

A Study on the Conditions of Language Usage of the Moso People in Yunnan, China

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Abstract: The Moso people, as a close relative of the Naxi ethnic minority and a much smaller group, have historically received little attention and research. Although in recent years, many more videos, documentaries, and research have been done on the Moso cultural traditions and heritage, little effort has been made to discover the language usage conditions of the Moso language. Language usage is a crucial characteristic to certify the vividness of culture, the core of the Moso culture preservation. Moreover, as they live in deep mountains and relatively undeveloped regions, the information of the Moso people is also hard to gain. This study utilizes the researcher's valuable experience in the local areas and contacts with the village head and wizard, the wise people in the village, to explore the language usage conditions of the Moso people and deduce their cultural and ethnic recognition among the elders and the youngest generation.

Keywords: Chinese ethnic minorities, the Moso people, current language usage

1. Introduction

The period between 2022 and 2032 is proclaimed to be the International Decade of Indigenous Languages by The United Nations General to draw global attention to the endangered situation of many indigenous languages and to promote critical stakeholders, scholars, volunteers, and resources for the preservation, revitalization, and promotion of the aforementioned languages. In the past, organizations such as UNESCO have already been involved in this kind of work, which would be further promoted by international institutes [1].

The formation of the International Decade of Indigenous Language demonstrates a shift in people's mindset towards the "superior culture" and "racial identity." Far different from Eurocentrism and white supremacy, it is discovered that Africans and many indigenous people, such as the Indians, have a unique approach to coexisting with nature and treating human life in ways that correspond to the scientific facts people discover. People's increasing understanding makes people's awe towards these former "inferior" and "backward" cultures grow. In contrast, people's amazement makes people more accepting and open to unveiling the many mysteries and wisdom of the aforementioned cultures.

In this critical process, people should value the languages. People hold these common facts together: Half of the more than 7,000 languages in the world are likely unwritten. At the same time, there are 2,000 languages spoken in Africa, 80% of which have no written form. Within this century, about half of the languages spoken in the world today could disappear [2]. The oral, endangered, and marginalized languages contain the many epics, sagas, myths, and thoughts passed down generation

after generation through the mouths of the wizards or storytellers. These languages are the history and life stories of cultures.

Thus, to maintain the history of the life stories of many people, it is critical to preserve first the languages, especially the oral ones.

To get to preservation, people should first understand which languages exist, are endangered, and must be preserved because of their value. In other words, the awareness is critical. Yet in China, neither awareness nor the following resources to support preservation work are sufficient, especially among ethnic minorities.

There are 56 ethnic minorities in China. Yet the majority does not know that as the identification work was hugely inaccurate in certain regions such as the southwest, many ethnic groups and people did not gain national recognition and the rights and attention they should have. They were either categorized in other ethnic groups or forgotten. For example, for the 20,000 Moso people who lived aside from the Lugu Lake in Ninglang Autonomous County for the Yi people, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, their children could not get any additional points in the National Entrance Examination for College, a right that their other fellow ethnic groups who lived in even better geographical and more economically developed region could enjoy. Thus, many Moso people are actively abandoning their legal identity to be classified as other ethnic groups, mainly the Naxi or the Mongol, in order to gain rights. This fact that they are not paid enough attention and given enough rights could be reflected in a questionnaire that the author did. Among 200 students in three of the most famous high schools in China, Beijing National Day School, The High School Affiliated with Renmin University of China, and The High School Affiliated with Beijing Normal University, 90% of them do not know the existence of unrecognized or wrongly categorized ethnic groups.

Besides unawareness, China still needs more support for the preservation of indigenous languages. Unlike other countries, most Chinese programs are supported by the government. While there are private organizations and NGOs in China, they are limited very much by a lack of support in terms of resources and policies. In the long time, most of the Chinese have a mindset to rely on governmental institutions rather than striving to make progress on their own. In the field study in the region of the Moso, the author got the information that there are rarely nationally funded programs to preserve the social usage of the Moso language and culture. Despite certain initiatives of individual influencers, scholars, and media workers, they have no long-term dedication and actual production. Compared with Chinese people, there are more people from the Western world who came and made progress in the form of documenting, filming, and translating.

What are the Moso people? The Moso people are brothers of the Naxi, and together, they were called by themselves the “Na.” They are unique for their matriarchal society and their practice of walking marriages, that is, man-leaving behaviors and lifestyle of large families living together along the female line. The Moso oral language is similar to that spoken by the Naxi. However, they continue their history and literature orally, not having any written language. Now, the major way to preserve their cultural heritage is through the help of other fellow Naxi who used their Dongba hieroglyph to help with the preservation work. Yet the majority of the Moso people have little cultural recognition and slight disagreement towards the usage of the Dongba hieroglyphs in preserving their culture, which made the preservation work of their oral language even more critical.

Through estimating the extent of Moso language usage among the Moso people located at Daluoshui village and Youmi Village in Ninglang Autonomous County for the Yi people, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, this study aims to provide more data to deduce the linguistic and cultural recognition among the Moso people, raise awareness, and to propose solutions to better preserve Moso language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Proposal Before the Estimation

To a certain extent, the language usage rate of the Moso is related to the remaining rate of Moso's large family living mode. The large family unit preserves the stability of the Moso traditions and, thus, language usage. As more and more small family units have formed in recent years under the Han traditions and the mainstream patriarchal practice, the mode of a large family is hugely threatened. The reasons for the small family formation are that parents usually go to work outside in the big cities while children go to get a better education.

According to the rough estimation of the author's team, the remaining rate of Moso's large family living mode is 35-40 percent. In the 1960s, the rate was 85%. Yet this data may not fully demonstrate the extent of language usage rate. The author observed that the Moso culture and language have strong adherence power. The warmth a large Moso family provides supports many Moso people outside, becoming the central motive for a different type of maintenance of the large family unit.

2.2. Summary of Previous Research

So far, while research on the language usage conditions of the Moso people is rare, there are certain articles that explore the language conditions of the Naxi language, a close dialect of the Moso language, through which the research and preservation methods are inspiring.

In Zhou Yajuan's "A Study on Native Language Identity and Ethnic Identity of the Naxi Ethnic Group in Yuhu Village, Lijiang, Yunnan Province" [3], she explored different identities of Naxi people and concluded through questionnaires and household interviews that they have a high level of native language proficiency, frequent use of their mother tongue, and smooth communication in their mother tongue. Ethnic members show a certain degree of protection towards their mother tongue, but there are also intergenerational differences.

In Liu Yan and Ge Zeqingzhu's "Language Maintenance of Moso People in the Lugu Lake Area of Yunnan Province after Tourism Development" [4], they discover that due to the small population and ambiguous ethnic affiliation of the Moso people (both Naxi and Moso), language planning and language protection policies cannot be implemented, and policies in terms of ontology planning and status planning are almost blank. Also, the ethnic situation of the Moso people is not conducive to maintaining their mother tongue because of the specialty of their form of marriage and the dominance and influence of Tibetan Buddhism.

In Liu Lingling's "A Study on the Current Situation of Language Use among the Mosuo People in Yunnan Province: Taking Yidi Village in Lijiang as an example" [5], she explores language usage through methods such as Moso language word tests and questionnaires. Furthermore, she extends the subject to examine the mutual influence of the Han and Moso languages and the national policies.

In Min Ruihua's "The Imbalance between Traditional and Modern Ethnic Education from the Perspective of Mother Tongue Erosion: A Field Study Based on Yulong Village, Lijiang City" [6], the author conducted a survey and study on the awareness and usage rate of 78 commonly used words in Naxi language daily in Yulong Village, Lijiang City, in order to investigate the intergenerational differences in Naxi language oral proficiency and pragmatic choice among Naxi villagers in Yulong Village, Lijiang City, and to observe the family education, school education. The phenomenon of educational changes in the three fields of social education and the analysis of the educational causes leading to intergenerational differences in the awareness and usage of commonly used words in Naxi language.

In He Qianyun's "A Study on Language Attitude Towards Naxi, Chinese, and English of the Naxi Ethnic High School Students in Lijiang" [7], she discovers that gender and grade have significant

differences in language attitudes and that students with the ability to speak Naxi language held are more favorable towards bilingualism while those who could speak Naxi regarded English was less important than Naxi and Chinese.

In Cui Jinping's "A Linguistic Ecology Study of Naxi Language in Dayan Ancient Town of Lijiang" [8], the survey participants are selected from Wenlin Village, the only gathering village of Naxi indigenous residents in Dayan Ancient City. The respondents were all Naxi people, and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire content were evaluated using SPSS Cronbach's alpha, Kaiser Meyer Olkin, and Bartlett's spherical test. Overall, the native language proficiency of the Naxi ethnic group is relatively high, yet the frequency of Naxi language usage is limited to families, and the low frequency of Naxi language use in work, study, and public places is a major concern. In the long term, the healthy language ecology within a society may be damaged.

In Liu Mei and Qi Aobao's "Investigation and Analysis of the Current Situation of Bilingual Use of the Naxi Ethnic Group in Mubiwan Village, Lijiang" [9], working year-round in cities, studying outside, and developing the local tourism industry are the major reasons for the reduced language proficiency for the youngest generation.

In Luo Wenjuan's "Study on the Bilingual Phenomenon of Naxi and Han Ethnic Groups in Dayan Town, Lijiang" [10], she discovers the common phenomenon of bilingual Naxi language and Chinese and also alerts the situation that the scope of use of the Naxi native language has been limited and that the native language proficiency of the Naxi ethnic group in Dayan Town, Gucheng District, Lijiang City is showing a decreasing trend due to the usage of Mandarin under the influence of tourism and involvement in work and school.

In Yao Xingxing's "A Case Study on the Language Recognition of the Naxi Ethnic Group in Ludian Village, Yulong County, Yunnan Province" [11], he deduces the language recognition level through observing, communicating, using sources and documents, doing field studies, and interviewing among Naxi individuals to gain further information.

In Liao Li's "Reflections on the Disappearance of minority languages and ethnic identity in China: Taking Naxi as an example" [12], she reflects on the three major reasons why ethnic minority languages are endangered such as the Naxi language: the first reason is that the scope of minority language use is narrowing; the second is that population mobility brings pressure to the development of minority languages; the third is that the publication of texts relevant in minority languages is reducing. While Liao also stresses the importance of cultural recognition and confidence of ethnic minorities, she also proposes specific strategies for ethnic minority language preservation: the first is to establish a bilingual teaching environment for ethnic minorities; the second is to utilize science and technology to further enhance the preservation and dissemination of minority languages; the third is to encourage ethnic minority people to participate in cultural protection work; the fourth is to introduce policies to protect minority languages and enhance the status of their language and culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Goal of the Research

The main goal of the research is to gain information about the current Moso language usage and, through the answers, to deduce the cultural and linguistic recognition among the Moso people.

3.2. Research Region

The research region is limited to Daluoshui Village along the Lugu Lake and Youmi Village, both in Ninglang Autonomous County for the Yi people, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China.

The geographical reason for selecting Daluoshui Village is that Lugu Lake Area is located at the intersection of Yanyuan County, Liangshan Prefecture, Sichuan Province, and Ninglang County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, connecting different Moso and Naxi communities around it.

The economic reason is that Lugu Lake Area has been rated as an AAAA-level scenic spot by experts from the China National Tourism Scenic Area A evaluation committee. The beautiful scenery is well-known nationally and internationally and is loved by many tourists, especially from Yunnan, Sichuan, and other surrounding provinces. Around the mountainous region with bad traffic and transportation, Daluoshui Village, after the COVID, is comparatively prosperous, commercialized, and more connected with other areas and provinces, providing the impacts of contacts with people from non-Moso backgrounds.

The reason for selecting Youmi Village is that it is highly isolated from other areas, about eight hours by bus from Lijiang City and away from commercialization. The village has a different social structure; it is a normal patriarchal Moso society, and human resource structure, most of the people there work in the village rather than going outside. Thus, Youmi village is famous for its strong sense of belonging and recognition of its culture.

3.3. Form of the Research

This study mainly uses the form of questionnaires and interviews.

The questionnaire that I designed is attributed to 48 native Moso in the village through: 1) the help of the village head of Daluoshui Village, also the co-founder of the Moso Museum that I volunteer. 2) the help of a Dongba of Youmi Village.

The interviews are mainly conducted in the homes of separate Moso families through the introduction of the village head and the Dongba.

3.4. Target Group

The target group is mainly divided into four categories according to age:

1. Under 22 years old:

Daluoshui Village has one kindergarten and one primary school that only reaches fifth grade, and the rest need to go to another county to finish their sixth grade. Beyond primary school, the students need to go to larger counties and regions to complete their education. Thus, people could only see small kids and some but rare larger students who came back for summer vacation, which poses a certain degree of difficulty.

1. 22 to 30 years old:

Many Moso women still marry young, approximately in their late 10s or early 20s. Many Moso women marry Han men in cities after their studies, while many work in cities such as Lijiang City, Yunnan province.

1. 31 to 40 years old:

Village people at this age appear a lot in streets or Moso homes. They are mostly at home for the summer to help with family business or simply work within the village.

1. 41 to 60 years old:

This age group is relatively common because the majority of this generation has little education (not beyond primary school) and was born and raised in the era (60s and 70s) when the Moso was not open to the modern outside world. They mainly live here in the village and have children and grandchildren who work outside.

1. Over 60 years old:

This age group is also relatively common. Because of the original and healthy lifestyle, many Moso elders have a high age expectancy. Elders in 80s and 90s are more common here than in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

3.5. Method to Assemble the Questionnaire

Through the help of the village head and the Dongba in sending and announcing in the group chat, the author was able to assemble the questionnaire for forty-eight village people in different Moso families. The average number of people in one Moso family is about eight, but some families have more family members.

3.6. The Content of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains two types of questions:

- 1) Questions about language usage and occasions

These questions aim to detect the frequency and occasion in schooling, work, family, and other occasions in using the Moso language.

- 2) Questions about identity recognition

4. Results

4.1. General Summary of the Results

There are, in total, 48 effective responses. Among the responses, about 1/3 come from Daluoshui Village, while 2/3 come from Youmi Village.

In the responses of Daluoshui Village, the main age range is 22 to 30 and 31 to 40 years old. In the responses of Youmi Village, the main age range is 41 to 60 years old, about 50% of the entire responses.

The differences in terms of the age group correspond to the characteristics of the two villages. People in the Daluoshui Village who were willing to respond were generally those who worked outside and had better education and the consciousness of preservation. Most people of the Youmi Village were of mature age, yet the fact that there are respondents in all age groups proves that collectively, they are more involved in language preservation.

4.2. Language Usage

In terms of language usage, approximately 93% and 100% of Moso people in Daluoshui and Youmi villages speak the Moso language in their Moso hometown or at home. Yet only 0% and 7% of people speak the Moso language at work. Separately, 0% and 5% of students speak the Moso language in school.

Through questions of bilingual education, almost all Moso people receive bilingual education from kindergarten to Junior High or polytechnic school for career.

Regarding preservation consciousness, in all responses, people believe that the Moso language should be preserved.

4.3. The Advantages of Knowing Both Moso and Chinese

Regarding whether being bilingual could benefit in school, career, and so on, responses from the two villages vary greatly and reflect their respective traits.

In Daluoshui village, 100% of people disagree that knowing Moso and Mandarin Chinese would earn more money or improve grades in studies. While 50% disagree that being bilingual helps promotion, the other half neither agree nor disagree.

For Youmi village, about 40% of the respondents believe that being bilingual could help promote and bring more monetary gains, while the other 50% neither agree nor disagree. In terms of studies, approximately 30% agree that being bilingual would help, while the other 65% neither agree nor disagree.

5. Discussion and Suggestion

Due to several limitations, this research process underwent a difficult period.

This first limitation is that many village people did not want to cooperate for several reasons: 1) Since it is the busiest travel season, many Moso people were trying their best to make money for the year. Thus, they were unwilling to accept research or interviews. 2) In the past, there were many research teams who came to do long surveys, which left many bad impressions and were unwilling to do more.

In response to this limitation, the author changed the plan from doing research on one family to another to creating a questionnaire to pose in the group chat with the help of the village head and the Dongba, the wizard. However, in this way, the research data that the author has collected has two potential problems: 1) The data sample is too small, as my original plan is to have 200 responses. Therefore, the data may not be typical enough. 2) The effective responses that the researcher collected may be answered by the most active people who originally valued the preservation and advertising of the Moso language and culture.

The design of the questionnaire also has some problems. For example, in asking the respondents to select their schooling experience, the research initially failed to take into account that in such less developed regions, most enter professional prep schools, a type of less prestigious and inferior kind of education in China. Afterward, the author texted the respondents or, through their other responses, deduced that they went to professional prep schools after primary school.

In terms of bilingual education, as the schooling experience of the local people is hugely limited, it is relatively difficult to deduce the actual conditions of bilingual education. Also, the definition of the extent of bilingual education was not given in the questionnaire, which makes this data less accurate and reflective.

6. Conclusion

The Moso people are an unrecognized ethnic group in China. While the Moso language and the Naxi language are mutually understandable, the former survives and passes on its many oral classics solely through the mouths of the wizards. Yet, in the research, it is discovered that while the mouths of the wizards are important for the inheritance of literature and cultural heritage, the oral language and its usage among the common citizens are also crucial for the social survival of the culture.

The research reveals that the more commercialized the region, the less faith and importance the Moso people put on their language. In other words, many believe that the Moso language could not help them in their careers or academics. Though all respondents have high recognition of their language and the importance of preserving it, most of them show little involvement in using their language to change the status quo in terms of cultural preservation. The main causes may be the lack of resources and economic development and a lack of methods and means to make changes.

These two causes actually alarm the scholars who believe that these cultures are valuable and worth preserving. Scholars may not understand the life of farmers in the undeveloped region and their will to have a better living standard in the city where those scholars belong. Thus, the words asking

them to preserve their cultural environment and stop over developing local tourism or other industries may be too bold.

Through exploring the language usage conditions of the Moso people, it could also be concluded that a better preservation method may find a balance between inheriting the essence of the old and combining the modern and innovative side of the new.

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