



Factors Influencing Chinese Dialect Variation: An SLR Based on a Multidisciplinary Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors influencing Chinese dialect variation from a sociolinguistic perspective. Despite the establishment of Putonghua as the national standard language, various dialects such as Yue, Min, Wu, and Hakka continue to be used in daily communication, reflecting linguistic and cultural diversity within Chinese society. This research aims to identify and synthesize the main factors affecting dialect variation through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Relevant articles published between 2020 and 2025 were collected and analyzed from reputable academic sources. The findings reveal that Chinese dialect variation is shaped by four major factors: social factors, including urbanization, mobility, and language contact; geographical factors, such as regional isolation and topographical conditions; historical-political factors, including migration patterns and language policies; and language identity factors related to cultural attachment and community belonging. The study also indicates that the dominance of Mandarin has contributed to language shift among younger generations, while local identity remains an important factor in dialect maintenance. In conclusion, Chinese dialect variation is the result of complex interactions among social, geographical, historical-political, and identity-related factors, highlighting the need for a multidisciplinary approach to better understand the dynamics of dialect diversity in contemporary China.

KEYWORDS

Chinese dialect variation;
Sociolinguistics;
Language policy;
Language shift;
Systematic Literature Review.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi variasi dialek Tiongkok dalam perspektif sosiolinguistik. Meskipun Putonghua telah ditetapkan sebagai bahasa standar nasional, berbagai dialek seperti Yue, Min, Wu, dan Hakka masih digunakan dalam komunikasi sehari-hari dan mencerminkan keragaman linguistik serta budaya masyarakat Tiongkok. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mensintesis faktor-faktor utama yang memengaruhi variasi dialek melalui pendekatan *Systematic Literature Review (SLR)*. Artikel-artikel yang relevan dari periode 2020–2025 dikumpulkan dan dianalisis dari berbagai sumber akademik bereputasi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa variasi dialek Tiongkok dipengaruhi oleh empat faktor utama, yaitu faktor sosial yang meliputi urbanisasi, mobilitas, dan kontak bahasa; faktor geografis berupa isolasi wilayah dan kondisi topografi; faktor historis-politis yang mencakup migrasi dan kebijakan bahasa; serta faktor identitas bahasa. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa dominasi bahasa Mandarin berkontribusi terhadap pergeseran bahasa pada generasi muda, sementara identitas lokal tetap menjadi faktor penting dalam mempertahankan penggunaan dialek.

KATAKUNCI

Variasi dialek Tiongkok;
Sosiolinguistik;
Kebijakan bahasa;
Pergeseran bahasa;
Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis.

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1. Introduction

China is a country with a very high degree of dialect diversity. Although the government established Putonghua as the national standard language, various dialect groups such as Yue, Min, Wu, and Hakka continue to be used in daily life. The differences between dialects are not only evident in phonological aspects but also encompass variations in vocabulary, grammar, and the degree of mutual intelligibility among speakers. Research indicates that dialect usage is undergoing changes due to the increasing dominance of Mandarin and shifts in public language attitudes, particularly in urban areas (Yan et al. 2024). This condition highlights the dynamics between the standard language and local dialects within the context of modernization.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, dialect variation is influenced by various social factors, such as population mobility, social interaction, and communication environments (Romaine 2023). Rapid urbanization drives intensive language contact, giving rise to phenomena of multilingualism and code-switching in daily life (Sharmini 2024). Furthermore, younger generations tend to use Mandarin more frequently than local dialects, indicating a gradual language shift (Mei 2024). This demonstrates that social factors play a crucial role in determining dialect maintenance.

Geographical factors are primary determinants in the formation of dialect variation. China's vast territory with its diverse topography restricted inter-regional interactions in the past, triggering linguistic differentiation; studies in linguistic geography show that geographical isolation contributes to dialect distribution (Nerbonne, Heeringa, and Kleiweg 1999). Additionally, historical and political factors such as migration and language policies—especially the promotion of Putonghua—also affect the sustainability of local dialects and can even lead to their decline (Zhang and Chen 2024). This indicates a close relationship between power, language policy, and the maintenance of dialect variation.

Furthermore, language identity is also an important aspect in maintaining dialect variation. Dialects function not only as tools of communication but also as symbols of cultural identity and social belonging. Speakers with a strong attachment to local identity tend to maintain dialect usage in their daily lives. Conversely, individuals more exposed to global environments tend to shift toward the standard language. Research shows that individual language proficiency and language attitudes also influence the continuous use of dialects (Jiao and Gnevshva 2022).

Although various studies have discussed Chinese dialect variation from social, geographical, and language policy perspectives, most research remains partial and focuses on a single specific aspect, thus failing to produce a comprehensive analysis. Previous studies also indicate that research on Chinese dialects is still limited to specific regions, approaches, and data, making the findings largely contextual and not yet fully

integrated (Huang et al. 2024). Moreover, research in sociolinguistics continues to use diverse approaches and methods, necessitating a systematic synthesis of studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding (Li et al. 2024). Therefore, this study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify and integrate the various factors influencing Chinese dialect variation in a more systematic, structured, and multidisciplinary manner.

While the reviewed studies consistently highlight the prominence of social and geographical determinants, a critical comparison reveals both convergence and divergence in how these factors drive dialect evolution. Our findings confirm classic sociolinguistic theories regarding the impact of mobility on language contact, yet they extend these theories by demonstrating how the digital era and computational dialectometry specifically in the Chinese context have accelerated these changes in ways previously unforeseen.

Interestingly, the literature presents a notable contradiction regarding the role of dialect diversity. While some studies (Luo & Tan, 2024) identify dialect diversity as an obstacle to urban innovation due to communication friction, others (Li & Yao, 2024) emphasize the protective role of local dialect proficiency in mitigating multidimensional poverty for rural-to-urban migrants. This divergence suggests that the 'value' of a dialect is context-dependent which acts as a barrier in high-efficiency economic environments but serves as a vital social capital in marginalized contexts. By synthesizing these perspectives, our study bridges the gap between purely linguistic views of dialect variation and broader socio-economic outcomes, suggesting that dialect maintenance is not merely an act of cultural preservation but a complex negotiation of social and economic utility in contemporary China.

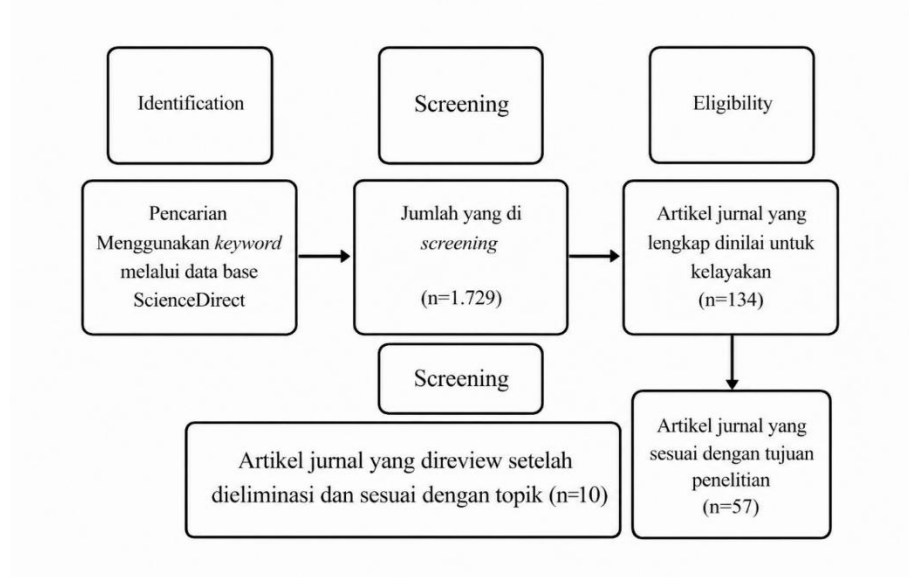
The novelty of this research lies in the use of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to systematically integrate prior findings within the context of Chinese dialect variation, which have previously tended to be studied partially and in isolation. This study aims to identify and synthesize the main factors influencing dialect variation through a multidisciplinary lens, thereby yielding a more comprehensive understanding. The expected outcome is the formulation of a structured analytical framework regarding the determining factors of dialect variation, while simultaneously providing a theoretical contribution to sociolinguistic studies and serving as a reference for future research.

2. Method

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous research relevant to Chinese dialect variation. The literature search was conducted on the ScienceDirect database using keywords such as "Chinese dialect," "Mandarin variation," and "language change," which were combined with terms

including "sociolinguistic," "geographic," and "language policy" using Boolean operators (AND and OR). The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025.

Figure 1. Literature Selection (PRISMA FLOW)



Articles were selected based on inclusion criteria that encompassed topic relevance, the quality of indexed sources, and data completeness. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, classification, and the synthesis of findings into four primary categories of factors: social, geographical, historical-political, and language identity. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and the use of credible references.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Articles

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the synthesis of the reviewed literature, four main factors were found to consistently emerge as determinants of dialect variation in China: social, geographical, historical-political, and language identity factors. These four factors do not act in isolation, but rather interact with one another to shape the complex linguistic dynamics across various regions of China.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Articles

Author(s) (Year)	Source	Research Focus	Main Findings
(LUO and TAN 2024)	Technological Forecasting & Social Change	The effect of dialect diversity on urban innovation in China.	Dialect diversity has a negative impact on urban innovation.

Author(s) (Year)	Source	Research Focus	Main Findings
(Elsevier)			
(Liu and Liles 2025)	Lingua	Comparison between Mandarin in Mainland China and Taiwan.	No differences at the speech act level.
(Liu 2025)	ScienceDirect	Phonological changes in the Xiaoling Junhua dialect due to contact with the Min dialect in Hainan.	Social status influences dialect change.
(Zhang et al. 2022)	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Analysis of phonological variations of Chinese dialects in 33 regions based on geographical distribution.	Dialects are more diverse in the southeastern regions compared to the northeast.
(Weng and Lee-Kim 2023)	Journal of Phonetics	Sound changes in Mandarin-Min bilingual speakers, specifically the loss of final stops due to language contact and structural convergence.	The deletion of final sounds occurs, followed by vowel lengthening.
(Huang et al. 2024)	Linguistics	Analysis of the geographical structure of Chinese dialects using a computational dialectometry approach based on big data from the Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects.	Chinese dialects possess a complex geographical structure influenced by migration, rivers, and mountains.
(Si, Liu, and Wang 2023)	Economic Systems	Analyzing the effect of dialect diversity on the labor income share in manufacturing companies in China.	Language policies and historical migration shape contemporary dialect variation.
(Li and Yao 2024)	Cities	Analyzing the effect of Local Dialect Proficiency (LDP) on multidimensional poverty among rural-to-urban migrants in China.	Local dialect proficiency significantly reduces multidimensional poverty among migrants.
(Jiao and Gnevsheva 2022)	Journal of Linguistic Geography	Identifying speakers' origins based on dialect proficiency in Jiangsu Province.	Dialect proficiency influences the ability to identify a speaker's origin.
(Ren and Wang 2025)	Lingua	Mandarin tone production within the framework of Global Chinese (IC, OC, EC).	Tonal variation is influenced by L1, typological distance, and social context; OC varieties are closer to IC than EC.

Author(s) (Year)	Source	Research Focus	Main Findings
(Jiang, Dong, and Liu 2024)	Computer Speech & Language	Factors causing phonological diversity in Chinese dialects as a basis for developing automatic phonemic annotation.	Dialect diversity is influenced by differences in phonetic systems (consonants, vowels, tones) and the vast number of dialect categories, thereby increasing the complexity of linguistic analysis.

3.1. Chinese Dialect Variation

Based on Table 1, Chinese dialect variation is evident in the differences in phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and tonal systems across each region. Dialects such as Yue (粤语), Min (闽语), Wu (吴语), and Hakka (客家话) possess distinct pronunciation characteristics compared to Putonghua (普通话), the national standard language. These differences result in limited mutual intelligibility among speakers of certain dialects.

Furthermore, dialect variation is also visible in the use of everyday vocabulary. For example, the word "to eat" in Putonghua is 吃饭 (chīfàn), whereas in the Cantonese dialect, it is 食饭 (sik faan). The word "no" or "not" in Putonghua is 不 (bù), while in Cantonese it is 唔 (m4). Research (Huang et al. 2024) also demonstrates that geographical distribution, migration, and social interactions contribute to the development of dialect characteristics in various regions of China. Thus, dialect variation not only highlights linguistic differences but also reflects the cultural diversity of Chinese society.

3.2. Factors Influencing Dialect Variation

Chinese dialect variation is influenced by various interrelated factors, including social, geographical, historical-political, and language identity factors. These factors lead to the emergence of differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and language use in every region of China. Therefore, categorizing these factors is necessary to understand the causes behind the formation of dialect variation more systematically.

Table 2 below presents the categorization of the factors influencing Chinese dialect variation, based on the synthesis of the various reviewed studies.

Table 2. Categorization of Factors Influencing Chinese Dialect Variation

Factor	Source	Findings
Social	(Liu and Liles 2025); (LUO and TAN 2024); (Liu 2025); (Weng	Urbanization, mobility, social interaction, and code-switching drive dialect shift toward Mandarin; younger generations tend to abandon local dialects.

	and Lee-Kim 2023)	
Geographical	(Zhang et al. 2022); (Huang et al. 2024)	Geographical isolation (mountains, rivers) triggers dialect differentiation; dialect boundaries correlate with natural geographical boundaries.
Historical- Political	(Jiang et al. 2024); (Ren and Wang 2025); (Li and Yao 2024)	Historical migration shapes the dialect map; Putonghua policies suppress the vitality of local dialects, potentially leading to extinction.
Language Identity	(Jiao & Gnevsheva 2022)	Attachment to local identity maintains dialect usage; diaspora communities actively preserve dialects as cultural symbols.

The research findings indicate that Chinese dialect variation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, this variation is formed through multidimensional interactions among social, geographical, historical-political, and language identity factors.

From a social perspective, dialects function not only as communication tools but also as markers of status and linguistic competence. Individuals with a high level of dialect proficiency tend to be able to maintain their distinct dialect characteristics (Liu 2025), while language contact in bilingual contexts drives phonological changes (Zhang et al. 2022). This demonstrates that societal social dynamics play an active role in dialect evolution.

From a geographical perspective, natural conditions have proven to be an important factor in shaping dialect diversity. Regions with geographical barriers such as mountains and rivers tend to have higher dialect variation due to limited inter-group interaction. Conversely, more open regions exhibit a higher degree of linguistic homogeneity (Huang et al. 2024).

Meanwhile, historical-political factors reveal that dialect variation is also the result of long-term processes. Historical migration brought languages to new regions and triggered contact between dialects, whereas language policies can either strengthen or reduce dialect diversity (Si et al. 2023). In a modern context, dialect diversity can even impact economic aspects, such as communication efficiency and innovation.

From the perspective of language identity, dialect variation is heavily influenced by the speaker's linguistic background. The first language (L1) and typological distance between languages determine how dialects are produced and perceived. Furthermore, differences in phonetic systems across dialects indicate that variation also stems from the internal structure of the language itself (Ren and Wang 2025).

Overall, these findings affirm that Chinese dialects are not merely linguistic phenomena, but also reflections of the interactions between social, environmental,

historical, and cultural identity factors. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach is highly necessary to comprehensively understand the dynamics of dialect variation.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Chinese dialect variation is the result of a complex interaction between social, geographical, historical-political, and language identity factors. These variations are evident in the differences in phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and tonal systems across various dialect groups, such as Yue, Min, Wu, and Hakka. Beyond serving as a tool for communication, dialects also act as a representation of the cultural and social identity of their speakers.

The results of this study demonstrate that urbanization, population mobility, language contact, and policies promoting Putonghua as the national standard language have a significant impact on the sustainability of local dialects. The dominance of Mandarin has caused a shift in dialect usage, particularly among younger generations, leading to a decline in the use of some dialects and raising concerns about potential extinction.

This research also highlights that dialect variation has impacts on social, cultural, educational, and communicative aspects. While dialect diversity can strengthen a community's cultural identity, it can also affect the effectiveness of inter-regional communication due to differences in pronunciation and vocabulary. In the context of modernization, advancements in technology, migration, and social interaction continue to influence changes in dialect variation across China.

By employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this research has successfully integrated various previous findings in a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary manner. Therefore, this study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to sociolinguistic research and serve as a valuable reference for future studies concerning Chinese dialect variation.

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