

## **On nationality and the recognition of Tibeto-Burman languages<sup>1</sup>**

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1. There are 56 nationalities in China, 55 of which are minority nationalities, speaking over 90 different languages. Most minorities speak their own languages, though a few, such as the Manchu and the Hui, generally speak Chinese. There are several reasons for the greater number of languages than nationalities.

First, a single nationality may use more than one language, for various reasons:

a. Sometimes, the people comprising the nationality have historically different backgrounds, and only became a single entity in consciousness and characteristics after a long period of living close to one another. Though willing to be recognized as a single nationality, the languages they speak are still distinct, as in the case of the Yao, who speak three different languages belonging to different branches and families. Other examples are the Yugur, who speak two languages belonging to different language families, and the Jingpo, who use two languages belonging to different branches of Tibeto-Burman.

b. Some historically small, weak nationalities gradually merged into large nationalities due to long periods of political control or cultural influence by larger, stronger groups, the smaller nationalities losing all their unique characteristics other than language. Some of these people are not willing to be recognized as a separate nationality from the dominant one, as is the case with the Tibetans of western Sichuan who speak Jiarong (rGyarong), Ergong, Guizhong, Zhaba, Muya, Shixing, and Namuyi, and with some of the Qiang and Pumi speakers of Sichuan who prefer to be considered as Tibetans.

c. The names by which some nationalities are known are simply geographic designations. For example, the Tibetans refer to all the peoples living in China's Luoyu area near the eastern section of the Sino-Indian border as 'Luoba' people, even though they speak several different languages.

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Another example is the minority nationalities of Taiwan, who are collectively known as the 'Gaoshan' ('High Mountain') people though they speak thirteen different languages (not including dead or dying languages).

d. Because of military campaigns to distant places, or through simple migration, a nationality, or part of one, sometimes loses its original language. We find two situations with respect to this type of change. One type is where the nationality (or the relevant part) completely loses its original language and takes on a new one. This is true of a group of Mongolian soldiers left in Yunnan after the southern campaigns of Kubilai Khan. After the fall of the Yuan dynasty, they lived among the Yi and Naxi peoples. The language they use now, Gazhuo, is an independent language within the Yi branch of Tibeto-Burman, different from both Yi and Naxi. The historic reasons for this phenomenon require further study. Another type of change is the use of a new, mixed language, as is the case with the Ai-nu dialect of Xinjiang and the Wutun dialect of Qinghai, the former having characteristics of Persian and Uighur, and the latter having some characteristics of Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, Tu, and Salar.

e. When a nationality splits up, and the different parts have had no contact with each other for a long time, the languages they speak may follow different paths of development and eventually become separate languages. An example of this situation is the Nu people of Yunnan. The Nu people who live in the Lancang (=Mekong) River valley call themselves the Rouruo; the Nu people who live in the Nu (=Salween) River valley call themselves the Nusu; between them is the Biluoxue Mountain. According to historical records, since the Sui-Tang period (7th cen.) they have had no contact with each other; their languages have already diverged to the point that it would be difficult to say they are dialects of the same language.

Second, there are still some ethnic groups that have not yet been recognized as distinct nationalities, some of them using one language, some more than one. For example, the Deng people of Tibet use two different languages, referring to them as 'Kaman' ('Geman') and 'Taraon' ('Darang'), and have been seeking recognition as distinct nationalities. The Kemu people of Yunnan and the Baima people of the Sichuan-Gansu border area also have their own languages, and have been asking for recognition.

As should be apparent, the use of two or more languages by a single nationality in China is not a rare phenomenon. According to preliminary statistics, of the 55 minority nationalities in China, 15 (27.7%) use more than two languages. This shows that there is a close relationship between nationality and language, but that this relationship is not always one to one.

2. Before the founding of the People's Republic, only a few scholars had done fieldwork on the minority languages, so the number of languages that

were known was small. In the early days of the People's Republic, the central government sent several investigative teams to the minority areas to determine the ethnic identities and the affiliations of the languages of the different minorities. As of 1954, when Luo Changpei and Fu Maoji published *'A survey of minority languages and writing systems in China'* (Luo & Fu 1954), 48 different minority languages had been recognized. In 1956, the government sent seven teams, totalling more than 700 people, to do a general survey of the minority peoples. As of 1966, 60 languages had been recognized.

After the third plenary of the eleventh congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978, the government established a program with respect to the minorities, and made investigation of the unknown minority languages an official part of that program. At the same time, many provinces and autonomous regions took up the work of distinguishing among the different ethnic minorities. This work often intersected with the task of distinguishing the minority languages. During this period, some new languages were discovered, though in some cases this did not lead to the ethnic group's being recognized as a separate nationality.

While doing fieldwork on the minority languages of the Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Liangshan, Sichuan in 1980, I came across a group of minority people who called themselves the 'Ersu'. After preliminary analysis, their language turned out to be unique; it was unlike any of the contiguous Yi languages, and unlike the neighboring Tibetan dialects as well. Responding to requests from the Ersu people, in the summer of 1981 the Sichuan People's Committee organized an investigation of their status. (They were still referred to by outsiders as the Xifan 'western barbarians'.) It turned out that there was a division among the Ersu people themselves; some felt they were a unique minority, others felt they were Tibetans.

When I returned to that area to do fieldwork in late 1981, the Ersu people were very concerned about the outcome of the work on their language. Those who felt they were Tibetans took out the Tibetan texts they had at home to prove that they could read Tibetan and that what they spoke was Tibetan. Those who felt they were a unique minority emphasized that they could not understand spoken Tibetan and said that, aside from a few people who had gone to Tibetan temples and become monks, those people who had Tibetan texts in their homes had brought them back from Tibetan areas, and not only could not read the texts aloud, but also had no idea what they were about.

In this situation, people holding different views about their nationality each hoped the linguistic investigation would support their view. Speaking objectively, language is a characteristic of a nationality, so the determination of a group's linguistic identity is directly relevant to the determination of their ethnic identity; an important criterion for the establishment of an

independent nationality is whether that group has its own language or not. If the results of my investigation were to show that Ersu is an independent language, then this would support the view of those who want the Ersu to be seen as a separate nationality; if the results were to show that Ersu is a Tibetan dialect, then the view of those who think the Ersu are Tibetans would find strong support. Because of this, the linguist must not express a viewpoint without proper justification. S/he must carefully dig deep into the language to expose its basic characteristics, comparing its phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon with those of related languages to determine the closeness of their relationship. Only such a process will determine scientifically whether or not one is dealing with an independent language.

Another example is the language of the Sherpa people, who live in the area straddling the border of the Tibetan Autonomous Area and Nepal. In the late 1970's, the Sherpa people asked to be recognized as a distinct nationality, just as the Sherpa people in Nepal had been treated as a separate nationality. They argued that they had difficulty understanding Tibetan. Actually, the language of the Sherpa and the Tibetan language are very close. Just from the list of several hundred commonly used words and the dozens of sentences which I recorded in 1979 we can see clearly the similarity between the two languages. Comparing Sherpa and the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan, we find that there are fewer differences among them than among the three major Tibetan dialects. From this we can conclude that Sherpa is closely related to the Ü-Tsang (dbu-gtsang) dialect of Tibetan, though of course Sherpa has its distinctive characteristics.

Another situation is when the name of the language and the name of the nationality are not the same. In China this is not unusual. For example, in Sichuan's Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Heishui County and Maowen Qiang Autonomous County are separated only by a stream of water. In 1956, when we were investigating the Qiang language, we found that the vast majority of the Tibetans of Heishui County used the Qiang language, and their religion, their architecture and many other aspects of their culture were the same as the Qiang, especially in the border area between the two counties. The people on both sides of the border intermarry and frequently interact, and there is very little difference between them in terms of language, economic life, etc., except for the fact that they see themselves as different nationalities and so have different autonyms. Here language recognition cannot change ethnic identity, since what determines ethnic identity is not simply language, but involves complex political, economic, and social factors, including the will of the people involved. A similar example is the fact that the majority of the Tibetans of the Muli Tibetan Autonomous County of Sichuan and the Pumi people of Ninglang Yi Autonomous County of Yunnan both use the Pumi language, and the fact that both the Nu people and the Dulong people of Gongshan Dulong-Nu