

# The Heritage Language Protection and Teaching in the Yangtze River Delta - Take the Shanghai Dialect as an Example

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**Abstract.** Concerns about the vitality of the heritage language have been rising in society. In more than 20 years of observation, researchers found that the 2001 Law of Common Language and Writing led to the marginalization of dialects in social life. This essay is mainly based on a large number of literature reviews, news and existing research, standing in the macro perspective of pedagogy, and analyzes the protection and teaching of the Shanghai dialect as a heritage language in the Yangtze River Delta, especially in Shanghai. Meanwhile, a case study is conducted to analyze the background, measures and significance of the Shanghai dialect protection movement. Therefore, the analysis of this essay was carried out based on China's current education system before reasonable suggestions were made to all relevant participants, mainly on the improvement of their actions and attitudes. The future planning of the Shanghai dialect will be a dynamic process, which needs to go through a repetitive process of proposal practice modification to respond to the changing reality.

**Keywords:** Heritage language; Shanghai dialect; Language protection and development.

## 1. Introduction

In China, there are many broad and diverse dialects, which are called regional dialects. They are significantly different from mandarin as a common language in terms of pronunciation, language expression and sentence order. Based on the 2001 Law of Common Language and Writing, these regional dialects have not been protected as minority languages but have been strictly restricted. In more than 20 years of observation, researchers found that the policy of 2001 led to the marginalization of dialects in social life.

The use of the Shanghai dialect seems to be a matter of personal choice. In fact, it reflects the political, social and cultural conditions that Shanghai, as a single city, has achieved in the process of China's globalization. However, the implementation of Mandarin Medium Instruction in the national language policy and the proportion of the migrant population in Shanghai have both reduced the used space for the Shanghai dialect.

The current movement and initiatives have achieved the goal of protecting the Shanghai dialect to some extent, but there are still many restrictions. Moreover, the proportion of the migrant population in Shanghai is far greater than the original residents who use Shanghai dialects, the scattered population using Shanghai dialects, and the lack of appropriate promotion conditions, which are the reasons why the protection of Shanghai dialects has little effect.

This essay focuses on the contradictions and disputes between mandarin only policy and heritage language protection. Firstly, explaining the constraints of the Shanghai dialect in local protection and teaching from the perspective of history and policy. Through a case study, analyzing the current measures taken by the beneficiaries in Shanghai to protect and teach dialects. With the help of previous research on social tensions, more carefully considered the contribution or obstacles between local Shanghai dialect users and migrant non-Shanghai dialect users to the protection and teaching of the Shanghai dialect.

This essay starts from the historical and policy aspects to understand the causes of the Shanghai dialect losing its communicative status in the local area. After interpreting that the Shanghai dialect has faced the crisis of inheritance, this essay explores the efforts made by local dialect users in Shanghai to protect and teach from the perspectives of individuals, schools and communities from

past research. Finally, it explored the social contradictions emerging in the process of Shanghai dialect protection and teaching, then tried to put forward optimization suggestions.

## 2. The History and Current Situation of the Shanghai Dialect

Backtrack in history, Chinese people have unique views on diverse languages and nationalities. Even if they use different dialects, they will not be affected to become a unified nation. Since the Qin dynasty, the unified writing system has played a role in preserving and recording the traditional culture of the Han nationality. This made the whole Han ethnic group has a strong sense of unity and national language identity, forming a centripetal force or unified ideology. This ideology will be displayed in the education of students of previous generations and strengthened in the school textbook, even local policy level. Li argues that as the basis for unifying the nation, using Chinese characters to write (commonly known as Chinese characters) solves the problem of communication and understanding between dialect users [1].

For the common ancestor relationship, different dialects are considerably referred to as "the same ancestor and the same nation" or "the same origin and different schools". The differences between dialects and Mandarin mainly lie in the historical, socio-political and ethnic cultural factors rather than linguistic similarities or differences. Notably, in traditional and extensive cognition, specific linguistic features still exist in contemporary dialects that are metaphorically referred to as living fossils in ancient Chinese. Li found that some corresponding grammar and homologous lexical usages can still be recognized in different dialects [1].

## 3. Local Policies towards Shanghai Dialect

With the help of Kurpaska's research in 2005, the policies towards the Shanghai dialect can be more comprehensively explained from the legal level. The Constitution of China has vigorously protected the language rights of ethnic minorities, although these minorities account for about 5% of the population. In addition, there are more extensive and diverse dialect Chinese varieties called regional dialects, which are significantly different from Putonghua as a common language in terms of pronunciation mode/language expression/sentence sequence [2].

However, compared with the minority languages, which account for about 5% of the total population, the dialects (known as the regional varieties) are not protected at any level. Even the application of local dialects will be strictly restricted by the 2001 law of common language & writing. This law is closely related to a provision of universal teaching compulsory education, the Mandarin Medium Instruction [1, 2].

The original intention of the law in 2001 was to enable dialect speakers to overcome communication barriers between dialects by learning and using Mandarin rather than eliminating each distinctive dialect. Although the initial goal of the policy played a positive role in achieving social mobility, 20 years later, the 2001 policy led to the marginalization of dialects in social life. In 20 years of attempts, the local dialect protection policy and the suggestion of dialect experts to teach two languages at the same time in dialect areas and make some comparisons have played a positive role in the protection of local languages [2-4].

The Shanghai dialect has not become the most common communicative language in their region as the Sichuan dialect (known as Southwest Mandarin), although the reason may be diverse. Apparently, the implementation of the teaching method of Mandarin as the medium in the national language policy and the proportion of the migrant population in Shanghai have both reduced the used space of Shanghai dialects. With the acceleration of China's economic globalization, as the cost of the rapid development of urban expansion, Shanghai has accepted tens of thousands of floating migrants, who may use their local dialects. Meanwhile, the urban reconstruction policy formulated to adapt to the infrastructure needed by global cities has made a substantial number of aborigines who use the Shanghai dialect move out of the city centre and scattered their communities. However, in the

process of communication with others, Mandarin allows them to understand each other's expressions to the greatest extent and then communicate smoothly. Speaking in which dialects seems to be a matter of personal choice. Arguably, it reflects the political, social and cultural conditions that Shanghai, as a single city, has achieved in the process of globalization in China [1, 5-8].

Arguably, the linguistic diversity in the Shanghai environment is experiencing a reformation in language use and change. Focusing on the protection and teaching of Shanghai dialects will be a way to maintain linguistic diversity. In the case of oversimplification and marginalization of language learning policies, the traditional language planning process (from the central government formulation to the local level implementation) now requires a bottom-up examination of the interaction between multiple relevant participants at a more contextual level. Based on the debate about the low level of Shanghai children's Shanghai dialect, since 2012, the academic community and the public in Shanghai have been carrying out a campaign to save the Shanghai dialect. Surprisingly, before the official start date of the campaign to save the Shanghai dialect in 2012, concern and fearful about avianize of the Shanghai dialect were concentrated by the academic community and the local community. In one survey, few young people born or educated in Shanghai and whose parents are Shanghai people have qualified Shanghai dialect users. With the decline in the use of Shanghai dialects among local young people, these young people are less fluent in Shanghai dialects than in Mandarin. This may be because the Shanghai dialect was prohibited from being used in schools and administrative departments long before the law was promulgated in 2001, which was 1992. Similarly, local students in Shanghai prefer to speak Mandarin on campus rather than the standard local dialect [4, 7].

#### **4. Protection and Teaching on the Schooling Level: A Case Study of "Saving Shanghai Dialect"**

Based on the differences between dialects and Mandarin, the compulsory promotion of Mandarin according to the national language policy will face challenges in the regional promotion stage. Shen (2016) claimed that in view of the fact that the Shanghai dialect was excluded from the school during the implementation of Mandarin education, some relevant participants were confused about the status quo regarding the extinction of the Shanghai dialect. These representatives who opposed the implementation of the Mandarin policy questioned the issue that Mandarin, as the standard language, has replaced the local dialect of Shanghai. They believe that the current central policy of Mandarin has caused the current dialect crisis and call on the 2001 language law to re-examine hundreds of local dialects that have been ignored [4].

After questioning the authority of Mandarin, followed by a query on the policy of school level restriction that teachers and students are not advocated to speak the Shanghai dialect while communication since 1992. Moreover, a proposal was suggested in order to further abolish the ban on the usage of the Shanghai dialect for elementary learning. The stakeholders involved require the clarification and adjustment of the policy, expanding the living space of the Shanghai dialect in the local area and redefining the rights and status of the Shanghai dialect through the revision of the language law. Shen (2016) summarized these suggestions directly related to school-level education as follows:

1. Teaching the Shanghai dialect in compulsory education stage and kindergartens;
2. Develop the Shanghai dialect and formulate a standardized writing system;
3. Encourage the creation and literary writing related to the Shanghai dialect (which can play a catalytic role).

In addition, there is a strategy to protect the Shanghai dialect, which can help promote the Shanghai dialect at the school level from the side, that is, to increase the use of the dialect by the public and media departments.

Advocates of the proposed adjustment plan have resonated with participants in the strategy formulation. Representatives of both sides believe that the Shanghai dialect should be included in

part of the teaching scope of formal education, with the consideration in textbooks, materials and teachers' language competence benchmarks when planning language education. On the other hand, increasing the programs and public service based on dialects through mass media, TV shows and broadcasting in the Shanghai dialect to expand the use of the Shanghai dialect.

In Shen's research, all the plans finally formed a joint organizational structure and achieved good interaction among all the beneficiaries by adjusting the following three aspects.

1. Keep the dialect active by providing public services and increasing the spread of mass media;
2. Make "new" Shanghai dialect learners gain cultural prestige through language teaching and language communication;
3. Strive to achieve a greater degree of social use through the development of a standardized Shanghai dialect writing system and language norms.

The voice of civil society has gradually brought positive changes to the Shanghai dialect protection plan, which is subtle but demonstrable in all aspects of society, community and schooling level. The documents and records on the preservation of the Shanghai dialect have been notably improved. Sponsorship has also been added to community dialect activities and organizations. Moreover, many children involved in the pilot dialect teaching have reported their willingness to participate. However, in terms of protection and promotion, there is still much room for the promotion of the Shanghai dialect.

Maintaining and protecting the Shanghai dialect are two different dimensions. The above efforts are only reflected in protecting the inheritance of the Shanghai dialect within its community, which is, maintaining. However, there are still some challenges in protection and dissemination. The pilot dialect teaching at the school level only exposed children to the Shanghai dialect, which was not enough to help them master the actual use of the Shanghai dialect. The application outside the school, that is, at the social level, may be a way to help young learners participate in the protection of the Shanghai dialect.

## 5. Cultural Identity at the Social Dimension

Liu claimed that social identity would promote language change; that is, social motivation may play a driving role in it [7]. Meanwhile, the core factors in language change are closely related to the promotion of social identity. For example, the crisis of Shanghai-style culture has a lot to do with social identity.

In the early days, people would define the identity of others according to the pronunciation of different Shanghai dialects and distinguish them from Shanghai natives or immigrants. Taking Liu's (2012) research as an example, as a native speaker of the Shanghai dialect, he will pay attention to the specific pronunciation in people's dialects. The research points out that if the specific pronunciation "wo" sounds like [u:] in the Shanghai dialect, it basically represents a substitute for the non-Shanghai dialect used by non-locals [7]. Notably, Shanghai natives usually equate this pronunciation with the substitute language used by immigrants. At the same time, they will regard it as a manifestation of low social status, forming an isolated unconscious behaviour. However, after the number of immigrants was gradually higher than the original number of local people, this pronunciation became a universal usage and developed into a phonetic change of Shanghai pronunciation.

Similarly, relevant participants in the Shanghai dialect protecting movements believe that the loss of the Shanghai dialect is positively related to the cultural identity of the citizenship [4]. Shen's interviewees said that the crisis faced by the Shanghai dialect is inseparable from the decline of Shanghai-style culture (Haipai) because the dialect carries the ancient memory and local knowledge of Shanghai. One of the interviewees expressed concern about the loss of the Shanghai dialect, reflected in the uniqueness of regional identity symbols and the inheritance of language and culture. The Shanghai dialect protecting movements has formed a common crisis framework for the regional dialect and the historical and cultural heritage preservation of the Shanghai style (Haipai) [4].

Language insecurity in society comes from the emotional component of language attitude. Social elites will convert from the Shanghai dialect to Mandarin in order to communicate more smoothly with colleagues in the business environment. Simultaneously, the performers of traditional Shanghai-style dramas or operas will be troubled because the audience complains that they have lost interest in the Shanghai dialect. Moreover, young people in Shanghai seldom use dialect to communicate, even though the Shanghai dialect bears the local culture and history to some extent. Most of the Shanghai dialect users mentioned above believe that the decline of language poses a threat to their local identity. Generational inheritance between families, social strata defined by dialects, and common participants' concerns about language endangerment, and all these senses of insecurity may change from a language issue to a social problem [4, 7, and 9].

Fortunately, the protection and development of the Shanghai dialect have led to the consideration of policy change in response to the cultural crisis. From Saving Shanghai Dialect to the Shanghaiese Heritage Project, the Shanghai Municipal Language Committee (SMLC), as the first relevant department to respond to the protection of the Shanghai dialect, proposed a cultural experience pilot (focusing on Shanghai dialect) at the kindergarten stage [4, 9]. SMLC has made some supplements in terms of media for broader social initiatives. Some programs with dialect as the medium have been added to TV and radio programs, and other relevant departments have been coordinated to provide services in public transport. SMLC's policy change to deal with the cultural crisis aimed at making up for the insecurity of native speakers of the Shanghai dialect (local people) about the cultural crisis, which to some extent reflects the language harmony mentioned in the National Medium and Long-term Strategic Blueprint for Language Reform and Development (2012-2020).

Undoubtedly, local protecting movements are likely to be limited by national policies. The planners of the Shanghai Dialect Protection Plan cannot bypass the negative impact of the national policy, which is the Mandarin promotion policy. Concurrently, the SMLC protection measures are difficult to involve specific teaching measures or specific methods used in the teaching environment. People are generally sceptical of the practical operability of curriculum design, textbooks and teacher training, reflecting that relevant participants in the protection plan are disappointed with the protection measures proposed by SMLC.

As common sense, nothing could be achieved overnight. The future planning of the Shanghai dialect will be a dynamic process, which needs to go through a repetitive process of proposal practice modification to respond to the changing reality. Even though the advocates of protecting the Shanghai dialect have reached an agreement with local policymakers for a short time, the actual reform effectiveness still needs to wait time to test.

## 6. Conclusion

This essay, mainly based on a large number of literature reviews, news and existing research, stood in the macro perspective of educational pedagogy to optimize suggestions for the protection of the Shanghai dialect and future teaching. Meanwhile, the analysis based on the law of common language and writing launched in 2001, the Mandarin Medium Instruction, the current local protection policy of the Shanghai dialect, and the movement to protect the Shanghai dialect. It found that simple top-down or bottom-up reform initiatives cannot fully mobilize relevant participants.

Therefore, the research and analysis of this issue were carried out based on China's current education system before reasonable suggestions can be made to all relevant participants, mainly on the improvement of their actions and attitudes. The voice of civil society has gradually brought positive changes to the Shanghai dialect protection plan, which is subtle but demonstrable in all aspects of society, community and schooling level. The documents and records on the preservation of the Shanghai dialect have been notably improved. Sponsorship has also been added to community dialect activities and organizations. Moreover, many children involved in the pilot dialect teaching have reported their willingness to participate.

Maintaining and protecting the Shanghai dialect are two different dimensions. The above efforts are only reflected in protecting the inheritance of the Shanghai dialect within its community that is, maintaining. However, there are still some challenges in protection and dissemination. The pilot dialect teaching at the school level only exposed children to the Shanghai dialect, which was not enough to help them master the actual use of the Shanghai dialect. The implementation outside the school, that is, at the social level, may be a way to help young learners participate in the protection of the Shanghai dialect [10].

The current movement and initiatives have achieved the goal of protecting the Shanghai dialect to some extent, but there are still many restrictions. The proportion of the migrant population in Shanghai is far greater than the original residents who use Shanghai dialects. Simultaneously, the Shanghai dialects communities are too scattered makes no good promotion conditions, which are all the reasons why the protection of Shanghai dialects has little effect. Due to the lack of support from a large amount of data in semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, the recommendations of this essay may show some subjectivity, and data support needs to be improved.

The future protection and teaching planning of the Shanghai dialect will be a dynamic process and the actual reform effectiveness still needs to wait time to test. However, as a vast country, China not only has endangered minority languages from ethnic groups that deserve protection but also dialect languages that deserve attention. Arguably, the diversity of different cultures and languages in different regions of China, as well as the relationship between indigenous people and migrant populations, the issues above both need the attention of policymakers at the national level.

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