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THE FORMATION OF PUTONGHUA AS CHINA'S COMMON NATIONAL LANGUAGE: HISTORY, POLICY, AND LEGAL REGULATION

Abstract: *this article examines the formation of Putonghua as China's primary language and its legislative entrenchment under the 2026 Law. Based on a comparative analysis of academic texts and legal documents (including the 2000 and 2026 laws), the findings suggest that Putonghua is presented as an instrument of national consolidation, while dialects appear positioned in a secondary role. Given the limited scope of this study, conclusions remain tentative. The analysis suggests a continuing trend toward a predominantly monolingual public sphere, with dialects potentially becoming confined to archival or informal domains, though this trajectory depends on future policy choices.*

Keywords: *Putonghua, language policy, dialects, China, 2026 language law, national consolidation, linguistic standardization.*

The People's Republic of China is one of the world's most linguistically complex nations. Hundreds of dialects and numerous minority languages are spoken across the country. For centuries, people spoke different dialects while sharing a common written language (文言wenyan). However, creating a single spoken language that everyone could understand remained a challenge until the 20th century. Today, Putonghua is based on Beijing pronunciation and Northern dialect grammar and serves in official discourse as a tool for national unity and as a means to strengthen the «Chinese national community» (铸牢中华民族共同体意识). This article traces Putonghua's formation from the 1950s to the 2026 Law, analyzes the evolution of language policy, and assesses the relationship between Putonghua and dialect preservation. The methods employed include normative document analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative legal analysis.

Before the mid-20th century, China did not have a single common spoken language. Educated people could understand the written language wenyan, but spoken dialects were mutually unintelligible across regions. As Chen Hong (1997) notes, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods there existed «different spoken sounds and different written forms» (言语异声, 文字异形) [4]. The Qin dynasty introduced the «same writing system» policy (书同文), but no similar policy existed for speech. Later, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, «official speech» (官话) emerged among officials, and Emperor Yongzheng ordered that officials «should no longer speak local dialects at court» (不得仍前习乡音). However, this rule applied only to officials. Before 1949, the lack of a common spoken language remained a practical problem for government, trade, and education.

After the PRC's founding in 1949, linguistic unification gained new ideological significance. The term 国语 (national language) was rejected as associated with the previous regime. Instead, 普通话 («common speech») was adopted, emphasizing its democratic character. The journal Yuwen Xuexi (1951–1960) became an instrument of the Language Standardization Movement [3]. In official discourse at the time, dialects

were viewed as potential obstacles to national unity, socialist construction, and mass literac. The underlying ideology was that a unified socialist nation required a unified language.

In 1955, after two national meetings, China officially defined Putonghua. The 1956 government directive gave the full definition: Putonghua uses Beijing pronunciation, Northern dialects as its base, and modern Chinese literature as its grammar standard. During the 1950s and 1960s, the government built systems for teaching and promoting Putonghua. Dialects were not banned, but they were treated as less modern, something that people were encouraged to move away from.

The evolution of language policy is not merely a sequence of stages but a fundamental shift in ideologies. Three main stages can be identified. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Putonghua was recommended but not required. From 1982 to 2000, the 1982 Constitution included «the state promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua» (Article 19), transforming promotion from guidance to constitutional norm. From 2000 to 2026, the 2000 Law gave Putonghua legal status as a «common language,» and the 2026 Law elevated this to «legislatively established national language» (法定全国通用的语言文字), making proficiency a marker of loyalty and belonging. Putonghua is no longer just a communication tool, it has become a constitutive element of citizenship. The state has moved from «encouraging» to «requiring,» from «standardizing» to «institutionalizing.» [7][2].

Within current policy discourse, Putonghua is presented not only as a means of communication but also as an important element of national integration. In official documents, language proficiency is associated with social integration and civic belonging. However, claims that Putonghua has become a «constitutive element of citizenship» or a «marker of loyalty» should be understood as analytical interpretations rather than explicit legal provisions. The 2026 Law does not formally link language proficiency to citizenship status.

Key implementation mechanisms include the education system, where Putonghua is the only language of instruction: mass media, with CCTV and state radio broadcasting exclusively in Putonghua, the civil service, which requires mandatory PSC certification, and the PSC testing system, created in 1994 and mandatory for teachers, announcers, and civil servants [6]..

Wang Yalan and Wang Hui (2025) propose a framework that may be useful for studying China's language policy. According to their analysis, research in this field appears to be moving from an early stage to a more developed one, with identified issues including a lack of strong theoretical foundations and limited methodological diversity. Their framework consists of three components: (1) what to study (practices, theories, real-world use), (2) what standpoint to take (Chinese perspective, global outlook, humanistic values), and (3) how to study it (investigative, comparative, interdisciplinary methods). Applying this framework to Putonghua policy suggests that China's approach is significantly shaped by its own national perspective, wherein a common language is viewed as a means of unifying the country. It may also be observed that research to date has relied primarily on document analysis and qualitative methods. [1].

China's dialectal diversity is considerable: ten major groups, with Northern dialects spoken by about 70% of the population and nine southern groups including Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Min, and Hakka. Some researchers have noted that differences between certain dialect groups are comparable to those between Slavic or Romance languages.

Both the 2000 and 2026 laws do not prohibit dialects but strictly limit their legal use to four exceptions: (1) state authorities when necessary, (2) mass media with special permission, (3) artistic expression, and (4) scientific or educational purposes. Outside these, Putonghua is mandatory.

A 2026 Shandong University dissertation exemplifies contemporary academic discourse on dialect protection. The author argues for active dialect protection as intangible cultural heritage, proposing systematic resources: audio and video recordings of older speakers, electronic corpora, digital dictionaries, and educational

platforms. The research team conducted fieldwork in Qingzhou in February 2026, collecting speech samples from speakers aged 60-80. This represents a «documentation» approach - preserving dialects in archives rather than maintaining them as living speech.

Empirical research on dialect vitality suggests a generational shift: urban youth often understand their grandparents' dialect but no longer speak it actively [9][11]. However, the rate of language shift varies significantly by region and dialect group, and generalizations require caution.

Despite formal legal balance, tensions still exist. Some sociolinguistic studies indicate that dialects are sometimes perceived as markers of lower educational status in certain contexts [12]. «Dialect tokens» - informal punishments for using dialect words in schools have been reported in some regions, though their prevalence is not systematically documented. There is evidence of what might be called hidden marginalization of dialects: not through direct prohibition, but through systematic neglect, stigmatization in certain institutional settings, and the absence of positive institutional support. The «balance» in the law is asymmetrical: Putonghua receives all institutional support, while dialects receive only permission to exist in narrow exceptions. The Shandong University project reflects a «salvage» paradigm - preserving what is disappearing rather than preventing disappearance. This might be characterized as conservation rather than revitalization, though such labels remain analytical. [5].

The 2026 Law (officially the Law of the People's Republic of China on the National Common Language and Script (2025 Revision)) was adopted on December 27, 2025, by the 19th Session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress and took effect on January 1, 2026.

Table 1. Comparison of the 2000 and 2026 Laws.

Aspect	2000 Law	2026 Law
Legal status	Putonghua is the national common language	Putonghua is the «legally established» (法定) national language, giving it a stronger, entrenched status
Citizens' rights	Citizens may learn and use Putonghua	Citizens have the right to learn and use Putonghua and no one may block this right
Promotion	Encouraged use but had no special annual event	Creates an annual Putonghua Promotion Week in the third week of September
Digital environment	No regulation of online content	Requires online content, video games, and streaming platforms to use Putonghua by default
Legal liability	Very weak enforcement with no real penalties	Clear punishments: fines for using dialects in official records, penalties for blocking Putonghua in schools, and fines or license cancellation for media that criticizes Putonghua

(compiled by the author based on: 中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法 (2000)[7], 中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法 (2025年修订)[2]).

The 2026 Law fits into a broader political context: completing China's «unified linguistic space» [10]. Linguistically, it marks a continuation of the trend from promotion toward normative entrenchment. Politically, within official discourse, Putonghua is presented as a constitutive feature of Chinese national identity, and proficiency is associated with social integration and civic belonging. The legislative explanation explicitly states: «Promoting the popularization of the national common

language and script concerns national unity and ethnic solidarity» (NPC Education, Science, Culture and Public Health Committee, 2025) [8].

Based on the analyzed materials, one possible trajectory is a gradual movement toward a predominantly monolingual public sphere in China, with dialects potentially becoming confined to archival domains (such as recordings, dictionaries, and corpora). If such a trajectory were to continue, it might be characterized as conservation rather than revitalization. However, alternative scenarios cannot be ruled out, for example, localized dialect revitalization movements or future policy reversals. These possibilities remain speculative at this stage. Further research, drawing on broader empirical data, would be needed to explore these hypotheses more fully.

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