


Spring 2013

# Language Shift and Development: A Case Study of Zhongdian Southern Khams Language Vitality

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## Recommended Citation

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Language Shift and Development:

A Case Study of Zhongdian Southern Khams Language Vitality

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Independent Study Project

SIT Study Abroad: Yunnan, China

May 2013

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The fields of language endangerment and maintenance address language shift overwhelmingly in the context of a local language being replaced by that of a surrounding oppositional dominant cultural group. There are, though, situations in which a local language is competing with the dominant variety of the wider cultural group to which it belongs. How a situation like this is dealt with by linguists and language planners depends largely on the recognition of participant tongues as their own languages or one as a dialect of another. Reversing language shift for a “dialect” is difficult to garnish institutional and financial support for if its “mother language” is not endangered.

This paper is a case study of one such language: the variety of Tibetan local to Zhongdian, Shangri-la County of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan. Through an examination of the linguistic vitality of the local Tibetan variety, I discuss factors that have contributed to the language shift of local Tibetans to the regional Chinese variety. Reviewing Zhongdian Tibetan’s localized maintenance reveals the threat posed to it by Literary Tibetan and other prestigious forms.

#### Acknowledgements



I am indebted to an immense number of people, not only for their assistance in this project, interviews, information, and introductions, but also for the friendship and support I received during my month in Zhongdian's Old Town. Unfortunately, for reasons of anonymity, I cannot give all of these individuals recognition here. I hope that those with whom I shared stories, meals, and good times are aware of the great help they have been to me and that our continued friendships will allow me many more opportunities to express my gratitude to them. Specifically, I would like to thank my adviser, linguist extraordinaire Ellen Barteo, who provided me with uplifting conversation and fantastic resources. Her outstanding work on the speech varieties of the region is admirable. I am unendingly thankful for her willingness to share her knowledge and research with me.

The passion that many in Zhongdian expressed for ensuring the continued integrity of their culture and quality of life for their people was invigorating and inspiring. The ambition that fills Zhongdian and the great amount of effort invested on the parts of Tibetans young and old in community projects promises a prideful future and vital tongues. Thank you for the motivation and positive example.

My last thanks go out to the little things that made my time in Zhongdian that much more enjoyable. They are: Tibetan mountains, fresh air, coffee, gooey chocolate brownies, and Triple S Threat.

Language Shift and Development:  
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*Every valley has its own dialect*

*and every lama has his own sect.*

-Tibetan Proverb<sup>1</sup>

Numbering nearly 300,<sup>2</sup> the languages of the People's Republic of China (PRC) represent a great range of linguistic diversity. Alongside the Chinese regionlects also exists a great array of ethnic minority languages. Although the constitution of the PRC guarantees the right of minorities to use and develop their languages,<sup>3</sup> they are proving to be no exception to the global trend of language endangerment. In this paper I will examine the language shift and revitalization of one community in Zhongdian,<sup>4</sup> a tourist town in a Tibetan autonomous county of Yunnan Province.

Before I delve into the particulars of Zhongdian, I will provide a general overview of language endangerment.<sup>5</sup> In the second section I introduce the site of the study and relevant information related to its geographic location, history, ethnic makeup, and economic development. Following the linguistic situation in Zhongdian, I will briefly

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<sup>1</sup> It was reported that this saying is used frequently around Zhongdian. I am uncertain about its pervasiveness in other Tibetan areas.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, M. P., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2013). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, seventh edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://ethnologue.com>. The number of languages listed in the Ethnologue for China is 299.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Yuxiang, & Phillion, J. (2009). Minority language policy and practice in China: The need for multicultural education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 11(1), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Although Zhongdian and the county of which it is the capital are now both officially called Shangri-la, throughout this paper I will consistently refer to the county as Shangri-la and the county seat where this study takes place as Zhongdian to avoid confusion. The Tibetan name, Gyalthang, is still in use among local and outside Tibetans.

<sup>5</sup> In doing this, I recognize that I risk engaging in an unnecessarily lengthy discussion on language shift, its causes, implications, and how linguists try to prevent it. However, because I have encountered enough individuals who require convincing of why language loss is a tragedy and something to be avoided, I feel this is a risk I must take and is unavoidable if the following study is to be meaningful to readers.

describe the main Tibetan language ‘dialects’, specifically the variety of Southern Khams local to Zhongdian. In the third section will draw from my field notes and interviews<sup>6</sup> to assess the vitality of the language at hand using the UNESCO framework.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, I will speculate about the possibility of a Tibetan language renaissance taking place in Zhongdian’s near future and the potential of the local variety to be its model.

### **Linguistic Diversity and Language Death**

Yunnan Province is a well known pocket of diversity. While accounting for only 4% of China’s landmass, Yunnan contains 50% of the entire country’s plant and animal species<sup>8</sup> and is home to 26 of China’s 56 recognized nationalities.<sup>9</sup> Its rich variety of ecology, plant and animal life, and ethnolinguistic groups, makes Yunnan an exemplary case of Luisa Maffi’s biocultural diversity<sup>10</sup>, which UNESCO recognized in 2003 to be a correlation between ecological and linguistic diversity. Along with their recognition came the official UNESCO opinion that preservation of linguistic diversity must parallel and work in accordance with environmental protection efforts.<sup>11</sup> As the “progress” of modernity wreaks havoc on the integrity of the world’s ecosystems, urbanization and

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<sup>6</sup> In accordance with the wishes of my contacts and informants, I will not use any names or provide any identifying information. While I do not believe my work to be particularly sensitive politically or threatening to the status quo, any discussion of language vitality will inevitably touch on policy issues and, especially when the subject matter is Tibetan

<sup>7</sup> Brenzinger, M., Yamamoto, A., Aikawa, N., Koundioubu, D., Minasyan, A., Dwyer, A., . . . Zepeda, O. (March 2003). Language vitality and endangerment. Document presented by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages to the *International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages held in Paris*.

<sup>8</sup> Pei Shengji. (May 2012). Biodiversity and cultural diversity of Yunnan and its conservation. Presented at the *International Symposium on Biocultural Diversity Conservation held in Kunming, Yunnan, China*. Video of the presentation accessed at <http://forestculture.cn/cbcdc/article.htm?projectID=af1210250017>

<sup>9</sup> At the time of Nationalities Identification (*minzu shibie*), the 1953-1954 Yunnan Province Census contained around 200 separate ethnic self-designations. Mullaney, T. S. (2011). *Coming to terms with the nation: Ethnic classification in modern China*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press. p. 35-36

Table 1

<sup>10</sup> Brenzinger, M., et al. (March 2003). p. 6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

incorporation into the global capitalist economy also threatens the vitality of languages spoken by those trying to cope in a changing world. Yunnan is deserving of attention in these arenas.

Estimates for the number of languages currently spoken on earth range from around 6,000 to nearly 7,000.<sup>12</sup> Of these, the 83 biggest are spoken by 79.4% of the world's population while 3,586 are spoken by a mere 0.2% of the world's population.<sup>13</sup> To compound this shocking disparity in language populations, 50% of all languages are not being transmitted to children and are losing speakers.<sup>14</sup> Experts believe that by the end of this century, 90% of our languages will cease to be spoken. That equates with approximately 700 remaining languages within our lifetime.<sup>15</sup>

### **At Risk Languages**

The languages currently under the greatest threat are those spoken by marginalized communities. These may be Indigenous peoples confronted with loss of land through colonialism or environmental degradation, or contingents of a society whose economic and social status is lower than the dominant group. When the traditional lifeways of an Indigenous population are disrupted so greatly that they are unable to continue them, it is common for them to be absorbed either into the intruding group's

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<sup>12</sup> Brenzinger, M., & de Graaf, T. (2006). Documenting endangered languages and language diversity. *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*. (EOLSS 6.20B.10.3). Retrieved from <http://www.eolss.net/Sample-Chapters/C04/E6-20B-1003.pdf>. p. 1

and  
Lewis, M. P., & Simons, G. F. (September 2009). Assessing endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS. Paper submitted to the *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* for the special issue on endangered languages. p. 4

<sup>13</sup> Refer to Appendix A for the graphic containing this information. Anderson, G., & Harrison, K. D. (2007). *Living Tongues: Institute for Endangered Languages*. Retrieved from <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/langhotspots/globaltrends.html>

<sup>14</sup> Brenzinger, M., et al. (March 2003). p. 2

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

society or a neighboring one, where they are then likely to occupy marginalized positions of low socioeconomic status. Consequently, their languages will also be associated with little prestige and have little perceived value.

As states expand and urbanization accelerates, multilingual societies increase in number as well as complexity. Diglossia is a common characteristic of multilingual societies, that occurs when a single language is not used in all areas of life, and instead two or more languages are utilized in the depending on the domain in which a speaker finds him or herself at any given moment. Even in monolingual societies, people utilize different speech forms in accordance with the given domain, which are social spaces carrying an association with a particular language determined by who the interlocutors are, what the topic is, and where the conversation takes place.<sup>16</sup> These conform rather nicely to societal institutions, such as that of family, education, religion, marketplace, and government. The stratification of different languages within a hierarchy of usage domains creates relative power and prestige associations with the society's languages. Languages with little prestige that find no application in domains associated with economic advancement and social mobility may still occupy casual or family conversation. However, their perceived "uselessness" will allow the dominant, "better" language to eventually replace them in these remaining domains as well. Without a concentrated revitalization or maintenance effort, this process of language shift will continue down the spectrum of language vitality until children no longer learn the local language as their L1, at which point it is considered endangered. When the youngest remaining speakers are the elderly great-grandparent generation, the language is

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<sup>16</sup> Brenzinger, M., & de Graaf, T. (2006). p. 4

moribund and will become dormant when there are no living L1 speakers. A language is only extinct, however, when there is no longer a group claiming ethnic or historical ties to it. This signifies an ethnolinguistic group's complete assimilation into a dominant group's culture and linguistic habits, and the erasure of an identity that a people used to use to define themselves.

### **More than Words**

The massive loss of linguistic diversity in our lifetime has linguists mobilizing in what seems like a hopeless effort to document and develop the languages that still exist. Every language is a unique cultural expression of the people who speak it, containing within it their history, worldview and cultural wisdom, as well as knowledge of local plants, animals, and land management techniques. As such, each language is an invaluable manifestation of the human experience and potential guide to solving some of our contemporary medical and environmental issues.

More significant than the myriad importance of language diversity for academia and science, however, is what the death of a language signals about the state of equality in our modern, ever-developing nations. The 83 languages that are spoken by the majority of the human population, as you may guess, are the languages of the wealthiest countries; those that have spread their languages by conquest in a colonial past (and, some may say, neo-imperialistic present) and now control the global economy. Under the dominance of another group, individuals abandon their languages because they are no longer viable as vehicles with which to maneuver in the society where they live. Being able to live one's own language and cultural, I argue, is a human right. The

endangerment of the world's languages on this unprecedented scale is the result of widespread structural violence that privileges a dominant group. Conversely, a people's ability to maintain their language is a display of self-determination, as well as a show of respect for diversity on the part of the state in which they live.

### **Saving a Language**

Among the various measures of language vitality, intergenerational transmission is usually categorized as the single most significant factor. When the home and familial domains where this natural transmission from older to younger speakers takes place begin to erode, a language transitions from 'safe' to 'definitely endangered'.<sup>17</sup> With languages in this state, community members may seek partnership with outside specialists and language planners to begin a process of restoring the domains of their language, ensuring its continued use and transmission to younger generations.<sup>18</sup>

This process generally begins with documentation. Linguists will record native speakers using the language in natural settings and talking about culturally relevant topics or telling traditional stories. Documentation includes the writing of a comprehensive grammar of the language and word lists or a dictionary. If the language has no orthography, one should be developed with the guidance of community members. In the cases of some Native American communities in North America, tradition dictates that the language must not be written down. The difficulties this presents must be skillfully and

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, M. P., & Simons, G. F. (2009).

<sup>18</sup> For a fantastic step-by-step guide to conducting a maintenance or revitalization effort, I recommend Grenoble, L. A., & Whaley, L. J. (2006). *Saving languages: An introduction to language revitalization*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. There are many other frequently referenced guides but this is the only one I have read and can recommend.

thoughtfully navigated to achieve the next step, standardization. Again with determination in the hands of the community, standard rules overriding all oral speech variation should be decided upon. Having a standard for language norms can strengthen the sense of authority that the language carries and is helpful in the creation and dissemination of teaching materials and methods. The proverb opening this paper appropriately speaks to the issue of great diversity within what is categorized as a single unified language. A community's agreement upon a standard for their language is not an easily accomplished feat. The issue of what variety will hold the authority of 'standard' is complex in the implications it has for speakers and their retention of the language. This will form a large component of my later discussion on the Zhongdian Tibetan variety.

After the solidification of this labor-intensive foundation, some sort of educational program should be implemented, whether they are in the form of immersion schooling for children, adult community education classes, or rely on the close partnership between fluent native speakers and younger learners. This is the most influential step in restoring the language to the home and social domains. Many revitalization efforts end here. Others seek to continue the development of the language by finding application for it in the domains of cyberspace, television, music, and news media. Using the language in these forms gives it a practicality in the everyday lives of speakers and encourages its continued use. Further, pursuing official recognition of a language or its institution in schools or government administration will achieve linguistic equality, lending it prestige as well as protection by law.



Having broadly introduced the field of endangered language maintenance and revitalization, some reasons why languages become endangered, what is at risk when languages are lost, and the magnitude of language extinction that we can expect to witness in our lifetimes, I will return to biologically diverse Yunnan.

### **Zhongdian**

Zhongdian, an urbanizing county seat with a well-established tourism infrastructure, is where I conducted my field research for this project from April 26 to May 17, 2013. Zhongdian is the economic and administrative center of Shangri-la County in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. While simultaneously occupying the Southeastern border of the Tibetan cultural area and Yunnan's Northwestern-most corner, Diqing has two other constituent counties aside from Shangri-la: Deqin and Weixi.<sup>19</sup> Zhongdian's name was officially changed to Shangri-La in 2002, the paradise in James Hilton's book *Lost Horizon*. Already a hub of commerce since the times of the Ancient Tea Horse Road, the name change marked a departure into the markets of domestic and international tourism. Although a local Chinese regionolect has long served as the language of interethnic communication for Tibetan, Bai, Naxi, and Han inhabitants, the increase in visitors and the dependence upon them for securing an economic livelihood has made knowledge of Chinese, especially standard *Putonghua*, more important than ever before.

The modern urbanization and changes to social and economic life in Zhongdian are compounded by the requirements of the education system, resulting in the infiltration of Chinese language into the home domains. The previous role of Chinese in Zhongdian

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<sup>19</sup> See maps in Appendix B

was to communicate with other ethnicities and trade in the interregional marketplace, thus preserving the in-group and familial domains of local languages. Now, however, Standard Mandarin is the language of education and socioeconomic advancement. As a result, already bilingual parents put more of an emphasis on Chinese in the early education of their children and have shifted away from the local Tibetan variety.

Aside from the obvious alterations tourism has had on the physical, economic, and linguistic landscapes of Zhongdian, it has also created a politically ‘safe’ area where Tibetans can display and celebrate their culture without arousing suspicion. Possessing and sharing cultural knowledge is encouraged within the new tourist economy as one of the primary drivers of this industry. This has attracted Tibetans from across Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), and many of various origin who were educated in India. These groups all represent regions with widely-recognized ‘strong’ Tibetan culture. Despite the fact that in Zhongdian, the designation *local* is synonymous with being hanicized, it is still sold to tourists as a Tibetan cultural destination. This allows these outsiders assume a position of authority on the culture and religious symbolism that tourists come to see, creating a complex, and at times, contentious social dynamic in Old Town.

### **Tibetan Languages**

Perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the segregated local and transplant Tibetan communities in Zhongdian is the linguistic distance between their varieties. Even locals who speak the Zhongdian variety are unlikely to cross the social boundaries separating them from the cultural authority in-group, and for two reasons. First, although

Tibetan is recognized as a single language and has a standardized written form, the range of speech varieties it contains is immense and many of them are mutually unintelligible. Second, varieties from other Tibetan areas enjoy a long literary tradition, lending them a certain level of prestige. As Zhongdian Tibetan has no tradition of writing, and to this day functional literacy in Tibetan remains uncommon for locals, the transplant community tends to view it as an inferior and incomprehensible pseudo form of the language, even contesting its legitimacy as a Tibetan language.

Tibetan is a Central Bodish language of the Tibeto-Burman family<sup>20</sup> that can be broken down into three commonly recognized dialect groups, Amdo,<sup>21</sup> Central<sup>22</sup>, and Khams. While the borders demarcating Tibetan autonomous regions, prefectures, and counties do not perfectly conform to the boundaries of dialect regions, Tibetan people will use these borders to explain the different ways of speaking Tibetan.<sup>23</sup> As such, Amdo areas include Gansu and Qinghai, although there are also speakers in Sichuan. The Central variety is only spoken in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and within many exile communities. Khams contains perhaps the most speech variation and covers the Tibetan areas of Yunnan, much of Tibetan Sichuan, and the eastern portion of the TAR.

Despite the pride in their varieties that many outsider Tibetans exhibit, when speakers from different regions interact, unless one of them has an ancestral tie to or has themselves spent time in the other's area, they communicate using Chinese. Depending

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<sup>20</sup> Bartee, E., & Hugoniot, K. (2013). Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>21</sup> Also spelled *Anduo* from the Chinese pinyin.

<sup>22</sup> Always referred to as Lhasa Dialect (*lasa yu*) in my conversations with people in Zhongdian. Written as Ü-Tsang elsewhere.

<sup>23</sup> See two maps in Appendix C, one showing the boundaries as people refer to them and the other depicting a more accurate and detailed dispersal of dialects and their constituent vernacular.

on their level of education and familiarity with one another, this can be either local Chinese vernacular or Standard Mandarin. In fact, the unintelligibility of equally prestigious dialects with comparable numbers of speakers<sup>24</sup> poses a problem for Tibetan intellectuals concerning themselves with a unified Tibetan nationalism. Many contacts told me that the de facto Tibetan *putonghua* is the language of Lhasa since it is the historical capital of Tibet. This did not at all agree with a scholar from Qinghai I mentioned it to once. She felt that a unifying Tibetan should incorporate aspects of all dialects. Whatever their position on the issue, the importance of a variety that all Tibetans can speak in order to avoid using Chinese, at least among themselves, and preserve their sociocultural identity is very salient for those participating in interregional Tibetan social networks..

### **Southern Khams Tibetan**

The topic of this paper, the form of Tibetan spoken in Zhongdian, is classified as a Southern Khams dialect. Resembling the diversity among the three major dialect groupings, the Tibetan varieties spoken in Diqing deviate greatly from Standard Khams as well as distinguish themselves from one another.<sup>25</sup> I spent a great deal of my time in the field trying to figure out who was speaking to whom using what location-based variety of Tibetan. I did the majority of these observations in a small cultural education environment. Those involved in the interactions were usually five males between the ages of 14 and 21. Occasionally there were additional males present; they included a

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<sup>24</sup> In Lewis, M. P., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (2013), Amdo has 1,800,000 and Central has 1,070,000 in the PRC. The data on Amdo comes from Lhungrub, C. (2005) and the data on Central is from the 1990 census.

<sup>25</sup> Refer to Appendix D for a map on which I roughly outlined approximate speech communities in Diqing. My adviser, Ellen Bartee, pointed them out and explained them to me, she did not assist in the sketching of this map and any inaccuracies or misrepresentations are my fault alone.

preteen monk in training, another student in his mid-twenties, a monk in his late twenties, an instructor in his thirties, and an elderly man. With the exception of the instructor, who is from an Amdo speaker, they all came from areas within the Khams dialect region. They include two from the TAR, two from Deqen, two from the natural villages outside of Zhongdian, and three from Dongwang.

The instructor almost only spoke *Putonghua* or local Chinese dialect with the others unless he was teaching them Literary Tibetan. As they all told me they only speak their home variety, contextual evidence suggested that these would be mutually intelligible because the boys all communicated with each other in Tibetan. The only exceptions to this were exchanges between the youngest boy and the student in his mid-twenties. Their speech would contain some Tibetan but was to a large extent Chinese. Also of note was that time words, such as the name of a month, ‘last week’, a day of the week or the time of day, were always expressed through Chinese borrowings.<sup>26</sup> Later revelations indicate that the boy’s ages, time spent living in a certain speech area, and time spent living in such close contact with one another may have influenced their ability to develop ways of communicating with one another. For example, the two from a Khams area of the TAR, I discovered, spent four years in Deqin before coming to Zhongdian, where they had already been for five months. They clearly had time to learn a Southern Khams variety in their time in Deqin and it is most likely that their home variety of Khams would not be sufficient for communication in these language environments. The remaining males are easy to account for; they have all spent at least a year together at the

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<sup>26</sup> It has been suggested that since these informants all come from rural village settings where time is irrelevant and usually simply referred to with the meal associated with that time of day, their daily lives had little application for words like this and so they were borrowed from the Chinese they learned in school. (Ellen Bartee, personal communication).

school, where they board and only rarely go home, therefore engaging with one another on an almost constant basis.

The last evidence I offer to highlight the distinctness of varieties in Diqing Prefecture comes from another educational setting in Zhongdian where students from villages across the prefecture board. I interacted with two Tibetan major classes, each representing a different grade in a three year vocational education to become teachers. One of them was composed of 27 students, nine girls and 18 boys, between the ages of 17 and 20. One girl's *minzu* was Naxi, though her father is Tibetan, and all the others were Tibetan. The other class was composed of 30 students, 16 girls and 14 boys, between the ages of 19 and 21. Aside from one Yi girl with no other connection to Tibetan communities or culture, the rest were all Tibetan. Their instructor is a Tibetan academic who speaks a rather mixed variety. During class he both presents information in a number of speech varieties and often elicits students' contributions to the building of this multi-dialectal shared knowledge of Tibetan, which the class can draw upon to speak with and understand one another. Clearly this teacher is concerned with the ability of Tibetans to understand others from their cultural group who speak a different variety. His approach seems to be effective; when I asked students about their home variety and which one they use to interact with one another, they overwhelmingly responded that their ways of speaking were different but because they had been classmates for two or three years they were able to understand one another.

Despite the low prestige of these varieties<sup>27</sup> and claims by Tibetans from other provinces that these are not actually Tibetan, they do, in fact, share a common ancestor with the prestigious varieties. In its development from its mother language, Zhongdian Tibetan has retained some archaic lexical and phonological forms the others have lost.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, it contains grammatical borrowings from Naxi, such as distinguishing between animate and inanimate nouns.<sup>29</sup> These factors contribute to the uniqueness of this variety and make it a valuable resource for linguists.

Differing however markedly from varieties like Amdo and Central, Southern Khams retains its classification as a dialect or a vernacular of standard Tibetan. Dialect status reinforces conceptions about its inferiority. The standardized umbrella language that stands above it is the authority on correctness and will be used in instruction where literacy education exists. Recall the importance of having a standard language to use for education and maintain a language through giving it practical domains and unifying the speech community. In instances such as that of Zhongdian Tibetan, however, the distance between it and the standard literary form result in the loss of a domain for a distinct variety that may be better described as a language.<sup>30</sup> In Nepal, for example, there are a large number of languages closely related to Tibetan that have also been classified and Central Bodish.<sup>31</sup> They may even be more similar to the forms used in Tibetan literacy education than the Zhongdian variety is, but because they are recognized by the

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<sup>27</sup> As Benzilan is home to a monastic community whose religious writings are well known, its speech variety enjoys high prestige. (Ellen Bartee, May 2013, personal communication).

<sup>28</sup> Bartee, E., & Hugoniot, K. (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ellen Bartee, May 2013, personal communication.

<sup>30</sup> The difference between a dialect and a language has been argued to be based largely upon political boundaries and not necessarily reflect linguistic reality. This is the reason for using the term 'variety', which reinforces the validity of all speech forms.

<sup>31</sup> Bartee, E., & Hugoniot, K. (2013).

Nepalese government as *languages*, these varieties are their own standard. Bartee commented that Tibetans in Zhongdian learning the literary form is akin to us, both native English speakers, having to learn Latin to be considered literate in our own language.<sup>32</sup>

As the local language domains within Zhongdian have been eroding, they have remained intact in rural areas immediately outside of the city. When I visited one informant's family there, the only person who could speak Chinese was his cousin, mid-to late-twenties female who had attended some school. The others we met, around the ages of 50 and up, were all monolingual speakers of Zhongdian Tibetan; though this stability may too turn to language shift following the consolidation of rural schools into centralized boarding schools. As the PRC's education infrastructure broadens, so does the enforcement of its compulsory education policy. This, along with the spatial closeness of these villages to the urban center of Zhongdian where these schools are established, ensure that children will spend the majority of their time in Chinese language environments away from their families and most important site of language transmission. The continued urbanization of Zhongdian is also likely to eventually alter the agricultural lifestyles of the villagers, indeed many younger people living there already work in the city. With education and employment moved to the Zhongdian Old Town, the same language shift that has made local vernacular Chinese the dominant language there can easily infiltrate the outlying rural villages.

In this section I have introduced the Tibetan dialect groupings, the linguistic distance that exists between them and within the Southern Khams varieties of Diqing, as

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<sup>32</sup> Personal communication.



well as some of the factors that have and are continuing to restrict the domains of Zhongdian's local Tibetan variety, replacing it with the local Chinese variety and Standard Mandarin. In the section that follows I will use the UNESCO framework of vitality assessment to provide a more detailed understanding of these factors and how they influence language shift.

### **UNESCO Language Vitality Index**

There are several indexes in use among scholars and researchers to assess the vitality of a language. Lewis and Simons adapted Fishman's pioneering Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) to better reflect the great amounts of research data from specific language situations that have amassed since his work in 1991. The new version, which they now use in their *Ethnologue*, is known as Expanded GIDS.<sup>33</sup>

Ascribing a quantitative grade, this scale is certainly helpful for comparing the status of multiple speech varieties. However, because it narrowly focuses its assessment on intergenerational transmission and official usage domains, I do not believe it well-suited to providing a thorough contextual description of a language. This information, while present in the language's *Ethnologue* profile, is itself not contained within the vitality grade. This flat understanding impedes language planners' access to knowledge about how the language is used, the attitudes people hold toward it, and whether it is in decline or in the process of being developed. In short, this scale does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of a language's actual vitality. Much more suited to the task of thick description is the UNESCO scale, which uses a dynamic set of 9 factors, rather than the two standing at the center of EGIDS. In addition to intergenerational

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, M. P., & Simons, G. F. (2009).

language transmission, these also include the absolute number of speakers, the number of speakers relative to the group's population, trends in existing language domains, the ability of the language to cope with new domains and media, the existence of literature and education materials, official attitudes and policy regarding minority languages in the society, the attitudes that speakers have toward their own language, and the amount and quality of documentation that exists.<sup>34</sup> Because my goal in this paper is an in-depth description of a single language's shift, I will utilize the UNESCO Vitality Index as a framework and discuss the list of factors at play in the case of the Zhongdian Tibetan variety. For each factor, the index provides six descriptions that correspond with a grade between 0 and 6, 6 being the most conducive to language maintenance and 0 indicating the worst condition for language vitality. Some of the grades carry a label indicating the degree or nature of what is being analyzed. For those that UNESCO did not create degree labels, I have thought up my own.

### **Intergenerational Language Transmission**

As previously noted, intergenerational language transmission is the natural passing of a language from older speakers to the children in their families. When children no longer learn to speak a language, it is decidedly endangered and will likely become moribund within one or two generations before there are no longer any living speakers or community members who remember any of the language.

In Zhongdian, plenty of people remember the language and even claim to speak it. Locals, however, rarely use this language. For greetings, people tend to use Tibetan and

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<sup>34</sup>Refer to Appendix E Table 1 for a summarizing table of the information and vitality assessment I will present.

may even being the conversation in the local variety. After a few exchanges, the vehicle of communication reverts to Chinese. The local families that I have met and spoken with, even if they wore traditional Tibetan clothing, did not use Tibetan in my presence. I do not believe that this was because I was a foreigner and they thought I would not understand. Unless they were speaking directly with me, they carried on their conversations in the local Chinese variety, which I also do not understand.

I met a few elementary school students who claimed they spoke the language but I was never able to verify this. As the local adults of parenting age with whom I interacted did not ever speak the language and only understand some of it passively at best, it is doubtful that their children would learn it. Even the grandparent generation in those families did not constitute fluent speakers. One grandmother, who was 57 years old, said they all knew and used both languages. To prove her point she threw out a few words such 'eat' and 'tea'. Her son later told me that she probably only understands 80% of the spoken language and he, in his forties, only understands 40%. Further, these parents do not encourage the use of the local language with their children because they want them to succeed when they enter school, which is conducted in Mandarin. Everyone I spoke with agreed that children do not know the language.

Due to the absence of fluent speakers even among the grandparent generation, the importance that parents place on the success of their children in a Chinese language education system, and the absence of any local children who knew any of the language indicated a state of critical endangerment. The index describes this grade as reflective of a language community in which there are only speakers in the great grandparent generation. While I am not certain that even they understand the language fully and use

it every day, the next grade indicates that there are no speakers left. Because at least partial knowledge of the language exists among many of the generations, I assign a 1, *critically endangered*.

### **Absolute Number of Speakers**

Based upon speaker community size, this factor intends to determine the vulnerability of the language to outside forces. As the scale of this evaluation is limited to the city of Zhongdian, any number of speakers is considered relatively small. While actual speaker numbers of any language are difficult to determine with any accuracy, it is already obvious in Zhongdian that the small speaker population of a single city has contributed to the susceptibility of their language to shift to one relevant to newl, concentrated economic and administrative pressures. With the knowledge that the speaker population within the already limited scope of a city is dwindling, we are sufficiently equipped to determine that the grade for this factor is a 1, *critically endangered*.

### **Proportion of Speakers to the Total Group Population**

As detailed above, the number of local speakers of this language is very small. Even the oldest generations possess incomplete knowledge of it. The low proportion of speakers within the local Tibetan community is exemplified by the use of the signifier *local* implying that the person being referred to only speaks Chinese. In accordance with the index assignment for speech communities in which ‘very few speak the language’, I assign a 1, critically endangered, to this factor.

### **Trends in Existing Language Domains**

The Zhongdian variety's domains of usage are severely limited. The language of religious instruction is a literary form, the language of compulsory state education is Standard Mandarin, and the language of most informal and social communication is local Chinese. The local variety is used in the marketplace only if the vendor from whom one is buying is from an outlying village. This is customary because the villagers rarely know any other language. Additionally, the ability to signify that one is from the same place earns a discounted price. Outside of this, the local Chinese variety is increasingly prominent as the language of the home and personal social interactions.

One informant told me that she is local and speaks the language. However, even when on the phone speaking to people with whom she claimed to always speak the local variety, she exclusively spoke the local Chinese. She took me to meet some old local women who spend their afternoons sitting in the sun in Old Town. Along the way, she exchanged greetings with several people. She grew up here and everyone knew her family, she was an insider in this local Old Town Tibetan in-group. With the elderly women we met, she also only spoke local Chinese. I wanted to know why, since they were all local, they insisted on using Chinese together. The traditionally-dressed ladies are unaccustomed to speaking the language with young people, they said. In their homes, the children only speak Chinese. This would seem like a valid explanation if they had not then resumed a conversation among themselves in local Chinese dialect. The 27 year-old local accompanying me said that their language was very 'tu', written with the Chinese graph meaning 'earth' (土). This does not communicate the negativity about their language that I initially believed. Instead, locals describe their language as *tu* because it is local (*bendi*) and using it with others explicitly signifies one's believed

closeness and familiarity with his or her interlocutor. Although I have not heard locals use the variety with one another to be able to observe the context in which the speech took place and the reactions that it elicited, if this woman's information is reliable, it is possible that she did not need to invoke these speech forms with those we encountered in Old Town because she grew up there and her membership in the in-group is already an established fact, requiring no reference.

Because the majority of speech domains in Zhongdian are dominated by other languages and those that do exist for the local variety are limited, one occupying a narrow niche in the marketplace and the other used for symbolic purposes, I believe this factor best aligns with a 2 on the index, *limited or formal domains*. The corresponding description for this grade and degree label says the restricted domains are social, which fits the cases I have just illustrated. However, it also stipulates that within these limited social domains the language serves multiple functions. Although this is not true for Zhongdian Tibetan, the next grade down the index does not acknowledge the sentimental, formal position that the variety still holds for locals.

### **New Domains and Media**

This factor refers to the adapted usage of the language in newly relevant domains that represent modernity and progress. For example, if speakers are both able to and actively are using their language in the most influential new domain of all, cyberspace, the language takes on a newfound practicality in the informational and social arenas. This also allows for the formation of a strong in-group of web users who can access and read information presented in this language online. The new domains include such things

as television programming or news, popular literature, magazines, and newspapers, as well as music that appeals to current trends and tastes of speakers. New domains are significant because as speakers engage with them, they catalogue the language and the culture it expresses. The relevance of these media in the lives of younger generations increasingly makes the language's application to them a requirement for the language's continued use.

To date, the Zhongdian variety has not been successfully introduced into new domains and media. This is set to change in the near future with the opening of a website that contains a comprehensive dictionary for Southern Khams Tibetan, containing multiple regional variations, alternate regional lexical entries, and their pronunciation. The local Tibetan television station currently only broadcasts in standard Khams. This, too, is scheduled to change in a few months with the introduction of a weekly 15-minute segment in the Zhongdian variety. There is only one publication that contains any vernacular writing<sup>35</sup> in Zhongdian Tibetan and it is not yet widely known among the population. Additionally, a common belief exists that the local language cannot be written down. Even though linguists in the area are actively pursuing this endeavor, the majority of locals remain illiterate in Tibetan. Until the newly developed expression of the variety in writing is accepted and implemented in literacy education, there remains no way of fully introducing it into cyber domains and encouraging its use. The publishing of the online dictionary will undoubtedly be a huge step in this direction, but because of current conditions and the inability to know how the forthcoming web and television media will develop, I categorize the degree of coping with new domains as a 1, *minimal*.

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<sup>35</sup> Brandt, J., & Barte, E. (n.d.). *A handbook to the birds of Shangrila*. No publisher listed.

### **Language Education and Literacy Materials**

As mentioned above, an acceptable standardization of the written local variety that reflects the development of the lexicon from Literary Tibetan is the focus of much attention among researchers and linguists in Zhongdian. The form has yet to be popularized and materials using it have not yet been developed on a large scale. While this may change in the near future, Tibetan education remains grounded in the literary style. For now, the orthography is not yet known to the community, so I must assign this factor a 0, *nonexistent*.

### **Official Attitudes and Dominant/Minority Language Policy**

Officially, the constitution of the PRC ensures the right of minorities to use and develop their languages. This was reaffirmed in article 36 of the 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities,<sup>36</sup> which states that, where conditions exist, schools administering predominantly to minority students should both lecture in and utilize textbooks in the students' language. Like many central directives in the PRC, this too did not often make it down to regional, prefecture, county, or local implementation. The realization of this education policy depends entirely on the interest and willingness of local officials. Although Diqing is a Tibetan autonomous prefecture, the schools here always teach and utilize materials in Chinese, relegating Tibetan language to an optional subject that is taught an hour per day starting in the second grade. Furthermore, the Tibetan granted official status, as discussed above, does not accurately reflect the speech of the local variety and as such is not conducive to its maintenance. Despite a professed

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<sup>36</sup> Wang Yuxiang, & Phillion, J. (2009). Minority language policy and practice in China: The need for multicultural education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 11(1), 3.



commitment to encouraging and supporting minority language development, little is undertaken in Zhongdian to place Tibetan, let alone the local variety, in an actual position of institutionalization. Therefore, I index the official attitudes toward the language as a 1, *forced assimilation*.

### **Community Attitudes**

A language can be on the verge of extinction, linguists and language planners ready to mobilize, but the only way for a revitalization effort to be successful is if the community who the language belongs to supports it. If the community is actively seeking assistance to restore language domains, the project is likely to be successful. If, however, the community has internalized views of their language as inferior and useless, they will not likely be willing to begin learning and speaking it. In a situation like this, the most linguists can do is document the language as thoroughly as possible so that it can be studied for language research and, perhaps, relearned by future generations of the community that left it behind.

Locals in Zhongdian claim a Tibetan identity and many even claim to speak their traditional language. Whether or not they actually do, the statement itself expresses both a desire to know and the sense that one *should* know. In this way, attitudes toward the language are positive, viewing it as a language of their identity and finding value in that. At the same time, the effort that these same individuals put into learning, practicing, maintaining their language and passing it on to their children is, they admit, inadequate. The outweighing of the local language's importance by the desire for easy navigation of the urbanizing tourism economy and Chinese language education system indicates an

attitude that I term *passive*, some support maintenance while others are indifferent or support language loss. This holds a 2 on the vitality index.

### **Documentation**

The amount and quality of documentation is especially relevant to situations of language shift or where a language is already in phases of endangerment. If documentation is diverse, rich, and thorough, it can be utilized in maintenance efforts and language planning. It is both the first and most time consuming aspect of a revitalization program, therefore the extent to which they already exist is an indicator of when development can begin and the scope that the effort may take.

Fortunately, Zhongdian Tibetan possesses a thorough grammar, a dictionary with a digital component, and some texts in development. The linguists working on this variety are also providing language documentation training to community members from Shangri-la. In the case of one man I met, his cooperation with linguists led him to record and transcribe his grandfather's folk sayings into a database. The information already compiled on the Zhongdian variety is impressive. The infrastructure in place for its further documentation is a positive sign of the language's future development. However, thorough texts about the language or written using the language remain to be published, and there are at present no everyday media available to the speech community. The degree of the documentation is *fair*, a 3 on the index.

### **The Future of the Variety in and around Zhongdian**

The completed assessment of the local variety within the UNESCO Vitality Index framework lends a grim view to the situation. While the documentation and development

efforts underway for the variety are moving at a powerful pace, the administration of education in general, and specifically Tibetan language education, must change significantly for local language's vitality to improve. A comparative assessment of the variety within urban Zhongdian and in the rural villages directly outside of town suggests that the variety is safe in non-urban areas and can continue to flourish in agricultural and pastoral communities.<sup>37</sup> However, because the urban center serves as the administrator of education and many economic sectors, the language shift in Zhongdian has the potential to spread to the surrounding villages as well.

With that being said, the opposite is also true. If local people are encouraged to hold positions of cultural authority within the tourism economy, they may invest more effort into learning their language. Similarly, the local government, keen on preserving and promoting the town as a tourist destination, may also encourage cultural preservation and increase access to Tibetan education in schools. New congressional directives to create more policy to support minority languages<sup>38</sup> are picked up by local officials and arguments are successfully made to the Education Bureau that mother-tongue-based literacy education in Tibetan is the most effective method, the local language will be in an optimal position to continue developing. The interest and participation of some locals in the documentation of what they believe to be a disappearing legacy of their culture is also positive. When a community decides that it wants its language and they engage others in its preservation, much more can be accomplished for both the official

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<sup>37</sup> Refer to Appendix E Table 2 for the summarized assessment of the variety in rural Zhongdian.

<sup>38</sup> Chen Yingying. (October 14, 2012). Yunnan minority languages to be promoted by law. 乐云网. Retrieved from <http://news.ynxxb.com/content/2012-10/14/N99461971058.aspx>

recognition and survival of the language. Ultimately, it is through its speakers that a language lives.

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<sup>39</sup> Note. All other interviewees and primary source persons have requested to remain anonymous.

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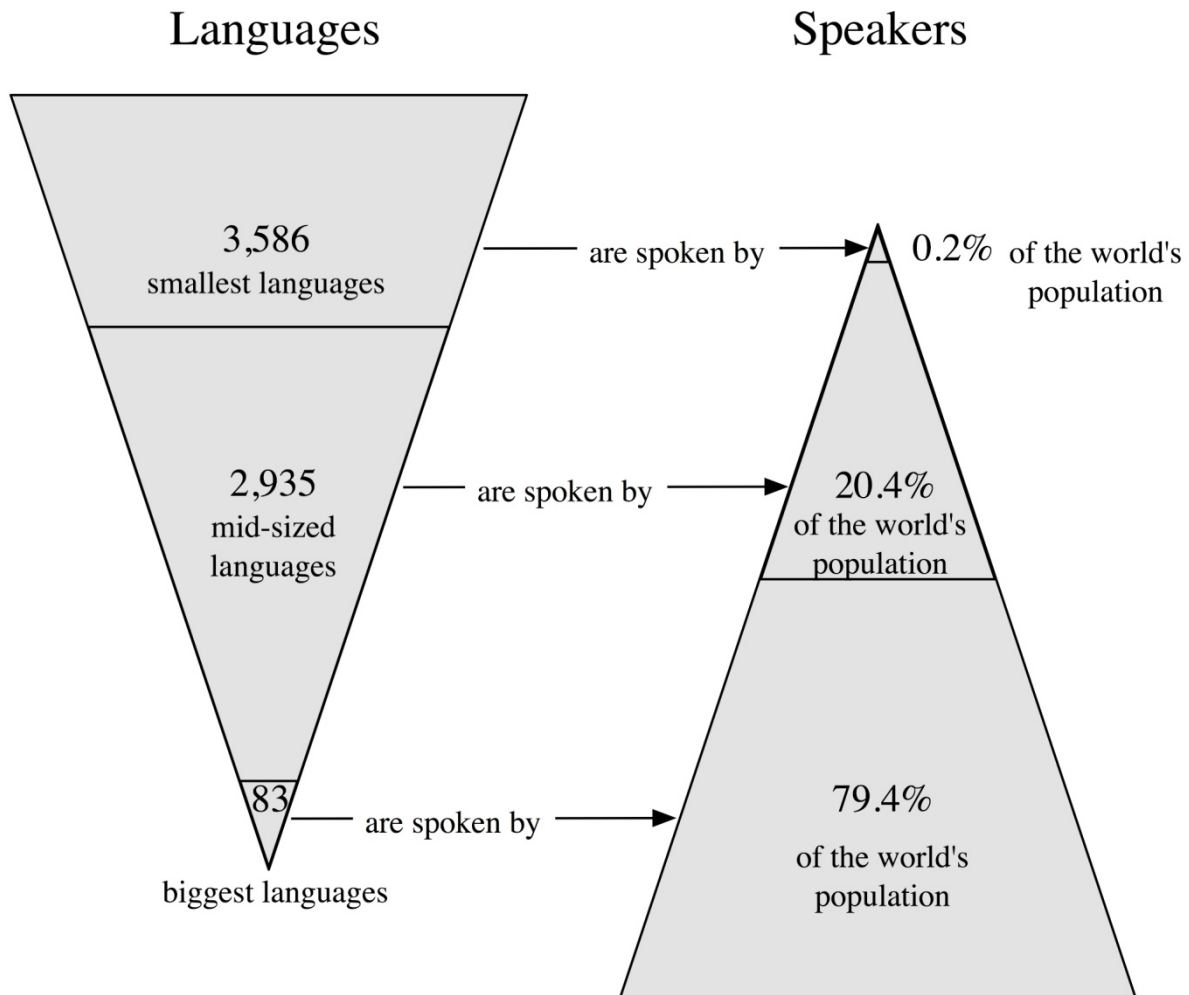
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## Appendix A

### World Languages and Speaker Populations

Graphic 1- Visual depiction of the imbalance between speaker populations for large and small languages.



Retrieved from

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/langhotspots/globaltrends.html>

## Appendix B

Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Map 1- Geographic location of study site within its prefecture and surrounding provinces, highways show accessibility to other tourist sites.

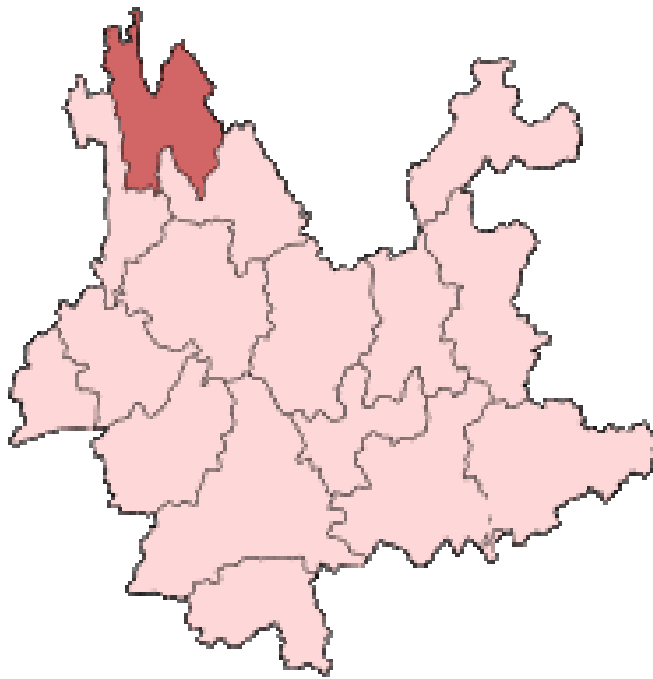


Retrieved from

<http://www.chinadiscover.net/china-tour/yunnanguide/yunnan-map-zhongdian.htm>

Map 2- Geographic location of study site within Yunnan Province.





Retrieved from

<http://blesschina.org/wp/what-we-do/locations/diqing/>

## Appendix C

### Tibetan Dialect Regions

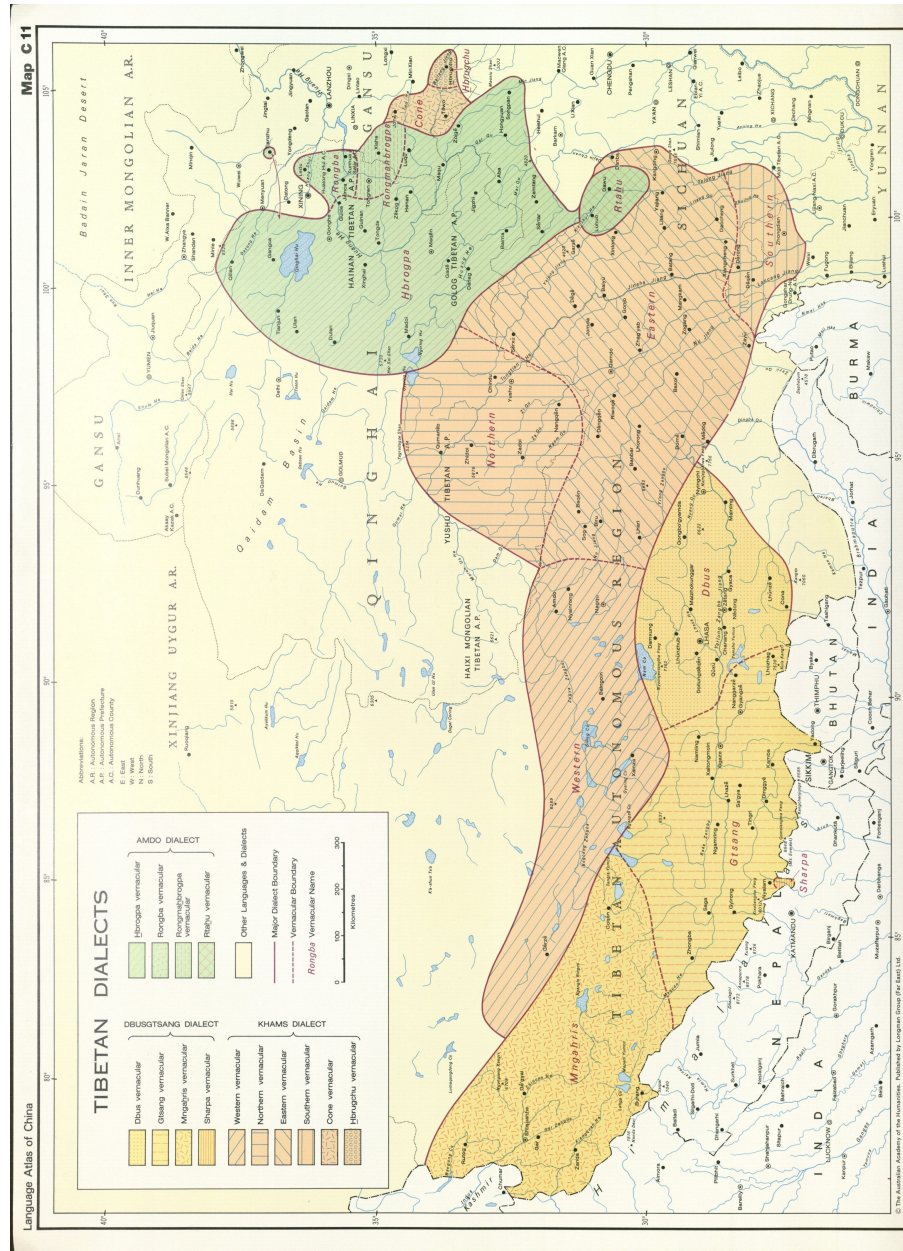
Map 3- Depicts the geographic distribution of dialects that informants frequently referenced.



Retrieved from

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetic\\_languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetic_languages)

Map 4- More accurate representation of variety distribution and legend highlighting level of diversity found within each major dialect.



Retrieved from

<http://www.llmap.org/maps/356330.html>

## Appendix D

## Distinct Southern Khams Varieties in Diqing

Sketch 1- Pink square: Benzilan, Orange circle: Lisu area, Dark purple circle: Dongwang



Sketched on map retrieved from

<http://www.swchina.wisc.edu/photo.zh.html>

## Appendix E

## UNESCO Vitality Assessment for Zhongdian Tibetan

Table 1- Scoring for Urban Zhongdian

Factor	Degree	Grade 0-5	Description
Intergenerational Language Transmission	<i>Critically endangered</i>	1	Grandparent generation only semi-proficient
Number of Speakers	<i>Critically endangered</i>	1	Very small
Speakers: Group	<i>Critically endangered</i>	1	Very few speak the language
Existing Domains	<i>Limited or formal domains</i>	2	Limited social domains
New Domains & Media	<i>Minimal</i>	1	Limited TV broadcasts forthcoming*
Education Materials	<i>Nonexistent</i>	0	No orthography available to the community*
Official Attitudes & Policy	<i>Forced assimilation</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected*
Community Attitudes	<i>Passive</i>	2	Some support maintenance, others indifferent or support loss
Documentation	<i>Fair</i>	3	A grammar and dictionary exist, texts in development, but still no everyday media

Table 2- Scoring for surrounding Rural Zhongdian, bolded writing shows factors graded differently than Urban Zhongdian.

Factor	Degree	Grade 0-5	Description
Intergenerational Language Transmission	<i>Safe</i>	5	Language used by all ages
Number of Speakers	<i>Definitely endangered</i>	3	Small
Speakers : Group	<i>Safe</i>	5	All speak the language
Existing Domains	<i>Universal use – multilingual parity</i>	4.5	Language used in all social domains and for all functions, except education
New Domains & Media	<i>Minimal</i>	1	Limited TV broadcasts forthcoming*
Education Materials	<i>Nonexistent</i>	0	No orthography available to the community*
Official Attitudes & Policy	<i>Forced assimilation</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected*
Community Attitudes	<i>Supportive</i>	4	Most value language and support maintenance
Documentation	<i>Fair</i>	3	A grammar and dictionary exist, texts in development, but still no everyday media

## Appendix F

## Subject Account of Field Research

Because this project was intended to be an exploratory opportunity in conducting undergraduate research, I will not say there is anything that I wish I had known before starting out in Zhongdian. My goal was to learn how to do field research and navigate all its complications and intricacies, and I certainly know a lot more for next time. I would have liked to be able to collect more quantitative data in my study, but again, I feel that the nature of a first-time exploratory field-based experience is better suited to broadness and qualitative research. Additionally, my qualitative accounts would have been greatly strengthened had I been proficient in the local Chinese variety, or better still, any form of Tibetan.

The majority of my information comes from previous linguistics classes I have taken and interviews I conducted in the field. I originally intended to administer surveys alongside interviews, but I found this style to not be conducive to creating the atmosphere around the encounter that I thought optimal. As a result, I generally held extended conversations with informants for at least three hours and then later devoted several more hours to recalling the entire encounter and recording it in my journal. I definitely left Zhongdian with a satisfaction that I learned a lot, both about my topic and about Tibetan people, culture, China's frontier, and tourism and development. Still, I could have used at least another week or maybe another month or two to gather all of the information I wanted- and leaving great new friendships after one month is not pleasant either.

I put a lot of effort and time into my personal relationships in town, meeting with friends, spending time with my roommates, and doing reciprocity work for those who helped me. I spoke with 18-21 year-old students at a local school on several occasions either to provide a perspective on life somewhere else or for them to practice oral English. I gave weekly English lessons to a small group of boys who lived in the same housing as I did. By far the most time consuming and mentally taxing assignment I took on was proofreading and editing someone's English translation of the script for the guided audio tour of Songzanlinsi Monastery. Performing acts of reciprocity in the community where you are conducting your project is a primary responsibility of researchers and I recommend you to do it; however, there are limits to the amount and nature of work you should take on. It is definitely within reason to refuse participating in something that will cut into the time you need to spend on your project or exhaust you, thereby also making your work more difficult to complete.



## Appendix G

### Suggestions for Future Research

If you are interested in conducting your ISP on a Linguistics-related topic or in Zhongdian, I encourage the further exploration of some areas I was able to touch upon only lightly in my project, but that I think are really interesting and would love to see someone write about in the future.

- The relationships between local Tibetans and the transplant Tibetan community
- The recent development of Tibetan education in Zhongdian
- The implementation of community learning centers and mobile libraries in Diqing's rural areas
- The function of the nightly traditional circle dances in the Old Town square
- Zhongdian as a center of domestic and foreign NGO and development work
- The history of the Long March in Zhongdian (there is a museum there that I did not make it to)
- The many uses of yaks and their cultural significance, especially their butter (and especially yak butter tea!)