

Language Rights in China

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Abstract

China is multi-ethnic state. So far the government has identified and confirmed 55 ethnic minorities. All the ethnic groups live together, each of them having their own language and culture. There are about 120 mother tongues in minority regions (Sun, 2004), among which only 30 minority languages have written scripts and 20 languages have less than 1,000 speakers (Zuo, 2007). Besides, the constant promotion of Mandarin language since 1956, China has also designed and adopted number of policy measures to protect the minorities languages. This paper will make an attempt to examine the minority language policy adopted by PRC on paper and its actual implementation. The paper will also discuss the gap that lies between the two.

Keywords: language policy, minorities, multi-ethnicity,

Introduction

China is a multicultural and multi-ethnic state. According to a study report of the Chinese anthropological scholars, there are 56 nationalities in China, among which the Han Chinese, make up over 91% of China's total population and the remaining 55 nationalities make up a little less than 9%. The Han Chinese speak mainly seven mutually unintelligible dialects, each with many subdialects, and the remaining non-Han Chinese speak other languages. These non-Han nationalities are popularly known as ethnic minorities. The ethnic minorities are mainly concentrated in the mountainous regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Tibet and mostly in the South China provinces. All the minorities have their own language and culture. China is an extremely heterogeneous country with many regional dialects but always classified together as the Chinese language. The government has only well recognised some of the minorities' language. However, Sun claims that there are about 120 mother tongues in minority regions (Sun, 2004), among which only 30 minority languages have written scripts (Zuo, 2007). According to the study by website Word Finder, based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 25 of China's spoken languages are "critically endangered".

However, after the formation of the People's Republic of China, there were few attempts by the Chinese Communist Party to unify the people of the vast geographical space. In the process of unifying people, the unification of language also plays a major role. Thus, it became the national language policy of the Chinese government to promote the Mandarin (Putonghua) language to carry out effective communication bringing about racial assimilation among the people of all the nationalities. However racial assimilation should not come at the cost of people's linguistic identities. Language is a representation of culture and therefore privileging Putonghua over all other languages spoken in China takes away the cultural diversity. The promotion of Putonghua has been considered by the Chinese

government as a welcome move, that has series of advantages like facilitating the gradual building up of a harmonious society(和谐社会)but, this, if pushed forward in a strident manner, at the same time, poses a greater challenge to the existence of the minority language and culture. Further, the concepts of assimilation(融合) promoted by the Chinese government posed a greater threat to multiculturalism. In the process of assimilation of different ethnic minorities, the culture and languages of the ethnic minorities get replaced by the dominant culture and language. Thus assimilation is not a policy to promote multiculturalism rather a move to create a more homogeneous society.

The present challenge and dilemma before the Chinese government and the society is that how far they can promote a national language while keeping the minority language and culture alive and vibrant so that the cultural, literary values that are found in the ethnic minority communities of the Chinese society would not perish. The Chinese government has been, no doubt, attempting to revise and formulate several policy measures to protect the minority's language rights and the accompanying culture. But how far the policies are implemented at the grass-root level true to their wordings and spirit is a subject matter of this study.

The Consequences of adopting a National language

The dangers of imposing a language are manifold. As per the philological studies, languages change every eight kilometres. The variation might not be very prominent but some phonological and morphological variation is obvious. Hence adopting one language and making it a national language will bring some bitter consequences like language death. There is no harm as such to expand and promote Putonghua but it should not be accompanied by the death of regional dialects. But in reality, the language death scenario has become a common phenomenon. In 2017, 73% of the Chinese population reported speaking Mandarin Chinese, up from 50% in 2000. ¹This shows the regional dialects are in a severe declining state and the official policy which states that ethnic minorities have all the right to use their language in all domains looks vague that's means the very goal of the party that is unifying the people through common language failed rather creating a rift between people.

Languages like Oroqen (鄂伦春语), Shē, Jīnuò , Pǔmǐ, Nù have completely lost their communicative function and are speeding up toward extinction. If a language dies, its songs, dances, music and other forms of literature and arts also die. In other words, saving a language is the first step to save its culture.²Besides, it is through language that an individual conceptualizes and communicates his thoughts which enables him to actively participate in society. In China since all the administrative, political, judicial, educational acts are carried out in Putonghua, many minority nationalities being not fluent in Putonghua cannot actively participate in such activities, thus lacking their representation in any government making decision bodies. Henceforth, naturally, their grievances remain unheard. On the other hand, the Chinese government officially states that minority languages and cultures are valued and respected, and the minority groups have the right to use their languages and practice their cultures and religions (Zuo, 2007); this was also stipulated in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1982. But the policy and the practices, political rhetoric and realities, generally speaking,

¹<https://www.mironline.ca/the-slow-death-of-chinas-dialects/>

²The Protection of Endangered Languages in Mainland China Chun Zhang Wuhan University of Science & Technology, 430081, China

always show some gaps. This gap needs to be reduced: one, to preserve linguistic diversity thus avoiding language death, two: for better governance.

Factors leading to language death:

Obsolescence is simply part of the natural life cycle, flora, fauna, species, birds, so as language can also die naturally. However, language death has taken on heightened significance in recent decades because it is occurring in epidemic proportions. In the period of globalization, it has been seen that factors determining language death are typically “non-linguistic” rather than socioeconomic and socio-political (Swadesh 1948:235). The socioeconomic factors include lack of economic opportunities, migration, resettlement, trade and commerce, industrialization etc. The socio-political factors include discrimination, official language policies, compulsory education, stigmatization etc.

Socioeconomic factors:

A good social and economic condition can lay a strong foundation for achieving a successful life. Employment provides income that shapes our way of life. In contrast, unemployment limits choices and can lead to economic distress. It has been found that Children less fluent in Putonghua find it difficult to compete in the job market where the government has made Putonghua a prerequisite. A good knowledge of Putonghua can help people to fetch high-ranking jobs in multi-national private corporations, organizational units and offices of the government. People having the accent of any regional dialect and lacking the ability to fluently speak Putonghua with accuracy are at times discarded by the employers on the ground that their Putonghua is not up to the mark. Parents of the children speaking one of the regional dialects, therefore, try to see that their children properly learn Putonghua from the very beginning with utmost accuracy. Under such circumstances, it is noticed that the parents use their own dialects while talking with each other, but when they speak to their children they suddenly switch over start speaking in Putonghua. The popularity of the Putonghua is thus gradually increasing following the language evolution ethics which asserts that “over the time the language of the wider society displaces the minority language mother tongue” (Holmes, 1992:56). This observation largely holds good in this case of popularization of Putonghua and the language shift phenomenon.

It has also been noticed that the minority speech community see no much future of their regional language and considers their regional language to be backward and impractical. Hence they themselves reject their regional language by not passing their next generations. Such people are also responsible for the language death.

Industrialization also plays a major role in the language shift phenomena. Industrialization means the establishment of new production operational activities (new industrial enterprises) through new technological machines, equipments and new production techniques. All this raises the labor productivity of the workers employed there and consequent rise in the production volume of goods and commodities. Such a huge increase in production of the concerned finished goods is not possible through manual labor. This also yields huge surplus value and more creation of capital. All this encourages the industrialists to expand the scale of their production operation and recruit more labour force. For this, they had to depend on the rural labor market of the agricultural sector. A large number of agricultural workers irrespective of their socio-cultural-linguistic background were hired and employed for the new production undertaking. This led to the congregation of people of divergent linguistics backgrounds and the formation of new associations, i.e. trade unions in industrial towns and cities. The mother-tongue of

all the workers and employees working together differs, and they mutually develop a communication system that becomes intelligible to all. Dialects and the mainstream language get integrated, leading to code-switching and code mixing phenomena.

Besides, in most societies, it is found that educational institutions like engineering and technical colleges, medical colleges and training centres catering to different trades and vocational jobs are all generally cantered in the urban areas, and therefore the young people move to the towns and cities for higher education and acquire the new technical skill to better equip themselves for prospective jobs. The medium of instruction in these educational institutes is Putonghua. Hence parents prefer to teach their children Putonghua from a very early age and don't pay much attention to teach them their own regional dialect, considering the regional dialects are redundant.

Socio-political factors

Every country has its own language policy. China is a multilingual county with huge diversity, however, there is a constant effort by the government to unify the language. To popularize a single means of spoken communication throughout the whole of China was also one of the demands of many veterans of the language reform movement. Back in 1932 when Putonghua was declared as the national language by the National Language Unification Commission, its goal was that within a period of a hundred years all the Chinese people would be able to speak Putonghua fully. Till the mid-20th century, the people of South China made no efforts to learn Putonghua, thinking they had their own language and found no reason to learn Putonghua. But after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 efforts were made to make Putonghua more popular. In 1982 Putonghua was again declared as the official language of PRC for the second time as a matter of emphasis. Today after 89 years, approximately 75% of Chinese speak Putonghua fluently. Putonghua is considered the language of prestige and power because of the very fact that it is the official language of China. A Good command over Putonghua is seen as the gateway to success. Hence many young Chinese students prefer to learn Putonghua and neglect their regional dialect as they see no future in their regional dialect.

Language death is also associated with the attitude towards a particular language. A positive language attitude of the Putonghua speakers towards regional dialect will encourage regional dialect speakers to use their language. On the contrary, a negative attitude towards regional dialect will encourage them to use and learn more of the Putonghua. It has been noticed that people who do not have good command over Putonghua are often discriminated, mocked off, and are considered non-classy. People well-versed in Putonghua start exhibiting a superiority complex, looking down upon people who are not proficient in Putonghua. In such cases skills, talent, education of a person takes a backseat and proficiency in Putonghua remains at the forefront. Hence most of the people to integrate themselves into the so-called mainstream become disloyal to their regional dialect. Language disloyalty is also considered to be a part of ethnic disloyalty.

Measures adopted by the government to check language death

It took a long time to recognize the issues related to language death. However, once the problem was diagnosed, ethnic linguistics started raising their voice to arouse the government's attention to carry out protection actions. The preservation and protection of endangered languages is a slow and gradual process. Thus the ethnic linguistics first tried to set parameters to identify the endangered languages. The core parameter includes three elements: the proportion of the population who lost the heritage language;

the proportion of the distribution of age group who still use the heritage language; the heritage language ability. According to this system, the endangered language should meet the following three conditions: 1) 80% of the national population have shifted to use the dominant language and the number is increasing; 2) the heritage language is only used by middle-aged and senior people above 40 specifically; 3) the heritage language users only have the listening ability and have lost speaking ability. These three complement with each other, and if these three conditions are met, it can be defined as the endangered language.³ Based on the above parameters till now, there exist 120 languages in PRC and more than 20 languages are in danger. It is estimated that more than 20% of languages will disappear within the next 20-50 years (S.X.Xu. 2001). Under such a socio-cultural scenario the Chinese Communist Party decided the protection of the endangered languages by adopting various academic projects at the institutional and policies at the government level.

Efforts at the Institutional Level:

Off let the Chinese government is running various projects and schemes for conserving the threatened languages. Through these projects and schemes, the government is trying to create awareness of the importance of languages. Since the early 90's the awareness program has reached a new height. The awareness period has been divided into the following phases:

1. The period of enlightenment and exploration(启蒙和探索期)
2. The period of prosperity and transition (繁荣和转向期)

1. The period of enlightenment and exploration(启蒙和探索期):

The very term “endangered language” itself is a new phenomenon. Until the 1990's the word “endangered” was usually associated with flora, fauna, birds and species. However, in as early as the mid to late 1980s, linguists from the Institute of Ethnic Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院民族研究所) during some investigations at southwest China came across some languages which are not at all comprehensible to them. Records also revealed that those languages were never been recognised by any of the National languages Census so far held. Among them, few languages were only spoken by the elderly, middle-aged people of a particular speech community. Children no longer use them and thus will disappear completely after the death of the elderly speakers in the next 20 to 30 years. Some of these languages in the 1980's itself had no fluent speakers. From then onwards the phenomenon of language endangerment was much discussed in the academic circle. In the year 1992, at the 15th International Congress of Linguists (十五届国际语言学家代表大会 Shíwǔjièguójìyǔyánxuéjiā dàibǎo dàihuì) the Chinese linguists for the first time formally discussed the concepts of endangered languages. The discussions of the meeting were published in a magazine titled as “Mínzúyǔyán” (民族语言) and thus the very concept “endangered language” became a new area of study in Chinese linguistics. With further field investigations in course of time, the subject gained much popularity. In the year 1996, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences collaborated to conduct in-depth research on the study of “Endangered Languages of Southern China”, which was the first domestic project to name as endangered language. In 1998, the Ministry of Education approved the fully-funded Ph.D. program project under the title “Survey and Research on Endangered Languages in Southwest China”. This is the first-ever endangered language Ph.D. program project supported by the Chinese

³ The Protection of Endangered Languages in Mainland China Chun Zhang

government. The quantitative analysis of the language vitality of all ethnic minorities in a country soon became the leading research of the time. With the passage of time it stimulated research interest to many young researchers. In October 2000, the China National Linguistics Society(中国民族语言学会) and the "Minority Language" magazine organised a conference on endangered languages to discuss the endangered languages of ethnic minorities. This is the first academic conference on endangered languages in China, marking the issue of endangered languages as a concern of the Party and government.

Various non-governmental organizations also recognized the challenges of language extinction and begun to fund this type of research. For example, In the year 2001, the National Social Science Foundation of China-funded a project titled "A Case Study of Endangered Languages in China" (“中国濒危语言个案对比研究”) in 2001.

From 1992 to 2003, it was the period of exploring and investigating the study of endangered languages in China and gradually this study became a subject of national interest. This initial research of 10 years laid a solid foundation for the subsequent study.

2. The period of prosperity and transition(繁荣和转向期)

The second stage of the historical process of preservation and protection of endangered languages started in the year 2004. The issue of endangered languages received wide attention as compared to the last decade. Several newspapers such as "China Youth Daily", "China Business Daily News Weekly", "Beijing Science and Technology News", and "Beijing Today" published articles on the endangerment of languages and consequently it arose consciousness among the common people. Hundreds of institutions started sanctioning funds on endangered language projects. Dozens of large and small-scale endangered language seminars and workshops were being conducted. The government also took initiative to develop endangered language databases. In general, significant progress has been made on theoretical research and the preservation and protection of endangered languages.

According to preliminary statistics, from 2004 to 2014, there were more than 300 projects on endangered languages approved by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission and more than 30 million yuan has been sanctioned. The China National Linguistics Association and the National Chinese Dialect Association are the two largest linguistic societies. The former has more than 230 members and the latter has nearly 400 members. The members of the society are mainly composed of university teachers, researchers, doctoral students, and local language workers.

The effort at the institutional level played a pivotal role to make people understand the importance of their regional language and how regional languages unify all ethnic groups. Thus the language shift phenomena which eventually cause language death phenomena can be checked.

Efforts at the Government Level:

Mao Zedong said, “Classes will be eliminated first, then states will be abolished, and finally nations will disappear.” When he said classes will be eliminated first, he thought of eradicating the class by unifying the language. According to Mao speaking different languages was regarded as a deviation from socialism. However, Mao soon realized that all of a sudden abolishing all the minority languages and adopting one language policy might upset the minority nationality and their cooperation is needed to build a socialist society. Hence the minorities were given autonomy to some extent. Autonomous government was established in minorities areas and students were being taught in their regional languages. Han officials who were working in the minority areas were also trained in local languages.

Initiatives were also taken to create scripts for those minority languages that had no written script. However, the linguistics freedom was very short-lived and during the Cultural revolution minority language policies took a back seat and Mandarin was given priority. In the late 1970s when the government became little stable, they passed new laws and policies to protect the minority language rights. The 1982 Constitution of the PRC stipulates that:

*All ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secession are prohibited.*⁴

During this period even the local government adopted new policies at their level to popularize their own language. Decisions were taken to make education bilingual thus protecting the interest of the minority nationalities to get basic education in their mother tongue. The local government tried hard to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage to the children of minority linguistic groups, enabling the child to develop its full potential. In the year 1984, Guangxi Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region also set forth the principle of using their minority languages for basic education and learning Mandarin Chinese as a second language with the goal of fluency in both languages after secondary school graduation (Dai & Dong, 2001).

Moreover, special funds were allocated to minority groups to develop minority education: the Ethnic Minorities Education Aid Special Fund, Project Hope (希望工程), and the Border Areas Aid Fund helped many minority students receive education in school (C. Yang, 1994). Preferential policies also included free tuition and books or free tuition, lodging, food, and clothing to students in boarding schools in agricultural or pastoral areas in Tibet and Xinjiang (Sautman, 1998; C. Wang & Q. Zhou, 2003). Every year about 1000 elementary graduates were taken out of Tibet and sent to the boarding schools in the eastern part of China for 7-12 years. (C. Wang & Q. Zhou, 2003)

Such initiatives were taken by the provincial and state government to preserve the minority languages.

Role of common people to preserve the language

It is relevant to mention that, that Putonghua being the national language in China is widely regarded as a language of higher social status is an established fact with the least doubts and ambiguities in anybody's mind. This, therefore, commands more prestige and has more practical values than any other regional dialects or local sub-dialects. But, at times emotions and sentiments play role in shaping the interests of the learners to learn a new language or dialect. Looked at the issue from this comparative viewpoint, local dialects are regarded by many as one giving rise to a better sense of belonging and affinity among the concerned speakers of the same dialect. There are thus some conflicting interests of the speakers between the national language of the Putonghua and the local dialects. Nevertheless, the use of the local dialects is preferred by the minority language speakers community in terms of the national average speakers of the Chinese language. This is so because the use of the local dialects evokes immediate affinity and friendship among the speakers of the concerned speech community. For example, when young people of Guangdong go to another city, they find that Putonghua has higher value in terms of social status, prestige and reputation. Yet, they maintain a strong emotional attachment with their

⁴<http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/4/4.2.htm>

local dialect Cantonese. Even in the new city to which they have shifted, they mainly speak Cantonese on private occasions and speak Putonghua only in public. Thus, they gradually turned out bilingual without losing interest in speaking their own dialects when the situation demands. All this suggests that their language maintenance ability is higher. This way they try to keep their regional identity intact. So also the Hakka people of southern China living in North China and they are also found mainly speaking Hakka dialect among the members of their own community in the time of need. The ground reality is that if the families of minority speakers live nearby areas or in one contiguous area, whenever they meet each other, they communicate among themselves in the concerned minority ethnic language. Further, another phenomenon of the urban habitation to be noted is that majority members of one and the same ethnic minority at times prefer to live in one contiguous area. For instance, members of the Muslim community (Xinjiang people) living in Beijing are mainly distributed in the areas like Niujie, Madian, Yujiawu, and Daxing of the Beijing city municipal zone. They frequently use their own Xinjiang dialect (language) as the dominant medium of communication among themselves. Another factor that contributes to language maintenance is the degree and frequency of contact of the city migrants with their own province while visiting their native place on special festive occasions. Further, a regular stream of new migrants or even visitors from the same region of the speakers will keep the need of using the language alive (Holmes. 1992:71). Further, the new residents coming from Inner Mongolia, Hebei, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang think that though their hometown dialects are not standard Putonghua, still they use the hometown dialects in some informal places in the new settlement area (Zhang. 2006:67). This is because they have deep feelings for their hometown dialects and consequently they very much want to preserve that. Again it is found that the 2nd generation new residents, especially those from Shanghai and Guangdong relatively show enough interest to learn and use their local dialects respectively. They think that it is by learning the local dialect they can better communicate with their Shanghai or Guangdong counterparts and can effectively crack the business deals than otherwise. Thus this class of people, especially businessmen with their ancestral origin in cities like Guangdong and Shanghai, besides learning Putonghua, also put efforts to learn their local dialects.

Current language death Scenario in China

Though the Chinese government states that all the ethnic minorities have the right to use their language freely, however, in reality it is indeed a challenge for the government to realize equal application and equal language education in practice, thus language diversity is highly threatened. Efforts made by the government for linguistic preservation are still not adequate, hence language loss or language death has become a common phenomenon. According to the 6th national census conducted in 2010, language endangerment is especially severe with Tartar, Lhoba, Hezhen and Dulong ethnic minority.⁵ The Tartar ethnic minority of Xinjiang, with a population of only 3682, are facing severe challenges in preserving their language. Apart from Tartar minority, Lhoba minority of Tibet, Hezhen minority of Heilongjiang and Dulong minority of Yunnan has a population of 3682, 5354, 6930 respectively.⁶ Linguists are trying to record the languages, however, recording is only for reference to do further research on that particular language. Passing onto the next generation and ensuring their everyday and official use is the best way to preserve a language. Few of these minority people speak their mother tongue fluently and most of the fluent speakers are above 50.

⁵https://guides.lib.unc.edu/china_ethnic/statistics

⁶https://guides.lib.unc.edu/china_ethnic/statistics

Besides the officially recognised 55 minority languages, there are many languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family and are still relatively under-explored. It is quite difficult to give an exact number of the Tibeto-Burman languages which are on the verge of extinction as few of them are yet to be discovered and described. Dialects like Kham, Amdo, Choni (Tibeto-Burman Language family) have rich culture and tradition but unfortunately due to lack of proper preservation measures these dialects are on the brink of extinction. Over one hundred Tibeto-Burmese languages have disappeared in the last few decades.

Conclusion

It is not an easy task to keep the endangered languages alive. It needs a lot of dedication, hard work, moral and financial support. A language cannot be revived in a day, proper policy and efforts are prerequisites. Formal training centre should be popularised to across so that the centres become easily accessible to native speakers. Bilingual education policy needs to be implemented in the minority regions and textbooks and grammar books need to be made available in regional languages. The government needs to sanction a project for compiling regional text and grammar books. Teachers should be trained well so that they can integrate well the minority language, cultural education with the mainstream languages to have comprehensive development of a child. Besides the government's efforts, the NGO can a vital role in the movement of endangered language protection programs.

Further, programs in regional languages need to be broadcasted on TV, radio, and other social media to widespread the usage of endangered language protection. Some scholars claim that some databases need to be maintained to preserve and record the language materials. However database rather helps to preserve the language to carry out further linguistics research, the languages need to be passed to the next generation to keep it alive in society. Hence it is only the sole responsibility of the government to protect the languages, but in reality, the role of common people is more vital.

Finally, the joint efforts of the government and common people will ensure that no language will disappear and can be well maintained thus keeping the diversity of China intact.

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