The Impact of PRC Language Policies on Minority Languages in China

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Introduction

While language is often used as a tool to bring people together and celebrate differences, language can also be weaponized and used to suppress minority groups of people. There are over three hundred unique languages and dialects spoken in Mainland China, with Mandarin Chinese being the most widely spoken of the languages (Shafer, 1955). Mandarin is the official state language of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and it is also the primary language taught in schools across the country. Over 1.1 billion people speak Mandarin Chinese (Ethnologue, 2022). Despite official Chinese policy of teaching Mandarin Chinese alongside local dialects, Mandarin is favored over minority languages. The unequal emphasis on Mandarin is an example of how the PRC uses language as a means to oppress minority groups in China. Previous research has studied the effects of government suppression of language among the Xinjiang Uyghur minority, the Zhuang minority group in the Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region, ethnic minority groups in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, and speakers of Miao in southern China. Using a timeline beginning in 1949 with the establishment of the PRC, this work uses a historical approach utilizing case studies and official Chinese government policies to continue to analyze how language policies in the PRC continue to negatively impact speakers of minority languages.

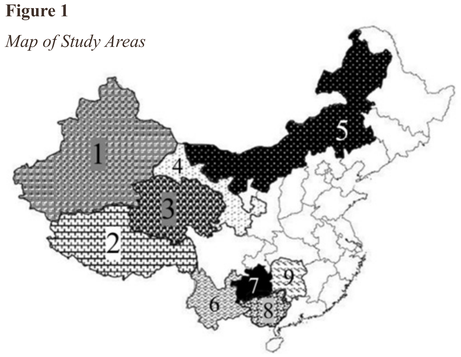
Areas of Analysis

Previous research on minority language policy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has spanned numerous provinces within China, though a number of studies have been conducted on languages and minority groups located in western China. Though China's ethnic groups are dispersed throughout the country, nearly 25% of members of minority ethnic groups live in northwest China (Gao et al., 2017, p. 5). Furthermore, ethnic minority groups, and by extension minority languages, tend to be concentrated in eastern Inner Mongolia, the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, and in the area of the Hubei-Guizhou-Hunan intersection, among others, which are included in the research areas covered in this study (Gao et al., 2017, p. 5). Within the literature that has been used to inform this study, the following nine provinces served as language case studies and have been marked with numbers corresponding to the location of the province on the map (Figure 1):

1 – Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xu, 2019)
2 – Tibet Autonomous Region (Xu, 2019; Wang and Phillion, 2009; Zhu, 2014)
3 – Qinghai Province (Wang and Phillion, 2009; Zhu, 2014)
4 – Gansu Province (Zhu, 2014)
5 – Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Xu, 2019)
6 – Yunnan Province (Zhang, 2008)
7 – Guizhou Province (Zhang, 2008)
8 – Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Grey, 2021; Wang and Phillion, 2009)
9 – Hunan Province (Zhang, 2008)

Figure 1

Map of Study Areas



Note. Each numbered province correlates to an area of study.

Official Minority Language Policy in PRC

As stated in Article IV in the 2018 edition of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the federal government recognizes all ethnic minority groups as equal and the state has a responsibility to protect the "lawful rights and interests of all ethnic minorities" (PRC, 2018, p. 5). Though the constitution stipulates that minority groups have the freedom to use their own minority languages, implementation of official federal minority language policies is contrary to this constitutional provision (PRC, 2018, p. 5; Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 4–5).

Official minority language policies as laid out by the 1984 Law on Regional National Autonomy prioritized minority languages as the primary language of instruction in schools with Mandarin Chinese being taught as a supplemental language class (Zhu, 2014, p. 701). However, following the implementation of the Law on Education in 1995, minority languages shifted from being the principal language to being an extracurricular language, with Mandarin Chinese becoming the language of instruction (Zhu, 2014, 702–703). Though the use of minority languages remained a *freedom* provided by the constitution, the adoption of the Law on the National Standard and Spoken Language in 2000 made the use of Mandarin Chinese a *right* (PRC, 2018, p. 5; Zhu, 2014, p. 703).

Despite local governments still having the authority to teach minority languages in schools, the national promotion of Mandarin Chinese has impacted the ability to successfully teach school curriculum entirely in minority languages. Beginning in third grade, minority students must use the national curriculum, which is taught in Mandarin Chinese as the official language (Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 7). The promotion of Mandarin Chinese and Han Chinese norms through mandatory curriculum reduces access to minority language education and can cause the loss of minority identity among students (Wang and Phillion, 2009, p. 7).

Current State of Minority Language Policy Implementation in China

The implementation of minority language policies has largely been relegated to the states, which makes policy implementation susceptible to negative impacts of poverty, a lack of qualified teachers, distrust of local officials, and prejudice against minority languages (Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 4–5). Furthermore, the overarching idea of national unity above all else has caused schools to abandon minority language education in favor of Mandarin Chinese (Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 5–6; Zhu, 2014, p. 700). The nationwide promotion of Mandarin Chinese and the use of Mandarin for college entrance exams and official government activities also serves to suppress minority languages (Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 6).

Though there have been some efforts to increase the teachings of minority languages in schools, such as implementing Miao-only language classrooms in Hunan, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces, few have been successful (Zhang, 2008). In Zhang (2008), it was found that after taking Miao language classes students had rarely mastered the basics of the Miao language. Many teachers were not even trained in teaching Miao, though they were native speakers (Zhang, 2008, p. 31–32). Outside of the classroom, efforts to increase the literacy of Zhuang through the use of Zhuang on street signs was also found to be unsuccessful (Grey, 2021, p. 276–280). Though the goal was to create a language landscape to improve Zhuang literacy, many people were unable to recognize the language as Zhuang, thus rendering this minority language policy ineffectual (Grey, 2021, p. 276–280).

Much of the language policy in China has been implemented for the purpose of teaching members of minority ethnic groups their native language. However, there has been little incentive for native-Han speakers to learn minority languages (Xu, 2019, p. 25–33). Furthermore, many monolingual Han speakers see little to no value to learning minority languages (Xu, 2019, p. 25–33). Even speakers of minority languages see the study of Han to be highly important to living a successful life in China (Xu, 2019, p. 25–33).

Moving Forward: The Future of Minority Language Policy

Current language policies throughout China have proven to be ineffective in preserving and increasing literacy of minority languages. A lack of funding in rural communities, unmandated training programs for teachers, and a disincentive to learn minority languages all contribute to the endangerment of Chinese minority languages (Grey, 2021, p. 276–280; Wang & Phillion, 2009, p. 4–5; Xu, 2019, p. 25–33; Zhang, 2008, p. 31–32). As Grey (2021) showed, previous attempts at creating language landscapes failed because people could not even recognize what the Zhuang language looked like. Written Zhuang was often interpreted as misspelled Pinyin or English by both Zhuang speakers and Han Chinese speakers alike (Grey, 2021, p. 277). Though the official government policy claims to promote equality of languages, the shortcomings of minority language policies and the favoritism showed toward Han Chinese, as well as opportunities associated with fluency in the language, have proven that implementation of minority language policy has not been successful.

In an increasingly globalized China, Chinese and English provide the most opportunities for individual economic prosperity (Xu, 2019, p. 25–33). Speakers of minority languages place great value on bilingualism in Han Chinese and minority languages; however, monolingual Han Chinese speakers show little interest in learning minority languages (Xu, 2019, p. 25–33). If China wishes to promote minority language education, it will be equally important to promote minority language learning among members of ethnic groups, but also among Han Chinese.

Though not entirely successful, the strategies implemented by Grey (2021) and Zhang (2008) are good starting points to increase minority language education. The idea of language landscapes can be effective in increasing language recognition and literacy, though the most basic requirement is that people are familiar enough with the language to perceive a written language as that language (Grey, 2021, p. 277). Future minority language policies wishing to create a language landscape will have to design the language landscape in such a way that the landscape can teach people how to recognize which language is being displayed, while also increasing exposure to the specific language.

School-based language immersion programs have been found to successfully produce bilingual fluency (Fortune, 2012, p. 2). Future iterations of the Miao language classrooms could produce successful results if changes to the implementation of the language classrooms is altered. Because the Miao teachers were not professionally trained in how to teach Miao as a second language, after one year of education, students were not proficient in basic Miao reading, writing, or grammar (Zhang, 2008, p. 31). Furthermore, due to a lack of Miao teachers, Miao can only be intensively taught at the preschool level, with a reduction of hours of instruction as students get older (Zhang, 2008, p. 30–13). Future language policies that prioritize formal training in teaching minority languages as second languages and implement a quota requirement for multiple minority language teachers per school will help improve the efficacy of minority language immersion classes.

Figure 2

Map of China

Note. This map provides context to the geographic location of China relative to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Minority languages will continue to exist in China alongside Han Chinese. It is important that future language policies continue to promote minority language education and bi- or multi-lingualism. While this research study provided some suggestions regarding changes that could be made to language landscapes and immersion classrooms in China, there is plenty of opportunity for the continued study of Chinese minority language policy.

The areas of study used for this research project consisted primarily of minority languages found in the western side of China. However, minority ethnic groups and minority languages exist throughout the entire country. Future research could investigate how minority language policies in different regions of China compare to each other. Additionally, though this study used a comparative approach to assess the effects of current minority language policies in China and provided suggestions for language policy implementation, future research could conduct experimental research on language landscapes or immersion classrooms.

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