Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development

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(Standard) language ideology and regional Putonghua in Chinese social media: a view from Weibo

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ABSTRACT

Despite having numerous Chinese language varieties and non-Chinese ethnic minority languages, China is often considered a monolingual nation (Liang, Sihua. 2015. *Language Attitudes and Identities in Multilingual China: A Linguistic Ethnography*. London: Springer, 154). The country's strong monolingual language policy heavily promotes a single standard language – Putonghua. Recently, scholars have begun to investigate 'regional Putonghua' varieties, contact varieties that have emerged from standard language promotion and community second language acquisition (e.g. Xiao, Jinsong. 2007. "Putonghua Zhongjieyu Yanjiu Shuping." *Journal of Yunyang Normal College* 27 (2): 119–122).

This paper analyses data collected from Weibo, China's online microblogging site, to investigate the language ideologies surrounding these 'non-standard' regional varieties. Two cities (Ningbo and Shanghai) and their local Putonghua varieties are examined: the cities share a similar linguistic background but Shanghai is more economically advanced than its neighbouring city Ningbo, and the language varieties in Shanghai are also believed to have more prestige (Zhou, Minglang. 2001. "The Spread of Putonghua and Language Attitude Changes in Shanghai and Guangzhou, China." *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 11 (2): 231–253).

Discourse analysis on Weibo posts allows us to show how regional Putonghua varieties are portrayed and perceived by laypeople and how they exist as 'non-standard' varieties in the shadow of the strong standard language ideology. These 'non-standard' varieties are associated with rich language ideologies and social meanings and their links to both negative cultural stereotypes and positive local identities often associated with vernacular varieties are also discussed.

Introduction

Language ideologies and language attitudes have been widely studied in the context of English and other European languages (Lippi-Green 2012; Vessey 2016). Existing studies on language ideology in mass media have found standard language ideology (SLI) to be a dominating ideology, often linking different (spoken and written) language varieties to idealised written standards (Lippi-Green 2012, 67). Recent research on pluricentricity in Western contexts has begun to challenge this view (Grondelaers and van Hout 2010), although relevant research on non-Western languages, many of which are, in fact, pluricentric, remains underdeveloped.

By studying the language ideology embedded in Chinese social media (Sina Weibo) posts about two spoken varieties (Ningbo and Shanghai Putonghua), this paper examines how (standard) language ideology is expressed in the online context where a 'hybrid' genre of written and spoken communication is used (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011), particularly regarding different spoken varieties with no 'standard' written form, and in doing so, contributes to our understanding of three interlinked yet under-researched areas in the study of language ideology, namely non-European, spoken and online languages.

Language ideology and media

When discussing language, we often talk about how language represents and is represented by its speakers, i.e. that language is ideological (Blommaert 1999; Woolard 1998). Language ideologies are 'a set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use' (Silverstein 1979, 193). A very common language ideology is the standard language ideology (SLI), which upholds the view that there is a correct or canonical form of a given language (Milroy 2007, 134).

The SLI is widely promoted, especially in the context of education, employment, and media (Lippi-Green 1994, 167), and consequently, the perception and evaluation of language varieties and speakers are often carried out against the SLI. Typically, the standard variety is accorded prestige, economic and social value, whereas non-standard varieties are stigmatised and associated with low socioeconomic status and negative values (Giles and Billings 2004, 193; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010, 215). Certain positive values related to solidarity qualities (e.g. integrity, social attractiveness) are also associated with non-standard varieties (Giles and Edwards 2010, 36). Masculinity is another quality that is often linked with non-standard varieties and used to explain the covert prestige and the continued use of non-standard varieties by some male speakers who invest heavily in this particular quality (Trudgill 1972, 188). Though many studies highlight the positive functions of non-standard varieties in terms of enhancing in-group solidarity, Fuertes et al. (2012, 129) show that non-standard varieties and their speakers are generally rated lower on dimensions of status, solidarity and dynamism. Such attitudes towards language varieties are shaped by the SLI, while at the same time, reinforcing and reproducing ideological schemas associated with the standard language.

Media, especially mass media such as television and newspapers, are considered the gate keepers of 'expert systems' and play an important role in disseminating and propagating SLI, through both their explicit emphasis on the importance of using the standard variety and their policies on standard language use (Johnson and Milani 2010, 5). Under the influence of media and other similar institutions of power, the prevalence of SLI is such that it is understood to be common sense, to the point where any debate or doubt on the topic is dismissed (Milroy 2001, 535).

However, the landscape of ideological work, including language ideology, is in constant flux. The pluricentric value orientation in late modern society, influenced by globalisation, leads to more diversified language ideologies than the SLI. The notions of 'de-standardisation' (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011) and 'anti-standardisation' (Armstrong and Mackenzie 2013) have emerged in a changing language ideology landscape where the attributions of standard and non-standard are rendered more complex and multi-dimensional.

Research carried out in Dutch-speaking areas shows that speakers are increasingly more tolerant of regional variation in Standard Dutch (Grondelaers and van Hout 2010; Grondelaers, van Hout, and Steegs 2010; Smakman 2006) and Standard Dutch with regional flavouring is still considered standard, though with added socially meaningful ingredients. This seems to suggest a 'standard extension' where speakers accommodate variability in 'the standard' and a relocation of the responsibility to maintain 'standardness' from the elite upper class to the broader population. The acceptance of variation in the standard variety does not necessarily indicate that the SLI is declining, rather, it suggests is that the valorisation of ways of speaking is changing. This is also seen in De Pascale, Marzo, and Speelman (2017, 135–37) where they interpret an inter-generational change

in perception of regional accents (i.e. the younger generation being more tolerant) as a change in the valorisation of these accents.

Existing literature has also noted a cycling process where the standard may split back into regional and social varieties, with regional features in particular finding their way into the standard and thus changing the threshold of 'standardness' (Deumert and Vandenbussche 2003, 10). Grondelaers and van Hout (2010, 234) explain this circular account of standardisation by arguing that language carries important information for social categorisation and stereotyping. Uniformity imposed from above by the SLI gets undermined when speakers are motivated to mark social boundaries and strive for distinction. The tension between uniformity, one of the central features of the SLI, and variability, persisting in societies where speakers use linguistic cues to mark identities and allegiances, is thus mediated by regional variation, which diffuses socially salient meanings into the standardised 'best' form (Grondelaers and van Hout 2010, 235).

This new acceptance of regional features in the standard variety is related to the prevalence of social media, which allows expressions of individual linguistic repertoires and has a significant bearing on individuals' sociolinguistic experiences and values. New media platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, open up new discursive spaces (Heller 2009, 277) where diverse voices can be heard, providing a broader indexical field (Eckert 2008, 454) where additional social meanings and symbolic forms flourish. These alternative discursive spaces enable the contestation of dominant language ideologies, the SLI included, endorsed by mainstream media. They provide rich semiotic resources for meaning-making and identity construction in the context of globalisation and superdiversity (Vertovec 2010, 83), although sometimes the 'diversification of diversity' associated with new media reproduces rather than eradicates existing ideological hierarchies (Vessey 2016, 21; Herring 2003, 220). Mass social media not only complicates patterns of social relations and interactions, but also displays a varied and mixed ideological field where it is unclear how the role of language ideologies plays out.

'Standard' Putonghua and regional Putonghua

China, like many other countries, has a state-implemented standard language which implies a state monolingualism, despite its largely multilingual population. The standard language in mainland China is *Putonghua* (literally meaning 'common speech'), a standardised Mandarin Chinese variety. It is also known as Standard Chinese, Standard Mandarin, *Guoyu* in Taiwan and *Huayu* in Singapore (Chen 1999, 30–33). In this paper, 'Chinese', when referring to a language, includes all sub-varieties of the Chinese language family while 'Putonghua' stands for the standard variety.

Putonghua is a relatively young standard variety (China 2016), standardised in the 1950s, and it is phonologically based on the Mandarin variety spoken in Beijing with a vocabulary drawn from various Mandarin varieties and a standardised grammar (Rohsenow 2004, 24). This has led to the standard variety co-existing with many other Mandarin and non-Mandarin varieties (mainly in the south and south eastern regions) in China (see Zhou and Ross 2004, for more details). In a sense, the language varieties used in China represent a 'polyglot repertoire' within a language (the Chinese language family) dominated by a monoglot ideology (Dong and Blommaert 2009, 8).

The status of Putonghua has been elevated in formal institutions, such as schools and local and national authorities and its instrumental value has been recognised widely, especially in achieving educational success (Liang 2015, 44). At the same time, the use of regional varieties (often called dialects) has been relegated to private domains, and regional varieties fare worse on social status dimension but better on speaker solidarity (e.g. kindness, likability) (Lin, Li, and Qiu 2010, 10; Zhang, Yang, and Zhu 2003, 53). Speakers of regional varieties or with marked regional accents are often silenced because their linguistic resources are not accurately recognised (Dong and Dong 2013, 174; Dong and Blommaert 2009, 11). This picture of public attitudes seems to confirm classical patterns on the status-solidarity dichotomy found for standard and non-standard varieties (Giles and Billings 2004; Giles and Edwards 2010; Liang 2015; Rickford 1985). However, the picture becomes more complex when regional differences are studied. Previous studies show that, in affluent areas

such as Guangzhou and Shanghai, local varieties (Cantonese and Shanghainese) are strong competitors with Putonghua in all traits (Liang 2015, 46–47; Zhou 2001, 247). This affiliation with regional variety is positively related to social-economic development of the area (Chen 2017, 121).

More interestingly, Putonghua seems to have acquired affective and solidarity functions recently. In Zhou (2001, 237–38), Putonghua is rated high on both status and solidarity dimensions by Cantonese speakers, and only rated high on solidarity traits by Shanghainese speakers. Similar findings where Putonghua receives high ratings on the solidarity dimension have been noted in Guangzhou (Zhang, Yang, and Zhu 2003, 53) and in Singapore (Chong and Tan 2013, 134–35), potentially caused by the introduction of Putonghua in the home environment where parents are pressured to use Putonghua to prepare their children linguistically for school (Liang 2015, 47). Regarding speaker gender and the use of (non-)standard varieties in China, existing studies seem to support the trend that women prefer the standard variety (i.e. Putonghua) (Wang and Ladegaard 2008, 70), though there is a lack of empirical studies to show how women and men are evaluated when they use different varieties. Zhao (2018, 186) suggests that Chinese women are judged less harshly when using regional features than men, where previous research in non-Chinese contexts has shown the opposite (Moosmüller 1995).

Although Putonghua was, and is, heavily promoted as the language to be used in education, the media, and other official institutions and contexts, many Chinese speakers have learned Putonghua as a second language/variety in addition to their native (Mandarin and non-Mandarin) variety/varieties. As a result, many Chinese people do not (and largely cannot) speak standard Putonghua according to prescriptive rules, and instead speak a collection of non-standard varieties of Putonghua termed regional Putonghua (*Difang Putonghua*) with their respective regional accents (*kouyin*, which can include lexical and grammatical as well as phonetic features) (You and Zou 2009, 10). It is reported that less than 7% of China's entire population can speak standard Putonghua, meaning that over a billion Chinese people are using a regional variety (Department of Language Application and Administration 2019).

Regional Putonghua is severely under-researched. Existing research on regional Putonghua is largely descriptive, focusing on the contrast between regional varieties and standard Putonghua in terms of phonological, lexical, and grammatical differences (e.g. Jing and Niu 2010, 46–48; Li and Lai 2011, 254). Regional Putonghua is often treated as a transitional form or an approximation to the standard (e.g. Xiao 2007, 120; Zhang 2005a, 160) and the ultimate goal for speakers of these varieties is to eventually master the standard form. Few studies consider regional varieties as legitimate varieties on their own and investigate these varieties from a sociolinguistic perspective (e.g. Jing and Niu 2010; Wang 2017; Zhao 2018).

The emergence of regional Putonghua is more than a by-product of language contact and should not be reduced to a transitional form from nonstandard to standard. Regional Putonghua can be a sign that other language ideologies are in competition with the SLI or that there is a relaxation of the SLI, and studying how regional Putonghua is evaluated will provide important insights into the current landscape of language ideologies in the Chinese context. When research elsewhere shows that globalisation and superdiversity are bringing about changes that contest the dominant SLI (Grondelaers and van Hout 2010), it is of both theoretical and empirical relevance to investigate whether the ideological landscape in China is also shifting towards more pluricentric value orientations. In this paper, we examine Sina Weibo posts, a tool used by laypeople to negotiate power within the broader discourse of hegemony in language use (Luqiu 2018, 668), to document public metalinguistic comments on language use, to investigate whether a shift in language ideology exists, and ultimately to understand what ideologies are being disseminated online.

Ningbo and Shanghai

This paper focuses on the regional Putonghua varieties spoken in Ningbo and Shanghai, both located on the east coast of China. Shanghai, a municipality of China, is its financial centre with a GDP of

450 billion US dollars and over 23 million residents (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau 2019). Although also a port city across the Hangzhou Bay from Shanghai, the city of Ningbo only has a third of Shanghai's GDP and 6 million residents (Ningbo Municipal Statistics Bureau 2019). The two cities were chosen based on the similarities and differences in their linguistic and social backgrounds.

First, both cities share Wu, a non-Mandarin Chinese variety used in South-eastern China (Norman 1988, 199) as their native variety. Compared with Putonghua, Wu has unique phonological, lexical and grammatical features and has several sub-varieties including the Ningbo and Shanghai varieties (see Norman 1988, 199–204 for a detailed account on Wu). It is widely accepted that Wu and Mandarin are mutually unintelligible but sub-varieties of Wu are generally mutually intelligible (DeFrancis 1984, 54–57). Shanghainese and Ningbonese share many linguistic features despite a lack of written standards, although Ningbonese is often described as sounding 'hard' and Shanghainese 'soft', possibly due to the variable syllable lengths (Zhao 2012). Unsurprisingly, the regional Putonghua in these cities carry over some features from their respective Wu varieties (See Guan 2008; Xiao 2013, for a list of these features).

The two cities and their languages make an interesting comparison. As Zhou (2001) has suggested, Shanghainese carries a certain prestige in comparison with other non-Putonghua varieties and even Putonghua in Shanghai. Shanghai is thus representative of more developed cities with prestigious local varieties (e.g. Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Beijing), while Ningbo is a smaller and less-developed city and its local variety does not have such prestige. Their main similarities and differences are summarised in Table 1.

Methodology

Building on previous literature in the study of language ideology in media discourse (both traditional and computer-mediated) (Johnson and Milani 2010), this paper investigates online data from Chinese social media. The analytical framework is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by scholars including Fairclough (1995, 2006), Van Dijk (2001), and Wodak and Meyer (2001). CDA focuses on the critical examination of the (unequal) power structure and (language) ideology produced and reproduced by language users within the broader social context, thus allowing an investigation into how Chinese social media users engage with language ideology in a country with a prevailing SLI. Moreover, by combining (critical) discourse analysis and data from 'unprompted' online responses on languages, we aim to access and uncover more covert ideology (Durham 2016, 184).

The data analysed here are from the Chinese microblogging site, Sina Weibo (weibo.com). As a microblogging site, Weibo offers the same functions as Twitter by allowing users to post and share messages with optional images and other metadata (e.g. location) with their followers unidirectionally. Weibo also combines some social network functions such as games and instant messaging. As the most popular microblogging site in China, Sina Weibo generated over 130 million posts daily in 2018 (Sina Weibo Data Center 2019). The website is mainly used by those aged 16–30 in China (80% of all users), 40% of whom come from relatively developed cities including Ningbo and Shanghai.

To obtain a corpus with posts related to regional Putonghua, a keyword search was first carried out using Weibo's search engine (s.weibo.com). Posts from the past eight years (1 July 2011–10 July

Table 1. Similarities and Differences between Ningbo and Shanghai

| City | Similarity | | Difference | | | |
	Language family	Location	City size	Language preservation	Language	Speaker
Ningbo	Wu	Urban	3730km^2	Low	Ningbonese	7,000,000
Shanghai	Wu	Urban	6341km^2	High	Shanghainese	14,000,000

Table 2. Keywords searched in Weibo posts (Ningbo).

Chinese	Pinyin	Translation	Number of occurrences	Percentage
灵桥牌	*Lingqiao pai*	*Lingqiao* brand	268	43.7%
宁波口音	Ningbo *kouyin*	Ningbo accent	218	35.6%
宁波腔	Ningbo *qiang*	Ningbo tone	67	10.9%
宁波普通话	Ningbo Putonghua	Ningbo(-accented) Putonghua	47	7.7%
甬普	*Yong³ pu*	*Yong*(-accented) Putonghua	7	1.1%
灵桥话	*Lingqiao⁴ hua*	*Lingqiao* speech	4	0.7%
灵桥腔	*Lingqiao qiang*	*Lingqiao* tone	2	0.3%

2018) were searched using a list of keywords (seven for Ningbo and five for Shanghai) often used to refer to the regional Putonghua varieties in Ningbo and Shanghai (Tables 2 and 3).

Both original posts and reposts with comments are included while reposts without comments (identical (re)posts) are excluded. Partial matches for the keywords and posts not relevant to the target dialect and/or variety were also manually excluded: for instance, the mention of *lingqiao pai* as a brand name or as an accented variety of other non-Putonghua varieties (Ningbo-accented Shanghainese, for example).

In total, 2138 unique posts were obtained: 604 are about Ningbo Putonghua only (28.3%), 1525 about Shanghai Putonghua only (71.3%) and 9 mention both varieties. Tables 2 and 3 also show the distribution of each keyword in the respective dataset. The qualitative analysis was performed in two stages: first, all posts were read, focusing on the content and use of linguistic forms (e.g. key words and phrases) to express different opinions on regional Putonghua and its speakers. In the second stage, all posts were reread and analysed with these key phrases and opinions in mind, in order to identify their functions in producing and reproducing macro-level discourse (e.g. the SLI) and common themes within the corpus.[1]

Data Analysis

In this section, an overview of the data is first provided before we present and discuss the different themes identified during data analysis and representative posts within the corpus. Both the explicit and implicit manifestations of language ideologies (Woolard 1998, 3–5; Vessey 2015, 279–82) in these posts are discussed to offer a fuller and more critical understanding of the language ideology relevant to regional Putonghua varieties.

Naming the variety

In the current corpus, '*qiang*' and '*kouyin*' are common names used to refer to regional Putonghua (see Tables 2 and 3 above). *Qiang*, meaning 'tune' or 'tone', is a generic term for speech with a certain 'flavour' and can be used to describe music and speech styles, as well as accents and the use of features beyond pronunciation (e.g. lexicon and grammar). *Kouyin*, combining *kou* ('mouth') and *yin* ('sound'), refers more specifically to accents, especially regional accents, and often also includes lexical and grammatical variation in speech. Since neither is used for the standard use of Putonghua,

Table 3. Keywords searched in Weibo posts (Shanghai).

Chinese	Pinyin	Translation	Number of occurrences	Percentage
上海腔	Shanghai *qiang*	Shanghai tone	622	40.6%
沪普	*Hu⁵ pu*	*Hu*(-accented) Putonghua	448	29.2%
上海口音	Shanghai *kouyin*	Shanghai accent	319	20.8%
上海普通话	Shanghai Putonghua	Shanghai(-accented) Putonghua	96	6.3%
沪腔	*Hu qiang*	*Hu* tone	47	3.1%

their presence in the data implies that the regional varieties are framed differently or viewed as 'non-standard'.

Conventionally, regional varieties of Putonghua in China are known as locally accented Putonghua using the city's name or abbreviation (e.g. Ningbo or *yong*), yet Ningbo Putonghua is also called *lingqiao* Putonghua by locals. As shown in Table 2 in the previous section, around 45% of the posts refer to the local variety as *lingqiao*. Just over 53% of the posts label the variety with the city's name: Ningbo *qiang*, Ningbo *kouyin*, and Ningbo Putonghua. The remaining 1% of posts use the city's short name, Yong, and call it Yong Pu (*pu* is short for *Putonghua*). The following post briefly explains the origin of '*lingqiao pai*':

> (1) *Lingqiao* (literally meaning 'spirit bridge') has a history as old as Ningbo city itself; therefore, it heavily influences the local culture. Ningbo locals call the Ningbonese-accented Putonghua 'lingqiao' brand Putonghua (*lingqiao pai Putonghua*).[2]

In comparison, Shanghai does not have its own 'brand name' for the local Putonghua variety. The variety is referred to as Shanghai accent (both *qiang* and *kouyin* – 40.6% and 20.8% respectively) and *hu pu* (*hu* is the short name for the city – at 29.2%). Shanghai Putonghua is less common (6.3%), and so is *hu qiang* (3.1%).

In the shadow of the standard

Although all posts were selected based on their mentioning of regional Putonghua, the standard variety of Putonghua and the notion of 'standardness' are repeatedly seen in the data, reproducing the dominant SLI in China. Standard Putonghua is treated as the preferred communicative tool among all Chinese varieties and as the best form of Putonghua, and 'standardness' is one main criterion used to measure all Chinese varieties, including regional Putonghua varieties.

First, Weibo posts discuss the incomprehensibility of different regional Putonghua varieties and by focusing on this communicative function and evaluating these varieties negatively (e.g. 'annoying', 'awkward', 'thick accent'), they (implicitly in Examples 2 and 3, and explicitly in Example 4) contrast Ningbo and Shanghai Putonghua with other easier-to-understand varieties such as standard Putonghua, and convey a preference for the latter.

> (2) Next time I'll bring my own **interpreter**! Must find someone who **understands** Ningbo accent!

> (3) I **really can't understand** my physics teacher's Shanghai Putonghua, which **annoys** me a bit.

> (4) I'm normally against all forms of geographical, race, and gender discrimination, but I have to say, men with a Shanghai accent are so **annoying** – can you **please speak standard Putonghua** …

Regional Putonghua in Shanghai and Ningbo is also often compared with standard Putonghua more generally. Instead of treating regional varieties as 'equal' to standard Putonghua, most posts comparing these varieties contrast them in terms of 'standardness', and in doing so, frame standard Putonghua as the better/best variety and regional varieties as less prestigious and 'non-standard'. This can be seen in attitudes towards both Shanghai and Ningbo Putonghua:

> (5) It is odd that Professor Qian is **so knowledgeable** […] but he can't read or talk **standardly** and speaks with a mouthful of **Hu Pu**.

> (6) I've always felt **inferior** to others since I was young … when I was in university in Hangzhou, everyone else spoke Putonghua, but I spoke Ningbo accented Putonghua. **Makes me want to cry**!

The author in Example 5 directly contrasts Shanghai Putonghua with reading and talking in standard Putonghua (and being very knowledgeable), indicating that regional Putonghua is non-standard and inconsistent with Professor Qian's otherwise prestigious educated persona. In Example 6, (standard) Putonghua is explicitly described as superior to the blogger's Ningbo Putonghua,

leading to negative emotion when their accent comes into direct comparison with that of 'everyone else' 'in Hangzhou'.

Furthermore, posts also reproduce the SLI observed in official discourse about using Putonghua in public and educational domains where it is explicitly stated that those working in education and public services 'have the obligation to learn and use the national language' (Pan 2016, 271). Standard Putonghua is strongly preferred over regional Putonghua in the employment and education domains:

> (7) I think the Shanghai accent sounds very nice but [those who work] in the service industry, especially public servants, **should** take it [speaking standard Putonghua] as their **basic responsibility** since they are serving people from all over the world in an international metropolis.

> (8) My management teacher's strong Ningbo accent is going to be the **last straw needed to crush this poor donkey** (i.e. the blogger).

Example 7 explicitly points out the practical value of the standard and that it is the employee's 'basic responsibility' to use standard Putonghua, while Example 8 negatively evaluates the use of regional Putonghua, implying a preference for standard Putonghua in educational settings.

Regional varieties of Putonghua exist not only in the shadow of the standard variety of Putonghua – being constantly compared to the latter and negatively evaluated – but also in the shadow of the notion of 'standardness' in a more complicated way. In Example 9, the blogger describes their Shanghai Putonghua as 'standard':

> (9) A foreigner asked me what time it was with Putonghua more fluent than mine, and I panicked and replied with **standard Shanghai Putonghua**: 'let me see-*o* (particle *o* is often used in Shanghainese) – half past two'.

It might seem paradoxical to discuss the 'standardness' of 'non-standard' varieties, as there is no 'standard' regional Putonghua accent and variation exists within each regional Putonghua variety (Qie 2015). In the current corpus, 'standard' (pinyin: *biaozhun*) is often used to signal 'typical' (of the regional Putonghua used by locals): using pronunciations, lexical and grammatical features often found in the local non-Mandarin variety (Shanghainese and Ningbonese, respectively) in the production of regional Putonghua. The blogger in Example 9 labels their accent as 'standard' Shanghai Putonghua since they used the typical Shanghainese particle '*o*' to end the sentence. Through the notion of 'typicality', 'standardness' is then used to convey 'authenticity', as shown in Example 10 below where the political figure's 'standard' accent in Ningbo Putonghua is seen as a marker for his origin and authenticity as a Ningbonese:

> (10) Xie Xunren's Putonghua is **standard** *Lingqiao* brand. He's an **authentic** Ningbonese.

The use of the word 'standard/*biaozhun*' for 'typical/*dianxing*' or 'authentic/*zhengzong*' (two alternatives in the corpus, see next section for more discussion on them) is not coincidental, rather, it demonstrates that Weibo users (and other Chinese speakers) use 'standard/*biaozhun*' as a criterion for good language use: high quality use of language, whether in standard Putonghua or in 'non-standard' regional Putonghua, can be said to be 'standard'. By measuring all Putonghua varieties with 'standardness', these posts also highlight the power differences between standard Putonghua users and 'standard' regional Putonghua users and offer us a glimpse into the implicit SLI represented in the data.

> (11) As a native Shanghainese, I have to say: This is 'standard' Shanghai Putonghua, and by the way, don't speak in this way, it will get you a low grade on your Putonghua pronunciation test.

The author of Example 11 identifies the typical use of Shanghai Putonghua in a video clip and warns readers not to use Shanghai Putonghua in language tests. The post relies on assumptions heavily influenced by the SLI: firstly, standard Putonghua is preferred in the education and employment domains ('test'); and secondly, 'standard' Shanghai Putonghua is not really standard (although

typical/authentic) and poses no competition to standard Putonghua regarding its linguistic and symbolic capital on the standard language market (Bourdieu 1991).

(Negative)#cultural stereotypes

In Chinese society, there exist many cultural stereotypes with close links to language use. Some of these stereotypes represent positive images, often benefitting from their use of the standard and/or prestigious language(s). For example, describing someone as sounding like a 'broadcaster' indicates a high proficiency in Putonghua and mostly likely also the associated levels of education and intelligence.

In the current corpus, however, we see more negative stereotypes being represented. In Example 12 below, the Ningbo accent is associated with pickled vegetables, a popular cultural reference in China as they are often linked to the poor, out-of-date lifestyle of the past found in less-developed areas.

(12) The Ningbo accent is so **unfashionable**. Ugh, Ningbo, full of the taste/smell of **pickled vegetables**.

Here, the use of this linguistic variety is viewed as part of an unfashionable, outdated cultural persona and the blogger's negative attitudes towards Ningbo Putonghua is conveyed in the process. Similarly, a character with a regional Putonghua accent is often thought to be unattractive, implying a link between certain accents and attributes such as (bad) appearance, as seen in Example 13:

(13) The vlogger has a strong Ningbo accent, so he must be **ugly**!

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the regional variety from Shanghai does not share the same cultural stereotype with Ningbo Putonghua. Instead, Weibo users often link the Shanghai accent with a snobbish and sometimes stingy and calculating personality. Some overtly comment on this, as shown in Example 14:

(14) The Shanghai accent has always been used to portray people who are **tight and stingy with money** and those who are **overly effeminate**.

(15) [I] ran into a middle-aged **weirdo** on the train! [He was] in a suit paired with a tie and sunglasses and wore a huge shiny golden ring! […] drank coffee […] with a Shanghai accent, he spoke [negatively] about Northerners and lower classed people […] what a show-off!

In Example 15, the blogger describes a middle-aged man with a Shanghai accent and how his outfit (suit, tie, sunglasses, and ring) and behaviour (coffee-drinking, and talking ill of others) fit into the snobbish stereotype.

More interestingly, the use of regional Putonghua as opposed to 'standard' Putonghua is associated with femininity and/effeminacy. This may appear surprising as existing studies on language and gender often link the use of 'non-standard' language with men and/or masculinity and that of standard or 'refined' language with women and/or femininity (e.g. Trudgill 1972, 1979; Eckert 1989). It is important to point out that the role of gender and/or masculinity/femininity should be understood in the social context and in fact, research in Chinese languages has noted this somewhat unconventional association between 'standardness' and gender (see Zhang 2005b; Zhao 2018, for more details).

In Examples 16 and 17, Ningbo and Shanghai Putonghua are positively linked to femininity in women in the corpus. Both posts evaluate regional Putonghua accents positively in relation to traits typically associated with femininity (soft-spoken, beautiful, adorable):

(16) A young woman on the bus spoke with a **soft** Ningbo accent and I **like** it **very much**.

(17) Are you from Shanghai? Shanghainese girls are so **beautiful**. I **love** the Shanghai accent – all the girls use lots of words from Shanghainese and the tone is so **adorable**.

In comparison, when regional Putonghua is used by a man, the accent is negatively linked to effeminacy and a lack of typical male masculinity and, problematically, to gayness.

(18) I was waiting for my bus and there was a **handsome** young man next to me – he was **very, very, very hand-some** – then he spoke, with a Shanghai Putonghua accent. This isn't the point, the point is, he sounded like a **gay** man and he had **really long nails** on his index and little fingers. Oh my god, I **lost interest right away**.

In Example 18, a physically attractive (presumably heterosexual) man is 'degraded' to a gay man with unattractive long nails (indicating either lack of hygiene or effeminacy) upon the blogger hearing his accent. The female blogger implies that men with a Shanghai accent cannot be attractive and must be homosexual and that regional accents are heard as negative traits in a man.

Authentic local identity

As briefly mentioned in the previous discussion, regional Putonghua varieties are sometimes seen to signal authenticity. Weibo posts often link the varieties to the cities and a sense of belonging although the exact origin of the user cannot be determined since the information is unavailable (geo-tagging is possible on Weibo, but it is the user's choice and many posts are not tagged). These posts use phrases like *qinqie* (kind, intimate) and/or *shuxi* (familiar), as shown in the Examples 29–21:

(19) I can hear **typical** (*dianxing*) Ningbo Putonghua from a woman […] I will tell people around me that I'm **familiar** (*shuxi*) with the sound and this place …

(20) I want to be **back** in Shanghai in the next second, no, I want to be **back** right now. I **miss** Shanghai Putonghua and Shanghainese. They sound **intimate** (*qinqie*).

(21) I had a seminar with a professor from Shanghai Normal University today and it felt like **I was with my own family**. The **familiar** (*shuxi*) Shanghai Putonghua sounds very **pleasant**.

These posts all imply a link between the city and its regional Putonghua accent and related to this, the familiarity and sense of belonging regional Putonghua can index. Example 20 is especially interesting as it evaluates the local variety Shanghainese and Shanghai Putonghua equally positively on this solidarity dimension, although Shanghai Putonghua is the product of a top-down standard language planning and standard varieties are not commonly associated with local identity or solidarity. Weibo posts such as this one could potentially be an indicator of the rise of Putonghua in the solidarity dimension observed in other attitudes studies in China (Zhang, Yang, and Zhu 2003, 53; Zhou 2001, 246–47).

Authentic use of regional Putonghua, especially by actors in television shows, is also often praised by viewers on Weibo, as this adds to the authenticity of the characters. Phrases such as *biaozhun* (standard), *dianxing* (typical – see Example 19 above), and *zhengzong* (authentic) are often used.

(22) Li Tianzhu (an actor) is from Taiwan? Impossible! That '**standard**' (*biaozhun*) Shanghai Putonghua!

(23) […] Several seasoned actors (on a television show) all speak **authentic** (*zhengzong*) Shanghai Putonghua and they occasionally even speak some Shanghainese. So **familiar** (*qinqie*)!!

It is evident that the bloggers share positive attitudes towards Shanghai Putonghua when actors are playing Shanghainese characters. However, only authentic regional Putonghua is accepted and encouraged in the public domain of media, as inauthentic portraits of local characters are frequently criticised:

(24) Fan Shengmei isn't from Shanghai but her mum has a thick Shanghai accent – another **continuity error** in Ode to Joy (a drama set in modern-day Shanghai).

(25) Jiang Jieshi's (former leader of the Republic of China) Ningbo accent is so **inauthentic** (*bu zhengzong*), the lines don't sound like how Southerners speak. [I'm giving it a] **Bad review**.

As can be seen from the above examples, the use of regional Putonghua can be perceived positively as a symbol of regional identity both in private (bloggers' personal life) and public domains (media), with a focus on the authenticity indexed by 'standard'/typical/authentic use of the variety in question.

Discussion and Conclusion

First, this paper demonstrates that Weibo posts can be a valuable source of unprompted metalinguistic comments to investigate language ideology and how laypeople view language varieties. It also offers a way to access speakers' language ideology over a long period of time (8 years, in this case) in relatively less time, although further analysis is needed to track any changes in language attitudes and ideology.

Moreover, the data show that on Weibo, both regional varieties of Putonghua do exist, explicitly or implicitly, in the shadow of the standard variety (standard Putonghua) and they highlight the complex notion of 'standardness' (meaning 'standard'/correct as well as indexing high quality/authenticity). Regional varieties are often contrasted with the standard, both in general and using the criterion of comprehensibility, and are labelled incomprehensible and/or 'non-standard'. Related to being 'non-standard', Weibo users show awareness of the power differences between, and symbolic capital of, standard and regional varieties of Putonghua, especially in public domains typically dominated by the SLI (education and employment). This is perhaps unsurprising considering China's vigorous (monolingual) SLI and decades-long standard language promotion.

The two varieties are also associated, often negatively, with their respective people, culture, and cultural stereotypes (e.g. the Ningbo accent is unfashionable while the Shanghai accent is snobbish). As existing literature has suggested (Zhou 2001, 246), Shanghai and its language varieties seem to index social meanings in a way which is different to other less-prestigious varieties from less-developed regions such as Ningbo. For example, they carry more prestige and invoke different cultural stereotypes. The gender-related associations with both varieties are also interesting: the use of regional Putonghua signals femininity in women and effeminacy in men in both varieties. Further investigations are needed to tease apart these meanings and the reasons behind them, given that the use of regional features is often associated with masculinity in previous studies (e.g. Trudgill 1972, 1979; Eckert 1989).

Additionally, regional Putonghua can convey a sense of belonging and familiarity for its speakers when used not only in private settings but also in the media. Two interesting points can be made here: firstly, speakers perceive a 'non-standard' 'standardised' regional variety to be indexical of local identity, a function often reserved for local vernaculars, suggesting these regional varieties of the standard language might be expanding in their social meanings. Secondly, the authentic use of 'non-standard' regional varieties is present in mass media (e.g. TV), a heavily censored public domain in China (Hassid 2008), and is positively received by Weibo users. This perhaps indicates a potential new direction in the development of regional Putonghua from non-standard transitional varieties to a loosening of the domination of the SLI.

Regional varieties of standard Putonghua are more than by-products of language contact and the intricate attitudes towards them can be indicative of the strong SLI currently dominating the Chinese society as well as potential changes that could challenge this dominance and move China into the process of 'de-standardisation' or 'anti-standardisation'. The data also indicate that the use and positive reception of regional Putonghua in mass media could be a driving force in this process, echoing previous research findings (Johnson and Milani 2010; Vessey 2016).

Future research on the topic of language ideology and regional Putonghua in (social) media discourse in China should consider studying other aspects of the reconstruction of (standard) language ideology in Chinese texts as the current study has concentrated solely on the key themes in the corpus. More detailed analyses on the use of standard grammar and lexicon in these posts, for example, would provide a deeper understanding of how the SLI is actualised at the micro linguistic level. A larger and more diverse corpus would also benefit our understanding of the relationship between the SLI and lay people's perception of different varieties beyond Shanghai and Ningbo Putonghua. Finally, a longitudinal perspective on the attitudes towards different Chinese varieties on social media is also much needed to track any changes in language ideology in China.

Notes

1. Due to the diverse content of the posts on two different varieties, the numbers of posts in each theme vary greatly and will not be reported here. Each of the main themes discussed here accounts for 15% to 20% of all posts.
2. All posts were translated by the first author, with minimal modification of the text, though all potential identifying information is omitted (username, date, location, accompanying images and videos) to make the posts less searchable to protect the identity of the post owner.
3. *Yong* is Ningbo's abbreviation in Chinese.
4. *Lingqiao* is a place in Ningbo, see below for more details on this name.
5. *Hu* is Shanghai's abbreviation.

Data availability statement

This study was an analysis of public data available from Sina Weibo (https://s.weibo.com). Further details can be obtained by contacting the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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