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LANGUAGE MONITORING STUDY IN CHINA: PRACTICE AND REFLECTION¹

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The monitoring of language life has a long history in China. Since the beginning of the 21st century, efforts have been made to establish research institutions, build platforms and research teams in order to monitor the language life in present-day China. Remarkable achievements have been made on a continuous, large-scale and regular basis, and a backbone team named "Language Life School" has also been formed, both of which have played an important role in serving relevant national policy-making, social life and academic studies.

After the summary of language monitoring practices, the paper further explored the rules and theories so as to boost the development of language monitoring as a discipline. Seven main perspectives and four basic characteristics of language monitoring study have been generalized, and eight issues requiring further study have been discussed as well, including determination of boundaries and focuses, identification of authenticity and validness, cyberspace monitoring, formulation of rules and theories, improvement of technologies, means, approaches and research systems, mechanisms for the prediction and early warning of language situations and so on.

Keywords: language monitoring, language life, language situation, "Language Life School", language policy in China

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МОНИТОРИНГ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ СИТУАЦИИ В КИТАЕ: ПРАКТИКА И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

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Исследование языковой жизни в Китае имеет давнюю историю. С начала XXI века прилагаются усилия для создания исследовательских институтов, платформ и формирования исследовательских групп для мониторинга языковой жизни в Китае. Была проделана значительная и плодотворная работа, сформирована исследовательская группа под названием «Школа языковой жизни». Все это играет важную роль в реализации принципов национальной политики, вносит вклад в фундаментальные научные исследования, и в конечном итоге оказывает влияние на общественную жизнь.

В работе представлен краткий обзор практики языкового мониторинга. Автор также анализирует правила и теории, способствующие развитию языкового мониторинга как дисциплины. В работе обобщаются семь основных концепций и четыре характеристики изучения языкового мониторинга. Отдельно выделяются восемь проблем, требующих дальнейшего изучения, включая определение границ и направлений деятельности, определение подлинности и достоверности, мониторинг киберпространства, формулирование правил и теорий, улучшение технологий, средств, подходов и исследовательских систем, механизмов прогнозирования и раннего предупреждения конфликтных языковых ситуаций и так далее.

Ключевые слова: языковой мониторинг; языковая жизнь; языковая ситуация; «Школа языковой жизни»: языковая политика в Китае

I. Establishment of language monitoring systems and main monitoring results

Since entering the 21st century, China has built up comprehensive language monitoring systems and achieved fruitful results so far as institution building, platform building, and team building are concerned and played an important role in serving relevant national policy-making, social life and academic studies.

i. Establishment of language monitoring research institutions

The State Language Commission has started to establish language monitoring research institutions with respective focuses and complementary functions since 2004. So far, three categories of systematic and regularized institutions have been established:

Institutions of the first category mainly monitor the development, changes and the usage of the languages in China themselves, represented by six sub-centers of the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center jointly established by the Department of Language Information Management, the Ministry of Education and relevant universities, namely, the Center of Print Media Language at Beijing Language and Culture University, the Center of Broadcast Media Language Resources Monitoring & Research at the Communication University



of China, the Center of Network Media Language at Central China Normal University, the Center of Educational and Textbook Language at Xiamen University, the Research Center of Overseas Chinese at Jinan University, and the Center of Minority Languages at the Minzu University of China.

Institutions falling into another category mainly monitor various kinds of phenomena, activities, and public opinions related to languages, represented by the Research Center of Public Opinions on Language at the Institute of Applied Linguistics, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Chinese Language Matters and Social Development at Wuhan University.

Institutions of the third category are domain-based language monitoring research institutions as represented by the Research Center for State Language Capacity at Beijing Foreign Studies University and the Research Center of Foreign Language Strategies at Shanghai International Studies University.

ii. Establishment of language monitoring platforms and release platforms

Relevant institutions have successively created specialized language monitoring and release platforms, mainly including:

- 1. Fundamental platforms for language resources monitoring. The most influential includes the "Dynamic Circulation Corpus" set up by the National Center of Language Resources Monitoring and Research, which consists of three sub-corpuses: corpus of Standard Chinese media, corpus of education and textbooks and corpus of minority languages (Hou Min and Yang Erhong, 2015).
- 2. Monitoring systems of public opinions on language, such as the "Information Syndication System of Public Opinions on Language" developed by the Research Center of Public Opinions on Language and the "Monitoring and Analysis System of Language Situation in China" developed by the National Institute of Chinese Language Matters and Social Development.
- 3. Journals in which information concerning language situations in China can be released, such as Language Information founded by the Institute of Applied Linguistics, Ministry of Education, Language Situation Information compiled by respective sub-centers of the National Center of Language Resources Monitoring and Research in turn, Language Situation in China Quarterly and Language Situation in China Monthly founded by the National Institute of Chinese Language Matters and Social Development, and Trends in Chinese Language Resources sponsored by the Commercial Press.
- 4. Journals in which information concerning international language situations can be released, such as Trends in Foreign Language Strategy (renamed as Trends in Language Strategy later) sponsored by the Research Center of Foreign Language Strategies at Shanghai International Studies University and World Language Strategies sponsored by the Research Center for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University.
- 5. Comprehensive platforms for the release of information concerning language life studies, represented by the Annual Report on Language Life Situation in China, which is compiled and organized by the Department of Language Information Management, the Ministry of Education, released by the State Language Commission and published by the Commercial Press.

iii. Team of researchers conducting language monitoring studies-the formation of the "Language Life School"

A backbone team of researchers conducting language monitoring studies, which is called the "Language Life School", has been formed in China. They are "a group of scholars rooted in the fertile soil of Chinese language life, taking solving language life issues in China as their own responsibility, and paying close attention to the language life of the world" [Li Yuming, 2016], and they are practitioners, promoters and pioneers of the studies on language life monitoring as well.

iv. Main achievements made in language monitoring studies

Language monitoring studies are booming in China now. Remarkable achievements have been made: developing from being deserted to being widely concerned, from being piecemeal to being systematic and large-scale.

- 1. Monitoring studies on general issues concerning the language life in China Representative works are as follows:
- (1) The Annual Report on Language Life Situation in China

The report is not only an important platform for the release of information concerning language monitoring and analysis but also the most representative and comprehensive platform featured with the continual integration of annual achievements of language life studies in China. And it is not only a compilation of language situation information and related data but also a paradigm for language monitoring studies created by Chinese scholars. The emotions, ideas, and methods connoted in it fully reflect the academic purport and value pursuit of Chinese linguists in monitoring and conducting studies on the language life. Guo Xi (2015) summarizes his ideas about conducting studies on the language life as follows: (1) Using an internationally-oriented view; (2) Being problem-driven; (3) Serving the country; (4) Applying data materials (5) Creating the "Language Life School".

(2) The annual overview of Chinese words and characters, the release of annual buzzwords, and the chronology of new words

The annual "Summary on Chinese Language" as initiated in 2006 is jointly sponsored by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center and the Commercial Press. It aims to describe China and the world in the past year with one character or one phrase so as to summarize the "History of the Year". Related activities include the annual "Top Ten Popular Phrases in Mainstream Newspapers in China", "Top Ten Popular Words in Chinese Media", "Top Ten New Phrases in Chinese Media" and "Top Ten Popular Phrases on the Internet in China" released successively since 2003, as well as the *Chronicles of New Chinese Phrases and Expressions* (1997–2010) and *New Chinese Expressions* (2006–2014).

(3) Achievements released by Language Situation in China (Quarterly and Monthly)

As a continuous internal journal in which the research articles concerning language situation are released, *Language Situation in China (Quarterly and Monthly)* has always been committed to tracking and conducting in-depth analyses on major language phenomena and language-related events of significance to the country, people's livelihood, and social development, found out through the real-time monitoring of language life. And it also puts forward policy suggestions.

(4) Achievements made in conducting monitoring studies on the language life of Chinese minorities

In the past, surveys and studies were mainly conducted on the demography of minority languages; but the scope has been expanded in recent years. For example, since 2009, the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center has conducted a field survey on the language use of the media in Uygur, Tibetan and Kazakh [Hou Min and Yang Erhong, 2015]; and Zhou Qingsheng (2010) conducted a survey on the publication of books in minority languages.

2. Monitoring studies on new changes in language functions and new expansion in the field of language studies

Social development and scientific and technological progress have brought about great changes in language functions and continuous expansion and exploration in the field of language studies, which has also attracted keen attention from those conducting language monitoring. Monitoring studies have been conducted in a large number of emerging fields, such as language economy, language professions, language science and technology, language services, national language competence, language security, Internet language life, corpus studies, language information processing technologies, Internet language technologies, phonetic technologies, language analysis technologies, translation technologies, forensic linguistics, linguistics for the military, neurolinguistics, pathological linguistics, and language rehabilitation technologies.

In 2015, *Language and the State*, jointly published by the Commercial Press and the Party Building Books Publishing House, can be referred to as a collection of achievements of scholars in different fields of China made in monitoring and tracking the contemporary social language life from different perspectives. It is in the very book that new changes in contemporary language functions and the latest progress in language applications have been comprehensively and systematically analyzed from the perspective of national strategy for the first time.

3. Monitoring studies on language policy and language planning

Studies on monitoring language policy and language planning are also being carried out and show fruitful results. A considerable achievement is the *Annual Report on Language Policy Studies in China* organized by the Department of Language Information Management, Ministry of Education and compiled by the National Language Policy Research Center. Its contents are so extensive that such aspects as the theories concerning language policy and planning, language life, macroscopic national language policy, national language policy on Standard Chinese, policies related to minority languages and Chinese dialects, policies related to foreign languages, language education policies, language economy and language services, language policy and its history are all covered [National Language Policy Research Center, 2015].

II. Studies on and understandings about language monitoring theories

Chinese scholars have not rested on simply observing linguistic phenomena and general practices in language life; instead, they have gone further to explore summarizing experience, revealing the laws, and conducting reflections on the theories so as to enhance language monitoring practices further and boost the development of relevant theories and the discipline.

i. Main perspectives of study

1. Academic purport of language monitoring

Those Pioneers, who had been conducting large-scale and sustainable systematic monitoring on language life, had made clear the basic concepts and goals from the very beginning. The most representative statement goes as follows: to get to know about the new situations and new issues in social language practice in time by monitoring and analyzing the status quo of



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language use on the mass media and, in turn, to establish a long-term mechanism to conduct real-time monitoring and regulation-based guidance over social language life. With the monitoring results made public, on the one hand, they can be used for reference when developing and making adjustments to the national guidelines and policies concerning language; on the other hand, it will be possible to provide consultancy and guidance on using our language correctly so as to enhance the guidance of regulations and promote the healthy development of social language life positively and effectively [Yuan Guiren, 2004].

2. Guidelines for conducting language monitoring

It is one of the prerequisites for doing language monitoring and analysis well to set up a correct and advanced overview on language, including correct and advanced views on language resources, on language ecology, and on language service. Scholars move with the times and exert themselves to advocate the philosophy that languages are resources. For example, Li Yuming (2009) pointed out that "It is not only an academic issue but also a social issue to promote setting up the awareness that languages are resources and get national language resources preserved properly and developed properly." and that "Language resource is "organic", it is the concept of language planning guided by scientific development thought." Wang Tiekun (2008) pointed out that so far as studies on language monitoring are concerned, it is necessary to "establish the brand-new concepts of 'cherishing the Chinese language resources' and 'serving the society'". Keeping that in mind, scholars make attempts to advocate the language ecology in which linguistic mainstream and linguistic diversity co-exists [Zhou Qingsheng, 2013], taking the harmony in language life as their goal. Those proposals have all become the essential guidelines for language monitoring studies.

3. The object and contents of language monitoring

The object of language monitoring is present language life (Here, "present" is opposed to "historical"; both traditional media and virtual networks are the carriers of present language life) and the specific contents of language monitoring are language situations. Wang Tiekun holds that "When conducting language monitoring, it is necessary to insist on reflecting real language life in an objective manner... It is our tenet to monitor the actual status of real language life while recording and reflecting it objectively" [Zou Yu, 2015:60].

As to what language life is and what a language situation is, scholars are incessantly intensifying their understandings. Chen Zhangtai (1994) called it a "language practice", and he holds that it refers to the status of people using their language. Li Yuming has defined the language practice twice; yet, he points out recently that "Language life refers to activities of various kinds concerning using, learning, and studying languages, linguistic knowledge, and language techniques. It has three dimensions, namely, application, learning, and conducting studies, and the term 'language' also involves three aspects, i.e. language itself, linguistic knowledge, and language techniques. Those three dimensions and three aspects form nine categories related to language life, including language application, the application of linguistic knowledge and the application of language techniques; language learning, linguistic knowledge learning and language technique learning; studies on language, studies on language knowledge and studies on language techniques" [Li Yuming, 2016].

As for the concept "language situation", Zhao Shiju (2009) briefly describes it as "various kinds of new situations in language life" at the initial stage. Later, he had those situations classified into three aspects: "First, the development of language itself; second, the status of language use and related activities; third, public opinions related to language" [Hao Rihong, 2015]. Chen Zhangtai (2015:399) defines language situation as follows: "As to language and the



status of its usage, it refers to the overall situation of linguistic demography in a nation or region." Li Yuming (2015) conducts particular studies in the three crucial fields of language situation, i.e. "situation of language politics", "situation of language education", and "public opinions on language". Nevertheless, Sun Manjun (2011) believes that "Public opinions on a language are the public's opinions, attitudes, moods, or desires towards guidelines and policies, systems and laws, regulations, and standards; or towards language phenomena, or language-related hot issues. And they also embody the social and political attitudes of the public towards the society and politics". Yang Jiang and Zhao Hanbing (2012) define public opinions on language as "social and political attitudes that the public has and holds towards those phenomena, incidents, and policies related to language life in a certain period of time and a certain social space." In addition, certain scholars equate language situations with public opinions on language.

4. Methodology, approaches and techniques of language monitoring

Li Yuming (2016) holds that the existing methods and approaches for carrying out studies on language monitoring include: observing language life in different fields, doing statistics on language life, monitoring, conducting studies on and making judgment over public opinions on language, conducting surveys and studies on national linguistic demography, setting up research systems of language situation monitoring. Li Yuming and others particularly emphasize that when studies on the living status of languages are conduct, it is necessary to attach importance to "strategic thinking" [Hao Rihong, 2015]. Dai Qingxia (2007) points out that in conducting studies on language practice conditions, it is required to "comprehensively use those research methods used in disciplines as linguistics, sociology, ethnology, pedagogy and geography to conduct systematic and thorough analyses and studies on language use and pay special attention to quantitative statistics and stratified analyses." Hou Min (2011) believes that when conducting studies on language monitoring, on the one hand, it is needed to build the theories about language monitoring itself under the guidance of linguistic, sociological, psychological, statistic, computational linguistic and even philosophical theories; on the other hand, support from related techniques is required as well. Both theories and techniques are indispensable to language monitoring.

As for monitoring techniques, Zhang Pu (1999, 2009) puts forward theories or statistical models of language dynamic-stable state, of relative time, of circulation, of diachronic circulation curves, and the theory and engineering model of dynamic circulation corpus. He Wei et al. (2007) brought up with the space-time monitoring model of buzzwords. The Research Center of Public Opinions on Language has launched a searching and automatic aggregating system for Web information on language. The National Institute of Chinese Language Matters and Social Development has developed a real-time monitoring and analysis system for language situation. Yang Jiang and Hou Min (2010) discuss the composition of modules used in systems of monitoring and conducting analyses on public opinions on language.

5. The rules concerning the emergence, dissemination, and evolution of language situation Most studies are conducted on the emergence, propagation and evolution of new words and buzzwords. Wang Lei (2016) summarizes relevant studies and has such studies classified into four categories: first, paying attention to the emergence and development process of language phenomena on the Internet, and describing them in detail; second, paying attention to the social impact of language use on the Internet as a communication phenomenon and cultural phenomenon at all levels; third, expounding the composition, derivation and functions of the language phenomena on the Internet according to contemporary linguistics, communication and other related theories; fourth, taking into account the situation overseas while focusing

on the domestic language facts on the Internet. So far as studies dealing with public opinions on language are concerned, Yang Jiang and Zhao Hanbing (2012) divide their occurrence and evolution into five stages. Zhang Ting and Wei Hui (2011) hold that as to the propagation of public opinions on language, a three-stage mode including mass media, blogs (opinion leaders) and the general public has formed.

6. Public opinions on language by type

Yang Jiang and Zhao Hanbing (2012) have the contents of public opinions on language classified into five categories: language standardization, language demography, language application, language education and propagation, and minority languages. Based on the nature of public opinions on languages, Zhang Ting and Liu Jingwen (2012) classify public opinions on language into three categories: key public opinions, non-key public opinions and false public opinions.

7. The Nature of language monitoring studies as a discipline

Dai Qingxia (2007) believes that studies on language life focus on the variations of languages in different fields, different regions and different periods of time, namely, conducting studies on languages mainly from a social perspective; therefore, it can be included in the category of sociolinguistics in terms of disciplinary classification. However, due to its strong value in application, some people advocate that it should fall into the category of applied linguistics.

ii. Basic characteristics of language monitoring studies

In general, the basic purport and characteristics for the research and practice of language monitoring in China can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, language monitoring studies have their definite research objects, i.e. the present language life, and emphasize that their research objects must be the real existing language life. The specific contents of language monitoring are language situations, which generally consist of three aspects: first, the development of and changes in languages themselves; second, the status quo of language use, progress of applications and language research and activities; third, public opinions related to language. In a word, language situations include languages themselves and various trends related to languages, which are the most vivid in language life.

Secondly, language monitoring studies have two perspectives or dimensions. First, looking inward; that is, mainly observing the development of and changes in languages themselves, the status quo of language use, the new academic and technological progress of language, and tapping the rules of and trends in language use and development. Second, looking outward; namely, observing the realistic social functions and social influence of languages, mainly focusing on the social views on various language issues and other fields related to language life, so as to examine the relationship between language and society along with the social phenomena it reflects, and to analyze and predict phenomena outside language, such as social psychology, public demands, political trends, cultural phenomena, economic activities and scientific and technological progress. Meanwhile, such a perspective is related to the first perspective in focusing on and studying the influence of various aspects of society on languages at different levels.

Thirdly, the tasks and purposes of language monitoring studies. First, to timely understand the status of social language life, grasp the status of language use and the rules for its development and changes, evaluate and judge the status quo of language life, provide the basis for the formulation of and adjustments to language policies and language planning, promote the scientific decision-making and effective implementation of language life management, and

provide first-hand information for conducting studies on language theories; second, to examine the interactive resonance between language and the society along with the social conditions and public opinions reflected by it by monitoring and analyzing language situations, understand its trends, conduct studies on its rules, discover existing issues and hidden dangers, and explore relevant countermeasures so as to provide reference for the government and relevant authorities in decision-making. The general purpose is to grasp the trends of social language life in a timely and accurate manner, reveal the rules, learn about the demands, provide warnings to problems, guide the society, resolve conflicts, promote the harmony of social language life, and serve national construction, social development, public life, and academic studies.

Fourthly, in terms of ways and methods, language monitoring studies are characterized by monitoring, researching and releasing the real language life in a multi-perspective, large-scale, systematic, sustainable, regularized, and even real-time manner. Besides, special attention is being paid to the application of modern information technology. At present, there has formed an academic research system in which various ways and methods are put into application to monitor, analyze and release the real language life in a regularized and systematic way and to carry out theoretical discussion on language monitoring activities in China.

III. Issues to be discussed in language monitoring i. Determining the boundaries and focuses of language monitoring

Determining the objects to monitor is the premise to ensure pertinent, scientific, and effective monitoring. Although it is generally recognized that the object of language monitoring is language life, people has different and vague understandings of it being a new concept. In particular, almost all activities in social life are related to language and thus, it is easy to lead to the blind expansion of the language life's boundaries, which is disadvantageous to the implementation of language monitoring studies and the realization of its value. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth studies on the scope of language life and determine respective monitoring focuses according to different needs.

Language life can be classified into personal level and social level, and more importance is being attached to the latter. Social language life is further classified into local level and national level, and more importance is being attached to the latter too. At the national level, focus should be laid on language issues of great significance to the national economy and people's livelihood. With a view on the three aspects of language situations previously mentioned, it is a must to focus on the use of language and public opinions on language when conducting language monitoring. Yet, further studies on clearer and more specific monitoring boundaries are still to be conducted.

ii. Identifying the authenticity and validness of language situation information

The language life is complicated, and the effects of such factors as the development of wemedia, the privacy of netizens' identities and the amplification effect of the Internet have led to the proliferation of false information, thus making it difficult to identify whether the language information is authentic and effective or not. It is difficult to meet the need for large-scale and continuous language monitoring if we simply rely on general artificial means for identification. Therefore, it is still necessary to explore a really effective information verification mechanism and develop an intelligent verification system.

iii. Revealing the rules of language situation

The analysis on language situations is still in its initial stage. In general, more analyses are being conducted on phenomena sorting, formal statistics, and case studies and it is still a must to enhance in-depth analyses and tap such rules as (1) the spatial distribution rules of language situations, (2) the rules on the distribution of language situations on the social network, (3) the periodic rules of frequent language situations, and (4) the rules for the interactions between language and the society.

iv. Monitoring and research on the language life in cyberspace

The monitoring and research on the language life in cyberspace would be limited to "language use on the Internet" and "language-related public opinions on the Internet". The former mainly focuses on new expressions and buzzwords on the Internet while the latter mainly attaches importance to social issues in reality as reflected by public opinions on language; yet, rather few studies were conducted on the status quo and rules of language life in cyberspace and the effects of all those on the society as well as individuals. Such a fact suggests that the past research on the contemporary language life was incomplete and less comprehensive.

The main reason for such a situation may lie in that we were misled by the virtuality of the Internet. Certain scholars call the language life in cyberspace the "virtual language life" and pay little attention to it. We believe that although the cyberspace is virtual, people's language behaviors of various kinds in it are objective and realistic. In particular, what deserves our attention is the fact that the "virtual" feature of the Internet is being weakened rapidly; the boundary between "virtual space" and the reality is becoming ever-increasingly blurred as they are deeply blended now. Virtualized society and socialized networks have become the general trends. Language life in cyberspace has become a very important part of social life, and its effects on the real society must not be underestimated. In addition, it has greater effects as compared with the real language life as cyberspace is featured with its immediacy, openness and wide coverage. Therefore, it is really necessary to strengthen studies on the language life in cyberspace.

v. Research on the mechanisms for the prediction and early warning of language situations

In the existing studies on language monitoring, follow-up tracking analyses are basically conducted and most of which can be described as "retrospections" or real-time tracking rather than prospection. There is lack of studies and judgments on the trends in language events and predictions about future language events. Although existing studies can be used to deal with some problems in reality, it is difficult to guide the trends and prevent problems in advance. Therefore, it is required to carry out relevant in-depth studies, continuously improve the capability to make predictions, and strive to build language situation prediction and early warning mechanisms and systems at the academic, institutional, technical and institutional levels.

vi. Improvement of technologies, means, and approaches to be used when conducting language monitoring studies

The existing technologies, means and approaches used when conducting language monitoring studies are still somehow limited. For example, information noise that accompanies

information in online language monitoring is still rather prominent; as a result, it is impossible to achieve accurate monitoring and the monitoring work is much less efficient and effective. Therefore, innovations in terms of technology, means, and approach are urgently needed.

vii. Further improvement of language monitoring research systems

With a view on the demands for future development, institutions conducting language monitoring studies need to get further optimized and improved. First, it is a must to optimize the internal systems, operation mechanisms and management methods within the existing institutions, further stimulate their vitality, and improve the level of their language monitoring studies and enhance their ability to provide services. Second, the communication and coordination between the institutions should be strengthened and a linkage mechanism should be built for them. Third, it is necessary to supplement new institutions to cover the blind areas of monitoring studies at a proper time and further improve the national system of language monitoring studies. Fourth, better conditions should be created for conducting international exchanges and hardware conditions for institutions conducting language monitoring studies.

viii. Building a system of theories on language monitoring

Theoretical construction is urgently needed for deepening language monitoring studies. At the present stage, efforts can be made from the following aspects: first, tap and refine the theories concerning language monitoring practices in China; second, get the theoretical viewpoints put forward by Chinese scholars sorted out, integrated and intensified comprehensively, and tap, construct and enhance their internal logics, overall systematicity, and universality; third, make attempts to enrich relevant theories according to the reality of Chinese language life and by using new theories and approaches abroad for reference.

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