

Language Use and Preservation Among the Naxi Ethnic Group in China: A Sociolinguistic Review and Recommendations

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Received: April 19, 2025 Accepted: May 20, 2025 Online Published: May 23, 2025

Abstract

The Naxi ethnic group in China possesses distinctive linguistic and cultural characteristics. Its Naxi spoken language and Dongba written script are of great values to the world's rich linguistic diversity. However, as Chinese Han language dominates most sociolinguistic contexts, Naxi native language is at great risk of being endangered. An increasing proportion of Naxi youth no longer speak their native language, not to mention the rarely transmitted Dongba written script. Protecting and preserving the Naxi language is not only the responsibility of the indigenous community, but also an undeniable task for both the local and central governments. Actions such as implementing high quality bilingual education of Naxi language in elementary and secondary schools, launching and promoting programs about Naxi language, literature and cultures are discussed.

Keywords: Naxi, indigenous language, China ethnic group, sociolinguistics, endangered language education

1. Introduction

The Naxi group is one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China. Residing in Yunnan Province of southwestern China from ancient imperial dynasty of Tang which was established more than 1000 years ago, Naxi ethnic group is undoubtedly an indigenous group to China [1]. National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020) shows that Naxi has a total population of 323,767, ranking No.28 in population size in terms of ethnicity [2]. The distribution of Naxi ethnic group is very concentrated in both ancient times and nowadays. According to National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China (n.d.), most of them reside in Lijiang city of Yunnan province; a very small number of them live in other parts of Yunnan province or border areas of Yunnan and contiguous provinces like Tibet and Sichuan [3].

The Naxi ethnic group is famous for their unique religion and culture of Dongba [3]. Dongba is very different from some more prevalent religions in China like Buddhism and Taoism. In fact, Naxi people, as the only carriers of Dongba culture and religion, have their own spoken and written languages developed from the ancient period [4]. The Naxi oral language has a different linguistic system from the dominant Han language. The written language of Naxi, also called the Dongba script, is the only photographic language that is still used today in the world [5].

Naxi people have a long history of interaction with the Han dominant group for more than 600 years [6]. The culture and language of Han were firstly taught to Naxi elite people as "privilege" in ancient Ming dynasty and gradually trickled down to ordinary Naxi people later on [4]. As a result, Naxi people have adopted some norms and values of the Han people. After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the national ideology of "Chinese" was further solidified [1]. From that time on, Han Culture, as the one and only dominant culture of China, further disseminated into all non-dominant ethnicities of China including Naxi. Today, although the state does not suppress and is actually actively preserving and promoting the culture of all non-dominant ethnic groups, Naxi culture, as well as many other ethnic cultures, is facing some level of inheritance difficulty because of the strong assimilation to Han culture. This paper intends to talk about the current sociolinguistic situation of Naxi ethnic group, as it is one of the strongest manifestations of their ethnic culture.

2. Sociolinguistic Background

Yunnan province, the home to 25 non-dominant ethnic groups including Naxi, is the most multi-ethnic province in China [7]. Unlike ancient times in which different ethnic groups live at their self-sufficiently societies and infrequently interact with each other, in the current modern society, multi-ethnic communication, which requires a "lingua franca", is necessary in places like Yunnan. Han language, which is spoken by the largest number of people in Yunnan, naturally became the most possible candidate of this position. Together with that, use of Han

language, particularly the Standardized Chinese, was regarded by the central government as a powerful tool to ally the Han dominant group with other non-dominant ethnic groups in China and consolidate the “national unity” [8]. It is also seen as the most useful way to eliminate illiteracy since standardized Chinese is the language of “scientific and educational advancement” [8].

Because of the above advantageous social and political position of Chinese, propagation of Mandarin, which is the unification of Chinese languages, has been strongly promoted as a national policy since the establishment of People’s Republic of China [9]. The “linguistic legitimacy” of Mandarin and its relative Han languages inevitably resulted in the declining usage of other non-Chinese ethnic languages like Naxi language although the central government states that “all ethnic minorities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages” [8] [10].

Nowadays, most young Naxi people can speak fluently in Chinese but some of them can no longer speak fluent Naxi language [6]. Also, as Lijiang city became a very popular tourism attraction in the last decade, many Naxi people work in the tourism industry which demands them to speak Chinese in order to communicate and do business with the tourists. In educational settings, Chinese is the only medium of instruction in most schools [6]. The powerful political, economical and educational position of Chinese results in the “marginalization” of Naxi language [10]. In order to participate in the highly dynamic society, younger generations of Naxi people actively or unwillingly prioritize Chinese over their indigenous language even though they know Naxi language has strong symbolic value of Naxi ethnicity. As a result, “the closer a place is to Lijiang city, the fewer children can speak Naxi; the younger the kids are, the fewer can speak Naxi” [8]. Although nowadays, many Naxi people still speak Naxi language in their homes, there’s a tendency of losing Naxi spoken language in the future generations [8].

In terms of written language, Naxi ethnic group have their own script named Dongba script, which was developed more than 1000 years ago [2]. As the only living pictographic script in the world, Dongba script was awarded the World Memory Heritage by UNESCO in 2003 [10]. However, the Dongba script is neither understood nor used by majority of Naxi people today. The name “Dongba” is the name of Naxi peoples’ religion. Historically, Dongba script was for sacred uses only thus can only be found in scriptures related to Dongba religion. The script was restricted to monks and priests exclusively as well. These monks and priests, called the Dongbae, also serve the roles of artists and teachers in Dongba culture; they are the only ones among all Naxi people who can “read, write, keep and master” the Dongba written language [4].

There are only few Dongbaes now. According to a conservative estimation in 2005, the number of Dongbaes accounts for about one percent of total Naxi ethnic population [4]. Among these Dongbaes, not all of them can master the Dongba script fully since Dongbaes have multiple roles and functions thus they have different concentrations. More severely, as the transmission of Dongbae required strict “master and apprentice” relationship, but most young people in the past decades attended schools and “detached” from the “closed” Dongba society, transmission happened rarely. With both the declining number of disseminators and receivers, the number of people who can fully understand and use Dongba script is irreversibly dropping down every year. Lots of efforts have been made towards digitalization of existing Dongba scripts to conserve them [11]. The central government also hire experts and Naxi Dongbaes to transcribe the existing scriptures in Dongba script into Chinese so at least in the future, the meanings of these literatures are preserved although people can no longer read them in their original code [11].

Reconciling with the national goal of developing indigenous languages and enhancing literacy among all non-dominant ethnicities [12], the central government took lots of measures to “affirm, revise and even create” written scripts for all 55 non-dominant ethnic groups in 1950s [9]. A new script based on Latin alphabet was created for Naxi language in 1957 [3]. However, this new Naxi written script, as well as 12 other newly created ethnic language written systems, are not widely used by their people [12]. On the one hand, the practice of these new written systems are not strongly implemented by the local governments; on the other hand, many ethnic groups already adapted to write in Chinese even though they speak in their indigenous languages.

3. Current Educational Status

Unity among all ethnic groups is the “highest interest” of Chinese nation [13]. In other words, one should identify him or herself as a Chinese first then a member of a specific ethnic group like Han or Naxi. School, as the primary institution to “socialize the youth of a nation,” takes on the responsibility to both disseminate knowledge and “eliminate aspirations for ethnic separatism” among the youth [13]. Learning the mainstream Chinese culture, beliefs and language is a core component of Chinese formal education in both Han dominant and non-Han dominant regions.

In 1986, China passed and started to implement the law of “nine year compulsory education” which required all Chinese children to attend elementary and junior high schools [14]. In accordance with this national policy, educational sector greatly developed in 1980s in Lijiang. According to Lijiang City Bureau of Statistics [15], in 2024, Lijiang children enrollment rate of elementary schools reached 117.95%, and the transition rate of primary school graduates to further education was 98.70%. This result shows that the “nine year compulsory education” policy is well implemented in Lijiang. Children of Naxi ethnic group, because most of them reside in Lijiang city, are expected to receive at least this 9-year compulsory education.

But in terms of curriculum, the national educational curriculum is created based on the needs and interests of the dominant group in China. Or in other words, it is “developed for the majority Han students” [10] as Han ethnic group consist of 91.51 percent of the total population in China [2]. As a result, schools in Lijiang, as schools in other regions of China, mainly have Mandarin as the only medium of instruction [6]. Naxi children, starting at the age of 6 to 7 when they are entering primary schools, begin to receive Mandarin as both a subject and a medium of instruction. Because some students living in rural areas of Lijiang can’t fully understand Mandarin at the entering stage of primary schools, their teachers sometimes informally use Naxi language in class to assist students learning Mandarin [6]. This sort of “bilingual education” would not last long. Once the students were able to understand Mandarin – normally at grade 3 of primary school – Naxi language would be abandoned [8]. In more centered areas of Lijiang, Naxi children tend to be accustomed to communicate in Chinese all the time thus many of them can’t speak Naxi indigenous language. Even in the year 1998, statistical result shows that 30% of Naxi elementary and middle school students were unable to speak Naxi language [8].

The lose of indigenous language became a great concern of education for Naxi people. In 1999, Naxi-dominant elementary schools were finally allowed to add the subject of Naxi language and culture into the curriculum on an experimental base [8]. This course, incorporating the teaching of Naxi spoken language, Dongba script, Naxi music, Naxi dances and other Naxi culture manifestations, was taught from grade 1 to grade 4 [8]. Proven to be successful, this class was officially added to the curriculum of Naxi-dominant primary schools in 2003 [13]. But unfortunately, this class is only taught in grade 1 and 2 for once per week [8]. An ordinary school class in China is about 40 minutes and a semester is about 16 weeks. With less than 16 hours per semester’s study of this subject, it is unlikely that Naxi students could gain deep understanding and knowledge about their indigenous language and culture. Although the national policy is promoting the usage and development of non-dominant ethnic languages and cultures, this attitude is not well expressed in the educational curriculum for Naxi ethnic group.

Not only does the formal education neglect Naxi indigenous language and culture, in informal family education, some Naxi parents also give little attention to them. The main reason is that learning Naxi culture would not have any benefits to students’ academic achievement because it is not in any exams [4]. Although these Naxi parents acknowledge the importance for their kids to learn Naxi ethnic culture, some of them express that their kids should only learn Naxi culture “when they are free and under no pressure of study” [4]. In a more extreme situation, some Naxi parents even discourage their children to speak Naxi language before their children could speak Mandarin fluently. This is because these parents think that learning to speak Naxi language “too early” would have negative effects on the child’s ability to speak Mandarin [8]. They are more willing to have their kids learn Naxi language as a “second” L1 or even as L2 after their kids can speak fluently in Chinese. But in reality, it is very often that when kids get used to speak Chinese, they don’t want to speak Naxi language. As a result, some parents speak Naxi to their children, but their children respond to them in Chinese [8]. Far from being afraid of assimilation to Han language and culture, these parents actually want their children to integrate into the mainstream culture and society because these parents think in that way, it would be easier for their kids to find good jobs and live a better life in the future because the ability to speak Chinese has much stronger economic value compared to that of Naxi language [8].

4. Recommendations For Educational Interventions

The above situations urge a need to reform the education curriculum for Naxi-dominant schools. The curriculum should attach more importance to Naxi indigenous language and culture. For example, the curriculum should increase the frequency of Naxi cultural classes and add this class to junior and senior high schools as well. In this way, Naxi students will have better chance to learn about their indigenous language and culture. Also, Naxi language and culture, as a subject, should be weighted equally as other subjects. It should be added to the examination system because otherwise, no matter how frequent this class is, students and parents would still subordinate it to other classes. Although this may not be the “ideal” way to give students incentives to learn about their indigenous culture, it could be an effective way. Or in other words, take weights of this subject into the examination system could “bring institutional cultural capital” to indigenous language and culture [4]. In this way, the value of Naxi indigenous language and culture will be self-evident among its people.

One thing very important for the curriculum reform to really take off is government's interventions and funding. The Maori in New Zealand is an example of good state action. New Zealand government not only give "relative autonomy" and "community control" to Maori people on making their own choices about education, it also established many Maori-English bilingual schools and later on Maori-medium of instruction schools for the Maori population [16]. In this way, Maori language is both valued in policy and implementation levels, which contributed greatly to the success of Maori "language reversal" [16].

Although the situation is not identical for Naxi people in China, one important lesson learned is that state intervention is very crucial for ethnic language and culture preservation. The Chinese central government together with the Lijiang local government should collaborate and allocate more resources and funds to the education of Naxi indigenous language and culture. For example, since there is both a shortage of quality and quantity of Naxi culture textbooks in schools [8], the government could first hire some Naxi-culture experts to compile a set of high quality textbooks and then distribute sufficient copies of these textbooks to schools every year. Also, Naxi-Chinese bilingual schools should be considered. Naxi language should not be used as a transitional language only serving the function of explaining Chinese; instead, Naxi language should be added as another medium of instruction. Bilingual education would both benefit the learning of L1 and L2; also, knowing well of L1 would later on benefit students' learning of L2. Thus, Naxi-Chinese bilingual education would both enhance students' language ability of Naxi indigenous language and Chinese, which is beneficial for both preserving Naxi ethnic culture and identity as well as being more competent in the mainstream job market which require fluency in Chinese.

5. Conclusion

Preserving the Naxi indigenous language is vital not only for the cultural identity of the Naxi ethnic group, but also for protecting one of the world's ancient and richly diverse cultural heritages. It is essential for both local and central governments to collaborate and set clear goals, as the relatively small Naxi population alone may not be able to bring up significant change by themselves. Actions such as integration of Naxi-Chinese bilingual education into the current educational system, inclusion of mandatory Naxi language and culture assessments in curriculum reforms, and increased funding for Naxi language and cultural education should be considered and implemented.

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