An Investigation of Family Language Policy in Chinese Urban Middle-class Families

Nan Hu[*]

China is a nation with linguistic and ethnic diversity. Putonghua, which translates to "common language" is the common spoken language in mainland China, also known as Standard Chinese historically and Mandarin Chinese in English, has been actively promoted for over half a century aiming at facilitating communication among people with different dialects across China. Under the nationwide promotion of standard Chinese since the State Council issued Instructions Concerning the Promotion of Putonghua in 1956 (Zhou & Sun, 2004), the linguistic ecology represented by the interaction among Putonghua and other dialects in urban contexts has changed dramatically. Based on the three dimensional language policy theory which includes the language ideology, the language practice and the language management (Spolsky, 2004), this study intends to investigate the family language ecology of 30 Chinese parents from 20 urban families with children aged three to seven years. Through analyzing the data collected from survey questionnaires and two interviews, the results indicate that the status of dialect has been marginalized consensually by parents within the family domain. Additionally, parents are shielding their children from dialect both consciously and unconsciously. This study concludes with a discussion of implications for future Family Language Policy (FLP) research within the distinctive Chinese context.

Keywords: family language policy, Putonghua, dialect

1 Introduction

The promotion of Putonghua at the national level since 1950s and the gradual disappearance of ethnic languages and dialect have made great changes to the linguistic ecology of Chinese families in urban areas. Family Language Policy (hereafter FLP) can be defined as explicit (Shohamy, 2006) and overt (Schiffman, 1996) planning in relation to language use within the home among family members. FLP is informed primarily by theories of language policy which was concerned primarily with solving 'language problems' in

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[*]**Nan Hu**, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Education, Chonnam National University

newly independent, former colonial nations (Fishman, Ferguson, & Das Gupta, 1968). After 23 years, Fishman (1991) claimed that the family was considered to be an extremely important domain for studying language policy because of its critical role in forming the child's linguistic environment. From then on, the family was placed at a central position as a key prerequisite for a successful language planning. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy includes language belief or ideology; language practice; and language management. Taking FLP as a theoretic perspective, the current study aims to explore what types of FLP exist in the urban Chinese families. Firstly, previous studies in the field of FLP mainly focused on the western middle-class bilingual families. Few studies have concerned dialect and Putonghua within the framework of FLP in the context of China, particularly in urban middle-class families. Secondly, existing literatures on language policy in China were most grounded on the macro level with emphasis on explaining the national language policy from the top down in the public domain. Few early studies took into consideration the actual implementation of language policy by family members on a micro level. Thus, this research draws on both self-report questionnaires and short interviews as instruments aiming to understand the language practice of parents as well as to inquire about their language ideology and language management in the family domain. This study concludes with further discussion on FLP and some implications for future FLP research in China.

2 Literature Review

FLP is defined as explicit and overt language planning by family members in relation to language choice and literacy practices within home domains and among family members (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008; Spolsky, 2012). FLP examines language planning and language choice among family members. More specifically, FLP addresses three interrelated aspects: the language ideology (what family members believe about language), the language practice (what they do with language), and the language management (what efforts they make to maintain or abandon language).

Early studies in FLP mainly focused on western middle-class bilingual families with a debate on whether child's language acquisition was processed in two separate systems. For example, De Houwer (1990) conducted a case study on a bilingual Dutch-English child who was exposed to both languages from birth. He found that the employment of One-Parent-One-Language (OPOL) strategy made this child's speech production resembled her monolingual peers in both languages. As shown above, early works of FLP were primarily centered on internal linguistic conditions involving two European languages. However, few researches paid attention to the external

social factors that may affect the FLP in immigrant families and communities with endangered languages.

Recent developments in this field have shown more attention to language attitudes, parental beliefs, and language endangerment in non-western, non-middle-class socioculturally and socioeconomically marginalized families and communities. For instance, Curdt-Christiansen (2009) conducted an ethnographic study on children from Chinese immigrant families in Quebec with regard to ideological factors underlying those families' FLP. She found that the establishments of FLP in those immigrant families are under the influence of broader sociopolitical forces, such as parents' educational background, cultural disposition, immigration experiences of parents as well as social status of minority and majority language. On the other hand, Smith-Christmas's (2016) study focused on language practices of an extended family of three generations on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. Based on the analysis of interactions among three generations, she found that even the adults made great efforts to use Gaelic with children; the children still did not speak Gaelic frequently.

Parents have more privilege to manage and plan the FLP during the parent-child interaction in family. Moreover, parents play a leading role in children's language development (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). However, in reality, several external factors are said to influence the formation of FLP; they are the sociolinguistic factor, the sociocultural factor, the socioeconomic factor and the sociopolitical factor. Sociolinguistic factor relates to people's ideology on the evaluation of dominant and weak language in society. In China, for example, Putonghua which is based on Beijing dialect is regarded as the standard language of modern Chinese because it meets the needs of the modern society. Sociocultural factor means that people's identity and value can be reflected in the language they speak. Socioeconomic factor decides the value in use of different languages. For example, globalization makes English acquire considerable power and is considered to be an effective way of entering the upper class. Sociopolitical factor which includes national language policy and language-in-education policy is most effective in interfering with FLP. Such government policies determine the maintenance and development of one language or abandonment of another language.

Since the 20th century, language policy in China has had a single aim: promotion of the national standard (Zhou & Sun, 2004), called Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) in the second half of the century. Currently, in China, Putonghua has been widely accepted as a national standard by speakers of other Chinese topolects. All these factors have led ultimately to the emergence of a very distinctive linguistic ecology in China. Such a phenomenon has motivated more researchers to look at how these changes are reflected on both macro and micro level (Li, 2018). In recent years, FLP has gradually become an academic subject of language policy research in

China (Xu, 2017). However, the study of FLP in China is still in its infancy stage (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2017). Most previous research has mainly discussed overseas Chinese families and ethnic minority families. Only a few studies attempt Mainland urban families with a focus on a limited number of cities (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2019).

Drawing on the three aspects (language ideology, language practice and language management) of FLP, this article tends to picture the current situation of FLP in Chinese urban middle-class families.

3 Methodology

3.1Participants

The 30 participants are urban middle-class parents who live in Zhengzhou city which is the capital city of Henan province with a population of 10 million. It is the political, economic and cultural center of Henan province. Among these participants, 20 are female and 10 are male, aged from 26 to 42. They all have one or two children aged three to seven years who were looked after or are being raised by their grandparents. All these participants are well-educated. Of them, 21 have a bachelor degree. Among the other nine participants, six people have a master degree and the other three people have a doctorate. These participants are now currently living in Zhengzhou with stable income and personal house property. All of the participants are currently employed, their occupations include: doctors, nurses, university lecturers, high school teachers, civil servants, engineers, etc. In terms of its composition the participant sample can be regarded as representative of urban middle-class families in China. All participants are native Chinese speakers with an ancestral home at Henan. Thus, all participants are capable of speaking both Putonghua and their own dialect.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaires
Drawing on Spolsky's (2004, 2009) theoretical model of FLP, the items in questionnaire covered three interrelated components: language ideology; language practices and language management. The items in the questionnaire were mainly adopted from Ryan (2008) and Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009). Some other items were written according to the literature reviewed before and my own experience as a parent sharing the same social background with other participants. The first draft questionnaire comprised 14 content items covering the three components of FLP. There are eight basic demographic questions as well. All the items originally written in English were translated into Chinese firstly. All the translation was checked by two college English

teachers. Then the draft was piloted among three parents. In the pilot study, two parents reported that two related items with regard to language practice are in paradox to them. Since the absence of these two content items caused no influence on the minimum number of the language practice area, so these two items were deleted from the questionnaire. Therefore, there were 12 content items and eight basic demographic questions (see Appendix). The first part of questionnaire was about participants' background information as well as children's and grandparents'. The second part concerned language practice of them and asked them to choose one single answer from three options. The third and the fourth parts were written in accordance with a 5-level Likert scale focusing on language ideology and language management. The questionnaire was administered through one Chinese online survey platform named Wenjuanxing. Finally, all 30 questionnaires were collected successfully and data were taken into frequency analysis.

3.2.2 Interviews

In order to obtain in-depth qualitative data about parents' beliefs, attitudes and expectations on language and dialect, short semi-structured interviews were conducted with two parents. These two interviewees were selected through a convenience sampling, because firstly, the sample universe of the current study was not broad and well restricted; secondly, these two interviewees showed great willingness to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted through the online-chat platform. Two participants were interviewed in Chinese one by one, based on one open question: What do you think of Putonghua and dialect? Two more elaborated questions relating to language practice and management were also included in the interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of their FLP at home. These two open-ended questions are: What is your language choice at home with different family members? How do you like if governments formulate policies to promote dialect speaking in children's schools? All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

4 Analysis and Results

4.1 The quantitative data: Questionnaires

In order to provide a straightforward and full presentation of FLP in family domain, descriptive data including frequencies and percentages of different responses will be reported. In the following, some of the data from this questionnaire will be presented regarding language ideology, language practice and language management respectively.

Taking language practice into consideration, the main finding from the quantitative data was that within three-generation households, dialect and

Putonghua were both used for daily communication. However, language choices made by the parents varied depending on whom they were talking to. The language choices made by parents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Language Choice of Parents

	Putonghua, N (%)	Dialect, N (%)	Both, N (%)
Children	22 (74)	4 (13)	4 (13)
Grandparents	4 (13)	23 (77)	3 (10)
Spouse	14 (47)	7 (23)	9 (30)

What Table 1 mainly shows is that among all the parents, 74% of them speak Putonghua with their children at home. Only 13% of the parents used only the dialect when talking to their children. This result can be compared to the data from parent-grandparent interactions. The results show that 77% of them switched to dialect which was the shared home language with their own parents to start their communication at home. Another noticeable point is the parents' language choices upon their spouses. Totally, 47% of them spoke Putonghua while another 23% chose dialect. Husband-wife interaction is also construed through both of these two languages; the number is 30%.

Turning now to the data from language ideology, as shown in Table 2, the overall responses to the evaluation on Putonghua from parents are very positive. The data of parents' positive attitudes toward the different values of Putonghua is 50%, 60% and 57% respectively. Out of all the negative evaluation parents made, 20% of them did not agree that Putonghua was a marker of high degree of education. Only 3% of the parents did not believe in the prosperity Putonghua would bring to his child. Finally, 13% of them gave no concern for the value of cultural identity behind Putonghua.

Table 2. Ideology on Putonghua

	Dst, N (%)	Dso, N (%)	N, N(%)	Aso, N (%)	Ast, N (%)
Well-educated	2 (7)	4 (13)	9 (30)	13 (43)	2 (7)
Brighter future	0 (0)	1 (3)	11 (37)	12 (40)	6 (20)
Cultural identity	0 (0)	4 (13)	9 (30)	12 (40)	5 (17)

Note. Dst=Disagree strongly; Dso=Disagree somewhat; N=Neutral; Aso=Agree somewhat; Ast=Agree strongly.

On the other hand, respondents made divergent comments on the value of dialect. As can be seen in Table 3, 30% of the participants expressed the belief that dialect was their cultural heritage thus worth saving. However, another 37% of them gave opposite viewpoints. Moreover, when the participants were asked to give an evaluation on the limitation and uselessness of dialect, 43% of the respondents expressed their worries about the practicability of the dialect. That is to say, these parents are in agreement

with such a statement that dialect is less useful than Putonghua in their lives. However, another 27% of the participants indicated their positive attitudes on the usage of dialect.

Table 3. Ideology on Dialect

	Dst, *N* (%)	Dso, *N* (%)	N, *N*(%)	Aso, *N* (%)	Ast, *N* (%)
Cultural heritage	3 (10)	8(27)	10 (33)	8 (27)	1 (3)
Lesspractical	2 (7)	6 (20)	9 (30)	7 (23)	6 (20)

Note. Dst=Disagree strongly; Dso=Disagree somewhat; N=Neutral; Aso=Agree somewhat; Ast=Agree strongly.

The next section of the survey is concerned with language management in terms of what efforts these parents plan to make for maintaining or abandoning one language. Of all the participants, 66% of the parents expressed the idea that they would suggest the government or the institution taking measures to protect dialect and support its development. Only 7% of them made clear that they did not plan to propose on dialect preservation. Within the home domain, when participants were asked to tell whether they would speak more dialect with their children than before, 47% of the participants said no to this plan. In total, only 20% of the parents said they were going to speak dialect more frequently with children at home than before. Another statement is about whether they plan to invest money and time in children's' dialect learning. 53% of the parents said they had no such intention. Only 17% of them gave a definitely positive answer.

Table 4. Language Management

	Dst, *N* (%)	Dso, *N* (%)	N, *N*(%)	Aso, *N* (%)	Ast, *N* (%)
Protect dialect	0 (0)	2 (7)	8 (27)	13 (43)	7 (23)
More dialect speaking	2 (7)	12 (40)	10 (33)	3 (10)	3 (10)
Investment in dialect learning	3 (10)	13 (43)	9 (30)	2 (7)	3 (10)

Note. Dst=Disagree strongly; Dso=Disagree somewhat; N=Neutral; Aso=Agree somewhat; Ast=Agree strongly.

4.2 The quantitative data: Interviews

Turning now to the main findings from the qualitative data collected from interviews with two parents. In the first part of the interview, respondents were asked to give a general description of the language they use with different family members. The information provided by two interviewees is supported by their responses in the questionnaire. Regarding the question: What do you think of Putonghua and dialect? Two interviewees have various viewpoints.

The first interviewee is a mother whose job is related to historical and cultural relic's preservation.

Interviewee1: I think dialect is as important as Putonghua. They are both parts of our national culture. Besides, children are really smart that they learn to speak dialect very quickly. However, both my parents and I speak Putonghua with him at home. The only occasion we use dialect is to make a warning when he is being naughty. My son does not consider our dialect as a language but something sounds interesting and funny. It is not easy to keep speaking dialect in an urban context all the time.

She also mentioned that although her son could understand the meaning of dialect utterance, he had great difficulties in speaking it.

The second interviewee is an English teacher in one local elementary school. When she was asked to discuss the status of Putonghua and dialect, she firstly expressed her confusion and no understanding to promote dialect.

Interviewee 2: I do not know why children should speak dialect rather than Putonghua. At school, a teacher who speaks dialect in the classroom is considered to be less professional. Besides, the high proficiency of Putonghua is good for the development of English speaking ability. Rather than promoting dialect among young students, it is more important to improve the English proficiency of younger generation.

As the first mother, the second interviewee also thought that her son had no problem in the perception of dialect but was unable to speak dialect.

5 Discussion

Regarding FLP implementation, this study found that a mixture of dialect and Putonghua was the most frequent choice in Chinese parents' communication with family members. Data from quantitative analysis further indicated that parents tended to use dialect when communicating with grandparents, and Putonghua when communicating with children at home. These findings are in line with Wang and Curdt-Christiansen's (2017) study in eight Chinese families in Wuhan, China. Additionally, the majority of the participants had positive perceptions towards Putonghua while had a mix of beliefs on the dialect. Moreover, few parents had intention to provide resources and support to facilitate children's linguistic development of dialect.

From investigating the patterns of language use, it is noticed the promotion of Putonghua in China has a certain impact on the living space of dialect. We found despite the co-existence of Putonghua and dialect at home, parental language practice in this study actually created a monolingual

environment for children. Besides, within the family domain, parents provided no sufficient support to facilitate children's bilingual development in Putonghua and dialect. Thus, few children could effectively speak dialect. Considering beliefs on language values, it can be concluded that making decisions on what language(s) to practice and encourage or to discourage or abandon depends largely on the values that family members ascribe to certain languages (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). For example, parents' responses indicate that Chinese parents believe positively in Putonghua and consider it as a capital for social and educational advancement. Their language practices and managements are guided by practical and pragmatic motivation. Moreover, their FLP can also be explained by another factor, which is the sense of cultural identity. According to their responses, Putonghua is taken as a linguistic capital embodying children's cultural identity rather than the dialect. Their beliefs are in line with those of many language theorists who consider identities as constructed, defined and framed by the language we use, and hold that language provides the most basic capital for membership in communities (Gee, 2005; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Norton, 2000). In this sense, Chinese parents adapt their own language use in order to promote desired linguistic competencies in their children purposefully.

The interview data indicates that types of FLP and demographic variables may play a role in predicting maintenance or disappearance of the home language. For example, both of the two interviewees have higher education experiences and are currently in their 30s. Their FPL is shaped by their educational backgrounds (Curdt-Christiansen, 2008). To illustrate this, the reported trajectory of L1 acquisition and foreign language learning of them may provide more details. According to these two mothers, the instructions of schooling in their elementary schools and middle schools were a mixture of Putonghua and dialect, because some of the experienced teachers were aged and historically had no access to learn and speak Putonghua. However, their teachers in high schools and universities were well-trained to speak Putonghua with corresponding certificates. Moreover, the profession of these two parents is another underlying force in their FLP. For example, the second female interviewee is an English teacher who showed high expectation about multilingual development of her child in terms of Putonghua and English. For this mother, Putonghua paves the way to the multilingual development and educational outcomes of her child (Gee 2005). However, the maintenance of a minority language is a ''problem'' as it may prevent them from participating in sociopolitical activities (Pennycook, 2002). This expectation is embedded in her daily home language practice which has decreased the access to dialect of her child.

In sum, from the findings, we see how important the parents consider the role of languages is in education and social life in general. For most of the parents, Putonghua is a language which enables their children to get better opportunities. In addition, many implicit things can be obtained through

speaking Putonghua rather than the dialect. Thus, the value of Putonghua and dialect is perceived differently by parents. This uneven degree of evaluation underpins the FLP within the family. Parents' language choice is functioning as a latent intervention in their children's language development within family domains (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009).

One of the limitations of this research study was the small size of the sample. Therefore, the results might not be of generalization. Another predictable weakness with regard to methodology is all the results tend to rely on parents' self-reports. This might have biased the results. What exactly happens at home needs to be examined through other measures and from children's perspective as well. Thus, more in-depth qualitative and ethnographic field work is recommended when conducting future study. Researchers are suggested to study the children's family language audits, observing their language/literacy practices and engaging them in conversations. Involving these instruments will be more effective in facilitating our research.

Future research needs to be conducted to explore the relationship between FLP and social, cultural, and political complexities of different family types with a further aim in understanding how external influences underlie the formation of FLP. Besides discussing the parental language practice, children's role in shaping FLP should also be considered in future studies.

6 Conclusion

Framed within the theoretical construct of FLP, this study investigates the linguistic ecology of Chinese urban middle-class families. Through analysis of survey questionnaires and the interview data, it is found that although parents admit the cultural value of dialect, both their language practices and managements at home are limiting the development of dialect of their children. Different from the western child-raising pattern, China's three-generation households create a distinctive context to conduct FLP research. The contribution of the current study is it extends the context and the background of previous studies on FLP. It also enriches our understanding of how and even why parents make various decisions on family language policy in a specific social groups. As known before, the language policy and planning of middle-class families will affect the overall language trend of one country. Thus, under sociolinguistic context it is particularly important to understand how Chinese middle-class families employ and reshape their own FLP accordingly.

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Appendix
Family Language Policy Questionnaire

Part I
Basic Demographic Questions:
1. Age: _____
2. Gender (circle): Male / Female
3. Year of birth: ____
4. Age of child (in years): ____
5. Education background(circle): Doctor / Master / Bachelor
6. Language ability (circle): Putonghua / Dialect / Both
7. Language ability of grandparents (circle): Putonghua / Dialect/ Both
8. Language ability of child (circle): Putonghua / Dialect/ Both

Part II

Language Practice

1. I speak (circle) Putonghua / Dialect/ Both with my parents.
2. I speak (circle) Putonghua / Dialect/ Both with my child.
3. Grandparents speak (circle) Putonghua / Dialect / Both with grandchild.
4. I speak (circle) Putonghua / Dialect / Both with my spouse.

Part III

Answer the followingquestions based on a scale of 1–5, with 1 meaning "Disagree Strongly" and 5meaning "Agree Strongly"

<u>Language ideology</u>

1. A person speaking Putonghua is considered to be well-educated:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Putonghua is important because it brings brighter future and wider communication:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Putonghua is vital to our identity and existence as a Chinese:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. Dialect has more limitations and it is less practical in work and life:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. Dialectworth saving and inheriting as a cultural heritage:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

<u>Language Management</u>

1. I would suggest our government or institutions to protect our dialect and support its development:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. I would speak dialect with my child at home more frequently than before:

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. I would encourage my child to speak dialect with other people:

Nan Hu

Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Nan Hu, Ph. D. Candidate
Department of English Education
Chonnam National University
77, Yongbongro, Buk-gu, Gwangju. 61186. Korea
Phone: 010 7389 8506
E-mail:hunanjnu@gmail.com.