance of creating a law-abiding, healthy, and harmonious social language environment. This not only helps protect ethnic minority languages but also promotes the standardization, normalization, and digitalization of languages, providing strong policy support for the inheritance and development of ethnic minority languages.

The Chinese government's initiatives in protecting and developing ethnic minority languages not only reflect respect for ethnic equality and cultural diversity but also demonstrate a profound understanding of the scientific management and rational utilization of language resources. The implementation of these policies and regulations has laid a solid foundation for the inheritance and development of ethnic minority languages, contributing to the construction of a diverse, harmonious, and inclusive social language environment, and promoting the prosperity of ethnic cultures and the harmonious development of society.

3.4. Comparison of Implementation Effects between China and the United States

3.4.1. Integration of Bilingual Education in China's Education System

China's achievements in bilingual education, particularly in ethnic minority areas, demonstrate the country's firm commitment to safeguarding linguistic diversity and cultural inheritance. This educational model not only equips ethnic minority students with the ability to master the national common language but also deepens their understanding and identification with their own ethnic language and culture, laying a solid foundation for their academic and career development. The Ministry of Education states, "The purpose of implementing bilingual education is to continuously improve the quality of education for ethnic minorities, effectively enhance ethnic minority students' ability to adapt to social development, and cultivate talents proficient in both languages for the country and ethnic minority areas."

In implementing its bilingual education strategy, China focuses on integrating the teaching of subject knowledge with the cultivation of language skills. While studying subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies, students simultaneously practice using both their ethnic minority language and Mandarin. This integrated learning approach helps students gain a deeper understanding of course content and promotes the coordinated development of thinking in both languages. For example, in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, a variety of bilingual education models are adopted, including Uyghur-Mandarin or Mandarin-Uyghur bilingual education, as well as teaching models using other ethnic languages. In “bilingual classes” at bilingual schools or ethnic schools in cities: a certain percentage of teachers are Han Chinese, libraries have a considerable number of books in Chinese, and cities with a relatively high proportion of Han Chinese population provide an environment for ethnic minority students to use Chinese.

Bilingual education plays a crucial role in protecting and inheriting ethnic minority languages. Incorporating the use of ethnic minority languages into the school education system not only maintains the vitality of these languages but also strengthens students’ sense of pride and belonging to their ethnic cultural heritage.

3.4.2. The United States’ Promotion of Indigenous Language Revitalization

Through the implementation of the Native American Languages Act, the United States has made positive progress in protecting and promoting ethnic minority languages. Enacted in 1990 and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush, the Native American Languages Act recognizes the special status of Indigenous cultures and languages in the United States and stipulates that the United States has an obligation to protect these cultures and languages. The promulgation of this Act represents a shift in the U.S. government’s attitude toward Indigenous languages—from the historical assimilation policy to supporting and promoting the protection and revitalization of these languages. The implementation of the Act has not only strengthened the education and cultural inheritance of Indigenous languages but also enhanced the cultural cohesion of ethnic minority communities, while raising social awareness and respect for the value of these languages.

In the field of education, the relevant Act recognizes the right of Indigenous tribes and other Indigenous communities to use Indigenous languages for instruction in Indigenous schools established by the Department of the Interior. This right applies not only to public programs but also to various settings outside of public education programs.

To implement the Act in practice, the U.S. government launched the Grant Program to Ensure Survival and Continuing Vitality of Native American Languages, which provides financial support for establishing and sustaining community programs for Indigenous languages, personnel training, and the publication and distribution of related materials.

The “language nest” approach generally refers to an immersive educational model, particularly in language learning and cultural inheritance. The core of this model is to provide learners with a language environment where they can naturally learn and use the target language in daily life. In the United States, the application of the “language nest” approach has promoted the revitalization of Indigenous languages, especially in different Indigenous communities in California. One example is the “Breath of Life” workshops and institutions, which aim to provide language revitalization workers with access to archives storing linguistic information and train them to use these resources. Additionally, there are “mentorship” programs that promote language learning by pairing fluent speakers with language learners. This language learning method fosters language acquisition through participation in real-life scenarios, such as cooking, shopping, walking in familiar places, and engaging in community activities, and has been applied in various language revitalization contexts around the world.

Although the Act faces challenges such as funding shortages and a lack of qualified teachers during implementation, and uncertainties remain regarding the future development of Indigenous languages, the introduction of the Native American Languages Act has undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for the education and protection of ethnic minority languages in the United States. This Act has not only had a profound impact domestically but also provided important experiences and insights for the global protection of ethnic minority languages.

3.5. Discussion

The core logic of China’s ethnic minority language policy is based on the principle of ethnic equality. This principle is clearly guaranteed by the Constitution and relevant laws, ensuring that all ethnic groups enjoy equal rights in language use and development. Through legislation, the Chinese government not only safeguards the equal language rights of all ethnic groups but also respects the right to ethnic autonomy, ensuring that authorities in autonomous regions can perform their duties using locally commonly used languages. This policy aims to promote mutual understanding and respect among ethnic groups and build a diverse and harmonious society.

At the same time, China’s legislative policies also address the challenge of cultural homogenization in the context of globalization. By protecting ethnic minority languages through legal means, China preserves cultural diversity and prevents the gradual loss of cultural characteristics amid global integration. This not only protects the languages themselves but also safeguards the cultural and historical heritage behind them, promoting the sustainable development of culture.

In contrast, the United States has experienced a major policy shift in the protection of ethnic minority languages. Through the Native American Languages Act, the United States has moved from its previous assimilation policy to protecting and re-

vitalizing Indigenous languages, reflecting a high degree of attention to diverse cultural heritage. The Act not only recognizes the cultural value of Indigenous languages but also enhances the cultural identity of communities that use these languages through community projects and educational programs. The government supports language revitalization projects through grants, promoting the inheritance of Indigenous languages.

In the specific implementation of policies, China and the United States show significant differences. China's bilingual education policy focuses on integrating the national common language with ethnic minority languages, aiming to enhance ethnic minority students' ability to adapt to society and cultivate bilingual talents. The government provides policy support and financial investment for bilingual education and develops teaching materials and resources tailored to the characteristics of different ethnic groups. In contrast, the United States focuses more on the protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages. Despite the different focuses of their policies, both countries have promoted cultural diversity and social harmony through language protection measures.

Furthermore, in terms of social participation and support, China's bilingual education policy has received broad social response. Parents, communities, and cultural institutions actively participate, forming an interactive support environment from family to society. While the United States has a positive policy direction, it faces challenges in funding and teacher recruitment, and the actual effectiveness of its policies depends on the investment and allocation of social resources.

4. Research Conclusions

When analyzing the implementation effects of ethnic minority language protection and education policies in China and the United States, the uniqueness of each country is clearly evident, reflecting the specific needs of their respective social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. China's bilingual education policy emphasizes the integration of the national common language with ethnic minority languages, aiming to improve ethnic minority students' mastery of Mandarin while maintaining their identification with their own ethnic language. By integrating the teaching of subject knowledge with language skill cultivation, bilingual education promotes the coordinated development of students' bilingual thinking. The government also provides policy and financial support and develops relevant teaching resources.

In contrast, the U.S. Native American Languages Act focuses on the protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages. This policy marks the United States' shift from an assimilation policy to active protection. It supports language revitalization projects through grants and adopts immersive "language nest" and "mentorship" programs to strengthen the inheritance of Indigenous languages. Although the Act faces challenges such as insufficient funding and a lack of teachers during implementation, it has raised social awareness of the value of Indigenous languages.

The level of social support also differs between the two countries in policy implementation. In China, bilingual education has received widespread social response, and its educational effects extend to family and community life. While the U.S. policy has raised social awareness of Indigenous languages, it faces the problem of insufficient allocation of social resources in practical implementation.

The educational models of the two countries also differ. China focuses on integrating subject knowledge with language skills to promote the development of bilingual thinking; the United States adopts immersive learning, emphasizing the natural acquisition of language in daily life environments.

Overall, the differences in ethnic minority language protection and education policies between China and the United States not only reflect their different policy orientations but also mirror their social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. China promotes the comprehensive implementation of bilingual education through extensive policy support, while the United States focuses more on the revitalization and cultural inheritance of ethnic minority languages.

References

- [1] Chen Xinren. Historical Evolution and Enlightenment of Chinese Language Policy in the United States[J]. *Foreign Language Studies*, 2017, 34(01): 22-26+31. DOI: 10.13978/j.cnki.wyyj.2017.01.005.
- [2] Hu Mingyong, Lei Qing. *Journal of Three Gorges University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 2005, (06): 89-93.
- [3] Zhou Qingsheng. *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, 2013, 34(02): 32-44+4. DOI: 10.14100/j.cnki.65-1039/g4.2013.02.004.
- [4] Zhang Guiju. Research on the Development of K-12 Chinese Immersion Teaching under the Critical Language Policy in the United States[J]. *Global Education Outlook*, 2022, 51(08): 115-128.
- [5] Zhang Zhiguo. Research on American Chinese Language Policy Based on Language Practice[J]. *Journal of Zhejiang University of Foreign Chinese Studies*, 2021, (04): 43-50.
- [6] Zhao Xun, Ye Jun. The Development of Inherited Language Education in American Colleges and Universities from the Perspective of Multidimensional Language Policy[J]. *Jiangsu Higher Education*, 2021, (02): 59-63. DOI: 10.13236/j.cnki.jshe.2021.02.010.
- [7] Zhang Weilei. *Journal Chinese of Zhejiang University of Foreign Chinese*, 2019, (02): 25-31+37.
- [8] Yin Gangkui, Shao Xiaoxia. Chinese Language Policy in the United States and Its Enlightenment on Bilingual Education in Ethnic Areas of our country[J]. *Ethnic Higher Education Research*, 2019, 7(02): 44-49. DOI: 10.14045/j.cnki.rhen.2019.02.009.
- [9] Hu Zhuanglin. *Journal of Zhejiang University of Foreign Chinese Languages*, 2018, (02): 1-8.