

Lexical Necropolitics: The Raciolinguistics of Language Oppression on the Tibetan Margins of Chineseness

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Abstract

This article aims to expand raciolinguistic theory to examine the issue of language oppression, i.e., enforced language loss. I used Foucauldian theories of race and racism to establish a link between lexical purism and language oppression, giving rise to a raciolinguistic theory of language oppression that I refer to as 'lexical necropolitics.' This issue is explored through a case study from northeast Tibet. I describe how state racism and the subordination of minority languages in the People's Republic of China has led to a grass-roots lexical purism campaign among Tibetans, and argue that since 2008, this purism has been linked to language oppression by the emergence of a new, biosovereign configuration of state power.

Introduction: Linking Lexical Purism and Language Oppression

In the summer of 2015, social media across Tibet was abuzz with text, photos, and videos about Tibetan children being abducted in vans with blackened windows. These children were being disappeared, and sometimes killed to have their organs harvested. When these realities circulated as rumor, fears of an annihilated collective future mingled with anxieties about boundary maintenance and veiled identities, echoing similar kidnapping and organ theft panics elsewhere (Bubandt 2017; Campion-Vincent 1997; Jamyang Norbu 1995; White 1993; Payne 1995). Monks suspected of being disguised kidnappers were detained with their wrists bound until their identities could be confirmed. Crowds attacked vans and beat their Han Chinese occupants. Children were kept indoors.¹

At around the same time, a Tibetan man from the valley of Rebgong, in northern Tibet, had travelled a few hours away to a small town where he found work building roads. While working one day, he chatted with another worker from his village. A passerby heard their conversation, and noticing that their speech differed from his, said to them, ‘If you’re not careful, you’ll become Chinese (*rgya*). And if we’re not careful, we Tibetans will turn into you.’ This statement was based in local raciolinguistic ideologies, explored in this article, that place the road worker and his language in a position of negative hybridity, as ‘neither Chinese nor Tibetan’: a state of negative hybridity indexing a process of inexorable transformation through the mixing of Tibetanness and Chineseness. As with the kidnapping panic, here we see anxieties about boundaries, mixing, ambiguous identities and collective disappearance, but this time via collective transformation rather than and bodily death.

This article explores how these anxieties emerge in the context of ongoing colonial domination of Tibetans in the PRC (Roche 2019a), producing a search for ‘dead certainty’ (Appadurai 1998)

¹ A small selection of social media posts on the child abduction panic of 2015 can be viewed: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4256915>. My description is based on these posts, as well as my recollection of conversations I had at the time with Tibetan interlocutors in Rebgong and Xining. Further information on methods and data can be found in the final paragraph of the introduction.

that aims to resolve ontological uncertainties of race and language through discourses and practices of purism. In exploring this issue I aim to lay out a theory of 'lexical necropolitics' that links lexical purism with the elimination of targeted social groups, resulting in language oppression: the "*enforcement* of language loss by physical, mental, social and spiritual coercion" (Taff et al. 2018: 863; italics in original). This theory builds on prior work exploring the ways in which lexical purism is entangled with the creation of hierarchies of language and people (Hall 1942; Thomas 1991), social exclusion (Urla 2012), racial purism (Hobsbawm 1990: 108), and ethnic cleansing (Spolsky 2004: 23), and aims to link raciolinguistics with the anthropology of genocide (Hinton 2002) and violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

In doing so, my discussion of lexical necropolitics in Tibet contributes to this special issue's aim of exploring raciolinguistics in the Sinophone margins. In exploring the links between lexical purism and social elimination in Tibet, I focus on the Tibetan category *rgya*, which collapses Han, as both a racial and ethnic group, with the state, thus producing a Tibetan vision of Chineseness rooted in a specific colonial predicament. I look at the constitutive role of this Chineseness for contemporary Tibetan identity in the People's Republic of China (PRC) by examining the treatment of people and languages that are described, like the road worker above and his language, as *rgya ma bod*, 'neither Chinese nor Tibetan.' Contemporary Tibetan purism aims to purge both Tibetan language *and* the Tibetan social body of Chineseness's threatening influence.

The theory of lexical necropolitics through which I explore this situation is based on Foucault's view of racism as a technique of governance. After introducing Foucault's work on racism below, I argue that the PRC, as a Han supremacist state, subordinates all minority languages, including Tibetan, to the state-mandated national language, producing annihilation anxieties and Sinophobic backlash. I then examine how certain languages are particularly impacted by this dynamic: abandoned by the state, and perceived as 'mixed languages' by Tibetans, these languages are targeted for elimination and their speakers subjected to everyday violence. I look at the predicament faced by speakers of one such 'mixed' language, Manegacha, and explore

how assimilatory pressure on this population has increased in the wake of the state's violent crackdown on anti-state protests in 2008.²

This article is based on an engagement with Tibet spanning several years. It includes 8 years living in the PRC, working with Tibetan communities on a range of projects to document and maintain language and culture, including collaborations with Manegacha speakers and other Tibetans that are labelled as 'neither Chinese nor Tibetan'. It also includes research in Rebgong from 2015 to 2017: household surveys (Roche 2019b), informal conversations in Tibetan and semi-structured qualitative interviews with Manegacha speakers and other local Tibetans,³ as well as the analysis of a number of Tibetan texts, including written texts and audio-visual materials; further details are given throughout the text. Finally, a note on data presentation. In exploring language oppression, I focus on the politics of language as they are imagined and practiced at the population level; this article therefore contains limited presentation of the languages under discussion (e.g., inter-linear glosses with IPA), focusing instead on providing broad outlines of discourses and practices related to languages and the populations identified with them at the intersection of changing configurations of state power and local language ideologies.

Lexical Necropolitics: A Foucauldian Approach to Raciolinguistics

Although the literature on raciolinguistics has examined the relationship between language and oppression, it has so far not examined the problem of language oppression in the specific sense

² Manegacha is known in the linguistics literature as Bonan or Bao'an; Manegacha—literally, 'our language'—is what speakers call it. Fried (2010) states that despite "a high degree of lexical borrowing from Amdo Tibetan..." the language is "an identifiably Mongolic language." Wu (2003) estimates that 43-54% of the language's lexicon derives from Amdo Tibetan. Despite the clear influence of Tibetan on Manegacha, it is mutually unintelligible with the local variety of Tibetan.

³ The interviews that inform the analysis in this article were conducted in two sets. The first set consisted of linguistic biographies, and was based on interviews with 79 people conducted in 2016. The second set of interviews focused on linguistic discrimination in Rebgong. For this set, 34 interviews were carried out with Manegacha speakers, and 30 with Tibetan speakers.

provided by Taff et al (2008) and used in this article: the deliberate elimination of language as part of a program of colonial domination. In building a raciolinguistic theory of language oppression, I am examining a problem that has been hegemonically framed in terms of 'language endangerment,' an approach that has largely eschewed the critical approach I propose here (Roche 2020a). In this section, I explore Foucauldian theories of race and racism to help build a raciolinguistic theory of language oppression, which I develop in subsequent sections of this article.

As discussed by Ann Stoler (1996) and others,⁴ Foucault's theories of race were developed primarily in the course of his lectures at the College de France from 1974-76, and briefly in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*.⁵ In these works, Foucault argues that race and racism are technologies used by the state to govern. Specifically, racism enables the state to create a break between a 'normal' population, which is managed in a way that maximizes life, and an 'abnormal' population that can be murdered, which, for Foucault (2003: 256) does "not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: ...exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on." In this sense, racism is an 'indispensable' political technology that "makes killing acceptable," (255) producing "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2007:38).

Foucault's ideas on race are mostly known in connection with his concept of biopower (Foucault 2007), a form of power he describes as foundational to the contemporary, normalizing state. He contrasts biopower with sovereign power, or the form of state power that prevailed in the *ancien regime*. Whereas sovereign power is the power to make die and let live, biopower is the power to make live and let die. The exercise of power by the contemporary state aims to create circumstances in which life may flourish: individual lives are lengthened

⁴ For work recounting the development of Foucault's thinking about race, see, in addition to Anne Stoler's seminal work, Stone (2004), Moreton-Robinson (2006), Macey (2009), McWhorter (2010), Rasmussen (2011), Taylor (2011), Erlenbusch (2017), and Chow (2017).

⁵ The key (English language) texts in which Foucault develops his ideas around race and racism are Foucault (2003, 2004, 2008).

and health maximized, the population is made to increase and its productivity expanded. Through a range of disciplinary techniques and technologies of management, life is made to live.

The idea that governance should foster life, however, is not the key insight offered by the concept of biopower. Rather, what lies at the heart of Foucault's analysis is the assertion that there is a productive relationship between fostering life and producing death: the racial caesura enables some people to live by allowing some to die. This is what Foucault suggests in saying *society must be defended*; in order for life to flourish, society must be defended against 'abnormal' populations which drain its resources and deplete its vitality. The existence of the racial other is not simply a nuisance or a taint: it is a threat, insofar as it limits the normalizing state's capacity to foster life. This threat is *internal* to society: it is not an attacking force that must be repelled, but a debilitating contamination that must be purged, leading to the maximization of life: "the death of the bad race, of the inferior race ...is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer" (Foucault 2003: 255).

Subsequent scholarship has explored this generative relationship between causing death and promoting life, and has expanded Foucault's idea of race and biopolitics beyond the parochial European context in which they were generated. Whereas Foucault hinted at how this deployment of death reactivates sovereign power within a regime of biopower, Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) has argued that the deployment of sovereign power within the normalizing state rests on its capacity to activate a state of exception, suspending the rule of law and reducing some populations to 'bare life' that the state can dispose of with impunity. Judith Butler (2006, 2009, 2020) has explored how this entails assigning differential grievability to various types of life, claiming that "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life" (Butler 2004:34). Achille Mbembe (2002, 2019), meanwhile, has advanced the analysis of how sovereign power emerges in biopolitical regimes to create life-giving death through the spatial and infrastructural creation of 'death-worlds'—"new and unique forms of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2002: 40). Elizabeth Povinelli (2006, 2011) and

Laurent Berlant (2007) add temporal nuance to the production of state-imposed death in their discussions of ‘slow death’—“...the structurally motivated attrition of persons ... because of their membership in certain populations...” (Berlant 2007: 761), resulting in suffering that is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” (Povinelli 2011: 13).

In order to build a Foucauldian, raciolinguistic theory linking purism and language oppression, I draw on all these theorists, but also particularly the work of Banu Bargu, and her concept of *biosovereign assemblage*. Bargu advances this concept in her study of the politics of human weapons: the increasingly common deployment of techniques such as self-immolation and starvation as forms of resistance. She explains the emergence of these techniques of *necroresistance* as political strategies aimed at contesting a specific formulation of power that combines sovereign power and biopower. Contesting the assumption that biopower supplants sovereign power, or that the latter only exists within the state of exception, Bargu (2014) sees the two existing in a “contradictory amalgamation” (26) in which they are “theoretically imbricated and operationally mingled” (51) in a way that ‘sharpens’ biopower into a “politics of death” (52).

The theory of lexical necropolitics I propose here examines linguistic purism in relation to the politics of collective life and death that occur within a biosovereign assemblage characterized by linguistic necroresistance. The link between lexical purism and language oppression I propose is perlocutionary, in the Austinian sense of bringing about effects in the real world (Butler 1997): when people engage in lexical purism they are also participating in the murder of certain forms of life. Thus, for Tibetans in the PRC, efforts to defend language against Han influence are imbricated with the endeavor to defend society against harmful racial others, in a life-and-death struggle where life must be secured by purification that is achieved by killing.⁶ In

⁶ In concentrating on race and biopolitics, my analysis differs from the ‘linguistic governmentality’ approach described by Urla (2019), which also draws on a Foucauldian approach to examine the “techniques and forms of expertise that seek to govern, guide, and shape (rather than force) linguistic conduct and subjectivity at the level of the population and the individual” (261). The task of synthesizing Foucauldian approaches to race, governmentality, biopolitics and language is beyond the scope of this article, but is a promising area for future research.

order for us to see the perlocutionary chain that links the defense of language with the defense of society, and the purge of vocabulary with the elimination of populations, we examine the specific politics of race, language, and purity in contemporary Tibet.

PRC State Racism, Annihilation Anxieties, and Tibetan Sinophobia

The PRC is a racial state that maximizes life for some by wielding the sovereign power to create death. The biopolitical drive is manifest in the state's rampant developmentalism: the relentless technocratic pursuit of longer lives, higher incomes, improved productivity, better health, sustainable birth rates, increased happiness, and above all, higher bio-quality (*suzhi*, Lin 2017). All this is achieved by wielding sovereign power as both direct bodily violence—torture, kidnapping, incarceration, deployment of quasi-private militias, state murder—and slow violence (Nixon 2011): exposure to environmental harms, exclusion from social safety nets, the foreshortening of lives, the destruction of collective identities, and language oppression; approximately half of the PRC's languages are 'endangered,' i.e., undergoing coerced language shift (Xu 2013). This slow violence, including language oppression, takes place in an environment characterized by uneventfulness (Povinelli 2011), enacting a state of peacetime war (Foucault 2003) that is the expression of the state's structural violence (Farmer 2004).

This state's giving of life, making of death, and enactment of language oppression are not evenly dispersed across the population. The PRC's racial apparatus is characterized by a fundamental rupture that creates and maintains a distinction between Han and non-Han populations, unevenly allocating the burden of death, fast and slow, to non-Han populations, proportional to the Han, for whom life is maximized and death minimized. In this sense, the central feature of the PRC as a race state is Han supremacy, which informs, implicitly and covertly (Shohamy 2006), the nature and operation of language policy (Roche 2019a).

The suppression of Tibetan language in the PRC is predicated on a fundamental inequality founded in law: the use and promotion of Putonghua is compulsory, but Tibetan is optional, even within nominally ‘autonomous’ areas (de Varennes 2012). Additionally, a lack of political incentives and persistent prioritization of national security over ethnic autonomy mean that the optional promotion of Tibetan is rarely pursued (Hillman 2016). This legal inequality is also exacerbated by discourses that promote Putonghua as the language of progress and prosperity, and stigmatize Tibetan as a language of disadvantage, poverty, and backwardness. Meanwhile, citizenship in the PRC is associated with Putonghua, further marginalizing Tibetan and stigmatizing it as either non-national or anti-national. The legal and discursive gap between Putonghua and Tibetan is also reproduced in material inequalities, with the state investing heavily in Putonghua, but comparatively little in the development, promotion, and use of Tibetan.

In response to this subordination, and despite massive pushback from the state, Tibetans have mobilized in defense of Tibetan language. The state’s punitive character means that much of this mobilization focuses on ‘safe’ expressions of positive sentiment about Tibetan language: exhortations to use, develop, and protect the language. Popular culture, particularly song and poetry, have become forums for promoting Tibetan language (Roche 2020b, Robin 2014). Poets and singers are joined by secular (Thurston 2018a) and religious (Gayley 2013) public intellectuals to form a fragmented, atomized civil society seeking to protect Tibetan language (Roche and Lugyal Bum 2018). Mass mobilization is relatively rare but does occur: primarily online, but also (as seen below) in street marches. And finally, indicative of the increasingly biosovereign nature of the racial state, we have also seen the emergence of human weapons—self-immolation protests—that deny the state “... its sovereign claim to determine how individuals... will be cared for, how they will live, and how they will die,” (Litzinger 2012), and which have been partly motivated by language grievances (Tsering Woeser 2016).

A central feature of these mobilizations around language has been a focus on lexical purism, seen in the promotion of *pha skad gtsang ma*: the pure father-tongue (Thurston 2018b, Yang

2018). Presented as opposition to ‘mixed language’ (*sbrags skad*, ‘*dres skad*, *bsres skad*)—language that is ‘neither goat nor sheep’ (*ra ma lug*)—the father-tongue purism movement encourages Tibetans to speak Tibetan free of loanwords. Discursively, this is achieved by promoting a dichotomy between denigrated ‘mixed language’ and hyper-valORIZED ‘pure’ speech (see Figure 1). This dichotomy is reproduced by small-scale, informal, and often ephemeral organizations through a variety of activities: producing and circulating neologisms to replace loanwords; holding classes, study sessions and competitions to encourage acquisition of neologisms; and practices of monitoring speech, and penalizing speech which is deemed to be impure, for example by leveraging small fines or feigning incomprehension until ‘pure’ speech is produced.⁷

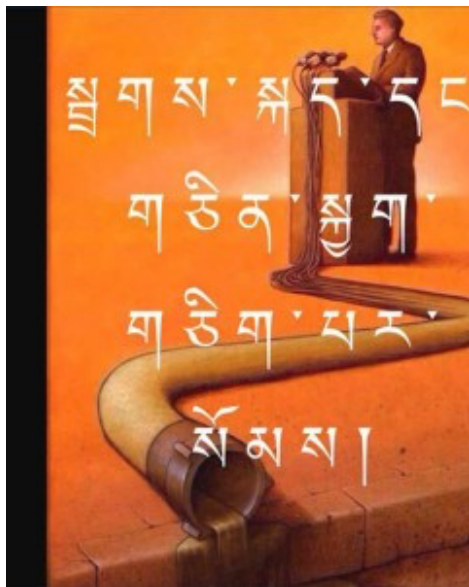


Figure 1. “Think of mixed language and sewage as one!” Unattributed post from social media.

Tibetan father-tongue purism is, importantly, part of a broader set of language purism movements in the PRC amongst Uyghurs (Cabras 2017), Yi (Kraef 2013), and Mongolians (Gegentuul Baioud 2017), all of which have emerged in opposition to the racial state’s slow

⁷ Although Roche and Lugyal Bum (2018) highlight the important role played by students in such organizations, a broad segment of Tibetan society participates in them, despite the fact that such activism is increasingly the target of government crackdowns (Roche 2020c).

violence. Considering Tibetan father-tongue purism in this broader context enables us to see an important feature of this movement that often goes unmarked, namely, that it specifically targets Chinese loanwords, whilst exhibiting tolerance towards (for example) Mongolian, Sanskrit, Hindi, or English loans. This Sinophobic basis of Tibetan father-tongue purism is reflected in another name commonly used for mixed speech: *rgya ma bod*, or ‘neither Chinese nor Tibetan’.

Although the Sinophobic nature of Tibetan father-tongue purism can be restricted to a curtailed sense of opposition to ‘Chinese’ loanwords, it articulates with a broader project of Tibetan Sinophobia that emerges at “...the intersection of fear *and* hatred of China...” (Bille’s 2015:10). This entanglement of fear and hatred is also a project of erasure, bringing the Party, state, Han people, and Sinitic languages within the orbit of the single category of *rgya*. We therefore see that the political project of “[r]esistance to Party control spills over into general antagonism toward the Chinese” (Schwartz 1994: 219), leading to a ‘widespread feeling’ amongst Tibetans that “‘the Chinese’—not the government, simply ‘the Chinese’ (*rgya mi*) as a collectivity” (Saxer 2013:211) are oppressing Tibetans. Much more than simply ‘anti-Chinese’ sentiment or prejudice, Sinophobia has had profoundly generative effects on Tibetan identity, producing “a renewed awareness of absolute alterity and essentially ethnic vulnerability and pride [linking] Tibetans across generation, region, and class” (Makley 2019:229).

The kidnapping panic that swept Tibet in the summer of 2015, whilst based on actual events, was interpreted through these Sinophobic anxieties. It is indicative of a state terror (Taussig 1989) that predominates in Tibet, producing a “heightened sense of foreboding, moral degeneration, and loss...” (Makley 2019: 229) in which total collective annihilation looms as a constant threat. The disappearance of children’s bodies—the theft of the future—operates metonymically for anxieties about how the loss of collective properties such as language presage an imminent future of collective annihilation, as captured in the meme below (Figure 2), which was widely circulated around the time of the kidnapping panic. And as we will see further below, like the Tibetan organs harvested to give life to Chinese bodies, or the *rgya*

masquerading as monks, lexical incursion implies a form of death by replacement manifest in categorical blurring.

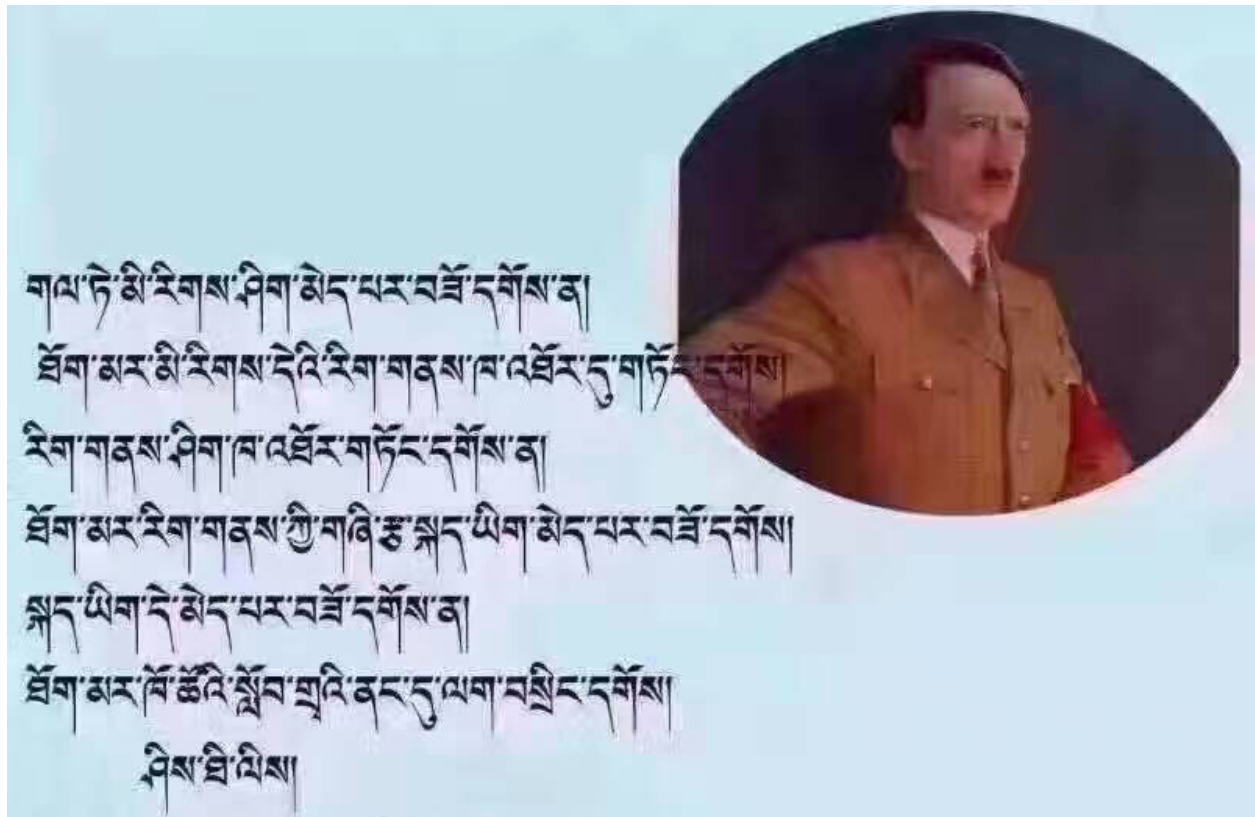


Figure 2. Tibetan language meme with a quote spuriously attributed to Hitler: “If you want to destroy a people, first, destroy their civilization. [In order to do that], destroy the language that is the foundation of that civilization. [And in order to do that], take control of their schools.”

Neither Goat nor Sheep, Chinese nor Tibetan: Discourses of Mixture and Languagelessness in Tibet

Tibetan Sinophobia is a politically and ontologically symmetrical response to the linguistic impacts and annihilation anxieties created by the racial state. It is also a crucial link in the perlocutionary chain that connects lexical purism to social elimination in Tibet. This is because

the fundamental racial caesura created by the Han supremacist state is a cleavage that cuts twice, not just separating all Han from non-Han populations, but also producing a distinction between recognized and unrecognized minorities along the contours of linguistic difference; each minority group is construed as a linguistically homogenous population, despite the existence of extensive linguistic diversity (Roche 2019a). For The state's racialization of the Tibetan population encloses and erases the approximately 30 languages that are used by Tibetans in the PRC in addition to Tibetan (Roche and Suzuki 2018).⁸ None of these languages are recognized by the state, and they are thus fully exposed to its assimilatory program. They are the linguistic parallel of Agamben's (1998) *homo sacra*—'sacred languages,' abandoned by the state, deprived of rights, and available to be eradicated with impunity.

Many of these unrecognized languages are seen by Tibetans as 'mixed'—specifically, as Tibetan languages that have been contaminated by Chinese (Sonam Lhundrop, Suzuki, and Roche 2019). This characterization of minoritized languages as mixed is based in Tibetan language ideologies that see the written language as the original (and ideal) form of Tibetan, and all spoken varieties as having arisen due to processes of drift (in the case of spoken Tibetan varieties) or mixture (in the case of minoritized languages) (Dge 'dun chos 'phel 1978; Kellner 2018). This model operates as a perceptual frame, whereby the (normative) Tibetan listening subject (Inoue 2006; Rosa 2019) perceives minoritized languages as mixed: Tibetan loanwords are heard as evidence of their original Tibetanness, while the rest of the language is heard as either degraded Tibetan or Chinese incursions. Therefore, whereas Chinese loanwords in Tibetan are seen as a corrupting, threatening influence, Tibetan loanwords in minoritized languages are seen as evidence of shared origins and long-standing historical processes of infiltration and divergence. Such perceptions of shared origins and deviation through mixture render these 'mixed' languages as "speech that is somehow not really language" (Urciuoli 2013: 35) and their speakers as 'languageless' (Rosa 2016).

⁸ A further layer of complexity exists in the diversity amongst 'Tibetan,' which is a cluster of related languages that employ a common script. For a discussion of the infrapolitics among Tibetan varieties, see Bendi Tso and Turin (2019).

To describe a language, and its speakers, as neither Chinese nor Tibetan therefore asserts that, due to historical processes of mixture, the language has become uncategorizable as either Tibetan or Chinese. Given the currently dominant, and state-sponsored, interpretation amongst Tibetans in the PRC that sees languages as iconic of identity, this also means that these populations cannot be Tibetan. And yet they are defined as Tibetan by the state, are recognized by other Tibetans as sharing ties of descent, and often profess a Tibetan identity themselves. Rather than being a population that can simply be abandoned, then, speakers of unrecognized languages become both icons of a feared future, and a contamination within the social body. These languages are therefore inalienable but corrupting, and thus assimilation into normative Tibetanness becomes an imperative that is constitutive of self-defense. However, this assimilation is not seen as destruction, but rather a restoration of an originary purity to ‘mixed’ languages. The replacement of Tibet’s minoritized languages with Tibetan thus enacts what Arthur Bradley (2019:5) calls a ‘nihilopolitics,’ whereby “what is socially, politically, or philosophically intolerable ... is simply deemed to be ontologically or politically nonexistent in the first place,” and is thus made not only to not exist, but to never have existed, placing it beyond the limits of grievability.

The non-existence of Manegacha, a language spoken by about 8,000 Tibetans in Rebgong, is reflected in local practices of ignorance and indifference. Tibetans label Manegacha using a problematic term I avoid—a hypernym that erases diversity. Tibetan speakers use it to refer to two distinct languages—Manegacha and Ngandehua—and the term thus refers not to a specific speech form, but to any speech identified with that particular social group. That social group, in Rebgong, is defined by their ambiguity and negative hybridity.⁹

For mainstream Tibetans in Rebgong, Manegacha is thought of and heard as a mixed language.¹⁰ There is discussion about what it is a mixture of, and how mixed it might be. It is

⁹ Interviews with Tibetan-speakers began by asking if they were aware of the term ‘Manegacha’. Most interviewees were not aware of this term, and in the process of ensuing conversation instead offered the hypernym discussed above.

¹⁰ Tibetan-speaking interviewees were asked to reflect on what sort of language Manegacha was, often leading to discussions about the origin of its speakers and the sources from which the language was mixed.

generally considered some combination of Tibetan and Chinese, and sometimes Mongolian. Manegacha is thus described as *rgya ma bod*—neither Chinese nor Tibetan. And although some Tibetans differentiate Manegacha and Ngandehua, they are both labelled, classified, and perceived as functionally and symbolically the same, because both are mixed: the only difference is what they are mixed from and in what proportions. The two languages thus possess a negative unity based in negative hybridity.

This negative unity is reproduced in discourses about the speakers of these languages, who are also described as *rgya ma bod*. This is often considered in racial terms of ‘lineage’ (*rgyud pa*). Like speculation over the nature and extent of mixture in Manegacha and Ngandehua, mainstream Tibetans in Rebgong also discuss, in a variety of formal and informal, private and public forums, the ‘origins’ of this population.¹¹ Were they originally Mongols, Chinese (*rgya*), Muslims (*he he, kha che*), or Tibetans? How did they become mixed and end up in their current, racially indeterminate state? Such speculations collapse racial and linguistic mixture, while also situating Manegacha speakers as the subject of socially acceptable racial speculation: where are they *really* from?

These speculations also insert Manegacha speakers into a value hierarchy that subordinates the hybrid to the pure, and the ambiguous to the unambiguous. This is often expressed aphoristically through the formulation “Among livestock, hybrids; Among people, Manegacha and Ngandehua speakers.”¹² The specific hybrid animal mentioned here, the *rtol mo*, is important.¹³ A *rtol mo* is a female, second-generation offspring of cross-breeding between yaks and cows. While the first generation hybrid (*mdzo mo*) is valued for its high milk productivity, docility, strength, and stamina, *rtol mo* are not only known as lazy, unproductive, and

¹¹ For published examples of such speculations, see Tshe rdor 2012, Dge ‘dun don sgrub 2015.

¹² *Srog gi nang gi rtol mo/ Nyi gi nang gi *****. The asterisks here replace the insulting hypernym used to refer to Manegacha and Ngandehua speakers. I have glossed the term in the English as ‘Manegacha and Ngandehua speakers’. The Tibetan used here represents the local spoken variety, rather than the literary standard.

¹³ The aphoristic comparison of Manegacha speakers to *rtol mo* was raised spontaneously by two Tibetan-speaking interviewees. Informal follow-up conversations with Manegacha speakers confirmed that it was a commonly encountered phrase.

undomesticatable, but are also infertile. *Rtol mo*, therefore, are not simply devalued, they are usually destroyed.

For Manegacha speakers, these discourses of mixture, ambiguity, and status subordination all manifest in practices of everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 1992) and ‘nano-racism’ (Mbembe 2019) that link the structural violence of state racism to interpersonal relations.¹⁴ Visiting a relative in hospital, a Manegacha speaker overhears—“If your son can’t find a Tibetan wife, I suppose a Manegacha speaker will do.” A Tibetan-speaking man married to a Manegacha speaker hears his daughter speaking the language, and flies into a rage: “Don’t speak that demon tongue!” he says, and lashes out with his fists. In a boarding school, a group of students roams the dorms, looking for Manegacha and Ngandehua speakers, shaking them down for spare change and roughing them up. At the local hot spring, a woman glares in irritation at a group of Manegacha speakers, thinking, “Why are they speaking *jikjik* like that?” And every day, Manegacha speakers have their speech policed by other Tibetans, subjected to hypervigilant monitoring (Urciuoli 2013), waiting for the appearance of a shibboleth in their Tibetan speech, to ‘hail’ the speaker as hybrid and interpolate them into a state-mandated, culturally-sanctioned subordinate social position, all the while claiming to be ‘just joking’.¹⁵

It is within this framework that we can understand the comments to the road-worker—a Manegacha speaker—in the anecdote at the start of the article. This offhand comment is part of a larger climate of everyday violence directed at speakers of Manegacha. It is predicated on language ideologies that position languages like Manegacha on a trajectory of change between purity and replacement. The next section examines how this everyday violence solidified into a

¹⁴ Manegacha speakers were asked to describe incidents of language-based discrimination they had witnessed or heard about (rather than their own experience) in order to minimize psychological and emotional discomfort. Many interviewees nonetheless responded by describing their own experiences of everyday violence.

¹⁵ Shibboleths used to identify Manegacha speakers when they speak Tibetan are typically phonetic or syntactic, though occasionally lexical gaps are used. A common phonetic shibboleth is the conflation of the consonants in the Tibetan syllables ཨ (ts) and ཨ (ts^h). A common syntactic shibboleth is incorrect inflection of nouns and pronouns according to the distinction between volitional and spontaneous verbs, a distinction that the local Tibetan variety possesses but Manegacha lacks. Lexical gaps in specific domains, such as the names of trees, are also used as a shibboleth to identify Manegacha-speakers when they speak Tibetan.

program of elimination under the emergence of new biosovereign configurations of state power and resistance after 2008.

From Lexical Purism to Social Elimination

In 2008, state-society relations in Rebgong took on a new biosovereign quality and became characterized by a collective life-and-death struggle, expressed in part through lexical purism. In 2008, the Tibetan New Year in Rebgong began violently, after a scuffle at a public gathering snowballed into protests that police forcefully repressed (Makley 2009). When demonstrations against Chinese rule broke out in Lhasa a month later, they were followed by demonstrations in Rebgong, leading to a state of martial law (Makley 2019). Protests continued across Tibet that year, and in 2009 self-immolations began. 2010 saw hundreds of students taking to the streets in Rebgong to protest proposed changes to Tibetan-medium education (Henry 2016). The first self-immolation protest in Rebgong was carried out in March 2012, and by the end of the year a further 11 people had used their bodies as human weapons in this way, including 6 in one week of November, making Rebgong an epicenter of self-immolation protests, with the second-highest number after Ngawa in Sichuan (Tibet Data 2015). Through and around these protests, new discourses and practices of ‘unity’ expressed in the biocollective idiom of ‘brotherhood,’ rose to prominence (Roche 2020b), predicated on resistance and Sinophobic alterity formed in “searing but silenced grief” over those who had died in the protests (Makley 2019:229).

During this same period, a grass-roots movement of father-tongue purism associations (*pha skad gtsang ma'i tshogs pa*) emerged in Rebgong. These groups, now mostly banned or suppressed but active up until 2015 (Human Rights Watch 2018), disseminated new Tibetan vocabulary by putting up posters, distributing flyers and books, and circulating videos on social media. More importantly, they also monitored and policed speech, penalizing the use of ‘mixed’ Tibetan through a variety of means, including monetary fines, shaming, and corporal punishment. These associations suffused everyday life in Rebgong: taxi drivers refused to take

passengers who spoke ‘mixed’ Tibetan, clothing stores offered discounts for customers who spoke ‘pure’ Tibetan, restaurants placed jars on their counter to collect fines from customers who spoke ‘mixed’ Tibetan, and families and friends bickered, fought, and came to blows over lexical choices.¹⁶ Like activists working on the ‘language frontiers’ of Austria (Judson 2006), these associations worked not only to influence individual linguistic behavior, but also to confront perceived indifference (Robben 1999) by reframing lexical choice as indicating an intention to participate in a collective project of resistance (Hill and Hill 1986).

For Manegacha speakers, the purist movement represented an increased pressure to resolve their ambiguous hybridity. In interviews about the local pure father-tongue associations, Tibetan speakers speculated as to what constituted the ‘pure father-tongue’ for Manegacha speakers: was it Manegacha with Tibetan loanwords, or just Tibetan? The idea that Manegacha could be a pure father-tongue seemed as anomalous as the language itself. For Manegacha speakers the purist movement therefore manifested as pressure to linguistically assimilate, rather than simply to memorize and use new vocabulary. As one Manegacha speaker in his early 40s put it: “When they tell us to speak pure father-tongue, they mean speak Tibetan.”

In the autumn of 2014, this mounting assimilatory pressure on speakers of Manegacha and Ngandehua led to a rare act of public resistance. At the conclusion of a large public ritual, a Ngandehua speaker stood up in front of the crowd that had gathered there. Addressing the people through a microphone that fed into a small speaker, he made a plea to the audience: please stop calling us *rgya*. Please stop laughing at the way we speak Tibetan. Please stop looking down on our language. “We are all Tibetan,” he emphasized.¹⁷

¹⁶ In interviews, Tibetan and Manegacha speakers were asked to describe the activities of local father-tongue purism organizations, and to offer reflections they had on the social and linguistic impacts of such groups.

¹⁷ Early in the process of interviewing Manegacha speakers in 2017, one interviewee mentioned this speech, and so questions about the incident were incorporated into the interviews. Since no recording of the speech was available, I have reconstructed an outline of its contents based on the interviews.

“Not only are *those people*¹⁸ not Tibetan, they’re not even human,” came the reply, several months later. It was the summer of 2015. As Tibetans in Rebgong protected their children from kidnappers, around the same time a Manegacha-speaking road-worker was being chided by a monk for becoming *rgya*, a message began circulating on social media—a vitriolic invective against Ngandehua speakers, which by implication and in reception, also targeted Manegacha speakers.¹⁹ After asserting that these people were neither Tibetan nor human, the speaker turns to their lineage (*rgyud pa*), claiming that they are descended from Muslims (*kha che mi rigs*). He then says, “When it comes to Chinese, you don’t know how to read it or speak it. And when it comes to Tibetan, you don’t know how to read it or speak it. You can’t wear Chinese clothes well, and you can’t wear Tibetan clothes well.” He then ties this negative hybridity to a purported expression of political indifference, accusing the community’s root lama of “doing whatever the state²⁰ tells him to.” He contrasts this with the behavior of the Dalai Lama, who he describes as going from country to country pleading the Tibetan cause. He then mentions the “many heroes and heroines” who self-immolated for the Tibetan cause, and how the community’s root lama had denounced these people on state-run TV. “So if you think about that, then you’ll really understand. Even though you consider yourself Tibetan, you’re not.”

The failure to be Tibetan, though rooted in the negative hybridity of those who are considered neither Chinese nor Tibetan, is seen to ultimately emerge in a refusal to participate in the political project of resistance against the Chinese state. And when resistance is identified with the performance of Sinophobic purism, simply speaking what are perceived as mixed languages like Manegacha or Ngandehua is seen as an act of refusal that acquiesces to and accelerates the state’s annihilatory project. When collective survival demands purity, eradication of the mixed Other becomes self-defense.

But because a language cannot be murdered in the same way that a body is destroyed or a community massacred, the last link in the perlocutionary chain between lexical purism and

¹⁸ I’ve elided the problematic hypernym used by the speaker.

¹⁹ I obtained a copy of this recording, but have not made it publicly available due to its offensive content.

²⁰ *Rgyal khab*.

language oppression requires the active participation of the victims, in making an overdetermined choice about language transmission. Many Manegacha speakers were already doing this prior to 2015, shifting from Manegacha to Tibetan as the dominant language in the household and of intergenerational transmission (Fried 2010). But in 2015, in the midst of the tensions described here, an entire community, consisting of roughly one quarter of Manegacha-speaking Tibetans in Rebgong, ‘decided’ to stop speaking the language to their children, and to talk to them exclusively in Tibetan.²¹ Members of the community rationalized their decision by claiming that they wanted their children to succeed in Tibetan-medium education, and thus this decision was for their own good. And it almost certainly *was* for their children’s own good, but in another sense—insofar as participating in their own language oppression spares them the everyday violence directed against Manegacha speakers, and which intensified in the biosovereign configuration of power that emerged in 2008, under which language became a life-and-death issue, and perceived indifference a threat.

Conclusion

This capacity to enlist victims in their own language oppression is the ultimate cruelty and cunning of the state’s racialized language regime. It not only subordinates all Tibetans and their languages, but also weaponizes resistance to this subordination for its program of elimination, by exploiting internecine hierarchies amongst Tibetans and wielding the perlocutionary chain that links lexical purism to language oppression. It ultimately achieves this aim by forcing a false choice on Tibetans that speak minoritized languages: to succumb to the state’s assimilation program and shift to using and transmitting ‘Chinese’, at the expense of their Tibetan identity, or to retain their Tibetan identity but abandon their language. The suffering entailed by the third choice—to retain their language and identity under conditions of material deprivation,

²¹ Roche (2019b) provides a statistical description of language shift in Rebgong’s Manegacha-speaking communities, based on household survey data.

grinding everyday violence, hyper-surveillance, and suspicion—effectively ensures the creation of ‘language death-worlds,’ thus slating ‘mixed’ languages for elimination.

Here, we see how the ‘margins’ of Chineseness emerge, within the PRC and amongst its ‘minority’ populations, as a site of entangled violence and resistance. I have focused on the Tibetan context, but, as we have already seen, other ‘minorities’ such as the Yi, Mongols, and Uyghurs also engage in Sinophobic purism. It remains to be seen is whether this is also linked to language oppression; we could expect this to occur in situations where unrecognized languages are rendered vulnerable by the state, and where particular speech forms are perceived as ‘mixed languages,’ giving rise to an assemblage of state practices and local language ideologies that creates ‘language death worlds’ through the perlocution of lexical purism and language oppression.

Beyond the PRC, we should also expect similar dynamics to operate, linking lexical purism and language oppression in cases where the racial state’s promotion of a dominant language leads to reactionary purism. But beyond this mere fact of domination, for lexical purism to lead to language oppression, certain languages must be viewed as already, and irredeemably, mixed. Under these conditions, and particularly when language politics take on a life-and-death quality under a biosovereign articulation of state power, lexical purism and language oppression become linked through practices of self-defense. This provides us with a raciolinguistic theory that enables us to delimit the cases where lexical purism and language oppression are linked.

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