

# ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE END ANGERED ETHNIC MINORITY LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN CHINA

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of minority languages is one of the most effective ways to document such intangible cultural heritage and at the same time to fulfill the need to create a common spiritual home for humanity. Some renowned Western linguists such as Krauss (1992), Crystal (2002), Bradley and Bradley (2002) are working diligently to save indigenous languages from different regions while preserving their respective cultures. This chapter examined the previous studies on the contact and shift of minority languages and cultures in China and highlighted the limitations in the literature. The review shows that language shift and cultural loss within minority communities in China is currently taking place, but little is reported on the ‘ecology’ of their languages and cultural environments.

China is a multiracial country consisting of 91.2% ethnic Han (汉族) and 8.8% of 55 ethnic minorities. Mandarin (*Putonghua*) serves as the national language for the nation, while the languages of the minorities have been restricted to their own tribes or villages since 1949. This symbiotic “ecosystem” has gradually attracted the attention of linguists in China since the late 1990s. Yuan (2001), for example, found that language shift and cultural loss among the Achang (阿昌) or Baizu (白族) are strongly influenced by linguistic and cultural contact with the dominant group, the *Han*. From the case study, China's National Language Policy

requires ethnic minorities to enrol their children in the national primary school at the age of 6 to (i) learn Mandarin and (ii) achieve the goal of national language education as fluent speakers of Mandarin (*Putonghua*). Obviously, this initiative has resulted in the new generations of minorities inheriting their mother tongue. Eventually, the ancestral language of these indigenous groups was replaced by Mandarin (*Putonghua*) for daily communication among the younger generations. The most recent case study reported is the youth (under 30 years old) of the Tajike (塔吉克族) in Xinjiang Province, who exclusively use Mandarin in their daily communication while adopting the *Han* costume as their life culture (Li & Zheng, 2019).

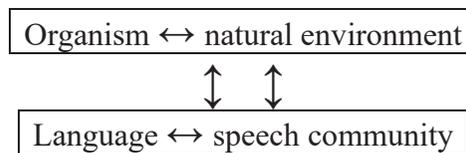
In the second decades of the century, Western scholars increasingly began to recognise that linguistic ecology offers a holistic view in the assessment of human languages and their environment (Elliason, 2015). Therefore, this chapter makes an important contribution to the literature in the field of linguistic ecology, especially for the minority communities in China, highlighting indigenous languages as cultural and ethnic heritage in the modern world.

## **HAUGEN'S (1972) LANGUAGE ECOLOGY FOR THE ETHNIC MINORITY SETTING IN CHINA**

To grasp and understand the complex relationship between national language policy and language shift in minority communities in China, the concept of “language ecology” proposed by Haugen (1972) is best suited to be used in the study of endangered languages and cultural loss, especially among minority communities. In 1972, the Norwegian-American linguist Einar Haugen proposed a new approach to the study of multilingual societies, which he called ‘linguistic ecology’. He defined it as “the study of the interactions between a particular language and its

environment” and criticised the fact that linguists generally focused too much on the aspects of phonology, grammar, and lexicon, rather than taking into account the social status and function of languages in everyday use. He urged that linguists should take a holistic approach to understanding human languages as they are embedded in their history, social and political context. Fill (2001) identifies four areas to draw an analogy between the elements in biology and language: (i) *ecology of language* refers to “the study of the interactions of languages”; (ii) *ecolinguistics* refers to “the study of the interdependence of language and the interpretation of the natural world in which we live”; (iii) *ecological linguistics* defines itself as “linguistics that adopts concepts and principles from ecology”; and (iv) *language ecology* refers to “the study of the interactions between a particular language and its environment.” According to Haugen (1972), a language is like a living organism — a language is born and has a lifespan in which it grows and changes, gets sick and dies. Figure 1 illustrates that the language environment is more of a social and cultural environment:

Figure 1: Analogy for Language Ecology



This view is supported by Wendel (2005), according to whom the language ecology approach takes into account the complex relationships between languages, the environment, and their users. The application of Haugen’s language ecology approach allows researchers to draw an analogy between (i) environmental concerns in relation to living

organisms and (ii) cultural concerns related to languages and living cultures. As a result, researchers will be able to critically explore the interactions that take place between minority language communities in China and their community languages in everyday life from the perspective of language ecology.

In addition, Haugen's (1972) ten ecological questions are particularly useful for understanding the endangered languages and cultures of Chinese minorities:

1. What is its classification in relation to other languages?
2. Who are the users?
3. What are the areas of application?
4. What concurrent languages are used by its users?
5. What are the internal varieties of the language?
6. What are its written traditions?
7. To what extent has the written form been standardised?
8. What kind of institutional support has it received?
9. What is the attitude of users towards the language?
10. Where does the language stand and where is it heading in relation to other languages in the world?

With these relevant ecological questions, researchers will be able to understand how minority languages function in different social and cultural settings. Secondly, it will help to raise the awareness of minority language speakers and increase their efforts to preserve and transmit their predecessor languages. In reality, the ecology of minority languages in China is generally shaped by its own community linguistically, socially, culturally, and psychologically. Elliason (2015) also emphasises the important role of Haugen's ecological issues in assessing the holistic ways in which languages are conceived and interact

in a given complex context. He concluded that the focus of the ecological approach to language should be on examining the connection between the language and its social and cultural environment, as mentioned in Haugen's approach.

### **CONCERNING *PUTONGHUA* SUPREMACISTS AND CRITICAL CONTACT SITUATION FOR THE MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN CHINA**

Language contact research was inspired by Western linguists on the phenomenon of language mixing, in particular on Creole and Pidgin. The results of this research were published in 1953 by Weinreich and Haugen in *Language in Contact* and *The Norwegian Language in America*. Haugen (1972) explained that the act of 'borrowing' from one language into another occurs when two languages are 'in contact' with each other. Accordingly, Fishman (1999) further elaborated that the process of language contact leads to language shift, language threat and ultimately language death. Meanwhile, some Chinese scholars redefined the concept of language contact for a multi-ethnic society like China by describing that "language in contact is when speakers of different language groups use a national language, e.g. Putonghua, together with their own mother tongue as a means of communication for different purposes". The real contact situation in the context of China refers to the contact situation between the superior language Mandarin *Putonghua* and the inferior minority languages, which led to a shift in language use in minority communities in China. Due to the rise of Mandarin Chinese as a global language, while the language shift is taking place globally (Wang et al., 2016), parents from the minority groups began to use Mandarin at home with their children and showed a positive attitude towards *Putonghua* and *Han* culture, although they recognise the values of their cultural heritage.

As for the ecological environment for minority languages in China, the common use of *Putonghua* for about 89 years has indeed led to the extinction of most indigenous languages. Education in China is not only for the teaching and learning of Mandarin, but also for the transmission of Chinese *Han* culture, Chinese *Han* beliefs and traditional values and, most importantly, the development of a sense of nationhood. As a result, around 100 languages of the 56 officially recognised minority groups are dying out, as the United Nations announced on 4 March 2010. Among the second largest minority group in China, the *Yi* (彝族), it can be seen that the younger generation of *Yi* in Guizhou Province, especially the adult learners, are more inclined and prefer to use Mandarin than their mother tongue in various social settings. Therefore, these students described themselves as semi-fluent speakers of *Yi* for several reasons. Most of them admitted that the inability to converse well in their mother tongue and low awareness of mother tongue transmission at home are the main reasons. However, the degree of loyalty to the *Yi* language and *Yi* culture was relatively high among them (Wang & Zheng 2023). Among the youth from the *Yi* district of Liangshan, the loss of language is obvious. Another dramatic language shift was found in *Erlunchun* (鄂伦春) in that (i) fluent *Oroqen* speakers are usually over 50 years old; (ii) the younger generation (age group under 40), especially *Oroqen* teenagers, have switched to Mandarin for daily communication due to the dramatic social changes (Ha, 2008; Wu & He, 2017).

A recent study contributing to the endangerment of languages in China reports that *Maonan* (毛南语), spoken in the northwestern region by the *Zhuang* ethnic group, and *Hezhe* (赫哲语), spoken in the northeast, are both listed among the languages with low vitality and are in danger of extinction, as these ethnic minorities have been almost sinicised after years of close contact with *Han* language and

culture. Dai et al. (2005) criticised that the prolonged contact with *Han* language and culture has adversely affected the minority languages and cultures that have been rooted in China for thousands of years. As for the endangered minority languages and cultures, *Xiaopoliu Miao* (小陂流苗语) spoken in Henan Province has undergone a language evolution, adopting 848 lexical items from Mandarin *Putonghua* into *Xiaopoliu Miao* and new items for the phonological system and grammatical pattern. A new spoken form of *Xiangxi Tumiao* has thus emerged (Dai et al., 2005). The *Ewenki* (鄂温克旗), *Buyi* (布依) and *Nusu* (怒苏) minorities also saw their identity destroyed in the 1990s due to language extinction and cultural loss. Among the *Nusu* (怒苏), the mass migration of *Lisu* and *Han* and intermarriage between them in the *Nujiang* region during the Ming Dynasty had led to acculturation and language shift from *Nusu* to *Lisu* and eventually from monolingual to competent bilingual speakers in *Lisu* and *Putonghua*.

Although the Chinese government declares that all ethnic minorities have the right to use their own languages and practise their cultures and religions but in reality, all administrative, political, judicial and educational institutional actions are carried out in *Putonghua*. Jiao and Guo (2021), who deal with the topics of language death and language attitudes in China, emphasise that "people who do not speak *Putonghua* well are often discriminated against and ridiculed and are considered to be out of line. People who are proficient in *Putonghua* develop a superiority complex and look down on people who are not proficient in *Putonghua*". Thus, the linguistic ecological environment is crucial for the survival of these minority languages, as *Putonghua* is labelled as the preferred language for all and is at the top level of the inverted pyramid, while it is also clearly visible in the linguistic landscape of China.

## LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE PLANNING FOR ENDANGERED MINORITY LANGUAGES IN CHINA

In China, the project to research the languages of ethnic minorities began in the 1980s and was initiated by a group of linguists from the *Institute of Ethnic Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* (中国社会科学院民族研究所). The issue of endangered language was raised by the scholars when field research revealed that various minority languages in the northwestern region were in acute danger of disappearing. The topic was then discussed at the *15th International Congress of Linguist* in 1992, and so the project began in 1996, with full financial support from the Chinese government, for co-operation between the *Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* and the *Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*. The first national conference on endangered languages in China, organised by the *National Linguistic Society of China* in October 2000, successfully raised awareness among the public and various non-governmental organisations. For example, a fully funded research project for minority languages entitled ‘*A Case Study of Endangered Languages in China*’ (中国濒危语言个案研究) was sponsored by the *National Social Science Foundation* in China in 2001. According to the *Ministry of Education* and the *National Language Commission of China*, around 300 projects on endangered languages were approved between 2004 and 2014. Therefore, the government took the initiative to build a database of endangered languages and ethnic minority cultures to document these languages. In addition, the government has taken a further step to preserve and revitalise minority languages and cultures through policies, regulations, and laws, e.g. the ‘*Law of the People's Republic of China on the Autonomy of Ethnic Minority Regions*’, the ‘*Law on the*

*General Use of the National Language*', etc. Nevertheless, the authority was criticised for failing to maintain linguistic diversity and safeguard the language rights of minorities before privileging Mandarin *Putonghua* as an official language. Under these circumstances, Mackerra (2016) argued that "there is no deliberate attempt by the government to destroy minority religions, languages or cultures, but that the problem is in fact related to the rapid modernisation in China... the process of modernisation is picking up speed everywhere in China and is hostile to traditional cultures.

There is no doubt that the implementation of bilingual education and bilingual language policy in China is a great challenge for the government in practice. The PRC's *13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2016-2020)*, which prioritises Mandarin while retaining regional languages and regional dialects for official, administrative, curricular, and religious purposes, has severely endangered minority languages in *Xinjiang* and *Yunnan*. Thus, in 2015, the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous People's Congress* revised the *Regulation of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Language and Written Form* in 2015 and announced that Mandarin *Putonghua* must be mandatorily included in the bilingual curriculum for schools at all levels in the region. Therefore, the new policy is seen by some scholars as biased and irrelevant to shaping language diversity in China. Cun (2015) criticised the *Xiandao* ethnic minority in *Yunnan* for experiencing discrimination and prejudice due to the emphasis on Mandarin as the medium of instruction in schools. Frustration levels rose when Mandarin was labelled as a major threat to the *Xiandao* language (仙島語) and the problem was not addressed. The study also found that most young native speakers of *Xiandao* are unwilling to learn their mother tongue because they cannot use the mother tongue for social interactions. In terms of minority language

promotion, young people showed great concern about the career path through mastering Mandarin and English and are willing to give up the language of their ancestors. The scenario mirrors Haugen's (1972) ten ecological questions related to the nature of institutional support and whether the support regulates the language under study. These organisations can range from government to non-profit organisations to the community. At the same time, Spolsky (2004) pointed out that micro-level actors such as families, religious organisations, etc. also play an important role in supporting community languages in a language ecology. This can be seen in the example of the minority language *Xiandao*, where parents have completely switched from *Xiandao* to Mandarin and English due to external pressure on the dominant language and are reluctant to use the *Xiandao* language at home. It is believed that the *Xiandao* language will soon die out if no efforts are made at the micro level, e.g. family language planning in *Yunnan*.

## CONCLUSION

The review sheds light on China's minority languages and cultures, which are on their way to extinction due to the great threat posed by the Mandarin-Putonghua. The reasons for the endangered situation of ethnic minority languages and cultures are diverse and complex and therefore need to be addressed with a comprehensive approach. Ideally, Haugen's (1972) concept of linguistic ecology can be adopted to the study of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities in China, especially in developing a phased strategy at macro, meso and micro levels that advocates the utilisation and preservation of their languages and cultures. To sum up, this approach is important to bridge the gap in shifting minority languages while addressing cultural sustainability for minority groups in China.

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