

# **A DISCUSSION OF QIANG BILINGUALISM—WITH CONCURRENT COMMENTS ON THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE ON THE QIANG LANGUAGE**

**SUN HONGKAI**

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences,  
Minority Language Institute, Beijing

*Translated by PETER and MARTHA LESTER*  
*The Summer Institute of Linguistics*

## **1.0**

Among all the ethnic groups living within China's borders, the Qiang (羌) have one of the longest histories. As early as the Yin-Shang (殷商) dynasty, inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells refer to the activities of the Qiang people. During the Zhou-Qin (周秦) dynastic period the Qiang resided along the He (Gansu), Huang (Qinghai), Tao (Gansu), and Min (Sichuan) rivers. As the Qin (秦) imperial court grew strong, the majority of the Qiang were compelled to live among the Han-dominated population. Moreover, the portion of the Qiang tribe "that feared the powerful Qin court", migrated to the south and settled there. Before settling down, they traveled for thousands of kilometers, crossing the winding Cizhi (赐支) river at its western extremities.<sup>1</sup> Later generations distinguished themselves by the different locales they occupied: the Yuexi Qiang (越西羌) as the Yak branch, the Guanghan Qiang (广汉羌) as the White Horse branch, and the Wudou Qiang (武都羌) as the Wolf Pack branch.

Today, the Qiang who live along the upper reaches of the Min River are the Southern Qiang that appear in the historical record. Records indicate that they settled in this region as far back as the Western Han dynasty (206 BC – 23 AD). The dynastic bibliographies of southwestern non-Han peoples note that in northwestern Zuo (笮), there were several tribes, among them a group by the name of Ranmang (冉駹) that had the largest population. Some of their customs were derived from the original inhabitants of western Sichuan. Later Han dynasty (25-220 AD) historical records on the non-Han tribes of the southwest state that the emperor Wu (武) opened up the Ranmang territory to

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Later Han – Western Qiang: Period History and Records*, p.55.

the Han. Furthermore, during the sixth year of the Han dynasty, during the Yuanding (元鼎) period (116 BC), the imperial court established the prefecture of Wenshan (汶山) in this area. For the first three years, the non-Han residents of Wenshan considered their taxes burdensome. Subsequently the emperor Xuan (宣) abolished the tax-system and incorporated Wenshan into the Northern part of Shu (蜀), present-day Sichuan), called Duwei (都尉). Wenshan was not only home to some unspecified non-Han groups, but also to the Qiang and the Di (氏) who were in turn subdivided into six, seven, and nine subgroups (tribes) respectively. Historical research has shown that today's Qiang trace their strongest historical links to the Ranmang. Records indicate that in every regard—cultural customs, architecture, and their indigenous geography—the Ranmang and the Qiang are clearly one and the same.

The genesis of Qiang bilingualism probably dates back to the Western Han dynasty (206 BC – 24 AD). Over 2000 years ago, while the Qiang were living along the upper reaches of the Min River, they came into contact with the Han of Shu (Sichuan). Documents mention the Qiang working as hired laborers, migrating in the winter to the Sichuan basin to avoid the cold, and in the summer returning to their mountain homes to escape the hot lowlands. The well known irrigation project at the midpoint of the Min River at Dujiangyan (都江堰) was the fruit of joint Qiang-Han efforts. Later Han (25 - 220 AD) archives record the Qiang leaders as having a wide knowledge of literature and a strict interpretation of the law, including cruel or corporal punishment. Since the Qiang language did not have an orthography, this would indicate that those who were literate read and wrote in Mandarin Chinese.

For more than 2000 uninterrupted years, not only have the Qiang entered Han territory to carry on business and export their pool of labor, but the Han have also entered the Qiang domain to conduct trade, and have utilized armies to carry out agricultural pursuits and wage war. The mutual contact between the Qiang and Han peoples is the most important societal condition influencing Qiang bilingualism. Over a period of 2000 years, during the development of Qiang society, whether the two peoples were at peace or war, there was no significant change in their overall relationship.

The Qiang are distributed in the following areas of Sichuan: Mao (茂), Li (理), Wenchuan (汶川), Heishui (黑水), and Songpan (松潘) counties of the Aba (阿坝) Tibetan Qiang Autonomous Prefecture; Beichuan (北川) county of the Mianyang (绵阳) City District; the Danba (丹巴) county of Ganzi (甘孜) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; as well as some Qiang who reside along the Northwest edge of the Sichuan Basin. On the southern and eastern extremes, Qiang territory borders Han areas. In contrast, on the western and northern

sides of their region, Qiang and Tibetan domains overlap. The majority of the Qiang coexist and intermingle with the Han. There is a minority who live, in relation to the Tibetans, in more segregated settlements. The villages where the Qiang have intermingled with the Han vary greatly in size and number compared to the Qiang who live in segregated villages. These then are the geopolitical considerations affecting Qiang bilingualism.

## **2.0**

According to the 1986 census, the Qiang have a population of approximately 170,000. The very nature of Qiang bilingualism is such that the majority of the Qiang community were able to utilize both the Qiang and Chinese languages. This analysis of Qiang bilingualism shows an extremely slow developmental period, due to societal, historical, geographical and other influences. Historical data concerning Qiang bilingualism, much like written Qiang itself, is virtually non-existent. However, much can be learned by analyzing the extent of bilingualism and the differences found from one locale to the next.

### **2.1 Monolingualism (Qiang)**

There must have been a transitional period from monolingualism to bilingualism. Written records, at the time of the Qin Han (秦汉), state that the Qiang migrated as a nation from six different river basins to western Sichuan. Consequently, this transitional period is seen as having had a long, slow evolution. At this point, the people were by and large monolingual, but some were beginning to articulate Chinese well, becoming bilingual in the process. As time passed, Qiang areas were increasingly affected by new arrivals, namely the Han and Hui peoples. More than a few Qiang left their homes to find odd jobs and conduct business, causing the level of bilingualism to rise. It was at this time that the first substantial number of bilingual Qiang appeared on the scene. They were mostly tribal leaders and their servants as well as a few educated folks. In the beginning, although the bilingual Qiang were small in number, their influence was comparatively large. During this period, Qiang was still the dominant language of their society. Chinese was only used once in a while by some people when they needed to communicate with non-native Qiang speakers. However, among the Qiang themselves, regardless of the occasion, utilizing their own language was the norm. Furthermore, this period developed into a very long, self-sustained, integrated, feudally ruled socio-economic system. Along with the establishment and implementation of the Qiangic headman system, Qiang society began to open up, with limitations, to the outside world. Headmen wanted their subjects to go to Han areas to transport goods, to deal with official documents, to pay the land tax in grain,

and to wage military campaigns. The Han ruling class wished to strengthen the feudal roles of headmen and leaders, and to continue economic exploitation and suppress resistance. After this type of treatment Qiang society fractured into two halves. At this point, one segment was called Shengfan (生番) or Shengqiang (生羌). For example a passage from *The Earthen Temple – the Loyal Generations* says, “In the 6<sup>th</sup> year of the Ying (英) clan (1441 AD), the minorities of Mao, Wei, and Wen districts rebelled. The court went on several punitive expeditions to put down the rebellion, but failed. Therefore, the districts were put under martial law.” The *Ming Dynasty History – Sichuan Headmen (Vol. I)* states, “Among the Qiang rebel forces of the Eastern Road area Qiang, the White Grass clan is the strongest. Also the Songpan Yellow Hair clan joined forces with the White Grass clan to form raiding expeditions to outlying regions.” *Readings from the Territorial History* states, “Residing in dangerously steep and complex terrain and mountain forests, the rebels built three stockaded villages beyond the river to the west. There was only one path from the village to Dongbu Hanhu (董卜韩胡) Xuanwei and another path leading to Meng Dong (孟董) and Liang Huang (梁黄). The rebel army controlled these two lines of travel, often causing disturbances.”<sup>2</sup>

Taking over at this time were the standard-bearing classes of the Sheng Fan and Sheng Qiang clans. Regarding military issues, while they did not promote banditry, they were repeatedly attacked and refused to submit. Concerning political interests, they refused to pay the grain tax and were resistant to pacification. In the realm of culture, they were considered uncouth and illiterate. In other areas, they were called the Shu Fan and Han Qiang. “Among the clans in Wei and Mao country some isolated themselves from the outside. It has never been determined whether these clans changed their names or not. However at this time (Yuan (元) and Ming (明) dynasties), these clans began to show a willingness to pay the grain tribute and gradually assimilate with the Han population.”<sup>3</sup> It is evident that during the Yuan-Ming dynasty (1271-1644) Qiang society began to fracture. One Qiang area accepted significant Han rule and as a result were deeply influenced by their rulers. This is where the foundations of the Qiang bilingual society were laid. Probably more than half of the Qiang speakers could understand and functionally use Chinese well enough to engage the Han segment of society. Among the clans that maintained their isolation, bilingualism naturally remained low. At this juncture, I believe the Qiang monolingual equilibrium was disturbed and crossed over the threshold to bilingualism. An overall analysis

<sup>2</sup> *A Summary of Regional Public History*: Vol.67 (“Sichuan #3”), p.56.

<sup>3</sup> *The Peaceful Dragon’s Government Archives*: Vol.5 (“National Minority Hereditary Headmen”), p. 56.