



## ЯЗЫКОВАЯ СИТУАЦИЯ

## LANGUAGE SITUATION

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### “LANGUAGE LIFE” IN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA OVER THE PAST SEVEN DECADES<sup>1</sup>

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*Over the past seven decades, the Chinese language has seen continuous changes that emerged as the result of radical changes in the socio-political-cultural context of China. Drawing from an extensive literature review of previous studies on the Chinese language development trajectory, this paper revisits and reflects on language practices in China and the respective features of language life in several key milestone periods since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The findings show that in general, China’s language planning and policy implementation have succeeded in managing language life for both the public and institutions. The success is demonstrated in the following aspects: nationwide popularization of the national common language (Guojia Tongyongyu); realization of the linguistic goal of the unification of speech and writing for the first time in the Chinese history; continuous improvement of overall language life across the society; and healthy development of language life towards diversity and harmony. This paper concludes that the use and development of Chinese over the past seven decades deserve further studies.*

**Keywords:** China; PRC seventieth anniversary, language life; language policy, language planning

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## СЕМЬДЕСЯТ ЛЕТ «ЯЗЫКОВОЙ ЖИЗНИ» В КИТАЙСКОЙ НАРОДНОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКЕ

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*За последние семь десятилетий китайский язык претерпевал непрерывные изменения, возникающие в результате радикальных перемен в социально-политической и культурной жизни Китая. Опираясь на обширный обзор литературы о траектории развития китайского языка, автор статьи рассматривает и переосмысливает языковые практики и особенности языковой жизни в Китае на протяжении нескольких ключевых периодов с момента образования Китайской Народной Республики. Полученные результаты показывают, что в целом реализация китайской языковой политики и планирования оказалась успешной в управлении языковой жизнью как общества в целом, так и институций. Успех проявляется в следующих аспектах: всеобщая популяризация общенационального общего языка; реализация лингвистической цели унификации речи и письма, осуществленная впервые в истории Китая; непрерывное улучшение общей языковой жизни во всем обществе; здоровое развитие языковой жизни в направлении разнообразия и гармонии. В статье делается вывод о том, что использование и развитие китайского языка за последние семь десятилетий заслуживают дальнейшего изучения.*

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, семидесятилетие КНР, языковая жизнь, языковая политика, языковое планирование

### 1. Introduction

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Over the past seven decades, the “language life” in China has seen continuous changes in a colorful and fascinating way. Against the background of China’s social development, this paper discusses the features and trends of Chinese language life over the past 70 years from a macro perspective, analyzes the social factors behind these features, and reflects the impact of language use on social life in order to help us draw experiences and lessons from history and face the challenges of language life in the future.

The academia has been paying attention to the language life in China for a long time, and a large number of researches have been published, although a considerable number of them do not use the term “language life”. Since “language life” was proposed and interpreted as a term, the study of “language life” in China has become more extensive and in-depth. More and more new results and achievements have emerged, represented by the report “Language Situation in China” (Green Book). Green books on regional language life, such as “Language Situation in Beijing” and “Language Situation in Guangzhou”, have also been published. The international influence of “Language Situation in China” has also been expanding. At present, it has been published in English, Korean and Japanese. These reports are records of today’s language life, leaving valuable information for the history of human civilization. They also reflect from different level the constant renewal and change of the language concept of the authors, as well as their academic ideals of creating positive impacts on language life in the society. At present, the theoretical and practical summary and analysis of the researches on language life has also begun. Guo and Zhu (2016) introduced the work done by Mou (1997),

Chen (1989, 1990), Guo (1998), and Li (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Li (2016) conducted a more in-depth discussion on several theoretical and practical issues of researches on language life and proposed nine categories for future language life research. These studies have played a positive role in promoting the theoretical and scientific study of language life and are important references to review language life over the past 70 years.

For many years, the author has been taking note of the changes in language use around. These changes are both explicit and implicit. The explicit changes are easy to be seen, while the implicit changes are more reflected in the language use orientation. In 1998, the author described the language life at that time as follows:

(1) A large number of deviations from the norm have entered the mass media; (2) some influential dialects in the South “advanced” northward; (3) foreign words have directly entered the Chinese communication circle [Guo, 1998].

What is described here is only some “new phenomena” at that time, rather than a complete picture of language life. Later, although we revised the above description, it still remained only on the “phenomenon”:

(1) New language phenomena emerged in large numbers; (2) a large number of “deviation from the norm” phenomena have entered the mass media; (3) Putonghua developed rapidly, and some influential southern dialects “advance” northward; (4) foreign words have entered the Chinese communication circle directly [Guo, 2004].

The first report of “Language Situation in China” gave a comprehensive description of language life in China in 2005, and we began to pay attention to the observation of the phenomenon, and description of the current situation. The hidden aspects of change have also been noted:

(1) Language life is developing towards subjectivity and diversity; (2) a large number of new language phenomena are emerging; (3) languages of ethnic minorities are protected by the state, but also face challenges; (4) the interaction between Putonghua and dialects is accelerated, and strong dialects have formed a certain impact on weak dialects; (5) foreign language learning attracts attention [Guo, 2006].

On the basis of previous observations and understandings, we have sorted out the language life since the beginning of the 21st century:

Today’s language life can be summed up in 4 words: active, colorful, hot, and controversial. It is mainly manifested in the following aspects: (1) the language ecology presents a new situation; (2) the language life is becoming more diversified; (3) the language awareness of the whole population is constantly improving; (4) language problems occur from time to time; (5) language protection has entered a new stage [Guo, 2018].

The above observation of language life proves once again the close relationship between language, society, and the current times. Luo [1989: 88] pointed out that “the objective social life of an era determines its language content; in other words, the content of language reflects all aspects of social life in a certain era. Social phenomena, from economic life to all social consciousness, are precipitated in language.” Later, many sociolinguists also believed that the relationship between society and language should be studied [Chen, 1983; Guo, 1999]. However, previous sociolinguistic researches focused more on language from a social perspective, and less on society from a linguistic perspective. The former is “sociolinguistics” with linguistics as its center, while the latter is “sociology of language” with sociology as its center. In our opinion, the current study of language life should be a combination of the two. It is a more generalized sociolinguistics study of the relationship between language and society. We used

to analyze the structure of sociolinguistics as “social + linguistics” [Guo, 1999; 2004, 2013a], but now it seems that it can be changed to “social· linguistics”, “social-linguistics”, or directly to “language use study”.

If it is relatively simple to describe the language life of a certain stage, it is quite difficult to make a complete and systematic study of the language life in China over the past 70 years. The language life in China involves all aspects of the society, intertwined and intricate. What is investigated and what is meant to be explained is worth studying in itself. From our point of view, while studying the language life of China over the past 70 years, it is inevitable to outline its profile, search for the main features, and analyze its social factors and roles in social life. Therefore, the research should not only have macro considerations (such as bringing into the big background and looking from the big social environment), but also include micro analysis and discussion. Both dynamic investigation (such as the longitudinal investigation from 1949 to the present) and static thinking focusing on a certain point are needed. The change of language can be seen from the social perspective as well as from its reflection and influence on society from the perspective of language. We need both quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis, among which qualitative analysis is the purpose. Of course, reference points at different stages including some previous studies should be searched for. It is, however, almost impossible to really realize the above vision, so starting from a certain aspect or angle may be a way to begin.

## 2. The discovery of language life facts

To outline the profile of the language life in China over the past 70 years, it is necessary to describe and explore the facts of language life based on observation. The fact of language life exists in social life, which needs to be observed and discovered from different aspects of society and then described and analyzed further. The source, cause and influence of any language life fact should also be considered. Language events, activities, concepts, ontology and related research results can all be entry points. From the facts, as a macro narrative, we can roughly divide the language life in China over the past 70 years into the first 30 years (1949–1978) and the last 40 years (1979–2018).

### 2.1. Language events, language activities, language planning and policies

Major events or activities in the 70-year language life, including social events, national language planning and language policies, usually directly affect language life.

Important events of the first 30 years (1949–1978) include: (1) *People's Daily* published an editorial titled “correctly use the language of the motherland, fight for the purity and health of the language!” on June 6, 1951. At the same time, the newspaper also serialized “Speech of Grammar and Rhetoric” by Lu Shuxiang and Zhu Dexi, and later, *Chinese language* serialized “Grammatical Speech” by Ding shengshu et. al. (2) In 1955, the National Conference on Character Reform and the National Conference on Standardization of Modern Chinese were held in Beijing. The former changed “Mandarin” (*Guoyu*) to “Putonghua” and defined Putonghua. The latter emphasized the importance of standardization of Chinese, and made an in-depth discussion on the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of modern Chinese as well as dictionary, translation, the relationship between Putonghua and dialects, literary style, and language standardization. (3) Reform of the Chinese characters. In 1956, the State Council issued a notice to promote Putonghua throughout the country. In 1958, Zhou Enlai published a report on the *Task of Current Character Reform*, and the National People's Congress approved the promulgation of the *Chinese Pinyin Scheme*, giving Chinese language its own true pinyin

form. On January 28, 1956, the State Council revised and approved the *Simplified Chinese Characters Scheme*. In 1977, the State Council promulgated the *Second Batch of Simplified Chinese Characters Scheme*. (4) Elimination of illiteracy. In March 1956, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Decision on the Elimination of Illiteracy*, setting off a nationwide literacy campaign on the basis of the “wiping out illiteracy” work started in the early days of the founding of new China. (5) Unifying units of measurement. On June 25, 1959, the State Council issued the *Order on the Unified Measurement System*, which determined that the metric system was the basic measurement system in China. Subsequently, it issued a series of instructions, orders, laws and so on. The impact of these actions on language life has long been downplayed. (6) The publication of *Tentative Grammar system of Modern Chinese Teaching*. This system has played a positive role in the grammar standard teaching of Chinese language in primary and secondary schools, and also has had a great impact on the language life standard of the whole society.

The last 40 years (1979–2018) can be further divided into two stages. The first stage ran from 1979 to 2005, and the second from 2006 to 2018.

The main events of the first stage are as follows: (1) in 1986, the National Conference on Language and Character Work determined the direction of the new period and prioritized standardization with the target of informatization of Chinese characters. (2) In 1997, the National Conference on Language and Character Work set the goals and tasks for the new century. (3) The Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed and promulgated the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the National Common Language (2000)*. This stage marked standardization and establishment of laws as the main goals of Chinese language planning [Li, 2019].

The main events of the second stage are as follows: (1) in 2006, the first report on *Language Situation in Chinese* was published. At the press conference, the person in charge of the State Language Commission proposed to build a harmonious language life<sup>2</sup> and, and issues of national language ability attracted attention. (2) In 2010, The Sixth Plenary Session of the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CPC passed *Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Several Major Issues concerning Deepening the Reform of Cultural System and Promoting the Great Development and Prosperity of Socialist Culture*, which put forward vigorous promotion of the national common language while calling for the language and characters of all ethnic groups to be scientifically protected. (3) In 2013, the State Council issued *General Standard of Chinese Characters Table*. (4) The invention of Chinese character informatization and Laser Phototypesetting technology made the Chinese printing industry say goodbye to “lead and fire”. (5) *The Belt and Road Initiative* further promoted multilingual foreign language teaching.

In addition, in the past 70 years, China has made great efforts in language education for the blind and the deaf, as well as in the area of hearing and speech rehabilitation for the deaf. In 2018, the state announced the national standards for sign language and Braille.

There is no doubt that all these have deeply influenced, are influencing and will further influence the language life in China.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Qinping, Paying Attention to the National Situation of Language, Building a harmonious language life—Speech at the Press Conference of the report on Language Situation in China in 2005, the government portal of the Ministry of education of the People’s Republic of China, [http://www.moe.edu.cn/s78/A19/s227/s6152/201202/t20120201\\_129792.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/s78/A19/s227/s6152/201202/t20120201_129792.html)



## 2.2. Representative words

Vocabulary can best reflect the changes of social language life and is also its main element. The liveliness or retiring or resurrection of words reflects the development and change of the society and the language itself. Guo (1993) realized that a historical dictionary can be formed by chronologically arranging the new words from different regions since 1949. The words of “Cultural Revolution”, community words in China and Chinese words in the world are tied to social development and changes. In the most recent 10 years, people began to look for some representative and important words to reflect the application of social language and record the development and change of society. Since 2006, China began to conduct an annual inventory of Chinese language, using one word to describe China and the world in the past year. It is also of great significance to study the language life over the past 70 years if the appropriate word of the year can be selected to reflect the language life at that time. Therefore, while sorting out the language events in China, we also sorted out some words that have appeared in the past 70 years, trying to select a number of annual representative words.

The selection of annual representative words is complex. Different people have different criteria and approaches. Relying on the major events happened in the past 70 years, this study selected more than 10 words in each year from various literatures, and meanwhile, interviewed people with relevant experiences to certain words and asked them to name the 10 most impressive words in a certain era. In this way, a total of 938 words were filtered out, and 920 cases were eventually determined after crossing out repeated ones. Professor Su Xinchun in Xiamen University used *People's Daily* corpus to conduct annual frequency statistics of words, selecting 700 words for the past 70 years. The 70 words listed below are further selected from these 700 words.

1949–1958: liberation, construction, resistance to US aggression and aid to Korea, peace, “Three Evils”, reform, constitution, reform of the characters, cooperation, anti-rightist, Great Leap Forward.

1959–1968: the people's commune, anti-rightist, social education, atomic bomb, Cultural Revolution, Red Guards, struggle-criticism-transformation, Model Operas, highest instructions.

1969–1978: satellite, hydrogen bomb, Criticism of Lin and Kong, Comments on *Water Margin*, smash “Gang of Four”, Gaokao resume, truth standards, reform and opening up.

1979–1988: redress, all-around contract, ten-thousand yuan per year income household, Chinese women's volleyball, spring festival gala, “one country, two systems”, special economic zone, bell-bottom trousers, video house, taxi.

1989–1998: Karaoke, Hope Project, two-day weekend, expressway, the return of Hong Kong, cellphone, Internet bar, supermarket, Beijing-Kowloon railway, the Internet.

1999–2008: E-mail, golden week, SARS, Shenzhou Spaceship, harmony, Beijing Olympic Games, Wenchuan earthquake, express delivery, migrant workers, bullet train.

2009–2018: people's livelihood, “gelivable”, high-speed rail, Diaoyu Island, China dream, WeChat, Internet +, fog and haze, second child, the Belt and Road Initiative.

In comparison, it is relatively easier to choose the annual words for the first 30 years due to the single media and simple communication channel, while the situation was much more complicated for the last 40 years. In particular, 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up, and “reform and opening up” was elected as the annual word of the year. It is a pity that no one published the 40 words of the 40 years of reform and opening up. The last 40 words of the above 70 words may serve as a supplement. These 70 words can generally represent the language life at that time, among which a few have been used throughout the

language life for many years and the majority were used in specific years, or later as historical references. A dictionary based on these 70 words could be an interesting history of 70-year Chinese language life.

We were supposed to date these words (and we did), but the emergence of a word to its popularity is a process. Some words often first appeared in internal documents or reports, and then gradually spread to the public, such as “the Constitution” and “the Gang of Four”. Now the chronological order can be roughly observed by making each 10 years a period. In the past 70 years, some words have been used for a long time, such as “construction”, “people” and “People’s Republic of China”, some for a short time, such as “mental pollution”. Figure 1 shows the trend of the word “construction”.

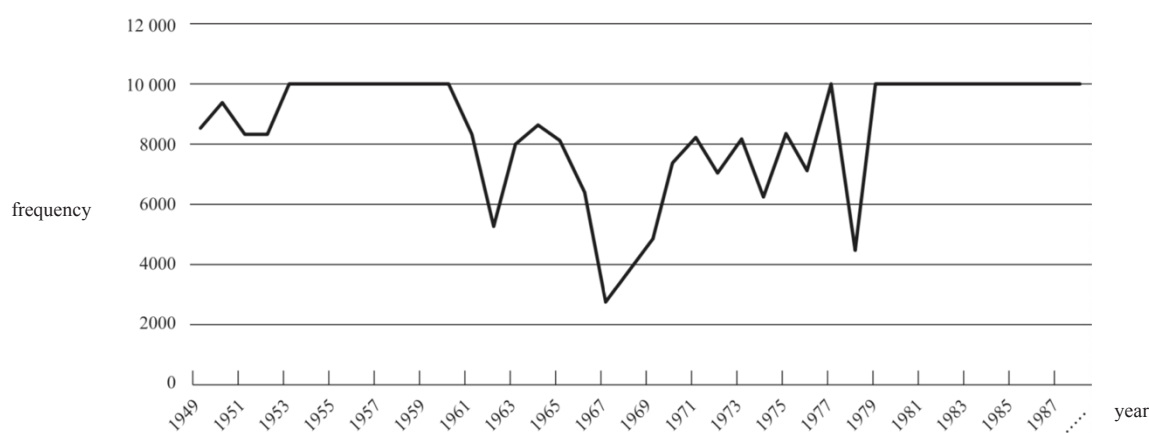


Figure 1. Trend of “Construction” over 70 years

Figure 1 shows that “construction” has been used at a high level over the past 70 years, but there are several lows, respectively in 1962, 1967 and 1978, with the lowest in 1967. Evidently, the peak in 1977 was due to the construction upsurge brought about by the smashing of the “Gang of Four”. After temporary adjustments in 1978, the use of the word had fully recovered and remained high again after 1979. This reflects the overall development of the country.

In our study, we realized that there should be a distinction between the real words and the tracing words. Some words have been around for a long time, such as “liberation”, but we chose to use it to represent 1949 rather than “the founding of the PRC”, because at that time, “liberation” was more often used. Other examples including “7000 people’s meeting”, “catching up with UK and US”, “pull out the white flag” and other words considered representative by later generations, however, are not found in the database of that era. They appeared widely only when recalling the history of that era later. There are other reasons as well, such as the difference between “the inside and outside” – media reports may not use words popular in society, or the official media may be slow to catch up to the use of new words. For example, a popular phrase of 1970 is “criticism of Chen and rectification”, but “criticism of revisionism and rectification” was used instead in newspapers at that time.

### 2.3. Language Products

The language products here refer to all kinds of speech works in language life, such as posters, slogans, lyrics, ballads, proverbs, language landscapes, etc. They are the product of language life and important materials for studying language life as well. The following is a list of some representative slogans since 1949 (the starting year of the slogan is shown in parentheses).

Long live the People's Republic of China (1949); To resist U.S. aid Korea and protect the country (1950); Resolutely suppress counter-revolution (1951); The general route is the beacon for all our work (1953); We must liberate Taiwan (1954); Take the road of cooperation (1955); Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend (1956); Long live the Great Leap Forward (1958); Go all out to the top and build socialism quickly and economically (1958); Good is the People's commune (1958); Never forget the class struggle (1962); Learn from Comrade Lei Feng (1963); Learn from Daqing in industry and Dazhai in agriculture (1964); Carry on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the end (1966); Promote revolution and production (1967); Make great achievements in the vast world (1968); We will not attack unless we are attacked, but if we are attacked, we will fight back (1969); Friendship first, competition second (1971); Practice is the sole criterion to test truth (1978); One-child is good (1980); Rejuvenate China (1981); Building socialism with Chinese characteristics (1982); Face modernization, the whole world and the future (1983); Rushing out of Asia and going to the world (1990); Development is the absolute principle (1992); Study, politics and integrity (1995); In-depth study and practice of the Scientific Outlook on Development (2008); Thoroughly study and implement Xi Jinping's Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era (2017).

These political and overall slogans have a great impact on the language life of all the people. There are also many folk slogans, which together constitute the language landscape of urban and rural areas.

Language products of different times are not only the records and images of those times, but also the driving force of active language life. Compared with ordinary language products, they are easier to enter all corners of the society and penetrate into people's language life. From "how bold people are and how productive the land is" in the Great Leap Forward era to "three loyalties", "four infinity", "overthrow" and "bombardment" in the Cultural Revolution period, the exaggeration of language reached its peak [Chen, 1980, 1983; Guo, 1999], and the unique Cultural Revolution roll call [Guo, 2014] left a deep historical imprint of language violence.

Traditional studies pay special attention to published literature, which is also an important basis for the study of language life. In fact, due to various reasons, many historical materials have not been preserved, such as various popular tabloids in the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, most of the published literature has been processed or filtered to a certain extent. In the era previous to personal media, it is difficult for these documents to present a complete picture of language life. Therefore, it is very important to collect unpublished literature and folk speech works. In particular, an unpublished book titled "Contemporary Folk Proverbs and Ballads" should be mentioned [Jiang, 1995]. The book has 550,000 words. According to our statistics of the book's sample, 3329 proverbs and Ballads from 1949 to 1995 were collected from the publications at that time. There must be more folk proverbs and ballads scattered among the people. These folk stories and songs, from the common people at the grass-roots level, reflect the aspirations of the people, which is the contemporary folk "wind" and valuable materials for observing the language life of this period.

#### **2.4. Other written and oral documents**

Other written documents are grouped into three types.

The first is a variety of historical documents, including books, papers and neologisms dictionaries that record and study the history of the PRC in different time periods. They are the academic achievements of that time, collating and recording the historical events and



words; meanwhile, the texts themselves are also data from those times. In 1962, Character Reform Press published a book *New Words*, including more than 1000 neologisms from areas of politics, economy and other social sciences commonly seen in the documents of the Party and government, newspapers and magazines since the founding of the PRC. A small number of natural science neologisms are also included [Character Reform Press, 1962]. These words reflect the social development of the PRC in the previous decade. After the Reform and Opening up, many dictionaries of new words have been published. Since 1991, China began to publish a series of annual dictionaries of new words [Yu et al., 1992–1996; Zhou, 2007; Hou et al., 2008–2017; Zou, 2018]. These dictionaries are of great value; however, they are not published consistently year to year and the acceptance of words into the dictionary is also subject to certain restrictions.

The second is the literary works published in different periods reflecting the life of the times. For example, the so-called “17-year” literary works in the 1950s and 1960s and works published during the Cultural Revolution have distinct characteristics of their times. In some cases, literary works reflecting the social life of a certain historical period written by witnesses or later generations are also of reference value but may not be reliable as data. We have found the phenomenon of “slip up” in many works.

The third is the yearly monitoring report of the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center since the beginning of the 21st century. This is an objective and real data record of the current situation of language life in China.

The importance of oral literature is self-evident. We did a lot of interviews in this study and realized that it was also a rescue work. The living elders over 80 years old are witnesses of the 70-year language life in China. They have a deep memory of all aspects of language life and profound feelings for words. They are a living literature that is gradually disappearing. After writing this article, the author resonated with a paragraph in Wang Hongjun’s (2019) rescue record of dialectic words as it also applies to the rescue record of the 70 years’ language life literature. It is as follows:

“In recent decades, the material life and spiritual world of individual regions have almost disappeared, and the words that bear them are gradually abandoned by the younger generation. Fortunately, these words still live in the memory of the middle-aged and the elderly! This time difference is the special value of rescuing dialects for the protection of local culture – to record the folk words in the memory of the middle-aged and the elderly is, in fact, to save the local culture – by means of scientific interpretation, marking and various multimedia approaches, we can preserve as many cultural imprints as possible, so that our future generations have the opportunity to learn more about and understand another way of existence and spiritual pursuit through these records. Consequently, there will be more independent thinking and experiences apart from drifting with the tide.”

### **3. The characteristics and trend of China’s language life over the past 70 years**

Through the observation of 70 years of China’s language life, we will outline its basic features and trend.

#### **3.1. The continuous promotion of the national common language and the improvement of its usage level**

In today’s China, except for a few places, people can communicate with each other in Putonghua wherever they go. Putonghua has become the real national language and the

main language in China's language life. According to the national survey on language use from 1999 to 2000, the proportion of the Chinese population being able to speak Putonghua was 53.06 % on average, and varied greatly among provinces, with the highest being 90.36 % and the lowest only 16.10 % (Office of the Leading Group for the Survey on the Use of Chinese Language and Characters, 2006). Further researches 10 years later unfold that Putonghua, Chinese dialects and minority languages have basically constituted the language situation of diversity in unity. In ethnic minority areas and large Chinese dialect areas, the communication mode of bilingual (multilingual) and dual dialects (multi-dialect) has become the mainstream of social language life [Xie et al., 2011]. In Guangxi, a province on the border, the popularization rate of Putonghua has accelerated from 56 % in 2000 to 80.7 % in 2010, and further to 84.72 % in 2017, higher than the national average level<sup>3</sup>. "For the first time in 2000 years, China has realized the real homophony" [Shi & Zhang, 2018], a major event in the language life of contemporary China. If the "standard characters" spread Chinese culture through the unified record of Chinese characters of over two thousand years ago, and promoted the historical process of the formation of a unified multi-ethnic country, then the "standard homophony" of contemporary China has consolidated the language foundation for promoting the verbal communication between nations and regions, safeguarding national unity, strengthening the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the language foundation for the great rejuvenation of the nation. It is the result of the joint efforts of the people and its historical significance cannot be overemphasized.

In terms of language education, the illiteracy rate of over 500 million people nationwide was as high as 80% in the early days of the founding of the PRC. In order to enable people to master certain language skills, the country began a large-scale and vigorous campaign to eliminate illiteracy since its founding. The illiteracy rate has been declining year by year, reaching 4.08 % today. The proportion of literate population using standardized Chinese characters exceeds 95 %. From illiteracy to literacy, it has changed people's language life [Sun, 2018]. The trend of the term "illiteracy elimination" in Figure 2 below reflects the society's attention to it. It can be seen from the figure that "illiteracy elimination" appeared in 1949 and reached a peak in the 1950s; after three years of natural disasters and then the Cultural Revolution, "illiteracy elimination" movements have slowed and stopped.

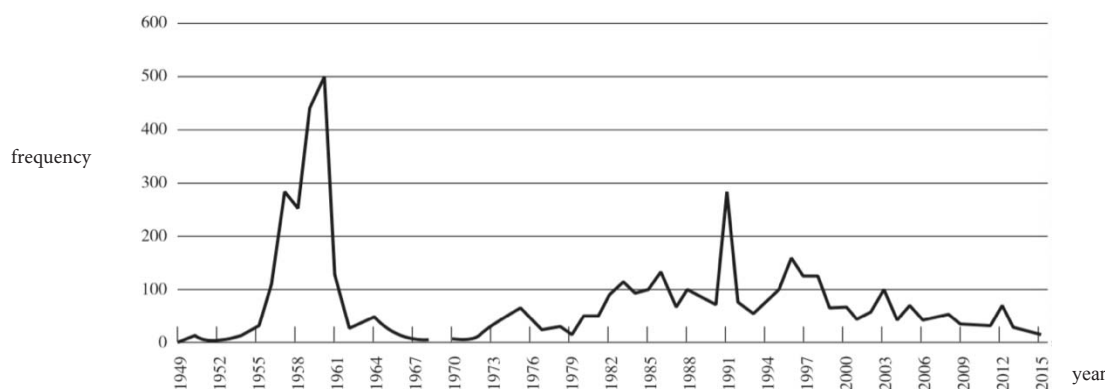


Figure 2. Trend of "Illiteracy Elimination"

Undoubtedly, China's national common language has become the mainstream of Chinese language life, which is inseparable from the correct language planning and language policy of the government.

<sup>3</sup> *China Education Daily*, 3rd Edition, September 24, 2018.

### 3.2. Harmonious and colorful coexistence of Multiple languages and dialects

China is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-dialect country, with complex language national conditions and diverse language life. Different regions and ethnic groups have different situations. China has its own language traditions, such as emphasizing language unification, written language, the unified role of Chinese characters, and ignoring spoken language. With the promotion of Putonghua, the popularization of foreign language education and frequent language contacts, bilingual and dual-dialect speakers have increasingly emerged. Putonghua with dialects, local dialects with Putonghua flavors, etc., are all present and active in language life. In general, from the perspective of the relationship between the national common language and minority languages, the former is the main body, and the latter reflects diversity. From the perspective of Putonghua and dialects, the former is the main body, and the latter reflect diversity.

The formation of this language situation has gone through a process. Since the 1950s, “Popularization of Putonghua” has always been the focus of the national language work. Although it has been repeatedly emphasized that the Popularization of Putonghua is not the elimination of dialects, local dialects have still been affected even previous to reform and opening up and the occurrence of population movements on a large scale. For instance, Bao (1980) pointed out the tendency for Nanjing dialect to move closer to Putonghua. In the 1990s, the issue of language ecology and dialect protection entered our vision [Guo, 1999]. Subsequently, dialect protection received more attention. The central government proposes that we should also scientifically protect the languages and characters of all ethnic groups while vigorously promoting the national common language, which is a historic breakthrough, deciding the macro development tone of diversity in unity for language life in China from the top-level design. At the same time, dialect speaking, dialect competitions, and dialect culture entering the classroom have become social hot spots. At the same time, dialect speaking, dialect competitions and dialect culture entering the classroom have become social hot spots. Dialect resource websites and WeChat official accounts have become increasingly active, and Alibaba has also begun to collect dialect resources. The content of language life has also entered some middle school courses [Guo, 2006] with issues of dialect and foreign language becoming topics of discussion among middle school students. These constitute “a beautiful landscape” of Chinese language life today.

Diversity in unity is also reflected in the relationship between Chinese and foreign languages. Foreign languages are continuously entering language life. The number of foreign language radio stations and television channels, foreign books and periodicals has greatly increased. The number of foreign languages being taught in China rose from 45 in 1965 before the reform and opening up [Fu, 1986: 80] to 98 at present. Foreign language words, foreign language interleaving, and the use of alphabetic words have continuously aroused heated discussions, becoming hot topics in Chinese language life.

Overseas Chinese is also interacting with the national common language. The basis of overseas Chinese is Putonghua, forming diversity in various parts of the world and reflecting the complementarity of Chinese. Overseas Chinese also has a great impact on the language life in China. *Global Chinese Dictionary (Quan Qiu Hua Yu Zi Dian)* and *21st Century Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (Quan Qiu Hua Yu Da Zi Dian)* are also records of this interaction in a certain sense.

### 3.3. Advances of Language life with prominent characteristics of the times

Chinese language life has always been accompanied by the development of the times.

The social changes and constant political movements in the first 30 years were the powerful driving force of social language life at that time, in which the most prominent manifestation was the politicization and militarization of words [Guo, 1999]. During this period, language life involved relatively less fields, mainly in political life, education, and cultural propaganda. As a brand-new social system, socialist life has replaced the social life of old China. The unified leadership and democratic centralism of the Chinese Communist Party have unified the national government. “The latest instructions do not stay overnight” and the “red wave” immediately spread a new way of expression to every corner of the country.

The social impact of Chinese language life in the next 40 years is much broader. The reform and opening up has brought about a large population flow, making Putonghua a necessity. Putonghua has been popularized with its level continuously improved. China, which has undergone the baptism of reform and opening up, has emancipated its mind and updated its concepts. A large number of new concepts and words have emerged. In addition to political life, economic and cultural life has become more influential. Modern technology, especially entering the era of the Internet and smart phones, has spawned many new ways of language use and application. The increase in foreign exchanges has expanded contact with language life. The content and form of language life are constantly enriched and are becoming more diverse.

The media is also an important driving force for language life in the next 40 years, but the difference is that modern media spurred language dissemination, and there was a horizontal expansion of media. It changed the situation of single-media and single-voice in the previous 30 years. At first, it was media connection and host system that constituted the interaction between audience and the host and made all kinds of “voices” transmitted to different directions through radio waves. At present, in the age of personal and integrated media, China’s Internet users have exceeded 800 million. With the help of new media, everyone is a reporter and editor. Language life is gradually going pragmatic and language continues to become lively. New words and expressions from various sources appear both in personal media, in the mouth of the public, and even in various official media. “Gelivable” (给力) and “give a Like”(点赞) are typical examples.

The development of the times has also changed the ways of language life. Modern science and technology directly affect language life, changing habits of language use. Traditional letters have become a rare thing and traditional reading is being replaced by electronic books in many cases. Audiobook has become a new way of reading. People have fewer opportunities to write by hand, and “forgetting how to write a character” has become a common phenomenon.

The changes in social language life have brought about the expansion of the language field. Language has gradually become a topic of concern to all walks of life in society. There are more topics linked to language life in the documents of relevant organizations from central to local institutions. In addition to traditional key areas of language use such as language education, press and publishing, radio and television, drama, film, etc., more fields such as science and technology, transportation, medicine, justice, civil affairs, and sports have begun to pay attention to language issues [Guo, 2018]. Various language standards and new concepts, such as language civilization, language poverty alleviation, language safety, language inheritance, etc., have become part of social life. Chinese character examination, Chinese inventory, Chinese character dictation competition, idiom competition and so on have aroused social attention to

language and characters. Language life has also been included in high school elective courses in some provinces [Guo & Zhu, 2006].

### 3.4. Significant change of language concepts and diversified language value orientations

Multiple language value orientations are another important feature of today's language life. The 70-year language life of China has gone through such a process: from pursuing language purity to emphasizing a healthy language life; from treating language diversity as a problem to treating it as a resource for monitoring, development and protection; from looking at language as a purely communicative tool to recognizing the existence of language ideology and then the construction function of language on identity; from the importance of personal language ability training to the promotion of national language ability; from national language standardization to language planning awareness for regions, communities, businesses and families. This series of language concepts is gradually evolving into social consensus, affecting today's language life, which undoubtedly benefited from years of hard exploration by Chinese language workers.

As far as language standards are concerned, Yu (1992) proposed that language plans should be scientific, applicable, stable, and dynamic, and language standards should be divided into mandatory and instructive. Later, Li (2008) created a new interpretation of language functions and language function planning, proposing that the national common language, language of all ethnic groups and dialects each have different functions, statuses, and duties. Xu Jialu said in the Theme Report on the National Language and Writing Conference in 1997: the development and relative stability of language and characters are inherent; standardization and the related work is an inevitable requirement for the healthy development of language and characters. Neither can we let it go or do nothing, nor can it be simplified as "one size fits all", pure and purer [Xu, 2000]. This is the first time the formulation published in the editorial of *People's Daily* on June 6, 1951 [Yu, 2004: 86] has been corrected in an important document. As early as December 25, 1995, in the meeting to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the reform of writing and the standardization of modern Chinese, the word "pure language" could not be found in the speech of then Vice Premier Li Lanqing, which evidently was closely related to the discussion of language views since the 1990s. Needless to say, the influence of this linguistic view is gradual, because just over two months before, Xu Jialu still published an article titled "Speaking of Old Topics in the New Era: Continue to Struggle for the Purity of the Motherland's Language" in the theoretical journal *Seeking Truth (Qiushi)*, sponsored by the CPC Central Committee [Xu, 1995].

Multiple orientations have brought constant hot spots to language life, such as Chinese crisis debate, restoration of old place names, pronunciation of place names, Chinese language at the Olympics, popularity of ancient poems, "language preservation" project, use of alphabetic words, dialects in the classroom, language recognition, standardization of Chinese medicine names, foreign language education, etc. Some aroused widespread concern in the society and various controversies [State Language Commission, 2017; 2018]. Today's language workers are no longer the so-called "language police". They have become language practitioners with a global outlook and academic mission of serving the country.

When discussing language life over the past 70 years, one topic should not be avoided. A popular saying in the society in recent years is that the language use in the mainland is not as elegant as that in Taiwan. In fact, this also involves the orientation of language use. The normative tendency of the mainland is to respect the common and conform to the public, paying special attention to the language use of the masses and the communication with the people,



which is evidently in connection with the mainland's social background.

At the same time, research has also found that a large number of new language phenomena are intermingled, for instance, vulgar words and phrases continuously appear though repeatedly banned, decayed writing styles are constantly emerging, language violence floods cyberspace, all of which have aroused people's attention and anxiety.

### 3.5. Constant evolvement of language itself and frequency of word replacement

Language naturally evolves with social development and changes. Language changes in Chinese language life over the past 70 years also have their own characteristics.

In terms of phonetics, except for the obvious tendency to expand the range of sharp accents, the decrease in soft voices, and the popularity of Hong Kong and Taiwan tones during a certain period, the overall stability was maintained. The changes in grammar were mainly reflected in the wide spread usage of "have(有)+VP", the frequent replacement of adverbs of degree in popularity, and the increase of verb-object type with objects. The vocabulary was stable with changes. The kinship and social appellation were constantly simplified. A large number of agricultural terms disappeared. The replacement of old and new terms occurred frequently. Foreign languages, dialects, and alphabetic words entered the communication system. Economic and technological words were integrated into daily life. Network language and daily language became intertwined.

The frequent replacement of old and new words is one of the most noticeable phenomena in language life over the past 70 years. There are several points worth noting. The first is the resurrection of old terms, such as "Mr.", "Miss", "Pawnshop", "Nightclub", "Exchange", etc. In the revision of Modern Chinese Dictionary, quite a few wordings with "old names of ..." was removed. The second is that some words were "destroyed" by the change in implicit meaning, such as "Miss" and "Boss". The third is the creation and retirement of new words. The emergence and retreat of new words particularly have distinct characteristics. Hou & Yang (2015) found some important features of new words by monitoring them from 2006 to 2014: the new words appear in large numbers and are used in a small scale, and then spread and die quickly with a short life cycle. One-third of the new words of the year will no longer appear in the second year and become "retired words". The replacement is also affected by foreign factors. Guo (1993) marked the entries of Hong Kong and Taiwan with \*. Examining these entries today, they have made their way into mainland language life in large numbers. No one knows the origins of many phrases such as "making a show" (作秀). The use of alphabetic words also has its own characteristics. Some alphabetic words have the tendency of Sinicization. For example, "E-mail" has experienced the transliteration from Email/e-mail/email/mail to Chinese characters "Yimeier" (伊妹儿) and free translation "electronic mail"(电子邮件), then abbreviation "E-mail"(电邮), and finally "mail" (邮件). At present, the total usage rate of all its letter forms add up to less than 4% [Hou, 2019].

Frequent word changes are still linked to the pursuit of fashion. Language fashion is changing and developing in the shape of waves. There are different language fashions in different periods. In the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution period, the slogan style language became fashionable. After the reform and opening up, Hong Kong and Taiwan tones and words were popular. Recently, the use of dialects appeals to the media. Fashion of naming is constantly changing. It goes without saying that names have a strong sense of their times. In a certain period, renaming local places became popular. For example, Huaiyin changed to Huai'an; Huizhou changed to Huangshan. Universities were also following the trend. On April

26, 2019, the WeChat official account “Language Research” released data on the renaming of universities. There are currently 1243 universities nationwide (excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan), with only 125 having kept the same name from 1981 to the end of May 2017. The author did not check these data, but it is generally in line with our expectations.

#### 4. Conclusions and Reflections

Language records the progress of human civilization. Over the past 70 years, social changes, population movements, technology, media, language policies, language teaching, etc. have all affected China’s language life. The government’s intervention in language life has achieved positive results. The national common language has been popularized and its level has been continuously improved, leading to the first realization of “homophony” in Chinese history and accumulating rich experience for language planning. The language life over the past 70 years has shown the language wisdom of Chinese people. Language concepts are constantly changing and updating, and the understanding of language functions is more comprehensive. Language awareness including awareness of identity, nation, country, group and culture has been continuously enhanced. Language life is keeping pace with the times, healthy and harmonious with continuous language changes, frequent word replacement, and increasing pressure on dictionary compilation. All these can be generally reflected through the key words of time periods we have listed before.

As a behavioral process, there are also some unsatisfactory aspects in the past language life. The first is the troubles caused by language planning itself, such as the hasty introduction and suspension of the “Second Batch of Simplified Chinese Characters” [Su, 2010], the ignorance to inheritance of Chinese culture when unifying the measurement system [Guo, 2013b], and the inconsistency in the implementation of new characters in some ethnic minority groups. Second, in terms of social language life, the decadent style of writing is deeply rooted, and language violence continues. New language contradictions continue to emerge, and language anxiety has been socialized. More attention needs to be paid to the underlying factors affecting language life.

The language life in China has always received the attention of foreign academic circles [Ferguson, 1959; De Francis, 1984; Norman, 1988]. In the past 70 years, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese linguists have made active contributions to the healthy development of Chinese language life. The active exploration of the localization of Chinese sociolinguistics research, which began in the 1990s, has begun to take shape. However, in the writing of this article, we have also noticed that linguists have not paid enough attention to language life, and its study is still more in the “phenomenon” stage: there is still a lack of various data, such as the use of the national common language by ethnic minorities. Foreign language life is already an important part of Chinese language life, but there is no statistics on the number of people using foreign languages and which languages they are using. There is no exact statistics on the number of illiterate people either.

In 2019, the National Social Science Fund planning project included language life research in the research guide for the first time, marking that the academicization of language life research is entering a new stage. In future research, we will not only study the actual language life, but also the past ones. 70 years of language life has left us with a wealth of language treasures. We should actively collect, record, organize, describe, dig and rescue language life and its products in the past 70 years, such as oral proverbs and ballads, oral narration of language life history, etc. How to learn lessons from previous language life, actively intervene, and offer

suggestions for building a harmonious and healthy language life should be considered in order to prevent history from repeating itself. How to make language life research more theoretical and methodologically meaningful continues to provoke academic thinking.

Nowadays, the impact of new media and micro-life on language life has begun to emerge. The influence of language intelligence technology to language education and learning, language communication and transmission is also approaching. The impact of oral language is beginning to increase, and language contact and interaction continues. All of these will affect language life in the future. We are in a new era. Language life is a part of our time. We look forward to a better life as well as a better language life in the future [Guo, 2018]. We look forward to the harmonious, diversified and healthy development of Chinese language life and all the new achievements yet to come in Chinese language life research.

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