Linguistic Convergence and Divergence in Guangzhou (Canton City): Social Variation of Vernacular Written Cantonese[*]

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This paper reports on part of a larger sociolinguistic study based on a written survey conducted on 116 Cantonese-Mandarin bilingual speakers in Guangzhou who are biliterates in Standard Written Chinese (SWC) and Vernacular Written Cantonese (VWC). This paper examines how VWC converges towards, or diverges from, the standard, SWC, across different social groups. A series of VWC variables at different linguistic levels are selected from the survey for a frequency distribution analysis with eight social variables (gender, age, education, income, occupation, SWC and VWC proficiency, and self identity). The findings suggest that the patterns of using VWC by the different social groups vary at the lexical and syntactic levels. Based on the study of the subjects' written responses to the survey, it is predicted that VWC would remain entrenched in the Cantonese-Mandarin community in Guangzhou. Nonetheless, the exact form of the VWC item is unstable and is easily influenced by SWC.

0. Introduction

In China, the written language sanctioned by the national government and taught in the education system is modern Standard Written Chinese (SWC). This written form reflects spoken Mandarin Chinese and is based on the lexicon and grammatical structure of Mandarin Chinese. Cantonese, the lingua franca of the many subvarieties of the Yue dialect group of Chinese, differs significantly from Mandarin Chinese with respect to phonology, lexicon, and syntax. Its written form, Vernacular Written Cantonese (VWC), is enjoying resurgence in recent years in the Guangzhou (Canton City) region, after decades of suppression since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, against the backdrop of a national language policy, as reflected in the Language Law of 2001. As a "Chinese-character-based" system to record spoken Cantonese, VWC

includes the standard stock of Chinese characters and a considerable number of dialectal vernacular characters. However, setting norms with regard to the registers of the spoken language (colloquial Cantonese), VWC is largely unreadable by an untrained Mandarin speaker. (Li 2000, Snow 2004)

Convergence and divergence, two opposite directions of language change, describe the increase and decrease in similarity between languages (cf. Auer et al. 2005: 1). The present study focuses on the linguistic convergence and divergence of a vernacular language to the standard language, that is, how vernacular language forms move closer to the standard forms, and how vernacular language forms move further away from the standard forms. For example, in the present study of the written language variations, the Cantonese lexical item *lai2* "to come, arrive" is represented by four VWC variants 来，（来），黎，and 嚟 in Guangzhou community:

Example 1:

      a.   来：   convergence to SWC

      b.   （来）：*xundu 训读*[1] "reading by gloss"

      c.   黎：   divergence from SWC

      d.   嚟：   strongest divergence from SWC

Most SWC-oriented<----------------------->Least SWC-oriented
  a. 来   b.（来）   c. 黎 d. 嚟

Table 1: Written variants for VWC lexicon *lai2* "to come"

+: indicating the adoption of the form

Orthographic Forms	来	（来）	黎	嚟
Form convergence to SWC	+			
Form for meaning only		+		
Form for sound only (Meaning diverges from SWC)			+	
Form Coined for vernacular Cantonese (non-existing in SWC)				+

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[1] Li (2000: 209): the term *xundu 训读* 'reading by gloss' is a Chinese rendering of the same concept of Japanese origin known as *kunyomi*, which consists of mapping the pronunciation of a target morphosyllable onto an existing semantically related character.

From variant a. 来 to variant d. 嚟，we observe a series of ongoing changes in writing VWC lexicon *lai2* "to come" as suggested in Table 1. There are two directions of VWC variation: one is to converge to SWC, another one is to diverge from VWC. The use of 来 indicates the strongest convergence to SWC, whereas 嚟 indicates the strongest divergence from SWC. Therefore, in writing the VWC lexical item *lai2*, the users of 来 tend to lead the convergence to SWC, while the users of 嚟 tend to lead the divergence from SWC.

Given the variation of VWC in different directions, the present study tries to answer the following quetsions: How does the variation of VWC correlate to different social identities of its users in the Guangzhou community? What are the key social factors that lead VWC to different directions of variation (convergence or divergence)?

1. Methodology

To explore the roles of different social factors in the variation of VWC, a quantitative study based on the Labovian stratified Model is conducted in the present study. This stratified model is pioneered by Labov (1966) in his study of New York City English. Following his approach, stratified social variables (such as region, age, sex, occupation, and etcetera.) are correlated with various quantifiable linguistic variables to analyze the language variation and change and their social context.

A sociolinguistic survey is conducted in the Guangzhou community in 2006. 116 Guangzhou citizens knowledgeable with VWC were recruited through a kind of networking procedure. There are three criteria in selecting subjects. First, since regional identity is one of the independent variables [2] to be analyzed, all subjects must be Guangzhou citizens. Second, the subjects must be Mandarin-Cantonese biliterates, that is, they are able to write in SWC and VWC. Third, the subjects are 18 years of age or older who are able to understand the written questionnaires in this study. Based on these criteria, three core neighborhoods in Haizhu District (海珠区), Liwan District (荔湾区) and Yuexiu District (越秀区) of Guangzhou city were chosen as the sampling areas.

Producing a personal information datasheet with seventeen items to be answered, the sociodemographic survey yielded a series of information on the participants (gender, age, education, occupation, place of birth, place of family, place of growing-up, family size, duration of residence in Guangzhou, family generation, income, spoken language background, written language background, and self identity). Eight of them are used as the social variables in the present study as shown in Table 2.

Three written tasks were designed to elicit written variables in different levels of language structures – lexical variables (in general), classifier variables, and syntactic variables in the survey. To study the tendency of language variation at different levels of

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[2] Independent variables refer to social variables such as age, gender, social identity. Dependent variables refer to linguistic variables such as lexicon and syntax.

linguistic structures, nineteen sets of VWC lexical variables, twelve sets of VWC classifier variables, and eight sets of VWC syntactic variables, are selected from the Guangzhou survey of VWC literacy practices for statistical analysis as shown in Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5.

Table 2: Sociolinguistic profiles of subjects

VARIABLES	SUBJECTS				
Gender	Female: 65		Male: 51		
Age	18-25: 26	26-35: 59	36-45: 6	46-55: 9	56 and above: 16
Occupation	White-collar: 78		Blue-collar : 19		Other (students and retired): 19
Income	High: 4	Mid-High: 27	Mid-Low: 70		Low and Zero: 15
Education	Public school: 30		College: 86		
Language Proficiency	**1** Best	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5** Worst
SWC	13	66	30	6	1
VWC	7	49	43	14	3
Regional identity	Guangzhou: 67	Guangdong: 5		Chinese: 20	Others: 24

Table 3 summarizes four strategies used in representing the VWC lexical items in the survey.

Strategy I: Writing Cantonese words in SWC characters. Most of the written Cantonese words provided by the Cantonese-Mandarin biliterates were represented by standard written Chinese characters in uniquely Cantonese ways. Cantonese writing system is a Chinese-character-based writing system in this sense. For example, 饮胜 *yam3sing3* "to drink a toast" is a written Cantonese word represented by a SWC character 饮 "to drink" which is used as verb only in ancient Chinese but has died out in modern Mandarin[3], and a SWC character 胜 *sheng* "to win" whose usage in Mandarin is not the same as in Cantonese. Nevertheless, the ways of rendering SWC characters to write Cantonese vary. They are either the same as Mandarin words in every respect except pronunciation such as 神圣 "sacred" *san4sing3* (Cantonese) / *shen2sheng4* (Mandarin), or they exist in both Mandarin and Cantonese but are used in different varieties such as the case of 饮胜 (Snow 2004: 52).

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[3] Note, it is not obsolete as a character in modern Chinese though. We can still observe 饮 is used in compounds in Mandarin especially as a noun such as in 饮料 yin3 liao4 "beverage".

Table 3: Seven types of written variants in nineteen VWC lexical variables

VARIABLES (N=19)	VARIANTS						
	Strategy I			Strategy II		Strategy III	Strategy IV
	Type1 (n=10)	Type2 (n=17)	Type3 (n=9)	Type4 (n=10)	Type5 (n=2)	Type6 (n=4)	Type7 (n=1)
ye5 "Thing"		野		嘢 吔			
me1 "what"	么	物 也	咩		乜		
faan1 "to come back"	返	翻 番					
gam2 "so"		今 敢 甘 禁 感	噤	咁		(口+敢)	
jo2 "verbal particle"		左	佐	咗		(口+佐)	
m4 "negative prefix"		吾	唔				
lak6 "smart, clever"			叻	叻			
fan3 "sleep, sleepy"		训		瞓			
lai2 "to come, arrive"	来	黎		嚟			
mou5 "have not"	无				冇		
hai6 "to be"	是	系	係	喺		(口+系)	
mai1 "don't"	未	米	咪				
ga2 "particle of sound"	嘎	架	咖				
Lau4hei3 "annoy"		劳气	唠气				
ge3 "possessive"		既		嘅			
ngaam1 "right, suitable"		岩		啱			
di1 "a little"	点	地		啲哋			D
Sai1lei6 "Capable"	犀利	西利					
Gu1han4 "poor, stingy"	孤寒	古寒 姑寒					
Total Tokens	44	82	75	110	48	5	4
	201			158		5	4

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Snow (2004) argues that:

> When they do not know how to write a word in Cantonese, the strategy most often adopted by Cantonese people—both past and present—is phonetic borrowing, i.e. using a Chinese character that has the same sound when pronounced in Cantonese as the word to be written down. (When borrowing characters in this way, the original meaning of the character is generally ignored.) This strategy works because literate Cantonese speakers know the Cantonese pronunciation of Chinese character. (p54)

To overcome the orthographic gap, modern standard Chinese is borrowed to transliterate Cantonese morpho-syllables, including those borrowed from English (Li 2000). For example, in both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese, character 核 *wat6* (Cantonese) / *hu2* (Mandarin) means "seed, kernel, core, nut; atom", and character 突 *dat6* (Cantonese) / *tu1* (Mandarin) means "suddenly, abruptly, unexpectedly". In Cantonese, the pronunciations of the two characters are similar to the Cantonese word *wat6 dat6* "ugly, disgusting". These two characters therefore are phonetically borrowed to represent the Cantonese word *wat6dat6*. Another example is 的士 *dik1si6* (Cantonese) / *di2shi4* (Mandarin), a phonetic borrowing word from SWC to VWC to transliterate the English word "taxi".

In this study, VWC variants using Strategy I are further subcategorized into three types:

Type 1: SWC characters with semantic interference, although they are usually borrowed for their phonetic value[4]. For example, SWC character 返 *fan3* (Mandarin) "return, revert to" is used to represent the Cantonese word *fann1* "to come back".

Type 2: phonetic borrowing from SWC characters without any semantic interference. For instance, SWC character 翻 *fan1* (Mandarin) "flip over, upset" is used to represent the Cantonese word *fann1* "to come back".

Type 3: phonetic borrowing from SWC *xingsheng* characters 形声字 with some specific semantic element such as the radicals of 口 "mouth" and 亻 "human, people". For instance, SWC character 唔 wu2 (Mandarin) "hold in mouth" is used to represent the Cantonese negative prefix *ng4*.

Strategy II: Writing Cantonese with Cantonese characters. Written Cantonese words are represented by Cantonese dialect characters. For some Cantonese words, Cantonese speakers adopt the strategy of creating new Cantonese-specific characters to represent them because no appropriate SWC Chinese characters can be used. The orthographic forms using Approach II are established forms that have been widely used by Cantonese people. For example, 乜 *mat1* (Cantonese) "what" is a popular Cantonese-

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[4] This type of usage is known as *xundu* 训读 "reading by gloss" as explained in footnote 43.

specific character which is created on the basis of a close SWC character 也 *ye3* (Mandarin) "also" with missing one stroke in the character.

Another common strategy of coining Cantonese dialectal character is through phonetic borrowing of SWC characters marked with certain radicals such as 口 "mouth" radical and 扌 "hand" radical. For example, Cantonese word 嘥 *saai3* (Cantonese) "to waste, all, entirely", is a phonetic borrowing of Chinese character 徙 *saai2* (Cantonese) / *xi2* (Mandarin) "shift, migrate" marked with 口 "mouth" radical. This strategy is inherited from the traditional strategy of nomenclature *xingsheng* 形声. The vast majority of SWC characters are composed by a semantic element (radical) and a phonetic component. Referred to as pictophonetic (*xingsheng* 形声) in traditional Chinese nomenclature, the left side of the character is usually the semantic element that would suggest the meaning of a character, while the right side is the phonetic element that would indicate its original pronunciation which may or may not represent it modern pronunciation. For those *xingsheng* characters such as 谂 *lam4* (Cantonese)，搵 *wam3* (Cantonese)，睇 *tai2* (Cantonese), which ever appeared in the ancient Chinese text but were no longer used in modern Mandarin Chinese text, we categorized them as written Cantonese coinages through phonetic borrowing.

Usually, the new Cantonese dialect characters are used with combination of the existing elements such as SWC characters to represent Cantonese language. For example, the word 做乜 *jou6 mat1* (Cantonese) "why" is represented by one SWC character 做 "to do" and one new Cantonese dialect character 乜.

The VWC variants using Strategy II, writing Cantonese words in VWC characters, are further subcategorized into two types:

Type 4: Cantonese dialectal coinages through phonetic borrowing of SWC characters marked with certain radicals such as 嘢 *ye5* (Cantonese) "thing" is a phonetic borrowing of Chinese character 野 ye3 (Mandarin) "field, wildness" marked with 口 "mouth" radical. Type 4 is different from Type 1 in that Type 4 is no longer used in modern Chinese texts written in SWC, although both of Type 4 and Type 1 are using phonetic borrowing strategy.

Type 5: Cantonese dialectal coinages other than Type 4 such as 乜 *mat1* (Cantonese) "what".

Strategy III: Writing Cantonese in "False Characters". The written Cantonese words are represented by pseudo characters (假造字 *jia zao zi*). Those pseudo characters are not established orthographic forms but innovative characters. For example, a "character" (香离) is created to represent 黐 in the word 黐线 *chi1sin3* "crazy". The VWC variants using Strategy III are categorized as *Type 6* in Table 3.

Strategy IV: Writing Cantonese in Romanized letters. The written Cantonese words are represented by Romanized letters, including letters used to record Cantonese pronunciation, and letters rendering English elements borrowed into Cantonese. For example, English letter "T" is used in T 恤 *ti1 seut1* "T shirt", and "D" is used in 慳 D *han1 di1* "miserly, parsimonious, stingy". The VWC variants using Strategy IV are also categorized as *Type 7* in Table 3.

From *Type 1* to *Type 7*, the ways of representing VWC are less and less SWC-oriented.

Table 4 summarizes four strategies used to substitute SWC classifiers with VWC classifiers.

Strategy I: substituting the given SWC classifier with the same form. In other words, Strategy I involves providing the same orthographic form in VWC as in SWC; hence, no actual "switching" takes place. For example, the same character 把 *ba* is given by 55 subjects to switch the SWC classifier 把 *ba* in the phrase of 一把刀 "one CL knife".

Strategy II: substituting the given SWC classifier with a different SWC classifier. It is noted that those substituting classifiers are not used with the given nouns in modern Mandarin Chinese. For example, SWC classifier 张 *zhang1* is given by 62 subjects to substitute SWC classifier 把 *ba* in the phrase of 一把刀 *yi ba dao* "one CL knife". However, in Mandarin Chinese, classifier 张 *zhang1* is not used with 刀 *da*.

Strategy III: creating Cantonese dialectal character to write Cantonese classifier. For example, 嚿 *kou* is a Cantonese coinage which is used to switch the SWC classifier 块 *kuai* in the phrase of 一块石头 *yi kuai shitou* "one CL stone".

Strategy IV: phonetic borrowing from SWC or using Romanized letters to write Cantonese classifier.[5] For example, SWC character 旧 *jiu* "old" is phonetically borrowed to switch the SWC classifier 块 *kuai* in the phrase of 一块石头 "one CL stone", and Romanized letter "P" is used to switch the SWC classifier 棵 in the phrase of 一棵树 "one CL tree".

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[5] Strategy IV includes both strategies of SWC phonetic borrowing and Romanized letters because the latter is also a kind of phonetic borrowing, and is only used in the case of 一棵树 "one CL tree" (19 tokens) and 一块布 "one CL cloth" (1 token). However, it is suggested to separate the two strategies in the future study for a better understanding of Romanization as a way of creating writing code.

Table 4: Four types of VWC classifier variants in twelve sets of classifier variables

Variables (n=12)	Variants			
	Strategy I (Type 1)	Strategy II (Type 2)	Strategy III (Type 3)	Strategy IV (Type 4)
一把刀	把	张，板		
一匹马	匹	只，头		
一服药	服	剂，包，煲，粒，贴		济，斋，食，凹，执
一顿饭	顿	餐	歺	
一辆车子	辆	部，架，驾，台		
一床被子	床	张，套，幅，铺		
一首歌	首	只，支，		
一棵树	棵	条，颗，把	(柯+果)	坡，婆，破，波，科，碌，朴，po, bo, paul, p
一块布	块	条，匹，张，幅，件，卷		忽，D
一面旗	面	支，块，只，枝，张，幅，个		复
一双鞋	双	对，只		
一块石头	块	粒	(口+旧), 嘈	旧，够，快
Total tokens	242	915	65	175

Table 5 summarizes the variants of the eight types of syntactic variables (S1-S8). Considered both sufficient variability and possibility of social variation in the VWC syntactic variables, eight VWC variants in five sets of syntactic variables (S2, S3, S4, S6, and S7) are selected for frequency distribution analysis:

S2: "比 *bi* sentence" (SWC-oriented) and "过 *guo* sentence" (non-SWC)
S3: "V+O_1+O_2" (SWC-oriented) and "V+ O_2+ O_1" (Non-SWC)
S4: "将 *zeong* sentence" (Non-SWC)
S6: "S+V+O+ negative-complement" (non-SWC) and
　　"S+V+ negative-complement +O" (SWC-oriented)
S7: "被 *bei* sentence" (SWC-oriented)

Table 5: the variants of the VWC syntactic variables

Variables	Variants	n	%
S1			
word order of adverbial modifier			
	adv.+ verb	4	3.4
	verb+ adv.	112	96.6
S2			
comparative construction			
	比 *bi* sentence	38	32.8
	过 *guo* sentence	76	65.5
	Other	2	1.7
S3			
double-object construction			
	verb+ object 1 + object 2	13	11.2
	verb+ object 2 + object 1	89	76.7
	Other	14	12.1
S4			
disposal construction			
	把 *ba* sentence	1	0.08
	将 sentence	18	15.5
	Other	107	92.2
S5			
yes-no interrogative construction			
	吗 sentence	3	2.6
	A-NOT-A sentence	108	93.1
	Other	5	5.2
S6			
verb negative-complement construction			
	subject + verb + negative-complement + object	100	86.2
	subject + verb + object + negative-complement	16	13.8
S7			
passive construction			
	被 *bei* sentence	12	10.3
	Other	104	89.7
S8			
statement construction in perfective aspect			
	S+有+verb	4	3.4
	Other	112	96.6
N=116			

2. Results of Data Analysis

The eight social variables (gender, age, education, income, occupation, SWC and VWC proficiency, and self identity) are tabulated with the selected VWC variables for a frequency distribution analysis. Considered VWC as a written form for a minority language in its own nation, the direction of its variation is mainly explored in the present study through how it is associated with the national standard written form (SWC). Based on the figures and tables created to elaborate on the significant patterns of language changes, the directions of VWC changes, convergence to SWC or divergence from SWC, are explored through interpreting the distribution patterns of the different VWC variables in different social groups. Several conclusions are suggested in this case study of the variation of vernacular written Cantonese in Guangzhou city.

First, in the present study of the variation of VWC lexical variables in the Guangzhou community (Refer to Table 3), seven types of lexical VWC variants are summarized according to the strategies used in representing nineteen sets of written lexical variables. Strategy I (representing VWC lexical items through phonetic borrowing) includes Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3 of written variants. Strategy I is the most common method of writing VWC lexical items in Guangzhou. This situation is similar to the case of Hong Kong written Cantonese[6]. However, in contrast to Hong Kong where Roman letters from English are commonly included in written Cantonese, Roman letters as Strategy IV are rarely used in writing VWC lexical units in Guangzhou. In this sense, the orthographic convention of writing vernacular Cantonese is dominantly Chinese-character-based in Guangzhou.

The literacy of a language requires more than the ability to register lexical units. Grammar should also be taken into account. The present study of Guangzhou VWC includes VWC classifier variables and syntactic variables in addition to the VWC general lexical variables, providing a more comprehensive picture of the VWC variation as suggested in Table 6.

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[6] According to Bauer (1988), there are three important points concerning with the difference between Standard Written Chinese and Hong Kong Written Cantonese on the lexical level: "(1) one variety of non-standard Chinese uses Cantonese words and expressions which are meaningful only to the Cantonese-speaker reader; (2) a second variety is distinguished from the first by its inclusion of English words; (3) both of these varieties of written Chinese by their use of the written forms of Cantonese words are so localized that their intelligibility is restricted to the Hong Kong Cantonese-speaker and stand in sharp contrast to a text written in standard Chinese, the unifying lingua franca for literate-speakers of mutually-unintelligible Chinese 'dialects'."

Table 6: VWC vs. SWC: Convergence and Divergence in Writing VWC Lexical variables, Classifier variables, and Syntactic variable in Different Social Groups

X: Divergence with SWC   √: Convergence with SWC   —: Not Clear

Social Groups	Lexical item	Classifier	Syntax
Female	—	X	X
Male	√	√	√
18-25 years old	—	—	X
26-35 years old	—	—	X
36-55 years old	X	—	√
56 and above	—	—	—
White-collar	X	—	√
Blue-collar	√	√	X
High income	—	√	√
Mid-high income	X	—	X
Mid-low income	—	—	X
Low and zero income	√	X	√
Public school education	√	—	X
College education	X	√	√
Level 1 SWC proficiency	—	—	—
Level 2 SWC proficiency	X	—	—
Level 3 SWC proficiency	—	—	√
Level 4 SWC proficiency	√	—	X
Level 1 VWC proficiency	—	√	—
Level 2 VWC proficiency	X	—	—
Level 3 VWC proficiency	√	—	—
Level 4 VWC proficiency	—	—	—
Guangzhou identity	X	√	—
Guangdong identity	—	—	X
Chinese identity	—	—	√
Other Identity	—	—	—

Table 6 summarizes the tendencies of the VWC variation in lexical variables, classifier variables and syntactic variables. Several social factors are important in the convergence of VWC to SWC. Among those social factors, male is the most influencing one to converge VWC to SWC in writing Cantonese lexical item, classifier and syntax (three √ with the three linguistic levels). The other notable social factors suggested in this study (two √ with the three linguistic levels) include blue-collar, the highest income, the lowest income, and college education. Another direction of VWC variation, divergence

from SWC, is noted clearly (two X with the three linguistic levels) in the female group and middle-income group.

Overall, noted as one of the most important social variables in a sociolinguistic study, gender is found to play an important role in the variation of VWC in Guangzhou community. Age difference is not as notable as gender difference. Nevertheless, at least in the syntactic level, the two youngest age groups (18-25 and 26-35) show a strong tendency of divergence from SWC. Occupation difference is a notable factor in the variation of VWC in current study. The blue-collar group tends to lead the convergence to SWC in lexical level but not syntactic level, whereas white-collar group is an opposite case. Similar situation is found with the educational difference. The group with public school education tends to lead the convergence to SWC at lexical level but not syntactic level, while the group with college education is the opposite. It is noted that the roles of some social factors in the variation of VWC are vague in the present correlation study. Since the variation of a language is a process that never stops unless the language no longer exists, the impact of certain social factors in the process of language change might not be as strong as the others in certain stages of the process.

3. Conclusion

Given the findings in the present variation study of the VWC literacy practices, it is predicted that VWC will continue to survive in the area of Guangzhou. However, whether it will diverge from SWC and become an independent writing system as in the case of Hong Kong suggested by Snow (2004), or it will converge to SWC finally, will depend on the relative strength of the national language policy, and the regional socio-promoters which include the groups and agents who are constructed by various social identities and cultural norms in the local community.

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