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Roger Casas

Regional Center for Social Science
and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Instituto de Estudios Internacionales e Interculturales
Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia
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Contacto editorial

Instituto de Estudios Internacionales e Interculturales
Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia

Edifici E1
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès) Barcelona
España

Tel: + 34 - 93 581 2111
Fax: + 34 - 93 581 3266

E-mail: gr.interasia@uab.cat
Página web: <http://www.uab.cat/grup-recerca/interasia>
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Linguistic Policy and “Minority” Languages in the People’s Republic of China: The Case of the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna

Roger Casas

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable
Development - Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una breve discusión de algunas de las contradicciones inherentes a las políticas lingüísticas puestas en práctica por el gobierno de la República Popular China (RPC) en áreas habitadas por las llamadas “minorías”, en teoría destinadas a preservar y promover el uso de lenguas no mayoritarias, a través del caso de los Tai Lue (clasificados oficialmente como Dai), en la provincia de Yunnan. Mientras el estado garantiza el derecho de todos los grupos étnicos reconocidos (minzu) en la RPC a utilizar y promocionar formas escritas y orales de sus lenguas, la inserción del Tai Lue y de otras lenguas “minoritarias” en una jerarquía simbólica dominada por la cultura de la mayoría Han legitima la exclusión de facto de dichas lenguas de los espacios públicos.

Palabras clave

Política lingüística, Minorías nacionales, Tai Lue, Dai, China.

Abstract

This paper offers a brief discussion of some of the contradictions informing linguistic policies implemented by the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in “minority” areas, allegedly aimed at preserving and promoting non-Han languages, through the case of the Tai Lue (officially classified as Dai) in Yunnan province. It is argued that, while all (recognized) ethnic groups (minzu) in the PRC are granted the right to use and develop their own spoken and written languages by the state, the insertion of the Tai Lue and other “minority” languages within a symbolic hierarchy dominated by the culture of the Han majority legitimates their de facto exclusion from public spaces.

Keywords

Linguistic policy, National minorities, Tai Lue, Dai, China.

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Introduction

In contrast with the strongly assimilationist character of the policies implemented during the Republic of China regarding the ethnic “minorities” living within the borders of the country,¹ the leaders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) made clear, even before the establishment of the new regime in 1949, that they would grant official recognition to the different non-Han groups inhabiting the country.² In terms of practical policy, this recognition meant, first, the consideration of all inhabitants in the PRC, no matter their ethnicity, as equal before the law –and thus equally subject to the rights and duties that citizenship entails; second, it involved the establishment of a system of “regional autonomy” implemented in those areas with a significant non-Han population, and aimed at providing

¹ On ethnic policy during the Republic of China and the assimilationist project of the Nationalist Party, see Dreyer (1976: 15-41). The terms “minority”, “minorities” and “majority” are put in inverted commas in order to emphasize their contested use within the context of integration of ethnic or social groups within larger political units (usually nation-states).

² On the complex cultural and political reasons behind this policy, see for example Connor (1984: 67 ff.) and Harrell (2000: 25 ff). The term “Han” is the official designation of the “majority” group in the PRC, comprising around 90% of the total population in the country.

the local ethnic groups with the institutional means to remain “masters in their own land”.³

The official recognition of ethnicity within the PRC (acknowledged in the constitutional definition of the PRC as a “multiethnic and unitary state”), as well as the implementation of the policy of “regional autonomy”, demanded the set into motion of a massive ethnographic project aimed at identifying, classifying, preserving and developing the cultures of the ethnic (non-Han) minorities.⁴ Since the 1950s, the central and regional governments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have spent a great deal of effort in the implementation of policies concerning non-Han cultures, as well as in publicizing the role of the state in the preservation and promotion of “minority” cultures and languages in the PRC.⁵

³ For a description of the system of “national regional autonomy” see MacKerras (1994). The establishment of the “national regional” administration run parallel to the identification process of ethnic groups and the creation of the official system for ethnic categorization which ended up being made up of 55 “minority” groups, or, in official terminology, “minority nationalities” (少数民族, *shaoshu minzu*) plus the Han majority; on the identification process, see Guldin (1994) or Fei Xiaotong, “Ethnic Identification in China” (in *ibid.*, *Towards a People’s Anthropology*, New World Press, Beijing, 1981), who offers the “official” point of view of a Chinese anthropologist. On the the meaning of the term “*minzu*”, usually translated in the PRC as “nationality”, and, more recently, as “ethnic group”, see Harrell (2000: 29).

⁴ See the previous footnote.

⁵ As stated in the 1982 Constitution, organs of self-government in the national autonomous areas “sort out and protect the cultural legacy of the nationalities and work for the development and prosperity of their cultures” (Art. 119).

Regarding specifically the situation of linguistic policies, CCP authorities have striven to show their commitment to the preservation and development of non-Han written and spoken languages around the country. The Constitution of the PRC specifies that the organs of self-government in areas of limited autonomy “employ the spoken and written language or languages in common use in the locality” (Article 121). According to the 1984 Law on National Regional Autonomy, such organs “shall persuade and encourage cadres of the various nationalities to learn each other’s spoken and written languages”; furthermore, “[c]adres of Han nationality should learn the spoken and written languages of the local minority nationalities [...] Awards should be given to state functionaries in national autonomous areas who can use skilfully two or more spoken or written languages that are commonly used in the locality” (Law on National Regional Autonomy, Article 49).

Recently-published official “white papers” dealing with “minority” issues in the PRC have emphasized the continued commitment to this policy on the part of the government as well as its success: after emphasizing once more that “[a]ll ethnic groups in China have the freedom and right to use and develop their own spoken and written languages”, the 2000 White Paper on “National Minorities Policy and its Practice in China” states that “the spoken and written languages of national minorities are widely used in judicial,⁶ administrative and

⁶ The Constitution of 1982 states that legal hearings in nationality areas “should be conducted in the language or languages in common use in the locality” (Article 134). Indictments, judgements, and other legal documents should be written in the relevant nationality language. The Nationality Law of 1984 “guarantees the citizens of every nationality the right to use their own nationality spoken and written language in carrying out litigation” (Article 47). Translations should be provided for participants who do not know the relevant language. See MacKerras (1994: 156).

educational fields, as well as in political activities and social life ... The organs of self-government in ethnic autonomous areas all use one or more languages of their areas when they perform their duties”. Reflecting the relative autonomy regarding educational matters in “minority” areas, the document states that the local governments “work out their local educational programs and decide on the languages to be used in teaching in the local schools”; furthermore, “[i]n schools with minority students as the main body and other educational institutions the languages of the ethnic groups concerned or languages commonly used in the locality are used in teaching” (Chinese Government, 2000).

Regarding the use of non-Han language in the media, and always according to the government, “the Central People’s Broadcasting Station and local broadcasting stations use 16 minority languages, and regional, prefectural and county broadcasting stations or rediffusion stations use more than 20. As many as 3,410 feature films have been produced and 10,430 films dubbed in minority languages” (ibid.).

Efforts on the part of the state concerning the preservation and promotion of “minority” languages include the publication of minority language translations of Chinese books on laws as well as on practical subjects such as agriculture or medicine, textbooks for students (in some cases up to university level), as well as posters for classrooms, office and street signs, banners, etc. Considerable attention is paid to collecting and publishing songs, stories, and other traditional literature in the selected “standard” languages.⁷ By 1998, 36 publishing houses

⁷ See Bradley (2005: 6): “Where it exists, writing literature is scrupulously collected and preserved; transcriptions and translations into Chinese are prepared and sometimes published, and research offices carry out various

specializing in publishing for national minorities had published more than 53 million copies of around 4,100 titles in 23 minority languages (*ibid.*). Apart from this, “China publishes about 100 newspapers in 17 minority languages and 73 periodicals in 11 minority languages” (*ibid.*).

All this data seem to confirm the overall success of ethnic policies in the PRC and give proof of the ongoing concern on the part of the CCP for the situation of non-Han cultures in general, and languages in particular –at least during the post-Cultural Revolution period. Recent state efforts at promoting local cultures and languages are seen as closely related to the “ethnic revival” and the resurgence of local cultural identities that has taken place in the PRC since the 1980s.⁸

kinds of linguistic work, including the preparation of grammars, linguistic and other original research about the language, more often in Chinese but also written and published in the languages of some larger groups”. Bradley points to some kind of internal censorship during the process of publication of such materials but he does not elaborate on the issue. See also the white paper on “Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China” (Chinese Government, 2005): “With the assistance of the state and efforts of the ethnic autonomous areas, by 2003, 4,787 titles of books in ethnic minority languages had been published, totaling 50.34 million copies. There were also 205 magazines and 88 newspapers in such languages, totaling 7.81 million copies and 131.30 million copies, respectively”.

⁸ See Iredale et al. (2001: 60): “Minority nationalities began to stress the maintenance of their languages, cultures, institutions and relics. The state demonstrated its tolerance by producing book during the 1980s on the culture, especially the costumes, dance and traditional lifestyles, of minority nationalities”; also *ibid.*, 80: “the state’s emphasis on strengthening minority groups languages has been notable. This is seen as one way of restoring some degree of cultural autonomy and winning back support that was lost during the Cultural Revolution”; on the alleged resurgence of ethnic identities since the 1980s, see also MacKerras (1994: 144, 266).

However, there are important factors concerning language policy theory and implementation which are often left out from such accounts and which point to a different set of realities: for a start, the “minority” languages preserved and promoted by the government are only those recognized (or created anew, in the case of writing systems) as standard languages for the recognized *minzu*: non-standard and unrecognized languages within the PRC do not fall under the policy, and due to this as well as to the overall expansion of Chinese language, many of them are today endangered.⁹ Apart from these endangered languages, the situation regarding *recognized* “minority” languages in different areas of the PRC shows striking contrasts, depending on the historical conditions and present economic context of the specific “autonomous area”, as well as on political issues related to the use of particular non-Han languages¹⁰ (Dwyer, 1998); in practice, issues such as Han migration into peripheral areas, the maintenance of traditional conceptions of “minority” cultures as “backward” and “underdeveloped” (*luohou*) on the part of the Han, the growing role played by Chinese as the only language of social mobility around the country, the shortage in public schools of funding for the implementation of training in “minority” languages, and the subsequent lack of political interest in preserving local cultural traditions, all guarantee that the teaching and use at official level of non-Han languages in the PRC is at best scarce, and that the emphasis is put on the teaching and use of standard Chinese –a reality officially reflected in the design and

⁹ On endangered languages in the PRC, see especially Bradley (2005), and the rest of articles collected in that issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.

¹⁰ As Iredale et al. remark, “[w]hile national minority languages have been strengthened, national minority literature is still strictly censored” (2001: 65).

publication in 2000 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language. This context of course affects the situation of languages of different non-Han groups in different ways, but in any case it all points to a stark contradiction between official goals and discourse, on one side, and policy implementation and local realities regarding the preservation and promotion of non-Han languages, on the other.

This paper deals with the contemporary situation of one particular “minority” language, the Tai Lue, spoken by an ethnic group included together with other Tai-speaking groups within the category “*Daizu*” and inhabiting mainly the Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna (XDAP), in southern Yunnan province. Basically, it will be argued that several issues related to state nation-building and developmental goals constrain the “preservation and development” of Lue language and script; while it is not implied that the situation of Lue represents in any way that of other “minority” languages, I believe that the study of this particular language within the context of current social, political, and educational trends in Sipsong Panna may shed light upon the situation of other non-Han languages in the PRC. In short, it is not my goal to imply that Lue language is “endangered”, but to point to some of the problems inherent to linguistic policies in the PRC and Sipsong Panna and their relation to local socio-political issues.

The paper starts with a brief presentation of Lue written and spoken languages and a short history of Chinese education in Sipsong Panna –including the development of a new Tai script after the establishment of PRC administration in Sipsong Panna in 1953; this is followed by an account of the ongoing conflict between the state education system and monastic education, as well as of some of the factors behind it and its connections with

contemporary struggles over the construction of Lue identity. The last part of the article will draw some conclusions regarding language policy and the cultural and social situation of the non-Han “minorities” in Sipsong Panna.

Lue vs. Chinese language in Sipsong Panna

The Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna,¹¹ in Yunnan Province, are arguably one of the “minority” groups within the PRC that have received more attention from scholars during the last few years. The importance that Xishuangbanna has attained as one of the main tourist destinations in Yunnan since the middle 1980s plays an important part in this interest towards the area and the changes it is experiencing as part of its inclusion in the national and regional trade markets.¹²

Lue language is one of the several different Tai dialects spoken in the upper Mekong region. In China, Lue is classified within the Tai (known in China as 壮, *Zhuang*) family.¹³ Lue is closely

¹¹ I prefer to use the term Lue to name the group (sometimes spelt “Lü” or “Lüe” in scholarly works), for, as noted, the official category “*Daizu*” (傣族) or “Dai” includes several ethnic Tai peoples who are not (they would *not* consider themselves to be) Lue. The Lue make approximately for one third of the total population of the *Daizu*, adding up to around 280-300.000 members, and constituting the most important of Sipsong Panna’s ethnic groups numerically, totaling around 35% of the total population of the prefecture. See Hansen (1999: 88). In this paper the terms “Tai” and “Lue” are used interchangeably when referring to the Sipsong Panna context.

¹² See Hansen 2004.

¹³ Most of the dialects within the southern branch of the Tai family are classified as part of the *Daizu* category, and many of them are mutually unintelligible –see Keyes 1992: 21. The relation of the Tai-Kadai languages to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family is disputed. Although traditionally linguists tended to group the Tai-Kadai family together with other families within the Sino-Tibetan family, at present this opinion is considered problematic even by Chinese specialists –see for instance Chen Baoya and

related to other Tai languages spoken in eastern Myanmar-Burma (Tai Khuen in the Shan State), northern Thailand (Tai Yuan) and northern Laos. Apart from the Lue population in Sipsong Panna, several Lue communities in Thailand, Burma and Laos continue using Lue language in spite of the standardization of education systems and national languages in all such states. Lue language is thus arguably not endangered, and it is still the main means of daily communication for Lue communities in Sipsong Panna – especially in the countryside where the presence of Han migrants is less important than it is in the towns.

A traditional writing system, basically serving as a religious script, is still widely used in the temples in Sipsong Panna; this script is practically identical to the one still used in monasteries in Kengtung (Chiengtung), in present day Shan State, in turn closely related to the traditional script of the Tai Yuan of northern Thailand. The *Tham* script¹⁴ was presumably brought into Sipsong Panna from Kengtung together with Theravada Buddhist texts by members of the Suondok and Padaeng sects, coming in turn from Chiang Mai, then the capital of the confederation of states known as Lan Na, in northern Thailand, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries AD.¹⁵

He Fang, “A Preliminary Study of the Basic Pedigree Structure of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family”, in the *Journal of Yunnan University for the Nationalities* (云南民族大学学报, *Yunnan Minzu Daxue Xuebao*), Social Sciences Edition (哲学社会科学版, *Zhexue Shehuixue Ban*), Vol. 21, No. 1, January 2004. See also Keyes (1992: 6 ff.).

¹⁴ So designated by scholar Hans Penth “since it was first used primarily as a vehicle to convey the teachings of Buddhism in a form more accessible to Tai speaking peoples” (Keyes, 1995: 140).

¹⁵ “The Yuan script was brought to Kengtung by the Yuan people of Lan Na in the thirteenth century when they moved into that area ... The Hkun [Kheun] area of Kengtung was culturally, racially and politically under the

Prior to the establishment of a firm Chinese administration in the region and the large-scale arrival of Han migrants in the area, Lue was the dominant language and *lingua franca* in the interethnic “symbiotic context” (Hsieh, 1989: 52) of pre-modern Sipsong Panna – although its use and learning was arguably not imposed to the rest of groups interacting with the Lue.¹⁶ This

influence of Lan Na until the mid-sixteenth century. The Hkun script ... is no doubt Yuan, and it is still very much a Yuan script” (Mong, 2004: 171 ff.); see also Mangrai (2002: 3 ff.): “Within the five above-mentioned states where Khün [Kheun] script was in general use [Kengtung, Muang Laem, Sipsong Panna, Laos and Chiang Mai], there seems to be little doubt that their culture and the Sasana [Buddhist religion] came from Chiang Mai, in the south, as recorded in the Padaeng chronicle”. This script was also (and still is) used by the Bulang, a Mon-Khmer group related to the Lawa/ Lua of northern Thailand and inhabiting the highlands of western Sipsong Panna, practicing Theravada Buddhism as well; on the relations between the Bulang and the Lue, see Hsieh (1989: 52 ff.): On the Tai scripts and the Tham, see Keyes (1995: 139 ff.): For a discussion of the concept of the Tai-speaking groups using the Tham script as an “imagined community”, see *ibid.*, 141, 145 ff.

¹⁶ On the relations between lowland and upland groups within Tai polities and the concept of “*muang*”, see George Condominas, *From Lawa to Mon, from Saa’ to Thai. Historical and Anthropological Aspects of Southeast Asian Social Spaces* (Australian National University, Canberra, 1990) and the collection of articles edited by Andrew Turton, *Civility and Savagery. Social Identity in Tai States* (Curzon, Richmond, 2000). Borchert (2008: 116) relates (mistakenly in my opinion) political de-centralization and dialectal diversity during this period; according to him, “the relative weakness of the *cao phaendin* [the king of Sipsong Panna] ... is reflected even today in the widespread view that there is no standard version of the Dai-lue language. Although what is spoken throughout the region is essentially mutually intelligible, pronunciations, tones and words vary widely”. Standardization of written and spoken languages and the consequent trend towards monolingualism are related to the spread of a universal educational system, phenomena arguably associated in turn with the birth of the modern nation-state; in pre-modern Sipsong Panna there was no need for the imposition of linguistic uniformity among the Lue, not to

situation was altered by the gradual incorporation of Sipsong Panna into Chinese administrative structures during the formative period of the Chinese “geo-body”:¹⁷ in 1895 Sipsong Panna was formally included within the borders of the Chinese Empire through the agreements signed by representatives of the Empire and of the British and French governments which conformed the present mapping out of the borders regions between China, British Burma, French Indochina and Siam.¹⁸

At that time (end of the nineteenth and beginnings of the twentieth century), knowledge of written and spoken Chinese was almost inexistent among the different non-Chinese populations inhabiting Sipsong Panna. Unlike in other peripheral regions of the Empire, such as Lijiang, Confucian education was never really popular in Sipsong Panna; according to Hansen, there were only two private Confucian schools in Mengla (a township in eastern Sipsong Panna) by the end of the Qing empire, and only some members of the ruling *chao*¹⁹ understood and spoke Chinese (1999: 93-94). This lack of knowledge of Chinese language on the part of the local non-Chinese population was regarded as a major obstacle for the imposition of Chinese rule early on, and already in 1912, just

speak of the imposition of Lue language and script upon the rest of subordinate non-Tai groups in Sipsong Panna; on these issues see for instance Guo Yingjie, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China. The Search for National Identity under Reform* (Routledge, London and New York, 2004), esp. pp. 93 ff..

¹⁷ The concept of “geo-body” was firstly used by Tongchai Winichakul and applied to the case of Thailand in his *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Univ. of Hawaii Pr., Honolulu, 1994).

¹⁸ Keyes (1992: 11-12); see also Tongchai, *Siam Mapped*.

¹⁹ The *chao* were the ruling class of landowners in Lue (and other Tai-speaking groups) traditional society; see Hsieh (1989: 106 ff.).

after the demise of the Empire, the head of the Chinese government of Simao and Puer reported to the provincial government on the urgent need for developing Chinese education in Sipsong Panna (ibid., 94). Subsequently, the Nationalist government set up then the first Chinese schools in the area (intended for both locals and Chinese immigrants) at the same time that the new administrative division of the area was established. Through “the teaching of Chinese, the government hoped to break the authority of the *chao* class and the influential Buddhist monks who conducted all education of Tai boys in the monasteries” (ibid., 93-94).²⁰ As we shall see, problems related to the importance of monastic education among the Lue have continued until today.

In 1921, guidelines for expanding “border education” were set by the central Nationalist government, and a quota system was established to get boys into state schools.²¹ However, the attempt to establish state education as an alternative to temple education in Sipsong Panna failed: most schools were not open

²⁰ How goals of nation-building were entangled at the time with traditional conceptions of Chinese cultural superiority is reflected for instance in article 7 of the “13 Principles of Governing the Frontier” elaborated in 1913 by He Shukun, the first Nationalist chief of government in Sipsong Panna: “The barbarians don’t know the Han language, so we must first emphasize education ... Children of the barbarian officials should all enter into schools. We will teach them speaking first, then simple characters, then more complicated sentences, so on and so forth ... They cannot follow the old custom of sending children to the temples to be monks and to learn Burmese books only. If they don’t know the Han language, they will face much difficulty in their work” (translated in Hsieh, 1989: 157-158).

²¹ According to this system, each medium-size village was forced to send at least one boy to the nearest Chinese school. Facing this new regulation, local villagers started paying poor Tai, Akha or Han to attend the schools instead their own children. See Hansen (1999: 95-96).

in the lowlands but higher up in the mountains in order to avoid malaria, and the Tai students did not get the preferential treatment they thought they were entitled to according to their traditional dominant position in the social hierarchy of the region; to these reasons one might add the deeply ingrained mistrust towards the Han Chinese on the part of the local Tai, and the lack of overall support from the royal family for the universalization of Chinese education in the area: in fact only the royal family and the families of officials in the local government and the palace in Jinghong (the traditional seat of the highest religious and political authorities in Sipsong Panna) sent their children to Chinese schools. Most students in the new schools were Han, and when finally in 1942 all schooling stopped in Sipsong Panna due to Japanese bombing in the area, the Nationalist project of establishing Chinese schools and expanding the use of Chinese language in this border area had failed (ibid., 95-96).

A contested tradition: the “new Tai script”

The creation of a new administration under CCP rule (the Xishuangbanna autonomous “region”, later “prefecture”, was created in 1953) involved a renovated effort towards the establishment of Chinese education in Sipsong Panna and the expansion of Chinese language in the area. According to Hansen (1999: 100), in the first years of the PRC the old Tai script was used as a means of teaching in public schools.²²

²² Hansen mentions that a few village schools experimented with teaching one class of Tai students in Chinese only and teaching basic Tai in another before turning to the study of Chinese; the teachers she interviewed all agree that the students in the Tai class performed better in school (1999: 99). On the other hand, some of the teaching materials from that period were also used when the use of the “new Tai” script was abandoned for the old one, at the beginning of the 1990s –see below.

However, in spite of these early attempts, soon the local government began conducting work aimed at reforming the existing Lue script. In the framework of a wider, national-level project aimed at reforming and standardizing existing scripts (and creating new ones), in 1952 a team sent by the Academy of Social Sciences and directed by linguist Fu Maoji arrived in Sipsong Panna to conduct research and prepare the reform of the traditional Lue script.²³ In 1953, the Second People’s Congress of Xishuangbanna approved the reform the traditional script, and a local “Committee for the Reform of the Dai Script”, composed of seven members, was formed (Hsieh, 1989: 244). Guldin has described how the process of standardizing non-Han languages at a national level involved the cooperation of members of the “national minorities”;²⁴ as Hansen has pointed out, in Sipsong Panna this process involved the collaboration of a few local Tai who apart from being proficient in the old script knew Chinese well (1999: 100), including the last ruler (the *chao phaendin*) of Sipsong Panna, who acted as an advisor and assistant to Prof. Fu (Hsieh, 1989: 244). The reform and put into use of the new script was ratified by a national-level commission in 1955.

²³ On the role of Fu Maoji in this project at a national level, see Guldin 1994. According to this author, the main phase of the project took place at the middle 1950s, when around 700 trained specialists were sent into minority areas in 14 different provinces to conduct research on 42 languages (Guldin, 1994: 133). The process began earlier in Sipsong Panna probably due to the existence of a script with an old tradition among the Lue.

²⁴ Due to this, “[s]ome ethnologists felt that their work had indeed helped include the minorities in the Liberation” (Guldin, 1994:134).

Several dictionaries and teaching materials in the “new Tai” (新傣文) were then produced,²⁵ and the script became the standard for official use and bilingual education among the Lue. Apart from a hiatus between 1987 and 1996, when the old script was again recovered for official use,²⁶ and of course from the periods when use of minority languages and scripts was banned (especially during the Cultural Revolution, see Hansen, 1999: 106), the “new Tai” has been the Tai script officially in use in the XDAP; therefore, two scripts, apart from Chinese, are at present in use in Sipsong Panna: while the old script is still studied by novices and monks in the local temples, the new script is used in official documents and signs or within the state education system –although to a very limited extent, as we will see now.

Conflicting education systems

Soon after the establishment of the XDAP, the Land Reform and subsequent political movements in the PRC inaugurated an era of repression of Buddhist practices in the area: from the end 1950s to the end of the 1970s, and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), temples and other religious sites in Sipsong Panna were destroyed or damaged, monks and

²⁵ In 1957 publication of the Banna Newspaper (using the new script) started. Publication was suspended from 1966 up to 1972 (Hansen 1999: 100).

²⁶ Hansen (1999: 100, 126); see also Hsieh (1989: 244): “in 1987, after the new writing system had been used for 32 years, the People’s Congress of Xishuangbanna passed a resolution to decide to resume the old style of Dai character. Apparently this was so because of the support for the old script on the part of the last *chao phaendin*”. Hsieh interpreted this as a symbol of “a resurgence of traditional Dai identity” (ibid., 244-5, 247). Keyes comments that the new script is not popular among the Lue in Sipsong Panna (1995: 142); however, local attitudes towards it seem to be mixed; for a more detailed account see Hansen (1999: 109 ff.).

novices forced to disrobe or flee to neighbouring countries, and Buddhist practice in the area was totally disrupted.²⁷ As mentioned, teaching and use of Lue script (traditional or new) was banned during this period. After the changes at the top of the CCP between 1976 and 1978, religious freedom was officially re-established in the PRC by the 1982 Constitution, and a strong recovery of Buddhist practice took place in Sipsong Panna: soon after the locals realized there was no danger in having their boys ordained in the local Buddhist temples once again, figures of novices and monks reached pre-1957 numbers.

However, the return of Lue boys to the temples created immediately a problem for the local government and its goal of expanding state education and Chinese language: most Lue boys preferred to become novices in the local temples than to enter public schools, and the number of Tai girls in schools was far greater than that of boys (Hansen, 2004: 65). Cooperation between local monasteries and the public system of education seemed to be the logical solution to this problem. However, while in the 1980s and 1990s there were some attempts to establish special classes for novices, combining Buddhist and public curricula, they were abandoned after a few years, and it can be argued that in general there has been little cooperation between the Buddhist authorities and the state education system (ibid.).²⁸

²⁷ See Hsieh (1989: 210 ff.).

²⁸ An exception to this may be the recent recognition on the part of the state of the Buddhist courses imparted at the main temples in Sipsong Panna, Wat Bajie and the new Wat Long, granted only after the temples accepted having Chinese teachers from the local Technical Institute (技术学院, *Jishu Xueyuan*) in Jinghong teach part of the curriculum.

Although according to law primary and secondary schools in Sipsong Panna may offer class in Tai Lue, in reality this seldom happens: the main reasons for this are the poor financial situation of many schools,²⁹ the shortage of Tai teachers versed on the Tai script (Hansen, 1999: 125), and, importantly, disagreement within the government and among school administrators on the need for and utility of Tai lessons. As Hansen notes, “teachers, school administrators and members of the Bureau of Education in the three counties and the prefecture [are] roughly divided between a majority who saw the teaching of Tai as a temporary necessity, and a minority who wanted expansion and improvement of Tai language instruction in primary schools, in examination, and in secondary education” (ibid., 129). Due in part to such disagreements, interesting experiments on bilingual education started in the 1980s were abandoned in the 1990s (ibid., 127; see also Hansen, 2004: 67). The return to the use of the old Tai script at the official level between 1987 and 1996 created more confusion and evidenced the internal divisions in the government regarding education in Tai and the inconsistency of educational policies.

The argument on the part of the government officials who see no need to expand teaching of local languages in public schools is that the use of such languages represents a hindrance to attain proficiency in Chinese, the only language of social mobility in contemporary Sipsong Panna. The majority sees thus the teaching of Tai as a temporary necessity at best, with the goal of facilitating the gradual disappearance of the language,

²⁹ The de-centralization brought in 1985 by the national-level reform of the educational structure meant that the financing of schools was increasingly dependent on locally generated revenue. This has meant in practice a general deterioration of education in border areas due to a general decline of local government’s financial capacities. See Iredale et al. (2001: 67-68).

considered as an obstacle for the economic and social development on the part of the Tai (Hansen, 1999: 129, 131). This view is closely related to the consideration of Chinese as the language of science and modernity, and as a superior way of communication –and the correlative representation of minority cultures and languages as “backward”.³⁰

The new socio-economic and political contexts in Sipsong Panna (and as it happens for many other minority areas) determines today the importance of Chinese language as a means of communication in the region. Since the early 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the development of tourism and trade in Sipsong Panna has attracted large numbers of individual migrants coming from populated areas mainly in the East of the country (such as Hunan or Jiangxi, but also from Sichuan and other provinces) who either have been recruited by private enterprises or have decided on their own initiative to try their luck in the developing border regions (Hansen, 2004: 60). Chinese has thus become the main

³⁰ As Dwyer puts it, “Mandarin, canonized as the standard language of China, stands at the pinnacle of a metalinguistic hierarchy which mirrors the vertical basis of power in China today” (1998: 68). See also Bilik: “We are up against a metaphor which considers Chinese to be the vehicle of high intelligence, and it reminds us of the imagined historical past when Chinese civilization was supposed to be superior to the cultures of its neighbours, ranking as highest in the world in literature, ethics, technology, and magnificent cities and palaces” (1998: 50). This linguistic hegemony of Chinese is also reflected in the local media in Sipsong Panna: in spite of the data presented in the introduction regarding the employ of “minority” languages in the media, such use is extremely limited in Sipsong Panna. This is especially apparent in both the two prefectural and the city Jinghong television channels, which limit programs in Lue and other non-Han local languages to a few minutes every week. On the other hand, all inhabitants in the XDAP have access to dozens of regional channels from within the PRC and emitting in Chinese, while access to foreign channels (including those from Thailand) is restricted.

language in use in the educational system, the administration, and trade in Sipsong Panna.³¹

Within this context, the possibility offered by law for the offspring of local ethnic “minorities” to be educated in their own mother tongues is constricted precisely by what Walker Connor has called the “voluntary principle”: faced with the choice of sending their boys to the temple in order to get an education in Lue, or to the Chinese school, parents will normally decide for the latter option. As Connor stated in relation to the situation in the Soviet Union, “[p]arents desirous of eliminating any barriers to the upward mobility of their children would be apt to select the school that assured their offspring the best grounding in the country’s language of success, that is to say, the language of access to the higher echelons of the party, industry, and government” (Connor, 1984: 257).

This reasoning may also be applied to the limited learning of Tai in state schools, for in view of this situation many Tai parents will expectedly not favour the introduction of Tai teaching in the schools: the symbolic association of Chinese language with modernity, and the arrival in Sipsong Panna of new patterns of consumption –and consumerism, together with the dominant presence of Chinese language in the national and local media, administration and educative system, explains that for many families, especially within the urban milieu of Sipsong Panna, the solution to the disjunction between the languages used at home and in school is solved not only by taking their offspring into state schools, but even by

³¹ See also Dwyer: “The population transfer and migration of Han Chinese from eastern China to the peripheral regions has firmly established the national standard, Mandarin Chinese, as the primary language of government, scholarship and, to some extent, commerce” (1998: 70).

abandoning the use of Lue language at home, in order to facilitate the learning of Chinese on the part of children.

Reflecting this attitude, even those (generally Tai) officials willing to expand education in Tai are convinced of the necessity and benefit of learning Chinese language and Han culture, and therefore bilingual education is generally understood at best as “transitional”, that is, a tool to accelerate the immersion of Lue children in Chinese language and culture.³² In the context of this (ongoing) conflict between state and monastic education, thus, the main aim of using spoken Tai and the (new) Tai script in schools seems to be not the facilitation of learning in itself (by means of providing with an allegedly more simple tool for the teaching of the local language), but to facilitate the integration of Lue boys into the state educational system, while at the same time annulling the temple as the main institution for cultural transmission and depriving local monks of their traditional symbolic and social power, thus weakening the potential of traditional Tai culture as a counter-ideology regarding state nation-building and developmental goals in Sipsong Panna.³³

³² A new pilot project concerning bilingual education is at present being implemented in Sipsong Panna by the local Bureau of Education, with technical and financial assistance by the organization SIL International. The project, carried out in five selected village schools in Sipsong Panna with a majority of Lue students, aims at establishing comprehensive Tai language teaching from the first year of primary school. However, the percentage of Tai teaching is progressively reduced every year while that of using Chinese language within the class is increased –so the project belongs also under the “transitional bilingual education” category. Newly produced teaching materials are printed using the “new Tai” script.

³³ On these issues, see Hansen 1999 (passim), and 2004: 64 ff. See also Keyes (1992: 26) on Buddhist monasteries in Sipsong Panna as a source of

In spite of these reasons (or precisely because of them), teaching and use of Tai written and spoken languages is practically absent from public schools, the media and the administration in Sipsong Panna.³⁴

Conclusions

In order to summarize while at the same time expanding on some of the ideas presented so far, I would like to emphasize two important points in relation to linguistic policies in the PRC in general and in Sipsong Panna in particular: the first is that goals of nation-building and economic development continue apparently to determine official attitudes and policies regarding minority languages in the country. From the point of view of the state, multiculturalism and multi-linguism may become an obstacle to attain goals of national unity and economic development, and while “minority” cultures and languages need not to be totally erased in order to reach such goals, generally the use and teaching of a single common lingua franca as a means of communication at the national level is emphasized.³⁵ Furthermore, within the PRC, social and cultural

“significant passive resistance” to state policies; and Hsieh (1989: 247) on the importance of the old script as a marker of traditional Lue identity.

³⁴ See Hsieh (1989: 245): “As a matter of fact, neither the traditional style nor the new style had much use in Sipsong Panna after liberation [in the case of Sipsong Panna the date should be 1950]... On the one hand, the number of teachers who knew the new Dai characters was still not adequate; on the other hand, school education concentrated on learning the Han language (Chinese)”. Even though Hsieh wrote this at the end of the 1980s, his conclusions are valid to describe the situation in Sipsong Panna today.

³⁵ On these ideas, see for example Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell Univ. Pr., 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme,*

conditions such as immigration of Han Chinese into previously “minority”-dominated areas or the subordinate position of “minority” languages in the “metalinguistic hierarchy” within the country guarantee that their use is more and more confined to the context of the family, making sure that all citizens are able to speak the standard (Chinese) and understand state messages. On the other hand, in the case of Sipsong Panna the creation of the “new Tai script” in the 1950s involved the attempt to isolate the Lue from culturally-related groups using the same script but living outside the PRC, a step in the process of erasure of traditional Lue identity and creation of a specifically Chinese *minzu* (that is, the “*Dai*”).

A second point I want to emphasize, related to the first, is that the implementation of special linguistic policies regarding “minority” languages more often than not help reproduce not only traditional cultural prejudices on the part of the Han majority (and very often of members of the “minorities” themselves) but, most importantly, the subordinate socioeconomic position of non-Han groups in the “autonomous areas”.

As has been shown in this paper, since the times of the Republic of China the integration of Tai children (particularly boys) within the state educational system has been problematic. The failure of Tai boys in school is all the more evident since children of other ethnic groups in the region do succeed in their adaptation to the state education system: members of other non-Han groups in Sipsong Panna such as the Akha (classified in the PRC as Hani) or the Jinuo, who, unlike the Tai, did not possess a script, and are therefore not entitled to receive

Myth, Reality (Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1991); Ralph Grillo, *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference: State, Culture and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford Univ. Pr., Oxford and New York, 1998).

instruction in their own language, do far better than the Tai in school. In the eyes of many local teachers and officials, the fact that the non-Tai groups in Sipsong Panna lack a written tradition –and therefore a culture worth of praise– is the reason why they are more willing than the Tai to abandon their own cultural practices and adapt to the Chinese school system (Hansen, 2004: 67; *ibid.* 1999: 125; 155-156) –according to local officials, thus, the Tai risk becoming *even more backward* than the groups living in the uplands.³⁶

For the non-Tai groups in Sipsong Panna the public school system may offer an opportunity for cultural vindication regarding their traditional subordinate status, but in any case they, no less than the Tai, must assimilate to Han culture as much as possible in order to succeed in school. Consequently, educational failure on the part of the Tai and other non-Han groups in adapting to a system which transmits cultural values basically alien to them is thus often interpreted as proof of the inherent “backward” character of their culture (including language), and of the superiority of Han culture and language. The logic response to this understanding of the problem as a matter of , by which such groups are forced to adapt to a model in which nevertheless it is impossible to succeed as long as they are part of the “minorities” “cultural deprivation” of the part of

³⁶ Hansen 1999: 168: “It appears that, due to their historically low position of the non-Tai in Sipsong Panna, some minorities from the mountains find in Chinese education a way to refute the prejudice against them that is still prevalent among Tai students and peasants [...] [A] local, historically inherited ethnic hierarchy can play an important role in determining responses to state education, and some groups apparently see assimilation as a strategy for changing their own position within the local community, government, and administration”. On the importance of the Chinese concept of “culture” (文化, *wenhua*) and its relation to literacy, see Iredale et al. (2001: 52).

the non-Han groups³⁷ is thus to increase education in Chinese language, while reducing the relevance of Tai and other languages in school and outside of it. In this sense, the educational system, in conjunction with cultural discrimination, which includes linguistic policy (it is irrelevant here whether such discrimination is positive or negative), serves to the reproduction and legitimacy of the system and to the maintenance of the subordinate position of the non-Han “minorities” vis-à-vis the Han majority, through the symbolic production of “backwardness” and of a veritable “structure of permanent deferral” regarding non-Han groups,³⁸ by which such groups are forced to adapt to a model in which nevertheless it is impossible to succeed as long as they are part of the “minorities”.³⁹

³⁷ The term is taken from the study on sociolinguistics by Labov (1972).

³⁸ This term has been used by Gary Wilder to refer to the symbolic domination of Western colonial powers on the colonized –and quoted in Li (2007: 15). As Hansen (1999: XV) points out, “[i]n many respects Chinese education in Sipsong Panna resembles the education established by colonial powers for indigenous peoples in other parts of the world” (see also *ibid.*, 165). The fact that the symbolic and material subordination of non-Han groups may take place as an “unintended consequence” of “minority” policies is irrelevant for the argument displayed here: I admit the effects of such policies may work in the same way that the effects of the “development apparatus” in Lesotho described by James Ferguson, that is, “behind the backs or against the wills of even the most powerful actors”; in any case this does not affect my argument. As Ferguson, I believe that “the outcomes of planned social interventions can end up coming together into powerful constellations of control that were never intended and in some cases never even recognized, but are all the more effective for being ‘subjectless’”. Ferguson (1994: 18-19).

³⁹ In spite of looking at linguistic choice exclusively from the point of view of the social situation and the opportunities for mobility in contemporary Sipsong Panna, I believe this issue cannot be grasped adequately by an exclusively interpretive approach –it is necessary to account for both

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people's choices and the material construction of the context by forces beyond the immediate control and choice of ordinary people (in this case, current economic and cultural dynamics in the region). In this sense, Iredale et al. (2001), as well as other authors, simply replicate official discourses about the problem of "access to education" with their emphasis on figures of students enrolled in public schools among "minority" populations. Social subordination of the non-Han "minorities" will remain as long as we do not break free of the discourses regarding cultural differentiation and the acceptance of social, cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

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