

THE PROSPECTS FOR THE LONG-TERM SURVIVAL OF NON-HAN MINORITY LANGUAGES IN THE SOUTH OF CHINA.

INTRODUCTION

Official Chinese linguistic policy, enshrined in the Constitution, allows ethnic minorities the freedom to use and develop their own languages and to create (if they lack an adequate one), use and develop their own scripts.

The justification for this is twofold. Firstly, all nationalities are equal and have the same right to use and develop their languages, scripts and cultures. Secondly, learning the minority language script will help speakers of these languages without a command of Mandarin Chinese (Han) to learn it with the help of primers in their own language. This recognises that trying to teach monolingual minority language speakers directly in Han is at worst a waste of time and at best highly inefficient.

Although all languages are theoretically equal, it is argued that Han is the language of China's socially, economically and politically most-advanced majority nationality, from whom their less advanced minority brethren need to learn, in addition to being the officially chosen lingua franca between all linguistic groups in China.

Officials involved in language planning are quick to point out that while no-one should be forced to use the majority Han language and script, neither should they be forced to use or preserve the languages and scripts of their nationalities against their will.

There are 2 main strands to linguistic policy in Chinese minority areas:

- 1) Throughout all ethnic minority areas where non-Han languages are spoken, great efforts are being made to teach and spread the use of the Northern variant of the Han language, *Mandarin* or *Putonghua*.
- 2) In some (but in far from all) areas where non-Han languages are spoken, ethnic-minority language scripts are taught to varying degrees.

Mandarin and the other so-called Chinese "dialects" belong to the Han or Sinitic language family and are spoken by over 90% of the population. There are at least 80 non-Han languages spoken in China, the exact number depending on how one defines the difference between language and dialect. The linguistic situation in the South of China is particularly complex with a mosaic of different languages, (mainly belonging to the Tibeto-Burmese, Tai-Kam and Hmong-Mien language groups) often being spoken in the same areas and is complicated still further by the lack of correspondence between the officially designated 55 minority ethnic groups or *minzu* and the actual languages spoken.

I shall focus on the Zhuang-Buyi language community, the non-Han language with the largest number of speakers in China and on Nuosu (or Liangshan Yi), a language whose speakers live in compact communities and have a strong sense of ethnic consciousness and pride. In accepting Zhuang-Buyi as a unified language community it must be borne in mind that this would by no means be accepted by all its speakers.

THE SITUATION OF ZHUANG-BUYI

Zhuang-Buyi, closely related to Thai and Laotian and with just over 20 million speakers, is the most numerous, but by no means the best known, non-Han language community in China. The Zhuang language is divided into two partly mutually intelligible northern and southern varieties which are spoken by some 18 million people, distributed over a large part of Guangxi, eastern Yunnan and isolated areas of Guangdong. In addition, in southern Guizhou live over 2 million speakers of Buyi, which is identical to the northern dialect of Zhuang. In Vietnam and Laos (and even in northern Thailand) there are speakers of languages easily intelligible with the southern Zhuang dialect.

Despite a reputation for being fully bilingual in Han and Zhuang, a very large proportion of rural Zhuang-Buyi speakers, having only minimum contact with Han speakers, have no (or only extremely rudimentary) knowledge of either South-Western Mandarin or Cantonese. In sharp contrast, many Zhuang living in predominantly, especially urban, Han areas are in an advanced state of language-shift in favour of these varieties of Han. These Hanised Zhuang form but a small minority of the total Zhuang population, but are extremely influential.

Zhuang/Buyi speakers were not aware that they were Zhuang/Buyi until they were classified as such in the 1950s, identifying either with the Han or a host of ethnic groups not recognised by the Chinese Government. Those living in Guangxi, Yunnan and Guangdong were classified as Zhuang and those in Guizhou as Buyi. Many Zhuang literate in Han characters wrote down Zhuang by adapting and combining Chinese characters, thus creating a system, called *fangkuaizi* even more complex than normal Chinese characters.

A romanised Zhuang script was created and promoted in the 1950s and part of the 60s, mainly in adult literacy campaigns, and was re-launched in the early 1980s after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. The initial plan in the early 1980s was very ambitious and it was envisaged that bilingual Zhuang-Han education at primary and secondary levels (in which an important part of the subjects were to be taught through Zhuang) and adult literacy in Zhuang would become generalised throughout Zhuang-speaking areas. This would be combined with the promotion of its public use and the propagation of reading materials promoting basic technological, sanitary and economic innovations to help the socioeconomic development of its speakers.

However, despite some limited successes via adult literacy campaigns and “experimental” Zhuang-medium bilingual schools, the promotion of the Zhuang script only reached a small proportion of the total Zhuang-speaking population (probably well below 10%) and was regarded with hostility by an influential part of the Zhuang-speaking population, especially by Zhuang officials and urbanised, educated members of the middle classes who were also fluent in Han. Many other Zhuang were not even aware that a Zhuang script was being promoted at all.

In the early 1990s the promotion of the Zhuang script was scaled-down dramatically from its previous experimental stage, since when it has become almost anecdotal, although without having disappeared totally as a theoretical political objective. In fact the official explanation for the scaling-down was that it was a necessary temporary

measure to consolidate the promotion of Zhuang. When in 1993/94 I visited several centres of the experimental promotion, outside of Zhuang language classrooms, and apart from a few symbolic official signs, there was almost no evidence of public use of the script.

However, the debate about bilingual education and rural Zhuang literacy campaigns has not died and is still advocated by a minority of intellectuals as the answer to the socioeconomic problems of the Zhuang population. They point out that decades of mainly Han-only education and literacy campaigns have made relatively little impact on advancing the mainly monolingual rural Zhuang.

Why did the attempt to promote the Zhuang script not succeed, despite much enthusiasm and dedication on the part of many of its proponents? Why didn't the *rags to riches* stories of illiterate peasants who had become rich through bettering themselves through Zhuang-script technical publications and propaganda stressing the usefulness of the Zhuang script in learning Han have a greater effect in mobilising the population?

The main reason I think was the mass of the Zhuang people and officials were not convinced of the need for it. In particular the educated, influential, and mainly urbanised Zhuang elite who had made it in the "Han world" –in the process of abandoning part of their linguistic and cultural identity- felt threatened by their knowledge of Han possibly becoming undervalued and value being placed on the part they had just rejected. There was thus a lack of conviction in the actions of many key Zhuang officials and a lack of coordination between some of the official bodies involved. The fact that the promotion never came anywhere near achieving universal literacy in Zhuang meant that newly literates often felt they were part of a small irrelevant minority. Added to this was the dearth of publications in Zhuang, leaving many Zhuang speakers with the impression that they had to give priority to learning Han.

Moreover, a part of the population wanted to believe that they were not really non-Han, but rather just speakers of "dialects" (implying they were not much different from say Cantonese or Hakka speakers) whose ancestors had come from North China. The lack of a sense of unity of the Zhuang as an ethnic and linguistic group meant that many speakers, particularly those of the Southern dialect who had to learn the standard based on the Northern dialect, stated that they would rather learn Han directly than waste their time learning standard Zhuang, for them totally lacking in status. Others were hostile to what they saw as an imposed, alien romanised script, which they felt was very second rate compared to Chinese characters (which a minority of Zhuang had used for centuries) and advocated instead either writing Zhuang with normal Chinese characters or *fangkuaizi*.

From my talks with local rural Zhuang cadres, I believe that many ordinary rural Zhuang –those who would have stood most to gain from the promotion- welcomed the script and many more would have welcomed it if they had had access to it and any say in its promotion, but they were not in position of influence. Certainly there is an active, but tiny minority of Zhuang-speaking intellectuals highly dedicated to the ideal of popularising the script.

Unless a wonder occurs, I cannot envisage the proponents of the promotion of Zhuang gaining the upper hand, even though they still advance strong arguments in favour.

They are not influential enough as has been confirmed by the victory of the opponents of the Zhuang script. If such a small proportion of the Zhuang-speaking population were made literate in, or even sensitised to the importance of, the Zhuang script after the best part of a decade of promotion, which never got beyond the “experimental” stage, and at the end of which it was made even more “experimental” and further marginalised, how can one hope for more positive results in the present atmosphere of ignorance, apathy and downright hostility towards promoting the script?

What future is in store for the large number of rural Zhuang with scarce or no knowledge of Han?

The vast rural majority will not only remain illiterate in their mother-tongue variant of Zhuang-Buyi, but will also have great difficulty in directly learning Han. Consequently they will be barred from participating fully in the economic and professional life of the country and will have great difficulty in learning Han Chinese. As among most monolingual non-Han-speaking populations, Han-only medium literacy campaigns and public education (based on past experience) are doomed, at best, to very limited successes. The urbanised, hanised Zhuang who have “made it” will probably not fully understand the predicament of their fellow Zhuang and take the attitude that if they made it so can all Zhuang. Once urban Zhuang start abandoning their language, they show little support for its preservation.

Of course many factors could work in favour of a language shift to Han in the rural Zhuang-only speaking areas such as increased Han immigration, increased urbanisation of the rural Zhuang population and increasing contacts with Han in other areas. If universal Han-only education were successfully and communicatively implemented perhaps the younger generations would become gradually bilingual. However Chinese education is not famous for being communicative and typically there is a high drop-out rate among monolingual rural Zhuang-speaking schoolchildren.. I have no doubt that in a few generations a language shift to Han is inevitable unless attitudes change radically, but such a shift will be slow and probably highly damaging to the individuals involved.

The most influential section of its speakers perceives Zhuang-Buyi as inferior to Han and not worth fighting to preserve. They seem to be ignorant of the perverse negative effects of this mentality. This means that the necessary funds for the spread of the Zhuang script are not allocated. Perhaps one solution (or a forlorn hope?) would be to solicit the active involvement of overseas NGOs whose remit would be to raise the motivation of Zhuang speakers in promoting their language and script alongside Mandarin and that an active knowledge of both is not incompatible. (The religious U.S.-based Summer Institute of Languages is presently involved in several projects for example).

THE SITUATION OF NUOSU

The Nuosu (officially classified in the 1950s as Yi, in common with 5 other groups of speakers, or hanised ex-speakers, of related but mutually unintelligible Tibeto-Burmese Languages) of the mountainous areas of Liangshan (in South Sichuan and North Yunnan) were effectively independent from the Chinese authorities until the communist victory and only after a bloody rebellion was put down in the 1950s were they brought

under central control. Traditionally they have regarded the Han as inferior, with the Han reciprocating these feelings. They possess an ancient traditional script, partly ideographic partly syllabic, which was mostly used and handed down by the *bimos*, the shamanistic guardians of Nuosu religion, history and culture.

In the 1950s their traditional script was used for administrative and propaganda purposes in a limited way by the authorities, who then created a romanised script which was in fact only tried out for a year or 2 before being disrupted by the leftist campaigns of the late 50s, although it was totally rejected by most Nuosu speakers who pointed out they already possessed a perfectly adequate traditional script. During the 50s and 60s a large number of people learnt the traditional script on their own initiative, which in the late 70s was radically simplified from some 8,000 characters to 819 characters, effectively converting it into a totally syllabic writing system. Unlike with Zhuang there was no feeling that the Nuosu script had been imposed from above, quite the contrary.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the simplified Nuosu script has been extensively taught in the core Nuosu-speaking areas of Liangshan by way of adult literacy campaigns and bilingual Nuosu-Han education (mainly at primary level) whose implementation has been well planned and coordinated by various official bodies. The literacy campaigns were successfully combined with courses and Nuosu textbooks about technological innovations (e.g. in agriculture and animal husbandry), accounting, health and sanitation and other topics of interest to peasants interested in bettering their lives. Many counties in these areas (with overwhelming Nuosu-speaking majorities) have been declared illiteracy-free. Unlike in Zhuang areas there is widespread evidence of the script being used at a popular level for basic written communication and public signs, as well as its use for a limited number of reading materials (including a Nuosu edition of the "Liangshan Daily").

Compared to Zhuang-Buyi, the promotion of Nuosu has been a great success. However, while there is a large rural population literate in Nuosu in a large part of the core Nuosu area, reading materials in Nuosu are limited and people aware of the desirability of learning Han. In the urbanised administrative centres with Han populations there is a tendency among many Nuosu state employees (though rather weaker than among their Zhuang equivalents) to bring up their children in the Han language only. Unfortunately these serve as a model for other upwardly mobile Nuosu speakers. I have known Nuosu working in the research and promotion of Nuosu culture and history who did not speak Nuosu to their children, although I did meet other urban Nuosu who did so.

Even in Liangshan the main concern of language policy has been with the learning of the Han language and script. Despite all talk of linguistic equality and the importance of literacy in the mother-tongue, the main motivation for promoting Nuosu-medium literacy for a large part of the Nuosu public is that it will serve as a stepping stone to learning more efficiently the Han language and characters. The main problem is usually perceived as the lack of knowledge of Han, rather than the imminent loss of Nuosu. When a Nuosu-speaking community is bilingual in Han, there is little concern at an official level that they become literate in Nuosu or that they might abandon Nuosu in favour of Han. Thus Nuosu has very much become a rural only language.

To sum up one could say that in sharp contrast to the case of Zhuang-Buyi speakers in the rural heartland of Nuosu areas a large proportion of people are literate, either

actively or passively, in the Nuosu script. In the eyes of most Nuosu speakers this script is seen as having a high status and being an important part of their historic and religious heritage. However, even here there is a widespread awareness of the limited practical functions of this script compared to Han characters, which are seen as the real passport to economic success. In the urban centres inhabited largely by Han, it is expected that Nuosu residents will speak Han to these and not vice-versa. These influential centres are a serious drain on the efforts of Nuosu-script promotion and Nuosu has failed to “conquer” the urban centres and shake off its image as a rural language.

There are other not so positive signs from Liangshan. One hears of areas where bilingual education is being scaled down, of how few Han make an effort to learn Nuosu and of cases of ethnic discrimination against Nuosu by Han in position of authority. The fact that there are serious alcohol and heroine addiction problems among the Nuosu population and that AIDS and other infectious diseases are rampant (with very inferior health care facilities) does not create a good atmosphere for Han-Nuosu relations or for implementing a tolerant language policy based on respect for linguistic diversity.

The future of Nuosu

The future for Nuosu is hard to predict, but that it will continue to come under strong pressure from Han is certain. The involvement of foreign NGO in favour of promoting Nuosu language and culture (as being fully compatible with the modern world and with learning Han and English) could probably have a strong positive psychological effect on the Nuosu-speaking population.

If urban Nuosu could be encouraged to actively use Nuosu (alongside Han) and to bring their children up in it and its social use promoted further, then Han residents of the Nuosu heartland could also be asked to use Nuosu with the natives, something generally only Han who have integrated into Nuosu society do. Nuosu classes for a limited number of Han cadres have been held, but based on my observations would seem to be anecdotal and certainly have not reached the general Han public living in Nuosu areas. Classes for both communities to teach cultural differences between Yi and Han society would not be amiss.

It is true that some classes have been held for Hanised urbanised Nuosu children to learn their jettisoned native language, but never letting them lose it would be far more effective. An encouraging sign is the setting up and financing of Nuosu-medium schools by some successful Nuosu businessmen who have insisted on the inclusion of the teaching of Nuosu. It would be desirable for all educational projects financed by foreign NGOs to follow this example.

OTHER LANGUAGES IN SOUTH CHINA

If Nuosu, whose speakers live in compact communities, have a high sense of ethnic consciousness and an ancient literacy tradition, were not to survive there would be little hope for other ethnic-minority languages of South China. Large numbers of scattered speakers of non-Han languages are loosing, or already have lost, their ethnic languages.

Many language communities, such as the Mien (Yao) are not as compact as the Nuosu or the Zhuang and live interspersed with speakers of Han and other languages and widely dispersed.

Unfortunately a large proportion of minority speakers seem to have received no or virtually no illiteracy eradication in their own language scripts and even where this takes place it is usually on a very limited scale. In case of some smaller languages scripts have not even been created. As in the case of Zhuang, there are often problems where speakers find their dialect differs greatly from the variant selected as the new standard language and in many cases only a small proportion of the population speaking these languages have been aware of the campaigns.

A major problem for all these languages is that speakers of these languages who become state employees or live in Han-dominated urbanised areas, tend to (even if their remit is to promote their native language and culture and even if they are highly supportive of them) speak only Han to their children thus creating a role-model not conducive to the long-run maintenance of the language. At the same time a majority of local Han state employees tend to be hostile and dismissive of the promotion of these languages, often looking down on the culture and way of life of their speakers and in too many cases making no attempt to learn these languages.

The central concern in minority language-speaking areas in South-West China is that monolingual speakers of these languages are enabled to learn Mandarin Chinese, with or without the help of their own scripts. Little or no attention is paid to their conserving their native languages in the long-term future or to encouraging local Han Chinese to learn minority languages and scripts.

Realistically speaking it would seem that, as elsewhere in the world, the outlook for minority languages perceived as inferior is grim. If there is not a radical change in the public's awareness of the utilitarian advantages of conserving their native languages alongside Han, I think most non-Han languages, including Zhuang, will disappear in the next few generations. Given the low levels of Han and low school attendance among many groups, this process of language-shift will often be slow and have painful consequences for their speakers. Those compact language communities with a high degree of ethnic consciousness and established script which is linked to the religion and traditions of the group (e.g. the Buddhist Dai, Christian groups of Hmong (Miao), the Yi) probably have the most chances of surviving, but even their situation is most precarious.

Non-Chinese NGOs could play an important role in persuading both the elites speaking these languages and local Han of the importance of a language policy which promotes multilingualism and respect for minority languages and should insist on the inclusion of these languages and their scripts in programmes which they finance or advise on.

INTRODUCTION

- > 100 non-Han languages in China v. 55 non-Han nationalities
 - Confusion as to language, dialect + nationality.

Mosaic of different languages in South China
(mainly Tibeto-Burmese, Tai-Kam + Hmong- Mien).

Minority nationalities' right to use + develop their languages / scripts.

- embodies equality of nationalities
- helps non-Han speakers to learn Han

All languages are equal, but Mandarin more equal than others.

2 main policies being implemented in Chinese minority areas:

- Promotion of *Mandarin* or *Putonghua* (everywhere).
- In **only some** (but in far from all) areas:
 - promotion of minority languages.

ZHUANG-BUYI (Tai-Kam language):

- most numerous non-Han language (c. 20 million)
 - Zhuang: northern and southern -18 million
 - Buyi (= northern Zhuang) – 2 million

Background

- Extensive compact, monolingual, rural speech communities,
- Urbanised, hanised minority
- Lack of ethnic consciousness
- Dialectal variation
- High illiteracy
- Traditional writing systems: Han characters, *fangkuaizi*

Promotion of Romanised Script:

- 1950s: Creation
- 1950s /early 60s: Promotion
- 1980: Ambitious revival of promotion
 - some successes, reached only small %
- 1990: Drying up of promotion –on slow burner -debate goes on

Reasons for failure:

- Ignorance of implications of bilingual policy (failure to convince potential beneficiaries)
- vested interests of Hanised classes + non-cooperation key civil servants
- lack of power and influence of main beneficiaries and supporters
- lack of prestige
- lack of identification with romanised script
- lack of ethnic and linguistic unity (belief that Zhuang are Han)
- lack of materials in Zhuang
- provisional and experimental nature of the promotion
- lack of funding

Future for Zhuang language

- Han-medium education not ideal
- Slow, gradual, painful Hanisation with negative consequences
- Widening rural-urban gap
- Han immigration, increased urbanisation, more efficient universalised Han education → favour language shift
- Inevitability of gradual language shift

Possible involvement of overseas NGOs

NUOSU (Tibeto-Burmese Language)

- 2.5 million

Background:

- Effectively independent till 1950, rebellion in 1956
- Traditionally regarded Han as inferior (Han reciprocating).
- 1950s: officially classified as Yi
- Ancient traditional script, partly ideographic partly syllabic

Promotion

- Early 1950s: Limited traditional script for administration + propaganda
- Late 1950s: creation of romanised script. - short-lived + rejected
- 50s + 60s: spontaneous learning of traditional script
- Late 70s: simplification >8,000 characters → 819 characters
- 1980s + 1990s: extensive promotion of simplified Nuosu script (in the core areas by way of well-coordinated:
 - adult literacy campaigns (integrated studying new techniques)

- bilingual Nuosu-Han education (mainly 1^{ty}).
- 1990s: many areas declared illiteracy-free.

Evidence of popular use of script:

- basic written communication
- public and commercial signs
- limited reading materials
- *bimos*

Large rural population literate in Nuosu, but:

- limited Nuosu reading materials
- Awareness of desirability of learning Han.
- Many urbanised Nuosu (less than among Zhuang) bring up children in Han only, serving as negative role model
- Lack of planning against language shift, especially among bilingual Nuosu
- Lack of involvement of Han residents
- Urban centres - drain on the efforts of Nuosu-script promotion.
- Rumours of scaling down bilingual education.
- Social / Political Problems: ethnic discrimination, alcohol / heroine addiction, rampant AIDS + other infectious diseases
→ bad atmosphere for implementing tolerant language policy.

Future

- continue to come under strong pressure from Han
- → rural language

Suggested solutions:

- Possible involvement of foreign NGOs to promote Nuosu (condition for financing)
- Encourage urban Nuosu to use Nuosu + bring children up in it
- Encourage Han residents in Nuosu areas to use Nuosu
- Spread cultural awareness

OTHER LANGUAGES

Many, e.g. Mien (Yao), in worse position than Nuosu:

- Scattered communities,
- Often low ethnic esteem / consciousness

- Little literacy / religious tradition,
- Widespread language shift already taking place.
- Little or no literacy work.
- Dialectal fragmentation
- Urbanised hanised privileged classes as negative role-models
- Central concern to learn Mandarin Chinese, with / without the help of own scripts
- Little / no attention to long-term preservation
- No encouraging local Han to learn minority languages and scripts.

Outlook: grim.

- If no change in public's awareness most non-Han languages will disappear in coming generations.
- Given low levels of Han and school attendance among many groups, language-shift will be slow + painful
- Compact language communities with a high degree of ethnic consciousness + established script with religious tradition have best chances, but still precarious.

Role for NGOs in promoting multilingualism and respect for minority languages and conditioning financing of projects on this?