

# Minority language planning of China in relation to use and development<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*China's more than 120 ethnic minority languages are classified into three levels, based on their social functions. Level 1 consists of seven languages, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak, Korean, Yi and Dai, all having their own traditional writing systems. These languages, with a total population of thirty-one million, are used throughout whole regions of minority nationalities, for all areas of life. Another twelve languages, such as Zhuang, are considered Level 2 languages. These languages, which have a total population of thirty-five million speakers, are used for limited areas of life. Level 3 consists of more than one hundred languages spoken by seventeen million speakers from thirty-three minority nationalities. None of the Level 3 languages have writing systems or, if there are writing systems, they are seldom used in formal settings.*

*The Chinese government's language planning efforts take place on the basis of the above classifications. Guiding principles, strategies and measures for language vitality are different at each level. This paper describes some of the information processing work that is taking place in the Level 1 languages and several bilingual teaching experiments in Level 2 languages. It also includes a description of some of the language revitalization efforts taking place at Level 3, including activities in which the author has been involved.*

## **Language situation in China**

In China, the Chinese language (here specifically referring to Putonghua, the Standard Mandarin Chinese which uses standard Chinese characters, but not referring to the multitudinous dialects of modern Chinese) is the national language and writing system. Its legal position is prescribed by the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, and the *National Language and Writing Law/Act of the People's Republic of China*. As the national language, it means, on the one hand, that in various formal domains such as state affairs, politics, economics, legal affairs, education, media and the press, Putonghua—standard Mandarin Chinese—should be the primary language that is used. On the other hand, it means that throughout the country and in the multi-national regions, Chinese is a common vehicle of communication between and among different nationalities.

In the minority nationalities areas such as the various autonomous counties, autonomous prefectures and even autonomous regions, the minority nationalities use local languages and writings. The rights of utilizing commonly used ethnic minority languages and writings in formal domains are safeguarded by the state, as stated in the related laws: *Ethnic Minority Region Autonomy Act of the People's Republic of China*, *Education Act of the People's Republic of China*, and *Compulsory Education Act of the People's Republic of China*.

As a result, bilingualism and multilingualism (one ethnic minority language plus Chinese or more than one minority language plus Chinese) are common in the ethnic minority language areas. Examples are the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region where people are bilingual in Chinese and Uygur, the Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture of this same autonomous region where multilingualism (Chinese-Uygur-Kazak)

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is practiced and Qapqal Xibe Autonomous County of this prefecture, also in the same autonomous regions, where people are multilingual in Chinese-Uygur-Kazak-Xibe.

The ethnic minority languages vary greatly in degree of use, sophistication of the written language, standardization and informatization of the language and writing. Consequently, the laws and regulations concerning the employment of minority languages in government official business, court proceedings, schooling and education, media and other formal domains contain additional conditional phrases and auxiliary words like “if actual need arises”, “if conditions permit”, “may reasonably” and so forth, instead of making rigid, uniform prescriptions at the state level. In different minority language areas, local regulations are needed to make further supplements and regulations appropriate to the actual language situations of those regions. For example, Tibet’s local regulations on Tibetan and Xinjing’s local regulations on Uygur are examples of regulations on minority languages at the provincial level, as well as some prefectural local regulations on minority languages.

Owing to the actual imbalance in use between Chinese and ethnic minority languages in the country, China implemented a language policy calling for equality (in use) of each and every minority language, prohibiting language discrimination and prejudice in any form. However, in actual practice, China has to adopt such language planning as classified guiding, which has been proved and still proves to be an effective measure in handling the complexities of China’s minority languages.

### **Classification of China’s minority languages**

China has 55 ethnic minority nationalities, with a population of 105,220,000, accounting for 8.47% of the total population of 1,242,610,000. Most of the minority populations in China still use their mother tongues as the main vehicle of social communication. There are over 120 minority languages currently spoken in China but only 35 languages have more than 50 thousand speakers, and other 51 languages have more than 10 thousand speakers. Approximately 90% of the minority population speak 15 languages—Zhuang, Uygur, Yi, Miao, Tibetan, Mongolian, Buyei, Korean, Dong, Hani, Bai, Kazak, Dai, Li and Yao—and 80% of the minority population speaks the first 10 of those languages.

Apart from disparity in number of speakers, the imbalance in the use of minority languages lies in the following aspects:

1) *Tradition of writing systems and written languages.* The languages having traditional scripts that are commonly used in written form are Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak and Korean. Although Yi, Dai, Kirgiz and Xibe (very similar to Manchu) also have traditional writing systems, they do not enjoy a common use throughout the given language communities or they haven’t been standardized. Since the 1950s onwards, the Chinese government has helped more than 10 ethnic minorities such as Zhuang create or reform their writing systems, but most of these are in the experimental stages and are used on a small scale. Most of the other minority languages do not have formal scripts and written languages for transcribing their mother tongues at all.

2) *The social domains and degree of language use.* The five languages mentioned above, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak and Korean not only are commonly utilized throughout the given language communities, but also are more widely employed together with Chinese language and writing in formal domains, such as in administration, legal business, education, media, press and so on. Yi and Dai, though used in some formal domains, are more principally used in folk activities and religious activities of the two nationalities. The newly created and reformed writing systems of more than 10 languages are mostly under experimentation and implementation, hence are seldom used in administration, education, and media, but are fundamentally used in the daily life in the areas where people know no Chinese. In formal domains the minority nationalities without writing systems exclusively use Chinese language and writing or other more prevailing minority languages and their scripts, whereas their mother tongues are limited to

use around the villages and in the households. Some minority nationalities with weak languages even speak Chinese or languages of other minority nationalities more than they use their mother tongues.

3) *The standardization of languages.* At present the Minority Languages Special Subcommittee of the Terminology Standardization Technical Commission of the People's Republic of China has established four subordinate Technical Working Committees in charge of Mongolian, Tibetan, Korean and minority languages in Xinjiang, specializing in the standardization of terms and scripts of the minority languages. The standardized results are publicized and implemented by the language institutions, and some dictionaries, character dictionaries and textbooks of minority languages have been compiled and published. In addition, national standards have been formulated for character sets, keyboards and fonts for writing systems of Mongolian, Tibetan, Yi, Uygur, Kazak, and Kirgiz, with the standard of Tibetan and Mongolian character sets having passed the examination and approval of ISO (International Standard Organization), and having achieved international standards. As far as standardization of documents of minority language is concerned, the standards of transliteration in Roman letters of scripts, names of people, names of places, names of minority nationalities, names of newspapers and periodicals, and so on, are being formulated.

4) *Language planning.* The National Commission of Minority Affairs is the principal government department responsible for language planning of China's minority languages, maintaining subordinate institutions in the autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties concerned. Some governments of the minority regions have promulgated regulations prescribing the position and range of the given local minority languages. However, these institutions and local regulations only involve minority languages with wide distribution and high prevalence, whereas their counterparts with fewer speakers and narrower range of use are not included in such government language planning.

Relating to the differences mentioned above, the minority languages in China may be divided into three categories or classes. The first category or class includes the Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak and Korean nationalities, which have their own traditional writing systems and are widely used throughout all the minority communities. The second category includes Zhuang and other minority languages that have newly created or reformed writing systems, developed with the government's help since 1949. This category also includes other languages with traditional writing systems but which are not used exclusively throughout the whole language community. These languages enjoy limited use in all social domains in the minority communities. The third category includes the remaining languages (more than 100) spoken by 36 minority nationalities. None of these languages have writing systems and basically are not used in formal domains.

#### **Planning measures for minority languages with traditional writing systems**

Languages belonging to this category all have a long historical tradition and a good foundation of use in everyday life, but in order to continuously and fully safeguard their use in certain social domains, their own creativity should be strengthened in order to accommodate the requirements placed on languages and writing systems in modern society. The standardization of new words and terms and the information processing of minority writing systems are two urgent tasks. In my personal experience, I have organized quite a few experts in minority writing systems, accomplishing the project *Comprehensive Character Sets of Minority Writing Systems in China* entrusted to us by the Language and Information Management Department of the Education Ministry of the People's Republic of China. This font collection includes all the ancient and modern non-Roman minority scripts and character systems that we can find throughout China, as the basis of developing fonts for computer network.

### **Planning measures for minority languages with non-prevalent writing systems and with newly created and reformed writing systems**

The use and development of languages constituting this category are restrained by lack of writing systems and low level of language standardization. Work on the following aspects is proposed for consideration.

- (1) In the regions where minority nationalities live in compact communities and where the minority population knows little Chinese, mother tongue instruction or bilingual instruction should be implemented in order to ensure the handing down of languages from generation to generation.
- (2) By using minority language scripts to document the minority groups' traditional cultural heritage, the minority nationalities will be encouraged to create literary and artistic works using mother tongues and native writing systems, and to develop a literary language and written style of their mother tongues, enhancing the creativity and level of standardization of the mother tongues.
- (3) In actual utilization, the strong points of the national language and writing system that are mutually complementary with the given minority languages and writing systems should be fostered. The use of native minority languages and writing systems in folk activities of informal domains should be particularly guaranteed in order to create, as much as possible, the environment and conditions in which minority nationalities can fully use their mother tongues, particularly during folk activities and occasions that draw mass participation. Another strategy would be to publicize works created in mother tongues through modern media: TV, broadcasting, newspapers and periodicals. In the meantime, it is necessary to enhance the minority people's self-awareness and self-confidence in using their mother tongue.

At present, eleven minority languages are officially used in bilingual instruction (mother tongues and Chinese language) in China. Excluding those with traditional writing systems, Zhuang, Dai and Jingpo are the only minority languages with created or reformed writing systems. Bilingual instruction in other languages such as Miao, Buyi and Dong used in experimental programmes in very few areas.

Bilingual instruction of the minority nationalities in China roughly falls into two types. On the one hand are the bilingual programs of Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak and Koran, in which all courses are conducted in the mother tongue and Chinese is used in only one of the courses. On the other hand are programs in which courses are taught in Chinese and the mother tongue is taught either as a subject or as an auxiliary language of instruction. In the 1990s I investigated in Yunan the effect of bilingual instruction of Miao and Jingpo, both belonging to the second type of program. The result of that investigation proved that the effect of bilingual instruction with mother tongue participation is much better than that solely conducted in Chinese. However, in fact, this kind of bilingualism has not experienced overall implementation throughout Miao and Jingpo areas for many reasons, among them the lack of textbooks, teachers, and funds. But the more fundamental cause is still that the minority nationalities lack confidence and enthusiasm in their own mother tongues. Because of the narrow domain of mother tongue use, they think that learning the mother tongue won't help them further their study or help them advance in society, whereas mastery of Chinese will help them secure more opportunities to participate in social life and social development. At present the language situation in China is that Chinese is prestigious and influential whereas minority languages are weakening. This has brought the minority nationalities to a crisis with respect to their mother tongues and has caused them to lose confidence in the future of their mother tongues. This state is arousing the government's serious attention and the government is enforcing mother tongue education in suitable areas through appropriate policies and measures in order to help maintain native tongues and transform people's attitudes towards their mother tongues.

### **Planning policy for endangered minority languages**

Chinese understanding on endangered languages places special emphasis on the narrow standards of mother tongue users' age and generation. Compared with the influence of Chinese language, a considerable amount of minority languages are on the verge of endangerment or are already endangered. Looking at the number of speakers of the mother tongues, 22 languages on the mainland of China have at present less than ten thousand speakers. These are Anong, Idu, Geman-Deng, Darang-Deng, Bengni-Bogar, Rouruo, Cona-Monba, Canglo-Monba, Bisu, belonging to Tibeto-Burman Group of Sino-Tibetan, Gelao of Zhuagn-dong Group, She of Miao-yao, Manchu, Hezhen, Oroqen of Manchu-Tungus Group, Altaic family, Eastern Yugur and Kangjia of Mongolian, Tuva, Tatar, Western Yugur and Uzbek of Turkic, as well as Huihui of Austronesian and Kemu of Autoasiatic. The languages replacing them are Chinese, Tibetan and Uygur, which are commonly used languages in that locality. As far as I know, the main traits of endangered languages in China are that only senior/elderly members can speak the mother tongues. The younger people use Chinese or other languages more and their ability to use the mother tongue is becoming weaker and even shifting completely to other languages. In addition, the structures of mother tongues are gradually being replaced by Chinese. For example a great number of Chinese loan words are found in their vocabularies and the phonological and grammatical systems deviate more and more from the mother tongues and become more and more like Chinese. This is very common and not only in endangered languages. The grave result is that traditional culture and knowledge that can be passed down through the mother tongues is becoming more and more meager. It is even difficult for people to communicate in mother tongues, to perceive the outside world and to narrate their own history and culture in their mother tongues.

Beginning in 2002, supported and sponsored by UNESCO Office Beijing, the State Commission of Minorities Affairs, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, our institute has initiated programs aimed at rescuing and documenting these endangered languages. The difference between these programs and past purely linguistic research efforts lies in the fact that we not only document and describe the structural state and endeavor to determine the genealogical relationships of these languages, but also record as much of the languages as we can. For example we record oral narrations such as tales and communicative scenes in the mother tongues, using digital technology. If possible we design concise phonetic symbols for them to document and teach mother tongues, anticipating that the intellectuals among them can employ the symbols to document their own linguistic products and teach the youngsters how to document and use mother tongues.

In addition, through this project we hope to promote much wider social participation as in the following.

At present the Chinese government is preparing to carry out a large-scale 'Protection Project of China's Minority and Folk Culture', which will involve both the salvage and preservation of material cultural heritages and non-material cultural ones. As the overwhelming majority of nonmaterial cultural heritages are carried and documented through language, the documented and rescued nonmaterial cultural heritage of each and every minority will mainly be their traditional cultural products encoded and recorded in their mother tongues.

To the languages that may be retained and revitalized to some extent, the native speakers' enthusiasm and confidence in using and handing down mother tongues should be highly encouraged. Without the native speakers' participation, language preservation and revitalization can in no way be fulfilled. Therefore, it's particularly necessary to train conscientious and conscious native speakers to shoulder the responsibility, undertake the job of mother tongue instruction, and create works in mother tongues.

In China, the government may exert guiding and supervisory function in minority affairs, including minority languages and minority education, so the institute should exercise advisory and participating function in the government's minority language planning, proposing to the government

that it formulates minority language policies and implements minority language planning from the viewpoint of sustainable development, paying attention to the overall development of the minority areas, including politics and economy as well as traditional culture and modernization.

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