



# Characteristics, issues, and future directions in Chinese multicultural education: a review of selected research 2000–2018

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## Abstract

Multicultural education has aroused extensive international attention and has been promoted by a large body of advocates due to its significance for the achievement of social equity in education. Such worldwide concern, therefore, calls for collaborative work, with contributions from diverse sociocultural contexts. This paper reviews 179 research studies on Chinese multicultural education (CME) from 2000 to 2018. Six interrelated categories were identified: (1) theoretical discourses on CME; (2) multicultural curricula and instruction; (3) students' perspectives in multicultural contexts; (4) multilingual education and language policy; (5) citizenship education; and (6) multicultural teaching and teacher education. Each category was thoroughly examined and the limitations were discussed. Also, the paper identified various issues that future research needs to address, such as broadening the concept of multicultural education, the academic communication between China and the West, and the need for empirical literature in English.

**Keywords** Diversity · Multiculturalism · Multicultural education · China

## Introduction

Multicultural education is widely perceived as an approach to promote school reform and achieve education equity for all students (Banks 2009b, 2015; Wang 2018). This approach dates to the American civil rights movement in the late 1960s. The idea was first developed to eliminate social discrimination against racial minorities in schools across American society (Banks 1989, 1993, 2015; Grant et al. 1986). It later became popular in different parts of the world and addressed issues such as gender, class, disability, and race in education (Banks 2015; Grant and Grant 1985; Sleeter and Grant 1987; Sullivan and Thorius 2010).

Western educational theorists have contributed significantly to our understanding of the multicultural education field by developing various salient theoretical approaches and concepts (Banks 1993; Banks and Banks 2004; Bennett 1986, 2001; Bennett et al. 1990; Gay 2000, 2004; Gibson 1976; Gutmann 2004; Lynch 1986, 1992; Nieto 1992). To promote conceptual clarity, Gibson (1976) reviewed multicultural education studies in the USA and identified five approaches focusing on cultural understanding and human experience. Similarly, Sleeter and Grant (1987) proposed five approaches to multicultural education, highlighting the shift in theoretical perspective the field had undergone—namely, from assimilation to social justice. To promote the structural reform of school systems, Banks (1993) later proposed five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture. Along with this, Banks (1993) developed a further four approaches (i.e., the contribution approach, the additive approach, the transformative approach, and social actions) to enhance curriculum reform. Subsequently, Bennett (2001) mapped twelve interactive research genres, revealing the multidisciplinary nature of multicultural education. She further categorized these twelve genres into four dimensions of

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multicultural education: curriculum reform, equity pedagogy, multicultural competence, and social equity.

Although theoretical and empirical scholarship on multicultural education in the West has flourished over the past decades, multiple issues have continued to concern scholars in the multicultural education field. Firstly, while consensus seems to have been reached concerning the major principles, purposes, and goals of multicultural education in Western scholarship, debates about the scope and boundaries of the term “multicultural education” continue (Banks 2009b). In other words, theorists and educators continue to interpret multicultural education differently, resulting in conceptual vagueness and confusion (Banks 2009b; Grant et al. 1986). Secondly, a variety of similar approaches and typologies complicate the theory of multicultural education and pose great challenges for school teachers implementing multicultural education (Castagno 2009). This also partially explains the significant gap between the fruitful theory progress and the limited educational practice in the multicultural education field (Banks 2009b).

Thirdly, scholarship on multicultural education has been dominated by Western perspectives (Agirdag et al. 2016; Sleeter and Grant 1987). Studies developed in the Western context are useful in understanding non-Western contexts as they provide researchers with an initial perspective and a framework to approach the multicultural education field. Nonetheless, the dominance of a Eurocentric perspective on multicultural education likely limits our understanding of how multicultural education intersects with the specific historical and socio-political factors in non-Western contexts (Hong 2010; Huang 2001; Sleeter and Grant 1987). For example, in Japan, *tabunka kyōsei* (“multiculturalism and coexistence”) is viewed as a Japanese version of multiculturalism addressing ethnic minorities and an increasing number of foreign nationals (Hirasawa 2009; Okubo 2013). Korean researchers, however, mainly attribute Korea’s multicultural changes to the increasing number of immigrant workers, interracial marriage, and North Korean refugees (Hong 2010). Thus, further research is needed to analyze how multicultural education is integrated into diverse sociocultural contexts. In this review, we aim to provide an innovative contribution to the research field of multicultural education by focusing on multicultural education studies in the Chinese context.

## Overview of multicultural education in China

Although China has been viewed as a multicultural society for centuries, the discussions about the necessity of implementing multicultural education are recent. The idea of multicultural education was initially introduced to China in 1983 (An 2016; Zhang and Cao 2017; Zhang 2014; Zheng 2016). By the late 1990s, the term “multicultural education” had

been repeatedly mentioned among a number of education researchers who primarily focused on well-known multicultural education theories and experience rooted in Western countries, particularly the USA (Wan and Bai 2008; Wang 1999, 2003; Yang 1999; Zhang 1998). From 2000 onwards, a large body of Chinese scholars in the existing field of ethnic minority education (*shaoshu minzu jiaoyu*) have emerged to embrace the multicultural education approach in China’s multiethnic context (Wan and Bai 2008; Wang 2003; Wang and Yang 2009). In 2017, the term “multicultural education” started to appear in the Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development (*Guojia jiaoyu shiye fazhan shisanwu guihua*). This policy stipulated that the state schooling system should strengthen multicultural education and education in international understanding, and enhance Chinese students’ cross-cultural communication skills.

Indeed, certain forms of multicultural education had existed long before multicultural education was introduced to China. One example is the aforementioned field of ethnic minority education which aims to meet the diverse needs of ethnic minority students in China. The ethnic minority groups constitute about 8.4% of China’s total population (approximately 112 million people), while the number of majority Han people is approximately 1.2 billion (NBSC 2010). Ethnic minorities are primarily concentrated in remote mountainous areas and rural parts of Western China (Lin 1997). Due to the disadvantageous locations, the ethnic minority areas lag far behind the majority Han regions both in terms of educational opportunities and economic development. Responding to this, the central government has launched a series of ethnic preferential policies and privileges since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (1949), which have all greatly impacted family planning, employment, business development, political representation, and educational opportunities in ethnic minority regions (Yang and Wu 2009). Meanwhile, many Chinese scholars have undertaken studies that approach ethnic minority education as a way of achieving educational equity and cultural diversity (Wang 2004a, b; Zhang and Tan 2015).

Despite this increasing scholarly and policy interest in the multicultural education field, a comprehensive review of emerging studies on Chinese multicultural education (CME) appears to be lacking. There are a few earlier review studies (An 2016; Zhang and Cao 2017; Zhang 2014; Zheng 2016) that have roughly sketched the developing trends and the overall characteristics of CME (see Appendix 1). However, they have failed to offer a systematic and critical review of the existing research on CME. Moreover, the fact that these previous reviews were published in Chinese has limited their access to a wider audience. We, therefore, would like to address these gaps in the literature by providing a comprehensive review of CME research published in

Chinese and English. By doing this, we firstly aim to inform a wider academic community about the CME research published in Chinese. Secondly, we analyze the case of CME to enrich the international perspective on multicultural education field and stimulate global scholarly debates within it. Thirdly, mapping the topical concern of CME research over the past few decades enables us to reveal and reflect on the characteristics, issues, and future research direction of CME.

## Research method

In this review, we follow three common systematic phases—namely, literature search, selection, and analysis of the studies (Kyndt et al. 2016). For the literature search, we included the literature published in English and Chinese in order to cover a wider academic community. Firstly, we searched the largest online database in mainland China, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), using the key term *duoyuan wenhua jiaoyu* (“multicultural education”). To ensure the quality of articles, the literature search in CNKI was restricted to the journals listed in the China Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), and the Chinese Core Journals Index, where researchers, teachers, and policymakers in China compete to publish their research (Ma et al. 2017). We assumed that these studies would offer a comprehensive and representative sample of what has been written in Chinese-medium journals. Moreover, we decided to focus on the studies published between 2000 and 2018, since previous literature reviews indicate that, since 2000, a large group of Chinese scholars has considered integrating Western-style multicultural education into the Chinese context (An 2016; Zhang and Cao 2017; Zhang 2014; Zheng 2016). Focusing on this period allows us to develop a comprehensive and contemporary overview of research studies on CME. In total, this literature search in CNKI led to 346 full-text records.

We also searched for the literature in English through the Web of Science and Education Resources Information Center (Ovid), applying the key terms of “multicultural education” and “China”. The search process included only peer-reviewed journal articles from 2000 to 2018, resulting in 141 articles. Table 1 shows the search process and results.

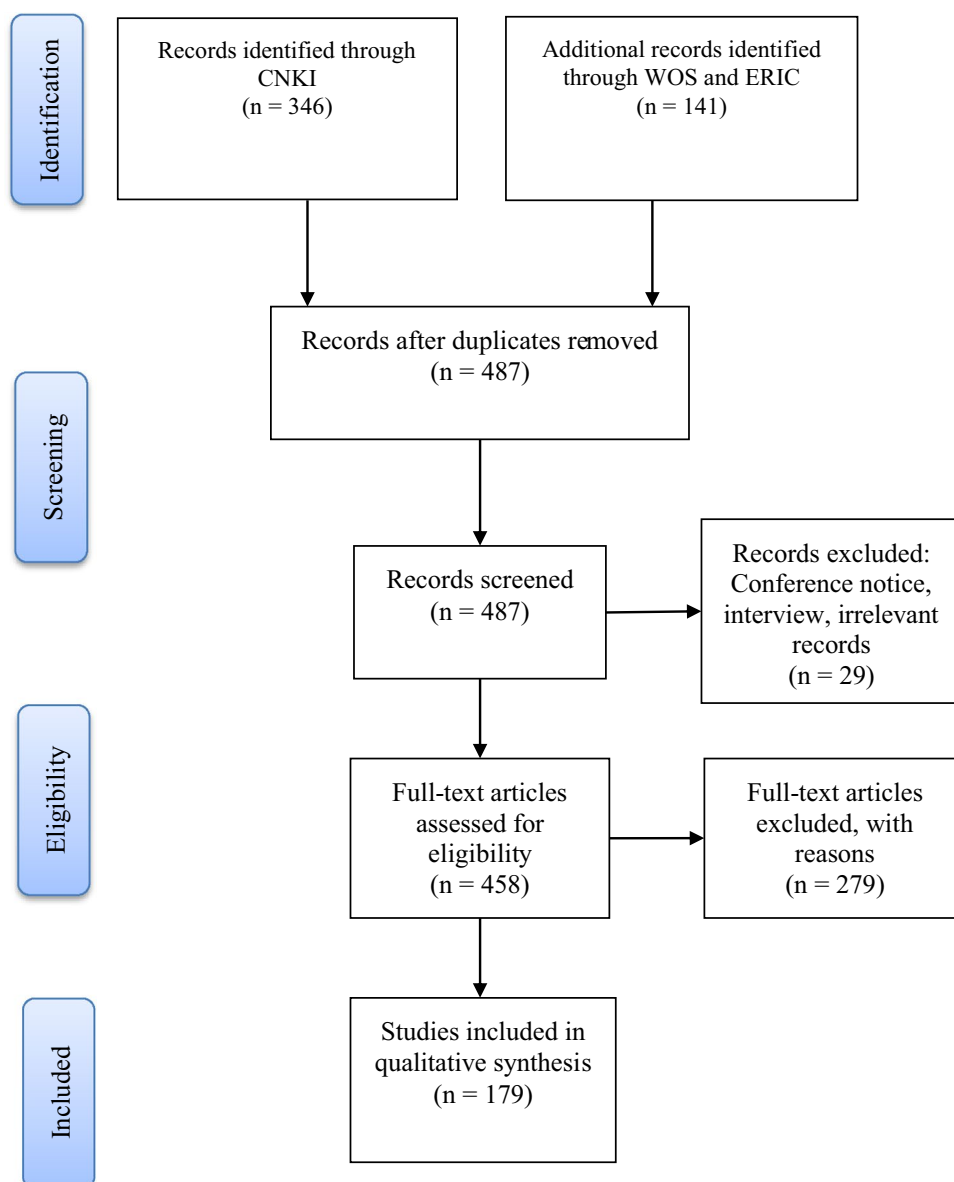
For the literature selection stage, we applied certain exclusion criteria to a total of 487 records and selected only the studies focusing on multicultural education in mainland China. We initially excluded 7 conference notices, 4 interviews, and 18 irrelevant records through screening the titles, which left 458 articles. Then, we excluded a bulk of literature primarily reporting the main ideas of multicultural education in the non-Chinese context. As a result, we removed 144 studies, leaving 314 articles. Next, we confined the article selection to the mainland part of China (hereafter referred to as China), considering the space limitations and the sociocultural differences that the Chinese context entails (Wang and Gao 2008). We, therefore, excluded 25 sources covering Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, which left 289 articles. In the following step, the full texts of the research studies were comprehensively examined, and 110 articles were eliminated. These studies superficially mentioned the multiculturalism and did not focus on educational settings in China. We finally selected 179 articles for further analysis, including 157 Chinese and 22 English sources. Figure 1 presents a flowchart outlining the decision-making process for inclusion or exclusion of literature in this review following the procedures raised by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Group (Moher et al. 2009). Figure 2 shows the time series trends in the number of included papers on CME. The growth rate between 2006 and 2019 is relatively steep, and the speed has slowed down in recent years. Appendix 2 presents more details on the share of literature in Chinese in terms of the CSSCI and Chinese core journal categories.

After literature selection, we interpreted the selected literature and synthesized the significant findings. We used a content-based method to analyze selected studies in an attempt to reveal the main characteristics of the findings (Vangrieken et al. 2017). The three stages of the process of analyzing the literature are shown below. For the first stage, each article was read, and the main study characteristics were examined, including author, year of publication, research objectives, findings, and research method. For the second stage, based upon the objectives and research results, we grouped the literature into six categories. The third stage involved rereading all articles thoroughly in order to retrieve sections containing relevant information and to elaborate

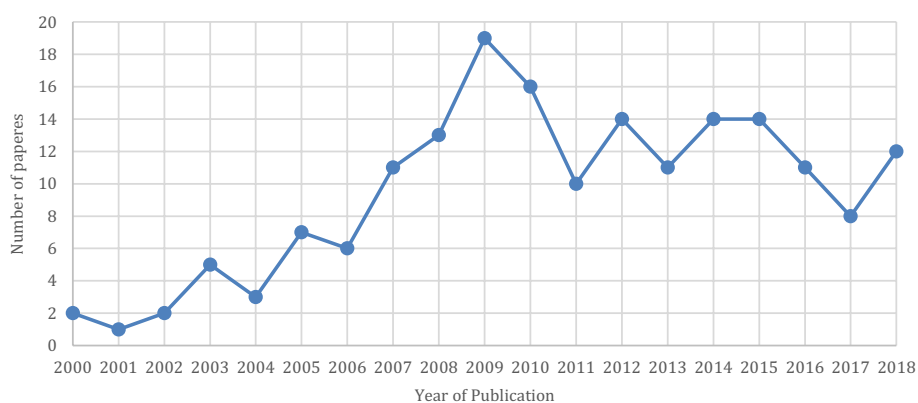
**Table 1** The search process and results

Database	Search term	Search criteria	Returned results
China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI)	多元文化教育 ( <i>duoyuan wenhua jiaoyu</i> )	Peer-reviewed articles from the CSSCI, China Core journals; 2000–2018	346 Articles
Web of Science (WOS)	Multicultural education AND China	Peer-reviewed journal articles; 2000–2018	73 Articles
Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	Multicultural education AND China	Peer-reviewed journal articles; 2000–2018	68 Articles

**Fig. 1** PRISMA flowchart of the literature selection



**Fig. 2** Papers selected via the literature search by year of publication (2000–2018)



on each of the categories. These sections were then coded through content analyses, leading to the identification of research focus under each category (see Appendix 3).

### Results

A total of six categories were identified from 179 research studies following the analysis: (1) theoretical discourses on CME; (2) multicultural curricula and instruction; (3) students' perspectives in multicultural contexts; (4) multilingual education and language policy; (5) citizenship education; and (6) multicultural teaching and teacher education. On the basis of the reviewed literature, a conceptual framework (see Fig. 3) was constructed to posit the linkage between six categories in terms of identity, minority cultural revival, and equity pedagogy. Firstly, the theoretical discourses on CME are strongly shaped by the coexistence of national identity and ethnic identity (Qian 2011; Teng 2003; Wu 2014; Zhang 2009; Zhao 2007). A group of education theorists have claimed that national identity remains essential to CME, given its crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and reducing ethnic tensions (Qian 2010; Teng 2003; Wang 2005). Secondly, citizenship education enables students to both develop national identity and maintain

their commitments to original ethnic communities (LAW 2013; Liu 2010; Zhang 2005, 2013). In doing so, citizenship education facilitates a balance between unity and diversity (Liu 2010; Zhang 2013). Thirdly, to achieve ethnic identity requires the practices of minority cultural revival and equity pedagogy whereby students' cultural backgrounds and experiences are integrated into the school culture and teaching activities (Cheng and Ma 2014; Jin 2014; Wang and Zhao 2012; Zhao 2015). Fourthly, multicultural curricula and instruction, and multilingual education and language policy are the main approaches to promoting minority cultural revival in education (Wang and Zhao 2012; Li and Ma 2006; Xu et al. 2004). Such practices aiming at minority cultural revival enable the teaching and learning processes relevant to minority students' ethnic identity (Luo and Xie 2013; Ma 2011; Zhao 2015). Fifthly, the multicultural teaching and teacher education and students' perspectives indicate the extent to which equity pedagogy is implemented in the classrooms (Ge et al. 2012; Jin 2014; Pi 2011). Banks and Banks (1995) defined equity pedagogy as a variety of teaching strategies and classroom environments through which students from diverse cultural groups gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a multicultural society. As such, the degree of multicultural teaching and students' perceptions and experiences could specify

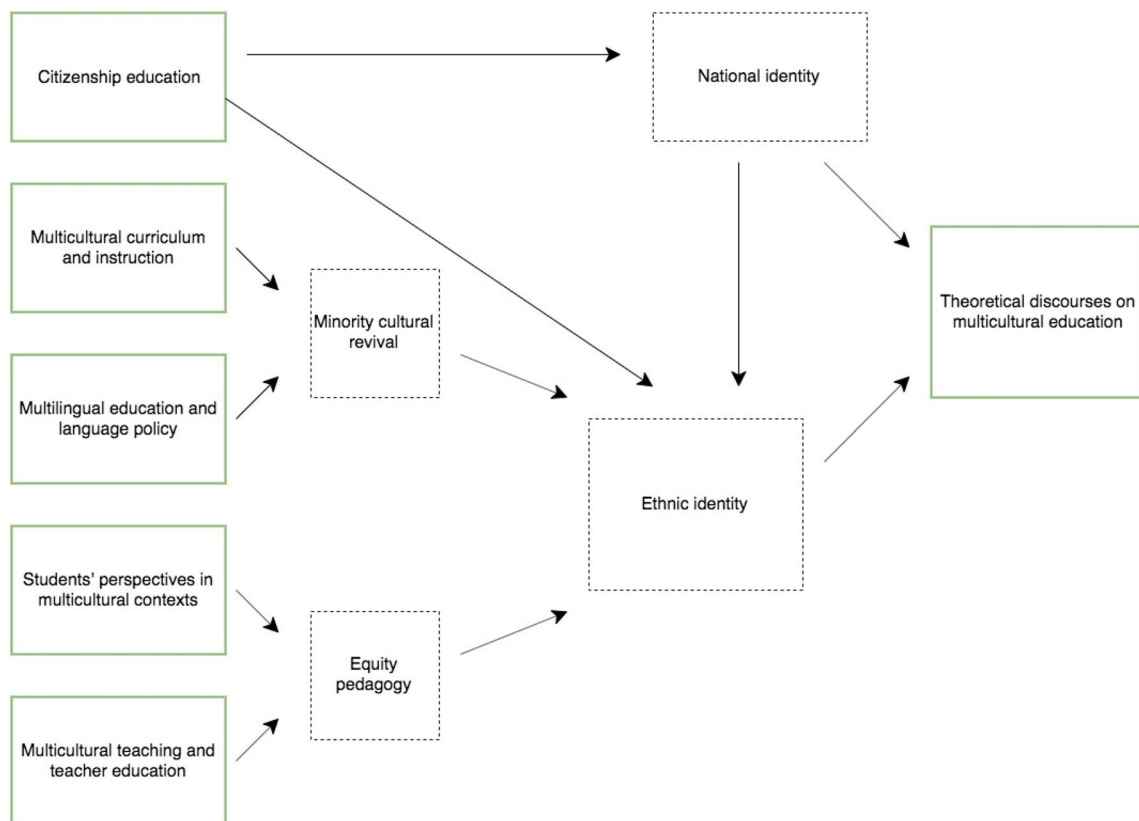


Fig. 3 The conceptual framework

the extent of equity pedagogy. Although the six categories are interrelated, the studies were discussed under the most relevant category.

### Theoretical discourses on Chinese multicultural education

Forty-four of the selected studies have contributed to exploring how multicultural education is likely to be adapted and applied in China in terms of the coexistence of national identity and ethnic identity. A first group of nine papers have specifically discussed the positive effects of promoting CME on ethnic minority students' identities and educational equity (Chen 2005; Jin 2010a, b; Li 2014; Wan 2000; Ye and Zhou 2009; Zhang 2009; Zhao 2007; Zheng 2012a). The first positive outcome of CME is its promotion of school justice and its role in facilitating access to high-quality educational resources among all students, regardless of their backgrounds (Jin 2010a). The second positive outcome uncovered by the research highlights how CME can facilitate the familiarization of ethnic minority students with both their home cultures and mainstream culture, thereby helping the development of ethno-national identities among students (Zhang 2009; Zhao 2007; Zheng 2012a, b).

A second group of 35 studies have noted that the role of national identity in achieving social cohesion needs to be discussed as multicultural education is conceptualized in China. Authors have argued that CME ought to develop unique Chinese characteristics, given the fact that the theory and practices of multicultural education likely vary in diverse contexts with different historical backgrounds (Geng 2013; Qian 2010). As Qian (2010) has said, "explorations into multicultural education must be linked with the political, cultural, and regional situations of multinational unity in China's society" (p. 70). Some studies have further pointed out that Western-style multicultural education has faced several challenges, which CME should avoid. For instance, Qian (2010) has argued that multicultural education in the West overemphasizes cultural differences and ignores the integration of minority groups into the mainstream society, resulting in the aggravation of social conflict. Therefore, multicultural education in the Chinese context should aim to reduce ethnic tensions and improve social cohesion by strengthening national identity.

In their attempts to realize multicultural education in China, four authors have proposed a multicultural education model suited to the Chinese context. Qian (2011), Teng (2003), Wang (2005) and Wu (2014) have advocated adoption of an indigenous term, *duoyuan yitihua jiaoyu* or *duoyuan wenhua zhenghe jiaoyu* ("integrated multicultural education") to distinguish CME from the Western notion of "multicultural education" (*duoyuan wenhua jiaoyu*). This indigenous concept affirms the fundamental discourse

of one "Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu*) when framing multicultural education in China. In other words, "integrated multicultural education" focuses more on national integration and political stability. According to this view, the economic development and multicultural inheritance of all ethnic groups must be based on the unity and harmony of the Chinese state (Wang 2005). Such discourse of national identity also shapes the CME in a particular way, demonstrating its distinction from other Western models (Wang 2003, 2005; Wang and He 2000; Wang et al. 2007). As Wang et al. (2007) have argued, "the biggest difference between Chinese integrated multicultural education and Western multicultural education is that unity education is the core" (p. 146). Based on the concept of integrated multicultural education, Qian (2010, 2011) has further suggested that CME should shift its focus from the conflict among ideologies of statism, localism, and individualism to mutual ecological balance between the individual and the whole. To achieve this ecological balance, he has developed a model based on three levels of multicultural education: multicultural dialogue education, multicultural *tongda* (access and comprehension) education, and multicultural *ronghui* (convergence) education. Indeed, the notion of "integrated multicultural education" is originally based on the paradigm of Chinese ethnic relations proposed by the leading Chinese sociologist Fei (1989) who suggested the notion of the "pluralist–unity structure of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti geju*). This paradigm demonstrates the harmonious pattern of ethnic relations in Chinese history by emphasizing the coexistence of diversity and unity. Given the blurred boundary between multiethnic education and CME, the idea of "pluralist–unity structure of the Chinese nation" has been widely adopted as a theoretical base for interpreting the multicultural education system in China (Wang 2004a).

The underlying contextual differences behind "multicultural education" and "integrated multicultural education" are further illustrated in the literature. The first difference relates to the ethnic composition of China and that of Western countries. Wang (2004a, b) and Wang et al. (2007) have argued that China presents characteristics of *indigenous diversity*. By this, they mean that ethnic minorities are the original inhabitants of China as they have co-existed with the Han majority for centuries. Through lasting cultural exchange among ethnic groups, ethnic minority cultures have been integrated into the Chinese culture (*zhonghua wenhua*). Such cultural integration processes provide a solid basis for the formation of national identity. Comparatively, multicultural populations in the West, particularly in Europe, are mainly composed of international immigrants. This is described as *external diversity* which is not conducive to the development of national identity (Wang and He 2000; Wang et al. 2007). The second difference between the two terms relates to the various living patterns in China and Western

countries. Wang et al. (2007) have argued that CME focuses on ethnic minorities who are predominantly concentrated in impoverished borderlands with a harsh climate and undesirable geographical conditions. However, in most Western nations, multicultural education is mainly practiced in urban areas and large cities where the immigrant minorities and majorities live. As a result, it has been argued that multicultural education in the West, particularly in Western Europe, emerged primarily due to the cultural and political needs of diverse immigrant groups (Wang 2004a, b, 2005; Tang and Pan 2000). In contrast, CME primarily aims to narrow the economic gap between the ethnic minority regions and Han majority areas in order to promote the social cohesion and national identity (Wan and Bai 2008; Wang and He 2000).

### Multicultural curricula and instruction

Multicultural curricula and instruction play a crucial role in promoting minority cultural revival and raising ethnic identity awareness. This research category was examined in 81 studies, of which 17 have discussed the assumptions and the goals underlying curriculum change in China. For instance, Huang (2007), Luo (2006) and Xiao (2010) have shared their reflections on the interrelation between curriculum design and cultural elements. They have emphasized that curriculum reform plans in China need to consider diverse cultural factors and embrace multiculturalism. Liao (2006) has argued that multicultural curricula refers to the incorporation of different ethnic cultures into the existing curriculum system, which aims to promote the revival of cultural traditions of all ethnic groups and strengthen their ethno-cultural identities.

Within this category, 33 studies have examined national-level school curricula and instructional activities. These studies have found that ethnic minority cultures have been marginalized in the national curricula system, and proposed various approaches to integrate ethnic minority cultures into the existing subject matter. Firstly, three studies discussed Han-dominated teaching materials in the subject of Chinese. Wang and Pi (2014) and Wei (2008) reviewed Chinese textbooks for primary and secondary education by conducting a content analysis. They found that existing Chinese textbooks pay little heed to ethnic minority cultures and have implicit stereotypes towards disadvantaged groups in China. One of the potential reasons for this might be that textbooks in Chinese schools are regarded by the central government as a special ideological tool (Wei 2008). Such selection processes by the government could lead to the domination of Han mainstream knowledge in Chinese textbooks and ignore the representation of ethnic minorities in schools.

Secondly, 14 studies discussing music education revealed that Eurocentrism and the Han majority have dominated the implementation of music education. A study by Zhao and Ni

(2015) collected data on 857 students from six Chinese universities in Hebei province. They found that music teachers in China tend to judge the merits of music according to classic Western norms, lacking comprehensive and critical perspectives in their teaching processes. Through a survey on secondary school teachers' attitudes and practices of teaching Chinese folk music, Han and Leung (2017) concluded that Chinese folk music is underrepresented in the music curriculum. Hence, they suggested that balancing Western classical music and Chinese folk music would enhance students' multicultural perspectives. Similarly, Chang (2010) and Jin (2007) highlighted the need for multicultural teaching goals for music education and embracing diverse styles of music belonging to different ethnic groups. A multicultural music curriculum needs to integrate ethnic minority cultures and accommodate the various needs of diverse students (Chang 2010; Jin 2007; Xu 2015).

Thirdly, the English curriculum was discussed in 13 studies which explored approaches to China's reform of English teaching in a multicultural context. Ren (2014) and Yang (2013) argued that English teachers in China should provide more opportunities for learners to use the English language and experience Western cultures in practice. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that teachers should adopt new instruction methods, such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching, which would contribute to achieving a more multicultural English education (Ren 2014; Tang 2002). A study by Wang (2018) discussed reform of English language teaching in ethnic minority areas from the culturally responsive pedagogy perspective, calling for the integration of students' home cultures into methods of instruction.

Fourthly, the subject of physical education was linked to multiculturalism in two studies (Wang and Zhao 2012; Xu et al. 2004). Xu et al. (2004) have contended that the physical education curriculum in the Chinese context should focus on the geographical characteristics of each school and the local community to promote a closer connection between school curriculum, life, and society. As the empirical evidence for this, Wang and Zhao (2012) conducted a survey in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region to study the feasibility of implementing a physical education curriculum in line with local ethno-cultural characteristics. They targeted Uighur students particularly. In this study, the researchers proposed the sport of wrestling as an example of multicultural physical education. In their view, this traditional sport would meet the learning needs of local students and promote minority cultural revival in schools.

Fifthly, one article by Hua (2018) discussed the effect of the multicultural education perspective on the arts curriculum, pointing out the value of painting on promoting mutual respect and understanding between different regional cultures.

In addition to the national-level curricula, 31 studies have addressed local-based and school-based multicultural curricula, which are designed to represent ethnic minority cultures based on the specific characteristics of schools and ethnic minority regions (Wang 2006, 2008). Focusing on minority cultural revival, such types of multicultural curricula are contrasted to the national-level subjects (e.g., Chinese, English) that follow central educational standards (Li and Ma 2006; Wang 2006, 2008). Regarding local-based and school-based multicultural curricula, the authors discussed goals and purposes, significance, principles, characteristics, and approaches. For example, Chen (2005) and Xie (2014) have suggested that local-based and school-based curricula have positive effects on minority cultural revival. For a long period, the mainstream culture has dominated school curricula, and ethnic minority cultures are, therefore, under-represented in state education. Thus, local-based and school-based curricula are expected to contribute to protecting ethnic minority cultures and strengthening students' ethnic identities (Luo and Xie 2013; Ma 2011; Zhao 2015). Some studies have also discussed the basic principles for developing local- and school-based curricula. For example, Cao and Zhang (2008) have pointed out that curriculum development in ethnic minority regions should achieve a balance between the self and others, inheritance and innovation, and unity and diversity. Likewise, Wang (2006) recommended adopting the "pluralist–unity structure of the Chinese nation" concept in designing curriculum materials. Along with this, the bulk of the literature further discussed a range of approaches to developing local-based and school-based multicultural curricula (Cao and Zhang 2008; Chen 2005; Ma 2011; Wang 2006; Jin 2011; Zhao 2009). These authors proposed that local-based and school-based curricula should integrate diverse ethnic cultural contents, including architecture, history, literature, festivals, customs, language, drama, music, medicine, and the residential environment, etc. An empirical study by Li and Ma (2006) provided an example in a specific ethnic context. This study investigated the school-based curricula of Tibetan primary and secondary schools in Gannan (Gansu province) and divided Tibetan culture into six aspects: life culture, etiquette culture, folk heritage culture, technological culture, religious culture, and festival culture. Based on these cultural resources, the authors argued that a range of local and school-based curricula could be developed and applied in Tibetan minority schools to support Tibetan students' ethnic and cultural identities.

### Students' perspectives in multicultural contexts

Six studies have discussed students' experiences and perceptions in multicultural contexts, which indicates to degree to which the equity pedagogy has been implemented in education. Three of the studies examined college students'

multicultural awareness and attitudes. Surveying nursing students enrolled in a 4-year bachelor program with a questionnaire on cross-cultural care, Wang et al. (2018) have found that students scored poorly on knowledge and skills related to cultural sensitivity. Thus, they emphasized that teachers should integrate cross-cultural care into the nursing curricula. Similarly, Ma et al. (2014) conducted focus group interviews to explore the attitudes of nursing students in two colleges in Yunnan Province. The study revealed that students lack cultural awareness, sensitivity, and humility. Hampton and Xiao (2009) surveyed 534 college students to explore their attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. Their research showed that university students enrolled in regular education or with little knowledge of disabilities held more negative attitudes about people with intellectual disabilities than their counterparts in special education or with more knowledge of disabilities.

The remaining studies have investigated the experiences of Uighur, Naxi, and Korean students. The number of students at the senior middle-school level from the interior region of Xinjiang enrolling in schools of China's developed cities has been expanding recently. Luo (2010) proposed a wide range of pedagogical strategies for these schools, in order to enhance Uighur students' acculturation processes in multicultural campuses. Through an ethnographic case study, Ge et al. (2012) have explored the frustrating life and study experiences of a female Naxi college student as a trilingual learner. Their research has revealed that the Naxi girl was struggling with the Han-dominated university curricula and learning environment as she was confronted with multilingual challenges, identity issues, and psychological problems. Therefore, the authors suggested that the current curriculum design, educational policies, and pedagogical practices in diverse higher education settings are problematic and need to be reformed. Utilizing field observation methods and semi-structured interviews, Gao (2010) examined the effects of ethnicity and achievement in the formation of interethnic friendships among a group of ethnic Korean pupils in northeast China. The results categorized participating students into three groups based on their diverse friendship orientations. The first group of students tended to reject interethnic friendships and interacted primarily with other ethnic Korean students, whereas the second group of students preferred to hang around with high achievers irrespective of their ethnicity. The third group of students was found to associate mainly with high-achieving "Han" peers.

### Multilingual education and language policy

Nine studies discussed multilingual education and language policy in China. Language diversity has been inherently linked to cultural diversity in China where 80 spoken languages and about 30 written languages exist (Wang and



Gao 2008; He 2009a). Over the past few decades, China has formulated a set of educational policies to enhance ethnic language survival in ethnic minority areas. Of them, the bilingual education policy, which was first introduced in ethnic minority areas in the early 1950s, received the most attention in official discourse (Fan 2010). Despite the political suppression during the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, the right to bilingual education has been maintained through laws and policies since the late 1970s (Wang and Phillion 2009).

The literature has shown that there are two types of multilingual education applied in ethnic minority areas of China (He 2009a). The dominant one is the bilingual education model, namely, Mandarin Chinese plus one of the ethnic minority languages. The other one refers to trilingual education, which incorporates Mandarin Chinese, English, and one of the ethnic minority languages. Huang and Wang (2012) and Wu (2005) have argued that trends in globalization will change traditional bilingual education into trilingual education in the future.

Moreover, a few studies have considered how multilingual education practice is interrelated with multicultural education. Li (2003) and Liu (2011) have argued that learning Mandarin Chinese would greatly foster ethnic minority students' intercultural communicative competence and promote mutual understanding between diverse ethnic cultures. On the other hand, Wang and Phillion (2009) have contended that multicultural education can promote the values of minority languages and cultures in schools, which may, in turn, improve ethnic minority students' ethnic identity and academic achievement. Other theoretical discussions have added that multicultural education perspective provides a solid theoretical framework for interpreting and implementing multilingual education in China (He 2009b; Liu 2011; Teng 2012).

### Citizenship education

Nine studies have examined issues of citizenship education aiming at promoting national identity and ethnic identity in socialist China. Zhang (2005) and Zhang (2013) discussed the linkage between citizenship education and multicultural education. They indicated that increasing cultural diversity within nation-states throughout the world urgently requires citizenship education. As a significant aspect of CME, citizenship education enables ethnic minority students to develop an allegiance to the national civic culture and maintain their commitment to original ethnic communities (Liu 2010; Zhang 2013). In other words, citizenship education could help to alleviate the negative outcomes of cultural diversity by helping minorities to achieve a delicate balance between diversity and unity. By examining the policy documents, curriculum standards, and related commentaries,

LAW (2013) highlighted the importance placed on Chinese citizenship education in helping students develop global, national, and local identities and actively participate in a multicultural world.

Furthermore, some researchers (Xue and Zhao 2016; Zhou and Zhu 2009) have emphasized the goal of political stability when discussing citizenship education for ethnic minorities in the Chinese context. This might be based on the prevailing argument that so-called hostile forces abroad may act to undermine the reunification of China by taking advantage of its ethnic and cultural diversity (Zhou and Zhu 2009). Therefore, in several studies, it was assumed that promoting citizenship education would protect China's national security and help to build a harmonious China (Liu 2010; Ouyang and Su 2012; Qi 2008). Comparatively, Zhang (2005) presented a critical stance towards the existing citizenship education in multicultural Chinese society. The author argued that Chinese citizenship education has focused alone on the ideological and political discourse by inculcating the mainstream Han values of nationhood to ethnic minority students. Indeed, Chinese schools have played a leading role in controlling the entire citizenship education system for a long period and has aimed at defending the legitimacy of the political foundation of the country (Zhang 2005). In response to this issue, Zhang (2005) and Zhou and Zhu (2009) proposed to not only reform the existing citizenship education, through teaching the knowledge and skills that are required to become effective citizens, but also to highlight the importance of constructing citizenship education curricula in ethnic minority areas.

### Multicultural teaching and teacher education

Thirty studies discussed teachers' cultural sensitivity and reform of the teacher education program in response to the need for equity pedagogy. In the past decade, the concept of cultural sensitivity has increasingly appeared in Chinese literature. In our review, eleven studies explored the definitions, goals, and purposes of developing teachers' cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity has essentially been seen as a psychological and physiological state of moderate awakening for teachers who become highly sensitive to the diverse cultural identities and cultural differences of students or individuals (Cheng and Ma 2014; Jin 2014; Pi 2011; Lu and Tao 2014). The authors agreed that equity pedagogy and educational changes cannot be achieved without teachers who have multicultural teaching experience and cross-cultural abilities (Pi 2011; Zhang 2015). However, in China, little attention has been paid to the cultural background and cultural differences of students in the traditional teaching process. Therefore, it has been assumed that teachers with cultural sensitivity could transform old instruction methods by reflecting on the

experience of their own ethnic cultures and exploring how they might interact with other ethnic and cultural groups.

To cultivate teachers' cultural sensitivity, a group of education scholars have proposed various approaches. Zhang (2015) has suggested that strengthening teachers' critical thinking could advance their multicultural teaching, particularly in ethnic minority regions. Teachers with critical perspectives do not embody the authoritative knowledge presupposed by the Chinese government and are not confined to passive forms of cultural transmission. Instead, they become independent and reflective, which leads to creative teaching (Guo 2010). Moreover, Pu and Liu (2017), and Zhang (2015) have argued that a learning community with a common sense of belonging in the ethnic areas of China should be cultivated. Such a learning community would be based on teachers' and students' cultural identities, where teachers and students could share the pleasure of learning from each other through cultural exchange. Also, Li (2014) and Zheng (2012b) added that schoolteachers should comprehend the hidden cultural structure of students, as well as their cultural preferences and preferred learning styles to accommodate ethnic diversity in the classroom.

This review has surveyed several studies that discovered that the existing teacher education programs in China lack multicultural perspectives and train teachers who are only familiar with mainstream Han cultures, although a growing demand has emerged for culturally sensitive and culturally competent teachers (Jin 2009a, 2009b; Lu and Tao 2014; Du and Liu 2015; Liu 2011; Meng 2007; Zhang 2002). By using the tools of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups in a teacher education program in Beijing, Yuan (2018) has found that pre-service Han teachers hold ambiguous attitudes towards cultural diversity and that they are not prepared for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. This supports the study by Meng (2007), which has found that reforming teacher education programs to train culturally competent teachers is an urgent matter in China. By culturally competent teachers, Meng (2007) refers to those who have an awareness of cultural differences and professional skills to adopt appropriate teaching strategies that address the needs of culturally diverse students.

The selected literature offers two main suggestions in this context. The first is to recognize the important value of multicultural teaching and to transform traditional teacher education objectives (Lu and Tao 2014; Meng 2007). The other important aspect relates to developing effective multicultural education curricula. Such curricula should be useful to assist pre-service or in-service teachers to clarify their cultural roles and form a positive attitude toward different cultural groups of students, as well as helping them to develop multicultural teaching strategies (Du and Liu 2015; Jin 2009a, 2009b; Liu 2011).

## Discussion

This review has documented the notable efforts that researchers have put into understanding CME from 2000 to 2018 and has aimed to contribute to international debates in the multicultural education field. We identified six themes concerning CME research and examined the studies in depth under each category. The theme of *multicultural curricula and instruction* remains dominant in the scholarship with a total of 81 studies. This is in line with the conclusion of Zhang and Cao (2017) who have remarked that multicultural curricula is the leading practice in promoting CME, particularly for the minority cultural revival in ethnic minority regions. The studies within this category have emphasized the importance of minority cultural revival in the school curricula and explored different approaches to developing local-based and school-based multicultural curricula. Nevertheless, we found that the studies we reviewed interpret the multicultural curricula and curriculum reform narrowly. They have focused primarily on including ethnic cultures in schools and the transmission of ethnic cultural knowledge to ethnic minority students. In doing so, they ignore matters such as promoting the transformation of thinking and social action among students through multicultural curricula (Banks 1989). Moreover, the voices of students, teachers, and administrators concerning multicultural curricula and instruction are rarely examined.

The category of *theoretical discourses on multicultural education* is also a popular topic among researchers, reaching 44 conceptual studies in our review. While a large body of the literature emphasized the coexistence of national identity and ethnic identity as the uniqueness of CME models, it is still unknown whether or to what extent the differences between CME and other models matter for the way multicultural education is enacted in practice.

Thirty studies within the category of *multicultural teaching and teacher education* have discussed the roles of multicultural teaching and teacher education in achieving equity pedagogy. Equity pedagogy takes students' cultural backgrounds and prior experiences into account and enables a learning process which is relevant to students' ethnic identity. This process has positive psychosocial, academic, and health outcomes for students (Miller-Cotto and Byrnes 2016; Rivas-Drake et al. 2014). However, the majority of studies that we reviewed in this category have merely provided conceptual and theoretical reflections. There is, in other words, a lack of empirical research on perceptions of stakeholders concerning multicultural teaching and the factors associated with the teachers' multicultural attitudes and practices.

As for the *citizenship education* category that includes nine articles, the literature showed that citizenship

education in the Chinese context mainly aims to develop both national identity and ethnic identity. In addition, citizenship education in China is often used interchangeably with ideological and political education. While many researchers have begun to look into citizenship education in light of multicultural education, more empirical research is needed to identify useful insights and constructive feedback for education practitioners and policy-makers. Nine articles under the category of *multilingual education and language policy* examined the significant role of language diversity in CME. These articles have underlined that an inclusive language environment would not only promote ethnic language revival in education, but also support ethnic minority students' intercultural communicative competence, ethnic identities and academic achievement. Despite this contribution, the reviewed studies did not provide any empirical evidence to substantiate the dynamic relationship between multilingual education practice, intercultural communicative competence, ethnic identity, and academic achievement.

The category of *students' perspectives in multicultural contexts* received the least scholarly attention as it consists of only six studies. Students' perspectives about their educational experiences are significant in multicultural education. As Nieto (2004) has noted, "students' views have important implications for transforming curriculum and pedagogy and educational reform in general" (p. 181). This group of research showed that there is a general lack of multiculturalism in students' attitudes and schooling practices. Thus suggests that the existing school environment and teaching strategies are not helping students from diverse ethnic groups to attain multicultural attitudes and skills. Moreover, although studies in this category included experiences and perceptions of students from different ethnic groups, students in primary and secondary education were largely underrepresented compared to college students. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to explore learners' perspectives across educational settings.

It is worth noting that research on multilingual education and students' perspectives have also been underrepresented in Western-style multicultural education field. For instance, Sleeter (2018) has called for more linkages between the field of bilingual education and that of multicultural education, given that multicultural education and bilingual education are quite separated in research. Nieto (2004) has found that the research on students' perspectives is growing. Thus, future research in both China and the West needs to shed more light on those underrepresented areas.

Apart from the research limitations within each research category and the fact of underrepresented topics, the current review has yielded significant results concerning the main characteristics and overall issues of CME in theory and practice. Firstly, the discourse of national integration persists as

a fundamental premise, which has been acknowledged as a unique feature of CME compared to the other Western models. Based on the "pluralist–unity structure of the Chinese nation" concept, a group of Chinese theorists has appealed for the utilization of an indigenous term, "integrated multicultural education" instead of multicultural education originating from the West. This might be because national integration has been the catchword in the political discourse of China in recent decades. As President Xi of China stated in a recent national speech, "the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the fundamental guarantee for the success of ethnic nationality work and the fundamental guarantee for the great unity of all ethnic groups. Without strong political leadership, it is impossible for a multiethnic country to achieve unity" (Xi 2014). Hence, when ethnic diversity and multiculturalism are recognized in China, it is assumed that such recognition will not weaken a strong sense of national integration.

Secondly, the related theories, terminologies, and definitions have been intertwined with those of "ethnic minority education". Our findings showed that each category was discussed in reference to ethnic minority groups of China, which indicates that ethnicity remains a dominant concern for CME. Moreover, scholars have claimed that the cultural revival of ethnic minority groups is critical to developing a multicultural education approach in the Chinese context. By contrast, the Western-style field of multicultural education has been interested in various aspects of diversity, such as ethnicity, religion, social class, exceptionality and gender (Banks and Banks 2004). One possible explanation for ethnicity-centered CME may be that the link between ethnic diversity and the appeal for educational equity is more apparent compared to other social issues in China. Another potential reason may be the interdependence of ethnicity and national unity. As a matter of fact, in the past decades, a set of ethnic conflicts in China have been observed in both well-known cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as in the far-reaching Western areas of Tibet and Xinjiang (Ma 2009). In response to such deteriorating ethnic relations, CME, therefore, has been expected to play an integral part in promoting the integration of ethnic minorities into the Chinese state, by affirming the value of ethnic diversity in the schooling system. Although the ethnic issue is considered to be a prominent aspect of CME, multicultural education itself ought to go beyond the scope of ethnicity and include other aspects of diversity in education. Furthermore, research looking into how ethnicity intersects with other forms of diversity in educational settings could open new research avenues.

Thirdly, the researchers based in mainland China have focused primarily on the differences between CME and Western-style multicultural education, overlooking the possibilities of commonalities between the West and China.

These researchers have argued that Chinese society must search for totally different theories and approaches to implement multicultural education, given the sociocultural differences in various contexts. Even though CME is characterized by unique ethnic situations and historical traditions, this does not necessarily mean the negation of Western models of multicultural education. Moreover, a group of researchers has claimed that awareness of national unity remains a unique concern in China. Yet, constructing nation-states with shared values is a concern that Western societies have long confronted (Banks 2008, 2009a). As Gutmann (2004) has emphasized, achieving the balance between unity and diversity is important in protecting the cultural rights of minorities and enabling diverse groups to participate in mainstream society. This implies that sustaining social cohesion is also crucial in Western nations. Therefore, there might be some misconceptions about Western-style multicultural education in the CME research field, and we hope that more research dialogues be set up in the future to promote academic communication between the West and China.

Fourthly, multicultural education practice remains at the stage of calling for action in China, although the CME research field has been flourishing over the past few decades. The reviewed studies have mostly discussed the absence of multicultural perspectives in teachers, students, curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogies, which shows that multicultural education has been marginalized in Chinese school systems. Despite the various forms of minority cultural revival at schools, China's curriculum and instruction policies in ethnic minority education remain highly centralized. Moreover, the national university entrance examination—based overwhelmingly on the majority Han experience—still dominates the orientation of primary and secondary education in ethnic minority regions (Yang and Wu 2009). Therefore, regarding CME, there exists a gap between policy discourse, pedagogical practice, and research. Notably, the Western-style multicultural education field has also faced a similar challenge in terms of creating links between research and practice (Geng 2013). Responding to this issue, we suggest that it is important to promote dialogue and cooperation among researchers, policymakers, and teachers.

Lastly, the vast majority of literature in Chinese that were included in the review were theoretical reflections, while the literature in English is mostly based on empirical analysis. The theoretical literature in Chinese has tended to apply some ideas from Western multicultural education researchers to develop non-empirical insights about the integration of multicultural education in the Chinese context (Malinen 2016). In addition, many studies in Chinese were very short (about six pages) and hence did not warrant more focused, in-depth analysis. Moreover, the studies published in English journals are still lacking, given the necessity of promoting international debates.

These limitations have also been underlined in Wang's (2018) review study on Chinese ethnicity and education. Therefore, more empirically oriented studies in English are needed in the future to inform the pedagogical practices in CME and enhance international scholarly debates.

While this review provided interesting insights on CME research and practice, some limitations need to be mentioned. First, because of the time limit, only peer-reviewed, full-text journal articles were included in the review. Unpublished or published theses, official government documents, conference proceedings, and websites were excluded. Second, literature in Chinese from Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan was not taken into consideration. Due to these limitations, the literature search process was not exhaustive or free from publication bias (Vangrieken et al. 2017). It is also possible that some helpful studies have been unintentionally excluded during the selection process. This might have led to missing information which would have otherwise contributed to the results of this review.

## Conclusion

At a time when the field of multicultural education is attracting extensive scholarly attention around the world, it is critical to document research conducted in non-Western countries to further our understanding of the way the field is being conceptualized and framed across various contexts. This review contributes to the multicultural education literature by documenting the research on multicultural education in mainland China. A total of six categories were identified from 179 research studies, including theoretical discourses on CME, multicultural curricula and instruction, students' perspectives in multicultural contexts, multilingual education and language policy, citizenship education; and multicultural teaching and teacher education. The relations between these categories were illustrated with the conceptual framework. Next, each research category was thoroughly examined and the possible limitations were discussed. In addition, we revealed the main characteristics of CME and provided an overall view of the issues relating to CME in theory and practice. Accordingly, recommendations have been made to promote future research, practice, and dialogue within and outside of China.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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