

# One of the Endangered Languages: Yellow Uyghur

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## **Abstract**

The Yellow Uyghur language is used by the Yellow Uyghur, one of the official minorities recognized by the Chinese government. The Yellow Uyghurs generally inhabit the Sunan Yellow Uyghur Autonomous County in China. Recent data suggests that the total population of the Yellow Uyghur in China is only around 15 thousand but only around half of the population of Yellow Uyghurs can use their language in everyday life. Instead, Mandarin Chinese, as a component of China's compulsory education system, has begun to replace the Yellow Uyghur both in the home and in several social realms. Drawing upon studies from social anthropology and socio-linguistic studies, this paper will consider the impacts that monolingual education policies in minorities areas, especially in Yellow Uyghur area, mixed marriages, and the sense of losing "ethno-memory" have on the marginalization of the Yellow Uyghur language.

## **Keywords**

Endangered language, Yellow Uyghur, Minority, Chinese Education System, Mixed Marriage

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## Introduction

The Yellow Uyghurs,<sup>1</sup> one China's minority nationalities with a relatively small population, mainly inhabits the Sunan Yellow Uyghur Autonomous County and the Jiuquan city Huangnipu Yellow Uyghur Autonomous Township in Gansu Province. The Yellow Uyghur minority are Turkic people who use three languages and believe in Tibetan Buddhism. According to data collected during the 5th national census in the year 2000, the Yellow Uyghur's total population was 13.719, the 48th largest minority population in China. The population of Sunan Yellow Uyghur Autonomous County is composed of 10 nationalities, mainly the Yellow Uyghur, Tibetans, the Mongols, the Tu, the Hui and Han Chinese. Han Chinese composes 50% of the total population in Sunan Yellow Uyghur Autonomous County while the Yellow Uyghurs and Tibetan minority account for 26.4% and 22% respectively (Yang et al 1999: 15-16).

Currently, the Yellow Uyghurs speak three languages - the east Yellow Uyghur language, the Western Yellow Uyghur language and Mandarin Chinese. The eastern Yellow Uyghur language is also called the "Enggar" or "Shera Yughur" language, which is an Altaic language from the Mongolian branch. Eastern Yellow Uyghurs mainly inhabit the eastern regions of Sunan County such as the Kangle, Mati areas; The Western Yellow Uyghur language, also referred to the "Yao Huer /Yughur" or "Qara Yughur/Sarigh Yughur" language, is an Altaic language from the Turkic language branch. Western Yellow Uyghurs mainly live in Sunan county's western regions such as Minghua and Dahe. Today the Yellow Uyghur can generally speak Mandarin Chinese, and some Yellow Uyghurs, especially those who live in the Jiuquan city Huangnipu village and Minghua Qiantan villages, can only speak Mandarin Chinese, and these Yellow Uyghurs have already forgotten their mother language (Western Yellow Uyghur). Other communities of Yellow Uyghurs like those who live in Dahe and Saritala (Huangcheng) are well-versed in two forms of the Yellow Uyghur languages. Generally speaking, however, because the Western and Eastern Yellow Uyghurs cannot understand each other's language, Mandarin Chinese has become the language of communication between these two groups of Yellow Uyghurs (Qarluq 2006: 72, Dong 2006: 17).

**Brief Background On the Yellow Uyghur’s Population and Language Use**

As noted above, the Yellow Uyghurs are one of China’s minority populations with a relatively small population. According to surveys conducted in 1942, the Yellow Uyghur’s total population was comprised of 580 households or approximately 3000 people (Tian 2003: 803). According to China’s first national census conducted in 1953, the Yellow Uyghur’s population stood at 3861 people and the “second national census” of 1964 shows that the Yellow Uyghur’s population increased to 5717 people.

**Table1:** Five national censuses, minority and Yellow Uyghur population and average annual growth rate (Li et al 2007: 39).

Category	Population					Average annual growth rate			
	1953	1964	1982	1990	2000	1953-1964	1964-1982	1982-1990	1990-2000
National (hundred million)	5.78	6.91	10.04	11.31	124.3	1.64	2.10	1.50	0.94
Minority population (hundred million)	0.35	0.4	0.67	0.91	1.05	1.19	2.94	3.90	1.43
Yellow Uyghur Population	3861	5717	10568	12293	13719	3.63	3.47	1.91	1.16

According to data collected from China’s third national census, which was conducted in 1982, the Yellow Uyghur population totaled 10,569, and among that Yellow Uyghur who lived in the Sunan Autonomous County, only 4623 people could speak the Western Yellow Uyghur language while only 2808 people could speak Eastern Yellow Uyghur. The fourth national census of 1990 indicates that the total population of the Yellow Uyghurs totaled 12293 people, and among those who lived in the Sunan Autonomous County, 3693 could speak the Western Yellow Uyghur language and 3194 could speak the Eastern Yellow language. According to the above data, the number of Yellow Uyghur who could speak the Western Yellow Uyghur language decreased by nearly 1000 people over this ten-year span (Zhong 2002: 278). Along with the changing times, the situation has also changed. According to the Sunan Autonomous County’s Ethnic Religious Affairs Bureau, in the year 1998, only 5,069 persons of the 10079 Yellow Uyghurs who lived in Sunan County could speak the Western Uyghur language. Furthermore, the number of those

Yellow Uyghurs who could speak the Eastern Yellow language numbered 4,684 people, and 326 persons could only speak Mandarin Chinese (Chen 2004). According to data collected from a 2001 survey in this region,<sup>2</sup> we discovered that the Eastern Yellow Uyghurs who participated in this survey 40.6% could speak the Eastern Yellow Uyghur language and of the Western Yellow Uyghurs who participated in the survey, 55.2% could speak the Western Yellow Uyghur language. Considering the responses from this survey, the proportion of Eastern Yellow Uyghurs who can speak their mother language is relatively higher than Western Yellow Uyghurs. Furthermore, according to the data from this survey, 89.1% of Yellow Uyghur spoke Mandarin Chinese fluently, while only 10.3% could speak some Mandarin or no Mandarin at all (Qarluq 2006: 77-78).

Other statistics indicate that the total population of the Yellow Uyghur stands at approximately 16,000 persons, half of whom can speak the Yellow Uyghur language (among the increased population, the population of Yellow Uyghur who can only speak Yellow Uyghur rapidly decreased, but the number of Yellow Uyghur who can speak both Mandarin Chinese and the Yellow Uyghur language has increased). (Ba 2009: 85)

**Table 2:** The Distribution of Yellow Uyghur in the People’s Republic of China (Persons)

Province/ city	1990	2000	Province/ city	1990	2000	Province/ city	1990	2000
Beijing	18	52	Anhui	0	2	Chonhqing	-	3
Tianjin	0	0	Fujian	1	3	Guizhou	0	1
Hebei	3	13	Jiangxi	0	1	Yunnan	0	10
Shaanxi	1	8	Shandong	0	7	Tibet	1	3
Inner Mongolia	9	27	Henan	7	6	Shanxi	11	23
Liaoning	5	1	Hubei	1	4	Qinghai	96	140
Jilin	0	0	Hunan	1	3	Ningxia	24	43
Heilongji- ang	30	28	Guang- dong	1	9	XUAR	258	302
Shanghai	0	6	Guangxi	0	48	Gansu	11809	12962
Jiangsu	1	7	Hainan	0	1			
Zhejiang	2	2	Sichuan	1	4			

Source: Fu et al (2007:29).

Considering the above table, since the floating population of China has increased since the early 1980s, the Yellow Uyghur population has also gradually spread and moved to other parts of China. In 1953, the percentage of Yellow Uyghurs who lived outside of Gansu was only 0.2%, however in the year 2000, 5.6% of the Yellow Uyghurs total population lived outside of Gansu province. From the years 1990 to 2000, the number of provinces with populations of Yellow Uyghurs increased from 19 to 29 (table 2). After 1990, some Yellow Uyghurs migrated to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Beijing, Guangdong, etc. (Fu et al 2007: 30). In 2001, the author conducted doctoral dissertation research in Sunan County, and the results of his research indicate that some Yellow Uyghurs believe they have found a better life after migrating to the Qumul/Hami regions of the XUAR. These Yellow Uyghurs believe that by migrating to Xinjiang, the next generation will be less likely to assimilate into the dominant Han culture. Furthermore, these Yellow Uyghurs believe that by migrating to Xinjiang they can even strengthen their ethnic culture (Qarluq: 2006: 46).

Before 1959, almost all Yellow Uyghurs believed in Lamaism, and each tribe was organized around a monastery, that is to say, each tribe had their own monastery. After 1958, as a result of various political movements in the PRC, many Yellow Uyghur temples were destroyed, religious figures were murdered, and people were prohibited from participating in religious activities. Even after the Reform Era (1980-present), although there has been religious revivals among other minority groups, there has not been a religious revival among the Yellow Uyghurs (Qarluq 2006: 78, Zhong 1994: 279). The most recent survey conducted in Sunan County concerning the Yellow Uyghurs reports that among 5,914 Yellow Uyghurs over the age of 18, only 812 (13.7% of the total population) believe in a religion, however, 47.5% of other minorities over the age of 18 who live in Sunan County hold religious beliefs. Moreover, in some ethnic minority groups in Sunan County, over 85% of their populations believe in a religion. In the Yellow Uyghur community of Minghua, an area with a dense population of Yellow Uyghurs, only 1.27% of the population over the age of 18 believes in a religion, or 1 person for every 100 (Yang et al 1999: 15).

## Reasons Why Yellow Uyghur Has Become an Endangered Language

By the end of 2004, China's Ministry of Culture recognized two types of the Yellow Uyghur language as "endangered" (*binwei yuyan* /濒危语言) and then initiated research aimed at rescuing and protecting these languages (Ba 2006:43). Because many "experts" (*zhuanjia* /专家) are unclear about how to protect these languages and some "experts" even support ideas calling for the extinction of ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu biran miawang lun* /少数民族必然灭亡论) or believe that minority languages are not useful (*wuyong lun* /无用论), they are unable to propose flexible plans that could protect the language and culture of the Yellow Uyghurs. As a result, these languages are continually being lost. This article rejects that population alone is the only reason the Yellow Uyghur language is endangered, and proposes education policies and practices aimed at acculturation (*wenhua hanhua* /文化涵化) as well as intermarriage are that the main reasons the Yellow Uyghur language is endangered.

**Education:** Historically the Yellow Uyghurs were engaged mainly in animal husbandry and were semi-nomadic. This coupled with the facts that the number of Yellow Uyghurs have been considerably small, Yellow Uyghur communities have been located far from their Turkic cultural core can begin to explain why the Yellow Uyghurs have not developed their own educational system. One Yellow Uyghur intellectual, Ba Zhanlong states:

Before 1949 the Yellow Uyghurs were on the brink of extinction and were completely illiterate. Before the 1940s, the Yellow Uyghur's education stagnately stood unorganized, unsystematic, and the content of education was based primarily on [the teacher's] own personal experiences. The typical portrayals of the Yellow Uyghurs education were "Life is education" and "Society is a school." The Yellow Uyghur's modern schooling, which began after 1938 the 7th *gujiakambu* urged for the revival of schooling, and from 1949 onwards, the development of education in the forms of small-scale schools and horse-back schools appeared. Then during the Reform Era, the development of school-based education flourished in Yellow Uyghur areas. (Ba 2009: 85)

In reality, before 1949 Yellow Uyghurs had already established their own education system, albeit in Buddhist temples and not in "modern" schools. Although these temples were perhaps not as developed as their Tibetan counterparts, nonetheless, these temples housed educated monks who taught religious knowledge.

After “liberation” the Yellow Uyghurs formally accepted the Chinese education system, a system that requires its students to learn Mandarin Chinese language and Chinese characters. Thus, Yellow Uyghur children gradually became separated from their ethnic language and culture and gradually became integrated into the mainstream (Han) society. After middle school and high school, some Yellow Uyghur students enter technically schools, universities, and are almost completely detached from their own language and culture environment. Instead these Yellow Uyghurs enter an environment that emphasizes the use of Han-Chinese language and script.

Currently, the degree in which the Yellow Uyghurs receive education compared to other minority groups is high. According to the fifth national census conducted in 2000, for every 10,000 Yellow Uyghurs, there were 654 high school graduates, 528 graduates of technical schools, 362 persons with a degree from a two-year college, 104 persons with an undergraduate degree, and 6 persons who have earned a graduate degree (Ba 2009: 85). As of the year 2007, the Yellow Uyghur Region of Sunan had four ordinary middle and high schools, one technical school, and 30 ordinary elementary schools, and the rate of school-aged children who attended these schools reached 99.5% (Ba 2008: 44). The education institutions in this region use the same teaching materials as those in Han populated regions of China, and schools transmit knowledge from Han Chinese society. For the most part teaching materials do not include information about the Yellow Uyghur’s own ethnic culture. Although formal education does not support the transmission of knowledge of one’s ethnic culture, ordinary groups still emphasize standard education (Jiang 1998: 41). By observing Yellow Uyghur education, we can easily find that the transmission of culture between generations has been distorted and as a result has restricted and inhibited the Yellow Uyghur’s cultural transmission. Unlike other ethnic minority communities whose members do not emphasize Chinese state-sponsored education, may worry about the influences of other (Han) culture on their community, and fear the lose their ethnic culture; many Yellow Uyghurs do not share these apprehensions. Because Yellow Uyghurs do not worry about losing their culture, Yellow Uyghur students have improved their cultural levels (*wenhua shuiping*/文化水平), their “universal quality” (*zonghe sushu*/综合素质), and have easily adapted to dominant Han cultural values. As a result of these choices, the cultural values,

thought processes, aesthetics, and behaviors of the next generation of Yellow Uyghurs will diverge from those of previous generations (Jiang 1998: 42).

Previously, Yellow Uyghur intellectuals twice attempted to teach Yellow Uyghur by means of an “educational experiment”, but these attempts ended in failure. The first attempt was conducted between November 1983 and July 1984 in the Yellow Uyghur community of Jiuquanshi Huangnipu.<sup>3</sup> Here the community’s middle school carried out the first Western Yellow Uyghur language course. For these classes, approximately 180 students were divided into 3 classes. These classes only used spoken methods and Chinese *pinyin* to teach, and these classes mainly taught students how to count, the names of relatives, and other phrases used in everyday life. Overall, these classes were fairly successful, but because students who studied the Western Uyghur language influenced younger students who studied Mandarin Chinese, and because Yellow Uyghur and Han alike studied the Western Uyghur language, many Han parents began to oppose the teaching of the Western Uyghur language in schools. In addition, because there were no ample conditions for studying the language, Western Uyghur language classes were discontinued (Ba 1998: 62-64).

The second attempt occurred between September 2003 and July 2004 in Hongwan elementary school. Hongwan elementary school implemented an interest group for the optional study of the Yellow Uyghur language. At that time, some Yellow Uyghur political figures and intellectuals proposed that Yellow Uyghur is the majority Ethnic group in a multi-ethnic county and schools in Sunan do not include any content concerning ethnic minorities. Therefore, schools should not influence or increase the normal teaching program. Instead schools should encourage Yellow Uyghur students to study the Yellow Uyghur language, and the best method of doing this is by establishing Yellow Uyghur language interests’ groups. Among the main reasons for the proposal to establish these interest groups were: (1) the population of Yellow Uyghurs is small, they do not have their own script, those who can use the Yellow Uyghur language proficiently are continually decreasing; (2) through studying the Yellow Uyghur language, Yellow Uyghur students can strengthen their ethnic identity, can become motivated to learn more, and can also conform ineffective educational resources and promote the complete development of the student. On September 11, 2003, the autonomous county’s education bureau



issued a document concerning the establishment of interest groups for the study of ethnic minority languages in areas with dense populations of ethnic minorities.<sup>4</sup> In reality, only the Hongwan elementary school implemented this program and organized interest groups for the study of the Western Yellow Uyghur language. Enrollment for these interest groups numbered between 26-43 students. The content of these interest groups was mainly devoted to teaching students the names of relatives, the names of commonly seen objects, and phrases used in everyday life. The teaching materials for these groups were very limited and there were no standard textbooks. Furthermore, the teachers were not qualified to teach the Yellow Uyghur language. By September of the second year of this program, only eight students registered for the advanced class in the Yellow Uyghur language, and the school administrators felt that the number of students in these interest groups were too few, and they decided to discontinue the program. The main reasons for discontinuing these interests' groups were mainly (1) some families of these students used Mandarin Chinese at home and the community language was a local dialect of Mandarin Chinese, therefore they lacked ample conditions for studying the Western Yellow Uyghur language outside of the classroom. These factors influenced students' active participation in learning the language; (2) some students who participated in this program did not do so because of their own interests, but because their parents wanted them to participate. Likewise those students who did not participate or those who withdrew from the program did so because of their parents' wishes; (3) some teachers who taught courses required at the school as part of China's national education believed that studying the Western Yellow Uyghur language would influence the students' study of Mandarin Chinese and English, thus these teachers opposed the study of the Western Yellow Uyghur language or at least did not actively support it; (4) some parents who did not allow their own children to attend the Western Yellow Uyghur language program, also spread ideas that "minority languages are worthless" and "minority languages are backwards", and as a result shattered the community's support for this program (Ba 2006: 42).

Education can improve a national group's universal quality and can develop all aspects of society. Ethnic minority education has two basic functions – one is to transmit scientific and cultural knowledge of modern society, which will allow ethnic minority students to adapt to the mainstream lifestyles, and through selection and distribution minority students can achieve a higher

social status; the second is to transmit ethnic culture and allow a number of students through enculturation to adopt the lifestyles of an ethnic community, which can help preserve an ethnic identity as well as ensure the existence and stability of an ethnic environment. Considering the present situation, the second function of the Yellow Uyghurs education has not been realized (Ba 2006: 39). Conversely, schools in Yellow Uyghur communities have contributed to the acceleration of Yellow Uyghur children losing or becoming alienated from their language and culture. Therefore, after the 1980s, Yellow Uyghur students who have enrolled in universities, junior colleges, or technical secondary schools have not returned to their home county. Moreover, Yellow Uyghurs who have graduated from middle school often migrate to other cities to find work or start their own business, and educated Yellow Uyghurs rarely connect their futures with the development of their ethnic communities (Jiang 1998: 43). As a result, this kind of education model, on the one hand, accelerates the external flow of educated Yellow Uyghurs and intermarriage, and, on the other hand, this type of education leads the cultural gap or cultural discontinuity of Yellow Uyghur society.

Although language does not necessarily make up the entire part of a national culture, language is, in some cases, the only component, and for the Yellow Uyghurs language has become the main indicator for determining ethnic belonging. Therefore, in Yellow Uyghur communities one can easily discover the attitudes of ethno-linguistic nationalism and the most commonly encountered logic states, *“If you cannot speak the Yellow Uyghur language, you are not a Yellow Uyghur.”* This statement alone suggests that the Yellow Uyghur language is the last piece of proof for being a Yellow Uyghur (local people say: *The Yellow Uyghur language is the last golden key of the Yellow Uyghurs*). This type of thinking reflects Yellow Uyghurs’ anxiety towards the rapid loss of their language and traditional culture.

**Intermarriage:** As a multi-ethnic autonomous county, Sunan has formed 5 different cultural areas: Han, Tibetan, Mongolian, Muslim/Hui, and the Yellow Uyghurs. There are stark differences in the lifestyles, languages, and customs of these cultural groups, but during the last few decades, there has been a trend of “Sinicization”. For example, Yellow Uyghurs who live in *Minghua* and are surrounded by Han Chinese culture have been deeply influenced by Confucianism, are more willing to intermarry with Han Chinese,

and have been increasingly assimilated into Han Chinese society. During this process of assimilation, the use of the Western Yellow Uyghur language has decreased and the religious beliefs among many Yellow Uyghurs have been weakened (Yang et al 1999: 15-16). For example, Yellow Uyghurs living in Qiantan village have completely adopted Mandarin Chinese as their language. In other Yellow Uyghur villages, intermarriage has becoming more common. For example, intermarriage among Yellow Uyghurs who live in Jiucaigou, an area where Yellow Uyghurs are the largest nationality group, has reached 35% (See Table 3). This number suggests that intermarriage between Yellow Uyghurs and other nationalities has already become a normal occurrence.

**Table 3:** Yellow Uyghur’s marital status in Jiucaigou Village (Dong 2006: 17)

Yellow Uyghur’s internal intermarry			Yellow Uyghur’s intermarriage with other nationalities			
Western Yellow Uyghurs	Western Yellow Uyghurs	Eastern Yellow Uyghurs	Yellow Uyghurs with Han Chinese	Yellow Uyghurs with Hui (Muslim Chinese)	Yellow Uyghurs with Tibetan	Yellow Uyghurs with Mongols
with	with	with				
Western Yellow Uyghurs	Eastern Yellow Uyghurs	Eastern Yellow Uyghurs				
213/couple	15/couple	7/couple	75/couple	2/couple	4/couple	1/couple

Note: the total population of Jiucaigou village is 1101 persons, among them the total number married of Yellow Uyghurs couples is 317 (widowed, divorced excluded).

Intermarriages occurring between Yellow Uyghurs and other nationalities in Sunan County over the past few decades have had a profound impact on the use of Yellow Uyghur language. The types of families can be divided into two categories: marriages occurring between two Yellow Uyghurs and marriages occurring between Yellow Uyghurs and a member of a different nationality. This kind Family can divide into two categories: one of them is Yellow Uyghur internal intermarry, and the other one is Yellow Uyghur intermarriage between other ethnic nationalities.

Yellow Uyghurs internal marriages include East Yellow Uyghurs with East, west and west, and marriages occurring between east and west Yellow Uyghurs. Generally, in marriages occurring between east and west Yellow Uyghurs Mandarin Chinese is adopted as the language spoken at home, and the

Yellow Uyghur language is rarely used. Among the Yellow Uyghur society, intermarriages that do occur with other nationalities are mainly with Han Chinese, and there are few intermarriages between Yellow Uyghurs and Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui and other non-Han nationalities. Families of intermarried couples, because they do not share a common minority language, almost always adopt Han Chinese as the primary language used in the home and their offspring generally only learn Mandarin Chinese (unless some parents deliberately teach Yellow Uyghur for their children, but this situation rarely occurs in the Yellow Uyghur region). However, after entering school, children basically do not speak the Yellow Uyghur language anymore.

When registering for their *Hukou*<sup>5</sup> children of intermarried parents generally identify themselves as “Yellow Uyghur”, their main purpose being to improve their chances to attend college or university and enjoy related government initiated preferential policies that add points to minority students’ college entrance examination scores. This kind of bonus point system is, in fact, a type of government covert policy aimed to encourage minority students to attend Han Chinese schools instead of national minority school which use minority languages as the language of instruction. According to the policy, if minority students enroll in Han Chinese schools (including primary, middle and high school) and take their college entrance examination with Han Chinese students, they are given bonus points according to different bonus points are added to a minority’s students score based on their home province and other standards.

Referring to this situation, one informant explained that “*Yellow Uyghur children who are born to an intermarried family with one parent being a Yellow Uyghur and the other being a Han Chinese can only speak Mandarin Chinese, and their parents do not teach Yellow Uyghur. A Yellow Uyghur girl who married a Han Chinese reported their children as “Yellow Uyghur”, because, the couple wanted to enjoy the country’s preferential policies for minority students when it was time for their children to take college entrance examinations*”. When we conducted a survey in the Yellow Uyghur area, we visited a Yellow Uyghur intermarriage family whose husband is a Muslim Chinese and woman is Yellow Uyghur. The woman could speak the Western Yellow Uyghur language and Mandarin Chinese, but Mandarin Chinese was spoken at home, so her son only knows Mandarin Chinese and does not understand his mother lan-

guage, even though he identifies himself with his mother's nationality - Yellow Uyghur.

In Yellow Uyghur areas radio and television broadcasts are in Mandarin not in Yellow Uyghur languages. The Sunan county government located in Hongwansi occasionally can receive radio broadcast in Mongolian or Tibetan pop songs or folk songs, but Yellow Uyghur songs cannot be heard. Therefore, with the popularity of television and all the modern communication tools to use, Yellow Uyghurs are constantly receiving modern information, but at the same time, these modern communication tools encourage Yellow Uyghurs to accept the language of mainstream society, lifestyle, way of thinking and values. This trend will inevitably reduce the scope that Yellow Uyghur language is used.

**Yellow Uyghur's use of language attitudes:** Some of the reasons noted above directly impact Yellow Uyghur's attitudes towards their use of language. Currently in Yellow Uyghur society, the elderly has more obvious and stronger attitudes toward the use of their mother language than the young generations. This is prominently reflected in elderly persons' dissatisfaction towards those young people who forget their mother language and those who can speak their mother language but do not use it in their daily life or at home. Some young people after leaving school, enlisting in the military, or starting work forget their native language in a matter of years or at the very least cannot speak it fluently anymore. Elderly people frown upon this and believe that children are changing in a negative way and are forgetting the language and culture that their ancestors have left behind. As a result, many older people believe that these children are rapidly growing apart from their own nationality.

The author conducted his first survey in this region nearly nine years ago, but still remembers the remarks made by one elder Yellow Uyghur women who said:

*"O My child, our children are like the Han Chinese today, and the people are my generations are very sad! Before our children go to school we speak, the same language eats the same food, but it all changes after they go to school. They are becoming more and more alienated from us, with every day they speak less and less of their mother language. One of my children went to Lanzhou for college and later married a Han girl. They decided to settle in Lanzhou, and it seems that he*

*never comes to visit me anymore. His child cannot even speak one word of Yellow Uyghurs. The language and culture that our great ancestors have left us will be cut off. I am very sad.”*

Correspondingly, there are stronger feelings towards language among yellow Uyghur persons who preservation his/her native language than those who has completely lost the mother language or those who can understand but cannot speak it. In the survey, the author has had found most of Yellow Uyghur think that when two Yellow Uyghurs meet each other should be speak with their mother language, otherwise feeling uncomfortable. Among the other part of Yellow Uyghur who has loss of their native language or disfluency in Yellow Uyghur, although many people show a kind feeling of unfortunately. In Sunan County, we often heard the expression “*half Yellow Uyghur.*” This expression was used to describe Yellow Uyghurs who could not speak (or could only speak a little) Yellow Uyghur language. This expression suggests that Yellow Uyghurs who can speak Yellow Uyghur fluently attach great importance to their language.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of reasons why the Yellow Uyghur language has become an “endangered language,” however, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, and educators all agree one of the primary reasons the Yellow Uyghur language is endangered is because that that during the course of schooling Yellow Uyghur children almost entirely receive a Mandarin Chinese education, students learn English as a foreign language, and teachers use Mandarin Chinese almost exclusively as the language of classroom instruction (even in English classes, Mandarin Chinese is used to teach). In addition, during the process of socialization, ethnic minority children are expected to fully accept the values of mainstream society and adopt a national outlook, which in practice means to adopt a Han-Chinese way of thinking and way of life. At the same time, these ethnic minority students drift away from their mother culture and ethnic lifestyle. The family values and ideas of marriage of this group of Yellow Uyghurs are much different from their parents’ generation. Young Yellow Uyghurs are more willing to speak Chinese and intermarry. With the popularity of intermarriage increasing, the use of the Yellow Uyghur language among Yellow Uyghurs who intermarry is decreasing rapidly. Furthermore, the children of parents who intermarry do not speak the Yellow Uyghur

language and do not understand Yellow Uyghur culture. The covert concept mainstream society has towards minority languages and cultures, which de-emphasizes these languages and cultures, has a direct impact on the social and cultural societies of those groups like the Yellow Uyghurs, and young “Sinicized” Yellow Uyghurs have basically adopted an attitude that the ethnic languages and cultures of their parents are useless.

As the use of Yellow Uyghur language is decreasing, the “generation gap” and cultural discontinuity is becoming more evident and many oral traditions and intangible parts of Yellow Uyghur culture, because they are not being passed down to the younger generation, are becoming extinct. Currently there are only a few members Yellow Uyghur society who can sing the “ancient” folk songs, tell the “ancient” stories and legends, and with each death of these Yellow Uyghurs, the person is carrying with them a “library” of their culture.

During my field research, the fact that many Yellow Uyghurs did not speak the Yellow Uyghur language and the community of Yellow Uyghurs did not differ too much from rural Han Chinese communities left the deepest impression in me. Likewise, my research indicates that many Yellow Uyghurs would like schools to teach both Mandarin Chinese and the Yellow Uyghur language as well as Yellow Uyghur history and culture. However, the suggestions and opinions of these Yellow Uyghurs aimed to establish a “bilingual” system of education (Yellow Uyghur language and Mandarin Chinese) do not seem to have received the respect and understanding of the government and schools. Every Yellow Uyghur who knows the Yellow Uyghur language is well aware that the use of their language by members of the Yellow Uyghur population is decreasing rapidly and that their mother language has come one of China’s “endangered languages.” Thus, the current treatment towards the subjective attitudes of mother languages cannot avoid the objective reality of the contradictions that emerge. There are two main aspects of this: First, maintain their own national language and accept the contradictions of Mandarin Chinese. That is to say Yellow Uyghur families who live Yellow Uyghur communities should study and accept their native culture for important occasions, but understand that their children will have to learn Mandarin Chinese and accept Han Chinese culture in schools. Yellow Uyghurs have long been faced with the choice of receiving a Han Chinese education and improving their “cultural quality” or retaining their national language. Second, Yellow Uyghurs

should retain their national language, national culture, and the desire to use their national language in an environment that does not emphasize its use. Reasonable solutions to these contradictions may help to protect the use of the Yellow Uyghur language.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Although the “Yellow Uyghurs” are often referred in English as the “Yugurs,” I prefer “Yellow Uyghurs” a term that was commonly used especially prior to the 1990s.
- <sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted between 5 November to 20 December in 2001, and covering 11 Yellow Uyghur’s village, total 330 householders has answered the questionnaire, among them of which 38.8% belong to the eastern Yellow Uyghur and, 61.2% of Western Yellow Uyghur.
- <sup>3</sup> Today nobody has used Yellow Uyghur language in this village, they have been renounced their language at least end of the Qing Dynasty, already switched to Han Chinese and Han Chinese has become their language of communication. There are more than 1000 Yellow Uyghur in this township, and mainly are Western Yellow Uyghur.
- <sup>4</sup> The Sunan Yellow Uyghur Autonomous County Education Bureau, Document About Carry out Ethnic Minority Language in the Second Classroom Activity, [Document number: Sunan Education Bureau 2003/199, Date: 11 Sept. 2003].
- <sup>5</sup> A *Hukou* (Chinese: 户口; pinyin: hùkǒu) or *huji* (Chinese: 户籍; pinyin: hùjī) refers to the system of residency permits which dates back to ancient China, where household registration is required by law in People’s Republic of China. A household registration record officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such as *name, parents, spouse, and ethnic national belonging, date of birth, etc.* Chinese ID card including *Full name - in Chinese characters only*, Non-Chinese ethnic names and foreign names are transliterated into Chinese. *Gender* - containing one character for either male (男) or female (女). *Ethnicity* - as officially listed by the People’s Republic of China. *Date of birth* - listed in the Gregorian calendar format, in YYYY年MM月DD日 order. *Domicile* - the individual’s permanent residence as dictated by the Identity Card Bill of the People’s Republic of China. *Identification number, Photo of the individual.*

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# Tehlike Altındaki Dil: Sarı Uygurca

Abdürreşit Celil Karluk\*

## Öz

Sarı Uygurca Çin’de resmi azınlık olarak tanınan Sarı Uygurların dilidir. Günümüzde Sarı Uygurların mutlak çoğunluğu Çin’in Gansu Eyaletine bağlı Sunan Sarı Uygur Özerk İlçesinde yaşarlar. Son veriler Sarı Uygurların toplam nüfuslarının 15 bin civarında olduklarını, ancak yarısından daha az bir bölümünün kendi dillerini günlük yaşantılarında kullanabildiğini göstermektedir. Mandarin Çincesinin Sarı Uygur toplumunda zorunlu eğitim dili olarak yaygınlaştırılması sosyal ve kültürel yaşamın her alanında Çincenin yaygın iletişim dili olması sonucunu ortaya çıkartmıştır. Makale sosyal antropoloji ve dil sosyolojisi açısından Sarı Uygur Türkçesinin neden yok olmaya yüz tuttuğunu Çin’in azınlık bölgelerinde tavizsiz olarak uygulamakta olduğu tek dilli ve tek kültürlü eğitim politikasına odaklanarak inceleyecektir. Sarı Uygur bölgesindeki kültürel Çinlileşme akabinde ortaya çıkan “karışık evlilikler” ve kaybolan “etnik hafıza” Sarı Uygurların her alanda marjinalleşmesi sürecini hızlandırmıştır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Tehlikedeki Diller, Sarı Uygur, Azınlık, Çin Eğitim Sistemi, Karışık Evlilik

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# Сарыг-югурский язык – под угрозой исчезновения

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## Аннотация

Сарыг-югурский – название языка, на котором говорят жёлтые уйгуры (сарыг югуры), тюркский народ, составляющий одно из признанных меньшинств в Китае. Жёлтые уйгуры проживают в основном в Сунань-Югурском автономном уезде провинции Ганьсу, что на северо-западе КНР. Жёлтые уйгуры делятся на две территориальные группы, одна, западная, говорит на тюркском сарыг-югурском языке, другая, восточная, — на монгольском шира-югурском языке. Они общаются между собой на китайском языке. Жёлтые уйгуры исповедуют преимущественно тибетский буддизм. По данным статистики, количество жёлтых уйгуров составляет около 15 тысяч человек. Менее половины из них использует родной язык в повседневном общении. Для жёлтых уйгуров образование на китайском языке является обязательным, что привело к распространению среди них китайского языка как языка общения. Причины угроз исчезновения сарыг-югурского языка рассматриваются в статье с точки зрения антропологии и языковой социологии, в контексте жесткой образовательной политики китайского государства по отношению к меньшинствам. В результате культурной китаизации в Сунань-Югурском уезде имеют место смешанные браки, утрачивается этническая память, что ускоряет процесс маргинализации жёлтых уйгуров во всех сферах жизни.

## Ключевые слова

языки в опасности, жёлтые уйгуры, меньшинство, китайская образовательная система, смешанные браки

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