

# Access denied

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Nanai/Hezhe children (Source: Wikipedia)

We have often examined here on *Language on the Move* how 'English for all' educational policies entrench inequality rather than alleviate disadvantage (e.g., [here](#) or [here](#)). But how does this play out in the real-life experiences of real people? Today I would like to introduce Wei Ru to you, a young woman from China. Wei Ru is the pseudonym of a research participant in [Jenny Zhang's PhD research](#).

In 2004, Wei Ru was in her final year of senior high school in a rural area of Heilongjiang province in northern China and preparing for the *gaokao* (高考; 'big test,' China's national university entrance exam). Wei Ru is a member of [an ethnic group called Nanai or Hezhe](#). These are an indigenous people of Siberia and have traditionally lived along the middle

reaches of the Amur River Valley, an area where, today, the Amur River constitutes the border between China and Russia. Consequently, the Nanai, as they are known in Russia, and the Hezhe, as they are known in China, have been divided between these two countries and today constitute a very small minority in both countries: in 2000, there were about 12,000 Nanai in Russia and 4,500 in China. Of these, only around 5,000 speakers of the Nanai/Hezhe language remained in Russia in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and only twenty in China. All twenty were elderly, and Wei Ru was not one of them.

Wei Ru has spoken Chinese all her life and has been educated through the medium of Chinese. Additionally, Wei Ru has spent many years learning Russian both formally and informally. Throughout her childhood and youth there were many Russian language learning opportunities available in Wei Ru's home town: there is a brisk cross-border trade and Russian visitors to the town are a regular occurrence, as are visits to the Russian side of the border. In school, Russian was an important part of the curriculum. Russian teachers were highly qualified and the students enjoyed learning Russian because it was well-taught and was of obvious relevance to their lives. Furthermore, for Wei Ru, who is passionate about her Hezhe heritage, Russian carried additional significance as the language that allowed her to connect with the Nanai on the other side of the border. To her, it is almost as if Russian had become the ethnic language of the Nanai/Hezhe.

Throughout her schooling, Wei Ru had been an outstanding student: she scored on top of her class in most subjects and expected to gain university admission in a prestigious university and in her preferred major. However, when China became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2001 and won its bid to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics the same year, university admission regulations in China changed dramatically. The

English language component of the *gaokao*, became much more important than it had previously been. The value of test scores in other languages, including Russian, decreased dramatically. Furthermore, English became an entry requirement for the most desirable majors, such as those in business, law, science and technology.

The 2004 cohort of high school graduates in Wei Ru's area was hit particularly hard: they had invested many years into studying Russian but English language instruction had not even been available to them. As Wei Ru said wistfully:

现在 [学俄语] 就成劣势了。现在完全是劣势了。本来我们高考可以打130 / 140分嘛，120多分其实 [在我们那] 完全就是中等水平了。然后结果如果是英语的话也就50多分吧，就那样。

*It [learning Russian] has become such a disadvantage. An absolute disadvantage! We could have scored 130 or 140 [out of the full mark of 150] on the Russian test in the gaokao. Actually, 120 was only an average score for us. But in English we would only be able to get a score of 50. That is the fact. (Quoted from Zhang, 2011, p. 198f.)*

Given these odds, many of Wei Ru's classmates decided to repeat the final year of high school in order to catch up on English. Wei Ru and her family felt that repeating a year just to learn English was not worth it, particularly as the quality of English language teaching in Wei Ru's hometown was low: when the high school curriculum changed from Russian to English, the only way to meet staffing levels was to deploy Russian teachers as English teachers. In the process, highly qualified Russian teachers in a well-resourced Russian language program were turned into poorly-qualified English language teachers in a poorly-resourced English language program.

As an outstanding student and given a bonus rating for ethnic minority students, Wei Ru still managed to secure admission to a *minzu* (民族; 'nation') university, i.e. a university specifically dedicated to the educational advancement of ethnic minority students. However, majors for which English proficiency had become an entry requirement were not available to her, and she enrolled in an anthropology degree.

When she spoke to Jenny Zhang in 2008 about her experiences of learning and using English in China, Wei Ru was still bitter about the way her lack of English proficiency had shaped her educational trajectory. Furthermore, as she pondered her future, English continued to loom large: English was an important part of her studies as many textbooks were in English and some of her classes were taught in English by foreign teachers. So, doing well in her studies depended on improving her English, an effort she considered an arbitrary imposition and consequently resented. Despite her best efforts it was almost impossible to catch up to the English level of her class mates, who had studied English throughout junior and senior high school.

After graduation, Wei Ru was hoping to return to her hometown and enter the public service. It is obvious that proficiency in Russian would be highly useful to a public servant in the Russian-Chinese border area but in order to achieve her ambition Wei Ru would have to sit yet another English test, as English – in contrast to Russian – is also a test subject on the public service entrance exam.

Chinese educational authorities have announced that, from 2017 onwards, the English component of compulsory testing will be reduced or even removed. Wei Ru's case shows why this is a good thing. ^

## Reference

Zhang, Jie. (2011). *Language Policy and Planning for the 2008 Beijing Olympics: An Investigation of the Discursive Construction of an Olympic City and a Global Population*. PhD, Macquarie University, Sydney.

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