

# Research on Language Landscape and Mandarin Chinese Promotion in Rural Ethnic Areas of China

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**Abstract:** *Increasing the popularity of Mandarin Chinese and characters in ethnic areas is one of the important tasks of promoting Mandarin Chinese and characters comprehensively in the new era. Based on a three-dimensional analytical model of language landscapes, this study investigated and analyzed the representation of the standard spoken and written Chinese language in local rural language landscapes and residents' attitudes, needs, and behaviors towards signs and the standard spoken and written Chinese language in five townships in Jinchuan County, Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The results show that the national standard language has a stable dominant status in the local linguistic landscape, and that residents express acceptance and willingness to learn the standard spoken and written Chinese language in the linguistic landscape, reflecting the role of linguistic landscape in promoting the standard spoken and written Chinese language to some extent. Finally, this study explores the ways in which linguistic landscape can promote the standard spoken and written Chinese language from the perspectives of government and private investment in standardized signage, research and regulation, and cross-departmental collaboration.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnic areas; Rural language landscape; Mandarin Chinese; extension; Language learning*

## 1. Introduction

Language landscape, as an important component in the construction of social public space, was first proposed by Canadian scholars Landry & Bourhis (1997), referring to "the languages on public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, and public signs on government buildings that collectively form the language landscape of a certain territory, region, or cluster of cities".<sup>[1]</sup> As a discursive process, language landscape not only reflects the characteristics of language use but also embodies the status and power relations of languages. It can regulate people's language attitudes and behaviors, reshape language awareness, and provide references for the government to adjust language policies and construct a social language environment (Gorter & Cenoz, 2008; Kallen, 2010; Lis, 2015).<sup>[2]</sup> Language landscapes in ethnic regions of China carry rich historical and cultural information, embody unique local material and cultural characteristics, and are important manifestations of cultural landscapes and language life. They serve as a display window for language policies and planning, and they are significant carriers for the tangible and perceptible transmission of excellent Chinese language culture, influencing and shaping people's language attitudes. Against the backdrop of strong national support and promotion of the development of ethnic and rural areas, Chinese ethnic regions are gradually paying attention to and developing and utilizing language resources, exploring unique language cultures, and shaping high-quality language landscapes. By focusing on the study of rural language landscapes in ethnic regions, we can tap into the application value of language landscapes in promoting Mandarin Chinese, thereby fully leveraging and realizing their value as educational tools.

The article focuses on systematically reviewing and analyzing the specific manifestations of Mandarin in the rural language landscapes of ethnic regions, and further investigates the attitudes, perceptions, and needs of local residents regarding the use of language landscapes to learn Mandarin Chinese. Finally, it proposes feasible measures for improving the planning and construction of language landscapes in ethnic

regions to enhance the promotion of Mandarin Chinese through language landscapes. JinChuan County in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, is a key county supported by the national rural revitalization program, which has long maintained a situation of ethnic unity and harmonious stability. Therefore, studying the rural language landscape and the promotion of Mandarin Chinese in this region has significant practical implications.

## **2. Theoretical Foundation**

Trumper-Hecht (2010) posits that the study of language landscapes can be analyzed according to a three-dimensional theoretical framework, and has proposed a three-dimensional analytical model for language landscapes: the physical dimension, which refers to the actual use of different languages in public spaces; the political dimension, which concerns the impact and manipulation by national policies and dominant ideologies on the construction of language landscapes; and the experiential dimension, which involves the attitudes and perceptions of the general public towards language landscapes.<sup>[3]</sup> The physical and political dimensions are beneficial for analyzing the symbolic significance of specific language uses within language landscapes.

By confining the language landscape to the towns within ethnic minority regions, one can examine the usage of Mandarin in these areas, including its quantity, spatial distribution, and status, thereby uncovering the underlying symbolic meanings. The experiential dimension focuses on investigating the public's attitudes and perceptions towards Mandarin in the language landscape, providing practical evidence for the formulation of local language policies and planning. It also offers a referential path for the promotion and popularization of Mandarin Chinese in ethnic regions, contributing to the development of actionable practices for this purpose.

## **3. Survey Overview**

### ***3.1 Survey Area and Participants***

Jinchuan County is located on the northwest plateau of Sichuan Province, in the southwestern part of the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. It lies at the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The current permanent population of the county is approximately 60,000. The surveyed towns and townships include Lewu Town, Guanyin Bridge Town, Anning Township, Shaxi Township, and Geer Township. These areas are characterized by rich and detailed language landscape data and dense populations, making them representative and typical of towns in ethnic regions. They can, to a certain extent, showcase the true linguistic life of rural areas after poverty alleviation efforts. Through the study of this case, one can gain insight into broader trends and phenomena.

### ***3.2 Research Methods and Basic Data***

This study employed a combination of field surveys, questionnaire surveys, and interviews for data collection. The field survey was primarily used to compile an overview of the rural language landscape in the area. A total of 837 valid signs were collected during this survey. By categorizing and analyzing these signs, we gained insights into the usage of Mandarin Chinese in local rural signage.

The questionnaire surveys and interviews were mainly directed at the local population to understand their attention to signs, their attitudes towards Mandarin as presented on the signs, and their behaviors regarding using the signs to learn Mandarin. A total of 167 questionnaires were distributed, with 163 valid responses collected. The survey participants included residents of the surveyed towns, as well as people living or working in the area who are not originally from there. In terms of ethnic composition, the majority were Tibetan, followed by Han Chinese. The age distribution of respondents was concentrated between 18 and 40 years old, with some over 40 years old. Regarding educational background, there was a relatively even distribution from elementary school to junior high school, and up to associate or bachelor's degree levels.

## 4. Survey Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Analysis of the Representation of Mandarin Chinese in Language Landscapes

Language selection refers to the types and quantity of languages presented in the public space of a specific area (Duan Yuanbing, 2016).<sup>[4]</sup> According to the research framework by Ben-Rafael et al. (2004), we have categorized the collected language landscape into two major types: official signs and private signs. Official signs include house numbers, street signs, directional signs, government slogans, government announcements, and scenic area introduction boards.<sup>[5]</sup> Private signs encompass advertising billboards, posters, and shop signs. This classification facilitates a clear demonstration of the differences in language choices made by different sign installers, as detailed in Table 1.

*Table1: Differences in Language Selection between Official and Non-Official Signage*

Type	Number	Chinese	Tibetan	Chinese + Tibetan	Chinese + English	Chinese + Tibetan + English	Chinese + Tibetan + English + Others
Official Signs	700	58.43%	1.71%	11.57%	4.57%	11.00%	12.71%
Private Signs	137	13.87%	4.38%	55.47%	5.11%	15.33%	5.84%

From Table 1, it can be seen that the text on signs primarily involves Chinese, Tibetan, and English. The language selection for official signs is relatively uniform, predominantly featuring monolingual Chinese landscapes, which reflects the official recognition of the status of Mandarin Chinese. In contrast, private signs differ markedly from official ones; data show that private signs are far fewer in number compared to official signs and have a more limited range of language combinations, mainly "Chinese + Tibetan". This suggests that, apart from Chinese, private signs tend to favor ethnic scripts to highlight the identity of residents in Tibetan-populated areas.

Looking at the overall language landscape of Jinchuan County, the use and frequency of monolingual Chinese samples hold an absolute advantage, significantly surpassing those of Tibetan. Chinese appears in various types of public signs in the form of standard characters and pinyin, becoming the most visible code in the minority regions of Jinchuan County, consistent with China's policy of promoting Mandarin Chinese.

### 4.2 Public Attention to Language Landscapes

The questionnaire surveyed the local residents of Jinchuan County regarding two aspects of their attention to language landscapes: the types of language landscapes they focus on and the purposes for their attention. According to the statistical results, The types of language signs that residents pay attention to include government slogans and announcements (56.44%), as well as house numbers, street signs, and directional signs in public places (76.07%). Additionally, residents also focus on advertising billboards, posters, and shop signs (41.72%) (see Table 2).

*Table2: Types of Signage that Residents of Jinchuan County Are Concerned About (Multiple Choice)*

Option	Percentage
Billboards, Posters, Shop Signs	41.72%
Government Slogans, Government Announcements	56.44%
House Numbers, Street Signs, Directional Signs	76.07%
Scenic Spot Information Boards	47.24%
Others	7.36%

Overall, the types of language signs that residents pay attention to exhibit diversity, primarily due to the different purposes for which people focus on these signs. As shown in Table 2, residents believe that the main functions of these signs are to meet the needs of daily life. For example, street signs provide route and

destination guidance for public travel (70.89%), or residents use government announcements and bulletin boards to learn about local public policies and convenience services (63.92%). These all contribute to the convenience of daily life. In the options for this question, we included "providing a feasible way for people learning Chinese characters," and 65 people selected this option, accounting for 41.14% (see Table 3).

*Table 3: Perceived Functions of Signage by Residents of Jinchuan County (Multiple Choice)*

Function	Provide a Practical Way for People Learning Chinese Characters	Provide Route and Destination Guidance for Public Travel	Display Product Information to Meet the Daily Needs of the Public	Promote Local Cultural Characteristics and Customs	Publicize Local Public Policies and Civic Services	Indicate Safety Precautions	Other
Number of People	65	112	93	91	101	71	5
Percentage	41.14%	70.89%	58.86%	57.59%	63.92%	44.94%	3.16%

Clearly, the language landscape has a significant impact on the residents of Jinchuan County. The attention residents pay to language landscapes is high, primarily due to their informational function, which meets the daily need for information acquisition. However, it also plays a certain auxiliary role in learning the national common language. Guiding others to pay attention to the language landscapes around them in daily life can enhance their awareness of the standard spoken and written Chinese language in the social environment.

#### **4.3 Public Attitudes and Needs Regarding Mandarin Chinese in Language Landscapes**

Language attitudes reflect a group's recognition, evaluation, and behavioral tendencies towards a specific language. The use of language signs to learn and master Mandarin Chinese is directly related to the public's attitude toward the Chinese language on these signs. To understand the public's attitude towards Chinese on signs, we conducted a survey from three aspects: evaluation, willingness, and needs. First, to reflect respondents' direct evaluation of Chinese on signs, the questionnaire included three options—"very helpful," "somewhat helpful," and "not helpful"—to gauge their attitudes towards "the assistance language signs provide for learning Chinese." As shown in Table 4, 65.52% of respondents believe that language landscapes are very helpful for learning Mandarin Chinese, while 29.89% find them somewhat helpful. This indicates that more than half of the respondents recognize the educational function of language signs.

*Table 4: Residents' Perception of the Role of Language Landscape in Learning the National Common Language and Script*

	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not Helpful
Number of People	49	107	7
Percentage	29.89%	65.52%	4.59%

Second, to reflect respondents' willingness to learn Mandarin Chinese through language signs, the questionnaire included three options—"very willing," "somewhat willing," and "not willing"—to inquire about residents' willingness to learn Chinese via language signs and their willingness to guide others to pay attention to language signs for learning Chinese. 48.28% of respondents expressed a very strong willingness to learn Mandarin Chinese through language signs, while 45.98% indicated a strong willingness. Regarding guiding others to pay attention to language signs for learning Chinese, 55.21% of respondents expressed a very strong willingness, and 31.29% indicated a strong willingness (see Table 5). From this, it is evident that residents of Jinchuan County have a high level of recognition for language signs and demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning Mandarin Chinese. This makes the promotion of the national common language

through language landscapes feasible.

*Table 5: Willingness to Learn Mandarin Chinese through Language Landscape*

	Willingness of Residents to Learn Mandarin Chinese through Language Landscape	Willingness of Residents to Guide Others to Pay Attention to Language Landscape for Learning Mandarin Chinese
Very Strong	48.28%	55.21%
Strong	45.98%	31.29%
No Willingness	5.74%	13.5%

In conclusion, the national common language, which has the widest application in social life, exhibits a high degree of orientation and demand in Jinchuan County. The local residents' recognition and awareness of learning Chinese from language signs to some extent reflect the implementation of the government's policies for promoting the national common language in ethnic minority regions. It also demonstrates that Jinchuan County has a favorable environment for the learning and promotion of the national common language.

#### **4.4 Public Use of Language Landscapes to Learn Mandarin Chinese**

Undoubtedly, the quantity of language input is a critical factor affecting the effectiveness of language learning and acquisition; substantial input of the target language material is one of the core elements of language learning (Shang Guowen, 2017).<sup>[6]</sup> This suggests that when learners are in an environment rich in language input, it facilitates language acquisition and enhances language proficiency. People can consciously and informally receive language information through the surrounding language landscape, thereby acquiring language knowledge and skills. This type of behavior is considered incidental language learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).<sup>[5]</sup> To understand whether residents have similar experiences and whether they use language landscapes to learn the Mandarin Chinese, the questionnaire surveyed three aspects: "experience of using signs to learn Chinese characters," "types of text on the signs they read," and "understanding and application of sign content." The survey results show that 52.76% of the respondents have used the content on signs to learn Mandarin Chinese (see Table 6). This indicates that some residents do engage in learning Mandarin Chinese by leveraging their surroundings, although their primary awareness of this learning method is not yet strong.

*Table 6: Experience of Jinchuan County Residents in Learning Mandarin Chinese with the Help of Signage Experience*

	Had a Long Period of Experience	Had a Short Period of Experience	No Experience in This Aspect
Number of People	26	60	77
Percentage	15.95%	36.81%	47.24%

The understanding of sign content and the ability to identify errors in the written text on signs can reflect a reader's pragmatic competence. Language landscapes can serve as a resource for the development of learners' pragmatic abilities. According to the survey results, 26.99% of respondents can fully understand the signs around them, while 58.28% mostly understand the surrounding signs (see Table 7). Regarding the identification of errors in signs, the majority of people (44.79%) occasionally notice mistakes, which is roughly equal to those who do not notice any errors (see Table 8).

*Table 7: Understanding of the Content of Surrounding Signage*

	Fully Understand	Mostly Understand	Partially Understand	Do Not Understand
Number of People	44	95	22	2

Percentage	26.99%	58.28%	13.5%	1.23%
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Table 8: Situations of Finding Errors in the Writing of Chinese and Script on Signage

	Frequently	Occasionally	No Errors Found
Number of People	16	73	74
Percentage	9.81%	44.79%	45.4%

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Language landscapes, as a highly visible form of language expression, play an indispensable role in the promotion of Mandarin. In the rural areas of Jinchuan County, signs primarily using the national common language serve as a tangible manifestation of consolidating the primary status of Mandarin Chinese, implementing the standard spoken and written Chinese language Law, and promoting the popularization of Mandarin Chinese. The survey on local residents' attitudes, perceptions, and needs regarding Mandarin Chinese in the language landscape reflects that the residents of Jinchuan County maintain a positive attitude towards using the local language landscape to learn Mandarin Chinese, and many have experience and willingness to do so. This provides valuable reference for the local government's efforts to promote Mandarin Chinese through language landscapes.

Therefore, in the process of promoting the standard spoken and written Chinese language, we should fully leverage the function of language landscapes to enhance public awareness and acceptance of Mandarin. Specifically, this can be achieved through the following measures:

### 5.1 Increase Investment in Official Signage with Mandarin

Official signage is one of the most common forms of language landscapes in both urban and rural public spaces. The government should establish standards for Mandarin signage to ensure uniformity and standardization of Mandarin Chinese content on signs. This not only facilitates public understanding and learning but also enhances the image and status of Mandarin Chinese in public settings. By increasing the investment in Mandarin Chinese content on official signs in public spaces, expanding their coverage and quantity, residents will have more opportunities to encounter and learn Mandarin Chinese in their daily lives.

To improve the readability and comprehensibility of sign content, emphasis should be placed on text layout, font selection, and coordination with symbols when designing and producing Mandarin Chinese content for signs. The goal is to make the content concise, clear, and easy to understand. Additionally, attention should be given to cultural heritage and linguistic diversity in the Mandarin Chinese content of signs. When creating such content, local cultural and linguistic characteristics should be integrated to preserve the uniqueness of the region while enhancing the acceptance and recognition of Mandarin Chinese.

With the development of digital technology, digital signage has become an important form of Mandarin Chinese content in public spaces. In the promotion of Mandarin Chinese, digital signage can also play a significant role. Digital signs offer multiple interactive features, such as images and voice interaction, and can be remotely controlled and updated via the internet.

### 5.2 Encouraging Private Enterprises and Individuals to Use Mandarin Chinese Signs

Promoting Mandarin Chinese involves encouraging private enterprises and individuals to use Mandarin signs, which is a crucial initiative. The government should actively guide and support private enterprises and individuals in adopting Mandarin signs by providing technical assistance and sign design services. This support can help businesses and individuals create and produce standardized Mandarin Chinese signs that are readable, practical, and aesthetically pleasing. Additionally, it is important to encourage industry associations and chambers of commerce to promote the standardization and normalization of Mandarin

signs within their sectors, thereby enhancing the quality and credibility of the signs. Industry standards and guidelines should be established, and training and exchange activities organized to disseminate advanced techniques in Mandarin Chinese sign design and production, improving both the design quality and efficiency. Tailored designs for different regions and contexts can also enhance the visual appeal and recognizability of Mandarin Chinese signs. For instance, in cultural venues such as tourist attractions, parks, and museums, traditional Chinese characters can be used to reflect cultural heritage and historical depth. In urban public spaces like commercial streets, squares, and subway stations, modern Chinese character designs can better meet contemporary urban needs.

### ***5.3 Strengthening Research and Regulation of Language Landscapes***

Strengthening research and regulation of language landscapes is a necessary measure for promoting the national common language and an important step in protecting and preserving the languages and cultures of all ethnic groups. Proper management and regulation of language landscapes can better facilitate the diverse development and inheritance of ethnic cultures, ensure the standardization and uniformity of Chinese, and prevent damage to ethnic languages and cultures. It is essential to conduct in-depth research on the trends, characteristics, and patterns of language landscape development, exploring the aesthetic value and cultural connotations of Chinese characters in these landscapes. Regular assessments and monitoring of language landscapes should be conducted to identify issues and areas for improvement, with subsequent enhancements and adjustments made accordingly. Standards and guidelines specific to language landscapes should be formulated, specifying design requirements, aesthetic standards, and usage norms, including rules for character selection, layout, and color coordination. A corresponding management mechanism and regulatory system should be established, with regulations and management policies for language landscapes to standardize their design, use, and maintenance. Public participation and professional oversight should be encouraged to foster collaboration and communication between the public and experts, jointly advancing the development and application of Mandarin Chinese in language landscapes. Where necessary, stricter enforcement and penalties for non-compliance can be implemented to maintain the standardization and uniformity of Chinese characters in language landscapes.

### ***5.4 Strengthening Interdepartmental Cooperation and Coordination***

To achieve the goal of promoting Mandarin Chinese, it is essential to fully enhance collaboration among departments such as education, culture, and tourism in the construction of language landscapes. This will create a more favorable social environment for the promotion of Mandarin Chinese. The education department should leverage its strengths by setting up signs and billboards in schools and public places, ensuring the standardization and proper use of Chinese characters and pinyin, helping students better master Mandarin Chinese. At the same time, it should provide guidance and supervision in the construction of language landscapes to ensure that all developments meet the required standards. The culture department should focus on the dissemination of Chinese culture, providing richer cultural content for language landscape construction. For example, informational boards and posters about history, culture, traditional cuisine, and other aspects can be set up in public spaces, closely integrating Mandarin Chinese with Chinese culture, thereby increasing public recognition and acceptance of Mandarin Chinese. The tourism department should utilize tourism resources to promote the construction of language landscapes. Signs and billboards should be placed in tourist attractions and transportation hubs to provide more convenient services for visitors. Tourism festivals and events can also be used to integrate traditional and local cultures, allowing tourists to naturally encounter and learn the national common language during their travels.

## **6. Summary**

This study conducted an empirical investigation into the language landscapes of five townships in Jinchuan County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, revealing the significant role of language landscapes in the promotion of Mandarin Chinese. The research has limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a somewhat narrow perspective. Future research could expand the scope to explore the language landscapes of other ethnic minority regions in greater depth. From the perspective of survey participants, future studies could examine the differences in cognition, attitudes, and

behaviors towards language landscapes and Mandarin Chinese among people with different social backgrounds, age groups, and educational levels, providing a more comprehensive research perspective. Going forward, we must continue to monitor the development of language landscapes in ethnic minority regions and implement more effective measures to promote Mandarin Chinese, fostering language exchange and integration among different ethnic groups, and achieving cultural prosperity and social harmony in the country.

### **Fund project**

\*This paper was supported by the Tibetan-Qiang-Yi Cultural Research Institute of Southwest University for Nationalities under the project "Research on Language Landscape and the Promotion of National Common Language and Script in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor of Western Sichuan" (Project No. ZQY2024ZX04).

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