

Minority Language Policy in China, with Observations on the *She* Ethnic Group

I. Introduction

China is a country with a deep history, vast territory, a burgeoning population (1.3 billion and counting) and, consequently, a multitude of languages spoken within its borders. Of the over 200 languages spoken by the 105 million non-Han minorities in China, at least 85 are considered to be endangered¹ (Bradley 2005). These include languages of the Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien,² Austronesian, and Altaic (Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic) families.

The state of minority languages has been and continues to be deeply affected by the policies of China's rulers, past and present. This paper summarizes the history of minority language policy in China and discusses current issues facing endangered languages there, ending with some observations on the "She" people in southeast China, a small subset of whom speak an endangered Hmong-Mien language.

II. History of Minority Language Policy in China

The pattern of official attitudes toward minority ethnic groups in China over the years, beginning with the dynasties around 1000 BC and continuing up through the modern People's Republic of China (PRC), has essentially consisted of a mosaic of assimilationist and accommodationist mindsets. This section outlines the ever-shifting attitudes toward minorities and their implications for minority (language) policy over the course of China's history, with special emphasis on the recent (and current) communist era.

A. Imperial & Republican Eras

As early as the Zhou dynasty (1100-256 BC), the ancestors of the Han people began to draw strong distinctions between themselves and the "barbarians," coining a number of derogatory terms

¹ This is most likely an underestimate, since Bradley notes that "China is one of the last places on earth where there are large numbers of unreported and undescribed languages" (2005:11).

² In China, Hmong-Mien is confusingly called "Miao-Yao" (the names of two official minority nationalities) and is assumed to be a subgroup of the Sino-Tibetan language family.

for the surrounding people groups.³ This disdain for the non-Han minorities eventually led to a policy of deliberate sinicization with the Han language and Confucian ideology in the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han dynasties (206 BC–AD 220), during which various institutions were established in the non-Han agricultural areas of southern and eastern China to teach Confucian ideology, enforce laws, and train local officials. For the nomadic herdsman minorities of the north and west, however, the rulers adopted accommodationist approaches, negotiating treaties with tribe-states to ensure that they would not invade the Han heartland (Zhou 2003).

The simultaneous implementation of two disparate approaches toward minorities arose from the Han's perception of the people in the agricultural south and east as more "cultivable" and the nomadic groups in the north and west as less so (Zhou 2003:3). Though varying in form, this strategy of disparate policies for NW and SE China has consistently resurfaced throughout the years, even in modern times. Minority groups have thus been shaped by these practices, to the extent that modern communities in areas where husbandry was historically predominant tend to be large, while those in agricultural areas tend to be small and discontinuous (Zhou 2003:15).

During the Jin dynasty (256-420) and the Six dynasties (420-589), repeated invasions by non-Han groups in the north led to significant migration of the Han peoples to the south and southeast, hastening the assimilation of minorities in those areas. Furthermore, many of the non-Han conquerors in the north who found themselves ruling Han-majority territories subsequently adopted and promoted the Han language to maintain order among their subjects. The result of this combination of two factors was an expansion of Han communities and language toward both the north and south of China.

After the short-lived Sui dynasty (581-618), the prosperous Tang dynasty (618-907) expanded westward toward Tibet and into Xinjiang, taking largely accommodationist approaches and granting a limited amount of autonomy to local rulers. Paradoxically, this tolerant policy actually furthered the spread of the Han language, as upper class minorities sought to participate in the "golden age" of the Tang period by acquiring an official education and attempting the imperial examinations for civil service positions (Zhou 2003:4).

³ Note that this is not meant to paint a simplistic picture of virtuous, tolerant minorities oppressed by the chauvinistic Han. The Han were not alone in their prejudices against "the other," but were simply able to act on them because they were culturally, politically, and numerically dominant. If history had granted the Yi people the same status, for example, it is not difficult to imagine that they would have carried out similar policies against a "Han minority" (cf. Dreyer 1976:68).

After the fall of the Tang dynasty, China was split into the Han-ruled Song dynasty in the south, the Khitan-ruled Liao Empire in the north, and the Tangut-ruled Xia state in the west. The Song (960-1279) rulers in particular took a forced-assimilation approach to some minorities (e.g. the Zhuang) through such institutions as the school system; but accommodated other minorities (such as the Yao and Miao) by granting them autonomy in exchange for loyalty to the state. In contrast, the following Yuan dynasty (1206-1368), a khanate of the Mongol Empire, attempted to freeze the process of assimilation and established a strict 4-tiered racial hierarchy that determined job placement: Mongol, Central Asian non-Han, northern Han, and southern Han (Zhou 2003). When the Mongol rulers withdrew to Mongolia, however, the hierarchy dissolved and assimilation to the Han resumed.

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) resurrected the north vs. south dichotomous policy, accommodating the Tibetan, Turkic, Mongolian, and Jurchen peoples in the north, but establishing Confucian schools and replacing local chieftains in the south. It is interesting to note that while the subsequent Qing dynasty (1616-1911) continued this policy, its ruling Manchu minorities, despite being in power, were unable to prevent their own slow assimilation into the Han. Zhou (2003) observes that early Qing law required all Han officials to learn and use the Manchu language, but by the 1700s this policy had been relaxed, requiring only Manchus to preserve their language and culture. During the 1800s, however, the government was forced to translate all Manchu official documents into the Han language, as the Manchus had gradually ceded their language and culture to the Han. That even the ruling elites of an empire were unable to maintain their language is a stark testament to the juggernaut of Han assimilation, driven as it is by more factors than simple political power.

In the final era before communism, the Qing dynasty was overthrown and replaced by the Republic of China (1911-1949), which (unsurprisingly) continued the aforementioned north vs. south policy. Although its assimilationist goals for some areas were quite ruthless, their implementation was hampered by various governmental and infrastructural inadequacies, leaving behind a legacy that, according to Dreyer, “might best be described as weak” (1976:41).

B. *Communism*

With the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 and the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the minorities of China entered a new phase, one which involved politically-driven, direct government involvement in their languages. Whereas the minority policies of the preceding

imperial and republican governments can be seen as arising simply from the needs of the state for political control, the CCP was preoccupied with the “national question” in their quest for the establishment of a harmonious communist society. Since the use of a unique language was considered one of the defining characteristics of a “nationality,” the issue of minority languages became a key focus of the CCP’s minority policy. Hence, it is easier to talk about minority *language* policy with respect to communist China than to its predecessors, as language use has been specifically targeted since 1949.

While minority policy in imperial times had the tendency to shift between accommodation and assimilation whenever new dynasties arose, communist China has performed these same alternations within the reign of a single, contiguous government. The reason for this behavior lies in the CCP’s adherence to the Leninist-Stalinist theory of socialist development, in which nations are viewed as intermediate entities in the progression of a society from capitalism through socialism to communism. The final goal of communism is the erasure of all boundaries to a united, harmonious society, as expressed by Mao Zedong in 1958: “Classes will be eliminated first, then states will be abolished, and finally nations will disappear. This will be the case for the whole world” (Zhou 2003:41). The official attitude toward minorities in China, therefore, is linked directly to the *Zeitgeist* with respect to the pace of socialist development. That is, when the political climate of the time is characterized by an expectation that communism is imminent, accelerated assimilation of minorities into the Han is the common practice. When China is viewed as merely beginning the long-term process of socialist development, however, the government is more willing to accommodate national differences and a plurality of languages.

Two points should be noted with regard to the above description of China’s minority policy. First, even in periods of time during which accommodation is the reigning strategy, integration is still the final goal. Pluralism is only tolerated insofar as it prepares minorities for eventual assimilation into the Han socialist state. Second, the aforementioned alternation in CCP minority policy between accommodation and assimilation has generally occurred without any change in the wording of official documents: the “political wind” of the time simply shapes and directs their interpretation and implementation.

Communist China’s minority language policy can be essentially broken down into three (admittedly simplistic) stages, taken from Zhou (2003): the first pluralistic stage (1949-1957), characterized by accommodation and official promotion of linguistic pluralism; the Chinese monopolistic stage (1958-1977), generally dominated by assimilationist practices and promotion of

Chinese; and the second pluralistic stage (1978-present), distinguished by a promotion of both Chinese and minority languages.

1. *First pluralistic stage (1949-1957)*

In the early years of the PRC, the exuberance of the newly-victorious CCP fostered a willingness among the leadership to generously accommodate minorities in order to encourage their active participation in socialist development. Though required to remain citizens of the Chinese state, minorities were granted a certain level of autonomy within China's 4-tiered hierarchical structure of local governments: regions/provinces, prefectures, counties, and *xiangs*. The largest minority areas are the five autonomous provinces, namely Xinjiang (Uyghur), Xizang⁴ (Tibetan), Inner Mongolia (Mongolian), Ningxia (Hui), and Guangxi (Zhuang) (see Figure 1). In 2003, 30 prefectures, 120 counties, and 1252 *xiangs* in China were also autonomous minority areas (Zhou 2003:19).



Figure 1: Provinces in China

source: <http://www1.cei.gov.cn/ce/region/Chinamap.htm>

⁴ i.e., Tibet

With regard to languages, the CCP and the PRC constitution promoted pluralism, decreeing that minority nationalities had the right to use and maintain their languages, develop writing systems, and utilize their languages in courts (or be provided interpreters). Schools were also established to train cadres in minority languages; radio station programming, newspapers, and other publications were produced; and infrastructure was developed for language work (e.g. classification, writing system reform/development, textbook publication).

Toward the end of this period, however, the CCP (led by Chairman Mao Zedong) became impatient with the slow progress of socialism in minority areas, and consequently initiated an ambitious plan of economic development through collectivization that came to be known as the “Great Leap Forward,” ushering in a period of Chinese monopoly in language policy.

2. *Chinese monopolistic stage (1958-1977)*

The first effects of the move toward a Chinese language monopoly were seen in the “Plan for the Phonetic Spelling of Chinese,” which established the Pinyin romanization system for Mandarin Chinese and pushed for the adoption of similar romanization methods in all minority language writing systems. This approach was designed to facilitate the learning of Chinese by minorities, and also encouraged the adoption of Chinese loanwords into minority languages, attempting to lay the groundwork for an eventual convergence of languages. This so-called “multi-step” policy, however, was eventually replaced in many areas with a total integration approach: minority communities were collectivized, forced to abandon traditional customs deemed “backward,” and placed in a fast-track to sinicization through the promotion of Chinese (Zhou 2003). Linguistic differences were viewed as a barrier to unity, and the Great Leap Forward aimed at uniformity. According to the propaganda of the time, minority communities were found to be suddenly experiencing “a new high tide of enthusiasm for learning Han” as they sought to erase “the linguistic hindrance to learning advanced ways” (Dreyer 1976:160-161).

With the fall of grain production and the resultant famine, minority communities experienced a muted respite from assimilation when the CCP officially admitted the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1962. The optimism of imminent communist convergence gave way to a conviction that the final stage of development was a distant goal, and the assimilatory pressure on minorities was thus relaxed in many areas. Expressions of unique minority identity, suppressed during the Great Leap Forward, were also allowed to resurface as long as they conformed to the Leninist principle of “nationalist in form, socialist in content” (Dreyer 1976:245). During this

period, the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia was able to develop a comprehensive language policy, dealing with such issues as language use in schools and government, standardization, coining of new words, translation, rules of language work, and training of minority language workers. This episode of relative linguistic freedom, however, was to be short-lived.

Though forced to make “self-criticism” (Zhou 2003:69) with regards to the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong was never removed from power, and was able to launch the chaotic Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s underneath the banner of “class struggle.” As well as subjecting urban Han to a reign of fear, the Cultural Revolution had major detrimental effects on minority communities, with forced assimilation justified as a revolutionary means of erasing class distinctions. Though the PRC constitution and various regulations protecting minority language rights were technically still in effect, government practice was dominated by integrationism, evident in the widespread existence of Chinese-only education and government services. As a sign of the times, a draft constitution that appeared in 1970 omitted a pre-existing clause that forbade discrimination based on nationality. It also revised provisions for autonomous areas to merely “allow” the use of minority languages, rather than “encourage” them, as the 1954 constitution had done (Dreyer 1976:233). This disdain for minority languages and the practice of assimilation were to be the norm until the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s.

3. *Second pluralistic stage (1978-present)*

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese minority language policy slowly returned to an accommodationist approach, reopening the doors for autonomous governments to promote and develop their own languages. In 1982, however, a new element was introduced that put a damper on achieving true pluralism: the PRC constitution was revised to require that Standard Mandarin (*Putonghua*) be promoted nationally. Since that time, additional legislation was adopted to increase the spread of Chinese, especially in the realm of education.

Additionally, as the PRC leaders watch the forces of modern economic development spread Putonghua (and English) without the need for their official coercion, they have subjected minority languages to a period of legislative neglect, especially with regards to the approval of writing systems. This recent practice likely reflects a social-darwinist attitude toward language vitality on the part of the CCP, as revealed by Jiang Zemin’s suggestion that there are too many languages in China (Zhou & Ross 2004). In anticipation of total assimilation, therefore, the CCP’s current strategy seems to be one of “accommodate and wait.”

III. Minority Language Endangerment in Modern China

A combination of several factors has led to the endangerment of a significant number of languages in China. Although the PRC appears to be currently taking a *laissez-faire* approach to its minority languages, its early involvement in language work had consequences that are still felt today. Based on classificatory research done by government teams, the CCP began granting official “nationality status” to minority groups in the early 1950s. In 1979, however, the recognition of unique minority groups ceased, and applicants for nationality status since then have been assigned into pre-existing categories. Despite the fact that over 400 groups have applied for minority status, China currently recognizes only 55 nationalities other than the Han Chinese (Poa & LaPolla 2007).

This lumping of ethnic minorities into larger groups has yielded a system that often lacks a one-to-one correspondence between nationality and language (Poa & LaPolla 2007). The Yao nationality, for example, includes speakers of distinct Mienic, Hmongic, Tai-Kadai, and Sinitic languages (Gordon 2005). The CCP’s official position has generally been to treat such distinct languages as simply dialects (*fangyan*) of each nationality, though this rigid approach has been relaxed somewhat in the last 20 years (Bradley 2005). The practice of combining multiple ethnic groups into one nationality is typically justified by portraying it as analogous to the Han nationality, who speak mutually incomprehensible languages (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Taiwanese, etc.) but share a common writing system and other cultural elements. These languages are thus officially labeled “dialects” of Chinese, and the practice of homogenizing the Han Chinese is extended to minority nationalities (Poa & LaPolla 2007).

This policy of lumping ethnic groups has had a detrimental effect on smaller languages, which are usually not chosen as a “standard” variety for their nationality and thus do not have access to official support. Such support would normally include orthography development, government-sponsored linguistic research, publication of translations and dictionaries, and documentation of traditional stories & songs (Bradley 2005). In addition, there are a number of ethnic groups and languages that still remain unclassified, and consequently their existence is not officially acknowledged (Dwyer 1998; Poa & LaPolla 2007).

Aside from the issue of classification, minority languages also face a threat from the Chinese education system and its nationally-standardized curriculum, which is designed to transition students to speaking Putonghua and instill the ideology of the Chinese state. Moreover, although minority

languages are used in instruction at lower levels of schooling, almost all higher education is in Putonghua (Poa & LaPolla 2007).

Increasing contact with the Han Chinese is another significant factor in the endangerment of minority languages in China. Migrations of Han to minority borders areas have historically been sponsored by the government—to dilute the ethnic minority population for the purposes of preventing a rebellion, for example. However, with the rise of China’s market-driven economy and increased mobility, language contact is more frequent as minority men leave their communities to work in urban Han areas. Rural minority regions are also increasingly influenced by contact with Han Chinese who have the financial means to become tourists (Poa & LaPolla 2007).

Perhaps the single most important factor, however, is the language attitude of minority ethnic groups. As China’s economy booms and Mandarin Chinese spreads as its *lingua franca*, learning Putonghua and adopting Chinese culture is seen as the means to advancing one’s socioeconomic status. Bradley (2005) and Poa & LaPolla (2007) both observe that the most sinicized or Han-assimilated members of a minority ethnic group are often the cadres, whose actions with regard to their communities consequently reflect a greater loyalty to the external Chinese system. Groups with moribund languages often choose “not to make an issue of language maintenance” (Bradley 2005:11), seeing no economic incentive to resist the adoption of Chinese by diverting monetary resources to language support.

The future of endangered minority languages in China, therefore, can best be described as grim. Both governmental policies and economic factors favor the adoption of Chinese, and many minority communities seem unwilling to resist. Though large-scale documentation projects have increased in recent decades (Poa & LaPolla 2007), revitalization efforts appear to be largely limited to democratic Taiwan (cf. Florey 2008; The China Post 2007). The next few decades are likely to see the continued loss of languages and unique minority identity in China as rapid economic development is treated as the paramount goal. It may only be when minority communities have sacrificed their identities enough to reach a level of economic stability that they will pause to ponder what they have lost. At that point, grassroots revitalization efforts may be able to take root if it is not too late.

IV. She Ethnic Group

The She (畲 [ʂə⁵⁵]) people are an ethnic minority group whose members live in scattered communities located in the Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces of southeastern China (Mao & Meng 1986). Though culturally similar to the Yao nationality (Ratliff 1998), they constitute one of China’s 56 ethnic groups, having received official recognition sometime between 1954 and 1964 (Zhou 2003). According to census data from the PRC, the She have grown from 234,00 in 1964 (Zhou 2003) to more than 709,000 today (Bradley 2005).

The She language, also called *Ho Ne* ([hɔ²² ne⁵³] “mountain people”), is a member of the Hmongic subgroup in the Hmong-Mien language family (Ratliff 1998). The Hmong-Mien languages are known for their impressive tonal inventories, and Ho Ne is no exception with its 8 tones (Mao & Meng 1986). Although a member of the Hmongic subgroup, its phonological inventory (Tables 1-3) exhibits historical features of both Hmongic and Mienic languages: During the development of Proto-Hmong-Mien into its two branches of descendants, the Hmongic languages tended to simplify the rimes, while the Mienic languages simplified the onsets. In Ho Ne, both the inventory of onset consonants (33) and rimes (28) are relatively simple⁵ (Ratliff 1998). With regards to morphology and syntax, Ho Ne appears to exhibit the typical Hmong-Mien characteristics of exclusively-monosyllabic morphemes and isolating syntax (cf. Mao & Meng 1986).

Table 1: Ho Ne Tones (Mao & Meng 1986:14)

| Tone | Contour | Visualization |
|------|---------|---------------|
| 1 | 22 | ┆ |
| 2 | 53 | ∨ |
| 3 | 33 | ┆ |
| 4 | 42 | ∨ |
| 5 | 31 | ∨ |
| 6 | 35 | ∧ |
| 7 | 21 | ∨ |
| 8 | 54 | ∨ |

⁵ Contrast Ho Ne with 1) Mong Leng (Hmongic), whose onset inventory consists of 47 consonants (with such stop series as plain, prenasalized, aspirated, and prenasalized+aspirated), but whose rime inventory contains only 6 monophthongs, 4 diphthongs, and 3 nasalized vowels that can end in [ŋ]; and 2) Iu-Mien (Mienic), which has only ~31 onset consonants but a vast inventory of 10 monophthongs, 8 diphthongs, 20 triphthongs, and 6 coda consonants (author’s own field notes, 2006-2007).

Table 2: Ho Ne Initials (Mao & Meng 1986:11)

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| p | p ^h | m | | v | f |
| ts | ts ^h | | | z | s |
| t | t ^h | n | | | |
| k | k ^h | ŋ | ŋ ^o | | h |
| p ^j | p ^{hj} | m ^j | | | |
| ts ^j | ts ^{hj} | | | z ^j | s ^j |
| t ^j | t ^{hj} | n ^j | | | |
| k ^j | k ^{hj} | ŋ ^j | | | h ^j |
| k ^v | k ^{hw} | | | | |

Table 3: Ho Ne Rimes (Mao & Meng 1986:13)

| | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| i | | iu | in | | it | |
| e | ei | eu | en | | et | |
| a | ai | au | an | aŋ | at | ak |
| ɔ | ɔi | | ɔn | ɔŋ | | ɔk |
| ɤ | | | | | | |
| u | ui | | un | uŋ | ut | uk |

Ho Ne is significantly endangered: A 2000 study of minority language vitality in China ranked Ho Ne 50th out of the 60 languages surveyed (Huang 2000, cited in Zhou 2003:29-32). In 2002 there were only ~1,200 remaining speakers, concentrated in the Boluo, Zhengcheng, Huidong, and Haifeng counties of Guangdong (You 2002). The overwhelming majority of She speak a variety of Chinese Hakka (Ratliff 1998), leading a Beijing-published book on China’s ethnic minorities to claim, “They use the Han language” (Lan 2003:60).

Published materials on their history are sparse, but it appears that She are hypothesized to have descended from the Bunu Yao people of Guangxi, who are culturally Yao but also speak a Hmongic language (Ratliff 1998). While moving eastward toward Guangdong, they came into contact with the migrating Hakka as early as the Song dynasty (960-1279), beginning their process of sinicization (Segawa 1995). During the Ming dynasty, the She continually revolted against the Han but were suppressed by imperial campaigns and ultimately subjugated in the 1650s (Leong 1997). The She today govern one autonomous county in Zhejiang (Jingning She Autonomous County: www.jingning.gov.cn) and a number of autonomous *xiangs* (townships) within Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Fujian, Guangdong, and Anhui provinces (Google 5/2008; searched for 畲族乡 [shēzú xiāng, “She ethnicity township”]).

The She are one of the most sinicized minority nationalities in southeastern China, with traditional male costumes lost, slash-and-burn agriculture long abandoned, and the last remaining speakers of Ho Ne relegated to a cluster of villages in Guangdong. Despite their near-total assimilation, however, a 1990 survey of four She villages in the Chaozhou District of Guangdong found the She maintaining clear (though minimal) ethnic boundaries between themselves and the surrounding Han (Segawa 1995). Some unique expressions of She identity included possession of ancestral paintings depicting the She origin myth, a taboo against eating dog meat, and “their own language” (Segawa 1995:198). Although the Chazhou She’s “own language” is actually a variety of

Hakka, which has been studied by at least one documentation effort (You 2002), the Han in Chaozhou speak not Hakka, but a variety of the Min Nan branch of Chinese. As noted by Segawa (1995), Han culture is not completely homogenous, a fact that has allowed the Hakka-ized She in Chaozhou to treat their version of sinicization as an ethnic distinction between themselves and the surrounding non-Hakka Han.

Some documentation has been published on the endangered Ho Ne (e.g. Mao & Meng 1986), but with the (relatively) small number of speakers, the lack of an influential county- or prefecture-level She autonomous government in Guangdong, and the official position that the She “speak the Han language,” the prospects of seeing a revitalization effort anytime soon are slim to none. The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) observes that Ho Ne is used primarily by adults and that children have largely switched from Ho Ne to Chinese, but perhaps the most discouraging indicator of Ho Ne’s future lies in this simple note: “Indifferent language attitude.”

V. Conclusion

Given the vast disparity between America’s wealth and China’s rural poverty, we Western linguists can hardly blame such minority groups as the She for embracing the dominant language as the means of socioeconomic advancement. We can, however, critically evaluate the governmental policies that have facilitated this erosion of minority languages. China’s policy history is replete with state-sponsored attempts to suppress minority ethnic identity through language replacement, and the CCP’s current inaction as Chinese spreads reveals the lack of value the PRC places on its minority languages.

But linguists also have another potential task. Times change, and history never takes a predictable course, so the “indifferent language attitude” of such groups as the She may actually reverse itself in the future. If/when it does, we can stand ready to help in any way possible.

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