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Language Oppression in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan Prefectures

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2021
The Claremont Colleges Library
Undergraduate Research Award

First Year Award Winner

Sonam Rikha
Pomona College

Reflective Essay

When my ID1 professor first announced that we would be writing our own research paper, I was quite nervous because the idea of creating a research question and attempting to answer it in a single paper felt daunting. I initially started the paper really lost on the direction of where I wanted it to go. I knew I wanted to investigate China's language policy in Tibet, but I struggled a lot with establishing the stakes to the reader and explaining why they should care. Additionally, I was worried that such a narrow topic would result in very little sources accessible in English. When using the Claremont Colleges Library database, I searched terms and phrases such as "Tibet language policy" and "China Bilingual Education". I looked through the descriptions and summaries of each of the items that popped up in the search to determine whether or not I thought the book or article would be beneficial to my research. Although there were a large number of items that popped up in my initial search, there were only three books that related to my research topic. To expand the number of sources I could use for my paper, I looked through the citations of the three books related to my topic and the subjects listed in their descriptions. From reading the reference pages of my three initial books and searching subjects like "Education and state China Tibet Autonomous Region", I was able to expand my list to five comprehensive sources.

After compiling a list of five sources, I was able to categorize as well as affiliate those sources to certain arguments, making it easier for me to create a rough outline of my paper. Once I finished the rough outline, I booked a Writing Center appointment with Maddie to receive general feedback on the sources I used and the structure of my outline. While the content of my sources was sufficient, Maddie suggested that I use more recent sources to demonstrate that the issue of language oppression in Tibet is ongoing and still relevant. I decided to return once again to the Claremont Colleges Online Database and tried different phrases such as "Tibet Language

Oppression” and found sources that were published within the last two years. I then used my new sources to add more empirical evidence to my outline and then scheduled an appointment to go over my outline with Professor Thomas. Meeting with Professor Thomas definitely helped me establish the stakes for the reader. Professor suggested that I use Tibet as a case study to understand the dynamic between language oppression and language of instruction. She also recommended that I have one general non-Tibet-related source that discussed the impacts of language oppression, so I could show that language oppression and linguistic erasure policies go beyond what’s happening in Tibet.

I struggled with finding the general source that Professor Thomas wanted and decided to book an appointment with a librarian. I met with Nazia Islam to find more general sources on language oppression for my research paper. Throughout my whole research process, I had been using the general search bar on the library website to find my sources but Nazia showed me more specific databases I could use to find sources. We searched through databases like “Anthropology Online”, “Bibliography of Asian Studies”, and “Linguistic and Language Behavior Extracts”. With Nazia’s help, we found the Grenoble & Whaley source which I used to explain the concept of language shift as well as highlight similarities between the linguistic erasure policies by the West against native communities and the linguistic erasure policies by China against Tibetans in Tibet.

During the research phase of my paper, I found a lot of sources I could use to support my thesis. Though once I finished writing my rough draft, I realized that I didn’t need a lot of the sources I initially had in my annotated bibliography. I was using way too much evidence to the point that it was drowning my own voice. I noticed that a lot of the sources I chose weren’t adding to the arguments in my paper, so I removed sources that were repeating ideas or claims

made in other sources that I had cited. I prioritized sources that were more recent and written by experts in linguistics or Tibet studies and added more analysis in my paper. I rewrote my paper and narrowed down my bibliography to eight sources. Before submitting my paper, I scheduled another meeting with Maddie and was relieved when she applauded my paper's balance of evidence and analysis.

Despite the long nights of writing and researching for this paper, I am proud of the outcome. While writing this research paper, I learned a lot about the different ways I could search for sources and how rewording certain phrases can make a big difference in the number of search results one can receive. I also learned more about the resources at the Claremont colleges like the writing center, library databases, and the fact that I can schedule appointments with librarians. I've never written a research paper that had exceeded five pages and the normal five-paragraph structure I was taught in high school. Through this paper, I've not only learned how to be a more effective researcher but also a better writer.

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Pomona College

Research Project

Language Oppression in the Tibetan
Autonomous Region and Tibetan
Prefectures

Language Oppression in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan Prefectures

Sonam Y. Rikha

Critical Inquiry Seminar (ID1), Pomona College

ID 001 PO-28: Language, Power, and Community

November 28, 2020

Language Oppression in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Tibetan Prefectures

In early 2016, Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan shopkeeper from Yushu prefecture, was kidnapped, secretly detained for months, and waited two years for a trial regarding his case. What was his crime? According to New York Times writer Chris Buckley's (2018) piece, *A Tibetan Tried to Save His Language. China Handed Him 5 Years in Prison*, the Chinese government charged Tashi with five years in prison for "inciting separatism" due to his participation in a New York Times documentary where Tashi expressed his concern over the erasure of Tibetan language in schools and the business world by the state (Buckley, 2018). The unjust imprisonment of Tashi Wangchuk reveals a bigger picture of China's language policy in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and the majority-Tibetan prefectures. China's language policy in these regions perpetuates language oppression and structural violence. The harmful language policies similar to those in the TAR and Tibetan prefectures have occurred and can be replicated in other countries. We can use Tibet as a case study to understand this dynamic of language policy and language oppression of minority groups that are happening in many parts of the world that are wrestling with the legacy of colonization and language of instruction. Before delving further into this topic, I want to acknowledge that Tibetans are not linguistically homogeneous and that there are a variety of languages spoken by Tibetans in the TAR and Tibetan Prefectures. Nonetheless, since there are many languages spoken by Tibetans in these regions and limited research on them, for organizational purposes I decided to focus on the Tibetan language. Throughout this paper, I plan to investigate how the Chinese Communist Party's state policy on language in the TAR and Tibetan Prefectures contribute to the erasure of the Tibetan language. I argue that the CCP should emphasize and make Tibetan the language of instruction in schools, higher education, and the public sphere in TAR and Tibetan prefectures

instead of treating Tibetan as subordinate in these regions. Making the Tibetan language the language of instruction in the TAR and Tibetan prefectures would not only prevent the erasure of the Tibetan language but would also increase the quality of education Tibetan students receive.

Although China has passed policies that guarantee that language rights for ethnic minorities are protected, these policies often contradict what's happening locally and on the ground. In Catriona Bass' (1998) book *Education in Tibet: Policy and practice since 1950*, she recounts the numerous laws that are supposed to protect the language rights of ethnic minorities. For example, the regional autonomy law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) states that minority nationalities have the right to "conduct affairs in their own languages and independently develop education for nationalities" (Bass, 1998, p. 229). In the 1995 Education Law, it states that "schools and other institutions for minority nationalities can use the common language of the ethnic group as the language of instruction" (p. 229). While at first glance these policies appear to protect the linguistic diversity of ethnic minorities, the reality is that these policies are often contradicted by state actions and local policies that emphasize Chinese over Tibetan. In anthropologist Gerald Roche's (2019) article *Articulating language oppression: colonialism, coloniality and the erasure of Tibet's minority languages*, he discusses how, even with these language policies in place, China's treatment towards minority languages is a form of language oppression. Even though the state may recognize or say they support the use of an ethnic minority group's language, there is a lack of institutional support compared to Putonghua (modern Chinese), inevitably causing minority languages like Tibetan to be sidelined (Roche, 2019). If language policies in the constitution and educational law were fully implemented into ethnic minority regions, then there wouldn't be mass protests by ethnic minorities surrounding the preservation of their language.

China's bilingual education system prioritizes Chinese as the language of instruction over Tibetan, causing a language shift in younger generations of Tibetans. According to language education professor Anwei Feng's (2007) book, *Bilingual education in China: practices, policies, and concepts*, China's bilingual education (Tibetan and Chinese) schooling is usually available in urbanized areas, but after primary school, there is a stronger shift to Chinese as the language of instruction instead of Tibetan (Feng, 2007, p. 52). In addition, in most schools in the TAR, math and science are taught in Chinese. Using Chinese as the language of instruction over Tibetan can lower the quality of education Tibetan students receive and can cause students to internalize that their mother tongue is inferior to Chinese. The fact that science and math are often associated with modernity and development and that state policy has mandarin as the language of instruction for STEM implies that the Tibetan language is incapable of being modern or the language of science. This focus on making Chinese the language of instruction can result in a language shift. According to linguistic professors' Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley, language shift refers to the fact that "language use in most Native communities has shifted toward loss of the indigenous tribal language in favor of national/world languages" (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998, p. 61). Living under Chinese occupation and recognizing the importance of Chinese in relation to economic opportunities has caused many Tibetans to subconsciously prioritize Chinese and view the language as more beneficial and useful than Tibetan. Even if shifting the language of instruction to Chinese may seem beneficial in terms of accessing job opportunities in the future, teaching in Chinese, especially in rural areas of Tibet where exposure to Chinese is limited, has correlated with lower quality of education because Chinese is a second language to Tibetan students.

A special type of education targeted toward a select group of Tibetan students, China's Neidiban Schooling policy further escalates the erasure of Tibetan. Neidiban schooling is a program by the state that sends Tibetan children (as well as other ethnic minority groups), mostly from unprivileged and rural areas, to boarding schools in inland China after primary school where Chinese is the main language of instruction (Feng, 2007, p. 50). According to James Leibold's (2019) article, *Interior Ethnic Minority Boarding Schools: China's Bold and Unpredictable Educational Experiment*, this program is voluntary and thousands of Tibetan students apply for the program and only around ten percent of applicants are accepted. In order to be admitted into the program, students must have excellent test scores and their family must have a clean ideological and political record (Leibold, 2019). Once students are accepted into the program they are sent thousands of miles away from their home and, as they reach higher levels of schooling, students are encouraged to study Tibetan less. In these schools, Tibetan is not treated as a core subject and most of the classes of Neidiban students are taught in Chinese. Since the national university exams do not include scores of the Tibetan subject in the total score for university exams, Neidiban students focus on studying Chinese and lose motivation to study Tibetan properly (Feng, 2007, p. 59). If Tibetans want to go to the best inland national universities then speaking Tibetan is not necessary. Graduates leave with a stronger grasp on Chinese but often leave with poorer Tibetan skills than they entered, with many graduates claiming that the Tibetan study curriculum was insufficient (Feng, 2007, p. 66). Graduates of the Neidiban program are usually sent back to work in the TAR and Tibetan Prefectures, often struggling to communicate in Tibetan and unequipped to work many local jobs that require a high proficiency in Tibetan. While Neidiban schools allow for unprivileged Tibetans to enhance their proficiency in Chinese, which can open up more job opportunities for them (especially

inland), they lose proficiency in their mother tongue and are hence unable to work local jobs in their community. These Neidiban schools create a new generation of Tibetans who are unable to speak Tibetan fluently, decreasing the probability that the children of these graduates will be able to speak Tibetan fluently. China's Neidiban schooling program and language policies send the message that being successful in the market economy and having Tibetan be the language of instruction in schools is mutually exclusive. While the Neidiban schooling program may seem beneficial in terms of access to more opportunities, the program only escalates the erasure of the Tibetan language and the assimilation of the Tibetan people into Chinese society.

Though different in some aspects, China's Neidiban schooling and America's Native American boarding schools are both examples of policies by the state that perpetuate language oppression against native communities. While the Neidiban schooling offered to Tibetans is optional, compared to the forced schooling of native children in the West, both programs physically, socially, and mentally distance native groups from their native language and culture. For example, Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools away from their families and homes during important years in terms of emotional and academic development. These boarding schools replaced their Native languages and culture with English and American culture as well as prohibited students from speaking their traditional languages (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998, p. 182). Similarly, Neidiban schools' separate Tibetan children from their homes and emphasize the Chinese language and Chinese culture instead of Tibetan and Tibetan culture. Even though these schools aren't as extreme as the Native American boarding schools in the West, in the sense that they don't ban the use of Tibetan, the prioritization of Chinese over Tibetan—at such a young age—and the exclusion of Tibetan in major tests causes a majority of the Tibetan graduates, like native graduates from US boarding schools, to lose their

connection and proficiency in their language and culture. These policies that perpetuate language oppression are not only occurring in China but can happen anywhere in the world and have occurred in the West.

New bilingual education policies inside the TAR and Tibetan Prefectures have caused concern over cultural preservation and sparked resistance from Tibetan communities. For instance, in Tibet scholar Francoise Robin's (2010) paper *Streets, slogans and screens: New paradigms for the defence of the Tibetan language*, he focuses on how the Qinghai Tibetan language protests demonstrated the dissatisfaction and anger of the Tibetan masses over bilingual education policies. In October 2010, Tibetan language-related protests broke out in Qinghai province after a ten-year bilingual education policy, that would prioritize Chinese as the language of instruction over Tibetan, was introduced (p. 209). This policy and many other bilingual education policies in the past have caused anxiety among the Tibetan community over language preservation. Out of fear of the Tibetan language dying out in future generations, Tibetans expressed their anxieties through protest and argued that the policy went against language rights that were supposed to be protected in the constitution and other laws. In response to the protests, the party tried to convince the masses that the new language policy would be beneficial to minority nationalities since fluency in the dominant language would be important for an individual's future. They also argued that the policy was beneficial since it would be linking linguistic unity with national and ethnic unity (p. 215). While party officials acknowledged the concerns of the protesters, they did not make any changes to the policy sparking more protests the following year. Unlike the party's claims of the bilingual policy being beneficial to students, there was a 30 to 35 percent decline in grades of Tibetan students after the policy was implemented (p. 216). It is obvious that the new bilingual education policy in Qinghai

is not aiming to help preserve the Tibetan language. These bilingual education policies are not only putting an academic strain on students but also a socio-emotional strain. China's bilingual education system has weakened students' fluency in Tibetan and people that call out the problems with the system are at risk of being labeled as separatists or trying to harm the state's goal of national unity.

The Chinese Communist Party's language policy has shifted to a goal of assimilation in the guise of unity, in hopes of stabilizing areas with a high ethnic minority population. The party's overall goal of education for minorities is to encourage political allegiance toward China and enhance stability in border areas (Bass, 1998, p. 10). Instead of embracing the linguistic diversity in China and implementing policies that protect the language rights of these ethnic groups, the Chinese government has focused on having minorities assimilate to Han Chinese culture in order to create a sense of national unity and stability. By encouraging national unity and assimilation, the party hopes to gain the loyalty of minorities and stabilize ethnic minority regions, like TAR, that are challenging party policy or even Chinese occupation. Under these policies, ethnic and linguistic differences are to be gradually erased in face of perceived external threats such as separatism (Robin, 2010, p. 228). There has been a politicization of the Tibetan language and belief that protecting language rights in Tibet correlates to a lack of loyalty to the state. The Chinese Party views expanding resources and support for ethnic minority languages as tied to the increase in separatist activity. Hence, instead of providing a sufficient amount of institutional support for languages like Tibetan, the Chinese government has chosen to emphasize Han-ethnocentric policies that contribute to the language oppression of Tibetans.

China's Han ethnocentric emphasis on language policy perpetuates the structural violence of Tibetans and other minority groups. China does invest a considerable amount of material and

symbolic capital in affirming, defining, developing, and propagating Tibetan but the institutional support is not enough and their material and symbolic capital is often contradicted by the language policy and curriculum on the ground. Also, it is extremely difficult to study from kindergarten to Ph.D. in Tibetan and then graduate and work in a predominantly Tibetan-language workplace (Roche, 2019). The structural violence perpetrated by China's language policy in the TAR and Tibetan prefectures is a slow violence that may not be as explicit or immediate as other forms of violence. This type of violence is often ignored by the media because of its slow but severe impact. This structural violence disrupts the transmission of the Tibetan language between generations and promotes assimilation by making desired options impractical and undesirable options both convenient and rewarding (Roche, 2019). The demand by the market economy for fluency in Chinese has resulted in Chinese becoming a desirable language to learn and Tibetan an undesirable language. In addition, the lack of access to higher education, science, math, etc. in Tibetan has caused the market economy in China to gatekeep the language most commonly used in these spaces. Tibetan only seems to be of use within predominantly Tibetan regions yet even that is slowly starting to change due to the increase in Han-Chinese tourism in the TAR as well as the effects of globalization on the economy in Tibet. As long as China's bilingual education system expands and continues to make Chinese the primary language of instruction, the erasure of the Tibetan language will escalate and with language loss, a loss of cultural traditions and practices will follow.

The global crisis of endangered languages will only escalate if we continue to be complicit to policies that oppress and erase languages. Research in the paper, *International relations and the Himalaya: connecting ecologies, cultures and geopolitics*, by scholars Alexander Davis, Ruth Gamble, Gerald Roche, and Lauren Gawne (2020) shows that China's

language policies are not only erasing the Tibetan language but other minority languages as well. China's focus on a single national language has caused half of the country's languages to be endangered (Davis et al., 2020, p. 12). Not only China, but nations all around the world will be less linguistically diverse and more homogenous because of policies that perpetuate language oppression. Native communities and other ethnic minority groups around the world shouldn't be forced to abandon their mother tongue in order to conform to the national language or the dominant language in the economy. Language and culture are very interconnected, and a massive loss of the world's languages will also mean a massive loss of culture. Therefore, the CCP should emphasize and make Tibetan the language of instruction in schools, higher education, and the public sphere in TAR and Tibetan prefectures instead of treating Tibetan as subordinate in these regions. The Tibetan language should be emphasized instead of sidelined. By having Tibetan be the language of instruction in schools and other important parts of society (higher education, science, law, etc.) in the TAR and Tibetan Prefectures, Tibetan culture will be preserved and their language rights, which are guaranteed by the constitution, will be protected.

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