

Will the Qiang Language Survive?

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ABSTRACT

Speakers of the Qiang language are decreasing in number. This is true for speakers of both the southern and northern dialects. Native speakers of the language, educational authorities and linguists agree that the language's ability to survive this century is in doubt. Although the Chinese government has made an effort to develop the language, several factors beyond its control are contributing to the demise of language.

At the present time, a Qiang practical transcription and two books have been developed. Of these two books, one has been used for adult literacy while the second has been used for children's education. As language development is taking place, however, it struggles against a backdrop of opposing conditions. Each decade, the number of Qiang children receiving an education in Han Chinese increases. Simultaneously, technological innovations such as satellite receivers make Chinese television programming available in remote areas, while Qiang cultural traditions such as dancing, singing and storytelling fall by the wayside.

This paper addresses the question, "Will the Qiang language survive?" The language's future is considered from three standpoints: cultural factors, language policy and sociolinguistic issues. The authors also undertook a small-scale survey in the village of Hexi (河西), Qugu (曲谷) township to determine the extent to which the Qiang language is being passed on to children. Our findings lead us to believe that the Qiang language is in danger of extinction. If the language is to survive, vigorous efforts at language development must be made, with an emphasis on the creation and use of Qiang language literacy.

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material and literature. We see the need for more research, especially in the form of a language use survey to determine the people's attitudes toward the use of Qiang and Han Chinese.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Qiang people, who refer to themselves as /zɿme/, live mainly in, Beichuan, Heishui², Li, Mao, Songpan and Wenchuan counties in the northwestern region of Sichuan province, the People's Republic of China. The language is classified in the Sino-Tibetan phylum, the Tibeto-Burman family, the Qiangic branch. There are about 290,000 ethnic Qiang, less than half of whom still speak one of the Qiang dialects. Qiang is an SOV language with a rich segmental inventory.

There are three views put forth as to the historical existence of a Qiang written language. A Qiang legend says that the Qiang once had written language kept in a set of sacred books; however, during their migration from central to western China these books were eaten by a goat. Thus their written language disappeared. Another thought which some scholars propose is that the now extinct Xixia language, which had a written form, is actually related to the modern day Qiang spoken language. Finally, there is the idea that Qiang has never had a written language. In any case, Qiang has not had a written form for the past several centuries, and this has only changed very recently with the development of a practical transcription system. This long-standing lack of a writing system has had an impact on how the people themselves view their language.

This paper concerns itself with the future of the Qiang language: Will it survive? Section two discusses the changes within Qiang culture and the the resulting impact on the language. Section three contains a synopsis of the implications of language policy for the Qiang and their language. Finally, section four delineates sociolinguistic variables that factor into the equation.

2.0 CULTURAL FACTORS

As is the case within all cultures, the passing of time inevitably leads to change. Comparing the present day Qiang culture with that of 50 or 100 years ago reveals that the people are changing. These changes are altering the values of the Qiang people and are affecting their attitudes toward the Qiang language. Specifically, the domains of demographics, education, entertainment, marriage and religion will be examined more closely.

2.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

According to 1999 census statistics, the Qiang population in the five

² A small number of a Tibetan subgroup in Heishui actually speak Qiang although they are Tibetan ethnically.

counties of Wenchuan, Li, Mao, Songpan and Heishui, is 290,000³. The 1982 and 1990 census statistics record the total population at 102,768 and 198,000 respectively. An educated guess is that a little more than 150,000 people still speak the language, although, there are no exact statistics available in this category. In Mao county, the main locus of Qiang-speaking people, the over-all population is 101,137. This figure includes Tibetans, Hui, Han and Qiang ethnic groups. Here the Qiang comprise the majority of the population with 93,000 plus people, and of these, roughly 45,300 still speak Qiang. Population factors such as birthrate, infant mortality, death rate, immigration and emigration have changed over the past twenty years. One of China's national family planning provisions is that ethnic minorities are permitted to have two children, instead of the "one-child" limit which the majority of the population must adhere to. The Qiang that live in farming regions often take advantage of this provision. Infant mortality has decreased and life expectancy has increased through improved nutrition and access to medical care. These factors have resulted in an overall increase in the Qiang population⁴. As with most rural areas of the world, Qiang emigration is greater than immigration. Despite this trend, the Qiang population is increasing, however, the number of people who can speak the language seem to be decreasing.

2.2 EDUCATION

Since Qiang has never been used as a language of medium for formal education, Han Chinese has dominated this realm. This is apparent when one considers townships such as Sanlong (三龙) in Mao county. In the 1950's this township still supported a healthy Qiang-speaking population. In 1951, the village established an elementary school using the Chinese language as the medium of education. During the 1970's a road linking the Heishui river valley and the township of Sanlong was completed. The construction of this road opened up Sanlong to the rest of Mao county and effectively to the rest of the world. This township is presently largely a Han Chinese speaking domain. Education and access to education or outside news has made it difficult for Qiang language maintenance to be sustained.

We are not the first to make this observation. Graham (1961), who conducted his research intermittently from 1925-1948, offers a similar opinion, "In more recent years the Chinese have established primary schools among the Ch'iang [Qiang], and a normal school for Ch'iang and Chinese at Wei-chou [Weizhou]. These schools are a very efficient means of absorption. There are those who believe that it is only a matter of time when the Ch'iang will be completely absorbed by the Chinese. Whatever the final results may be, the

³ A small number of people from Beichuan are not included in this figure.

⁴ Given that some Qiang have migrated to urban centers, this figure refers to the Qiang population of the five counties of Heishui, Li, Mao Songpan and Wenchuan, not the total Qiang population in the Peoples' Republic of China.

present is a time of rapid changes, and many old ideas and customs are passing away."

2.3 ENTERTAINMENT

More recently, since the early 1990's, the domain of Qiang traditional entertainment has seen changes. Even remote Qiang villages have fairly reliable hydroelectric power supply for at least 4-6 hours per day. With the widespread availability of electrical power, various electrical appliances such as television, stereos and other imported forms of entertainment are rapidly replacing the Qiang traditional forms of entertainment such as story-telling, singing and dancing. The latter forms of entertainment all employ the use of the Qiang language. However, with television broadcasts completely using Chinese and with access to Chinese music via radio and stereo, the domain of entertainment is losing its Qiang language component. Typically, while watching a Chinese television program, the older members of the family will still discuss aspects of the program in Qiang. However, if the older members of the family ask the children about the program in Qiang, the children will usually answer back in Chinese. A wave of television satellite receivers during the 1990's has brought Chinese television broadcasts into most homes on a daily basis. Even more remote Qiang townships, like Qugu (曲谷), have a plethora of satellite dishes allowing approximately 90 percent of homes to access Chinese broadcasting programs regularly.

Furthermore, the 1990's has seen the importation of activities such as the playing of Majiang, a traditional Chinese game, cards, and weddings that are being held outside of the home in bigger cities where the entertainment is "more interesting". When playing Majiang and card games, both Qiang and Chinese can be heard, not necessarily one or the other.

2.4 MARRIAGE

From an anthropological perspective, the Qiang have no restrictions on inter-marriage with members of other ethnic groups. The authors are acquainted with Qiang who are married to Han Chinese, Tibetan and Hui. Because Qiang is seldom spoken in mixed marriages, the increase in those marrying out-group members is slowly diminishing the pool of Qiang speakers. This is likely due to Han Chinese being the language of prestige and wider communication. The offspring of Qiang mixed marriages rarely learn to speak Qiang rather the whole family tends to speak Chinese together. More to the point, many ethnically Qiang speakers often marry other ethnic Qiang who are unable to speak Qiang. Here again, a Han Chinese environment tends to dominate family life resulting in children who are unable to speak Qiang⁵. Examples of this situation abound, the first listed author's daughter is but one of

⁵ It is a well demonstrated fact that in circumstances where the mother speaks one language and the father another language children are quite capable of learning both languages. However, the authors do not know of any children who have learned Qiang from one parent and Chinese from the other.