

Language Rights in a Changing China
A National Overview and Zhuang Case Study

Alexandra Grey (2021)

De Gruyter Mouton 342pp

Reviewed by Lingxia Zhou¹

In her Fishman Award-winning book *Language Rights in a Changing China*, Alexandra Grey focuses on a case study of the *Zhuang* ethnic group, which has the largest number of speakers among the officially recognized ethnic minority languages in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Grey unveils how language rights and policies are interpreted and implemented, and how they affect *Zhuang* and *Zhuang* language in varying ways. She scrutinizes constitutional minority language rights in a changing China by examining language policies at different levels, from national laws and policies to regional language policies and their implementation in the local context.

Grey's research is well situated in the field of critical sociolinguistics and language policy and planning (LPP). Rooted in a Bourdieusian paradigm that attends to the relationship between language and power, Grey innovatively combines three analytical angles: one from legal studies, one from an extended linguistic landscape approach, and a final one looking closely into social actors. Through multi-sited, ethnographic fieldwork, Grey draws her conclusions based on data collected from interviews with 63 participants (43 *Zhuang*-speaking or ethnic *Zhuang* university students and 20 *Zhuang* language leaders), linguistic landscape texts, fieldwork observations and a corpus of policy documents. By unveiling the power imbalance and structural constraints that shape *Zhuang* language governance she shows that, far from empowering minority language speakers, the governance framework perpetuates the 'developmentalist' language ideology embedded in China's national language policy.

The eleven chapters of the book are organized into four parts. The first part contains two chapters in which Grey introduces the foundations of her research. Chapter One explains the context, rationale, and theoretical and methodological frameworks of the research with a clear outline of the book. Despite having the largest number of speakers among all the ethnic minority languages in China, *Zhuang* has been under-researched in existing sociolinguistic literature (p. 19). Thus Grey selected *Zhuang* as a case study to examine China's constitutional language rights. She conducted multi-sited fieldwork in and across Guangxi *Zhuangzu* Autonomous Region (GZAR), Yunnan Province, Beijing and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Chapter Two builds on the author's and other researchers' understanding of *Zhuang* and provides a sociolinguistic profile of *Zhuang* language, including its history, speakers and current status. This chapter is not only useful for readers who are not familiar with *Zhuang*, but is also a solid reference guide for readers interested in *Zhuang* studies as it does not only introduce technical knowledge about *Zhuang* and *Zhuang* language but also denaturalizes *Zhuang* as a language of a people (p. 62). Grey points out that *Zhuang* is a constructed ethnic and political category, and that actual language practice had no bearing on the project of ethnic classification. Two disconnects are highlighted in the chapter: one 'between the state's construction of language and people, and the people's construction of themselves, others, and

¹**Affiliation**

Department of Languages and Cultures, Lancaster University, UK
email: l.zhou11@lancaster.ac.uk

language' (p. 63); another between the government's promotion of standard Zhuang language and local people's oral practice of non-standard Zhuang language.

The three chapters of Part Two turn to legal discourse and analysis, critiquing language laws and policies using theories of Bourdieusian critical sociolinguistics, specifically 'the theorization of law as symbolically powerful discourse', as well as the critical sociolinguistic concept of language ideologies (p. 23). Chapter Two focuses on language-related legislation and the policy-making framework in China under which language policies are created and implemented. It also covers the language ideologies embedded in the language laws and minority language governance. Grey illustrates the fractured nature and limitations of the PRC's language governance framework through the case study of Zhuang, particularly GZAR's language-in-education laws and structures. In explaining her use of the term 'language governance', Grey emphasizes 'the processual and dialectic practices of law rather than the posited texts' (p. 24).

Chapter Three provides a thorough analysis of the PRC's legal provisions about minority languages and minority peoples. Grey argues that while Article 4 in the constitution declaims citizens' freedom to use and develop all China's official minority languages, its negative nature and lack of enforcement mechanism made constitutional minority language rights a normative discourse rather than a form of empowerment for minority peoples (p. 82). Grey's further analysis of Article 9 of the *Criminal Procedure Law* and Article 139 of the Constitution helps readers unfamiliar with Chinese laws better understand the situation, which is partially attributed to the PRC's law-making style, whereby the government may have intentionally used law to provide normative, flexible guidance through changing circumstances (p. 78). Grey closes the chapter by concluding that whilst China's majority language policy on both the national and local scale can be classed as a type of 'promotive policy' in Schiffman's (1996) fundamental typology, minority language laws are a form of 'tolerance policy' on the national scale, with some other possibly promotive policies on the local scale, as shown in *Nanning Measures*, which is also examined in Chapter Nine (p. 81, p. 254).

Building on Chapter Three's analysis of the PRC constitution and other legal provisions about language, Chapter Four delves further into the language ideologies entrenched and (re)produced in the language governance framework. In analyzing legal texts and participants' accounts, Grey identifies a predominantly developmentalist ideology expressed within official discourses as seen in language laws and policies, which frame and evaluate minority languages under the paradigm of cultural and economic development. Any language deemed to lack economic capital or developmental value potentially falls 'outside legitimate expectations for state policy and resourcing' (p. 104), including Zhuang. In addition to the lack of enforcement mechanisms discussed in Chapter Three, linguistic developmentalism further constrains minority language rights, particularly nonstandard Zhuang language practices (p.102).

Chapter Five rounds out Part Two with a critique of the structural distribution of language governance powers. Through a close-up study of Zhuang language-in-education policy in GZAR, Grey reveals the poor or failed implementation of constitutional minority language rights, even in the nominally autonomous Zhuangzu region under the system of ethnic minority self-governance, which in fact fails to either represent or empower Zhuang people. Zhuang language-in-education policy treats Zhuang language as an objectified commodity instead of a lived language, which aligns with the latest state-initiated national Language Protection Project's (*Yubao*) focus on heritage as distinct from lived language practices. This chapter also reveals the heterogeneity of overt language policy and policy cleavages, as exemplified in different regions' and provinces' responses to the constitutional freedom to use and develop minority languages.

Taking inspiration from the critical analysis of the system of minority language governance, Part Three uses an innovative linguistic landscape approach to investigate sociolinguistic realities through an empirical analysis of language governance as socially situated practice. The four chapters of Part Three capture four theoretical perspectives on public linguistic landscapes. Chapter Six probes the patterns of language display and their locations in urban places, universities, and GZAR, which can physically manifest both de facto and de jure language policies. Grey notes that government organizations at different levels are the main authors of Zhuang texts in these landscapes, reproducing and visualizing language ideology that considers Zhuang language as non-autonomous, non-commercial, historically unwritten and immobile rather than a living, varied language (p. 185). Chapter Seven extends to the use of non-linguistic emblems of “Zhuangness” in the same landscapes investigated in Chapter Six, and to the development of these symbolic conventions in other media. It also explores explicit references to the written Zhuang language, which Grey proves to be rare, whereas visual tropes have a wider presence across various genres (p. 203). The public linguistic landscape examined in these two chapters reveals the dominance and hegemony of Putonghua, the standard variety of Han Chinese that is promoted nationally by the state, in contrast with the limited public presence and thus marginalization of Zhuang language. This hinders individuals from increasing language practice in Zhuang by limiting its role as a symbolic resource that can construct meaningful associations between specific places and the Zhuang language (p. 185). These linguistic landscapes as de facto language policies can potentially either enable or constrain individuals’ language practices. In this case they marginalize or even exclude Zhuang by framing it as a less important part of contemporary Zhuang culture, or a personal and group identity for Zhuang people and the GZAR.

The two subsequent chapters then examine the role of the “linguascapers” who control and deploy visual linguistic resources to reproduce and enhance senses of place and particular language ideologies. Chapter Eight, my favorite chapter, introduces the “lived landscape” approach (Grey, 2021) and extends the examination of linguistic landscapes to overlooked viewers and other social actors experiencing and interpreting these landscapes (p. 219). It tackles the dialogical relationship between language on the one hand and space and place on the other, as well as the agency and subjectivity of people co-constructing space, identity and meaning. Drawing from data collected from interviews with university students and language leaders, most of whom are Zhuang speakers, Chapter Eight highlights how participants read and interact with Zhuang-inclusive street-name signage and other public texts and how these interactions embody identity. A special, authoritative Zhuang identity is constructed through Zhuang literacy given viewers’ perception that professional training necessary for reading Zhuang signage is scarce. However, these identity-construction affordances provided in the linguistic landscape were not activated to participants for a number of reasons, including misrecognizing written Zhuang as Putonghua, a majority language (p. 222); overlooking Zhuang writings (p. 228); and perceiving Romanized Zhuang as inauthentic (p. 231) or as intended for tourists instead of locals (p. 238). Drawing on the details and nuances from her lived landscape data, Grey argues that ‘noticing is socially-situated’ and that various users of the spaces may interpret landscapes’ texts, imagery and patterns differently from language policy makers (p. 250).

Rounding out Part Three, Chapter Nine then turns back to de jure language policy and local laws, examining how they control the distribution of power and choice-making in ‘linguascaping’. Laws and policies in turn shape public linguistic landscapes to reproduce and resist linguistic and social orders through legal action (p. 261). Echoing the discussion on the structural and legal limitations and ideological tensions in Part Two, Chapter Nine also illustrates the dis-organization of language governance, giving the example of lack of coordination or complete control in ‘linguascaping’, even though the government acts as a

domineering linguascaper to use laws to prioritize its language ideologies. This chapter explains that “the government” is actually “various law-making bodies with differing legal ranks and diverse designs and priorities” (p. 266), which can regulate linguascaping agency but not entirely constrain or direct it. Grey concludes that the current Zhuang linguascaping policies are not enabling the physical or ideological drive for a change to a greater Zhuang language presence in public linguistic landscapes.

Part Four recaps the study and its conclusions. In Chapter Ten, Grey offers a clear, chapter-by-chapter summary of the book and then postulates the direction in which future Chinese minority language policy may be headed, as well as setting out her vision for minority language policy-making, particularly those concerning Zhuang, which she clearly feels passionate about. Chapter Eleven reflects on the book’s general theoretical and methodological implications for language rights and policy research and practice worldwide.

To conclude, this book presents an interdisciplinary, multi-faceted study of minority language governance in China, combining legal analysis with an ethnographically orientated critical sociolinguistic approach. Grey shows a solid knowledge of the Zhuang language, and thoughtful engagement with relevant literature in sociolinguistics and legal studies. The book is an exemplary resource for anyone interested in Zhuang studies and Chinese language policy. Readers will also be impressed by the comprehensiveness and richness of the data presented in the book and appreciate the ample quotes and visual evidence.

As a researcher in language policy and planning, I am fascinated by Grey’s innovative integration of lived linguistic landscape studies into language rights and policy studies. In particular, Grey looks beyond the presence of scripts in the built environment and explains how Zhuang is indexed through other symbolic means. She also extends the study of linguistic landscape to an examination of viewers’ subjectivity through “commented walks” and interviews with interlocutors conducted while walking through the landscapes (p. 220). It would also be interesting to see future research on other minority languages adopting similar approaches.

With relevance beyond China, this study also connects mobility, capitalism and globalization in the Chinese context through its discussion of minority language politics. It is a valuable contribution to our growing understanding of language policy and planning, linguistic justice, linguistic landscape and contemporary China studies. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the above-mentioned fields.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Grey, Alexandra (2021) Perceptions of the invisible Zhuang minority language in LLs of the PRC and implications for language policy. *Linguistic Landscape*.
- Schiffman, Harold F. (1996) Typologies of multilingualism and typologies of language policy. In Harold F. Schiffman (ed.), *Linguistic culture and language policy*, 26–54. London: Routledge.