

# Minnan Dialect and Policy Research: the Transfer of Dialect “Traditional Identity”

Xinyao Huang

*China Agricultural University, Beijing, 100083, China*

**Abstract:** *In 2013, China proposed "The Belt and Road" (Sun et al., 2013). "As the coastal Fujian Province is the starting point of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (Chen & Fan, 2015), Hokkien's importance has changed as a result. In the same year, the Education Bureau of Fujian Province issued announcements such as "Building the Chinese Language Resources Conservation Project (Fujian Dialect)" to protect Fujian dialects such as Hokkien in various ways (Fujian Provincial Department of Education, 2017). The official announcement of the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau on the protection of the Hokkien potentially demonstrates that the "political utility" of the Hokkien is shifting to "economic utility" under the influence of national economic policies. In general, this paper will analyze the existing literature on language policy from three perspectives. First, from an individual perspective, the use of the Hokkien has a reinforcing effect on the shaping of personal identity and culture. Second, at the societal level, top-down government policies and citizen discussions and practices on language policy have increasingly highlighted the importance of dialects in society. Finally, the third section will look at the implications of Hokkien preservation in the context of globalization.*

**Keywords:** *Hokkien; Dialects; Traditional Identity*

## 1. Introduction

The endangerment of dialects noted in language ecology varies globally, and for China, which has "over 100 languages and more than 30 scripts, as well as foreign languages" (Zheng, 2021), the push to strengthen a unified national identity has led to a gradual decline in regional languages are gradually decreasing" (Ni, 2022). Hokkien, one of the most representative dialects in China's Fujian Province, has also been impacted by the combined Mandarin-based and English teaching models. The field of Chinese education can focus on standard language ideology, where groups are judged using designated official terms.

To this day, Mandarin is still mandated as an officially certified standard language for use in formal and public settings. In addition to specifically designating Hokkien exchanges between universities in Fujian and Taiwan, "the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Common State Language and Script" (The Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress, 2005) encourages the promotion of Mandarin use in kindergartens, elementary school, secondary schools, and colleges.

## 2. Status of language policy research

The language bulletins of the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Education (FEBE) are based on the language policy of the central government, so an analysis of the existing literature on language policy research helps understand the factors that influence the development of language bulletins by the FEBE.

### 2.1 *The individual in the education system and language policy*

Teachers and students, as important components of the educational system, have the most direct experience of language policy events in the field of education. The tension between political cohesion and dialect preservation in language policy can be seen in their practical experiences. Huang (2016) argues that there is room for language policy to be practiced in specific educational processes, with teachers often demonstrating positive attitudes towards dialect preservation in the direction of following standard language ideologies. Although teachers have the freedom to make decisions on specific educational approaches, their active role in multicultural education is often passive in the context of China's exam-oriented educational environment and the need for a unified language ideology.

Students tend to be more passive in their educational environment, dictated by language policies, and their psychological and behavioral activities when using Mandarin and dialects in the classroom and everyday life have received scholarly attention. Some scholars have found that in some groups of China university students, the level of language anxiety arising from the use of dialects is greater than that arising from the use of Mandarin (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). At its root, dialect use anxiety arises from the conflict between the need to use a standard language on campus and the specificity of one's identity, reflecting the struggles of language use among college students in China. In the view of many scholars, the practice of language policy in multicultural education tends to ignore the thinking and behavioral influences on students (Liu et al., 2020). In terms of educational equity in multiculturalism, dialect protection in language policy is more specific to minorities. The use of dialects by non-minority students, however, is less often considered, and they are more often expected to be implementers of standard language practices.

The practice of language policy in education is more politically pragmatic in terms of "bringing people together", but there is little mention of the impact of language on social life in terms of its practical utility.

### ***2.2 Standard language ideology and the "resource" orientation of language***

The standard language ideology conveyed in language policy demonstrates the "resource-oriented" role of language, i.e., the language that provides more practical utility is at the center of language policymaking. In the communication space provided by online media, government and Internet users' attitudes toward standard language ideologies are diverse, and Zhao argues that standard ideologies are often assigned high social value, while non-standard ideologies are associated with low economic status (2019). From the perspectives of both language policy and local language, users' discussions on the definition of "standard language" have led to a certain degree of "de-standardization" of language (Zhao & Liu, 2021). Netizens' thinking about standard language ideology has more of a "centrifugal" effect on language policy (Liang & Shin, 2019). This relatively relaxed online climate demonstrates the tolerance of Chinese citizens for multilingualism in the new era and informs the development of more flexible language policies. The relationship between multilingualism and linguistic standardization is made clear by identifying the targets of linguistic standardization, exploring the extent to which different users rely on linguistic standardization, and identifying the differences between different linguistic ideologies and the specific locations where they are used (McLelland, 2021).

From a "linguistic resource orientation" perspective, dialects have implications for identity and commercial value (Shen & Gao, 2019). Social coalescence has led to an increasing tendency for language policies to try to create appropriate spaces for the use of different languages. However, the dominance of standard languages in the classroom does not reflect the policy emphasis on linguistic equality (Wang & Gao, 2023). This "misalignment" between policy and practice suggests that standard language ideology remains an important factor influencing language practice.

### ***2.3 Globalization and the Commodification of Language***

Globalization has influenced not only the political landscape and traditional economic trade patterns but also the development of language policy.

Cultural exchanges driven by globalization have made language use more complex, which has created certain difficulties in language policymaking. Language policies based on specific time and space are not fully applicable in today's context of globalized population mobility, thus requiring the use of "linguistic domains" needs to be replaced by the delineation of specific language use contexts (Spotti & Kroon, 2019). Because of the expansion of international trade, language use among mobile populations involves the use of both standard and non-standard languages. However, the literature has focused more on the impact of language commercialization on standard languages than on dialects, and there is a paucity of analysis on the commercialization of Chinese dialects in the new globalized trade landscape. "Market discourse" and "cultural discourse" are the two main aspects of dialect language policy talked about in the mass media (Xiong, 2018), showing the difference between top-down government language policy and bottom-up citizen language practice.

Although the contradictory nature of language policymaking and implementation from the government's perspective in the context of globalization is particularly evident when contrasted with citizens' language practices, research on how dialects have reshaped traditional language ideologies under the influence of language commodification, neoliberalism, and globalization remains scarce.

## 2.4. Summary

Although there are few studies of Chinese language policy, there is a lack of analysis of the nature of the protection of Hokkien in the context of globalization from the perspective of government announcements due to various limitations, and the study of languages has mainly focused on Mandarin and Cantonese.

## 3. Methodology

The importance of the Hokkien in education is demonstrated by the announcements related to Hokkien preservation issued by the FEBE in the past six years. The selected announcements are taken from the "Public Affairs" section of the official website of the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau, but since access to data on the implementation process of some of the plans is not open to the public, the analysis of this paper focuses on the contents of existing announcements.

The methodological approach chosen for this study is rhetorical analysis (Kennedy, 1991), which helps readers to understand the nature and attitude of the ideology conveyed by the author by using the text. This paper focuses on the analysis of three official announcements, starting with the announcement of "the Chinese Language Resources Protection Project (Fujian Dialect)", which analyse the interaction between individuals and Hokkien preservation. Next is the announcement of "the special project on language and writing", which focuses on the role of Hokkien preservation in society. Finally, there is the announcement of the construction of "the Silk Road Language and Culture Research Center", which focuses on the importance of Hokkien for international communication and dissemination from a global perspective. The analysis of each announcement is intended to provide evidence that the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau is becoming aware of the economic "resource" orientation of the Hokkien.

## 4. Findings and discussion

In the last six years, (Notice on the construction task of "Chinese Language Resources Protection Project (Fujian Dialect)" in 2017), (Notice of Fujian Provincial Department of Education on the Announcement of special language Projects in 2020), and The Silk Road Language and Culture Research Center was settled in Quanzhou Normal University are relatively representative announcements on the implementation of the dialect plan. In these three notices, "the role of individuals in the implementation of the plan" (6 cases, 50%), "the influence of language life on the implementation of the plan" (2 cases, 16.7%), and "the relationship between national needs and globalization and the implementation of the plan" (4 cases, 33.3%). Three aspects show the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau's attitude towards dialect protection. The first level highlights the role of the Education Bureau in supporting and guiding the development of dialect protection programs. The second and third levels show the wider influence of dialect protection in language life and internationally.

### 4.1 The role of individuals

Among the three announcements, the individual role of the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau is most directly related to the implementation of the dialect protection plan. The Fujian Provincial Bureau of Education (6 cases, 50%) demonstrates guidance (example1) and support (example2) for the implementation of the plan.

#### Example 1:

1) The Education Bureau shall carefully organize and actively contact the investigation team of universities

2) The Education Bureau takes the lead in setting up an editorial board to manage the work

In terms of guidance, the Education Bureau has always shown the attitude of controlling the overall situation. "Carefully organizing and actively contacting the survey team of the university" and "leading the establishment of the editorial committee to manage the work" both emphasize the status characteristic of the Education Bureau to actively promote the development of the dialect program. In the context of the announcements, the Education Bureau is creating a good working environment for those who implement the dialect Protection Programmer. "Active contact" and "lead establishment" show that the Education Bureau does not act in parallel with the implementation of the dialect Protection Program but

is deployed before everything starts. The implication is that the role of the Education Bureau is not only "guiding", but also "leading".

**Example 2:**

- 1) The Education Bureau shall provide support in terms of policies, resources, and security.
- 2) The Education Bureau shall provide funding for scientific research
- 3) Hold press conferences to publicize the importance of using the role of the media.
- 4) The Education Bureau is responsible for publicizing the conditions of the speakers and recruiting them openly, and providing necessary working conditions

From the economic aid of "resources" and "scientific research funds", to the government support of "policies" and "guarantees", to the mass media support of "using the role of the media to publicize", and to the work environment support of "providing necessary working conditions"... In the literal sense, the full range of support provided by the Education Bureau is in line with the service attributes of the government. However, from the perspective of the implementation of the dialect protection plan, all-round help also means all-round influence. To some extent, this puts on the cloak of "leadership" for the effectiveness of "support". Because the announcement for the content and tone of the special requirements, the tone pattern of seriousness and coercion of the announcement lends an authoritative character to the "support" provided by the Education Bureau.

In general, the Education Bureau has shown its service and leadership characteristics as one of the government departments. However, such characteristics to a large extent make the "guiding" and "supporting" role of the Fujian Provincial Education Bureau in the implementation of the dialect protection plan have unquestionable authority.

#### ***4.2 The influence of language life***

The connection between announcements and society is mainly reflected in the utility of language in real life (2 cases, 16.7%). This part shows that the Education Bureau attaches great importance to the language practice of dialects, which also potentially reflects the Education Bureau's views on the ideology of standard language.

**Example 1:**

- 1) Chinese language resource set. Fujian (Pronunciation volume/Vocabulary volume/Overview volume/Grammar volume/Oral Culture volume)
- 2) Connect with important problems in language life and propose solutions

"Fujian (Oral Culture Volume)" and "Connecting Language Life" both show the Education Bureau's attitude of taking dialect practice into account. The announcements proposed that "connect with... 'problem' and 'solution'", which means that the Education Bureau intends to deepen the social connection of dialects and relax the restrictions of dialects with "language resources" in a society dominated by the standard language ideology. Usually, standard languages are endowed with higher social value (Zhao, 2019), but in this context, Fujian Provincial Education Bureau aims to promote the social status of the Fujian dialect.

Fujian Provincial Education Bureau's support the coexistence of dialects and standard languages in the social life and positive attitude of the Education Bureau to protect dialects.

#### ***4.3 The relationship between national needs and globalization***

The announcement concerning the global level mainly came from (The Silk Road Language and Culture Research Center was settled in Quanzhou Normal University) (4 cases, 33.3%). This part is related to the national economy, culture, scientific research, and foreign policy. The author connects dialect protection with national development when writing the content, and emotionally elevates dialect protection to the level of international communication and human destiny so that readers can feel the role of dialects as a cultural tool to bring together different countries or nations (example 1).

**Example 1:**

- 1) Build a community with a shared future for mankind

2) Analyze the language service needs of countries along the Belt and Road and give play to regional advantages

3) Meet the national language strategy needs and enhance the international exchange of language and culture needs

The authors in the bulletin all describe the role of dialects concerning international influence. The "Community of Shared Future for Mankind", "Analyzing the Language Service Needs of Countries along the Belt and Road", and "Enhancing the Need for International Exchange of Language and Culture" all use language to connect different cultures. In context, dialects have the tools to assist international communication, but suggest a deeper identity for dialects. For example, "Building a community with a shared future for mankind" is not directly related to the actual language problem but refers to a higher level of national strategic theory, which enhances the status of dialect protection, but also gives a strong psychological implication to Quanzhou Normal University and other people who need to understand the implementation of the plan.

#### **Example 2:**

1) Focus on scientific research service and application to serve local economic development and discipline construction

In this part, the "language resources" feature of dialects shows more subordinate and auxiliary features of "service". In the sub-example, a short sentence emphasizes "service" twice, highlighting the characteristics of dialect as a tool. The characteristics of dialect as an "intangible culture" are weakened, making readers feel the narrowing of the gap between dialect and standard language in this special context.

At the international level, the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Education has identified dialects as "tools" with positive practical effects, but there are still subtle differences in definitions in domestic and international contexts. In the international context, dialect shows more cultural effect and is a tool to promote cultural identity. However, in the domestic context, the cultural characteristics of dialects are weakened, and the practical utility ability is strengthened instead.

## **5. Conclusion**

The three announcements, ("Notice on the Construction Tasks of 'Chinese Language Resources Protection Project (Fujian Dialects)' in 2017"), ("Notice on the Announcement of Special Subjects of Language and Writing in 2020 by Fujian Provincial Department of Education"), and ("Silk Road Language and Culture Research Center Settles in Quanzhou Normal College"), which are the main ones analyzed in this paper, the new dialect protection concept of "coexistence of protection and utilization" has gradually replaced the traditional attitude of unilateral emphasis on the cultural characteristics of dialects. The Education Bureau of Fujian Province reshaped the consideration of the proportion of "political utility" and "economic utility" in the protection of Hokkien, and intentionally promoted the status of Hokkien and other Fujian dialects in the environment dominated by the standard language ideology by emphasizing the practical characteristics of "language resources".

As one of the local government departments, the Fujian Provincial Bureau of Education expands the connotation of dialect protection by means of "development and utilization", which means that the language ecological issues are complicated under the objective social environment dominated by the standard language. In addition to the emphasis on the intangible cultural characteristics of the dialect, globalization and the trend of neoliberalism have increased the emphasis of the education Bureau on the political and economic utility of the Fujian dialect, thus breaking the single image of the traditional local cultural representative of the Fujian dialect. These announcements provide an important perspective to reveal the government's treatment of dialect protection under the fusion of domestic and foreign environments in the new era and as one of the dimensions to analyze the power change between standard language and non-standard language.

However, education bureau notices, which symbolize interpreted versions of official language policy, are rarely used to analyze the attitudes of different provincial governments toward dialects. The field of education is largely reflective of the state's political approach to language, and more research is needed to explore the relationship between the political situation in China, which has seen a convergence in the cultural sphere in recent years, and the documents published by the Education Bureau.

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