

Growing Constraints on Language and Ethnic Identity in Today's China

**Testimony to the
Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

5th April 2022

Dr Gerald Roche

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy, La Trobe University

La Trobe Asia Fellow

Co-Chair, Global Coalition for Language Rights

Thank you sincerely for this opportunity to testify today. I deeply appreciate the chance to share with all of you some insights into the language rights situation for people in China, and I thank the Commission for bringing attention to this important topic.

We must defend language rights because doing so ensures dignity, freedom, and equality for all people. Who amongst us would want to live without any of these?

When people are denied language rights, it severs their connections to their family, community, and heritage. It excludes them from political participation. When people are denied language rights in vital services like healthcare, their lives are at risk. And when they are denied language rights in education, their futures are at risk.

Millions of people in China today face these challenges due to the state's denial of language rights. This happens primarily in two ways: erasure and suppression.

Erasure refers to the state's refusal to acknowledge the existence of most of China's languages, by calling them dialects. To put this in perspective, imagine if German, English, and Norwegian were defined as 'dialects' of a single language.ⁱ Imagine if your government told you what language you speak. How would you feel?

In China, erasure means that from the country's 300 or so languages, only about 56 are recognized as *languages*: one for each of the country's 'nationalities.'ⁱⁱ Most people in China speak unrecognized languages, whether they belong to the Han majority or a minority group.ⁱⁱⁱ Most people in China are therefore completely denied their language rights.

Our research demonstrates the catastrophic impacts of this denial in Tibet.^{iv} Tibetan people in China use about 30 unrecognized languages,^v not including Tibetan.^{vi} People who use these unrecognized languages face linguistic barriers everywhere: in schools, media, government, healthcare, the legal system and so on. When the government refuses to

remove these barriers, people are forced to adapt by changing their language to either Tibetan or Chinese.^{vii}

Meanwhile, recognized languages like Uyghur, Mongolian, and Tibetan, are suppressed.

Suppression happens through the gradual dilution of the Chinese constitution's language freedoms,^{viii} and the pervasive under-implementation of protections for minority languages.^{ix} Suppression also takes place through the encroachment of the national language, Mandarin, into spaces for minority languages—part of a broader plan to universalize Mandarin among the entire population.^x

The cumulative impact of erasure and suppression mean that at least half of China's languages are currently losing speakers or signers as they switch to dominant languages.^{xi} In an open, democratic society, people would be lobbying and protesting to change this unjust system. But in China, particularly under Xi Jinping, civil society has become increasingly repressed domestically, and isolated internationally.^{xii} In Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, wherever protest happens, the state sees foreign interference rather than legitimate grievances.

China's citizens will therefore be denied an unprecedented historic opportunity to defend language rights, namely, the United Nations International Decade for Indigenous Languages, which starts this year.^{xiii} China will prevent its citizens from participating in this event because it denies that it has Indigenous people,^{xiv} and it denies its colonial history.^{xv}

The goal of this Decade is “leaving no one behind and no one outside.” We have a responsibility to extend this inclusion to people in China, to ensure they are not left behind or outside.

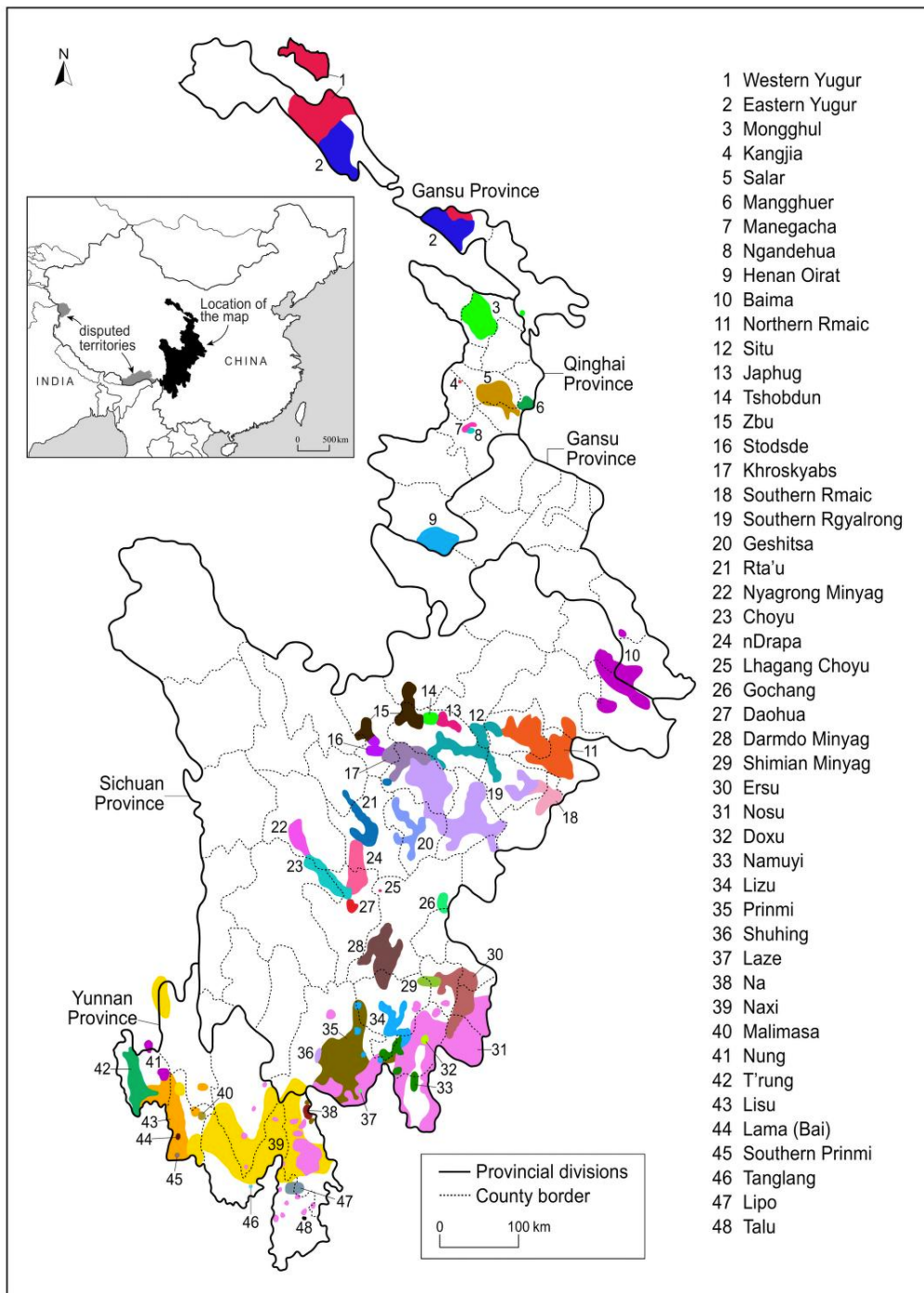
Here are some suggestions for how we can do this:

1. The US must pressure China to clarify whether its citizens can identify as Indigenous and whether they can participate in the UN Decade. An ideal opportunity to do this is China's upcoming Universal Periodic Review in the UN Human Rights Council in November 2023.^{xvi}
2. China's efforts to isolate its citizens from international civil society need to be countered. We must raise awareness inside China of language rights, and of activities taking place globally during the UN Decade.^{xvii}
3. With specific regard to Tibet, earmarking funding for Tibet's unrecognized languages will make a huge difference. This can be done using funds allocated under the Tibet Policy Act of 2020.^{xviii}
4. Finally, the USA needs to lead by example. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be formally endorsed, and its obligations respected.^{xix} Failing to do so will enable China to defer attention from their language rights violations and onto America's.

Thank you again for your time, and if anything I have said raises questions for you, I would be very happy to discuss further.

Appendix One: Map of the Unrecognized Languages of Eastern Tibet

Minority Languages of the Eastern Tibetosphere



Cartography: Chandra Jayasuriya. Language data: Gerald Roche and Hiroyuki Suzuki.



Map available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1199216>

ⁱ This analogy is taken from the work of linguists David and Maya Bradley, see David Bradley and Maya Bradley, "Language policy and language maintenance: Yi in China", in David Bradley and Maya Bradley (eds), *Language Endangerment and Language Maintenance: An Active Approach* (RoutledgeCurzon 2002), 77–97. In exploring the relationship between nationality, language, and dialect in China, they apply the same logic to Europe and claim it would create "...one Romance nationality [for French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese etc.], one Germanic nationality [English, Swedish, Yiddish, Icelandic etc.], one Slavic nationality, and Basque, Celtic, Finnish/Estonian, Greek, Hungarian, Romani and possibly Baltic minorities ..." (p77-78).

ⁱⁱ The term 'nationality' here is a gloss for *minzu*, a term that combines aspects of race, nation, and ethnicity.

ⁱⁱⁱ The work of historian Gina Tam provides essential insights for understanding the emergence of contemporary language policy in China and the state's efforts to standardize Chinese languages, tracing the complex relationship between Chinese 'dialects' (*fangyan*) and nationalism in China from the mid nineteenth century to the early decades of the People's Republic of China (see Tam, Gina Anne. *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960*. Cambridge University Press, 2020). It is also worth noting that recognition and awareness of linguistic diversity among Han Chinese, and the complex, multiple identities attached to language, might play a role in countering the Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism which have intensified in recent years within the context of rising geopolitical tensions between the USA and China. On the role of Chinese *fangyan* and identity outside of China, see Ward, Shannon, Jingyi Ni, and Fong Pui Alison Chow, "Topolects in Motion: Narrative Possibilities for Language Vitality among Mobile Chinese-Canadians" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* (forthcoming) DOI: 10.1111/jola.12361.

^{iv} When I speak about Tibet here, I am not referring only to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), but to the broader Tibetan-inhabited areas in China, which stretch beyond the TAR and include parts of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces.

^v These unrecognized languages are typically spoken by small, highly localized Tibetan populations, amounting to about 4% of the total population, or a quarter of a million people. Research on these languages has surveyed and mapped linguistic diversity across Tibet, and examined the broad policy regime these languages are subject to, see: Roche, Gerald, and Hiroyuki Suzuki. "Tibet's minority languages: diversity and endangerment." *Modern Asian Studies* 52.4 (2018): 1227-1278; Roche, Gerald. "Articulating language oppression: Colonialism, coloniality and the erasure of Tibet's minority languages." *Patterns of Prejudice* 53.5 (2019): 487-514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1662074>; Roche, Gerald, and Hiroyuki Suzuki. "Mapping the linguistic minorities of the Eastern Tibetosphere." *Studies in Asian Geolinguistics VI—“Means to Count Nouns” in Asian Languages* (2017): 28-42. Roche, Gerald. "Introduction: The transformation of Tibet's language ecology in the twenty-first century." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 245 (2017): 1-35. I have also conducted research in several specific communities, most extensively with speakers of Manegacha, see Roche, Gerald. "Lexical necropolitics: The raciolinguistics of language oppression on the Tibetan margins of Chineseness." *Language & Communication* 76 (2021): 111-120, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2020.10.002>.

^{vi} 'Tibetan,' meanwhile, is a single written language *and* cluster of mutually unintelligible spoken forms, see Tournadre, Nicolas. The Tibetic languages and their classification. In Thomas Owen-Smith and Nathan W. Hill (eds.) *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics: Historical and Descriptive Linguistics of the Himalayan Area*. (Walter de Gruyter 2014), 105-129. It is also important to acknowledge the existence of Tibetan Sign Language, see Hofer, Theresia. "Is Lhasa Tibetan Sign Language emerging, endangered, or both?" *International journal of the sociology of language* 2017.245 (2017): 113-145.

^{vii} Many other 'nationalities' in China face a similar situation. The 8 million Yi people, for example, speak some 60 distinct languages (see, David Bradley, "Language policy for China's minorities: orthography development for the Yi." *Written Language and Literacy*, 12.2 (2009): 170–87; David Bradley, "Language policy for the Yi", in Stevan Harrall (ed.), *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2001), 195–213; Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2001)). Taiwan provides a useful counter-example to practices in China. Where the PRC recognizes a single minority

nationality (the Gaoshan people) with a single language, the government of Taiwan enables Indigenous groups to self-identify, leading to the recognition of 16 distinct languages.

^{viii} For an excellent recent review of language rights issues in contemporary China, combining ethnographic fieldwork with a legal analysis of policy documents, see Grey, Alexandra. *Language Rights in a Changing China: A National Overview and Zhuang Case Study* (Walter de Gruyter, 2021).

^{ix} This policy regime is described with reference to the Tibetan case in Roche, Gerald. "Tibetan language rights and civil society in the People's Republic of China: Challenges of and for rights." *Asian Studies Review* 45.1 (2021): 67-82. This article discusses how the freedom to use and develop languages provided in the constitution is progressively weakened (Roche 2021: 3-4): "The Educational Law, for example, states that minority nationalities *may* use their language in education (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 1995). The regional autonomy law, meanwhile, seemingly provides a stronger basis for the provision of constitutional language freedoms: "Autonomous agencies in ethnic autonomous areas *guarantee* the freedom of the nationalities in these areas to use and develop their own spoken and written languages" (Congressional Executive Commission on China, 2006, emphasis added). However, this strong wording is diminished in later articles that describe how this guarantee is to be enforced. Article 37, on education, states that textbooks should use the native language "if possible" (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 1984); Article 47, on the legal system, states that people's courts "should" provide written and spoken translation for local languages (Du, 2015); and Article 49 states that cadres working in minority nationality regions should be "instructed" (*slob gso gtong*) and "encouraged" (*bsngags bskul*) to learn local languages (Klu mo mtsho, 2016). The weak obligations suggested in the wording of these legal instruments undermine the strong wording found in the constitution."

^x One recent effort in this vein is the 2021 campaign to implement Mandarin Chinese education in preschools across China (see, Grey, Alexandra and Gegentuu Baioud. "Educational Reforms Aim to Mold Model Citizens from Preschool in the PRC" *China Brief* 21.17 (2021) <https://jamestown.org/program/educational-reforms-aim-to-mold-model-citizens-from-preschool-in-the-prc/>). The changes to curriculum and teaching materials that precipitated the 2020 protests in Inner Mongolia are another example (see, Atwood, Christopher, "Bilingual Education in Inner Mongolia: An Explainer" *Made in China Journal* (2020)

<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/08/30/bilingual-education-in-inner-mongolia-an-explainer/>). James Leibold has extensively covered how these initiatives have gathered pace under Xi Jinping (see, Leibold, James, "The Not-so Model Minority: Xi Jinping's Mongolian Crackdown" *China Leadership Monitor* (2021), <https://www.prcleader.org/leibold-1>; Leibold, James, "China's Ethnic Policy Under Xi Jinping" *China Brief* 15.20 (2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-ethnic-policy-under-xi-jinping/>; Leibold, James, "Planting the Seed: Ethnic Policy in Xi Jinping's New Era of Cultural Nationalism" *China Brief* 19.22 (2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/planting-the-seed-ethnic-policy-in-xi-jinpings-new-era-of-cultural-nationalism/>).

^{xi} Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2015. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 18th edition*, SIL International, Dallas. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>. Liu Jinrong, and Zhang Qi. 2015. An Analysis of the Current Status and Language Endangerment of the Kucong Language at Shuitang Township in Xiping County. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 38(2): 215-224. Moseley, Christopher (ed.). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (3rd ed.). (UNESCO, 2010).

<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>. Xu Shixuan, "Language endangerment", in Li Yuming and Li Wei (eds), *The Language Situation in China, vol. 1* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2013), 261-70.

^{xii} Howell (2019, p. 79) has called domestic restrictions on civil society in China under Xi "the most sustained and severe crackdown on rights-based and advocacy groups since 1989" (see, Howell, J. "NGOs and civil society: The politics of crafting a civic welfare infrastructure in the Hu-Wen period." *China Quarterly*, 237 (2019), 58-81). These restrictions are enacted partly through campaigns against specific types of activists (e.g., human rights lawyers, feminists), but also through the promulgation of new laws, such as the 2016 Charity Law (see, Spiers, Anthony J. "Regulation as political control: China's first charity law and its implications for civil society." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49.3 (2020): 571-588). Meanwhile, the activities of international civil society organizations are now regulated under the 2017 Law on Administration of Activities of Overseas NGOs in Mainland China (see Holbig, Heike, and Bertram Lang. "China's Overseas NGO Law and the Future of International Civil Society." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2021): 1-28). My own involvement with China has tracked these changes since the early 2000s. In 2005, I moved to China to support a growing civil society sector amongst Tibetans. By 2013, restrictions on international NGOs meant this was no

longer possible, and I left the country. Now, in my role as co-chair of the Global Coalition for Language Rights, I would not even try recruiting members from China, for fear of endangering them. I was also prevented from entering China on my last attempt, in 2019, presumably because of my critical scholarship and advocacy work.

^{xiii} <https://en.unesco.org/dil2022-2032/globalactionplan>

^{xiv} In a 1995 working group of the UN Economic and Social Council aimed at drafting the a declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples, the Chinese delegate stated their government's official position as "there is no Indigenous peoples' question in China," because "the question of indigenous peoples is the product of European countries' recent pursuit of colonial policies in other parts of the world" (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/227459?ln=en>). UNESCO, in evaluating the outcomes of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, recognized this when they claimed as one of the Year's successes that it had managed to "showcase events and conferences on IL [Indigenous language] issue in countries where IL and IP [Indigenous people] are not recognized in law nor practice." A footnote on [this](#) statement lists only China as an example. UNESCO's report on the outcomes of the Year list only a single event in China, an international academic conference held in Changsha. Titled "Role of linguistic diversity in building a global community with shared future: protection, access and promotion of language resources," the conference did not include a noticeable focus on Indigenous languages, but rather 'language resources' more broadly. For further discussion of these issues, see Roche, Gerald. "Global Civil Society Must Promote Linguistic Rights for China's Indigenous Peoples" *Melbourne Asia Review* 6 (2021) <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/global-civil-society-must-promote-linguistic-rights-for-chinas-indigenous-peoples/>.

^{xv} Scholars are increasingly recognizing the need to consider China's contemporary relationship to Tibet and Xinjiang as colonial. See: Anand, Dibyesh. "Colonization with Chinese characteristics: politics of (in) security in Xinjiang and Tibet." *Central Asian Survey* 38.1 (2019): 129-147; McGranahan, Carole. "Empire out-of-bounds: Tibet in the era of decolonization." Stoler, Ann Laura, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue. *Imperial formations* (2007): 173-209; Roberts, Sean R. *The War on the Uyghurs: China's campaign against Xinjiang's Muslims*. Manchester University Press, 2020; Roche, Gerald, James Leibold, and Ben Hillman. "Urbanizing Tibet: differential inclusion and colonial governance in the People's Republic of China." *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2020): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1840427>; Tobin, David. "Genocidal processes: social death in Xinjiang." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45.16 (2022): 93-121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.2001556>; Wang, Ju-Han Zoe, and Gerald Roche. "Urbanizing minority minzu in the PRC: Insights from the literature on settler colonialism." *Modern China* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700421995135>.

^{xvi} The timeline for China's next Universal Periodic Review is outlined here: <https://www.upr-info.org/en/review/China>. A second Universal Periodic Review will take place before the end of the UN Decade, providing a second opportunity to stress the issue.

^{xvii} This awareness could be raised through Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, as well as various social media channels.

^{xviii} The Tibet Policy Act currently allocates over 26 million dollars per year from 2021-2025 for Tibet, including 8 million dollars for Tibetan communities in China, 6 million dollars for Tibetan communities in South Asia, and 3 million dollars for exile governance. A portion of this money could be used to raise awareness, understanding and appreciation of Tibetan linguistic diversity; to undertake work that supports Tibetans in China who speak and sign unrecognized languages; and to increase governance capacity in exile regarding language policy. During the United Nations International Decade for Indigenous Languages, the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues should also give priority to highlighting linguistic diversity in Tibet, and the unique predicament of Tibet's unrecognized languages. For the full text of the Tibet Policy Act, see <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4331/text>.

^{xix} The UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People enshrines rights to revitalize, use, develop and transmit Indigenous languages to future generations; to establish, control, and access educational systems and institutions in Indigenous languages; and to establish media in Indigenous languages. Within the Declaration framework, states are obliged to ensure that these rights are protected, and to provide financial and technical support, and to allow international cooperation, for the enjoyment of rights in the Declaration (see, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>).