

China Language Law

China

Language Policy



Good Practice Executive Summary

This Good Practice focuses on the policy of managing the standardisation of Putonghua (Mandarin) Chinese as the official national language and the retention of the remaining Chinese languages. The Law was passed on 1 January 2001 and applies to the whole of the territory of the People's Republic of China. It is to be implemented at provincial and local level, although ultimate authority lies with the Ministry of Education at national level. The Law is accompanied by a manual, which in turn is supported by a handbook, and both of these publications inform local government offices of how to implement & manage the policy.

Some of the information contained in this introductory section is also contained in the 2 other best practices outlined in the Zhejiang Language Support and the METP dossier files.

China is a complex country, and to understand the reasoning behind its language policy we need to appreciate the linguistic challenges which China has faced. The information below helps to 'set the scene'. Some of this is based on desk research, in particular reference to 'Language Education in China' by Agnes Lam, 2005 (Hong Kong University Press). The remainder is based on 2 visits to China, one to Shanghai and Hangzhou in April 2009 and the other to Beijing and Hangzhou in March 2010.

China is also a multilingual and multidialectal country. The majority language group are the Han Chinese, for which there are 2 main groups of dialects, namely northern and southern. Within these 2 groups there are 7 sub-groups of northern dialects and six sub-groups of southern dialects. In addition, there are 56 ethnic minorities (mainly located in the west and south-west) who between them speak up to 70 main languages and possess 50 written languages. In total there are 128 Chinese languages. Of these, 64 are spoken by a population of less than 10,000 people. China faces an issue in terms of the preservation of the lesser-spoken languages.

The official language is Chinese, and the standard dialect is Putonghua ('common speech'), which is based on a northern dialect and which in the west is called 'Mandarin' Chinese. As part of this, and to raise the levels of literacy amongst the general population, the government decided to simplify the Chinese characters to make them easier to learn.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) government has implemented 3 main language policies, revised in 2001:

- 1) Standardisation of Chinese
- 2) Promotion of importance of English
- 3) Development of minority languages

Although it is the second which is of primary importance for the Lilama project, the first and third have direct bearings on the second, as learners often need to acquire both Putonghua and target foreign language skills.

The standardisation of Chinese began in earnest in 1956 with the First Character Simplification Scheme, which contained 2,235 simplified characters & 14 radicals (part of a Chinese character). In that year was announced a directive that all Han Chinese schools should teach in Putonghua. To facilitate this, a standard pronunciation based on a phonetic alphabet was introduced, called 'hanyu pinyin', in 1958. Although Chinese dialects share the same written script, they vary in pronunciation. Speakers of southern dialects have a greater learning curve to cope with when learning Putonghua, as it is a northern dialect.

There are over 100 million ethnic minority people in China, or around 8.4% of the population. These live in the west and south-west regions which account for approx 64% of China's total area. In 2001 the policy of the promotion of Putonghua has encouraged minorities to learn Putonghua whilst maintaining their own language. Job recruitment in government, business or education, however, is conditional on having a level 2 or 3 qualification in Putonghua.

1. Reflects current EU and regional policy on multilingualism

As the target country lies outside the EU, we cannot refer to this policy, however we can highlight the parallels to the principles of the policy. All Putonghua language training is delivered through the mainstream educational system, with additional support in adult education classes for those falling outside this system.

Language training in general is not given for specific employment-related contexts, as it aimed primarily at those in education. However, it does promote lifelong learning and mobility, as it aims to develop a society of citizens for whom language does not present a barrier to employment in other territories, thus enabling the free movement of employed people and unemployed alike. This is particularly of interest to those moving from rural locations to cities where their own language or dialect is not spoken.

Job recruitment in government, business or education, however, is conditional on having a level 2 or 3 qualification in Putonghua, depending on the job role. The written language is to be the simplified character system, where these have been approved (most common characters have been simplified, by many less common ones have not). The existence of a simplified character system promotes a much greater degree of literacy amongst the lesser educated population groups.

The policy is driven by economic growth, greater mobility, social cohesion (particularly with the influx of rural migrants into the larger cities), the development of economic zones and centres of scientific excellence, and also aims for political stability. It is also a mechanism for central government to communicate its messages to the wider population. The Law has 28 articles, and its official title is the 'Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language.'

It is to be implemented at provincial and local level, although ultimate authority lies with the Ministry of Education at national level. The Law is accompanied by a 305-page manual (study book), which in turn is supported by a 347-page handbook, and both of these publications inform local government offices of how to implement & manage the policy. These 2 publications differ in content.

The manual contains detailed definitions, terms of reference & practical examples of the individual law articles to be implemented. Chapter 1 focuses on general provisions, chapter 2 on the usage of Putonghua, and chapter 3 on management and oversight. The driving messages behind chapter 1 are the need to protect all Chinese languages (as part of China's cultural heritage) whilst developing and implementing a platform of common communication, both spoken (Putonghua) and written (simplified characters). There then follows a list of approved simplified characters with their traditional equivalents. The manual ends with a list of corresponding regulations.

The handbook focuses more on the simplification of written Chinese, and contains a list of characters order by pronunciation and stroke count, and focuses in particular on the more complex characters. The most commonly used 2500 characters are first presented, ordered by stroke count (there are 1-23 strokes, with the larger proportion having between 6 & 13 strokes). There then follows a list of the 1000 semi-frequently used characters. Together these constitute the 3500 characters which the government's researchers believe to be necessary to achieve an appropriate level of competence and to pass successfully through the education and employment

spectra. The handbook also distinguishes between those characters classified as 'modern' and those classified as 'historic'. The latter are organised phonetically.

The next chapter outlines the correct writing of numerals in publications (for example, the modern number '1' appears similar to a horizontal line and the modern number '2' two horizontal lines of different length. However, in written documentation (especially finance) it is easy to alter a '1' to a '2', therefore historic versions need to be used. This is the case, for instance, in single or double entry Chinese visa identifications, and is also the case on currency notes. The following chapter outlines the correct use of punctuation. Finally, a chapter is devoted to the correct use of the tonal system (Pinyin, the pronunciation system for Putonghua, uses 4 tones).

Both the manual and the handbook are supported by other publications. These include a 380-page resource guide which clarifies the research approaches to the principles of the Law and determination of its specific content. It also explains how certain foreign language words such as proper nouns are pronounced, citing examples of well-known world political leaders. The second supplementary document is a 465-page summary of all related language laws, especially those during the development of the 2001 Language Law. All related policies since 1979 are contained in this document.

The department in charge of the work related to spoken and written language under the State Council is responsible for planning, guiding, administering and supervising the work related to the standard spoken and written Chinese language. The departments concerned under the State Council administer the use of the standard spoken and written Chinese language in their own departments.

The administrative departments for industry and commerce under the local people's governments at or above the county level administer and supervise the use of spoken and written language in the names of enterprises and commodities as well as in advertisements. The department in charge of the work related to spoken and written language under the State Council issues standards for the testing of Putonghua at different grades. Other departments concerned shall make arrangements for the examination of the translation of proper nouns like the names of foreigners and foreign places and scientific and technical terms into the standard spoken and written Chinese language.

2. Includes incentives to enhance and sustain language learner motivation and employment benefits

The key documentation to support the ongoing evaluation of the impact of the Language Law is the annual publication 'Report on the Language Situation in China', for which the latest version is from 2008. This 1084-report (for the year 2008) is based on extensive research across the country into the development of the impact of the Language Law. Volume 1 includes results of research into the standards of taught Chinese across the country, multilingual use in the Beijing Olympics, problems of legislating & implementing the languages agenda, the promotion of Mandarin Chinese in foreign-owned enterprises, language planning in schools for migrant

workers, and comparisons to Chinese teaching in Macao, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It includes case studies to make its point.

Volume 2 focuses on research into the implementation of the Languages Law in the media, a survey of new words which had come into existence, words and expressions used in websites, and confirmation of the current list of high-frequency characters. It ranks words by usage and contains over 60 tables of data which analyse the usage of Chinese characters. The research is carried out across the country, and it takes approximately one year to collect and analyse the data. There is thus an ongoing system of validation of the Law based on empirical research.

Feedback from those engaged in employment comes from interviews with a wide range of citizens, and specific examples of each target group are included in the report. These include foreign-owned companies in Shanghai, the economic trade zones in Yiwu (Zhejiang province), social cohesion in Altay (Xinjiang region), issues of dialect amongst nannies & childcare specialists, and issues of language standardisation in criminal courts. The research also captures data on the growing number of Chinese citizens acquiring foreign languages skills (in particular English). The data from the surveys is put online.

We did not observe any of the research being conducted, therefore we have had to take the results of the research at face value and are unable to comment on the effectiveness of its methodology. At face value it is a thorough system which is managed on an enormous scale.

The policy dictates that the State will provide citizens with the conditions for learning and using the standard spoken and written Chinese language (article 4), and that the local people's governments at various levels and the relevant departments under them shall take measures to popularise Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters (article 4).

In terms of social cohesion, the Law states that the standard spoken and written Chinese language shall be used in such a way as to be conducive to the upholding of state sovereignty and national dignity, to unification of the country and unity among all ethnic groups, and to socialist material progress and ethical progress (article 5).

The Law expresses that it is obligatory to reward organizations and individuals that have made outstanding contribution in the field of the standard spoken and written Chinese language, yet also that ethnic groups shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages. It also explains that Putonghua shall be used by the broadcasting and TV stations as the basic broadcasting language, and that standardized Chinese characters shall be used as the basic characters in the service trade.

The six areas of particular focus for supervision are (1) spoken and written language for broadcasting, films and TV programs; (2) written language for the facilities in public places; (3) written language in signboards and advertisements; (4) names of enterprises and other institutions; (5) packaging and specifications of commodities marketed in the country, and (6) information processing and information technology products.

The Law recognises, however, that as part of China's cultural heritage, local dialects need to be maintained under certain circumstances. These include occasions when State functionaries need to use them in the performance of official duties, where they are used in broadcasting with the approval of the broadcasting and television administration under the State Council or of the broadcasting and television department at the provincial level, where they are needed in traditional operas, films and TV programs and other forms of art; and where their use is really required in publishing, teaching and research. The reality of commerce is that languages or dialects are frequently used between speakers of those languages or dialects, as this sometimes gives a competitive edge or, more commonly, makes for easier conversation.

The Law recognises that traditional characters still need to be used in certain circumstances, including In cultural relics and historic sites, the variant forms used in surnames, in works of art such as calligraphy and seal cutting, handwritten inscriptions and signboards, and where their use is required in publishing, teaching and research.

In terms of pinyin, the Law recognises the extensive communication barriers caused by differing pronunciation across the country, and confirms that the pinyin "Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet" is the unified norm of the Roman letters for transliterating the names of Chinese people and places as well as Chinese documents and is used in the realms where it is inconvenient to use the Chinese characters or where the Chinese characters cannot be used.

The Putonghua level of those who use Putonghua as their working language, such as broadcasters, program hosts and hostesses, actors and actresses of films, TV series and plays, teachers and State functionaries is required to reach the respective standards set by the State, whereas those who have not yet reached such standards shall receive different training based on individual need.

The policy needs to be considered in the environment of Chinese culture, in particular Chinese political culture. It is a policy which, officially, is non-negotiable. Therefore by default anyone not seeking to acquire Putonghua language skills is subject to the standard response from the law. Specifically, article 26 of the Law states that "where persons mentioned in the second paragraph of Article 19 of this Law (such as broadcasters, TV stars, teachers, civil servants) use the language in violation of the relevant provisions of Chapter II of this Law, the units concerned shall, by way of education, criticize the persons who are directly responsible; anyone who refuses to put it right shall be handled by the units concerned."

Equally, "where the characters used in the facilities and signboards in public places of cities and in advertisements are in violation of the relevant provisions of Chapter II of this Law, the administrative departments concerned shall give orders for them to be corrected; anyone who refuses to correct them shall be given a disciplinary warning and be urged to put them right within a time limit".

3. Reflects regional strategy for employability and intercultural benefits

The primary driver behind the Law is the need to support rapid & consistent economic growth with a mobile labour market which is capable of communicating with each other with little difficulty, even given the myriad of dialects and use of traditional and simplified characters. It recognises the increasing global growth of education and communications. Job recruitment in government, business or education, however, is conditional on having a level 2 or 3 qualification in Putonghua.

The Ministry has confirmed that an approach to developing the consistent use of Putonghua needs to possess 5 criteria, which informally they have labelled A-E. A is its value, B its usefulness, C its impact, D its flexibility, and E its scope for improvement.

Priority economic sectors for implementation of the policy are science & technology, telecommunications, infrastructure development, international trade & investment and its extensive civil service. These are targetted as part of the research conducted each year (see above). Hence the inclusion of Yiwu (specifically the China Commodity City) and foreign-invested companies in Shanghai.

In Yiwu, traditionally a small Chinese town in Zhejiang Province, as a result of expansion the population of the zone rose from 700,000 in 2006 to over 1 million by the following year. Business people from over 100 countries are represented in the zone, making it the 10th largest commodity zone in China. Of its population, 26,000 are from 40 Chinese minority groups. A total of 1200 people were asked to participate in the research in Yiwu, of which 1198 responded (this response rate is typical of China). The majority of those targetted were in the 20-50 age range, with the largest proportion of those (just under 40%) in the 30-39 age range. Although this is only 1 case study out of numerous zones engaged, it serves as a practical example of implementation of research to inform policy.

The policy does not utilise minority languages for international trade, with the exception of inbound tourism. The proliferation of Putonghua is targetted for local economic growth.

4. Addresses local language minority and migrant community language resources

There are over 100 million ethnic minorities in China, or around 8.4% of the population. These live in the west and south-west regions which account for approx 64% of China's total area. In 2001 the policy of the promotion of Putonghua has encouraged minorities to learn Putonghua whilst maintaining their own language. Although Chinese dialects share the same written script, they vary in pronunciation. Speakers of southern dialects have a greater learning curve to cope with when learning Putonghua, as it is a northern dialect.

Some of these minorities have not only their own dialect but also their own language, often with a different script to Chinese. Uyghur (based on Arabic script) and Tibetan are two clear examples. From the national perspective, these scripts are maintained for reasons of culture, heritage & tourism. The definition of 'migrant' in the title above

is based on an European employment environment, yet mobility in China is two-way, with first the repopulation of traditionally non-Han geographical areas (such as Xinjiang Province) with Han Chinese citizens, and secondly with minority citizens moving to the cities in search of employment, particularly in the construction sector.

It is frequent practice to attend formal meetings held in Putonghua and then for breakout groups or smaller meetings to take place in local dialect, such as Shanghainese. Many business meetings between Chinese also switch between Putonghua and local dialects, depending on the background of those involved.

Article 8 of the Law states that “all ethnic groups shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages”. The Ministry of Education has made it clear (in their Mar 2010 presentation) that they treat the decline in use of minority Chinese languages as a threat to their heritage, ‘equal to that of climate change’. They are confident that their extensive research (see above) has highlighted the need to maintain these languages whilst promoting the importance of Putonghua.

The government has undertaken codification of some minority languages in order to retain them. This included the standardisation or designing of scripts for those which were based on the spoken word. The Ministry of Education encourages the learning of minority languages by Han Chinese (the majority ethnic Chinese people group) when relocated to minority territories (minority by population not by size).

The minority languages which have seen their scripts retained are as follows, together with the equivalent alphabets: Chosen (Korean), Dai (‘Indian’), Kazak (Arabic), Kirgiz (Arabic), Mongol (Uighur), Russ (Cyrillic), Uygur (Arabic), Xibe (Uighur) and Zang (‘Indian’).

The minority languages with their scripts revised are as follows: Bai, Jingpo, Lahu, Lisu, Naxi, Va, Zhuang and Yao (all using the Roman alphabet), Miao (Pollard script), Yi (Chinese characters).

Those minority languages which have had new scripts developed using the Roman alphabet include Buyei, Derung, Dong, Hani, Jino, Li, Qiang, Tu and Tujia.

5. Provides for international networking and/or mobility

Please see above sections, as the detail has been included there. China is a highly mobile society, and the policy has a direct impact on the ability of Chinese working citizens to move to other territories to work.

6. Incorporates the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) with transparent validation/ credits

Not applicable, however the Chinese educational system requires a level 2 or 3 Putonghua qualification to perform in most key work functions. The standard tests of Mandarin Chinese are the PSC (Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi or Proficiency Test), which measures spoken Chinese, and the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, which measures proficiency in written Chinese, mainly for overseas nationals and minority language speakers.

The CSP grades learner proficiency from 1 (the highest) to 3 (the lowest), with each of the following criteria:

3B: many errors in pronouncing tones & sounds, and prominent influence from another language or dialect; loss of test marks within 40%

3A: several errors in pronouncing tones & sounds, with evident dialectical influence; loss of test marks within 30%

2B: some errors in pronouncing tones & sounds, but with no evident interference from another dialect or language; loss of test marks within 20%

2A: basic correct pronunciation, with natural intonation & fluent expression; occasional errors; some errors in vocabulary & grammar; loss of test marks within 13%

1B: accuracy in pronunciation, vocabulary & grammar; fluent expression, but with occasional error in sounds or tones; loss of test marks within 8%

1A: accuracy in pronunciation, vocabulary & grammar; fluent expression & natural intonation; loss of test marks within 3%

7. Can be readily & usefully implemented

The policy is being fully implemented, although there are regional variations. Impact of the policy is measured through the research mentioned above. China is a one-party state which implements policy rigorously and generally provides the resources to do so.

8. Transferability

The transferability of the policy is possible to those countries which possess multi-language societies. However, given the size of China and the availability of resource, especially human resource, at its disposal, elements of the policy will need to be transferred. It is particularly interesting to note whether a transferee country or region adopts the policy of propagation of its own language or propagation of a third-party language such as English. We believe that China has struck a balance by following both options simultaneously.