

CHAPTER SIX

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH ON MINORITY LANGUAGES IN CHINA

All of China's minority nationalities, except the Hui and the Manchu, who use Chinese, have their own languages, some of them with their own writing systems. Multiple nationalities, languages, and writing systems are the distinguishing features of the sociolinguistic condition of China. These features are closely related to the development of Chinese politics, economy, and culture and should be carefully studied (White, 1992:47).

An aspect of language closely related with the issue of globalisation is the spread of English. The fact is that English is a language useful for virtually all peoples in the contemporary world. Never in the past has any language achieved the dominant place in the world that characterises English today. A minority group in China which wishes to maintain its own language will need to be trilingual if it wants to adopt English, because any ethnic group which is part of China must know Chinese to get on in the world (Mackerras, 2003a:132).

6.1 Introduction

The Han Chinese are by far the largest nationality in China and it is this group that comes to mind most often when people talk about the Chinese. Somewhat less known is the fact that "since time immemorial there have also been minorities living within China's borders" (Mackerras, 1994:3). In terms of population, the Han constitute 91.59% and the minorities make up the remaining 8.41% of the country's total (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2004:97). While there are important exceptions, China's minorities are by and large worse off than the Han Chinese. Minority areas are often not as developed as other parts of the country and minorities are generally less politically powerful than the Han Chinese (Mackerras, 1995:8-15). In addition, levels of education are generally lower as

are levels of income. Nevertheless, minority nationalities present challenging and important issues for the Chinese government. Apart from their diverse nature and low standard of living, minorities are strategically and politically important. Many of them occupy China's border regions where members of the same ethnic group live across the border, sometimes in an independent country. The Mongols, Koreans, Kazhaks, Kirgiz, Tajiks and Uzbeks are examples of this situation (Gunde, 2002:11). Minority areas are also rich in resources, having the majority of the country's forest and mineral resources and in excess of 80% of meat, milk and wool producing livestock herds (Dreyer, 1976:4; Ramsey, 1987:158). Minority issues have also started to take on international significance in recent years and can therefore have an effect on China's political and economic goals. International attention on the treatment of Tibet and the Islamic world's reaction to Chinese policy towards Muslim minorities are the most prominent examples of this (Dreyer, 1993:258). Minorities therefore have potential propaganda value because "minorities happily and enthusiastically integrated into the life and functioning of the Chinese state are the best advertisement for a successful and benevolent government" (Ramsey, 1987:158). It is easy to understand why the 'minority problem' occupies a high place on the Chinese agenda.

The spread of the English language is another issue facing China's minorities. This chapter will look at the presence of English in minority areas and the impact it is having on minority languages. Minorities have to deal with English in a different way than the Han Chinese. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter shows, minorities are already in a position where they have to know Chinese in order to be successful in Chinese

society. On top of this they also have to deal with English, the dominant language in the world outside of China. English may well contribute to a shift away from minority languages and therefore endanger them further. Despite this seemingly gloomy situation, this chapter argues that English most resembles an irrelevant language as far as minorities are concerned. Minority languages are of course under varying degrees of threat but as I argue here this threat comes mainly from Chinese and at this stage English seems to have relatively little presence in minority areas and therefore relatively little influence over the fate of minority languages. This argument is based on my fieldwork data which I have used to map out the use of English in minority areas (when, where and by whom it is used) and describe the opinions of members of minority nationalities about English, including their language learning goals and concerns. Where possible, I have also linked my data to that contained in other sources to show how it is similar or different.

6.2 Overview of Minorities in China

In China, the term *shaoshu minzu* is used to refer to ethnic minorities. This term literally means minority nationality. In the Chinese context, a minority nationality is basically “an ethnic group that is relatively small numerically compared with the largest nationality, and that is distinguished from society at large and from the Han by certain national characteristics” (Heberer, 1989:12). The Chinese Communist Party based its definition of a minority nationality on the Stalinist definition. According to this definition, a nationality is a group having a common language, common territory, common economic life and a common culture (Brugger and Reglar, 1994:309). This definition is the foundation of minority theory and policy in China (Mackerras, 1994:141). However, this

definition was somewhat problematic for the CCP. On the one hand, strict adherence to this definition would mean that very few minorities could be recognised (Zhou Minglang, 2003:10). Members of the same minority may speak different languages, for example the Jingpo who speak a number of languages, or speak Chinese as the Hui do. Some minorities are spread out over large areas such as the Hui and Mongols while others do not have a unique economic life. Proximity to the Han may also influence the culture of a minority making the criteria of common culture somewhat problematic (Heberer, 1989:31-2). On the other hand, not using Stalin's definition would be a contradiction of the Party's ideology (Zhou Minglang, 2003:10). Eventually, the Chinese decided that Stalin's definition was to be applied flexibly. It was also decided that a group's ethnic self-consciousness was to be taken into account. That is, decisions on minority nationality status are made on the basis of the objective characteristics of the group in question and the beliefs of the people (Heberer, 1989:32-3). It is nevertheless the government who has the final say in identification and recognition of minority nationalities.

When the government announced in the early 1950s that it planned to officially recognise minorities, 400 groups applied for recognition (Brugger and Reglar, 1994:310). Gaining recognition as a minority nationality was a complicated process. Local governments first told the population in their area about the recognition policy and any group that thought itself to be a nationality applied for recognition. Local governments passed on the applications to the provincial commission of nationalities affairs. The provincial commission would then work with anthropologists, ethnologists and linguists to classify the applicants. Sometimes fieldwork was conducted to help determine claims to being a

nationality. Then, with the help of experts from Beijing, a final list of applicants would be decided upon. Once again, fieldwork was conducted at this stage. The finalised list of applicants for recognition would then be submitted to the State Commission on Nationalities Affairs. The State Commission on Nationalities Affairs then made recommendations to the State Council about which groups should be recognised (Zhou Minglang, 2003:11). From 1949-1953, 39 groups were recognised. A further 15 groups were granted recognition between 1954 and 1964 after which the government considered the recognition process to be complete. Despite this, another two groups were granted recognition. In 1965 the Lhoba were recognised and the Jinuo were granted recognition in 1979 (Zhou Minglang, 2003:11-4). No further groups have been recognised to date. However, there are still a large number of people who belong to groups that are not officially recognised as minority nationalities by the authorities (Mackerras, 1994:143). At the time of the 2000 census, 734 400 people belonged to this category (*China's Ethnic Yearbook*, 2002:76). So far the government has shown little inclination to recognise more minority nationalities. For example, the Mosuo are a group numbering around 40 000 living on the border of Yunnan and Sichuan Province. There is a belief among many of these people that the Mosuo are a separate and distinct nationality. However, the government classifies them as a branch of the Naxi and all attempts to gain official recognition of the Mosuo as a nationality in its own right have been unsuccessful (Mackerras, 2003b:24; McKhann, 1995:48)¹. This example is illustrative of the usual approach to dealing with this issue, namely to assign people to already recognised nationalities that are considered to have similar characteristics (Mackerras, 1994:143;

¹ The Mosuo in Sichuan did however successfully campaign to have themselves classified as Mongol (McKhann, 1995:61).

Zhou Minglang, 2003:14-5). This is what happened to a group known as the Kucong. The Kucong applied for recognition as a nationality but the government refused and instead added the Kucong to the Lahu nationality (Bradley, 1994:197). There have also been cases of misclassification. According to Tapp (1995:198), the people in Hainan that are officially classified as Miao are in fact Yao.

The minority population has increased over the last few decades. In 1953 minorities were 6.06% of the population, in 1964 they made up 5.76%, and 6.68% in 1982. At the time of the 1990 census, the minority population had increased to 8.04% of the population and reached 8.41% by 2000 (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2004:97). One reason for this increase is that minorities are mainly exempt from China's one child policy. A second reason is that large numbers of people changed their nationality. Many of these cases are members of the majority Han reregistering as Manchu, Miao, Tujia and Dong. Some Zhuang, who are not exempt from the one child policy, have also reregistered as other minorities (Gabe Wang, 1999:174-8). Table 6.1 gives a list of all of China's officially recognised minorities, showing their population and distribution.

Table 6.1 China's Minority Nationalities

Minority Nationality	Main Locations	Population According to 2000 Census
Mongol	Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Xinjiang	5813947
Hui	Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Yunnan, Hebei, Shandong, Anhui, Liaoning, Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Tianjin, Heilongjiang, Shaanxi, Guizhou, Jilin, Jiangsu, Sichuan	9816805
Tibetan	Tibet, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan	5416021
Uygur	Xinjiang	8399393
Miao	Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Chongqing, Hubei, Sichuan	8940116
Yi	Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou	7762272
Zhuang	Guangxi, Yunnan, Guangdong	16178811
Bouyei	Guizhou	2971460
Korean	Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning	1923842
Manchu	Liaoning, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Beijing	10682262
Dong	Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi	2960293
Yao	Guangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangdong	2637421
Bai	Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan	18588063
Tujia	Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou	8028133
Hani	Yunnan	1439673
Kazak	Xinjiang	1250458
Dai	Yunnan	1158989
Li	Hainan	1247814
Lisu	Yunnan, Sichuan	634912
Va	Yunnan	396610
She	Fujian, Zhejiang, Guangxi, Guangdong	709592
Gaoshan	Taiwan, Fujian	4461
Lahu	Yunnan	453705
Shui	Guizhou, Guangxi	406902
Dongxiang	Gansu, Xinjiang	513805
Naxi	Yunnan	308839
Jingpo	Yunnan	132143
Kirgiz	Xinjiang	160823
Tu	Qinghai, Gansu	241198
Daur	Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang	132394
Mulam	Guangxi	20735
Qiang	Sichuan	306072
Blang	Yunnan	91882
Salar	Qinghai	104503

Minority Nationality	Main Locations	Population According to 2000 Census
Maonan	Guangxi	107166
Gelao	Guizhou	579357
Xibe	Liaoning, Xinjiang	188824
Achang	Yunnan	33936
Pumi	Yunnan	33600
Tajik	Xinjiang	41028
Nu	Yunnan	28759
Uzbek	Xinjiang	12370
Russian	Xinjiang, Heilongjiang	15609
Ewenki	Inner Mongolia	30505
Deang	Yunnan	17935
Baoan	Gansu	16505
Yugur	Gansu	13719
Jing	Guangxi	22517
Tatar	Xinjiang	4890
Derung	Yunnan	7426
Oroqen	Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia	8196
Hezhen	Heilongjiang	4640
Monba	Tibet	8923
Lhoba	Tibet	2965
Jinuo	Yunnan	20899

Source: China's Ethnic Yearbook (2002:446-7)

Among China's 55 minority nationalities there is great diversity in terms of living environment, language, culture, religion and economy². The regions inhabited by minorities make up about five-eighths of China's area and, as one would expect from such a large amount of territory, the regions in which minorities live can be quite different from each other. Minorities can be found in the jungles of Yunnan, the tropical regions of Hainan, the cold climates of the north and the deserts of Xinjiang and Tibet (Mackerras, 1995:3-4). Most of the minority population can be found in autonomous places. China has five autonomous regions: the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region

(established May 1947), Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (established in 1958), Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (established 1955), Tibetan Autonomous Region (established in 1965) and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, set up in 1958. There are also 30 autonomous prefectures, 14 located in the northeast and northwest and 16 in the southeast and southwest. At the county level, there are 21 autonomous counties in the northeast, 20 in the northwest, 10 in the southeast and 69 in the southwest. In addition, there are 1252 minority *xiangs* (Zhou Minglang, 2003:16-9). The *xiang* level of administration was originally included under the auspices of autonomous governments for minorities but the 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy declared that *xiangs* are part of the local government and did not set out the nature or scope of autonomy for this level of administration. This puts minority *xiangs* in the interesting situation of having “more autonomy than an ordinary *xiang* but the least autonomy among minority autonomous governments” (Zhou Minglang, 2003:403). In terms of location, the vast majority of minority *xiangs* are in the southwest which has a total of 762. The northeast has 315, the northwest 120 and the southeast 55 (Zhou Minglang, 2003:16-9)³. However, just because a particular place is autonomous does not mean that only minorities live there. There are also substantial numbers of Han living in autonomous places (Gabe Wang, 1999:168-9).

Culturally, the minorities vary greatly in degree of similarity to the Han, making China a "patchwork of cultural landscapes" (Smith, 1991:11). Some minorities, such as the Zhuang, Manchus and Bai are quite similar to the Han while others, like the Tibetans,

² The reader is again reminded that the Han are by no means a homogenous group. There are significant differences in dialect, customs, food, religion etc. among the Han of different regions of China (Moser, 1985).

Uygurs and Kazhaks are very different indeed (Mackerras, 1995:4). Among China's minorities there are herders, hunters, farmers and nomads (Brugger and Reglar, 1994:310). The traditional lifestyles of minorities are maintained to varying degrees. The minorities also practice a number of religions. Islam is practiced by ten minorities including the Huis, Uygurs and Tatars. Buddhism also has a strong following, most notably among the Tibetans. A range of shamanistic religions are also practiced by China's minorities including those of the Oroqens, the Miao and the Va. Christians can also be found within some minorities due to contact with Western missionaries (Brugger and Reglar, 1994:310; Fei Hsiao-tung, 1981:29).

The CCP started to develop its minority policy prior to coming to power in 1949 (see Dreyer, 1976:63-92). The essence and guiding principles of CCP minority policy were outlined in the interim Constitution known as the Common Program, adopted on 29th September 1949 (Mackerras, 2003b:21). Articles 9, 50, 51, 52 and 53 of the Common Program deal with minority issues. Article 9 states that no part of China is allowed to secede. Article 50 declared that both Han chauvinism and local chauvinism must be opposed. The establishment of autonomous governments in areas with a significant minority population was the subject of Article 51. Article 52 stated that all nationalities were equal and that everyone had the right to practice their traditional culture including religion and the use of minority languages and written scripts. Article 53 stated that the government would help minority areas develop in a number of ways (Benson and Svanberg, 1998:89). These ideas on minorities were later put into the constitution. In all

³ For a full list of minority autonomous places see Mackerras (2001:254-6) and *China's Ethnic Yearbook* (2002:37-72).

of China's constitutions from 1954-1978 there are five principles regarding minorities which have formed the basis of policy towards the minorities throughout the history of the PRC:

1. China is a multinational and unitary state, and no area may secede
2. Regional autonomy is the basic form of government for all areas inhabited by national minorities
3. There is equality for all nationalities within China
4. There is freedom to believe and not believe in religion
5. National minority peoples have the right to use their national languages in written and spoken forms (Benson and Svanberg, 1998:93).

In reality however, minority policy has oscillated between tolerance and a desire for assimilation⁴. The present time is one of reasonable tolerance towards minorities. This more tolerant policy began in the 1980s. The 1982 Constitution put more emphasis on minority issues than previous versions. Among other things it contained a provision banning discrimination against minorities and more rights for minorities, including the right of authorities in autonomous areas to make their own laws (Mackerras, 2003a:26). In 1984 the Law of Regional Autonomy was put into effect. This law "expands considerably on the various specific aspects of autonomy, in such areas as administration, law, the economy, finance and budgeting, culture and education" (Mackerras, 2003a:26). A number of *youhui zhengce* or preferential policies were also implemented during this period. These policies entitled minorities to special treatment in a number of areas. For example, preference was given to members of a minority when applying for some jobs and in education where minorities require lower scores to enter university. More money was also allocated to minority areas and for the most part minorities were exempt from China's one child policy (Mackerras, 2003a:27). The tenor of these policies has been

carried through to the present day and recent years have seen increasing attention paid to minority issues. In 1999 for example, the Central Ethnic Work Conference was reconvened. Out of this meeting came the government's decision to adopt an amended version of the 1984 law on autonomy. While not significantly different, it did grant more rights to the minorities (Mackerras, 2003a:39). Despite this positive stance on minorities, significant problems remain. Relations between the Han and minorities have not always been smooth. Minorities still suffer from discrimination and some Han see them as backward or even inferior (McKhann, 1995:42-3; Tapp, 1995:217). Ethnic unrest in both Tibet and Xinjiang has by no means completely subsided and in light of the war on terror ethnic relations in Xinjiang have become increasingly tense, thus raising the possibility of secession, something the Chinese government desperately wants to avoid. While not nearly as volatile as secessionist movements, language is an important aspect of the minority issue in China. Indeed, the handling of minority languages has been a significant and challenging issue in itself.

6.3 Overview of Minority Languages

As with other characteristics of the minorities, there is amazing diversity among languages. Understanding the linguistic characteristics of the minorities was an important part of the CCP's minority work and beginning in the 1950s efforts were made to do just that. Determining the number and classification of minority languages was no easy task. While Altaic languages had been extensively studied by both Soviet and Western linguists, almost nothing had been done on the languages of south and southwest China.

⁴ For a discussion of minority policy throughout the history of the PRC and how it differs from the minority policy of imperial and Republican governments, see Dreyer (1976) and Mackerras (1994).

Consequently, a large portion of minority languages were virtually unknown to the authorities (Zhou Minglang, 2003:21-2). Survey teams were sent out to investigate China's language situation. Seven survey teams were dispatched to Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangxi in 1951. In 1956, more than 700 linguists organised into seven survey teams were sent from Beijing to investigate minority languages. Six of these teams went to the south and southwest with the remaining team going to the northwest. Based on the work carried out by these teams, the Chinese government came up with a list of 60 officially recognised minority languages. Most of these languages were recognised and classified in the 1950s with a few additions in the 1980s (Zhou Minglang, 2003:22-3). The classification and distribution of the officially recognised minority languages will be discussed below. A description of the linguistic features such as the phonology, morphology and syntax of these languages can be found in Ramsey (1987).

China's minority languages belong to five families: Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic and Indo-European⁵ (Dai Qingxia, 1998:1; Teng Xing and Wang Jun, 2002:102; Zhou Minglang, 2003:23). Geographically, most minorities in southern and southwestern China speak languages belonging to the various branches of the Sino-Tibetan family. Sino-Tibetan languages can also be found to a lesser extent in the western

⁵ The Chinese classification of languages is slightly different from generally accepted classifications. The Chinese refer to Tai-Kadai languages as Dong-Dai and consider them to be part of the Sino-Tibetan family rather than a language family in their own right. Also, Bai, Tujia, Derung, Pumi, Qiang and Nu are generally thought to be Tibeto-Burman languages but some Chinese linguists consider them to be either unidentified languages or independent subgroups of languages (Zhou Minglang, 2003:23). The affiliation of Miao-Yao is also uncertain, although it is generally thought to be a separate language family (Katzner, 2002:209). Here it is included in the Sino-Tibetan family following Zhou Minglang's (2003) presentation of minority languages. The classification given here differs from that in Chapter Two because in this chapter I present minority languages according to the Chinese classification in order to show the official classification/view of the PRC government. For more detail on varying classifications and their merits, see Katzner (2002).

regions of China (Mackerras, 1995:4; Zhou Minglang, 2003:23). The Sino-Tibetan family accounts for most of China's minority languages (Dai Qingxia, 1998:2). In all, there are 19 Tibeto-Burman languages, four Miao-Yao and ten Tai-Kadai languages (Zhou Minglang, 2003:26). The Sino-Tibetan languages are shown in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Minority Languages of the Sino-Tibetan Family

Branch/Group	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Tibeto-Burman	Tibetan	Tibetan	Tibet, S. Qinghai, S.W. Gansu, N.W. Sichuan, N. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Jiarong	Tibetan	N.W. Sichuan
Tibeto-Burman	Monba	Tibetan	S. E. Tibet
Tibeto-Burman	Jingpo	Jingpo	W. and N. W. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Yi	Yi	Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou
Tibeto-Burman	Hani	Hani	S. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Naxi	Naxi	N. E. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Lisu	Lisu	N. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Lahu	Lahu	S. W. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Bai	Bai	Central N. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Jinuo	Jinuo	S. W. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Nu	Nu	N. W. Yunan
Tibeto-Burman	Zaiwa	Jingpo	W. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Achang	Achang	W. Yunnan
Tibeto-Burman	Qiang	Qiang, Tibetan	W. Sichuan
Tibeto-Burman	Pumi	Pumi, Tibetan	W. Sichuan
Tibeto-Burman	Tujia	Tujia	S. W. Hubei, N. E. Guizhou, N. W. Hunan
Tibeto-Burman	Lhoba	Lhoba	S. E. Tibet
Tibeto-Burman	Derung	Derung, Nu, Tibetan, others	N. W. Yunan
Miao-Yao	Miao	Miao	W. Hunan, S. W. Hubei, N.W. Guangxi, Guizhou, S. W. Sichuan
Miao-Yao	She	She	Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Anhui
Miao-Yao	Bunu	Yao	N. W. Guangxi, S. W. Hunan, S. Guizhou, E. Yunnan
Miao-Yao	Mien	Yao	N. W. Guangxi, S. W. Hunan, S. Guizhou, E. Yunnan
Tai-Kadai	Zhuang	Zhuang	Guangxi, S. E. Yunnan
Tai-Kadai	Bouyei	Bouyei	Guizhou
Tai-Kadai	Dai	Dai	Yunnan
Tai-Kadai	Dong	Dong	Guizhou, S. W. Hunan, N. W. Guangxi
Tai-Kadai	Mulam	Mulam	Guangxi, S. Guizhou
Tai-Kadai	Shui	Shui	Guizhou
Tai-Kadai	Lakia	Yao	Guangxi
Tai-Kadai	Maonan	Maonan	Guangxi
Tai-Kadai	Li	Li	Hainan
Tai-Kadai	Gelao	Gelao	Guizhou, N. Guangxi

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

In the north, minority languages belong to the various branches of the Altaic family. The five Tungusic languages used by the minorities can be found in the northeast. This group includes the language of one of China's smallest minorities, the Hezhen. Until relatively recently, the Hezhen language did not receive much attention from scholars (Ramsey, 1987:215)⁶. The Xibe language has a different distribution than the other Tungusic languages. The Xibes are originally from the northeast but in 1764 some Xibes were sent to the Ili River valley in Xinjiang to act as border guards and open up new land for farming (Chun Shizeng, 1989:82; Mackerras, 2001:265). Those Xibes who live in Xinjiang have maintained their own language and script. However, there are a substantial number of Chinese loanwords and some influence from Uygur and Kazak, both of which are spoken in the proximity of Xibe communities (Ramsey, 1987:216). The Xibes who still live in the northeast, however, are far more like the majority Han and do not use the Xibe language to the same extent (Chun Shizeng, 1989:82). Turkic languages such as Uygur and Kazak are spoken in the northwest and Xinjiang. This group has eight representatives in China. Mongolian languages are found primarily in Inner Mongolia. Mongol is the main representative of this group of languages and there are three dialects of Mongol spoken in China: the Inner Mongolian dialect, the Barag-Buriat dialect and the Uirad dialect (Du Ruofu and Vincent Yip, 1993:22). The Mongolian script is also used in China and its origins can be traced back to at least the 13th century (Mackerras, 2001:264). Other Mongolian languages such as Daur are also spoken in China.

⁶ While there is more work done on Hezhen now than in the past, it is by no means abundant. For example, in my time in China I was only able to find one book (Zhang Yanchang et al, 1989a) and one journal article (He Junfang, 2002) on Hezhen. It should be noted however that there is a strong tradition of studying Hezhen (also known as Nanai or Goldi in Russia) among Soviet scholars, dating back to the 1920s.

Altogether there are six Mongolian languages spoken by the minorities (Zhou Minglang, 2003:26). A list of the Altaic languages is given in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Minority Languages of the Altaic Family

Branch/Group	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Turkic	Uyгур	Uyгур	Xinjiang
Turkic	Kazak	Kazaks	Xinjiang, Gansu
Turkic	Kirgiz	Kirgiz	Xinjiang
Turkic	Uzbek	Uzbek	N. Xinjiang
Turkic	Tatar	Tatar	N. Xinjiang
Turkic	Salar	Salar	Qinghai, Gansu, Xinjiang
Turkic	Western Yugur	Yugur	Gansu
Turkic	Tuvin	Tuvin (officially categorised as Mongols)	N. Xinjiang
Mongolian	Mongol	Mongol	Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, other northern provinces
Mongolian	Daur	Daur	N.E. Inner Mongolia, N. W. Heilongjiang, Xinjiang
Mongolian	Tu	Tu	Qinghai, Gansu
Mongolian	Dongxiang	Dongxiang	Gansu, Xinjiang
Mongolian	Baoan	Baoan	Gansu
Mongolian	Eastern Yugur	Yugur	Gansu
Tungusic	Manchu	Manchu	Heilongjiang
Tungusic	Xibe	Xibe	Xinjiang, parts of the northeast
Tungusic	Hezhen	Hezhen	Heilongjiang
Tungusic	Ewenki	Ewenki	Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia
Tungusic	Oroqen	Oroqen	Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

Only two minorities, the Russians and the Tajiks, speak Indo-European languages. Russian belongs to the Slavic branch and Tajik to the Indo-Iranian branch. Both languages are spoken primarily in Xinjiang although Russian also has some presence in the northeast, as shown in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4 Minority Languages of the Indo-European Family

Branch/Group	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Indo-Iranian	Tajik	Tajik	S. Xinjiang
Slavic	Russian	Russians	Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Heilongjiang

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

An almost equally small number of minorities use Austro-Asiatic languages. These are the Va, Deang and Blang, all of whom live mainly in Yunnan Province. Details of the Austro-Asiatic languages are given in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5 Minority Languages of the Austro-Asiatic Family

Branch/Group	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Mon-Khmer	Va	Va	S. W. Yunnan
Mon-Khmer	Blang	Blang	W. Yunnan
Mon-Khmer	Deang	Deang	W. Yunnan

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

The Austronesian languages spoken by China's minorities are a complicated case. The Gaoshan people of Taiwan speak 17 languages belonging to the Indonesian branch of Austronesian. However, because of the political situation, the Chinese government refuses to acknowledge the work of Taiwanese linguists and groups all of these languages into the category of *Gaoshanzu* languages (Zhou Minglang, 2003:404). Table 6.6 gives a very basic picture of the Austronesian languages. A more detailed discussion and classification of these languages can be found in Zeng Siqi (1998:484-9).

Table 6.6 Minority Languages of the Austronesian Family

Branch/Group	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Indonesian	17 languages classified only as <i>Gaoshanzu</i> languages	Gaoshan	Taiwan

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

In addition to these languages, there are two minority languages whose classification is uncertain, as shown in Table 6.7. These are Korean and Jing. Korean is spoken in the northeast and is considered a language isolate, as discussed in Chapter Two. The Jing are a small group who live in Guangxi Province close to the Vietnamese border and are the descendents of the Vietnamese people who have been moving into China since the 15th century. They are sometimes referred to as Gin, which is the equivalent of the Vietnamese word for the majority population of Vietnam (Mackerras, 2003a:184-5; Ramsey, 1987:287; Teng Xing and Wang Jun, 2002:102-3). There are differing opinions on the classification of the Jing language and while many accept it is Austro-Asiatic this is by no means universal; some linguists for example classify it as a Sino-Tibetan language (Katzner, 2002:22;227; Ramsey, 1987:287; Teng Xing and Wang Jun, 2002:102-3). Jing is still spoken today although a lot of Jing have shifted to Cantonese (Mackerras, 2003a:184-5).

Table 6.7 Minority Languages of Uncertain Family

Possible Classification	Language	Minority Using this Language	Main Area of Use
Language isolate	Korean	Korean	Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning
Sino-Tibetan or Austro-Asiatic	Jing	Jing	S. Guangxi

Source: adapted from Zhou Minglang (2003:24-6)

This official list does not adequately reflect the reality of China's language situation. There is much more diversity than the official list suggests. Estimates of the number of languages in China range anywhere from 80 to over 100 (Stites, 1999:99). According to Zhou Minglang (2003:23), in the early 1990s Chinese linguists generally put the number of languages at around 80. By the late 1990s many linguists believed there to be more

than 120 languages in China. Higher estimates can be found in Western sources. According to Ethnologue (2000), China has 201 living languages and one extinct language. Furthermore, “there is not a one-to-one correspondence between language and national identity in China” (Stites, 1999:99). As we have seen, there are more languages than minorities in China. Some minorities use two or more languages. The Yao speak three languages, Mien, Bunu and Laka. The Yugurs speak Eastern Yugur, a Mongolian language, and Western Yugur, a Turkic language (Dai Qingxia, 1998:1). An example of a different kind of language use is found among the Ewenki nationality. The Ewenki have their own language but are also said to use Mongolian in pastoral areas and Chinese in agricultural areas (Chun Shizeng, 1989:40; Du Ruofu and Vincent Yip, 1993:33). On the other hand, there are also cases where different minorities use the same language (Teng Xing and Wang Jun, 2002:104). Further complicating the issue, there is often variation within the same minority language which can be very significant (Stites, 1999:98-9). The various dialects of Miao and Hani for example are mutually unintelligible (Teng Xing and Wang Jun, 2002:104). A more extreme case is the Yi. The Yi language is classified into a total of six dialects, Northern, Eastern, Southeastern, Southern, Central and Western. There is also considerable variation within each of these dialects (Bradley and Bradley, 2002b:81). At the same time, some languages are very close to each other. Ewenki and Oroqen are close enough that they could be considered dialects of the same language rather than different languages (Ramsey, 1987:214). However, this recognition of greater linguistic diversity is largely confined to academic circles and has little influence on the government’s policy making (Ramsey, 1987:169; Zhou Minglang, 2003:23).

6.4 The Current Use and Status of Minority Languages: Policy and Reality

As with policy towards minorities in general, policy towards minority languages has alternated between tolerance and repression. According to Dreyer (2003a:353), policy towards minority languages is repressive when ideology is deemed to be the most important issue and tolerant when such concerns are not the top priority. The early period of the PRC was quite tolerant towards minority languages and as discussed earlier the emphasis was on researching minority languages. This period of tolerance came to an end with the Hundred Flowers campaign of 1957 and the Great Leap Forward of 1958. Language was not a major aspect of these campaigns but “tremendous emphasis was placed on rapid growth and ideological purity, and government toleration for ethnic diversity consequently diminished drastically” (Dreyer, 2003a:363). The government wanted minorities to speak *putonghua* and many minority language activities ceased because they were deemed to be too expensive and a distraction from production. Research on minority languages was also scaled back or cancelled altogether and some scholars were accused of exaggerating the differences between *putonghua* and minority languages or not wanting to help the CCP achieve its goals (Dreyer, 2003a:363-4). A more tolerant approach was taken from the early to mid-1960s where most of the intolerant policies were reversed. However, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, minority languages were again repressed, more so than at any other time. Although some political works were published in minority languages (Bradley, 1994:198), many publications in minority languages ceased and minority language broadcasts also stopped during this time (Dreyer, 2003a:365-6). After the Cultural Revolution, there was a swing back to tolerance in minority language policy. Broadcasts began again, minority

institutes were opened, operas were allowed to be performed in minority languages and research renewed (Dreyer, 2003a:369-72). Under Deng Xiaoping, minority language policy was even more positive and tolerant:

Deng believed that encouraging minority languages and their cultures would stimulate production. His reasoning, which also applied to Han areas, was that repressive policies had led to economic stagnation. It followed that allowing more freedoms –which, in the case of minorities, would include greater freedom to use and develop their languages and literatures –would generate increased production. Deng further believed that economic backwardness rather than class friction was the main source of interethnic tensions in China (Dreyer, 2003a:372).

Research on minority languages boomed, education in minority languages was expanded and publishing also increased. Of course, things did not always go according to plan and some significant problems hindered the implementation of minority language policy, not the least of which was the generally poor conditions in minority areas (Dreyer, 2003b:372-9)⁷. However, this positive approach continues today and minority languages are certainly in a better position than when repressive policies were in force. To give some idea of the overall situation, by 2003 4787 books (amounting to a total of 50.34 million copies) in minority languages had been published and there were 205 magazines and 88 newspapers in minority languages. In the area of radio and television, there were 122 radio broadcasting organisations providing programming in 15 minority languages through 73 radio stations and 523 radio transmitting stations and 111 television broadcasting organisations providing programming in 11 minority languages via 94 television stations and 830 transmitting stations (*White Paper on Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China*, February, 2005). In addition, steps have recently been taken to improve the lot of minority languages. In 2002 the 15th session of the Seventh

⁷ This issue is taken up in Chapter Seven as it applies to English language learning among minorities.

Regional People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region passed a law aimed at protecting the Tibetan language and increasing its use. The law has various provisions including compulsory study of Tibetan for the first nine years of schooling, the right to use either Tibetan or Chinese in court and government meetings, and Tibetan study for Han and other nationalities living in Tibet. The law also stipulates that the regional government must take steps to produce teachers and other professionals with Tibetan language skills (*People's Daily Online*, 22/5/2002). Also in Tibet, the Qamdo People's Radio Station began broadcasting a program in the Khamba dialect of Tibetan. There are 18 hours a day of broadcasting on topics such as news, agriculture and science and technology (*People's Daily Online*, 2/12/2001). Minority languages have also started to be used in information technology. According to a report in the *People's Daily Online* (31/7/2002), the official website of the Hohhot Municipal People's Government is the first website to use a minority language. The purpose of the website is to provide local people with information in both Mongolian and Chinese. People can also contact the government via emails written in Mongolian or Chinese. Developments in information technology have also been made in Tibet. In 2001, researchers at Tibet University began working on a Windows platform that could handle Chinese, English and Tibetan (*People's Daily Online*, 7/6/2001). In the same year a Tibetan language version of the website www.tibetinfo.com was launched (*People's Daily Online*, 12/9/2001). Qinghua University and Xinjiang University have jointly developed technology that allows the Uygur, Kazak and Kirgiz languages to be scanned into a computer (*People's Daily Online*, 11/8/2004). One of China's largest appliance companies, Haier, decided to make television sets with instructions in minority languages. The first batch of televisions will

have Mongolian instructions and televisions with Uygur, Tibetan and Korean instructions are planned for sometime in the future (*Xinhua News Agency*, 23/6/2002).

Despite these positive policies and activities, minority languages by and large remain limited in their functions and use⁸. Teng Xing and Wang Jun (2002:104-5) estimate that around 38 million people use a minority language, which amounts to 34% of the total minority population. The use and status of each minority language varies considerably. At one end, there is Korean. The Korean language is used a lot in China, perhaps more so than any other minority language. In recent years there has also been some interest among the Han Chinese in learning Korean due to the rise of business with Korean companies. As Bilik (1998:57) explains:

The successful South Korean economy and its gigantic companies like Samsung, which has made its way into China's market with large investments in metropolitan areas, have helped to raise the status of the Korean language. Free Korean classes are offered to urban people and many, [...], have attended. The motive is simple enough: proficiency in the Korean language will help get a job in a Sino-Korean joint-venture company where staff are better paid than at state enterprises.

At the other extreme is Manchu. Today, the Manchus are almost completely assimilated to the majority Han. This goes for the Manchu language as well, which is in a similar situation to Gaelic in the British Isles (Ramsey, 1987:217). Manchu is now spoken only by a few elderly Manchus in remote villages. The language does have a written script originally based on the Mongolian alphabet but, like the spoken language, it too is hardly

⁸ Nonaka (2004) reminds us that it is not just spoken languages that are in danger of extinction but also sign languages used by minorities. According to a *People's Daily Online* (20/5/2004) report, China has developed a sign language for Tibetan. This is the first time a sign language has been developed for a minority nationality in China. The development, use and status of such languages in China would be worthy of its own research project.

ever used anymore except for a few places in Xibe territory (Du Ruofu and Vincent Yip, 1993:7). Most minority languages are somewhere between these two extremes.

Determining the number of speakers a language has is notoriously difficult as has already been discussed in relation to the number of English speakers in China. For minority languages the situation is no better. There is little agreement across sources and different sources sometimes give vastly different numbers. For example, Ethnologue (2000) says of Hezhen that there are “40 speakers out of 4 245 in the ethnic group in China (1990 census)”. The *UNESCO Redbook on Endangered Languages: Northeast Asia* says the number is “unknown, but hardly more than 500, possibly much less”. For Manchu, the *Redbook* states there are “probably less than 20” speakers and Ethnologue (2000) puts the number at “20-70 speakers”. Zhou Minglang (2003:25) says there are “a few hundred out of 9 846 776 Manchus” who speak the language. This confusion is perhaps understandable for small languages that are close to extinction but similar disagreements are also found for larger languages. According to Zhou Minglang’s (2003:24) calculations, “94% of 4 593 072 Tibetans” speak Tibetan. Ethnologue (2000) however puts the number at 1 066 200. In an attempt to avoid some of this confusion, I have avoided giving exact numbers of speakers for each minority language. Table 6.8 shows approximate numbers of speakers for each minority language. This table is based on figures given in Teng Xing and Wang Jun (2002:104). They list a total of 73 minority languages, the official 60 plus 13 more. Only the 60 officially recognised languages are included here. I have kept Teng Xing and Wang Jun’s original categories but added one

more, the last, and reassigned some languages where there is enough agreement across sources to do so.

Table 6.8 Minority Languages by Approximate Number of Speakers

Number of Speakers	Languages	Total
Over 10 million	Zhuang	1
5-10 million	Uyгур, Yi, Miao, Tibetan	4
1-5 million	Mongol, Bouyei, Korean, Dong, Hani, Bai, Kazak, Dai, Li, Mien	10
500 000 – 1 million	Lisu, Lahu	2
100 000 – 500 000	Bunu, Dongxiang, Shui, Va, Naxi, Tujia, Kirgiz, Qiang, Tu, Duar, Mulam, Zaiwa	12
50 000 – 100 000	Blang, Salar, Jiarong, Pumi	4
10 000 – 50 000	Maonan, Xibe, Jingpo, Tajik, Achang, Ewenki, Russian, Jinuo, Deang, Jing, Nu, Derung, Baoan, Lakia, Monba, Gaoshan	16
5000-10 000	Gelao, Western Yugur, Oroqen, Uzbek	4
1000-5000	Eastern Yugur, Tuvин, Tatar, Lhoba	4
Less than 1000	She	1
Less than 100	Manchu, Hezhen	2

Source: compiled from data in Teng Xing and Wang Jun (2002:104)

One commonality among all minorities is the increasing use of Chinese. As we saw in Chapter Five, Chinese has increased its influence and scope in China considerably. Minorities have definitely been touched by this trend, especially in recent years. As Zhou Minglang (2003:27) points out, “the linguistic landscape has changed significantly in China in the last half century”. While there are no exact figures, the proportion of minorities who can speak Chinese has increased drastically. According to Teng Xing and Wang Jun (2002:104-5), over 23 million, or 21% of those who speak a minority language

are bilingual. In addition to this, there are some 50 million or 45% of the minority population who have shifted to another language and no longer use their minority language. They assume, almost certainly correctly, that the language most often used by bilinguals and those who have shifted to another language is Chinese. This then means that 65% of the minority population speaks Chinese. Zhou Minglang (2003:27) gives some idea of how this situation has changed over time, as shown in Table 6.9. When the Communist government first came to power in 1949, under 20% of the minorities were able to speak and understand Chinese. The percentage had increased by the late 1950s when around one quarter of the minority population could speak and understand Chinese. Towards the end of the 1980s the figure had increased to 50-60%. Based on these trends, Zhou estimates that at the start of the 21st century over 70% of China's minority population speak and understand Chinese. While there is a slight difference between the two sets of figures, the trend is clear.

Table 6.9 Percentage of the Minority Population that Speak and Understand Chinese

Time	Percentage of Minority Population that Speak and Understand Chinese
1949	Probably under 20%
Late 1950s	25% or more
Late 1980s	50-60%
Late 1990s – early 2000s	Probably 70% or more

Source: compiled from data in Zhou Minglang (2003:27)

While the government's policy has not shifted drastically away from supporting minority languages, there has been greater emphasis on promoting Chinese in recent years (Zhou Minglang, 2003:88-98). For example, in 2002 a campaign was launched to promote *putonghua* in China's western regions where many minorities live. According to officials and academics, good knowledge of *putonghua* is essential for attracting investment,

developing the region and communicating with other parts of China (*China Daily*, 23/9/2002). More recently, the government has taken steps to improve Chinese language ability in Xinjiang. The 76 million yuan project will train approximately 6000 teachers in Chinese. Around 2000 of these teachers will then be posted to schools around Xinjiang (*South China Morning Post*, 6/3/2004). A Chinese language test called the Chinese language proficiency test for ethnic minorities (MHK) has also been introduced. The first test was held in Jilin on 17th December 2003. The test will soon be used in Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Tibet and Sichuan. The test can be used for purposes such as deciding how much Chinese training a minority student might need. It is also seen as part of the promotion of Chinese, it is supposed to “push forward the reform of Chinese language teaching and improve the ability in the use of Chinese language using [sic] for the ethnic minorities in their life, study, and social communications” (*People’s Daily Online*, 20/12/2003). Zhou Minglang (2003:27) sums up the situation aptly when he states “as more and more minority people speak Chinese as a second language or shift to Chinese as the first language and Chinese occupies more and more domains of language use, minority languages in China become less and less vital”. Considering their present use and status and the spread of English in China, some may say that English is an additional threat to minority languages and may contribute to their demise. The rest of this chapter examines the use and status of English in minority areas of China.

6.5 English and China's Minorities

The study of the influence of English in minority areas of China has been almost totally ignored by both Western and Chinese scholars. Of course, this does not mean that English is not having an influence on the minorities. According to the information available, the English language has indeed reached minority areas. A report in *People's Daily Online* (9/3/2000) tells of Yao women in Sishui village of Longsheng Multinational Autonomous County in Guangxi Province learning tourism English at the village school. English has also established some presence in Tibet, where increasing numbers of people are studying English at universities or in classes outside of school (*People's Daily Online*, 19/11/2001). However, the exact nature of the use and status of English in minority areas and the implications it may have for minority languages are far from fully understood. As outlined in Chapter One, most of the data for this section comes from fieldwork. The representativeness and generalisability of data were difficult issues to deal with. Choosing one minority to focus on would not have been appropriate because no one minority can possibly represent all of the minorities. On the other hand, treating the minorities as a whole runs the risk of ignoring the great diversity and differences among them. After going through the process of designing and conducting the research, I found that there was insufficient information to focus on one minority or even a specific area. The approach taken here was to get information where it was available and accessible, regardless of which minority nationality it applied to.

Nevertheless, I believe that the data do have some general applicability. I went to two very different areas to conduct fieldwork. The fieldwork sites are at opposite ends of

China, one in the northeast and one in the southwest. These regions have different characteristics and are home to different minorities who are integrated into China to different degrees. In the northeast, fieldwork was conducted primarily in Jilin Province. Historically, the northeast is considered part of the Frontier as opposed to China Proper (Sinclair, 1987:10; Toops, 1999:15-6). Reflecting this, the northeast was once almost entirely non-Han. As van Kemenade (1997:310) says, the northeast was “steppeland scantily populated by Manchus, Mongolian and Tungusic tribes”. Today the northeast is firmly under Han control. It is not a minority region in the same sense as Tibet or Xinjiang and with the exception of the Koreans the minorities there are well integrated with the Han. The northeast is an important region for industry and agriculture. It is the most industrially developed part of China and the most productive agricultural region outside of China Proper (Crissman, 1992:19-20). Guizhou on the other hand is one of the poorest provinces in China. Guizhou Province is located in China’s southwest and covers the northeast section of the Yungui or Yunnan and Guizhou Plateau. Much of its area is mountainous. Industry in the province did not advance in any meaningful way until the 1960s (Mackerras, 2001:248). In terms of minorities, Guizhou has many more than Jilin. In Jilin Province there is one autonomous prefecture, three autonomous counties and 32 minority *xiangs* (*China’s Ethnic Yearbook*, 2002:39-40, 55). Guizhou has three autonomous prefectures, 11 autonomous counties and 253 minority *xiangs* (*China’s Ethnic Yearbook*, 2002:63; Mackerras, 2001:254-5). In terms of population, 2 453 211 people or 9.51% of Jilin’s population are members of minority nationalities. In Guizhou, 12 625 500 people or 35.81% of the total population are classified as minorities (*China Population Statistics Yearbook*, 2002:78-106)⁹. Guizhou’s minorities are much less

⁹ These figures exclude unidentified minorities and foreigners with Chinese citizenship.

integrated than those of the northeast in the degree to which they have maintained their traditions, cultures and languages. Despite these differences, there are some striking similarities between the two places in terms of the presence of English, as will be seen below. Therefore, the data presented here gives a reasonably accurate, if only partial, picture of English in minority areas of China. The following section will explore the uses and users of English in minority areas and the attitudes of the minorities towards English. At the present time, English has a fairly limited presence in minority areas. In terms of attitudes towards English, the minorities want to learn English for the benefits it can bring although some did express concerns about the potential impact of English on their own languages. All interviews were conducted in Chinese unless otherwise noted. The data is presented in English; all translations are mine and in some cases the translation was done with assistance from my Han Chinese girlfriend who accompanied me during my fieldwork.

6.6 The Uses and Users of English in Minority Areas

Compared with the widespread use of English in China as a whole that was outlined in Chapter Three, English has very little presence in minority areas. Furthermore, this presence is fairly superficial. It is possible to find English in minority areas but it is used in a limited number of domains that are for the most part not very meaningful.

6.6.1 Limited and Superficial Use of English

The main domain in which English is used is on signs. There are two types of signs: official and commercial. Official signs appear on government buildings while commercial signs appear on businesses, shops and in advertising.

Official Signs

Most of the official signs listed here were seen in Korean areas. In these areas, it is common for signs to have Korean on top followed by Chinese and then English on the bottom. In Tumen, a sign at the train station ticket office followed this pattern. The first line was Korean, followed by Chinese then the English words “Handicapped First”. At the entrance of the customs building there were two signs, one either side of the gate. One was in Chinese and the other read:

People’s Republic of China
Tumen Customs

An official sign featuring English was also displayed on the door of the local government offices in Aladi, a Korean village outside Jilin City. With Chinese characters on top and English underneath, it read:

A MODEL UNIT JILIN BRANCH OF COMMUNIST PARTY

In the Miao areas of Guizhou there was an official sign that had Chinese characters on top and English underneath. It read:

Leishan National Health Inspection

Commercial Signs

Commercial signs were much more numerous than official signs. English was featured in signs on banks, businesses and in advertising as the following examples show.

In the Korean village of Aladi, there was a sign for China Unicom, which read:

China Unicom A La Di Service Branch.

These signs listed below are from Yanji. All of them had Chinese and English with some also having Korean. The layout was the same as the official signs described above.

China Industrial and Commercial Bank
China Tobacco
Bank of China

A sign for China Mobile in Tumen also looked like this. Several signs of a similar type were seen in Leishan, a Miao village close to Xijiang. They too followed the pattern of Chinese on top and English underneath. Examples include:

China Post
China Unicom
China Life Insurance
Construction Bank of China

The following sign is from a banner atop a building in the main square of Xijiang village:

MIAO'S FOLK HANDICRAFT GALLERY

The same place also had a board of photos advertising various services. It read:

INTERPRETER ENGLISH
TAKE PHOTOS
SELL FILM
DEVELOP FILM

An advertising banner over the basketball court in Xijiang featured mainly Chinese characters but in one corner had the English words China Mobile.

Although in some cases the use of English on signs gives it “official” standing, the use of English on signs is hardly a significant intrusion of English into minority areas.

6.6.2 Limited Knowledge of English

There are members of minority nationalities who have knowledge of English. However, upon further investigation this knowledge turns out to be rather limited and confined to a certain section of the population. The English spoken by minorities is usually some simple greetings and attention getting phrases. While ability of this kind was found among a wide variety of people, proficiency in English beyond this basic level is largely confined to students and teachers.

Greetings and Attention Getting Phrases

There is certainly English spoken by minorities in minority areas, including some of the more out of the way places. As Mackerras (2003a:133) points out, “that most globalised of languages, English, is beginning to spread, even in the minority areas, and in Tibet ordinary people very frequently address tourists in broken English”. This is certainly the case elsewhere. At a market in Yanji a Korean woman yelled out “okay” and there was the usual “hello” in Tumen, Xijiang and Langde. This came from a range of people including old women in Xijiang who frequently say “hello” or “hello *ni hao*”. Some children in Xijiang approached me by saying “hello *gei wo shi kuai* (hello give me 10 kuai)”. These kinds of greeting are fairly typical and can be heard throughout China. However, in minority areas knowledge of English does not seem to extend much past these simple greetings and exchanges. In interviews with members of minorities in both

the northeast and southwest this theme came through clearly. In Tumen a Korean shopkeeper called out to me in English: “Come into my shop”. When I asked if she could speak English she said she had learnt English at school and could say simple things such as “how much is it?” The shopkeeper upstairs also called out in English. However, she said she could not speak English although she studies it with her son. He can say simple things like “what’s your name?” and “how old are you?”

On the bus trip to Wuladi, a Manchu town near Jilin City, I asked a Manchu man if he could speak English. His response was:

I can’t speak it. I can only say “okay”, “hello”. I didn’t study it. In the 70s I studied Russian at school because China had a close relationship with the Soviet Union. But I’ve forgotten it.

In Xijiang a waiter said, “okay” after we had ordered and after paying for the meal he said “thank you” but when asked if he spoke English he said no. At a store selling Miao handicrafts, I asked the shopkeeper how much something was. She replied “*Er shi wu*, okay”. The conversation then went as follows:

Jeff: Do you speak English?

Shopkeeper: Only a few simple words.

Jeff: Are there many people here who can speak English?

Shopkeeper: Very few. I can only say a few simple words. Hello, Okay.

Based on this data, the English used by minorities is what was described in Chapter Three as peddlers’ English. This is the kind of English used to attract the attention of foreign visitors and bargain with them (Pride and Liu Ru-shan, 1988:49-55; Zhao Yong and Campbell, 1995:385-8). However, knowledge of English did not extend much past this point.

Students and Teachers as the Main English Speaking Group

Not only is there limited knowledge of English but only a section of the population has such knowledge. In the areas I visited, only students and teachers had any regular contact with English and beyond basic proficiency in the language. This was the case in Hantun, a Manchu village near Jilin City. The village head, himself a Manchu, said that children in the village start to learn English in the fourth year of school. He had this to say:

Jeff: Are there people here who can speak English?

Village head: Very few. Only senior high school students and English teachers. One [English teacher] can speak English but the other can only say and understand simple things.

Unfortunately the English teacher was not at home on the day I visited so I was unable to check on this. However, in the village there was no English visible anywhere and not one person spoke English to me at all. The Miao waiter mentioned earlier expressed similar sentiments about the situation of English in Xijiang:

Jeff: Are there people here who can speak English?

Waiter: A lot. At least 100.

Lin Han: Are they Miao?

Waiter: Yes, most are. Few Han can speak English. The majority [of English speakers] are students and young people.

Jeff: Where do they learn English?

Waiter: Some of them go outside [the village] to work or study. Some people from Han areas come here to be teachers. They speak English.

Although there is no way to verify the number of English speakers, the waiter's comments bear out the argument that English is used mainly among students and teachers. It is also interesting to note that people from Han areas are coming to teach English. This seems to indicate that exposure to English is still largely confined to Han

areas. According to the hairdresser in the same village, “the middle school teacher can speak English” but “ordinary people can’t”.

In the minority areas visited, English is on the surface but it has not penetrated very deeply into these areas. With such limited presence and relatively few speakers, it is hard to see English as a destructive language or as a threat to minority languages. The fact that students are the main group of English speakers does have some important implications. These will be discussed more fully in Chapter Seven. For now, we turn to another aspect of language use among minorities.

6.6.3 Koreans Opting for Japanese

As mentioned before, the Koreans and their language are somewhat exceptional among China’s minorities. There are certain features of their interaction with English that may not be typical of the minorities but are still worth mentioning here. Interviewing conducted in Korean areas indicated that the foreign language of choice among some Koreans is not English but Japanese¹⁰. This first came to my attention in Tumen. When talking to the Korean shopkeeper mentioned earlier, she told me that more Hans than Koreans studied English and while there were some Koreans who could speak English most Koreans who studied a foreign language studied Japanese. A restaurant owner in Tumen said that her son was studying English at Harbin University but Japanese was the main focus of his studies. The same theme emerged from conversations with students. An English major student at the Economics and Information College of Jilin University told me that most of the Koreans at her college choose Japanese over English because

Japanese is more similar to Korean than English (Lin Han, personal communication). I interviewed a Korean student attending this college. He was an English major but also studied Japanese. Here is an extract from the interview, conducted in English:

Student: The number of students studying Japanese is next to those studying English.

Jeff: Why do so many students study Japanese?

Student: Japan is a fast developing country.

A similar situation exists in Aladi, the Korean village outside Jilin City. This is an extract from an interview with a worker at the government offices that summarises the language situation there:

Jeff: How many Koreans speak Korean and Chinese?

Worker: Basically all of them speak Korean and Chinese.

Jeff: Is there people here who speak English?

Worker: Very few. Students at high school study it. Most of them study Japanese because it's similar to Korean. Japan is close [to China geographically].

In terms of the three views of English outlined in Chapter Two, English among the Koreans most resembles an irrelevant language. Japanese is more immediate and seems to have the preference of the Koreans.

6.7 Mixed Feelings About English

The data presented so far shows the limited presence and influence of English in minority areas. However, this is not to say that English has no influence at all on the minorities and their languages. In Yanji, I asked a Korean shopkeeper if she thought English was useful. She replied “*You yong. Zenme mei yong?*” or “of course English is useful, how couldn't it be?” This perception was common among the minorities I spoke to. At the same time, some minorities did express concerns about the potential effects of English.

¹⁰ This is similar to the foreign language learning situation in South Korea, as discussed in Chapter Five.

This section looks at the reasons why minorities want to learn English and some of the concerns they raised.

6.7.1 Desire to Learn English

There is recognition of the importance of English among minorities and a perception of English as being associated with modern technology and prosperity. One of the Korean shopkeepers in Tumen thought that English was useful because Americans, Canadians and English people come to her store. Others have similar views of English.

This is an extract from the interview with the Korean worker at the government offices in Aladi:

Jeff: Will English have an influence on the minorities one day?

Worker: It will have a big influence. China has joined the WTO so we will use more and more English. We have to communicate with foreign countries. If you speak English it's easier to find a job.

One night in Xijiang I had dinner with a Miao family. This family made money by renting rooms, having tourists over for dinner and selling handicrafts afterwards. They said they communicated with guests in Chinese, although sometimes it was difficult.

Then followed a discussion about English:

Jeff: It seems there's very few people here who speak English.

Wife: Very few. Students and teachers speak it. My son can.

Jeff: Is English useful?

Wife: Yes, it's useful.

Husband: It's useful. To do anything you need English. It's useful for hi-tech things, they all use English. After joining the WTO we have to study many languages. We don't just have to study English but also German, Japanese and other languages. Like Zhou Enlai, he could speak many languages.

In Leishan I visited the Leishan Minzu Zhongxue (Leishan Nationalities Middle School). There I spoke to two English teachers, both of whom were Miao. All of the students at this school were minorities. Most were Miao with some Dong and Yi. Students have an English class everyday for a total of five classes per week. One of the teachers felt that English was useful “because English is used in medicine, advertisements, machinery and computers. If China wants to develop we have to learn English”.

The commonly held view that English is useful came with the caveat that its usefulness applied more to the world outside than one’s immediate surroundings. The first Korean shopkeeper in Tumen felt that English was useful but not in small places like Tumen, only in bigger places. The Manchu village head also told me that English was useful “but in small villages very few people speak it”.

6.7.2 English as a Potential Threat to Minority Languages?

We have seen that minorities want to learn English for the benefits it can bring. This leads to the question: could English one day become a threat to minority languages? In Xinjiang’s Qapqal Xibe Autonomous County, one of the editors of a Xibe language newspaper said, “although my job is to spread Xibe language, I only ask my child to learn to speak fluent Chinese and English. Xibe language is not a must” (quoted in *People’s Daily Online*, 8/2/2002). There is certainly the possibility that English may contribute to a shift away from minority languages. However, when this question was put to the minorities I spoke to most thought English was not a threat. They did however express some concerns over its potential implications.

The Manchu village head felt that English was not a threat to Manchu because “English and Manchu are not in opposition to each other”. The Korean worker at the government office in Aladi made the following comments about this issue:

Jeff: Is English a threat to Korean?

Worker: No it's not. Koreans can all speak Korean and Korean has a country. We have close contact with Korea. [showing a Korean language magazine] This is published in Yanbian. We have these kinds of things, Korean won't be like Manchu.

The Miao family did raise some concerns over English as illustrated by the extract below:

Lin Han: Is English a threat to Chinese?

Husband: No, the two languages will mutually influence and help each other.

Jeff: Could Miao be replaced by Chinese and English?

Husband: No, not now but there's a danger. Now few people speak Miao and it's not widely used. It's only spoken at home. English is used all over the world. You can't just study a bit. You have to learn it well. I told my son to learn it well. Chinese is also widely used. Mongolian, Tibetan and Miao people are in the same situation. These languages are only spoken in one place. If they want to develop they have to communicate with Han people. There will be more and more Chinese spoken. So there's a bit of a risk. Few people can write Miao. At school they don't teach it, they just learn themselves.

One of the teachers at the Leishan school expressed similar sentiments although seemed to think that the Miao language was in more danger from Chinese due to the difficulties students had with learning English:

Jeff: If the children study Chinese and English everyday will Miao slowly disappear?

Teacher: Yes, there's that risk. We have to speak to Han people. People don't neglect the language on purpose, they don't notice it happening.

Jeff: If more and more people study English, is that a danger to Miao?

Teacher: No. It's difficult for Miao children to study English. They speak Miao then when they go to school they slowly learn Chinese. At middle school they also study English. If they want to speak English they have to first think of how to say it in Miao, then translate it into Chinese then translate it into English. Vegetables in Miao is *cai bai*, in Chinese it's *bai cai*. It's hard for them to speak English. Their writing is OK but oral English is not. Teacher's English is also not good.

There are certainly some valid concerns about English among members of minority nationalities. For the most part however, they do not seem overly worried about what English might do to minority languages.

6.8 Conclusion

While there are some exceptions, minority languages in China are definitely under threat. Some of them are even on the verge of extinction. However, English is not the main reason for this threat. Based on my observational and interview data we can see two trends regarding English in minority areas. Firstly, English has only a limited presence in minority areas. It appears only on a few signs, in a kind of peddler's English, and in schools. Apart from students and teachers, not many members of minority communities have knowledge of English. Secondly, there is a strong desire among minorities to learn English for the benefits it brings. In terms of the three views of English, English in minority areas can best be described as an irrelevant language. However, the spread of English in minority areas is in its initial or beginning stages and will probably continue. What is likely to happen to China's many languages in the future? The next chapter looks at this very issue and makes some tentative suggestions on how linguistic diversity might be maintained while at the same time acquiring English.