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1

Introduction

There is a total of 56 officially recognized “nationalities” in China. The term “nationalities” is often used to identify the diverse ethnic and sociolinguistic groups within the country that represent over 100 different languages. It is inclusive of the Han (Chinese)¹ majority which comprises around 91 percent of the population. However, this kind of recognition towards minorities is the effect of past decisions which are still felt today. Historically, communities living within China’s respective boundaries and kingdoms have had their own spoken language to use. Regardless of written scripts, they have used their mother tongue for their frequent interaction with their neighbours, either through trade or warfare. A significant number of such minorities actually occupy strategic locations in China’s frontier regions, and the creation of policies and practices to efficiently manage important community affairs, education and language issues has been a constant feature of Chinese history. These aspects have been viewed in the context of these regions’ relationship with the central government. Since China is a great civilization, it is not surprising that decisions made through the years continue to exert influence on the contemporary setting as various living traditions are continuously being reshaped in the present.

In the country’s outer regions, discrete communities established themselves in ancient times, giving rise to separate languages and dialects within their areas. It was not even surprising that some groups’ languages were considered unintelligible to others despite close geographical proximity to one another. Meanwhile, native religions often also served as binding forces in language maintenance. A second language still gained acceptance as dominant religions like Buddhism or Islam entered the country. Nonetheless, challenges of competing language domains occurred, particularly during the periods of Han expansionism and

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when China was ruled by non-Han people like the Mongols or Manchu. The spread of the Han language was not necessarily due to the enforcement by Han rulers, but more because of the communities' choice. The underlying motivation was based on the premise that its user would gain status and utility by speaking an elite language. It is widely believed that Han enabled good communication in governance as well as improved trade opportunities. Also, if the Han occupation lasted for generations, then a minority's language would have weakened or even fallen into neglect. Furthermore, Han ideology and customs were carried by its language. Hence, this exposed the works of its great thinkers by utilizing technologies of paper and the printing press.

The concept of minority, as distinct from native, tribe or clan, is a cultural artefact by itself. It is also regarded as a relatively modern invention. The middle kingdom, China's name for itself, viewed its people according to one of two relationships. The people either belonged to the superior center or to the inferior periphery of the kingdom. Here, individual kinship, ethnic group, language family, frequently signposts for differentiation, were all over-ridden by whether an individual was considered Chinese or not. In order to become one, the individual had to submit to the direct sovereignty of the emperor, or else, he or she was placed in the category of a barbarian who lived beyond the pale. In English, the use of the word minority draws back at least to medieval times when it meant "part of a whole". Later, its meaning stressed the idea of separateness and deficiency, and was even associated with the affirmative action by governments. During the late nineteenth century, the Chinese combined the words *min* (people) and *zu* (race), to form a name for its minorities, *minzu*.

Five autonomous regions have been designated as China's minorities. The first was established in 1947, and was followed by a number of provinces having autonomous prefectures, counties and townships. However, the identification of a minority has corresponded disproportionately with the actual situation. While the ruling state may prescribe a check list of pre-determined traits like location, size of population, beliefs and language, the identified groups do not always suit the cultural, linguistic or political criteria. In most cases, these designated minorities carry with them the stigma of backwardness and poverty, though some minority stakeholders may consider the Han as the backward party. This sense of deficiency carries a notion of social improvement in terms of majority culture acceptance through external urging and intervention. In contrast, the state would have to accept the fact that minorities represent its

frontier space. This is characterized by a land rich in natural resources, which is essential for national development.

The rise of nationalism during the nineteenth century brought the language issue to the fore. As such, borders were prescribed as barriers for the free movement of people. This increasingly placed the minority groups as subject to the dictates of the nation state including its policies on language and education. Overall, the powerful opinion of the central government aimed to impose its authority on minorities for national unity. The government designed a language policy that would enable a dominant/minority communication through the use of a particular mother tongue, which would also encourage linguistic homogeneity in the name of social cohesion. However, a minority living within the center could still seek a non-coercive path through the recognition or at least a toleration of local languages. Hence, no actual agreement of purpose regarding the policy has ever existed. Because of the increasing impacts of coercion, the minorities came to associate language with their own political demands for autonomy based on minority identity. In addition, the center was unable to exert its dominant language in these areas during the early modern period. This can be attributed to the government's own uncertain grasp of power as rival administrations contested the vitality of the local communities.

The Constitution of the Republic of China stipulated a greater consideration for minority language rights after World War I. In fact, the new government even sought the support of minority peoples, and the Republic itself joined an institution with a policy of protecting the interests of minorities called the League of Nations. However, after some time the Republic veered away from recognizing minority rights. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decided to follow the example set by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in its establishment of Republics. Following its proclamation of language protection, it attempted to apply Stalin's definition of language as a guide. Unfortunately, all succeeding Chinese governments violated its own policies at certain times, as some reverted to the old view that minority language is nothing but an expression of disunity. Worse, the lack of a comprehensive legal system in the Republic of China and the CCP entails that there be little redress when language guarantees are flouted. In recent years, most language debates have focused on the relationship between the minority languages and Putonghua, the latter being considered the national language and based on the spoken Beijing dialect, and on the romanized *Hanyu Pinyin* alphabet.

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For most young people, learning Putonghua is an arduous and time consuming activity. In addition, most minority languages are very different from the Han language in sentence construction, word order, pronunciation and even in written scripts. The language domains also differ with regards to semantic form and meaning. This can also effectively identify insiders from outsiders who operate at different discourse levels. It is observed that although the Han language has a common Chinese writing system that allows for some script modifications, the Han people themselves may speak seven major dialects: Putonghua (Mandarin), Yue (Cantonese), Wu, Min, Gan, Kejia (Hakka) and Xiang. Thus, a person who is fluent in a Han dialect may be unintelligible in another.

According to the country's history, second language learning occurred through non-formal arrangements across communities and such opportunities led to mutual advantages. Individuals, often young boys, are sent to other places in order to learn a particular ethnic group's language. The principal purpose of this endeavour is future trade, and girls who married outside their communities eventually became bilingual. Meanwhile, another important carrier of bilingual skills is service in the army. Through time, both extended and bilingual language learning became a function of the school system in modern mass education. China's use of schools to transmit approved knowledge goes back to the Shang Dynasty at least. By virtue of the power and authority of the Hanlin Academy during its apex, the Han language was dominated by the classical script and works of Confucius. The prestige of learning was further enhanced by the introduction of the imperial civil service examination. It offered successful examinees, which occasionally included minority children, rewards for high office. Undoubtedly, these structural arrangements reinforced the power of the dominant language. Simultaneously, alternative language opportunities were facilitated within the minority community through Taoist and Buddhist temples and Islam's mosques.

Modern period language learning through educational programs and language teachers would eventually overwhelm the non formal modes. Missionaries from overseas learned both the Han Chinese and minority languages to communicate with the community folk. In turn, they taught their native languages for religious and commercial purposes. On the other hand, foreign powers among Chinese enclaves taught the homeland language, and the Chinese authorities commonly taught French or English in new middle (secondary) schools. Overall, foreign language learning became increasingly popular with its usefulness for

statecraft, trade and technological applications. The demand for second language learning resulted in particular methodologies for foreign language teaching such as the *Guoyin* system, a system introduced in the late nineteenth century, and based on meaning and themes rather than rote memorization.

The most important objective for modern China's leadership is the use of the school system in order to spread the common language, Putonghua, and the alphabetic script, *Hanyu Pinyin*, as a means toward national unity. This national policy has led to the introduction of a vernacular Chinese that is supported by script, grammar, lexicon and pronunciation. It has been argued that the national language is crucial in exploring concepts, solving problems, organizing information, and in the sharing of knowledge and experiences across communities. Thus, various approaches have emerged in the second language policy. These approaches are: isolationist, where the children are taught in their mother tongue; assimilationist, where the dominant supersedes the minority language; and pluralist or integrationist, where groups maintain their identity and yet access the dominant tongue. Generally, the national language policy has become a significant factor in determining which approach should be applied in a particular political climate.

Major problems have emerged in attempting to establish a national spoken language. The national policy was inadequately conceptualized and marred by overly political and insufficient financial resources during its promotion. Basically, the new language programs needed time for planning and execution; it has hence become a handicap for policy makers who are in a hurry. Unfortunately, the central government's common assumption is that a change in policy handed down from its education ministry would immediately impact the ground. Worse, schools that misinterpreted the government policy practice did not follow the central government's principle sensibly and the feedback from the intended recipients was completely ignored. In some cases, the expected benefits by parents conflicted with the school's intended outcomes, and the languages learned failed to benefit the student materially. Finally, the school management was capable of working against intended outcomes resulting in the resistance of students and staff alike. It took over half a century for substantial progress to appear.

In sum, China's economic progress has materially aided the spread of Putonghua among the nationalities. This challenged the authority of minority languages particularly among the young generation. Since different policies have operated across minority groups, some languages strengthened at the expense of others while some individuals and age

groups have been marginalized. In other places, the minority language has been negatively viewed as a force inciting civil unrest and terrorism. Important questions arise in a developing global economy, such as “Which languages are to be protected and which are not?” “What ‘obligations’ does China have with regards to language usage in the mainland and in Hong Kong?” “Should there be a Charter protecting language heritage and diversity?” As always, sophisticatedly organized and motivated ethnic groups with an established social and cultural base are the most economically developed. Meanwhile, other minority groups exemplify the tail end of the increasing gap between rich and poor. They have not substantially gained from the national government’s willingness to pass the responsibility down to regional groups. This can be attributed to the fact that their communities are ill-equipped to handle the alternatives open to them. While the central government has new plans from the revisions in its political system, the minority stakeholders continue to have their own priorities and expectations. This will now require accommodation and reconciliation between the center and the periphery. Overall, China’s size, historical experience and uneven development are all factors that contribute to these dynamics.

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