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# 17 Minority Languages of China

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## 17.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at language endangerment in the People's Republic of China, focusing on three of the main factors that influence language maintenance in China today: increased contact due to population movements and changes in the economy; the population policies of the government, particularly the identification of nationalities and languages; and the education system, particularly bilingual education. Finally, we give a brief account of the major efforts to document endangered languages.

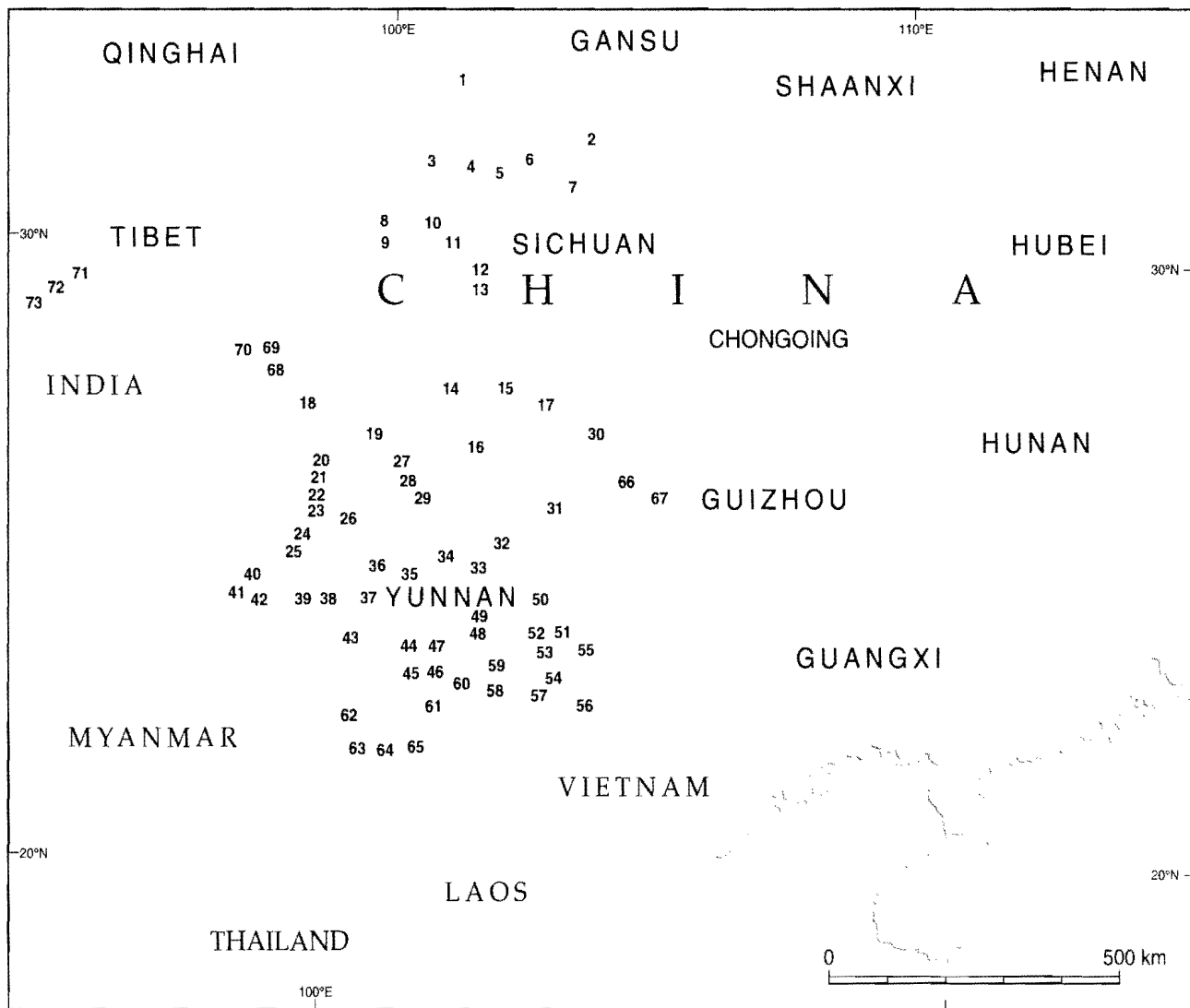
## 17.2. Migration, Economics, and Language Contact

China officially recognizes fifty-six nationalities (*mínzú*),<sup>1</sup> with the Han nationality comprising about 91.5 per cent of the population of 1.24 billion people, and the other fifty-five nationalities plus 734,438 unclassified people making up only 8.5 per cent of the population (2000 census). Despite their relatively small number compared to the Han, these ethnic groups are spread out in large geographic areas covering 60 per cent of China's land area.

According to Sun (2001: 3; see also Shearer and Sun 2002), 125 minority languages have been recognized in China (including nineteen in Taiwan),<sup>2</sup> though Bradley (to appear) presents information on eighty-nine endangered

<sup>1</sup> The Chinese term *mínzú* (borrowed from Japanese in the early 20th century) is used at two levels simultaneously. It is used for each of the fifty-six individually recognized ethnic groups, but at the same time it is used for the totality of all of the peoples of China, which together form what is called the *Zhonghua Minzu* [Chinese Nationality].

<sup>2</sup> Many of these were recognized only recently; in 1954 only forty-eight minority languages were recognized (Luo and Fu 1954), and even after the mass investigation of minority languages of the late 1950s only sixty languages had been recognized by 1966. Since the resurgence of work on minority languages after 1978 many more languages have been recognized (Sun 1992).



### Distribution of Tibeto-Burman Languages in China

1	Tibetan, Amdo	19	Choni	37	Yi, Western	55	Yi, Poluo
2	Baima	20	Anong	38	Yi, Western Lalo	56	Yi, Southeastern Lolo
3	Shangzhai	21	Ayi	39	Achang	57	Yi, Muji
4	Guanyinqiao	22	Lisu	40	Jingpho	58	Yi, Pula
5	Jiarong	23	Nusu	41	Xiandao	59	Yi, Southern
6	Qiang, Northern	24	Zauzou	42	Zaiwa	60	Yi, Yuanjiang
7	Qiang, Southern	25	Lashi	43	Yi, Limi	61	Hani
8	Zhaba	26	Bai	44	Yi, Mili	62	Lahu
9	Queyu	27	Pumi, Southern	45	Yi, Southern Lolopho	63	Bisu
10	Horpa	28	Naxi	46	Yi, Eastern Lalo	64	Akha
11	Guiqiong	29	Lipo	47	Maru	65	Jinuo
12	Muya	30	Yi, Wumeng	48	Yi, Eshan-Xinping	66	Yi, Wusa
13	Ersu	31	Yi, Naluo	49	Yi, Ache	67	Yi, Guizhou
14	Shixing	32	Yi, Wuding-Luquan	50	Yi, Sani	68	Geman
15	Namuyi	33	Yi, Mique	51	Yi, Axi	69	Darang
16	Pumi, Northern	34	Yi, Dayao	52	Yi, Awu	70	Yidu
17	Yi, Liangshan	35	Yi, Central	53	Yi, Azhe	71	Bugaer
18	T'runq (Dulong)	36	Bai, Southern	54	Yi, Puwa	72	Moinba
						73	Tsangla

Figure 17.1. Distribution of Tibeto-Burman languages in China

languages just within the People's Republic of China, forty-one of which are not on Sun's list.<sup>3</sup> Fifty per cent of the languages listed by Sun have less than 10,000 speakers, and 18 per cent have less than 1,000 speakers (see Huang 2000 for seventy-three of the languages and the number of their speakers). However, the number of speakers is not the only factor in determining the vitality of a language. Isolated languages, such as the Dulong language of north-western Yunnan (LaPolla 2003), can survive well even with only a few thousand speakers, whereas languages with a relatively large number of speakers, if dispersed over a wide area where there is intense contact with a dominant language, such is the case with the Qiang language (LaPolla with Huang 2003), can be in danger of language shift within a relatively short time. Within China the latter is by far the more common situation today. Even the Dulong area is being opened up now with a road through the mountains. Although there are five large autonomous regions (Tibet (Tibetan), Xinjiang (Uyghur), Guangxi (Zhuang), Ningxia (Hui), Inner Mongolia (Mongolian)), and there are many Autonomous Prefectures and counties in Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and other areas, most minorities live in small clusters alongside the Han and other ethnic groups. For example, within Yunnan province, there are twenty-four different minority nationalities with populations above 4,000 (Zhou 1995: 195), and many live in areas where different minorities and Han people interact on a regular basis. For example, in Luquan Yi and Miao autonomous county in Yunnan, there are of course Yi and Miao, and a large number of Lisu as well, but in fact the dominant nationality is the Han, comprising 70 per cent of the population (Wang 2000). Even in the autonomous regions, which originally had large populations of a single ethnic group, the situation is now one of increased and increasing contact with Han people. Throughout the history of China there has been government-sponsored (sometimes forced) migration of people from the central regions of the empire to the border areas, to relieve population pressure on the central areas, alleviate the effects of natural disasters, solidify border regions, and water down ethnic populations to make it more difficult for them to unite and oppose the government (LaPolla 2001). There have of course also been large- and small-scale migrations which were not government sponsored, in reaction to foreign invasion, natural disaster, or the search for a better life. These migrations and the language and culture contact that they resulted in are two of the main factors that influenced the development of the language situation in China historically, and are

<sup>3</sup> *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) says there are 202 languages in China, but counts the major and some subdialects of many languages as different languages. In some cases, such as with the Chinese "dialects", an argument might be made to support this (see below), but in many other cases, such as with the northern and southern dialects of Qiang, this is not correct.

also two of the main factors involved in language endangerment in China today. These migrations continue up to the present, with large numbers of Han people moving to Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet, and other areas of western China. Some of this migration is government sponsored and encouraged as part of the effort to open up and develop the western part of the country.<sup>4</sup> The effect is that the minorities become minorities even in their own areas. For example, after many years of Han migration into Inner Mongolia, the Mongolians account for only 15.8 per cent of the population (Zhang and Huang 1996: 35). This has led to the loss of use of the Mongolian language in all but the most northern areas of Mongolia. The same process is happening in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet, and parts of Yunnan and Sichuan (see Ren and Yuan 2003 and other articles in Iredale et al. 2003).

In China most minorities live in mixed communities of one type or another, and so bilingualism or multilingualism is the norm. In some cases the bilingualism is of the native minority language and a second minority language, such as in the case of the speakers of Anong, who generally also speak Lisu, but more commonly bilingualism is of Chinese and a minority language, and multilingualism will include Chinese and more than one minority language. The bilingualism is of an unequal sort, with speakers of the smaller languages being bilingual in the more dominant languages, but native speakers of the more dominant languages rarely being bilingual in the smaller languages (Wang 2000). Chinese is the main lingua franca in most areas where people speak different languages. Particularly with the rapid increase in inter-area economic activities in the last few years, this role of Chinese has become more and more important. Because of this, there has been a shift in the types of language situation found in the last few decades: in areas where traditionally there has been monolingualism, there has been a shift to bilingualism with Chinese; in areas where there was bilingualism of a dominant minority language and non-dominant minority languages, there has been a shift to bilingualism with the different minority languages and Chinese; in areas where there was bilingualism with the minority language being the major language and Chinese as a second language, there has been a shift to Chinese as the dominant language and the minority language being the second language; in areas where there was bilingualism with Chinese as the dominant language, there has been a shift to monolingualism in Chinese, or bilingualism in two varieties of Chinese (Wang 2000; see Xu 2003 for a

<sup>4</sup> For example, to improve the education of Tibetan youth, thousands of secondary school teachers from the Han areas have been sent to teach in Tibet, and thousands of Tibetan students were sent to Han areas of the country to receive education (Iredale et al. 2003: 74; Stites 1999: 118).

detailed examination of the example of language use among Bisu speakers, and Yuan 2001 for the case of Achang speakers). In the case of Anong (Sun 1999*b*), a language with less than seventy fully fluent speakers, all relatively old people who are generally more proficient in Lisu than Anong, the major language shift has not been from Anong to Chinese, but from Anong to Lisu.

The simple dominance of Han people in administration and education and the dominance of the Han language in education, economics, and administration are major obstacles to achieving anything like true equality for the minority languages and people (cf. Harrell 1993: 110–11). While there has been a policy to train members of the minorities to be administrators, the majority of administrators are still Han, and what native cadres there are are the most Sinicized members of their nationality, often monolingual in Chinese. Minority people get ahead in China by adopting the Han language and culture. Pluralism is only possible on the local level.

Another major problem for minority language maintenance is the historical attitude of the Chinese towards their own culture and minority cultures. Throughout its history China has seen itself as the most civilized and advanced culture, and “raising one’s cultural level” (*tigao wenhua shuiping*) is equated with learning Chinese.<sup>5</sup> Many minority peoples have also internalized these attitudes, in part due to the education system (see e.g. Hansen 1999). Attitude is one of the greatest factors which influence language maintenance (Zhang 1988, Bradley 2002).

There have also been changes in the economics of many minority areas that have led to greater contact with the Han or other minorities. Due to modernization, globalization, and increased tourism, there has been a change from an agricultural self-sufficient economy to a cash-based economy, and so the men more often go to the Han areas to work. This change has also accelerated because of the government policy of *tui geng huan lin* (“stop farming and allow the forests to return”), which was instituted because the denuding of the forests in the mountain areas in western China was seen as leading to or aggravating the flooding of the Yangtze river further east. This policy means the minorities in some areas can no longer farm as much as they could before, and so have more time to pursue cash-based work, and they have also been encouraged to

<sup>5</sup> This is true even of many scholars. For example, Wang Yuanxin (2000: 6) contrasts “the rise in the cultural level of minority young people” (= their ability in Chinese) due to the spread of Chinese education with the loss of their ability in their native languages.

<sup>6</sup> An extreme case is what happened in Jiuzhaigou (Nine Village Valley) in northern Sichuan province. In order to preserve the ecology of the area and turn it into a tourist site, all of the Tibetans living in the valley were moved out of the valley, and now live in the more urbanized (and Sinicized) areas selling tourist trinkets or doing other non-agricultural work.

move to the lowlands to allow the forests to return to the mountain areas. In some cases whole villages have been relocated,<sup>6</sup> but even where some people stay in the village, many do move to the plains, where they then have increased contact with Han people and/or other minorities. Even those who stay in minority areas have increased contact with Han people because of tourism.

One minority this has had a big impact on is the Qiang. The Qiang people have a relatively large population (306,072), and a fair number, possibly 30 per cent, still speak the Qiang language, but because the population is rather spread out geographically and speakers of the language are classified into two different nationalities, and also because all literacy, education, and media are in Chinese, there has been a very rapid increase in bilingualism and shift to Chinese monolingualism, so much so that it is not inconceivable that within two or three generations the language could be lost, or at least limited to a few old people in remote areas. Now less than 7 per cent of the Qiang are monolingual in Qiang (Huang 2000: 63). The Qiang were originally rather isolated in mountain villages which often had no access roads and no electricity. Even though there was peripheral contact with the Chinese for centuries (see Sun 2002), the Qiang language was not threatened. With the change in the economic and political situation, many Qiang now go out to work in the Han areas, and often end up staying there, either for work or because they marry Han people, or because they have been moved there by the government because of the "stop farming and return the fields to the forests" policy. Many villages now have electricity, which allows access to radio and television, both of which are all in Chinese, so even the youngest children, who in the past would not have had any contact with Chinese before a certain age, are exposed to Chinese, and are now often heard reciting jingles from the TV in Chinese. The dominant language then has become part of the local context through mass media (cf. Grenoble and Whaley 1998: 39). Children now also have more access to school, which is generally all in Chinese (though Qiang may be used in the first two grades to help explain some concepts if necessary), and they have to live away from the village for schooling. Grinevald (1998: 140) has pointed out that this sort of situation sets the stage for rapid shift to the dominant language, and we see exactly that happening in the Qiang areas. Even with the large number of speakers, in Qiang we already find several of the symptoms of the beginning of language death pointed out by Dressler (1988), such as an increasing number of lexical replacements with little integration with Qiang phonology rather than the kind of loans that enrich a language and are integrated into the language, the loss of native proper names, and restricted grammatical and lexical competence on the part of younger speakers compared to the older speakers. (See also Tsung 2003 for the case of rapid shift to Jingpo among the Xiandao speakers due to migration.)

Even with the minorities that have had more success with maintaining their languages, there has still been an increase in bilingualism, which might eventually lead to language shift. As reported by Y. Lin (1995), in 1943, when Lin first did fieldwork on the Yi minority of the Liangshan area of Sichuan, because the Liangshan area was cut off geographically from the surrounding Han cultural area by high mountains, the Yi people of the area were economically, culturally, and linguistically isolated, and so preserved their own language and culture with little outside influence. But in the fifty-odd years since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the area has become much more open to the outside with the building of roads, rail lines, and modern communications, and has become more integrated with the Han areas in terms of government, economy, culture, and language. A large number of Han people have moved into the area, while a large number of Yi people have gone to the Han areas to study. This has led to the change in the Liangshan area from Yi monolingualism to Yi–Chinese bilingualism. In different areas this has taken on different forms: in the area of Leibo Little Liangshan and the Anning river area, Chinese is the dominant language, and Yi is the secondary language; in the heart of Liangshan, in the township towns and county towns of Xide, Zhaojue, Butuo, and Meigu counties and along the highways, Yi and Chinese are equally dominant languages; in areas far from the township and county towns and highways, Yi is the dominant language. This is in fact similar to what happened with the Qiang, and the trend is toward a greater degree of bilingualism and Chinese dominance.

### 17.3. The Classification of Ethnic Groups and Languages

Ethnic identification is an important issue in the discussions of language endangerment in China. Ethnic groups were given a chance to apply for status as an independent nationality in the early 1950s. Starting in 1956, hundreds of scholars were sent out to the minority areas by the Chinese government to identify and classify minority nationalities.<sup>7</sup> Although 400 groups applied initially, only fifty-five have been granted the status of an independent nationality. Currently there are still a number of unclassified ethnic groups, and a few ethnic groups that are contesting their status as part of some nationality (e.g. the Naze (Mosuo) of Yunnan, now classified as Naxi (Harrell 2001: ch. 11), and the Sherpa and the Ersu, both now classified as Tibetan (Sun 1992)). Ethnic groups

<sup>7</sup> A similar study was done on the Sinitic dialects as well for the purpose of preparing materials for helping speakers of the different dialects to learn *Putonghua* (the Common Language, standardized Mandarin).



in China were given official status and designation as one nationality supposedly on the basis of the Stalinist principle of having “a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin 1913[1953]: 307). However, there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between nationality and language. As Bradley and Bradley (2002) point out, China went further than the Soviet Union in terms of the degree to which ethnic groups were lumped together into a single nationality. For example, in four of the counties in Aba Zang and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province people classified as Zang<sup>8</sup> speak the rGyalrong language or the Qiang language. In Heishui county those classified as Zang but who speak Qiang call themselves *RRme* in their own language, the same ethnic designation used by people classified as Qiang,<sup>9</sup> and one dialect of Qiang spoken by them (the Mawo dialect) was originally chosen as the standard dialect for Qiang in the 1950s. Later all of the *RRme* in Heishui county were classified as Zang during the classification of the minorities, and so the dialect used for the standard Qiang language had to be reselected (as it seemed inappropriate to have the dialect of people classified as Zang being the standard language for people classified as Qiang). In fact speakers of thirteen different languages were classified as Zang, many of them willingly, as they shared at least the Tibetan style of Buddhism with the Tibetans, or felt that they would benefit from being associated with the larger nationality.<sup>10</sup> In many cases ethnic groups that were lumped together had historical associations and had lived intermixed with each other for many years, even though they did not speak the same language, such as the Jingpo, who are made up of four groups which speak four languages belonging to two different branches of Tibeto-Burman. In some instances, group identification was based solely on geographic location. For example, the people living along the Dulong river were classified as belonging to the Dulong nationality, while speakers of the same language as those living in the Dulong river valley but who happened to live in the Nu river valley were classified as belonging to the Nu nationality (along with speakers of

<sup>8</sup> The ethnic designation *Zàng*, a Chinese transliteration of part of the Tibetan name for central Tibet, is equated with “Tibetan”, but this designation is not one native to Tibetans, who call themselves *Bod-pa* (Tibet-person) or a variant of this word.

<sup>9</sup> Because the people living to the west of the Central Plains were in ancient times called *Qiang*, when the linguist Wen Yu began work with the people who live in that area (who called themselves *RRme* or some variant of this word in their own language) in the early part of the 20th century, he identified them with the ancient Qiang, and so now the *RRme* are known as the Qiang in Chinese, and have assumed the history of the ancient Qiang as their own.

<sup>10</sup> Aside from the prestige of being part of a larger and more influential nationality, there are also benefits in terms of promotion in government jobs, as members of smaller minorities are prevented from assuming positions higher in the government hierarchy.

three other languages who happened to live along the same river), and speakers of the same language who happened to live on the other side of the Burmese border were considered to be Rawang (see Gros to appear for discussion). This meant speakers of a single language (who feel they are part of a single culture) were split into three different groups. Some groups were split by political rather than natural boundaries, such as the speakers of the Prinmi (Pumi) language. Those Prinmi speakers who live in Sichuan province are classified as Zang, while those living in Yunnan province are classified as the independent Pumi nationality (Harrell 1996, 2001: ch. 10).

The lumping of people into large nationalities also often affected the classification of the languages spoken by those nationalities. For example, the languages spoken by people assigned to the Yi nationality are all assumed to be dialects of a single Yi language because they are all spoken by people classified as Yi, parallel to the situation with Chinese, even though a classification based solely on linguistic factors, such as that given in Bradley (1979), not only considers the mutually unintelligible Nuosu and Lipuo to be separate languages (the latter being more closely related to Lisu), but languages belonging to different sub-branches within the Loloish branch (cf. Harrell 1993; Bradley 1998: 99). The language affiliations assumed in China generally match the ethnic designations. Even when linguistic criteria are considered, languages varieties with as low as 40 per cent cognacy of basic vocabulary can be considered dialects of the same language (Sun 1992: 12). The opposite situation, where one language is considered to be two separate languages because the people who speak the language are divided into two nationalities, also occurs, as in the case of the Zhuang and the Buyi (Harrell 1993: 106). These two nationalities share a common language and culture, but were divided into two nationalities based on whether they lived in Guangxi (the Zhuang), or in Guizhou (the Buyi). As the people have been divided into two nationalities, the language they speak has been divided into two languages (Zhuang and Buyi).

The lumping applies to the Han people as well, and the fact that the Han are lumped together this way is often mentioned as legitimizing the lumping of the ethnic minorities together. Official language counts treat all of the Sinitic dialects as one language, regardless of the fact that many are mutually unintelligible and represent different cultures,<sup>11</sup> and so there are said to be 126 languages spoken in China, one by the Han nationality and the rest by the

<sup>11</sup> The fact that all Han speakers use the same script and write using the lexicon and grammar of the Mandarin dialect (that is, except for the Cantonese speakers of Hong Kong, they do not write their own dialects), much as all Europeans wrote in Latin in medieval Europe, is seen as justification for considering all the Sinitic dialects as belonging to a single language.

minority nationalities (Huang 2000; Sun 2001). Because Chinese dialects are given a single identity, the composite is called a language, and so the different varieties subsumed under this label are called “dialects”, and are not given the same kind of status or recognition as the minority languages. Unlike with the minority languages, speakers of dialects of the Sinitic group are not given the choice to use their own dialects in education or administration, and no writing systems have been developed for them. Because of this, the languages/dialects are under threat from Putonghua. Not only is there no effort being made to preserve them, at times there has been a policy of active suppression of the dialects.

There are special circumstances involved in the maintenance and resurgence of two Sinitic languages, Cantonese and Taiwanese. The fact that Hong Kong was a colony and not part of China from the middle nineteenth century until 1997 allowed Cantonese to develop normally, now spoken by 96 per cent of the population and used in education (as a medium of instruction) and the media. With the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, Putonghua is now a required subject in primary and secondary schools, and there are plans to change the language of instruction (at least for Chinese classes initially) from Cantonese to Putonghua.

The Taiwanese language, a subvariety of the Southern Min (Fujian) dialect, was suppressed during the fifty years of Kuomintang (largely mainlanders who came to Taiwan after 1945) rule, and could have disappeared completely if the island had not become democratic, allowing the ethnic Taiwanese to take control. The language has made an amazing recovery, thanks both to natural factors and to efforts to promote the language.

The lumping of the speakers of a language into a larger nationality or splitting speakers of a single language into two nationalities can affect the prospects for maintaining that language, whereas being recognized as a separate nationality with a common language can be beneficial for maintaining that common language. Bradley and Bradley (2002: 95) argue that this lumping has caused many languages to go unrecognized. They estimate that as many as fifty languages have gone unrecognized just among those people classified as the Yi, and so nationwide there must be many hundreds of unrecognized varieties.

#### **17.4. Minority Language and Education Policies**

One of the crucial factors for language maintenance is whether there is governmental support for the use and maintenance of the language. In China the recognized minority languages are given legal status equal to that of

Chinese, but sociopolitical realities, particularly the unequal political and economic development of the Han and the minorities, as well as centuries-old attitudes of Han superiority, have hindered their development.

Minority languages in China are protected by the constitution. Article 4 of the constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982)<sup>12</sup> states that "the people of all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own ways and customs". Furthermore, it also states that ethnic minorities have the right to use their own languages in court (Article 134) and in administrative functions (Article 121). Although minority languages are constitutionally protected, the same constitution (Article 19) also stipulates a national priority for the promotion of Putonghua. Article 12 of the Education Law of the PRC states that in schools where minority students are in the majority the minority language can be used for education, but the same article also states that schools and other educational organizations should promote the use of Putonghua (Nationalities Education Section of the Sichuan Education Bureau 2000: 2).

From the early 1950s until 1958 a lot of work was done creating writing systems and establishing education programmes that at least used the minority languages in an ancillary role, but there was a change in policy after 1958, such that work on minority languages basically stopped, as it was felt that minority students should learn Putonghua right from the start without any help from the minority language (Dai et al. 1999: ch. 3; Zhou 2002). After 1978, another change in policy brought on a resurgence of work on minority languages and creation or re-emergence of minority scripts, and there has been some success in spreading the use of the scripts, especially among the Yi (Bradley and Bradley 2002) and the Hani (Bai and Ju 1995), but with the move toward a free-market economy in the 1990s, minority languages once again are getting less support, particularly from the minorities themselves, as they are seen as a hindrance to economic advancement and there is often not enough money to support the teaching of and publication in minority writing systems.

Putonghua is also seen by many minority peoples as a key to economic advancement and social equality, while minority languages are seen as of limited use and having a stigma of low socioeconomic status. Local officials often do not feel any threat to the local languages, and so feel teaching

<sup>12</sup> Constitution of China, translated in A. Tschentscher (ed.), *International Constitutional Law* (last modified 9 January 2004), [www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/](http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/) (FRG). See also: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/constitution/constitution.html> and for the Chinese version, see: <http://szbo.myetang.com/xf.htm>

the minority languages is unnecessary and a waste of resources. Education is seen as very important for socioeconomic advancement, and almost all higher education is in Putonghua, although some institutions of higher education in minority areas, particularly Tibetan and Yi areas, since 1980 have been allowed to have their own entrance exams and accept students directly.

Crucial to language education in the minority area is the role of “bilingual” teaching. As China has a centralized curriculum, minority students must study the same curriculum and use the same textbooks as the Han students or translated versions. Since 1991 there has been some flexibility in terms of being able to use different textbooks, but it is still the same curriculum. In some minority areas it has been recognized that students who do not speak Chinese need to be taught in their own language, though the minority language itself, and the culture it represents, is rarely taught (see Upton 1999 for a case where the culture is taught), it is simply used as an aid for getting the students to learn Chinese and the standardized curriculum (Wang 2000). Only those majoring in the language in the minority institutes continue to study in the minority languages. The goal of education is not stable bilingualism and the maintenance of the minority language, but the spread of Putonghua and the ideology of the state. While the education policies recognize and accept ethnic diversity, “they do not appear to reflect a ‘valuing’ of such diversity as national capital” (Iredale et al. 2001: 51). Stites (1999: 95) argues that “the most fundamental obstacle to native language schooling and literacy for China’s ethnolinguistic minorities may well be the fact that literacy in minority languages lies outside the cultural sphere defined by the Han language and writing system”.

Another factor detrimental to the maintenance of the smaller minority languages is the standardization of the writing system and the promotion of the emblematic language. As we have mentioned, the relationship between language and ethnic identity is quite complex. There is not always a one-to-one relationship between language and ethnic identity. The promotion of bilingual education, that is the teaching of the mother tongue (or nationality language) alongside Chinese, has created problems in some areas such as the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. As mentioned above, people classified as Tibetans in four counties in the prefecture speak rGyalrong or Qiang as their native language, not Tibetan, but in carrying out the policy of bilingual education, because the students were classified as Tibetan, the elementary schools in the rGyalrong-speaking areas of the prefecture were all teaching in Tibetan (Lin 1985; Sun 1992: 5). This

is also the case with the Prinmi speakers classified as Tibetans in Sichuan (Harrell 2001: 197). This is an extra burden to the students, as none of them speaks Tibetan, and inhibits their education and the maintenance of their own language. This is the same as considering Putonghua as the mother tongue of all the Han people regardless of what their true native language is. They are mistaking the emblematic language of the nationality for the true native language. Even for native speakers of a dialect of Tibetan, the standard may be quite different from their native dialect, and so cause problems in education (Kolås 2003). This problem also came up during the attempts to promote the standard Qiang language. As there are large discrepancies between dialects, many speakers of non-standard dialects felt it was just too much effort to learn the standard dialect in addition to Chinese and possibly English.

### 17.5. Current Documentation and Maintenance Efforts

The earliest large-scale documentation project was the Brief Description series (*Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan jianzhi congshu*) that came out of the investigations of the late 1950s. Because of the “leftist wind” that blew through China from 1958 until 1978, they were not published until the 1980s. These fifty-seven books were quite brief descriptions of fifty-nine different languages. They included phonology, grammar, a glossary of about 1,000 words in two or more dialects, and some detail about the difference between the dialects, but were quite brief, and did not include texts, though texts for some languages, and even briefer descriptions of other languages, have been printed since 1979 in the journal *Minzu Yuwen* (Nationality Languages) published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The Language Files Project (*Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yuyan yindang*) carried out by the Nationalities Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which began in the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s, produced short descriptions (phonemic system, 1,000 words, 500 sentences, some texts) of twenty-four languages and dialects, with the description and word lists being accompanied by audio recordings (up to eight hours in the case of some languages; Xu 2001: 307).

A dictionary project called *Dictionary Series of China's Minority Languages* (*Zhongguo shaoshu minzu xilie cidian congshu*) was also started in the 1980s. The dictionaries are bilingual minority language–Chinese and Chinese–minority language dictionaries, and have anywhere from 10,000 to 40,000

entries. To date, the project has produced twenty dictionaries of minority languages and dialects. The goal is to produce a set of dictionaries for each of the recognized languages (Xu 2001: 307; Sun 2001).

In 1992, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences started the project *New Found Minority Languages in China* (*Zhongguo xin faxian yuyan yanjiu*). This project focuses on the study of forty selected languages, including newly discovered minority languages, languages which have a small number of speakers, as well as those languages that were not investigated or described in detail in earlier studies (Xu 2001: 307). A book on each language, roughly 300 pages long, including phonology, grammar, lexicon (roughly 2,000 items), sociolinguistic notes, and texts, will be or already has been produced (see Thurgood and Li 2003).

In 1997, the National Minorities Commission began the Catalogue of the Ancient Texts of China's Minority Nationalities Project, a major effort to collect oral and written literature from national minorities in all parts of China. In 1999 the Ministry of Education, the National Language Commission, the National Minorities Commission, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and seven other ministries and departments jointly began a nationwide survey of language and script use in China.

Sun (2001: 6) reports that aside from the efforts just mentioned, the Chinese linguists, particularly the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, hope to do more extensive fieldwork on the dialects of certain minority languages, as well as utilize the dialect materials from the 1950s, create computer databases of the lexical material, and publish studies on the dialects (so far three volumes on dialects of certain minority languages have been published).

Aside from these large-scale projects, individual scholars, such as Dai Qingxia (e.g. Dai 2003; Dai and Tian 2003a, 2003b; Dai et al. 2003) and Sun Hongkai (e.g. Sun 1992, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2002), have continued to work on minority languages and also to bring attention to the question of endangered languages. They have also trained a number of native speakers of minority languages to work on their own languages, and these minority scholars are now becoming important contributors to the field. There are also a number of long-term, large-scale documentation projects being carried out by scholars outside China, such as Jackson T.-S. Sun, of the Academia Sinica, who has been recording rGyalrong dialects; David Bradley, of La Trobe University, who has been recording languages spoken by various Loloish peoples; and Randy J. LaPolla and Dory Poa, also of La Trobe University, who have been carrying out a project to record Qiang dialects for a dialect atlas.

Aside from Chinese publications, one of the main English-language journals which publishes information on endangered languages in China is *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, published at La Trobe University. This journal often publishes translations of articles by Chinese scholars and also articles by scholars outside China working on endangered languages of China.

Much work needs to be done recording languages, but the first step would be to recognize the many language varieties that now are not recognized as languages worth recording and possibly maintaining. Once recognized, archival work should be carried out. There are in fact many materials that were collected over the years, but these are not properly archived and not made available publicly. Only a small amount has been published. If the speakers wish to have a writing system, a standard should be selected and the script created, but as Grinevald (1998: 139) has pointed out in the South American context, if we hope to ensure the survival of a language, standardization of an orthography and development of language materials is not enough. Opportunities need to be created for the use of the language in different domains and the sociological and economic incentives for using the language must be improved. But the simple realities of globalization and the economic value of Chinese and English in the new economy mean that there are few economic incentives for maintaining most of the endangered languages of China.

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