

Language Policies in Ethnic Minority Areas in the PRC: The Case of the Tibetan Region

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Abstract

This paper studies language policies for ethnic minority populations in the PRC with the focus on the Tibetan region in western China. It shows that China's language policies are first and foremost based on the political and economic agenda of the nation-state with inadequate consideration for issues that are important to minority populations such as ethnic culture and identity. Based on the findings, this paper argues that there are serious and far-reaching negative consequences of language policies in the PRC. Not only are these policies ineffective in enhancing the educational achievement of ethnic minority populations and their overall well-being, but more importantly, they are detrimental to the preservation of ethnic identity, tradition and culture of the Tibetan population. Subsequently, these policies and problems are likely major contributing factors in the continued riots and racial conflicts in minority areas in China.

Keywords: China, ethnic minority, language policy, Tibet, ethnic relations

1. Introduction

This paper studies language policies concerning ethnic minority areas in China. Approximately eight percent of China's population is officially classified as ethnic minorities, which amounts to nearly 100 million people. Some of the minority populations have their own spoken as well as written languages and are concentrated in remote areas distant from the Han region. The use of native language vs. Putonghua as teaching media and official language in these populations and regions has been one of the most controversial issues in China's ethnic policies.

Through the analysis of language policies and their implementations in the Tibetan region in western China since the founding of the PRC in 1949, this paper demonstrates that China's language policies are first and foremost based on the political and economic agenda of the nation-state with inadequate consideration for issues that are important to minority populations such as ethnic culture and identity. Based on these findings, this paper argues that there may be serious and far-reaching negative consequences of language policies implemented in the Tibetan region during the last seven decades. Not only are these policies ineffective, for the most part, in enhancing educational achievement of ethnic minority populations and their overall well-being, but more importantly, they are detrimental to the preservation of ethnic identity, tradition and culture of the Tibetan population. It further argues that these policies and subsequent problems are major contributing factors in the continued riots and racial conflicts in the minority areas in China.

2. Literature Review on Language Policies and Power Relations:

Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that educational and language policies should never be viewed as purely serving the purpose of generating learning or transforming knowledge. Instead, they are designed to help fulfill political and ideological purposes and maintain and reinforce the social order and hierarchy. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is the dominant social forces that play an instrumental role in designing, implementing and changing language policies in the educational system of ethnic minority areas (Desjardins, 2015; Leibold and Chen, 2014; Hobsbawm, 1996). In this process, languages used by dominant social forces are promoted and expanded while those of minority populations are marginalized, as Desjardins states: Thus the idea that education can simply be taken at face value to be empowering, or serve an enlightening and even transformative function is perhaps too optimistic.

Primarily because it neglects the conditioning effects of power relations and the fact that education has important effects on the position of citizens in any prevailing hierarchy of social relations. It also neglects the reproductive forces associated with education, namely those that seek to preserve or even enhance dominant interests. (Desjardins, 2015b, p. 240)

The above perspective helps explain why and how English has become the world's lingua franca even though it was a minor language with limited influence in the world just a few hundred years ago. The British imperialist expansion in the world since the 15th century and the American development as the world's political, economic and military superpower during the 20th century were both major contributing factors to English being the dominant language in the world. At the same time, many native languages in colonized lands have become secondary, marginalized and eroded (Phillipson, 1992).

Similarly, it was through thousands of years of gradual changes, adaptation and even battles and fights among various competing forces in China that Putonghua finally became the dominant language in China (He, 2014). During this long process, many languages and scripts used by populations in periphery and frontier regions of China became eroded and some of them eventually ceased to be functional. Numerous ethnic minority populations in southwestern China, for example, have long since lost their own languages and scripts due to the influence and expansion of the Han Chinese culture and language (He, 2014)

Scholars use the expression "linguistic imperialism" to refer to patterns of promotion and development of both English and Putonghua becoming the lingua franca in the world and China respectively (Phillipson, 1992; He, 2014). As a general rule, the political, economic and military strength of various nation-states or ethnic groups determine the extent to which their languages are promoted and expanded or marginalized and eroded. Based on this perspective, He argues that with the increasing influence of China's political and economic power since the end of the 20th century, English may soon have to compete with Chinese as the world's most influential language (He, 2014). In other words, language use is a direct indicator of the dynamic change of the political and economic strength of various ethnic groups or nation-states.

When a language obtains what Hobsbawm refers to as a "privileged" status, i.e., it becomes the lingua franca in a formal educational system, it does not necessarily benefit users of the language. This is especially the case if the language is imposed on them, as Hobsbawm points out: The case for the privileged use of any language as the only language of education and culture in a country is, thus, political and ideological or, at best, pragmatic. Except in one respect, it is not educational. Universal literacy is extremely difficult to achieve in a written language that has no relation to the spoken vernacular-and it may be impossible unless the parents and the community are particularly anxious for their children to become literate in that language, as is the case with most immigrants into anglophone countries today. Whether this requires formal bilingual education is another matter. Basically, the demand for official education in a language other than the already established one, when this does not bring obvious advantages to the learners, is a demand for recognition or for power or for status, not for easier learning (Hobsbawm, 1996, p. 1072; Nyati-Saleshando, 2011)

3. China's Language Policies in the Tibetan Region

According to the Chinese census of 2010, there are approximately seven million Tibetan people in China. About half of them reside in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), which is one of the five autonomous regions in China. An additional three million reside in the numerous Tibetan autonomous prefectures in three provinces adjacent to TAR, i.e., Sichuan, Qinghai and Yunnan. The Tibetan region in China, consequently, refers to the geographic territory that covers not only the TAR, but also adjacent areas where Tibetans are dominant inhabitants. Even though Putonghua has been the dominant language in China since at least the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), there are areas in China that are predominantly inhabited by ethnic minority populations that have their own spoken and written languages such as Tibetan. In recent years, however, Putonghua has been gaining momentum to replacing the minority language as the dominant language in Tibet as well as other ethnic minority areas (Leibold and Chen, 2014). The Chinese government justifies the efforts to promote Putonghua in ethnic minority areas by linking it with an ideological and political context such as national defense and protection of the sovereignty of the nation. For example, in the document "Outlines of Plans for the National Mid- and Long- Term Language Reform and Development, 2012-2020" (国家中长期语言文字事业改革和发展规划纲要 (2012—2020年)) produced by China's Ministry of Education and the National Language and Script Work Committee (国家语言文字工作委员会), it is stated that:

The promotion and universalization of national standard language and script are fundamental prerequisites in the implementation of legal policies in the nation. They are also significant components of safeguarding the national unity and sovereignty, promoting economic and social development, and enhancing the unity of Chinese nationality and its soft power. (See Note 1 for the original Chinese version of this statement)¹

In addition, language policies in ethnic minority areas have also been justified and legitimized by numerous other official documents and legal codes including “the Law for the Common Language and Script of the Nation” (国家通用语言文字法), passed by the National People’s Congress of China in 2000, and the “General Outlines for the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan of the National Economy and Social Development” (国民经济和社会发展第十三个五年规划纲要) (for 2016-2020) adopted in 2016.

In order to ensure the successful enforcement of the language policy discussed above, the Ministry of Education of the PRC issued yet another document. It is titled “Outlines of the Division of Labor Assigned by the National Language and Script Committee for the Implementation of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan”(国家语言文字事业“十三五”发展规划分工方案) (Ministry of Education, 2017). The very second item in the document addresses the issue of how to speed up the process of promoting the national common language and script in ethnic minority areas. It states that the target population of the campaign to promote Putonghua includes teachers, grass-root level cadres members as well as young and middle-aged farmers and nomads. It also lists governmental organizations and departments at various administrative levels to be responsible for this cause. These organizations include the Language and Script Committee, the Education Department, the Civil Affairs Committee, the Labor and Social Protection Committee, the Trade Union and the Youth League Committee. (See Note 2 for the original Chinese version of this stipulation)²

3.1 Tibetan education in the Tibetan region, ups and downs in the 1950s

The Tibetan region in general experienced a rapid development of modern educational system shortly after the Chinese Communist Party took over control of Tibet in 1949. The early 1950s was viewed as “a period of unprecedented development” in terms of educational infrastructure and Tibet language education (Upton, 1999, p. 291). For the first time in history, many primary schools were established in areas that were predominantly inhabited by the Tibetan population who were usually farmers or nomads. The first middle school ever founded in the Tibetan region was established in Lhasa in 1956 (Ma, 2014, p. 86). Referred to as *minzuxuexiao* (schools for ethnic populations), these schools used Tibetan as the major teaching medium with Putonghua being offered as well when qualified teachers were available (Upton, 1999). There was only one class in the middle school in Lhasa where the major teaching medium was Putonghua and that class was attended mostly by children of Han cadre members in Lhasa (Ma, 2014, p. 86).

Upton provides detailed analysis of one *minzu* school in Songpan County of Aba Tibetan Prefecture in Sichuan Province. Commissioned by the county government in 1951 and subsidized heavily by governments of all levels, the school was able to overcome a tremendous amount of difficulties to make the school operational albeit the preparation had taken a couple of years. The difficulties that they encountered included cultural traditions in local communities that did not value formal education as well as a lack of funding, material infrastructure, textbooks and teaching staff. Of all the difficulties and problems, the one that arguably posed the greatest challenge was the reluctance and unwillingness of many Tibetans, especially nomadic Tibetans, to send their children to schools. This is the case not only during early years of the PRC (Bass, 1998; Upton, 1999), but in recent time as well (Postiglione et al, 2014).

¹Note 1: (推广和普及国家通用语言文字是贯彻落实国家法律法规的基本要求，是维护国家主权统一、促进经济社会发展、增强中华民族凝聚力和文化软实力的重要内容。) (Chinanews.com. 2013)

²Note 2: (二) 加快民族地区国家通用语言文字普及

以提升教师、基层干部和青壮年农牧民语言文字应用能力为重点，加快提高民族地区国家通用语言文字普及率（国家语委牵头，教育部、国家民委、人力资源社会保障部、全国总工会、团中央、相关地方语委参与）。加强国家通用语言文字教育教学，确保少数民族学生基本掌握和使用国家通用语言文字（教育部牵头，国家民委、团中央、国家语委参与） (Ministry of Education, 2017)。

The hesitation of parents and children to receive formal education reflects complicated psychological, cultural, social and economic conditions ranging from the fear of the children's safety away from home to the desire to keep children at home to help with household chores and economic activities. The perceived irrelevance of children's education to their daily lives and economic hardships of the Tibetan population also help explain the unwillingness of the parents to send their children to schools (Ma, 2014; Upton, 1999; Postiglione et al, 2014). Despite the many difficulties, the operation of the school that Upton studied turned out to be a huge success. With painstaking efforts and support from the government, the school enrolled initially less than 20 students in 1953. The enrollment grew to over 100 within just a few years (Upton, 1999, p. 287).

Unfortunately, the rapid development of Tibetan education during the early 1950s was short-lived. Starting from the late 1950s, there was a significant diminution of Tibetan education throughout the Tibetan region, including the school that Upton's research focuses on. The Tibetan education that was designed "by Tibetan and for Tibetan" (Upton, 1999, p. 291) in rural and nomadic areas of the Tibetan region in the early 1950s became so marginalized that it came to a complete stop in some of the schools towards the end of the 1950s. At the same time, Putonghua teaching received increasing emphasis. By the early 1960s, schools in Lhasa offered two parallel programs with both Tibetan and Putonghua languages as teaching media respectively and it was proposed that "Putonghua language courses should start during the third grade in public primary schools." (Ma, 2014, p. 87)

The reasons for the overturning of the emphasis on Tibetan education starting from the end of the 1950s were mostly political and ideological. A series of Political campaigns and upheavals took place throughout China at the time. The anti-rightist campaign that Mao Zedong launched in 1957 was his reaction to criticisms and negative sentiment towards the government expressed mostly by intellectuals and Party members. In other words, the campaign was an ideological battleground to purge those who had been viewed as not being completely loyal to the Party.

In addition, the Great Leap Forward (GLF) movement was an economic campaign that lasted for three years in China from 1958 to 1961. Also launched by Mao, it was designed and implemented in order to transform China from an agricultural to a socialist society as soon as possible. The measures taken to achieve this goal were to engage in rapid industrialization in urban areas and thorough collectivization in rural areas of China. Later proven to be a total disaster, the movement reflected the dominance of leftist ideology and tension and division of political viewpoints within the Party. These political upheavals brought much instability and chaos to China as a whole. But in many ways, their negative impact was much more detrimental in ethnic minority areas such as Tibet. Irrespective of the unique historical, cultural, environmental and demographic characteristics in ethnic minority regions, many of the political campaigns ended up intensifying complicated local conditions in these areas (Upton, 1999; Dreyer, 2003). The following is Upton's observation of how Tibetan language education suffered from these political upheavals: "No longer would Tibetan-language instruction be a primary focus of the curriculum: education was instead to meet the goal of 'strengthening Chinese-language education.' Though practical necessity sometimes dictated the use of Tibetan in the classroom..., local educational practice saw little formal Tibetan-language pedagogy for the next two decades." (Upton, 1999, p. 293)

3.2 Continued setbacks of Tibetan education: the cultural revolution period (1966-1976)

The two decades of total absence of Tibetan language education that Upton refers to covered not only the time period of the series of political and economic campaigns discussed above, but also the ten year cultural revolution (1966-1976) that would prove to be even more disastrous to Tibetan language teaching. Consistent with the situation throughout China during the cultural revolution, the educational curriculum in Tibet focused exclusively on political propaganda and ideological indoctrination rather than academic training. In addition, there were unprecedented efforts to suppress the use of Tibetan language, which was sometimes justified in terms of racist expressions. For example, it was stated in political posters at that time that "Tibetan Written Language is Useless. Only the Han Language is an Advanced Language." (Bass, 1998, p. 230)

As a result, by the end of the cultural revolution, there was a huge cultural vacuum within practically a whole generation of Tibetans who were deprived of the opportunity to receive Tibetan language education. Being illiterate with their mother-tongue language, many of these Tibetans tried to make up for their loss by bringing about a resurgence of Tibetan education conducted in Tibetan language for their children (Upton, 1999, p. 296). Fortunately, Tibetans were able to realize this cherished goal during the 1980s following the end of the cultural revolution.

3.3 Tibetan education in 1980s: a period of rest and rehabilitation

China adopted a “policy of rest and rehabilitation” in regard to ethnic relations, which created a much more relaxed atmosphere in ethnic minority areas during the 1980s (Dreyer, 2003, p. 416). Encouraged by the top authorities, institutional changes took place to regulate practices that called for respect to local and traditional culture. With the passing of legal documents such as *the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law* by the People’s Congress in China in 1984, efforts were made and funding was provided for the development and enhancement of economy and regional wellbeing, as well as cultural and educational programs for ethnic minority populations. A large number of Buddhist temples were constructed or renovated and repaired in Tibet. In addition, minority language teaching received a tremendous amount of support and experienced a rapid development.

Advocated by the 10th Panchan Lama and NgapoNgawang Jigme, both much respected religious figures in Tibet, a document titled “the Provisions on the Study, Use and Development of the Use of Tibetan” was passed by the People’s Congress of TAR in 1987. These “regulations allowed the use of both Tibetan and Chinese (in Tibetan educational system), but Tibetan was to be the first language.” (Bass, 1998, p. 231). Furthermore, it was made clear that “all Tibetan students in universities, colleges and professional higher schools should be taught in Tibetan while most Tibetan students in primary and middle schools should also be taught in Tibetan.” (Ma, 2011, p. 289) In other words, even though a bilingual educational system was institutionalized, Tibetan was designated as the primary language while Putonghua was placed as secondary in the educational system. The significance and perceived benefit of using the minority language as the dominant language were repeatedly emphasized by governmental officials as well as various institutions and public documents. The promotion of Tibetan language education was said, for example, to be causally related to the success of the economic development in the region, and rapid economic development in the region was to receive the utmost primary attention, according to official documents (Bass, 1998, pp. 231-232).

One of the most pressing issues in the implementation of the language policy discussed above was the severe shortage of textbooks in Tibetan language. To solve this problem, about 500 people were assigned to the task of translating textbooks from Chinese into Tibetan language (Bass, 1998, p. 231), which was an indicator of the strong commitment that the government had made in promoting minority language teaching.

3.4 Tibetan education since 1990s: increasing marginalization

Unfortunately, the political climate in China changed again during the 1990s. Escalating social and economic problems such as rising inflation, unemployment, inequality and corruption resulted in growing resentment and social unrest throughout the country. Widespread student movement and demonstration ultimately led to the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. In Tibet, a series of pro-independence demonstrations and riots took place at around the same time, which eventually ended with the declaration of martial law in the region. After suppressing the riots and demonstrations with military force in Tibet and elsewhere in China, the government tightened the ideological control and has followed a leftist hard-line political orientations in China ever since.

In ethnic minority areas such as Tibet, the drastic change of the political atmosphere meant an overturn of the relaxed climate and ethnic policies during the earlier years. Very tight control was placed on the social and cultural practices of ethnic minorities. Not surprisingly, earlier efforts to promote Tibetan as teaching medium and official language were curtailed. The sharp decline of translated textbooks available in Tibetan language is an illustrative example to show the impact of these changes. In 1998, there were 590 translated textbooks in Tibetan, but this number dropped to only 60 just two years later in 2000 (Ma, 2011, p. 305). Using textbooks that are translated from Chinese into minority languages has been a controversial issue mainly because the contents of these books tend to be detached from the daily lives of minority students. This is especially the case when the books are filled with propaganda materials and political slogans, which is often the case in China. This problem could be resolved by reducing the amount of political content and replacing it with materials that are meaningful to Tibetan students, such as Tibetan history, literature and geography. Instead, however, the pendulum moved to the direction of gradually phasing out the Tibetan language as the dominant teaching medium in schools. As Ma points out, in 2002, the People’s Congress of TAR officially made an amendment to the existing policy, which “resulted in a transition in schools from ‘the mainly teaching in Tibetan model’ to ‘the mainly teaching in Putonghua model.’” (Ma, 2011, p. 306)

To use Putonghua as the teaching medium in the Tibetan region, however, is by no means easy. According to the 2010 census, at least 90 percent of the population in the Tibetan region is Tibetan, and this figure was even higher in earlier years. In rural and nomadic areas, the population is completely or nearly completely Tibetan (Ma, 2011), and the majority of them do not know Putonghua. If Putonghua were to become the dominant teaching medium, not only would it be difficult for Tibetan students at school, but they would not have a chance to practice it after school.

As Upton points out, “One point that should be evident throughout this discussion of both historical and current practices of Tibetan-language education in Songpan County is the frequent disjuncture between the content of the formal, standardized curriculum and student’s individual experiences and personal backgrounds.” (Upton, 1998, p. 306)

Given the teaching effectiveness with Putonghua as the medium was highly questionable, the school system at Songpan County repeatedly requested to expand the Tibetan language program, especially at the senior high school level, since there were high demands for the expansion. But these requests were all turned down by those in the higher-up authority who insisted that courses must be taught in Putonghua (Upton, 1998, p. 305).

At the level of elementary school education, simply for the sake of practicality, Tibetan language had to be kept as the teaching medium for the majority of courses that elementary school students were required to take in the Tibetan region (Ma, 2014, p. 100). At the middle and high school levels, however, with the only exception of the Tibetan language course, all other courses are taught in Putonghua (Ma, 2014, p. 100; Upton, 1998, pp. 304-305). In recent years, Tibetan language is in the process of being phased out even in elementary and preschool education. This change has been taking place at an increasingly faster rate (Wong, 2015).

Furthermore, for at least hundreds of years prior to the establishment of formal education, Buddhist monasteries in Tibet were the major institution that offered lessons in Tibetan language (Bass, 1998, pp. 1-2). In recent years, the government has asked monasteries not to offer language training to laypeople any more (Wong, 2015). Hence, virtually, it is no longer possible to receive an education in Tibetan language in the Tibetan region.

4. Conclusion and Analysis

Language policies in ethnic minority areas in China have been heavily influenced by patterns of political and economic development in the country. The early 1950s and the 1980s saw a relatively open and relaxed political atmosphere in China. As a result, Tibetan education experienced rapid and healthy development. However, most of the PRC era has been dominated by political tension and instability. Such was the case during the two decades from the end of the 1950s to the end of 1970s. During those turbulent times, minority language education suffered severely since efforts for ideological and political control by the dominant political forces left little room for the development of culture and tradition that were not part of the mainstream social structure. Since the 1990s, the Tibetan language has been even more marginalized and gradually replaced by Putonghua as the teaching medium in the Tibetan region. Researchers speculate that based on the current trend, it is just a matter of time when ethnic minority languages, such as the Tibetan language, will become so eroded that they will be extinct (He, 2014; He, 2015).

The language policy of the PRC has generated deep resentment from among the Tibetan population, intensifying the already strained racial relations in the region. In October 2010, for example, at least one thousand protestors, including students and teachers, petitioned the government against the policy of limiting the use of Tibetan language (Wong, 2010; He, 2015). In January 2018, a Tibetan business man, Tashi Wangchuk, was tried in the court of Yushu Prefecture of Qinghai Province after having been detained for two years. The charge against him was characterized as “enticing separatism” of Tibet and it was based on a film in which he criticized the government’s policies and practices of limiting and marginalizing Tibetan language education. He argues that the government’s language policy is unconstitutional since the constitution stipulates that ethnic minority populations have the right to be educated with their own languages. The film also shows his trip to Beijing to petition for the use of the Tibetan language education so as to protect Tibetan culture. Tashi states in an interview, “In politics, it’s said that if one nation wants to eliminate another nation, first they need to eliminate their spoken and written language.” (Buckley, 2018)

As was pointed out earlier, the Chinese government justifies using Putonghua as the teaching medium by asserting that this move is for the sake of enhancing national unity and sovereignty as well as the social and economic development of ethnic minority regions.

It is indeed true that for ethnic minority populations, learning Putonghua has many advantages in regard to employment opportunities and economic and career advancement. Consequently, many Tibetan parents choose to prioritize their children's education by emphasizing Putonghua learning or even sending their children to Han dominant areas to receive education (Ma, 2014). At the same time, however, many Tibetans prefer to have their children receive education via Tibetan language. Besides, there are also Tibetans who have been educated in Putonghua but would like to receive or continue with Tibetan language training in order to protect their heritage and tradition.

Language is one of the most important components of a culture. Without a functional language, the culture becomes lifeless. The erosion and extinction of a language indicate the discontinuity of the culture and history and the eradication of cultural identity of the minority population. In a word, it is for the protection of the Tibetan culture that Tibetan people feel deeply about the Tibetan language education. To be educated with one's mother tongue language is considered a fundamental human right by many (Schimmel, 2007). The deprivation of the right to learn the mother-tongue language has resulted in anger and frustration among the Tibetan population, as discussed in this paper. This policy and its repercussions do not help with the realization of the goal of enhancing national unity and sovereignty that the government has planned. They may in fact result in disunity and disintegration amongst a large population in the Tibetan region and in China as a whole.

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