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Scientific protection of ethnic languages

Foreword to *The Language Situation in China: Volume 4*

As shown by the latest research, China, home to 56 ethnic groups, has more than 100 languages and nearly 30 written languages in use. The spoken and written languages are the cultural treasures of the Chinese communities, facilitating communication domestically and internationally. The languages are also important thinking tools for the Chinese, recording the history and culture of all ethnic groups in China. Therefore, the languages should be treated equally and respectfully; they should be cherished, scientifically protected, and fully utilised.

1 Establish a scientific perspective on language

In China, the equality of positions and the complementarity of functions are the general phenomenon and basic principle of language planning. Language equality is crucial to China's ethnic equality policy; it is the embodiment of the spirit of the Constitution and a manifestation of the universal values of "equality for all". However, language equality means that languages have the same political status and equal positions, in real life, different languages have different functions.

- (1) Different languages differ in their situations. Some languages are used by a large population; while others are used by fewer people. Some communities share a common language; however, some have not yet formed one. In some areas, dialects are widely used, while other areas show no appearance of dialects. Some languages have a written form but not others. Whereas some languages were used in a large number of written documents, others are only passed on verbally. Some languages can be used in primary, secondary, and higher education; some at primary and secondary levels, while some only in primary education.
- (2) Due to various historical factors, the use of different languages varies. Some languages are widely used throughout the entire nation; some are only used in the autonomous regions or in special occasions by certain members of certain ethnic groups. Some languages are widely used by the newspapers, books, radio programmes, television shows, movies, and other media outlets, appearing in every facet of social life; however, some are used only in limited areas or only in the family setting. Some languages are learned and

used by other ethnic communities on top of their original ethnic speakers; while some are endangered, abandoned even by their original users and are therefore under threat of extinction.

Regardless of its usage, each language plays a certain role in life. Moreover, the functions of different languages are complementary. Putonghua is the common language used by the Han Chinese and serves as the national lingua franca. Therefore, Putonghua is used as a communication tool between people who speak different dialects or belong to different ethnic groups. Putonghua is also a crucial communication medium in education, press and publication, administration, public service, science and technology, military affairs, as well as other fields. In international settings, Putonghua is the official language of China. However, it is impossible for the citizens to use Putonghua on every occasion. There are situations in which minority languages, Chinese dialects, and foreign languages are the most suitable medium of communication. It is undoubtedly true that every language has an irreplaceable role to play.

Strengthening the scientific protection of ethnic languages is by no means hindering the functions and promotion of Putonghua. While advancing the popularisation and standardisation of Putonghua, attention should also be paid to the functions and protection of minority languages and Chinese dialects. China has a wealth of language resources. If language relations can be handled well, the language resources will become the nation's precious cultural assets. However, if the relations are mismanaged, conflicts will emerge and the resources will turn into troubles. It is inevitable that language conflicts occur in multilingual nations. The key to addressing this issue is to treat the languages concerned from a scientific perspective. 'The promotion and standardisation of the national common language' are complementary to "the scientific protection of ethnic languages". The national common language and ethnic languages are interdependent yet internally coherent entities; they should not be isolated from or seen as in competition with each other. Therefore, it is only rational to establish an effective mechanism to adjust language functions so as to resolve language conflicts and maintain a harmonious and orderly language environment. Having a scientific perspective on language is a prerequisite for the scientific protection of ethnic languages.

2 Formulation of a scientific language protection plan

The scientific protection of ethnic languages is an undertaking that involves many parties. It is far-reaching and urgently needed. A scientific plan is necessary to

complete the task. The first step of language protection planning is to seek legal protection and consolidate popular awareness of language protection through publicity, education, demonstration, and other means. The priorities also include establishing an effective and efficient coordination mechanism, as well as planning for concrete and effective measures.

The second step is to thoroughly understand the current situation of different ethnic languages and formulate realistic protection plans accordingly. For instance, for the few endangered languages, preservation should be given priority and comprehensive surveys on language facts should be conducted as soon as possible. In addition, for languages that are becoming extinct, a permanent database should be set up. Similar to compiling a list of intangible cultural heritage, it is also feasible to establish a directory of language inheritors. The preservation of certain endangered languages relies on them being passed down by grandparents to grandchildren. Establishing language protection zones or language museums are also means to rescue minority languages. For languages that show signs of shift or loss, education and social space should be encouraged to revitalize them. For the rather vigorous languages, the main task is to maintain their vitality at the political, educational and usage levels.

Thirdly, the planning of language protection requires concerted efforts of experts, volunteers, and the whole society. The plan should be sustainable, in keeping with sociolinguistically viable language functions. Language protection methods should be compatible with the economic and cultural development. Society's awareness of language protection should also be taken into consideration with a view to keeping undue demands from society in check.

Fourthly, language protection involves both ethnic groups and individuals. The protection methods should be adopted according to the will of language users. Consensus-building should be duty-bound and reached through consultation in order to avoid imposing domineering views on people.

3 Adoption of scientific language protection methods

Language is used by humans. Therefore, language protection must be people-oriented. Language and culture are closely related. Language is the foundation of culture yet language is also cultivated and developed by culture. Giving that language also carries cultural elements, language protection methods should take language users into consideration. The integration of humanity, language, and culture is methodologically significant to language protection. There are many ways to protect languages and they should be reviewed and analysed comprehensively. The methods should be chosen cautiously based on the national

conditions, in keeping with the spirit of close-knit integration of humanity, language, and culture.

Special emphasis should be placed on the use of modern language technology. Modern language technology includes digital technologies such as audio-recording, photography, video-recording, and the construction of databases and corpora. To protect ethnic languages, it is necessary to establish appropriate technical standards, develop and optimise related software, build technology packages, as well as pay attention to the selection of suitable hardware. In addition, it is crucial to conduct personnel training regarding technical standards, the use of hardware and software, and other related issues. An innovative and well-equipped team is the key to successful language revitalization. A notable case that is worthy of learning is that the State Language Commission is currently taking the lead in the construction of the 'Audio Database of Chinese Language Resources'.

In the Internet era, greater attention should be paid to harnessing the Internet with a view to facilitating real-life projects through the virtual world. Advocating language protection and broadcasting related news online is effective in increasing society's awareness and participation in language protection. In addition, promoting research on language use online helps inject vitality into ethnic languages. Moreover, virtual language museums and exhibitions allow more people to take advantage of the results of language protection. It is also of great significance for netizens to get involved in the specific projects of language protection, such as providing audio data, as well as photos and videos of regional customs and culture. Nowadays, the Internet is well-developed and the number of netizens has exceeded 500 million. Moreover, the once abstract concepts such as cloud computing and the Internet of Things have been put into practice. Therefore, the role of the Internet should not be underestimated.

4 Exploring benefits of language protection

Language protection is beneficial in terms of the following three aspects:

Firstly, language protection benefits the society. Once the protection measures are in place, it is necessary to assess whether the language environment is more harmonious, the national language fully exercises its functions, the language users are satisfied, language conflicts have been diminished, and the endangerment of languages has been halted.

Secondly, language protection creates economic benefits. Although language protection is not free of cost, it is, to a certain degree, beneficial to the economy. For instance, language protection boosts the development of the cultural industry

such as press and publication, tourism, convention and exhibition, and language arts. At the same time, by protecting languages, new occupations and industries will emerge. Moreover, the language information industry will be advanced thanks to the induced use of language resources.

Academic benefits should indeed be taken into account. Language protection itself is a highly academic topic; it propels the development of linguistics, folklore, cultural anthropology, and information science. Language resources generated through language protection can be used not only for academic research but also for the improvement of many academic disciplines.

It requires a thorough understanding of the generated benefits to ensure languages are well protected. Language protection plans should be designed cautiously. The indexes of the utilisation of benefits should be used in language protection. Language protection and development are interdependent. Whether language protection is sustainable depends on how the benefits it generates are put to creative and meaningful use through incessant exploration.

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