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CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

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State-driven Integration

Lhasa, Tibet, 2006. Source: Pedro Szekely (CC), [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/pedroszekely/).

Navigating Linguistic Hierarchies in Tibet

Dak LHAGYAL

According to the British Council, one in four English-language learners globally is Chinese, for a total of 400 million students. That number may be massive, but it fails to capture just how pervasive English is in China, not only within schooling, but also in everyday conversations, public signage, and family concerns. This essay looks at why English has become so popular in the country. Its influence exceeds pragmatic concerns like examinations and job qualifications. Rather, the article points to the way that Chinese people imagine their future selves, and how this fits into a long tradition in China of self-transformation through language.

China's complex linguistic landscape reveals deep tensions between the state's push for the use of Mandarin and the preservation of minority languages like Tibetan. As Mandarin is promoted as a neutral language essential for social mobility, Tibetan communities are caught in a struggle to maintain their linguistic heritage. Balancing cultural preservation with the demands of integration, Tibetans face growing external pressures and internal efforts to protect their language. This dynamic reflects broader questions of identity, power, and cultural survival in a rapidly modernising society, offering important insights into how language policies shape the future of multi-ethnic nations.

Language has long been a powerful tool for shaping national identity, but in countries as vast and diverse as China, it also reveals deep tensions between cultural preservation and state-driven integration. This tension is particularly pronounced in Tibet, where the Chinese Government's promotion of Mandarin intersects with the Tibetan people's desire to maintain their linguistic heritage. This ongoing encounter between language ideologies offers a window into how the balance of power, culture, and identity is negotiated in modern China.

The Chinese Government often frames Mandarin as a neutral, universal language, intended to foster unity and development throughout the country. As the official national language of China, Mandarin Chinese is used for communication across different regions and ethnic groups. It is seen as a bridge to economic opportunity and social mobility (Roche 2017). While the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of China passed in 1984 allows ethnic minorities to use their languages in education, how these protections are applied differs from place to place and, with legal provisions sometimes lacking clarity,

local officials often choose to prioritise Mandarin (Roche 2017). This can make it hard for Tibetan communities to maintain their language, especially as Mandarin is promoted for its perceived benefits in education and economic development.

For ethnic minority groups like the Tibetans, their native languages carry deep cultural significance and preserving them is about more than just practical use; it is a way of maintaining their cultural heritage. Many Tibetans continue to advocate the use of Tibetan, especially in schools and public life, seeing it as an important part of their identity (Barnett 2012). This creates a delicate balance between the need to participate in the broader Chinese society, where Mandarin dominates, and the desire to keep Tibetan alive.

In this essay, I first examine how Mandarin acts as a tool for integration by putting pressure on Tibetan communities to adopt it for social and economic advancement. Next, I discuss Tibetan efforts, such as the language purism movement, to preserve Tibetan as a distinct cultural identity despite the dominance of Mandarin. Finally, I address the ideological dilemma Tibetans face between maintaining their linguistic ‘authenticity’ and adapting to a Mandarin-dominated social life. I argue that while China’s language policies promote Mandarin as a tool for national unity, they also undermine minority languages like Tibetan, complicating cultural identity and autonomy for ethnic minorities within the state.

Mandarin as a Tool of Integration

In recent years, the pressure to learn and use Mandarin in Tibet has grown steadily, reflecting broader shifts in China’s language policy. Mandarin is increasingly tied to better educational prospects, career opportunities, and fuller integration into Chinese society. This policy shift has actively promoted the gradual replacement of Tibetan as the primary medium of instruction in many schools, particularly in urban areas. While these changes are often justified as necessary for social and economic development, they raise important questions about the future of Tibetan as a living language.

The push for Mandarin is closely linked to larger trends, such as urbanisation and the rise of digital communication. As more Tibetans move to cities or access social media via mobile devices, Mandarin becomes a more dominant presence in their everyday lives. While these platforms allow Tibetans to connect and share their culture, they also expose them to Mandarin and Chinese cultural norms, which some fear could dilute Tibetan traditions.

In response to these anxieties, some see Tibetan–Chinese bilingual education as a necessary compromise—allowing students to learn Mandarin for practical purposes while maintaining a connection to their native language. However, navigating these pressures

requires a careful balance, as advocates of Tibetan must work within state laws and policies, often finding ways to promote their language without openly challenging the prominence of Mandarin. Advocating for Tibetan language use while accommodating pressures to use Mandarin is sensitive and requires careful navigation.

Woolard (2016) describes this as the ideology of ‘anonymity’, where a dominant language, like Mandarin, is positioned as neutral and universally accessible, detached from the specific interests of a single ethnic group. In theory, this neutrality makes Mandarin appear to be the most useful language for everyone but, in reality, it often overshadows minority languages and the important cultural roles they play. In Tibetan areas, positioning Mandarin as neutral gradually marginalises Tibetan, altering the region’s linguistic dynamics and cultural fabric.

Internal Efforts and Challenges in Tibetan Language Preservation

In Tibetan society, grassroots efforts such as a movement encouraging the use of Tibetan in daily conversations, singing in Tibetan, and writing in Tibetan in online posts have been essential in resisting the growing dominance of Mandarin. These internal pressures gained traction particularly after the 2008 Lhasa uprising, when protests broke out against Chinese rule and sent a wave of unrest across Tibetan regions, marking the resurgence of Tibetan language in popular culture (Jabb 2011; Morcom 2018). Tibetan-language songs became more prominent, with many musicians embracing what has become known as the ‘language purism movement’. This movement, reflected in both Tibetan music production and daily conversations, emphasises the use of ‘pure’ Tibetan, free of external linguistic influences, and has found a platform on tightly controlled Chinese social media since the early 2000s (Morcom 2018).

The desire to protect linguistic ‘authenticity’ is a powerful motivator within Tibetan society. Woolard (2016) explains that this authenticity is rooted in the belief that a language reflects the ‘essential nature’ of its community. In this case, speaking pure Tibetan is seen as a way of asserting and preserving the cultural identity of Tibetans, while ‘impure’ forms—those that incorporate Chinese elements—are often stigmatised. This has fostered a culture of mutual awareness within Tibetan communities, where individuals encourage one another to maintain linguistic standards, reinforcing the value of speaking pure Tibetan.

The ideology behind language purism focuses on keeping Tibetan language intact by avoiding mixing it with Chinese. Woolard (2016) notes that similar dynamics are seen in other cultures, where the distinction between a ‘pure’ native language and one influenced

by other tongues can become a marker of identity and solidarity. Among Tibetans, this movement has become deeply tied to ethnic pride and cultural preservation. However, this strict focus on linguistic purity raises concerns that it may alienate Tibetan speakers who use a mix of Tibetan and Chinese, fostering divisions within the community.

The language purism movement is driven by growing enthusiasm for using Tibetan in public spaces, expanding its use beyond homes and classrooms. The push to normalise Tibetan in daily life has spread its influence into public places, with many advocating for greater use of the language in places like banks, hospitals, and government offices, where Mandarin typically dominates (Lhagyal 2021). As a result, the increasing presence of Tibetan, particularly in the Amdo region, which has long been a stronghold of Tibetan-medium education, has sparked calls for expanded Tibetan-language services in education and public institutions.

In Tibetan communities, the pure language movement manifests in an expectation that speakers consciously avoid Chinese loanwords, especially in formal settings such as community gatherings and cultural events. Tibetan musicians and artists who support language purism often deliberately sing and speak in Tibetan in public performances, and lamas and educators encourage speaking in Tibetan in a non-mixing fashion. These initiatives—often lacking clear organising bodies—are against using widely understood Chinese-origin words, even if the Tibetan equivalents are less familiar or more challenging to comprehend (Lajiadou 2022). This intentional choice serves as a form of cultural resistance to the influence of Mandarin, reinforcing ethnic pride and promoting a sense of linguistic and cultural integrity within segments of Tibetan society.

Despite the broad grassroots support for these efforts, they have also taken on more prescriptive and disciplinary aspects internal to Tibetan speakers. As the push for pure Tibetan gains momentum, it has led to growing expectations around language use. For some, speaking pure Tibetan is not just a mark of education but also a demonstration of moral integrity and true cultural authenticity (Thurston 2018; Yeh 2007). In contrast, mixing Tibetan with Chinese is often viewed negatively, with some considering it a sign of being uneducated or even morally compromised. Those who switch between the two languages may feel pressure or experience disapproval from supporters of the language purism movement (Thurston 2018).

These judgements have sparked debates within Tibetan society about the need to standardise the language and establish a version of Tibetan that is mutually intelligible across its diverse, often mutually unintelligible regional varieties (Roche and Suzuki 2018). While Tibetan remains a critical aspect of cultural preservation, internal policing of linguistic norms has become more widespread, with expectations around pure Tibetan growing stronger (Thurston 2018). This policing often operates through naming and shaming those who speak Chinese or mix Tibetan with Chinese, while praising those who consistently use pure Tibetan, and is enforced both through peer pressure in daily interactions and on social media among Tibetans (Lhagyal 2021).



Songs and Authenticity

A Tibetan Folk Singer.
Source: Jrwooley6
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However, this internal policing can also create unintended consequences. Efforts to standardise Tibetan may marginalise speakers of non-standard varieties or those who regularly code-switch between Tibetan and Chinese. Roche and Suzuki (2018) caution that such movements could limit linguistic diversity within the broader Tibetan community. While the movement for language purism is driven by a genuine concern for cultural survival, it also reinforces linguistic hierarchies that may divide Tibetans rather than unite them.

The tension between preserving linguistic purity and navigating the pressures of everyday life in a Mandarin-dominated world reflects a deeper struggle within Tibetan society. As Mandarin

continues to grow in influence, the desire to maintain Tibetan as a vibrant, living language persists, but this goal is complicated by the realities of cultural adaptation and the practical need to engage with Mandarin in public life.

Navigating the Paradox of Language Ideologies

The tension between preserving linguistic ‘authenticity’ and adapting to the pressures of linguistic ‘anonymity’ is central to understanding China’s approach to language governance and Tibetan people’s response to language policies, particularly in regions like Tibet. Woolard (2016) describes this paradox as a common challenge faced by minority languages that seek to maintain their roots within local communities while also existing within the broader national and global context. Mandarin, which is promoted as a neutral and unifying language across China, exemplifies this push for linguistic universality. Yet, as we have seen, for Tibetans, Tibetan language represents more than just a practical tool—it is a vital part of cultural identity and serves as a safeguard against the loss of traditional values.

The ideologies of both ‘authenticity’ and ‘anonymity’ carry assumptions that overlook the agency and the active role of speakers who navigate, reshape, and reinterpret these languages to meet cultural needs (Woolard 2016). The state’s promotion of Mandarin as essential for modernisation and social cohesion positions it as the practical choice for Tibetans seeking to engage with modern China. But this focus often neglects the deeper significance of Tibetan language as a cultural resource that connects people to their heritage and identity. Despite the structural challenges and pressures to adopt Mandarin, the right to mother-tongue education remains a critical issue for minority communities like Tibetans. The ability to study in one’s native language is not only a constitutional and legal right but also a key strategy for preserving linguistic and cultural diversity and resisting assimilation.

China’s approach to language governance, balancing between promoting Mandarin as a national language and supporting minority languages like Tibetan in limited contexts, has implications for multi-ethnic nations around the world. As China’s global influence expands, its model for managing ethnic diversity through language policies may offer lessons for other countries grappling with similar issues of national unity and cultural preservation. The situation in Tibet highlights the complexities of language politics, where efforts to preserve minority languages often come up against structural barriers and ideological conflicts.

Ultimately, while navigating this paradox is challenging, it is crucial to continue advocating for the right to mother-tongue education. Although China's Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of 1984 (Article 37) grants ethnic minority languages status as a medium of instruction in minority schools (NPC 1984), these constitutional rights are framed in 'much weaker wording' (de Varennes 2012: 19, quoted in Roche 2017: 16), creating ambiguity that has led to inconsistent and often unclear implementation at the local level. This right is about not only linguistic preservation but also ensuring cultural survival and social equity. Woolard's (2016) analysis of language ideologies shows that decisions about language use are closely tied to questions of identity, belonging, and power. For Tibetans, the effort to preserve their language is tied to the larger challenge of maintaining their cultural identity in an interconnected, rapidly changing world. ●