

An Ethnic Community Local Organisation with Multifaceted Networks to Help Save Their Endangered Languages in North-West of China

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Abstract

The Yugur, also known as the Yellow Uyghur, are one of the smallest ethnic minorities in north-western China. Yugur people speak three distinct languages: Western Yugur (WY), a Turkic language; Eastern Yugur (EY), a Mongolic language, both with about 2,000 speakers; and the local Mandarin Chinese dialect. Both Western and Eastern Yugur are critically endangered, and maintaining these languages faces challenges.

Some Yugur people are supporting school-based language maintenance. So far there have been four main efforts for school-based maintenance, with two efforts failing and two continuing, all at primary school level. The fifth major effort has been largely due to a local organisation, Yugur Education Academy (YEA), which has spearheaded relationships with the local county government, schools, teachers, parents and prominent academics to help preserve the Yugur languages though trust, with some success.

Current situation of the languages

Yugur languages are mostly used within the community, mainly at home, but been classified as 'moribund'.

❖ Situation of language decline

- Lack of child speakers
- Many young parents cannot speak the languages
- Lack of consciousness about desirability or feasibility of Yugur languages use and revitalisation **BUT** it is growing (attitude)
- Language development contrasting economic development

❖ Learning Mandarin & English as ethnic minority students

- Mandarin Chinese is the dominant language
- Mandarin & English are compulsory subjects, but Yugur languages are not
- Parents want best for children – cannot see the value of learning own languages, but they consider Mandarin and English more important for their future careers

Major efforts in school maintenance

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| November 1983 – July 1984 | Huangnipu Primary/Secondary School (WY) | (failed) |
| September 2003 – July 2004 | Hongwan Primary School (WY) | (failed) |
| September 2007 (EY) / March 2008 (WY) | County Kindergarten | (still going) |
| September 2012 | Hongwan Primary School (only Grade 1 & 2) (WY & EY) | (still going) |
| September 2016 (Fifth effort) | County schools and regional schools (WY & EY) | (still going) * effort mostly due to YEA |

Reasons for failure/success

| Failure | Success |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of community recognition of the value of the languages | Obligatory attendance |
| Lack of teaching resources or references | Parent support for kindergarten: some parents/grandparents come to class and teach and interact |
| Lack of trained language teachers | Strong support from local community academics, advocates and school principals |
| Language as extra- curricular activity | Strong support from the Yugur Education Academy |
| Lack of extensive local county government support | Quota of language teachers in 2015 assigned by the local government |

An ethnic minority local organisation: Yugur Education Academy (YEA)

Background

- ❖ Fifth major effort in school maintenance due largely to YEA.
- ❖ The then principal of a local secondary school, who is a Yugur language speaker, is the head of the academy.
 - Strong motivation and belief in preserving Yugur language.
 - Liaison with the local government as a school principal to establish YEA in August 2014, where the office is located in the school.
- ❖ Took over managing the yearly teachers' workshop, 'Yugur Culture into Schools - Teacher's Training'.
- ❖ With its strong connections with the community and reputation receives donations from charity sponsorship, which provides the majority of funding for the academy.
- ❖ Although the school is under the administration of the local government, the academy functions more like a community-based organisation in some respects – since some of the members collaborate from outside the school, such as Yugur academics who are working in different universities.

Main efforts

- ❖ Organise forums and teacher's training and invite scholars to give talks, which builds connection with academics to provide research on education practice and various fields to share information.
 - Tries to establish relationships with various prominent scholars to help the community, and gains their trust through their reputation when dealing with grassroots community members.
- ❖ The trainees of the teachers' workshop who were teachers from different local schools and were chosen as potential language teachers, but not necessarily language teachers but could speak their own ethnic language. The trainers were some educated Yugur community members, including principals, academics and educators.
 - Built connections and recruited trainers through inviting them, emphasising the importance of language teaching and through recognised YEA's positive influence in the community.
- ❖ Active in improving and recording its activities and functions by issuing internal publications in the field of education.

❖ Yugur language curriculum

- From 2016, began to develop a Yugur language curriculum for different school levels, from kindergarten to secondary school.
- Organised all the language teachers and related educators to develop the curriculum at that time further.
- In 2018, the county Education Bureau and the YEA finalised a trial version of the curriculum which was implemented.



Results in quotas for teachers and placements

- ❖ By the end of 2015, the local government had made an agreement, set a quota, and opened recruitment for ethnic language teachers
 - It included three Eastern Yugur speakers, two Western Yugur speakers and one Tibetan speaker to teach three different languages.
 - All were young university graduates, but graduated in other areas besides education and are native speakers of their languages.
 - They received more than half a year of training run by the YEA, where the training included language data collection, some basic transcription, grammar and teaching material development.
- ❖ The local government and the YEA assigned them to different schools, including remote township schools, where they started teaching from September 2016.

Conclusion and Discussion

- ❖ YEA efforts and influence have made a significant step in revitalisation of Yugur languages and because it is community based, they responding to the community, can decide the direction of keeping their languages alive.
- ❖ We can compare YEA efforts against the section for **Reasons for failure/success:**

| Countering failure | Indicating success |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Compulsory teaching Yugur languages enhances community recognition of the languages | Obligatory attendance |
| Development of curriculum and teaching materials | Support from local community academics, schools and advocates |
| Training university graduates as languages teachers | A quota for language teachers given by the local government |
| Local government support after a series of requests | |

- ❖ A major effort will be needed to effectively protect endangered languages around the world. This will require the joint efforts of government, schools, communities, parents, media and related scholars.
 - YEA is an example of an ethnic minority local organisation who can help revitalise their language.
 - It is a grassroots organisation from community members, networking and working with local government, local community, Yugur scholars, advocates and school principals and teachers.