**Teaching in Northwestern China under a Neoliberal Market Economy:
Opportunities and Challenges**
**Enseigner dans une économie de marché, au Nord Ouest de
la Chine: opportunités et défis**

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Abstract

This study explores teachers' perspectives on the impacts of the market economy on their working and living conditions in Northwest China. Findings reveal that the participants believed that they had benefited from the market economy such as increased pay, improved working and living conditions and professional development opportunities. However, the participants found the shift from the traditional teacher-centered pedagogy to a more student-centered approach and working with more resourceful students and their parents challenging and stressful. Findings also suggest that minority teachers were concerned that the current *Hanyu* medium of instruction may have been an impediment to minority students' educational achievement.

Résumé

Cette étude explore l'impact de l'économie de marché à partir de la perspective des professeurs. Elle analyse les effets de l'économie de marché sur les conditions de vie et de travail, les opportunités et les défis de ces derniers au Nord Ouest de la Chine. Les résultats montrent que les participants pensent avoir élevés leurs conditions de vie et leurs opportunités professionnelles. Ils trouvent cependant que le changement pédagogique d'une part, c'est-à-dire le changement d'une pédagogie traditionnelle centrée sur le professeur vers une pédagogie centrée sur les apprenants, ainsi que le fait de travailler avec des apprenants et des parents avec plus de ressources financières d'autre part, est très exigeant et stressant. Les résultats montrent également que les professeurs minoritaires pensent que l'actuelle méthode d'enseignement, le *Hanyu*, peut avoir des conséquences négatives sur les résultats académiques des étudiants minoritaires.

Background

A market economy began growing in China three decades ago, coinciding with a western neoliberal globalization "political project of world integration" (Peters, 2011, p. 1) that committed China to guaranteeing "the ability of market forces to negotiate values and exchange at global scale" (MacPherson, 2012, p. 193). This top-down policy proposed by Deng Xiaoping called for a shift from a socialist welfare system to a market economy by enforcing household responsibilities and entrepreneurialism through joint ventures and foreign investments. As the market economy experiment coincided with the "political project of world integration,"

attracting foreign business to invest in Chinese joint-ventures became a major concern. The country's economy has grown at a fast pace throughout this period, only beginning to slow down this year, earning the country membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001 and, in its own way just as important, culminating in a successful space mission in 2012.

The market economy is guided by a neoliberal ideology that reduces the world to a market place which promotes intense global competition for resources; reduces quality of life to pursuit of financial freedom (Macpherson, 2012); and drives an increasing number of people to work more for less, which deprives others of gainful employment. Critics argue that neoliberalism, through policies such as the privatization of public resources, is a class project that creates "ever increasing inequalities between and within states" (Peters, 2011, p. 190; also see Limpman, 2012). According to Peters, neoliberalism also promotes a one nation cultural rhetoric in which "all individuals, freed from their ethnic origins, their tribal histories, ... their traditional cultural beliefs, can participate in a modern democratic society" (Peters, 2011, p. 38). As such, it is "antagonist to the sustainability interests of indigenous languages and cultures" (MacPherson, 2012, p. 193), promoting homogeneity and monoculturalism, as it sees pluralism and ethnic diversity as threats to the modern society. Neoliberalism, critics charge, systematically excludes groups historically defined as Other (Peters, 2011), displacing them linguistically and culturally. Reflections of the global neoliberal agenda in China include various educational reforms, including the introduction of a western style student-centered pedagogy and the current craze for English language education that promotes global relevance, and the *Hanyu* (official national language also known as *Puotnhua*) medium instruction for minority students to enforce homogeneity. Neoliberal ideology helps justify enforcing *Hanyu* among minority students because it allows for stratification of languages by assigning economic value to them (Beckett & MacPherson, 2005), rendering minority languages less valuable because they are spoken by fewer people. It also helps justify the push for replacement of indigenous and minority languages as medium of instruction with that of *Hanyu* because neoliberals would view the former as the Other that needs be excluded in their promotion of homogenous society with monolingualism and monoculturalism.

While there is some discussion of the impact of neoliberal marketization in general and of teachers' working and living conditions in the United States and New Zealand (e.g., Peters, 2011; Lipman, 2012), there is little direct discussion on its impacts on Chinese teachers, particularly in minority areas. The few scholars (e.g., Guo & Beckett, 2012; MacPherson, 2012; Zhao, 2004) who have published on this topic raise serious concerns, citing additional inequalities and further problems the market economy has created in already economically underdeveloped minority regions of China. The case study reported here was conducted in Xisheng (pseudonym promised to the participants for anonymity purposes) in Northwestern China. The study explored:

1. The impacts of a market economy on Xisheng teachers, including minority teachers, in relation to their working and living conditions;
2. The opportunities and challenges Xisheng teachers faced under the market economy.

The rest of the article discusses the existing literature on these topics and the findings of the current study, which are drawn from survey, interview, and document analysis. Findings of the study shed considerable light on the impacts that the neoliberal ideology has had in a Northwestern Chinese context as they relate to teachers' lives and minority education. As the market economy is a system guided by a neoliberal ideology which is prevalent globally, the findings of the study will have research and professional implications for other contexts facing or soon to be facing similar situations.

Working and Living Conditions: Opportunities and Challenges

Working and Living Conditions

Little existing work explores the impact of the market economy on teachers' working and living conditions directly; but research and discussions on teaching and working conditions during the market economy era continue to paint a bleak picture. Scholars alert us to the severe shortage of qualified teachers and poorly equipped schools and call for salary increases, better working and living conditions, career incentives, improved recruitment strategies as well as restructured training and mentoring programs.

In exploring bilingual programs and teachers in Xinjiang, Ma (2009) found that many schools attended by Uyghur students lack libraries, science laboratories, standard classrooms, and sufficient operating budgets. He also

found that minority teachers were overworked, burdened with non-teaching jobs in situations where schools are dually supervised by the Bureau of Education and the town (*xiang*) government. Apparently, this happens because, while the Bureaus of Education assign teaching tasks, the town (*xiang*) government assigns additional non-teaching tasks such as managing employment services, surveying rural surplus laborers, and registering laborers for various training programs, which teachers must also perform successfully; otherwise, they must forfeit part of their wages. There is also additional work such as cleaning, gardening, and campus security watch expected of these teachers (see Ma, 2009, for more detailed discussion).

Others report that minority teachers also work in some of the poorest parts of the country with little pay, especially in comparison to their colleagues who work in more developed parts of the country. In Gansu, Northwestern China, for example, 57.1 percent of minority teachers earn less than 1,000 *yuan* (\$120 CAD a month and few of them had medical benefits (Li, 2004). Li's (2004) study reveals that minority assistant lecturers in Urumqi earned an average base salary of 660 *yuan* (less than \$100 CAD) a month; lecturers earned 840 *yuan* (about \$110 CAD) a month, associate professors earned 920 *yuan* (about \$130 CAD) a month, and full professors earned 1,200 *yuan* (about \$190 CAD) a month. The same study also reports that 95 percent of urban university minority teachers reported having not received a pay-raise for over 10 years.

It is clear from this discussion that the market economy contributed little to improving teachers' working and living conditions. It is unconscionable that, while the market economy benefited the country enough to launch a mission to space, it left minority area schools without laboratories, libraries, and sufficient operating budgets and poorly paid teachers. Their low pay and the extra workload imposed on them may have contributed negatively to the education of minority students, as some of their teachers, having the new market economy freedom of mobility, moved away in search of better opportunities elsewhere, while those who stayed focused on performing their non-teaching duties in order to keep their jobs.

Benefits and Challenges

As pointed out earlier, the market economy created many opportunities and choices, encouraging citizens to strive for better lives, unlike the pre-market era

when people stayed at their state-assigned positions for life working under a state-set pay scale. Under the market economy, teachers have mobility and choice for better professional positions. New pedagogical approaches such as western style student-centered teaching have been introduced across the country and *Hanyu* medium of instruction (referred to as Bilingual Education in China) has been reinforced in minority areas. Some seem to view the *Hanyu* medium of instruction for minority students introduced during the market economy also as affordance of good opportunity for learning another language. However, these changes under the market economy seem to have become challenges as well, particularly for minority teachers and students. According to Zhou (2012), for instance, opportunities for teachers to pursue better lives elsewhere devastated already poorly resourced Dongxiang County schools mostly staffed by graduates of the local junior college, as even those teachers would rather pursue better opportunities in more developed urban areas of the country.

Research conducted in other parts of the country make similar observations. Tsung, Wang, and Zhang's (2012) study of bilingual programs in Yunnan and Ma's (2009) study of bilingual education in Xinjiang reveal that teachers in those programs are ill-equipped for their jobs, as some of them are only proficient in a minority language and others are only proficient in *Hanyu*. According to the survey by Tsang, Yang, and Qiu (2005), 10,635 of Yunnan's 12,936 bilingual teachers were mono-literate while only 2,301 were biliterate, and only 5.6 percent of Yunnan's 218,969 primary school teachers were bilingual. This is consistent with Ma's (2009) finding that bilingual teachers in bilingual programs in Xinjiang are also in a difficult situation because they are asked to teach in *Hanyu*, which they have little proficiency in. Yang and Wu's (2009) study of primary and middle school minority teachers' attitudes toward the *Hanyu* medium of instruction (known as Bilingual Education in Xinjiang) confirmed such concerns and pointed out that teachers had mixed feelings about teaching using *Hanyu* as the medium of instruction. The teachers suggested that *Hanyu* be taught to all students as a second language and that content knowledge be taught in students' first languages to ensure quality instruction as well as first language literacy maintenance.

Other work on the impacts of the *Hanyu* medium of instruction on in-service minority area teachers and minority education presents similar

challenges. Dong and Wang's (2009) study of middle school minority teachers in Xinjiang concluded that though many of the teachers had degrees that qualified them to teach, they needed further training in content area knowledge and pedagogy. However, due to a lack of cultural understanding and *Hanyu* proficiency, their continuing education was of limited value. Others point out that some Uyghur teachers who acted as trainers did not have sufficient fluency in *Hanyu* either (see Ma, 2009). Needless to say, all of these contribute negatively to the basic educational development of minority students in Xinjiang.

Challenges for further training are compounded by the financial difficulties minority teachers face as discussed by Li (2004), Ma (2009), Postiglione (2009), Postiglione and Jiao (2009), Tsung, Wang, and Zhang (2012), and Zhou (2012). According to Ma (2009), for example, various school teachers in Southern Xinjiang faced a situation where they felt the need for further training to keep their jobs but were extremely stressed due to a lack of funding. Li's (2004) study of Urumqi post-secondary physical education instructors reveals that further training is full of challenges. In the last 10 years only 7 percent of the eligible instructors went through the training while the rest, 93 percent, were yet to be trained. Furthermore, the training policy for the instructors stipulated that they engage in training at their own expense, paying tuition, transportation, and accommodation with an understanding that some of the expenses may be reimbursed upon successful completion of the training and obtaining diplomas and degrees. However, for most instructors, the possibility of obtaining degrees is slim due to their poor *Hanyu* proficiency. Worse yet, administrators' responses to the survey indicate that they were not committed to training the instructors, with 57 percent of them citing budget as an excuse. Furthermore, there were discrepancies between budget allocated for professional development subsidies and the actual subsidies that teachers received. For instance, Ma (2009) reports that in some areas of Xinjiang, each teacher should receive a 962 *yuan* (about \$150 CAD subsidy for bilingual education per month, but the actual subsidy that the teachers received ranged from 400–600 *yuan* (\$63 CAD to \$100 CAD, see Postiglione, 2009; Postiglione & Jiao, 2009 for similar discussions).

The market economy seems to have afforded some opportunities, but it also seems to have created many more challenges and serious problems for

minority area teachers, the most serious of which seems to be the enforcement of the *Hanyu* medium of instruction without sufficient preparation. It is clearly irresponsible to have implemented the *Hanyu* medium of instruction and the bilingual programs when neither the teachers nor the teacher-trainers have literacy in the languages that they are supposed to instruct in. It is even more irresponsible to ask those already financially-disadvantaged teachers to pay for their own professional development on something that they may not have had any say in.

Wang and Zhou (2003) claim that the minority teaching force has been greatly developed with increased funding from the state that has invested one billion *yuan* (over \$156 million CAD since 1983 to implement mandatory elementary education policies and to assist senior citizens, young people, and border and poor regions in their educational development. According to Tang (2002), China took a \$2 billion (about \$313 million CAD) loan since the 1990s for education development in 11 provinces and 200 counties with minority populations and in 1995 the Central Committee invested 39 billion *yuan* (about \$7 billion CAD), 22 billion (about \$3.4 billion CAD) of which was allocated to nine of the most economically needy provinces with the largest minority populations for their educational development. Up to 54 percent of this fund was budgeted for five minority autonomous regions. Other researchers, however, point out that the funds allocated to minority areas were only enough for basic salaries, chalk, paper, and classroom repairs (Li & Hu, 2004). Wang (2010) states that the education budget for Guangdong province in 2000 was 44 times than that for Tibet, 28 times than that for Qinghai, and six times than that for Guizhou. This is a significant contrast because while Guangdong is a developed province whose population is predominately the *Han* majority, the others are poor provinces with significant numbers of minority people.

Obviously, there is much more work to be done in the minority areas, especially regarding understanding the impacts of the market economy on economic and psychological wellbeing of teachers, particularly minority teachers. Further research on other opportunities and challenges under the market economy through teachers' perspectives gained from lived experience can extend our knowledge on this topic. Such knowledge can help make recommendations

for better policies and practices to make necessary improvement in Northwestern China as well as other similar contexts.

Methods of Inquiry

Research Site

This study was conducted in the Northwestern Chinese province of Xisheng (pseudonym promised to the participants) inhabited by people of 47 ethnicities, with 13 major ethnic communities comprising 60.7 percent of the total population. The participants were from four schools (referred to as schools A, B, C, and D in this article) from Xishi (pseudonym, also promised to the participants for anonymity purposes) with a population of 2.08 million, including Uyghur, Kazak, Hui, the Mongol people making up about 27.3 percent of the total population, the rest being of *Han* ethnicity.

School A was established in 1916 and has a high profile administrator and 190 teachers. 27 percent of the teachers had completed or were working towards graduate degrees. Student enrolment at this school was 3,785, among whom 745 were middle school students (Grades 7-9). School B was established in 1957 and became an ethnically mixed school (*minhan hexiao*) in 1963. Ethnically mixed schools in Xisheng are schools where *Han* and non*Han* students attend. It is a model created to help promote interethnic interaction and understanding between *Han* and non*Han* students and staff through this officially and formally created environment. School B's 22 teachers were divided into Native/indigenous language and *Hanyu* departments based on their first languages. The *Hanyu* department had 87 teachers and the Native/indigenous (Uyghur) language department had 115 teachers. 73 of the teachers were reaching retirement age. The school had 1818 students in total; 21 classes belonged to the *Hanyu* language department, and 19 belonged to the native/indigenous Uyghur language department. The latter included both middle school and high school, while the former only had a middle school. School C, established in 1947, is an experimental school with modern educational technology, known for its multimedia networked classrooms and nationally advanced institute for education union. The school, as a subordinate unit of the provincial government, is one of the best middle schools in the province. At the time of data collection, there were 305 teachers, 18 of whom held graduate degrees. Five of the teachers were also members of the provincial education reform committee; 13 were research fellows

either at provincial or municipal levels; and ten were national core teachers (who played lead roles in the new curriculum training). Student enrolment from kindergarten to high school was about 5,600, more than 3,000 of whom were high school students. School D, located on an agricultural university campus, was established in 1952. At the time of data collection, the school had a teaching staff of about 152 with 113 full-time teachers, 19 support staff, 14 administrators, and 6 workers with student enrollment of 2,395. 1,023 of those students were in its high school division and 1372 of them were in the middle school division

Participants

Twenty-two teachers volunteered to participate in this study. Four of the teachers were in the 26-30 age range, eight were in the 31-40 age range, four were in the 41-50 age range, and six were in the 51-55 age range. 16 of the 22 teachers were of *Han* ethnicity, four were Uyghurs, one was Kazak, and one was Tujia. Nineteen participants indicated that they could express themselves most easily in *Hanyu* while the rest chose Uyghur, Kazakh, and *Hanyu* plus Uyghur respectively. All the teachers had teaching certificates, in addition to their degree qualifications. Twenty-one of the 22 participants were full-time teachers with years of service ranging from 5 to 32 years. Their monthly income ranged from 500 to 6,000 *yuan* (\$78 to \$938 CAD), with one participant reporting income between 1,001-2,000 *yuan* (\$156 to \$312 CAD), 12 participants reporting income between 2,001-3,000 *yuan* (\$312 to \$469 CAD), six participants reporting income between 3,000-4,000 *yuan* (\$469 to \$625 CAD), and one participant reporting income between 5,001-6,000 *yuan* (\$781 to \$938 CAD). Table 1 below summarizes this information graphically. Note that T stands for teachers and that each participant is numbered in the order they were interviewed for reporting convenience.

The original plan for the study was to recruit predominantly minority teacher participants from rural areas, but that was not possible due to political sensitivities in the region. Even though the data came from participants mostly of *Han* ethnicity, the findings of the study should still be valuable as they are representative of working and living conditions some teachers in the region as well as the opportunities and challenges for teachers in a minority area of China under the market economy, which is the focus of the study.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

T	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Marital status	Education	Certification	Language	Yrs of Service	Monthly Income
T1	Female	36-40	Han	Married	B (1)	Yes	Mandarin	13	2001-3000
T2	Male	36-40	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	20	3001-4000
T3	Female	31-35	Uyghur	Married	B	Yes	Uyghur	10	2001-3000
T4	Female	41-45	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	24	3001-4000
T5	Male	51-55	Han	Married	P.S.(2)	Yes	Mandarin	30	3001-4000
T6	Female	41-45	Uyghur	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	25	2001-3000
T7	Female	36-40	Uygur	Divorced	B	Yes	Man.Uyg.(3)	1(4)	1001-2000
T8	Female	31-35	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	12	2001-3000
T9	Male	31-35	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	8	2001-3000
T10	Male	46-50	Han	Divorced	B	Yes	Mandarin	24	2001-3000
T11	Male	51-55	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	30	Under 500
T12	Female	31-35	Uyghur	Married	B	Yes	Uyghur	11	2001-3000
T13	Female	26-30	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	8	2001-3000
T14	Female	46-50	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	24	2001-3000
T15	Male	26-30	Kazakh	Single	B	Yes	Kazakh	5	3001-4000
T16	Male	26-30	Tujia	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	6	2001-3000
T17	Female	26-30	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	6	3001-4000
T18	Female	31-35	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	11	2001-3000
T19	Male	51-55	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	32	5001-6000
T20	Male	51-55	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	32	3001-4000
T21	Female	51-55	Hui	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	30	2001-3000
T22	Female	51-55	Han	Married	B	Yes	Mandarin	30	-----

Note:

1. B stands for Bachelor's Degree.

2. P.S. stands for Post-Secondary

3. Man. Stands for Mandarin and Uyg. Stands for Uyghur.

4. The respondents misunderstood the question.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources included a demographic survey, in-depth interviews in *Hanyu* with 22 (9 males and 13 females) junior and senior high school teachers recruited by a *Han* research assistant, and document analysis by another *Han* research assistant and by the researcher. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by two *Han* research assistants in Chinese and translated and analyzed by the researcher. The demographic survey data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics. The transcriptions of the interview data were read numerous times, translated into English, reread again numerous times, and categorized and reorganized logically for salient emerging themes and sub-themes constantly comparing them to the

research purpose and foci (Spradley, 1980). Impacts of the market economy; working conditions; living conditions; opportunities; and challenges all emerged as major themes, and they were used to identify subthemes such as salaries, teaching resources, professional development, and *Hanyu* medium of instruction. Various documents obtained from the schools, and from municipal bureaus and provincial ministry of education office websites were read and analyzed and then synthesized with information the participants provided about their schools as the background information related to the research sites.

Findings

Improved Working Conditions

Findings are presented thematically in relation to research questions. Analysis of the interview data revealed an overwhelming agreement, by all 22 participants, that the market economy had positive impacts on their working conditions. They said that since the 1990s, they had increased budgets; more committed leadership; newer, more modern and stronger buildings; computer equipped offices (some were given laptops); some overhead projector (OHP) and TV equipped classrooms; access to the internet and laser printers (“huge improvement from the two typewriters and one recorder for whole school situation in the 80s”, in teacher 20’s words); better resourced libraries; English language labs; automatic gates; and freshly painted and better quality sports facilities and other equipment for students. The following excerpts from interviews with teachers 5 and 13 exemplify these sentiments. (Note that participants are numbered T1 to T22 in the order of their interviews and that T stands for teacher.)

.... the government has invested much. All schools have new buildings, which have been remodeled since last year to stand earthquakes. The three buildings in our school got remodeled as well, all with money from the government. (T5)

There’s been much improvement in teaching condition. For example, the teaching buildings are new. ... We now have multimedia classrooms. While there’s much to discuss regarding whether every class needs multimedia, as the principals say, these things make it possible to teach differently in combination with the traditional approaches. Teachers bring their courses on U drive and show their contents to students, very convenient and versatile. Much more different from before where we did just chalk and talk only. (T13)

According to the participants, some of the revenue that helped improve working conditions was generated by their own schools.

Starting from the 90s, there has been good benefits, especially in comparison to our counterparts. Starting from the 90s to the beginning of 21 century, our school had the advantage of being able to create some revenue by renting out some spaces and increasing enrollment and the school had control of resulting revenue used to benefit the teachers.

As we see in T 13's account, participants not only acknowledged improved working conditions under the market economy, they also discussed how those improved working conditions enabled them to teach differently adding convenience and versatility to their teaching even though some teachers also thought that more needed to be done (e.g., more computers could be added).

Improved Living Conditions

All 22 participants also agreed that there had been much improvement in their living conditions, as evidenced by salaries that were many times higher than the salaries they had received in the 1990s and even higher when compared to earlier days. For example, Teacher 19 said that his salary increased from 28.18 *yuan* (less than \$5 CAD) when he started working in the 1970s to its current 3,000 *yuan* (\$469 CAD) a month excluding bonus salaries. Teacher 11 illustrated this by saying that when he started working in 1981, his monthly salary was 62 *yuan* (less than \$10 CAD). After 25 years of teaching, his current monthly salary is between 2,000 (\$312 CAD) and 3,000 *yuan* (\$469 CAD). Teacher 1 reported that she now earns 21,000 *yuan* (\$3,281 CAD) in annual bonus salary alone, something that was impossible before the market economy system was in place. Some participants thought that their salary and bonuses could have been increased more because their salaries were still lower than the salaries of others such as civil servants (*gongwuyuan*). Participants said that experienced teachers could earn up to 6,000 *yuan* (\$938 CAD) a month and that those who had time and were physically able could make extra money (50 *yuan* (about \$8 CAD) hourly pay) for overload-teaching and tutoring. The sample size here is too small to run a meaningful comparison of data to account for possible discrepancies between minority teachers' working condition and those of their *Han* peers, but no discrepancy was mentioned by the participants.

In addition to salaries, housing was the most often cited example to illustrate improvement in living conditions. The participants pointed out that getting housing for young teachers was difficult before the 1990s. Those who could get any often got small and sometimes shared accommodations and some even had to stay in flats where there were no indoor toilets. Under the market economy, teachers could live in larger apartments with housing subsidies from their schools. Some even bought a second apartment which they could rent out. The excerpts from interviews with Teacher 22 and Teacher 14 below illustrate this very well:

Living conditions have also improved much. There weren't many apartment buildings before and therefore we lived in flats. The best new teachers could get was one bed-room apartments and that everyone was happy that their schools had a place for them to live in at all. Now all who teach and have over two years of teaching experience can have apartments allocated to them. People who have 25-30 year teaching experience can have at least 100 square meter of well-built living space. Some teachers can even buy and drive their own cars. (T22)

About half of my colleagues own cars. Because there are so many people, about 20 or so of us, driving to work, our principal had an underground parking lot built for us, though parking is no issue for me because my husband drives me to work. And parking is free. (T14.)

Some participants, however, also said that more improvement was needed, as expressed by Teacher 10 below:

Along with the changes that took place in the whole nation, teachers' living standards here have improved much. There is a policy that teacher salaries and benefits should not be lower than that of civil servants, but they are in reality. Also, a horizontal comparison would reveal unequal progress and gains.

Other indications of improved living conditions that the participants mentioned included subsidies from their schools for heating, transportation, and professional development.

Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

As discussed earlier, China has introduced a student-centered pedagogy across the country and enforced *Hanyu* medium of instruction (known as bilingual education in Xisheng) in minority areas. Findings of this study revealed that

Xisheng is no exception and that the participants saw these developments as opportunities for improved teaching/learning. For example, 19 of the 22 participants said that the student-centered pedagogy calls for innovation, flexibility, exploration, and meaningful teaching/learning, which afford various opportunities to get students more interested in their learning. There are many more opportunities to communicate with and engage students.

The Uyghur participants reported that the reforms under the market economy created opportunities for *Han* and non*Han* teachers to work together and learn about/from each other in the bilingual education model, though the learning seems to be unidirectional where non*Han* teachers learn from *Han* teachers. Teacher 7 explains:

In our junior high, we work together. Because of the bilingual education arrangement, non*Han* teachers often observe Han teachers' teaching. We discuss teaching methods and approaches together.

Teacher 7 also believed that the *Hanyu* medium of instruction that came about during the market economy created opportunities for those locally born teachers to go to other parts of China and learn *Hanyu* and new teaching methods.

Participants viewed professional development as another opportunity afforded by the market economy system. 21 out of the 22 the participants confirmed that there were numerous professional development (PD) opportunities, which included a few weeks' to six-months' full-time professional development every five years. These took place locally, nationally, and even internationally. For example, Teacher 21 reported having gone through several PDs, including a short-term one in the United Kingdom. Additionally, there were 8-10 day PDs during every summer vacation, as well as other opportunities in the evenings and on weekends. The PDs took place intra-and-inter institutionally through seminars, presentations, and a mentoring system on topics such as computer skills, lesson and unit planning, and even on the policy behind and implementation of the new curriculum. Other PD topics included bilingual education, *Hanyu*, and second language pedagogy (T6). According to the participants, most PD expenses were reimbursed by their schools. The participants also reported having received 400 *yuan* (\$63 CAD) towards their expenses during full time PDs (e.g., T12).

Challenges

However, teachers thought that the pedagogical changes under the market economy also created much more work for them because the changes are so extensive that they require much time to prepare and deliver. Twenty one of the participants agreed that changes were extremely challenging and stressful, “8 to 9 on a 10 point scale,” as they had to cope with fast paced change; increasing competition; fear of being replaced; teaching smarter, richer, and more confident students; and working with more resourceful, knowledgeable, and busier parents. Many participants reported having to “teach even on Saturdays and students learning even on Sundays” (T20). According to 20 out of the 22 participants, they worked approximately eight hours daily, each teaching from 49-300 students on average. The stress also included getting more students into better universities because, due to the increased competition, all students are seeking degrees that will get them a job, not just any degree.

All 22 participants agreed that homeroom teachers are even busier, working longer hours, up to 11 hours a day, with a 400 *yuan* (\$63 CAD) monthly incentive. Everyone said that homeroom teachers have more responsibilities, with some of them reporting having to spend every spare minute checking on students’ homework, solving student problems, communicating with parents, and organizing parent-teacher meetings after school, on weekends, and during winter and summer breaks, typical tasks that homeroom teachers engage in. They said that the most challenging work for homeroom teachers is communication with parents.

The most difficult work is communicating with parents. Parents should be responsible for their children too. But many of them feel that unless they are at home, their children are teachers’, particularly homeroom teachers’ responsibility. That’s why we need to communicate with parents and talk to them about their children’s study and moral issues. They, especially those born after the 70s, are knowledgeable themselves and expect a lot from their children and their teachers. (T4)

Uyghur participants found the enforcement of *Hanyu* as the medium of instruction dilemmatic and challenging for teachers as well as for students due to their limited *Hanyu* proficiency. Teacher 3 explains,

My pronunciation is okay, but there are some expressions that I have difficulties with, that I cannot express. I didn’t go to school in *Hanyu*. I just learned one year of basic *Hanyu* at university. Then, I didn’t use it for five or six years. There was no bilingual

education then. The government is putting a lot of emphasis on this now. So, I was sent to be trained to teach bilingual education.

... the situation actually is dilemmatic. On the one hand, learning another language is an opportunity. On the other hand, learning in *Hanyu* presents a challenge for students. They look like they understand. In reality they do not. We need to find a better way of teaching them.

The participants are clearly concerned about the impact of *Hanyu* as the medium of instruction because while learning another language, *Hanyu* in this case, is definitely an opportunity, learning *in it* may be an impediment to comprehension, which could impact students' educational achievement. This finding echoes Beckett and Postiglione (2012); Tsung, Wang, and Zhang's (2012); and Yang and Wu's (2009) sentiments regarding instruction in *Hanyu* for minority students.

Discussion and Implications

This case study explored the impacts of the market economy on Northwestern Chinese teachers' working and living conditions, as well as opportunities and challenges it presented from teachers' perspectives. This was done in response to a scarcity of research which can help us understand how a neoliberal marketization project (MacPherson, 2012) that earned China WTO membership and turned the country into economic powerhouse that has had a successful space mission in just three decades may have impacted minority area teaching and teachers from their own perspectives. Relevant work indicated continued poverty that contributed to teacher shortages, under-resourced schools, and poor educational achievement (e.g., Li, 2004; Ma, 2009; Zhao, 2004; Zhou, 2012). Findings of the current study, however, suggest that the teacher participants believed that they had benefited from the market economy, citing more modern and better equipped office spaces, more accessible living spaces, and, in some cases, 100 times higher monthly income (e.g., from 28.18 *yuan* (less than \$5 CAD in the 70s to 3,000 *yuan* (\$469 CAD) in 2011). The participants also thought that the market economy afforded them opportunities to earn additional income and to further their professional development.

While these findings indicate progress and positive impacts of the market economy on teachers' working and living conditions, contradicting the previous work discussed earlier, they must be interpreted cautiously as the study did not investigate inflation and/or the average cost of a decent life style in Xisheng, as

that was not the purpose of the study. It is possible that the dramatic salary increase aligns with the cost of living increases and therefore the improvement may not be as dramatic as it sounds. We must also be reminded that the participants reported having to work much longer hours including on the weekends to keep up with their more resourceful students and felt much stressed due to the constant demand for professional development as a result of the shift to a pedagogical approach that they were not trained in, confirming Lipman (2012), MacPherson (2012), and Peters (2011). It is important to be reminded that the teachers participated in the current study came from a capital city with a population of 2.08 million with non*Han* population of only about 27.3 percent and that one school had a high profile administrator and another school was a nationally known experimental school with modern educational technology directly administered by a government organization. As such, these teachers and their working and living conditions do not represent average teachers and their working and living conditions in Xisheng and therefore the findings of the study cannot and should be generalized to the whole province. They do, however, shed some light on how market economy could impact lives of teachers in similar contexts.

Another finding of the study revealed that the Uyghur participants found the *Hanyu* medium of instruction for minority students initiative, another pedagogical change under the market economy, as an additional challenge for them and their students. These teachers, while supportive of *Hanyu* instruction, were concerned that the *Hanyu* medium of instruction may be an impediment to minority students' educational achievement, due to a lack of linguistic proficiency of both teachers and students. They were concerned that teaching subject matter content in a language that neither the teacher nor the students have sufficient proficiency in is detrimental to knowledge acquisition in general and to indigenous and minority language sustainability in particular, confirming Beckett and Postiglione (2012); Ma (2009), Yang and Wu (2009), and Tsung, Wang, and Zhang (2012). This may be of little concern to neoliberals whose agenda is to homogenize through their one nation, one language/cultural beliefs, as they see pluralism and ethnic diversity as a threat to modern society and therefore argue for the *Hanyu* medium of instruction to promote speedy learning of it because it is economically more valuable (see MacPherson, 2012; Peters, 2012), they are

serious and complex issues of concern to the research community and to society generally that deserve urgent attention. As Beckett and Postiglione (2012) pointed out, *Hanyu* is the national language that all Chinese citizens including minority citizens should learn for more work and learning opportunities, and the *Hanyu* medium of instruction can be an efficient approach for *Hanyu* acquisition if implemented intelligently, responsibly, and effectively. However, the existing research, including the findings of the current study, evoke a troubling reality where *Hanyu* is the required medium of instruction even when neither the teachers nor the students are equipped with sufficient cognitive academic *Hanyu* proficiency and students do not have threshold literacy in their first language to be successful students and future citizens ready to take their places in modern society. Left unaddressed, such a situation can jeopardize the very neoliberal agenda for modern society itself and may even negatively impact social harmony if all citizens are not educated responsibly.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study sheds some light on the impact of the market economy on some Northwestern Chinese teachers' working and living conditions, as well as opportunities and challenges it presents, including a pedagogical shift to student-centered teaching and *Hanyu* as the medium of instruction. However, the data came from surveys and interviews only and the participants came from schools that seemed to have privileges that other schools, particularly rural or other urban schools where minority and indigenous teachers and students predominate may not have. Therefore, future studies should/could explore the benefits, dilemmas, and challenges under the market economy through multiple methods and from multiple perspectives by including many more minority teachers, particularly from rural areas, as well students, administrators, and parents whenever possible. Research methods could include classroom observations to investigate how those challenges reported by the participants in the current study transpire in reality. Future studies may also investigate inflation and/or the average cost of a decent life style in Xisheng to find out more precisely the impact of the market economy on Xisheng teachers' living conditions. Such studies could further enlighten us on the issues under investigation and allow for suggestions for policies and practices.

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