

Language and Policy: Preservation of Minority Languages in China

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of language preservation initiatives in China, a nation rich in linguistic diversity and home to 128 spoken languages, 107 of which are minority languages or facing endangerment. Language loss threatens cultural diversity, educational quality, social mobility, and social identity. Prior research discusses the importance of language preservation, the advantages of language policy, as well as how language policy has developed over time. Building upon that research, this research examines ineffective language policy, considering what factors may contribute to its decreased impact. This research was conducted using content analysis performed on existing literature, as well as narrative analysis on two interviews conducted with members of the affected groups. It concludes that language policy is ineffective due to the failure to account for the social and economic circumstances of the affected groups, reinforcing the necessity of inclusive language policy and preservation efforts to support cultural inclusion, identity, mobility, and education.

Keywords: linguistics, China, minority languages, language policy, standard Mandarin, sociolinguistics

Background

Language impacts many aspects of society, from building communal identity to establishing cultural context. This makes language preservation projects, that ensure languages are maintained, prevalent in linguistically diverse countries, such as China (Li & Luo, 2022). Particularly in territories with a large number of social identities, language develops fluidly and is subject to various societal factors, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education. China, a multi-ethnic country with a population of 1.4 billion people, is one of these highly linguistically diverse territories, with 128 spoken languages and many more sub-dialects. However, with such a volume of linguistic diversity, a significant portion of these languages are facing endangerment, thus classified as ‘minority languages.’ Of the 128 spoken languages, 48 have 5,000 to 10,000 speakers, and 11 have 100 to 4,900 speakers, creating a total of 59 minority languages within China’s borders (Li & Luo, 2022). This paper argues that current language preservation policy has not been effective in preventing the social barriers that arise from speaking minority languages in China, therefore perpetuating language loss.

Throughout human history, language loss has been a prominent issue, generally due to the suppression of local, indigenous languages and cultures by the politically dominant languages and cultures. Language loss is directly related to the erosion of cultural and intellectual diversity, which holds implications for both society as a whole and individuals. Some implications include the issue of reduced quality of education and the decline of tradition and collective memory (Hale, 1992). The concepts of national identity, cultural heritage, and human identity are all detrimented by language loss, among more physical consequences such as economic impact, issues in education, and the process of social mobility (Jiang, 2023).

Pursuing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the United Nations created The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that outlined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals act as a framework for addressing major global challenges, providing measurable targets each with specific indicators. All global development projects should work towards achieving at least one of these goals, and the preservation of minority languages in China relates to both SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 10: Reducing Inequalities (United Nations, 2023). By preserving minority languages, China can work toward achieving relevant targets within these SDGs, such as target 10.2, which focuses on promoting social, economic, and political inclusion, and target 11.4, which focuses on preserving cultural heritage (United Nations, 2023). Preserving and protecting the use of minority languages would be a way of being inclusive toward groups that speak these languages, as well as a way to preserve the cultural heritage that these languages carry.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Making cities and communities sustainable, inclusive, safe and resilient is the overarching goal of SDG 11. Within this framework lies specific targets, in which language preservation can play an important role, including target 11.4, which aims to protect the world's cultural heritage, and target 11b, which aims to implement policies to increase inclusion in human settlements (United Nations, 2023). Within public policy, in order to support endangered minority or indigenous communities, comprehensive multilingual policies must be implemented in order to protect cultural diversity. Developing language policies can ensure linguistic pluralism, in which diversity in languages and cultures is welcomed, by ensuring that speakers of minority languages have access to various forms of 'standard' languages while still protecting

the survival of local languages (Bianco, 2010). Language loss can be addressed through SDG 11 and is an issue seen in various areas of the world, not only in China. Thailand's dying Mekan language and heritage is gradually declining as transmission to younger generations is not as present (Kraisame, 2018). However, with proper documentation and promotion, cultural heritages can be preserved, ensuring that their legacy endures even after traditions fade. In other parts of the world, there have been initiatives taken to address language loss that have resulted in cultural benefits, as exemplified by the Alaska Native Language Center. The organization focuses on documenting languages before they become extinct, and has helped retain the national treasure of diverse languages and the essence of state and communal identity of minority groups in Alaska (Hale, 1992). Thus, retaining minority languages leads to positive impacts within society and contributes to an individual's sense of belonging and identity.

SDG 10: Reducing Inequalities

The 10th Sustainable Development Goal focuses on establishing equality between all kinds of people. In multilingual societies, it is often true that different languages are used in different contexts. When one language is prioritized as a nation's official language, it is possible for barriers to arise between the professional or governmental world and people living in communities who speak local dialects (Xu, 2019). These barriers can lead to inequality of opportunity. Furthermore, in the histories of some multilingual nations such as Nepal, the governmental effort to establish a national language was incredibly forceful, where speakers of minority languages were discriminated against and socially punished (Singh et al., 2012). Therefore, when establishing a national or official language, equitable language policy is necessary in order to allow minority language communities to both preserve their culture and

find opportunities to learn the common language. China has made an effort to support its multilingual society through decades of adapting its language policy (Singh et al., 2012).

The Values of Worthwhile Development

While language loss is particularly relevant in China, policy and legislative initiatives can play a role in maintaining and preserving minority languages if executed sustainably and inclusively. In order to ensure that projects to preserve minority languages are well-executed, development experts can use Routledge's Handbook of Development Ethics. Researcher and development studies experts, Jay Drydyk and Lori Keleher, outline the Seven Values of Worthwhile Development that can be used to assess the success of development projects, both in terms of immediate needs and long-term development ethics goals (Drydyk & Keleher, 2018).

Well-Being

The concept of well-being is one such crucial point of Routledge's Seven Values of Worthwhile Development. Although a minimalistic term, well-being covers human needs, generally interpreted as basic, or materialistic, needs, as well as the right to exercise the human capabilities of reasoning, forming social relationships, and acquiring knowledge (Drydyk & Keleher, 2018). The value of well-being protects the human right to develop, both mentally and physically, in an accessible and attainable manner. In relation to minority languages in China, well-being stands as a prevalent concept particularly when it comes to social mobility and the promotion of linguistic diversity. The promotion of Putonghua¹—also known as Standard Mandarin and the sole official language of China—can pose an issue of accessibility in certain social interactions. In regards to the linguistic marketplace, 'standard' dialects have immediate privilege over minority languages, which poses an important consideration to social mobility and linguistic ability (Xu, 2019). The promotion of a diverse linguistic society would contribute to

the development goal of well-being by creating a more approachable society for a greater range of languages.

Well-being also plays a role in the development of language policy, particularly in China. Language policy in Asia revolves around government policy, educational measures, and local initiatives. Although there are many language policies in place in Asia, challenges faced by policy makers include variation-related issues and inadequacy in current policies¹ due to a lack of resources (Bulusan, 2019). In order to promote the well-being of diverse linguistic communities, policies must be altered to meet the needs of minority language speakers and preserve the well-being of their communities.

Cultural Freedom

Another of Routledge's Seven Values of Worthwhile Development is cultural freedom. Cultural freedom is essentially defined as the ability for individuals to live their lives how they wish to live them. This includes the ability to uphold any traditions, to be guided by any values, to practice any rituals, and more. It is important for all development projects to respect every individual's right to cultural freedom (Drydyk & Keleher, 2018). This value relates to this research topic because language itself is culture. Language is at the base of many forms of art as well as literature (Zhang & Ma, 2012). In many cultures, history is passed down through storytelling traditions, songs, and poetry. All of this is done using language that is unique and that holds value beyond the literal meaning of each individual word (Zhang & Ma, 2012). As a part of their cultural freedom, people must be able to express themselves and their traditions using their own language without negative consequences.

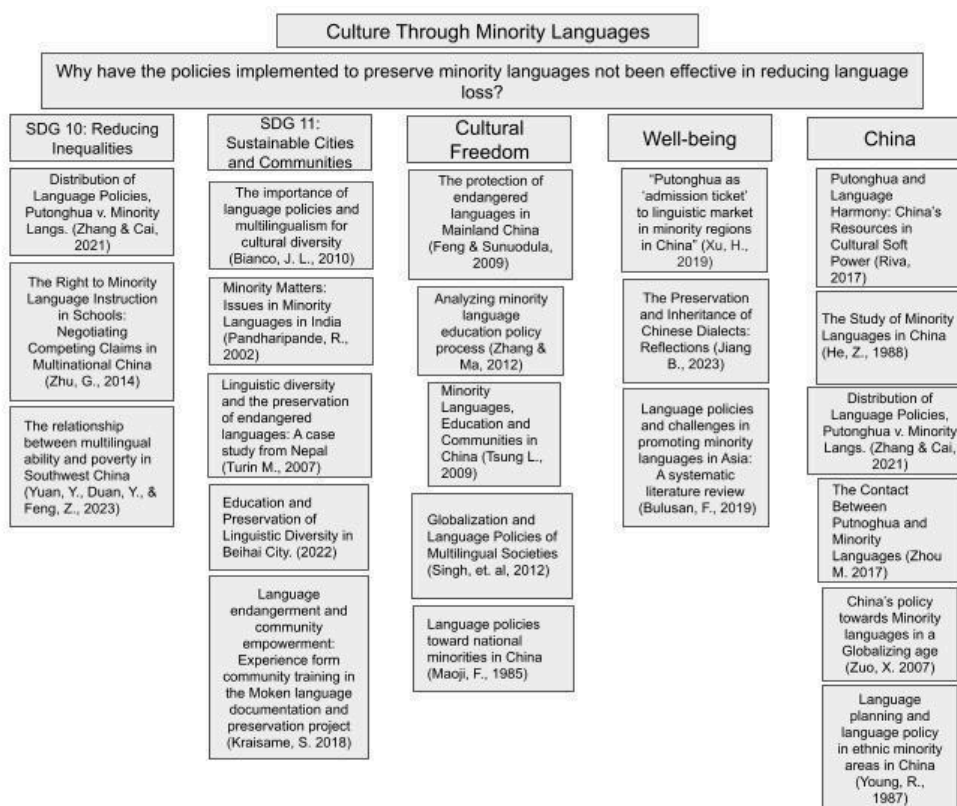
¹ Note that while the authors recognize a technical difference between Putonghua (Standard Mandarin) and the broader Mandarin dialect (which is more commonly spoken with some variation by region), for consistency, the term "Putonghua" will be used throughout the paper to somewhat refer to both, a choice made to emphasize the standardization of the language and to contrast it with the natural variation and fluidity of language.

One specific example of language policy enacted in the Qinghai province of China exemplifies how this issue relates to cultural freedom. In October of 2010, Tibetan students in this province staged a major protest against the implementation of Putonghua as a mandatory language of instruction in their schools (Zhu, 2014). Guobin Zhu explains in his paper, “The Right to Minority Language Instruction in Schools: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multinational China” that this protest came after a new wave of policy and public discourse about the importance of promoting a common language: Putonghua. Education reform policy at both a national and provincial level had been released that made the teaching of Putonghua mandatory, and Tibetan students feared that instruction in the Tibetan language would be severely limited. However, protections for ethnic education were included in this policy. As of 2014, four years after the policy was established, the Tibetan region consisted of two types of schools: one in which Putonghua was the main language of instruction and another in which students were taught in Tibetan language and the school offered Putonghua as a separate class. The schools where the Tibetan language was the main language of instruction were usually smaller and found in rural areas. Zhu continues to explain that there are multiple opinions within the Tibetan community alone of how the instruction of Putonghua should be prioritized. This is an indication of how complicated the issue of language policy is. People within minority language communities alone hold different perspectives, and opinions continue to differ from community to community and within the government. At the core of the issue, the ability for every person living in China to choose how they want to incorporate Putonghua into their life is crucial to their cultural freedom (Zhu, 2014).

Language and Policy Discourse

The literature map in Figure 1 below shows how the research process was conducted, as sources were collected for each of the relevant categories that relate to the research question. The general purpose of this figure was as a method of research organization. All sources were sorted into the categories of SDG 10, SDG 11, Cultural Freedom, Well-being, and China. SDG 10 and 11 refer to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals of reducing inequalities and creating sustainable cities and communities. The categories of Well-being and Cultural Freedom refer to two of Routledge's 7 Values of Worthwhile Development. Finally, the category China refers to China's history of multilingualism and language policy. This figure demonstrates the patterns found within the research collected. The literature emphasized the importance of the historical context in China as well as the relevance of SDG 10 and 11 and the Worthwhile Development Values of Well-being and Cultural Freedom.

Figure 1: Literature Map



(Source: Authors)

This literature map shows how this research builds on existing literature on language policy in China. Research has been done on the language policies passed in China, as well as the importance of language policy in the preservation of minority languages. Much of the research focuses on the advantages of language policy and advocates for inclusive language policy as a solution to issues around minority languages. However, there is a pattern of policy not being completely effective in practice and this research attempts to examine that pattern further.

Introduction

Through the values of well-being and cultural freedom, as well as SDGs 11 and 10, the issue of minority language loss can be addressed within Chinese society. Despite efforts to retain minority languages in China through initiatives such as local policies and education programs,

language loss shows no signs of stopping (Jiang, 2023). A significant aspect of minority language preservation lies in policy implementation, particularly how, historically, language policies in China have not been effective in preventing language loss primarily due to a lack of resources (Bulusan, 2019). The analysis developed in this research aims to address the disparity of effective minority language policies in China.

The importance of preserving minority languages within China cannot be overstated, there are numerous reasons the preservation of minority languages is essential. The loss of minority languages could lead to several negative effects such as, lack of cultural independence, decreased social equality and also lack of diversity within the community.

Problem Statement

The problem that has been identified and will be explored through this research is the endangerment of minority languages in China. Despite the existence of policies that attempt to protect these languages, there continues to be language loss as the official language of Putonghua is increasingly prioritized. Currently, language policies across China are not promoting linguistic cultural freedom or well-being because minority languages are becoming endangered and disappearing. Furthermore, there have been only weak attempts at preserving these pieces of social identity, tradition, and heritage, which are all tied to the concepts of having the freedom of expressing culture as one chooses and the ability to develop human practices, such as language. As seen in examples within other countries, effective initiatives to preserve minority languages take active steps to document and promote endangered languages (Hale, 1992). The policies currently in place in China, however, are not effective in preserving such languages. Previous literature has explored various language policies and the issues as to why language endangerment should be prevented, however, this paper aims to address exactly why and how

current language policies fail to preserve minority languages and what kind of underlying obstacles are making policies ineffective.

Purpose Statement

This research is being conducted so as to explore and better understand China's language policies and methods of implementing those policies that have been successful in the past. Previous research has examined the importance of language preservation and the development of effective language policy (Bianco, 2010). However, a thorough understanding of how policies have worked before, alongside how they have not worked, will better equip policy makers as they look to implement new policies or make adjustments to current ones. This research aims to support this understanding by building upon the existing body of work, examining ineffective language policy and proposing potential influential factors that have led to the ineffectiveness. Further, this research aims to help progress the goals of SDGs 10 and 11, promoting cultural equality and creating sustainable communities and cities. With additional resources being allocated towards producing content (e.g. news reports) in minority languages, important societal information will be better understood. Through this, language would lessen the barrier between the government of China and minority communities, helping to promote cultural equality and equity, alongside communities' well-being and cultural freedom. It will also strengthen minority communities by ensuring that there are no disadvantages to continuing to speak these languages and allow for people to fully and uniquely express themselves.

Main Research Question

This research attempts to answer the question, "Why have the policies implemented to preserve minority languages not been effective in reducing language loss?" This research question evolved throughout the research process. Initially the question was much more broad,

looking at the conflict between the process of advancing and unifying a country and the preservation of minority languages. The question was modified and narrowed as gaps in current research were noticed. Many sources discuss the more general challenges of this conflict and what language policies have been put in place, but few examine *why* policy is effective or ineffective.

Objectives

The objectives of this research include identifying opportunities for communication in minority languages, education in minority languages, and linguistic preservation policies within communities facing culture loss.

Objective 1: Investigate how to increase the resources available within minority languages.

Accessibility and availability of various resources, such as commercial goods and government information, can improve communication in minority language communities. Continued growth of these services will help improve fluency in these minority languages and increase their importance and status (Bianco, 2010). If information is constantly available in minority languages, more people will be incentivized to learn the language as it offers more opportunities and native speakers of the language will not feel that they are at a disadvantage.

- Subquestion: How can governments properly distribute forms and information within these communities and utilize a minimal budget (Bulusan, 2019)?

Objective 2: Evaluate how local and national policies can help support educational systems in better incorporating and teaching languages to students in an accessible and inclusive manner.

Bilingual education for students tends to produce a more academically sound student population, and educational initiatives can promote effective dialect courses within schools and

universities to enhance understanding of linguistic diversity (Jiang, 2023). Through the implementation of policies that enable a bilingual environment, this additional language learning will increase fluency amongst younger students, helping revive the language.

- Subquestion: How should researchers evaluate education systems' current conduct? How can communities maintain a budget while properly developing a curriculum that will provide a sufficient language learning environment?

Objective 3: Discover ways currently enacted policies can be examined and improved in order to ensure that they efficiently preserve minority languages.

The third objective of the research is to discover ways policies can impact language preservation. While many policies exist in China to prevent language loss, they have proven insufficient in preventing the decreasing number of native speakers of these languages (Maoji, 1985). Through constantly shifting language preservation policies, governments can better handle new and unexpected circumstances and ensure that their policies are fulfilling their purpose (Young, 1987). As with most policies, they must be updated and adaptable to new circumstances. Constant evaluation of policies' effectiveness can help identify areas for improvement and modification to ensure the policies can remain effective long term.

- Subquestion: How should researchers evaluate how policies should be developed and the extent to which these policies should be evaluated and altered?
- Subquestion: How will policies need to be changed over time to adapt to the fluctuations of language and their respective societies?

Overall, through the fulfillment of the objectives of improving resources within these languages, improving educational curriculums for minority languages, and improving policy, this

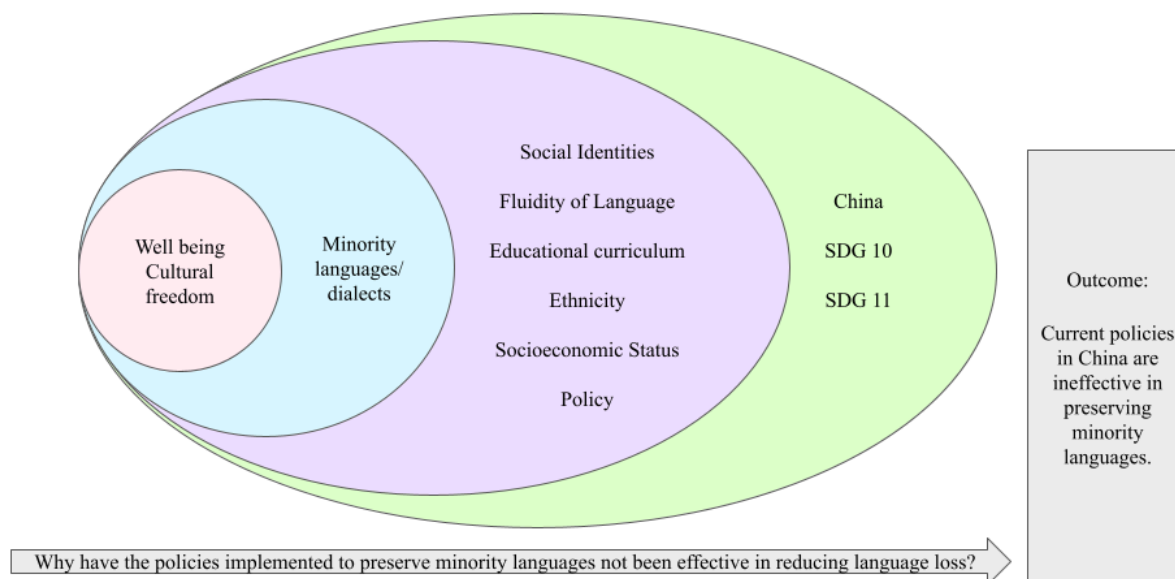
research can evaluate the extent and consequences of minority language loss in terms of government policy.

Methodology

This study will employ qualitative methods to explore the dynamics of language preservation and its implications in China. Documents and case studies will be analyzed using content analysis, a method focused on evaluating patterns within a specific context. This method allows for an examination of how language policies and government initiatives impact linguistic diversity. Also, narrative analysis will be used to analyze two interviews: one with a person whose parents spoke the Hakka dialect, and the other with someone who grew up in Yangzhou, speaking the dialect with parents. For the purpose of anonymity, these subjects will be referred to as Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 respectively. Interview #1 was a woman in her 50s who was born and raised abroad. Her parents spoke Hakka and (regional) Mandarin, but she was only taught to fluently speak Mandarin, using it with friends and family, as well as during her enrollment in Chinese school. Interviewee #2, also a middle-aged woman, was born and raised in China. She spoke a combination of Putonghua and the local Yangzhou dialect with family, but always spoke Putonghua outside of her neighborhood. Narrative analysis will enable a detailed understanding of different perspectives on language preservation and cultural identity.

To visualize the research process, a conceptual framework using social determinants was created to illustrate the expected relationship between variables in the study on the ineffectiveness of current policies in China on preserving language loss.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



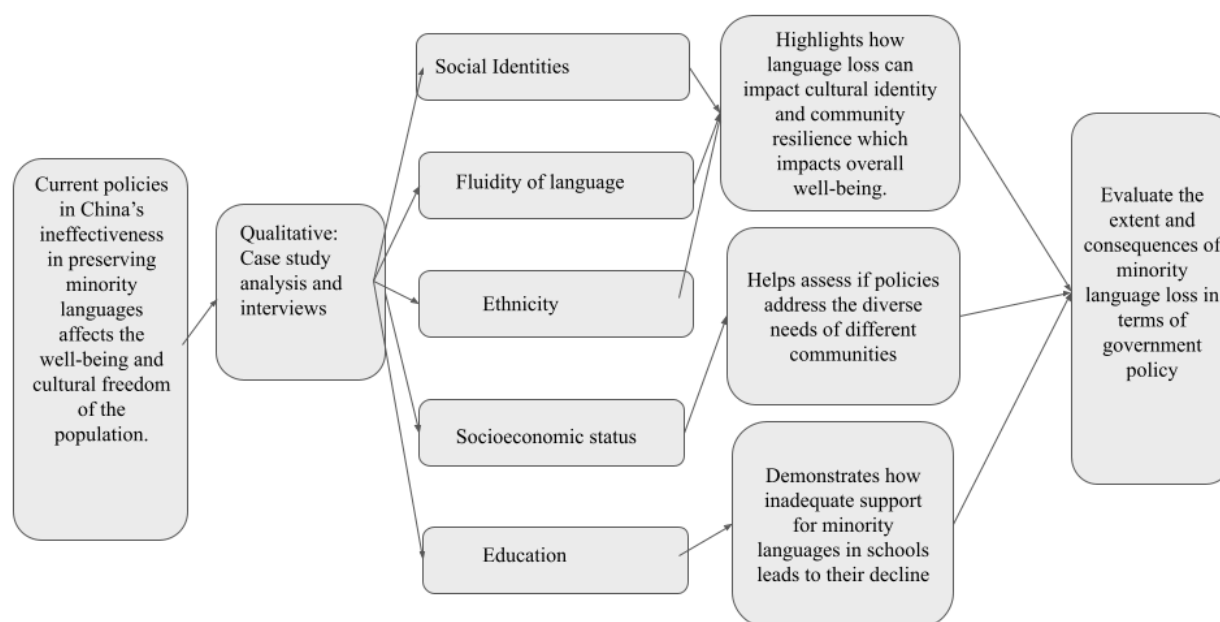
(Source: Authors)

The study started with identifying the dependent variables which are well-being and cultural freedom. These variables serve as key points for assessing change, gauged through indicators explained below. Along with this are the control variables, minority languages and dialects. There is an implied dominance of ‘standard’ languages and dialects that could have a potential influence on individuals’ well-being and cultural freedom. Specifically examining minority languages and dialects will help to ensure that any changes will not be due to the inherent power difference that comes with speaking a dominant, widely spoken language, but rather due to differences in the independent variables. The independent variables, or indicators, include social identities, fluidity of language, educational curriculum, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and policy. These variables serve as tools for quantifying change within the dependent variables. Lastly, environmental factors were established. These include China, the region in

which this research is focused, and two of the UN's SDGs that fit with the research topic—SDG 10 and SDG 11. Together these components form a framework that will guide exploration toward addressing the main research question.

The following figure, Figure 3: Analytical Framework, highlights the core of this paper, in regards to the research question, subcategories being explored in relation to the Values of Worthwhile Development and SDGs, and the layout of the paper in terms of research findings and discussions.

Figure 3: Analytical Framework



(Source: Authors)

The analytical framework of this study is structured around understanding how the ineffectiveness of current language policies in China impacts the well-being and cultural freedom of minority languages. It examines key variables: social identities, fluidity of language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education to evaluate the extent and consequences of minority

language loss. Social identities, language fluidity, and ethnicity highlight the role of language in cultural and personal identity. Socioeconomic status shows the divide between economic advancement and cultural preservation. Education is a key factor that shows that teaching only the main language in schools often leads to language loss.

This framework assesses the connection between these variables and the outcomes of well-being and cultural freedom. It highlights gaps in policy such as how minority needs are not met and how language loss is linked to less cultural diversity and community resilience. By providing an understanding of these variables it shows the importance of policy solutions to address the challenges of language loss in China.

Results

This paper's research findings indicate that China's language policies are unable to preserve minority languages due to their lack of impact on social and economic factors. Various subcategories relating to the Values of Worthwhile Development, cultural freedom and well-being, and the SDGs 10 and 11, were explored: socioeconomic status, ethnicity, social identities, education, and the fluidity of language. The cumulative results show that China's prioritization of standard dialect implementation and its lack of attention towards minority language preservation directly harms these subcategories, and thus the attainability of these values and SDGs.

Socioeconomic Status

The policies implemented to preserve minority languages in China have been ineffective in reducing language loss because they often fail to account for the socioeconomic factors that are connected to dominant language. In China, affirmative action policies in education implemented to achieve equality for the Uyghur ethnic minority have not translated into

economic success. This is mostly due to the Uyghur populations' overall lower proficiency in Putonghua (Tang et al., 2016), demonstrating that even with equal educational opportunities, lack of fluency in the dominant language restricts minorities from achieving equal socioeconomic opportunities.

In addition to educational opportunities, language also has an impact on social mobility in terms of careers. In particular, members of the Han Chinese ethnic group, who speak the standard language, tend to have occupations in the non-public sector, which are associated with higher salaries than the agricultural sector jobs in which Uyghur people make up the majority, as demonstrated in Table 1. This disparity is not only a result of language proficiency but is also likely influenced by ethnic discrimination against the Uyghur population. This systemic bias further reinforces the socioeconomic gap between the two groups.

Table 1: Relationship Between Ethnicity and Job Type

| | Han | Uyghur |
|-------------------|-----|--------|
| Non-Public Sector | 46% | 17% |
| Public Sector | 19% | 12% |
| Agriculture | 33% | 69% |
| Other | 2% | 2% |

(Source: Tang et al., 2016)

According to this data table, there are more Han Chinese people in markets with high competition than Uyghur people, depicted by the Non-Public Sector row, where the Hans' 46% workforce greatly outweighs the Uyghurs' 17% workforce. Similarly, the agriculture sector, which is viewed as low on the occupational prestige hierarchy, is dominated by the Uyghur workforce at 69%, while the Hans' workforce for the agricultural sector is 33%. These differences show how native standard speakers have an advantage in competitive workforce

markets over minority language speakers, reflecting the disparity in social mobility that is influenced by linguistic factors.

It is a challenge to balance preserving minority languages and acquiring fluency in Putonghua. While Putonghua is used for economic advancement and job opportunities, minority languages are used to maintain heritage and identity (Zhou & Sun, 2004). This creates tension between the need for socioeconomic advancement and the desire to maintain culture and linguistic diversity. As a result, many minority speakers may feel pressured to prioritize learning Putonghua which could lessen their proficiency in their native language (Fillmore, 1991).

Also, language preservation policies often lack institutional support which makes it difficult for the languages to be passed down to future generations. For example, in regions like Xinjiang, where Uyghur is spoken, education systems prioritize dominant languages. This leads to less instructional time and inadequate resources for minority languages (Schluessel, 2007). Policies aimed at protecting minority languages do exist, but their effectiveness is limited by the broader economic and social realities that push minority groups to adopt the dominant language for survival and success.

Ethnicity

Many minority languages pertain to a specific ethnic group. In China, these ethnic groups face a wide range of discrimination as a result of recent pushes towards assimilation within China. Minority languages often are shunned as a result of this discrimination and as a result policies have had difficulties successfully preventing language loss. When considering ethnic assimilation, many experts such as Rodrigue Landry consider learning the predominant language to be the first step (Landry & Allard, 1992).

Within China, the predominantly spoken language is the Putonghua dialect, correlating to the largest ethnic group the Han. As a result, the Chinese education system places heavy emphasis on the teaching of Putonghua, along with its grammatical structure. From the perspective of young adults, Putonghua offers more convenience compared to their smaller and non-widely spoken ethnic language. As a result, a trend has formed amongst the youth to assimilate, focusing on appealing to a wider audience compared to their family and ethnic background (Landry & Allard, 1992).

In the 2010s, China passed several laws outlawing the teaching of minority languages, declaring it unconstitutional within the state. As a result, minority language proficiency has dramatically fallen, slowly disappearing within the nation. This is partly a result of continued efforts from China to construct a ‘national identity’ for Chinese people, rather than a multicultural nation. Throughout the nation, discrimination against ethnic groups has risen exponentially (Mobius et al., 2016). This discrimination shuns minority cultures, and often encompasses language. As a result, many have willingly suppressed their ethnic backgrounds, submitting to assimilation, teaching their children exclusively Putonghua to better position themselves in the evolving nation.

Interviewee #2 (personal communication, November 15, 2024) spoke both Putonghua and the Yangzhou dialect of her hometown, Yangzhou. However, she said that she was never around people who spoke minority languages—despite the fact that she herself spoke a minority language and she knew people in neighboring cities who spoke different languages as well. But to her, as a member of the Han majority ethnic group, there is an important distinction between the varying languages of Chinese that are spoken in different Han communities and languages spoken by ethnic minorities. She did not consider herself as someone who spoke a minority

language. She consistently made sure to use the term “ethnic minority languages” to reinforce the fact that she was only thinking about languages spoken by ethnic minority groups as being in need of preservation or being part of the larger conversation. Furthermore, she said “...to be honest we don’t care that much about the ethnic minority languages” (personal communication, November 15, 2024). Here, “we” is based on the speaker’s own identity, likely referring to herself and other members of the Han ethnic community, though it was not stated explicitly. The separation between the perception of ethnic minority languages and dialects of Chinese spoken in different major cities is an important factor to consider in the attempt to preserve minority languages.

Social Identities

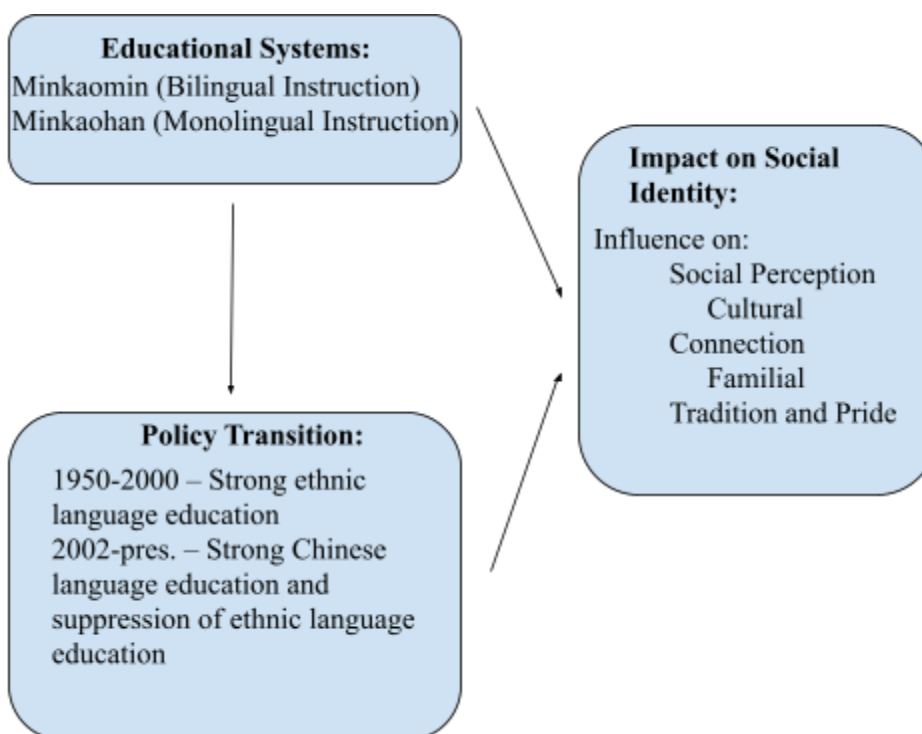
Policies implemented to preserve languages have not only been inefficient in reducing language loss, but have also impacted the identities of minority language speakers. Educational policies in particular have a complex relationship with social identity, mainly in the way that Chinese minority education is split into a bilingual system that focuses on the ethnic minority language and a monolingual system with no minority language instruction.

According to interviews conducted on Uyghur, Tibetan, and Mongol youth, the bilingual education system harbors cultural identities, based on communal language traditions and family lineage— promoting the pride and preservation of these minority cultures. Since ethnic minorities and minority language speakers in China have long been ostracized in part due to the linguistic power dynamic found in the country, pride in a common language is a cultural connector that motivates the preservation of minority languages. On the other hand, minority students of the monolingual education system have a weaker connection to the communal aspect of their

endangered languages and tend to relate more to the lifestyle and culture of the Chinese society associated with the standard dialect (Wang, 2022).

The following figure, Figure 4, maps out the relationship between language policy in education and social identity (Wang, 2022). The education system in China consists of two kinds, a bilingual instruction with both the standard language and a minority language, and monolingual instruction, with only the standard language. This approach greatly influences social identity, particularly when national policies solely focus on instruction in the standard language.

Figure 4: Educational System and Social Identity



(Source: Wang, 2022)

As shown above, Figure 4 demonstrates the interconnected relationships of how language policy in the education sector influences social identity. The choice of the Chinese government to implement a strong presence of standard language instruction over minority language instruction had cascading effects on social identity, along with the separation of the bilingual versus

monolingual schooling formats. Although the existence of two different approaches to language instruction in schools, the policy transition enacted in 2002 ultimately made the option of two types of educational systems null with the overt emphasis placed on Putonghua. This negatively impacts the social perception of minority languages, as they are not institutionally represented, as well as individuals' cultural connection to their language and familial tradition and pride due to the lack of formal education and awareness.

In terms of social perception of identities, minority languages in China, particularly those without orthographies, are still overwhelmingly looked down upon by standard variations, reflecting the tense power dynamic within the linguistic hierarchy of Chinese society. This can be analyzed in terms of how Putonghua is perceived, in comparison. According to Interviewee #1 (personal communication, October 31, 2024), in her travel experiences, the use of Putonghua over a different dialect or language forces an immediate connection during interactions. On the other hand, Interviewee #1 (personal communication, November 15, 2024) explains that in her childhood, she was encouraged to speak Putonghua over her heritage language of Hakka, demonstrating the intense language power dynamic. This power-based hierarchy thus influences how language policies are implemented and the parameters they are based on, which, if too generalized, can serve to overlook marginalized languages that do not fit into the existing classifications of language (Dwyer, 1998). Divisions between dialects and languages have historically been controversial in terms of what defines one over the other, and these parameters are no different. Therefore, language policies have an active impact on the perception and reception of the social identities of minority language speakers.

It is also the choice of individual families to decide what language(s) will be spoken at home, proving to be a further factor in building social identity. Some strongly believe in the

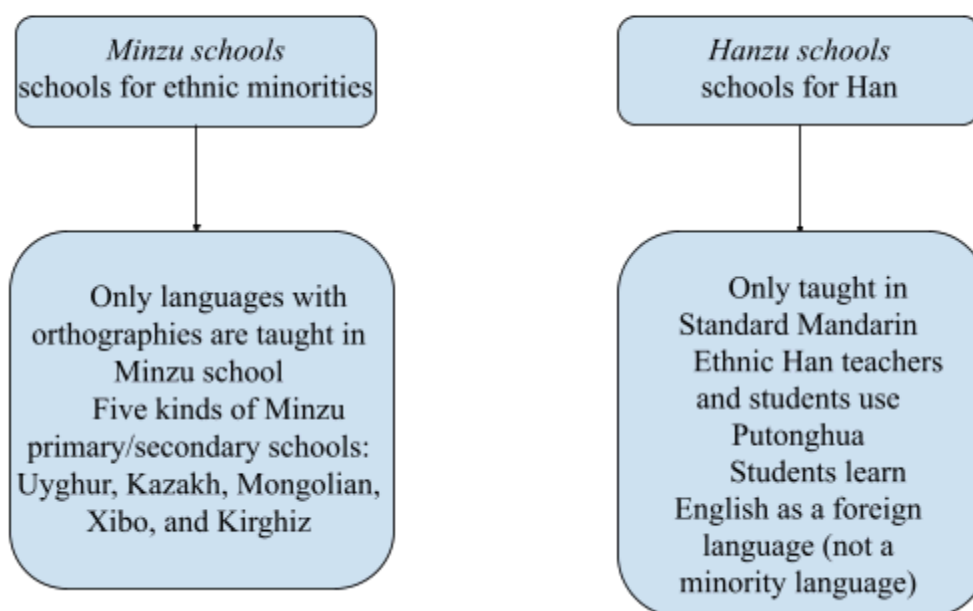
importance of speaking their minority language to preserve their cultures, while many believe more in the opportunities that Putonghua brings (Han & Johnson, 2020). In the case of Interviewee #1 (personal communication, October 31, 2024), her parent's belief in the importance of Putonghua was strong enough that they chose not to teach her their community dialect of Hakka. While she was always able to understand her family members when they spoke Hakka, she only ever replied to them in Putonghua. She believes that while this did not inhibit her relationship with her family members, she could have found greater, deeper connection with them by sharing in the language that is unique to her community.

Education

Language policy that mandates the use of Putonghua as the primary language of instruction in schools is damaging to minority languages. Lin (2022), titled "Education and Preservation of Linguistic Diversity in Beihai City," explains that in Beihai City, Putonghua took over as the language of instruction over two generations after the Chinese government began promoting the use of Putonghua in 1955. By the early 2000s, indigenous languages were banned on school grounds and teachers considered it rude when students spoke them. Additionally, Interviewee #2 (personal communication, November 15, 2024) explained when she was growing up in her schools near Shanghai, the use of dialects was not banned, but it was necessary to speak Putonghua. Because teachers spoke to the students in Putonghua, they were simply expected to reply in the same language. Furthermore, this allowed Putonghua to become the "habitual" language of students, meaning they spoke it outside of school, as well (Lin, 2022). Even though Putonghua was only mandatory on school grounds and not in private homes, the language still spread beyond the school walls as it became central to students' lives.

Today, Putonghua is necessary for higher education (Han & Johnson, 2020). In the Xinjiang autonomous region that is majority Uyghur, there are multiple different types of schools that are split up by ethnicity and language of instruction. The majority Han schools are taught solely in Putonghua and are considered to be more prestigious and to provide better quality education. They also lead to more opportunities as attendance of these schools looks better on a student's university application, especially since they will need to use Putonghua at university (Han & Johnson, 2020). A breakdown of the division of the education system types and how they are conducted is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: The Two Different Types Ethnically Separated Schools in Xinjiang



(Source: Han & Johnson, 2020)

Figure 5 depicts the general differences in terms of how language instruction is applied in the different types of schools. During the shift in educational language policy in the 2000s, with an increase in Putonghua language promotion, the Chinese government urged the combination of

Uyghur and Han schools, which was marketed as a way to encourage bilingualism among minority-language-speaking students. As a result, a third type of school emerged, however, Figure 5 only focuses on the distinct differences between the original two types of schooling to highlight the separate approaches to language policy.

There are programs that work to elevate Uyghur students and allow them more educational opportunities by integrating them into these majority Han schools and teaching them Putonghua. Their minority language is not protected in this process of integration as Putonghua becomes the only language they speak in school, effectively decreasing their use of their minority language (Han & Johnson, 2020).

Fluidity of Language

The policies aimed at preserving minority language in China have been ineffective in reducing language loss because they fail to leverage the constantly evolving nature of language, or language fluidity, in a globalized context. Globalization has spread the use of dominant languages like English and Putonghua through technology and media which puts more pressure on minority languages to adapt (Zhou & Sun, 2004). The concept of language fluidity is that languages do not always stay the same, they can evolve through bilingualism or multilingualism (Zhou & Sun, 2004). As Interviewee #1 (personal communication, October 31, 2024) explained, language is closely related to ethnic groups, and their culture and heritage, and thus, the underlying issue to why these language policies are ineffective may be more linked to social behavior—just as social groups are fluid and change over time, so do their respective languages. Therefore, language preservation efforts may clash with the natural evolution that occurs as communities grow or develop their culture. This standardized approach neglects the dynamic nature of language, where speakers adapt to external factors—whether they be economic, social,

or technological—by borrowing words or changing syntax, for example. Therefore, language policies with set parameters, not adapted to the abstract concept of language, will fail simply because languages are constantly changing, and cannot be grouped into strict, stationary categories.

Discussion

Overview of Objectives

This study aimed to explore why policies implemented to preserve minority languages in China have been ineffective in reducing language loss. The objectives included investigating resource accessibility, evaluating the role of inclusive education, and assessing policy. The findings reveal that China's focus on promoting Putonghua as the main language has marginalized minority languages. Current policies do not account for the economic, social, and cultural factors that influence language retention. This contributes to a gradual loss of linguistic diversity and language loss. Though the study did not lead to a deeper dive on how to improve the resource accessibility of minorities, it did lead to a potential way policies can support inclusive education initiatives. The findings highlight a gap in current education policies. They tend to focus on inclusivity regarding ethnicity but not in terms of language. Current education prioritizes Putonghua, which puts down minority languages. A potential solution is increasing the use of bilingual instruction which would enable the students to retain their native language while gaining proficiency in Putonghua to broaden their opportunities.

In terms of discovering ways currently enacted policies can be examined and improved, the allocation of resources and energy must be considered from the standpoint of the government. New research must be adopted in order to ensure policy makers meet the needs of minority language speakers in order to promote equitable well-being in society. This requires an

understanding of how current initiatives are functioning, which can be achieved through sociolinguistic research, and a re-evaluation based on that research of current policies.

Ultimately, language policies must be re-evaluated through a social lens that supports diversity within China, rather than aiming for a unified national identity.

Policy recommendations could include incentivizing minority language learning and installing educational programs to raise awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity. These initiatives could be seen in both grade school and higher education. In terms of incentivizing minority languages, tangible benefits could be offered, such as career opportunities in language proficiency or scholarships for education. In addition to policy, local cultural initiatives could be taken to celebrate minority languages and their use, which would be another way of raising awareness. However, ultimately, an effective change could be instilled if the social attitude towards minority languages were changed, and the tense power dynamic between standard and non-standard dialects could diminish.

Well-Being and Cultural Freedom

The preservation of minority languages is closely tied to well-being and cultural freedom by affirming identity, community, cultural development, and the freedom of expression. As mentioned in the findings, the need of Putonghua for socioeconomic mobility often clashes with minority groups' interest in maintaining linguistic and cultural identity.

In terms of cultural identity, Interviewee #1 and #2 (personal communication, November 15, 2024; personal communication October 31, 2024) both spoke of the closeness and intimacy that comes with speaking to someone in their native dialect. Interviewee #1 did not actively wish that she spoke her community dialect better, but upon further reflection, she did believe that it would have allowed her to have a deeper connection with her family members. On the other

hand, Interviewee #2 did not long for the kind of closeness that comes with the use of her dialect. The closeness an individual feels to their community's unique language or dialect is greatly affected by how often they use this language, which in turn is related to whether they grow up learning in schools that use bilingual or monolingual instruction (Wang, 2022). Interviewee #2 (personal communication, November 15, 2024) grew up speaking only standard Putonghua at school, therefore she found it very normal to speak nothing but standard Putonghua outside of speaking to her family and community members in her hometown.

The freedom to feel connected to one's own culture is also essential to their well-being, along with more quantitative factors such as socioeconomic status. Tang et al. (2016) found that members of the Uygur ethnic minority group who were less proficient in Putonghua had a lower degree of socioeconomic status compared to members of the Han ethnic majority. The ability to speak Putonghua is linked to the ability to achieve higher education and more competitive job opportunities. Higher paying jobs allow for a higher quality of life, and proficiency in Putonghua is necessary for such kinds of professions and positions.

Societal Expectations May Be More Influential Than Policy

A major finding from the two interviews is that the current policies that attempt to preserve minority languages are not sufficient in preventing language loss because the policies that enforce the use of Putonghua greatly outweigh these few protective ones. This is because the enforcement of Putonghua goes beyond policy, the importance of the language has become ingrained in social aspects of life in China, with links to status and achieving higher education as well as being able to function in and feel a part of the greater society. Therefore, policies that try to include minority languages don't change the fact that people need to be able to speak Putonghua to live in cities, go to university, get jobs outside of their community, and even more.

Between the two interviewees, Interviewee #1 (personal communication October 31, 2024) believed that social and cultural life is deeply intertwined with language, thus creating the concept that language preservation is more so related to social behavior and attitudes rather than governmental implementations. In terms of language policy, building and prioritizing the various variables and parameters, such as who would be affected and to what extent, may be an unattainable goal. Therefore, the idea of using policy to solve this linguistic phenomena may be obsolete due to the ever changing nature and vast range of alternating variables.

There was also a tension between the perspectives of the two interviewees: while Interviewee #1 recognized herself as impacted by the dominance of Putonghua, Interviewee #2 did not. Both interviewees (personal communication, November 15, 2024; personal communication October 31, 2024) had very similar stories of not being able to fluently speak the dialect of their community. Throughout their childhood, they each supplemented all conversations with relatives and neighbors with standard Putonghua—the language they both feel more comfortable communicating in. However, Interviewee #2 did not include herself as someone who has been affected by the influence of the prioritization of Putonghua, assuming that it was only ethnic minority groups who were notably impacted by the need to speak the standard language. The importance of Putonghua and the expectation that everyone speaks the language has become such mainstream thinking that the interviewees had not previously thought critically about the fact that they did not fluently speak their community's unique language. This kind of thinking goes beyond the reach of the impact of current policies that attempt to preserve minority languages—which can not alone be the solution to the issue of language loss in China.

Conclusion

Minority languages are deeply intertwined with the cultures of small communities. Addressing language loss and finding ways to combat it helps foster an inclusive society and is essential to developing cultural diversity and social equity. This paper examines unsuccessful implementations of language policies in China, attempting to answer the question, “Why have the policies implemented to preserve minority languages not been effective in reducing language loss?”

The research found that a person’s ability to use the official language of Putonghua is essential to their social mobility and is often telling of their socioeconomic status. Nearly all members of minority communities need to learn Putonghua if they hope to obtain higher education and jobs that pay well (Tang et al., 2016). Social identities and one's sense of self are compromised due to the social and economic pressures to learn Putonghua and assimilate into the majority culture. The government’s campaign to create a united, national identity has been effective in enforcing the use of Putonghua. So effective, as this research has found, that it outweighs the current policies in place that attempt to preserve minority languages.

To address such a problem is complex; a theory as to why minority language policies are failing is because of the fluidity of languages and how it is an ever-changing matter. For example, the internet has become yet another reason to learn Putonghua and English, as websites and games are not offered in minority languages (Zhou & Sun, 2004). Additionally—when it comes to education—despite the existence of policies that create bilingual education systems within certain communities, it is often the schools taught strictly in Putonghua that are viewed as higher quality and more prestigious. Therefore, it is these schools that are more likely to help students get into universities and launch their futures (Han & Johnson, 2020). The well-intended

policies in place today do not account for the social and economic pressures involved in language use.

Furthermore, the preservation of minority languages does not align with China's domestic goals. In the recent 2010s, China has continually pushed the concept of a 'singular national identity' for the Chinese people. When distributing information, it is both easier and less expensive to release statements and articles in a single language rather than translate and redistribute information in regional dialects. Thus, the policies have also been ineffective due to the international trend towards globalization and China's focus on expanding the use of the official language rather than preserving endangered dialects.

Further research can also be conducted in order to better understand what next steps can be taken by the Chinese government to preserve minority languages. The following research questions are listed below, numbers (1) through (3):

- (1) How can governments properly distribute forms and information within these communities and utilize a minimal budget?
- (2) How should researchers evaluate education systems' current conduct? How can communities maintain a budget while properly developing a curriculum that will provide a sufficient language learning environment?
- (3) How should researchers evaluate how policies should be developed and the extent to which these policies should be evaluated and altered? How will policies need to be changed over time to adapt to the fluctuations of language and their respective societies?

These questions can guide a re-evaluation process for how minority languages are viewed in China and how this negative perception can be improved to preserve cultural identities and

best uphold the values of culture freedom and well-being. Additionally, this more nuanced understanding of how social and economic variables can affect a group's ability to continue to use their minority language can encourage a more multilayered approach to policy and language preservation efforts. This research can support China's efforts in achieving SDG targets such as 10.2, increasing political, economic, and social inclusion, and 11.4, preserving cultural heritage, by encouraging this more nuanced approach, suggesting variables that may affect language loss, such as economic barriers, social and ethnic identities, education, and natural language change.

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