



“Fangyan is a necessity of my child’s life”: navigating language ideologies and family language planning in urban Chinese families

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Abstract

Rapid industrialization and globalization have intensified the complex dynamics between dominant languages and regional dialects (*fangyans*), giving rise to significant challenges for linguistic diversity and language policy. Situated in the Chinese context, this paper explores the ways in which middle-class parents’ language ideologies and beliefs about Putonghua, fangyans, and English influence their family language planning and decision-making processes of Chinese families. Data were collected from 18 families through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and recorded conversations during family visit, as well as two focus groups of parents conducted online. The findings reveal that parents view English as a valuable investment for enhancing their children’s academic and professional prospects, while fangyans are seen as vital for fostering familial bonds and preserving cultural identity. Putonghua is regarded as a key tool for professional mobility, both domestically and internationally, in the foreseeable future. The study highlights parents’ favorable attitudes towards fostering multilingual competence in their children with the association of improved career opportunities, professional mobility, and educational advantages. The findings reveal a critical disconnect marked by parents’ increasing investment in children’s multilingualism amidst a significant policy vacuum. This highlights the complex negotiation of ideologies and resources inherent in family language management. This paper thus calls for policy support at both national and community levels to empower parents with practical strategies for language planning and practice for more effective investment in children’s multilingual repertoires.

Keywords Family language planning · Language ideologies · Language beliefs · Language practices · Parental involvement

Introduction

Family language policy (FLP) plays a pivotal role in children's language development (Curdts-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; McCarty & May, 2017). FLP has traditionally examined three core components within multilingual households: language management strategies, prevailing language ideologies, and everyday language practices, viewing these as fundamental to understanding heritage language preservation (Spolsky, 2012). Parents' decisions about which measures should be implemented to provide affordances and constraints in facilitating and limiting their children's language development, namely, parental agency, "gives priority to social prestige, educational empowerment and socioeconomic gains" (Curdts-Christiansen, 2016, p. 695). To be more specific, parental ideologies impact their family language decisions about which language(s) to practice, promote, or abandon (Mirvahedi & Hosseini, 2023; Shalley & Eisenclas, 2020). These decisions often reflect broader societal ideologies, as well as parental beliefs about the role of language in social, educational, and economic success (Curdts-Christiansen, 2016; Fang & Yao, 2025; Johnson & Johnson, 2015).

Families are situated within dynamic social systems in which parents are the primary agents responsible for providing and maintaining linguistic input. The home domain, as an intimate space where linguistic practices are formed, offers unique insights into how families navigate the complexities of multilingualism, language prestige, and cultural identity (Curdts-Christiansen, 2022; Huang & Fang, 2024). Socioeconomic status (SES) shapes parental approaches to English learning at home, with higher-SES families prioritizing global mobility through immersive bilingual investment while lower-SES families adapt strategies towards academic success and local opportunities due to disparities in economic, social, cultural, and linguistic capital (Wang & Liddicoat, 2026). Multilingual families experience conflicting language ideologies shaped by societal norms and personal experiences, resulting in tensions between declared beliefs and actual language use that challenge children's multilingual identity development (Reichmuth, 2024). These disparities reflect broader sociolinguistic inequalities, where access to linguistic resources reinforces existing power hierarchies and perpetuates divergent language socialization trajectories. Parental involvement in language planning is crucial for fostering multilingual competence in children, especially in increasingly globalized societies where linguistic resources can enhance professional mobility and academic success (Curdts-Christiansen & Gao, 2021). This prioritization underscores the powerful role that parents play as language managers within the family: They determine the linguistic environment, which significantly impacts their children's language development with regard to conscious involvement and investment (King et al., 2008; Macalister & Mirvahedi, 2017).

In the case of urban families in Guangdong province of China, the intersection of Putonghua (Standard Chinese), regional dialects (*fangyans*), and English represents a particularly complex and dynamic language landscape (Shan & Li, 2018). Putonghua, as the national lingua franca in China, is increasingly perceived as essential for social and professional mobility. English, as an international language, is viewed as a key tool for global competitiveness and career advancement. Regional dialects (*fangyans*), while often seen as less prestigious in formal contexts, hold significant cultural

value within families and local communities (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). Consequently, parents in Guangdong face the challenge of balancing linguistic priorities in ways that simultaneously promote their children's future success while preserving cultural heritage and familial bonds. Given that urban families typically have greater access to educational resources, cultural capital, and exposure to English, examining their family language ideologies offers critical insights into the complex interplay of language management strategies in this region. Drawing on Spolsky's (2004) language policy model, this study explores how urban families negotiate competing linguistic demands in their language planning.

Despite its importance, the impact of parental ideologies on family language management in this context remains understudied. The dynamic language practices of urban families in southern China, with their complex considerations of linguistic prestige, cultural identity, and socioeconomic aspirations, warrant further exploration (Gao & Zeng, 2021; Yang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). Understanding how parents in this region navigate the competing demands of language use and policy, as well as how parents' decisions shape their children's language development, is crucial for developing more nuanced and context-specific insights into family language management practices (Fang & Yao, 2025; Palviainen & Boyd, 2013).

Literature review

Family language policy and fangyan dilemma in China

FLP is defined as "explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members" (King et al., 2008, p. 907); it refers to the intentional and unintentional planning of language use and literacy practices within familial settings, encompassing everyday interactions, underlying language ideologies and beliefs, as well as the objectives and strategies employed to influence language development and learning trajectories (Smith-Christmas, 2016; Spolsky, 2012). FLP plays a critical role in language maintenance and transmission in multilingual contexts, particularly within the Chinese sociocultural landscape, where the linguistic environment is shaped by the dominance of Putonghua and the presence of various regional dialects (fangyans). That is to say, FLP in China is particularly complex due to the diverse linguistic landscape and the sociopolitical emphasis on Putonghua as the national language (Zheng & Mei, 2021). Previous studies have highlighted the influence of macro-level language policies on micro-level family practices, indicating that families often navigate their language choices in response to governmental regulations and societal expectations (Fang & Yao, 2025; Gao & Zeng, 2021; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). Therefore, FLP is crucial to the intergenerational transmission of language and culture, particularly in a society where state-level language policies favor Putonghua (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Fang & Yao, 2025).

In recent years, studies have shown that FLP is influenced by various socioeconomic factors, including migration patterns and parental involvement (Crump, 2017; Liu & Bray, 2022; Wang & Liddicoat, 2026). Parents often negotiate between maintaining local dialects and adhering to the national language policy (Zheng & Mei,

2021). For instance, parental agency is exercised through conscious decision-making regarding the linguistic environment provided for children, highlighting the complex interplay between societal expectations and family dynamics (Peng & Wan, 2025; Smith-Christmas, 2022). Internal migrant families often negotiate complex language practices that reflect their unique habitus, capital, and social fields, leading to diverse outcomes in language acquisition and maintenance (Huang & Funoi, 2024; Liang & Shin, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, the interplay between state language policies and familial decisions significantly shapes children's linguistic environments, underscoring the importance of understanding FLP in the context of broader societal changes (Huang & Fang, 2024).

The fangyan dilemma in China is characterized by the struggle to maintain regional fangyans and by challenges related to balancing the use of multiple languages in the face of growing dominance by Putonghua and foreign languages (e.g., English). Although fangyans carry cultural and historical significance, their status is increasingly influenced by societal shifts that prioritize Putonghua (Chen & Liu, 2026; Gao & Zeng, 2021). Previous studies have revealed that many families, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, are aware of fangyans' diminishing vitality and wish to preserve these dialects (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Huang & Fang, 2024). However, the linguistic environment often favors Putonghua, resulting in a lack of active language transmission at home. As Peng and Wan (2025) argued, parents often find themselves in a difficult position, balancing the need to equip their children with valuable resources for future success while fostering a connection to their cultural identity through fangyans.

Families often struggle to maintain their heritage languages while promoting proficiency in Putonghua and English (Gao, 2020; Liang & Shin, 2021). This tension is exacerbated by societal pressures and educational demands, leading to concerns over language loss and cultural identity (Huang & Fang, 2024). Moreover, the challenge of navigating the expectations of state language policies alongside familial aspirations creates a complex environment for language planning and practice within families (Duff, 2020; Fang & Hu, 2025). Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural dynamics at play and the development of supportive resources that families can utilize to effectively manage their language use.

English learning in families in China

A fuller engagement with China's language policy trajectory would provide an important foundation for understanding FLP and everyday language practices. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the strong promotion of Putonghua has shaped language use across institutional and home domains. Following the Reform and Opening-up policy after 1978, increased mobility and globalization intensified contact with global languages, particularly English, while also reshaping how families make language-related decisions (Gao & Zheng, 2019; Zhou & Sun, 2004). More recent research highlights how families actively negotiate state policies alongside local identities and multilingual realities with a more cosmopolitan flexible and situated language use (Curdt-Christiansen & Gao, 2021; Huang & Fang, 2024; Shen, 2016). Within this evolving landscape, English is widely perceived as a key resource

for social mobility and educational success (Qi, 2016), shaping parental aspirations and investment in children's language development (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). For many urban families in China, learning English has become an important priority. English is widely seen as a key to academic success, better career prospects, and upward social mobility in an increasingly globalized world (Gao & Zheng, 2019; Kramsch, 2020). As a result, parents often face difficult choices when planning their children's language learning, especially when trying to balance the promotion of Putonghua with the desire to develop English skills (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). Even though national policies may restrict early English instruction, many families continue to invest heavily in English education, a trend that also raises concerns about unequal access to learning resources across socioeconomic groups (Curdt-Christiansen & Gao, 2021; Sah & Fang, 2025). Urban middle-class parents often prioritize English, viewing it as essential for their children's future, and parental beliefs and involvement play an important role in shaping children's language learning. Many families therefore invest in private tutoring, extracurricular classes, and English-language media at home (Butler, 2014; Peng & Wan, 2025). While these efforts reflect strong commitment, they can also place pressure on children and raise concerns about emotional well-being (Zheng & Mei, 2021). At the same time, access to quality English learning opportunities remains uneven. Higher-SES families are better positioned to afford such resources, whereas lower-SES families often face constraints, contributing to unequal language learning outcomes (Butler & Le, 2018; Wang & Liddicoat, 2026). These disparities are further intensified when parents have limited English proficiency and rely heavily on shadow education, which may reduce direct parental engagement in children's learning (Liang & Shin, 2021; Liu & Bray, 2022).

Compounding these issues are conflicting macro-level policies, such as those that discourage early English instruction in childhood education settings, which add an additional layer of complexity to family language planning (Smith-Christmas, 2016; Zheng & Mei, 2021). These structural limitations, coupled with the pressures of maintaining a balance between Putonghua and English in the home, create a complex landscape for language planning within urban Chinese families. The interplay between familial aspirations for multilingualism and the socioeconomic and policy constraints they face shapes the way in which English learning is approached and implemented in these households (Fang & Yao, 2025). Thus, while English remains a priority, the systemic pressures and personal limitations parents encounter can hinder effective language education, creating significant stumbling blocks to achieving the desired linguistic outcomes.

Despite extensive research on English learning, FLP, and parental involvement in China (Fang & Yao, 2025; Huang & Fang, 2024; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021), existing studies have largely examined these issues through the lenses of language acquisition, socioeconomic stratification, or policy compliance. Much less attention has been paid to how urban parents actively negotiate and prioritize multiple linguistic resources, including fangyans, Putonghua, and English, as part of everyday family language planning. In particular, parents are rarely conceptualized as reflexive agents whose language ideologies shape grassroots language policy within the home. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how parental beliefs and perceived

linguistic values inform family language decisions and practices in urban Chinese households. Working with 18 families in Guangdong province, this study explores how parental ideologies and beliefs shape linguistic involvement in their children's language practices, with a particular focus on language decisions and planning activities within urban families in Guangdong province, China. The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the parents' attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies associated with learning fangyans, Putonghua and English in the home domains?
2. How do parental ideological factors and their perceived values about different linguistic resources shape their children's language planning activities in the family domains?

Methodology

The participating families

This study was conducted in an urban city in Guangdong Province, where Putonghua, English, and multiple fangyans are used in everyday life. The first author initially approached parent participants at her own children's school parents' meetings, and these participants subsequently referred acquaintances through both online and offline networks. Additional participants were recruited through personal networks and local schools. The final sample comprised 18 urban middle-class families. This sample size was determined to balance depth and diversity, allowing for detailed within-case analysis while enabling systematic cross-case comparison. The number of families was sufficient to capture meaningful variation in parental education, occupational background, engagement with schooling, and orientations towards fangyan maintenance and dominant language acquisition, while also allowing patterns to recur across cases. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point additional cases no longer generated substantively new insights.

These 18 participating families with children aged from 3 to 12 years (from K1 in kindergarten to Grade 6 in primary school) are predominantly well-educated and categorized as middle-class (see Table 1), as determined by their SES, which was assessed based on income level, profession, educational attainment, and property ownership. Specifically, each of the parents reported an average monthly income exceeding 10,000 RMB, and all owned at least two urban properties. In terms of English, all participating parents had some degree of English proficiency: Some had passed College English Test (CET) Bands 4 and 6, some had passed Test for English Majors (TEM) Bands 4 and 8, and some had obtained an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.5 or higher. All parents had received formal English education from primary school to university. All children were born in the cities and predominantly spoke Putonghua.

Table 1 Information of the participatory families

Family	Education attainment		Profession	Languages/Fangyans used at home	Number of children	Age of children	
1	F1	Master	Civil Servant	Cantonese,	2	C1	12
	M1	PhD	University Lecturer	Putonghua		C2	6
2	F2	Bachelor	CEO	Cantonese,	1	C1	5
	M2	Bachelor	HR	Putonghua			
3	F3	Bachelor	Senior Manager	Teochew, Putonghua	2	C1	8
	M3	PhD	University Lecturer			C2	4
4	F4	Bachelor	Teacher	Cantonese,	2	C1	12
	M4	Bachelor	Teacher	Putonghua		C2	7
5	F5	Bachelor	HR	Hokkien, Putonghua	1	C1	8
	M5	Bachelor	Teacher				
6	F6	Master	CFO	Hokkien, Hunan	2	C1	12
	M6	PhD	University Lecturer	fangyan, Putonghua		C2	7
7	F7	Bachelor	Civil Servant	Huazhou fangyan,	2	C1	8
	M7	Bachelor	Teacher	Putonghua		C2	3
8	F8	Master	Civil Servant	Teochew, Putonghua	1	C1	4
	M8	PhD	Manager				
9	F9	Bachelor	Engineer	Teochew, Putonghua	1	C1	8
	M9	PhD	Marketing Manager				
10	F10	Bachelor	Banker	Jiangmen fangyan	2	C1	7
	M10	Bachelor	Civil Servant	Putonghua		C2	4
11	F11	PhD	Engineer	Changsha fangyan,	1	C1	12
	M11	PhD	University Lecturer	Putonghua			
12	F12	Bachelor	Engineer	Huizhou fangyan,	1	C1	4
	M12	Bachelor	Manager	Putonghua			
13	F13	Bachelor	Designer	Cantonese,	1	C1	8
	M13	Bachelor	HR	Putonghua			
14	F14	Master	Lawyer	Zhongshan fangyan,	1	C1	3
	M14	Bachelor	Teacher	Putonghua			
15	F15	PhD	Researcher	Hubei fangyan,	1	C1	3
	M15	Bachelor	Teacher	Gansu fangyan, Putonghua			
16	F16	Bachelor	Manager	Hakka, Putonghua	2	C1	8
	M16	Master	Teacher			C2	3
17	F17	Master	Engineer	Zhaoqing fangyan,	2	C1	8
	M17	Master	Teacher	Putonghua		C2	4
18	F18	PhD	Researcher	Taiyuan fangyan,	2	C1	12
	M18	PhD	Doctor	Putonghua		C2	8

*F, Father; M, Mother; C, Child; C1, The first child; C2, The second child

Data collection

Adopting the method of convenience and purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), the study targeted families who used both local dialects (fangyans) and Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) in their everyday communication. Families were selected using purposive sampling based on urban residence, the presence of school-aged children, engagement with multiple linguistic resources, and willingness to participate (Pal-

tridge & Phakiti, 2015). After confirming the willingness and availability of family members, home visits were arranged with all the participating families by the first author every month (between November 2023 and July 2024). Detailed field notes were taken during every family visit in order to depict comprehensive family language management and practices.

A total of 21 parents (8 fathers and 13 mothers) were interviewed about their family language practices and language attitudes, as well as their language planning activities. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted in Putonghua during family visits, with each interview lasting approximately 45 min. These visits also involved observation and audio-recording of everyday family conversations to document natural language practices in the home. In addition, two focus group discussions were held in January 2024 online with certain participants based on their availability with each lasting around 50 min to 1 h 15 min (see Table 2 for focus group information). Together, these methods enabled a detailed examination of how parents shaped the linguistic environment and enacted language decisions and practices within their families. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews were conducted according to participants' availability during data collection. As a result, it was not always possible to interview both parents in each household.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted with a combination of deductive (top-down) and inductive (bottom-up) approach to identify emerging themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the authors applied deductive coding based on a theoretical framework focused on language ideology, practices, and management, which guided the data analysis. This was followed by inductive coding to capture unanticipated themes and patterns that arose naturally from the data, allowing for a deeper understanding of family language practices and parental decision-making. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the coding process, both authors independently coded the data, and regular inter-rater reliability checks produced agreement rates of above 95%. The transcripts were transcribed verbatim, returned to and verified by the participants, and then translated into English by an expert specializing in translation, with additional back-translations to ensure accuracy. The iterative process of coding and theme generation identified key themes related to parental ideologies, language management strategies, and their impact on children's language development.

Table 2 Focus group participants and duration

Focus group	Participants	Date	Duration
Group 1	M2, M9, M13, F3, F15	January 15, 2024	1 h 16 min
Group 2	M6, M10, M11, F18	January 24, 2024	56 min

M, Mother; F, Father

Findings

Competing ideologies: the tension between unity, heritage, and cosmopolitanism

This section addresses Research Question 1 by examining parents' attitudes, beliefs, and ideological orientations towards fangyan, Putonghua, and English in the home domain. The findings demonstrate that parents attribute differentiated affective, normative, and symbolic values to these linguistic resources, embedded in broader considerations of family intimacy, national belonging, and global aspiration.

Fangyan as a medium for strengthening family bonds and cultural identity

Parental discourse positioned fangyan as the indispensable carrier of local identity, juxtaposed against the utilitarian value of Putonghua. The potential loss of fangyan was discursively constructed not merely as linguistic change, but as an existential threat to cultural heritage itself. Many parents expressed expectations and aspirations for their children to speak fangyans during focus group interviews. For example:

Mother13: We transmit fangyan as cultural heritage while recognizing Putonghua's national role and English's global function. Proficiency in both is vital, yet fangyan remains a distinctive asset. To offset its limited public use, we deliberately uphold fangyan at home. (Focus group 1, 01/15/2024)

Father3: The widespread revival of Chaoshan Yingge and other intangible heritage practices demonstrates the continued vitality of traditional culture. I therefore support my child in learning fangyan, as it serves as an immediate cultural and affective bond, reinforcing shared identity and belonging. (Focus group 1, 01/15/2024)

Other participants (Mother2, Mother9, Father15) also echoed this sentiment. This commitment was often expressed with a sense of urgency and personal responsibility. They viewed themselves as crucial links in a fragile chain of transmission, standing against a tide of linguistic homogenization. The potential failure to transmit fangyan was therefore framed not merely as a personal loss, but as a lasting disruption in the continuity of the family's cultural heritage and intergenerational tradition.

In the follow-up family home visits, other parents also emphasized the importance of its maintenance and preservation, as it is essential for raising children with a strong sense of cultural belonging and identity. For example:

Father16: Children can acquire Putonghua and fangyan concurrently with minimal interference. The key concern is therefore not whether fangyan hinders Putonghua learning, but how to sustain fangyan transmission to preserve cultural heritage and foster a lasting sense of identity and connection to one's hometown, even amid future mobility. (Interview, 02/08/2024)

Father12: Children should acquire fangyan before learning Putonghua. Although some dialect features become harder to master with age, regular exposure to Putonghua in daily life ensures later proficiency. What is more concerning is the gradual loss of fangyan-specific expressions among younger generations, signaling an erosion of linguistic and cultural meaning. (Interview, 04/19/2024)

It is also noted that Mother1 expressed delight in observing her child's natural shift to fangyan when expressing strong emotions or feelings, even within a Putonghua-dominant conversation.

Mother1: It is pleasing to see my child naturally blend fangyan expressions into fluent Putonghua. As Putonghua dominates school and society, children quickly acquire it upon entering education, as my daughters did in kindergarten. In early childhood, I deliberately used fangyan during shared reading to convey our family's emotional and cultural meanings. (Interview, 04/24/2024)

Parents in Family 2, Family 8, Family 12, and Family 15 all mentioned the different language use between children, parents, and grandparents. Parents' time availability is rather restricted because of their working schedules; therefore, grandparents are the main caretakers of children at home. Due to some grandparents' limited proficiency of Putonghua, fangyans were the only linguistic resources used in intergenerational communication.

Father8: Fangyan is mainly sustained through daily interactions with grandparents during childcare. Although we are aware that their non standard Putonghua may influence our child's accent, we continue this practice to strengthen his cultural and identity ties. As a result, he has developed near native fangyan fluency, which is rare among his peers and a source of pride. (Interview 02/02/2024)

Nevertheless, many parents reported challenges in sustaining fangyan use once children entered kindergarten. Peer pressure and institutional dominance of Putonghua often led children to reduce or abandon fangyan in daily interactions, generating parental anxiety over cultural loss and weakened family language transmission.

Putonghua as a pragmatic resource for navigating national mobility

Putonghua has been the default medium of communication and is used in local and global, formal and informal, and official and non-official settings in work, study, and social interactions as the *de facto* lingua franca because of its wider area of effective communication and mobility, versatility, and identity and cultural markers (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). As the participants noted, the dominance of Putonghua is deeply entrenched in virtually all spheres of society.

Mother16: Fangyan serves as an intimate in-group code that affirms local identity, while Putonghua functions as a national language enabling broader social

integration. Together, they form complementary dimensions of communication in China, linking local belonging with national unity. (Interview, 01/24/2024).

Mother6: China's linguistic landscape includes many fangyans, yet when compatriots meet abroad, Putonghua often creates an immediate sense of shared belonging. While our children's futures are uncertain, proficiency in Putonghua, alongside English, can serve as a linguistic passport that enables connection wherever they go. (Focus group 2, 01/24/2024)

Father18 echoed this in the focus group discussion, stating that "the value of a language lies in communication. The more you need the language, the greater its value, and Putonghua is beyond doubt such a language." (Focus group 2, 01/24/2024). He further added in the family visit:

Father18: After moving from a small northern town to the south, we hope our children can speak fangyan but recognize that Putonghua is essential for social integration. Having once felt self-conscious about our own accented Putonghua, we prioritize its mastery for our children's future. Fangyan remains a valuable cultural asset, but its absence will not limit their prospects. (Interview, 02/08/2024).

Parents emphasized the importance of acquiring both Putonghua and fangyan for cultural diversity and social integration. They recognized the benefits of multilingualism in enhancing communication skills and fostering cultural pride in order to help children thrive in diverse social contexts. For example:

Father7: Putonghua is essential for education and social integration, while fangyan is ideally used at home. In practice, however, maintaining such clear boundaries is difficult, as everyday family and community life rarely follows rigid language divisions. (Interview, 01/25/2024)

Mother18 emphasized the entrenched position of Putonghua, pointing out that within the mechanisms for academic progression and personnel evaluation, assessments are consistently administered in Putonghua, which represents the most basic linguistic competency requirement.

Mother18: Putonghua is the medium of instruction in compulsory education and the main language of children's social interaction, with children often defaulting to it unless a shared regional background is clear. (Interview, 02/12/2024)

In summary, parents consistently viewed Putonghua as the dominant language for education, social interaction, and mobility, serving as an essential resource for integration and participation across Chinese society.

English as a globalized symbolic and digital asset

The “Double Reduction Policy,” which was first introduced in 2021 by the Chinese government (Chen & Lin, 2024), aims to secure mainstream schooling and retain private tutoring in order to promote education equality. This, in turn, heightened parental anxieties, particularly regarding the policy’s impact on children’s English proficiency and future opportunities. Mother7 expressed concern about the deprioritization of English classes in the lower grades (from year 1 to year 3) in public elementary schools.

Mother7: English instruction should maintain sufficient class time and prioritize listening and speaking skills, shifting away from exam-oriented teaching to reduce reliance on private tutoring and enhance students’ practical proficiency. (Interview, 03/06/2024)

Parents also acknowledged the instrumental value of English but voiced concerns regarding the pronounced discrepancy between the duration of formal instruction and the development of functional, real-world application skills. For example:

Mother16: English is clearly essential as a global lingua franca. However, despite significant investment in online platforms, progress remains slow. Lacking pedagogical expertise, I have turned to private tutoring, as home instruction often leads to tension and fails to sustain engagement. (Interview, 07/11/2024)

In response to the substantial reduction in formal English instruction, some parents have adopted what may be described as a strategy of disengagement, often referred to as “*lying flat*” (躺平). This approach is typically driven by parents’ recognition of their own limited pedagogical expertise, even among those with strong academic backgrounds. Mother17 exemplifies this tendency, as despite having overseas educational experience, she expressed a lack of confidence in supporting her child’s English learning.

Mother17: Although both my husband and I hold master’s degrees from the UK, neither of us has received systematic training in English language pedagogy. To avoid offering sub-optimal learning guidance, we have chosen to rely on specialized educational institutions that provide structured curricula and professionally developed teaching materials. (Interview, 02/26/2024)

Although English is widely seen as a passport to global opportunities, this recognition often leads parents to invest pragmatically in supplementary tutoring, effectively outsourcing part of their children’s language education. Parents such as Mother16 and Mother17 described difficulties in supporting English learning at home, a concern echoed by many others in the study. Even parents with overseas learning experience reported limited confidence in providing systematic instruction because of a lack of pedagogical expertise. As a result, English was rarely used in daily family

interaction, reflecting parents' concern that insufficient input at home might limit their children's opportunities for meaningful language development.

Some parents recognized the communicative value of English but expressed concern about students' low proficiency despite years of formal education. For example, Father8 noted the time and effort spent on learning English:

Father8: Although the "Double Reduction" policy has reduced in-school English instruction, English remains heavily weighted in Entrance exams. As a result, high English proficiency is still essential for academic advancement, making extracurricular tutoring a widespread and often unavoidable response. (Interview, 02/08/2024)

Unlike other parents, Mother10 questioned the effectiveness of extracurricular English classes and reported adopting a *laissez-faire* approach to her children's learning.

Mother10: Parents recognized that formal instruction alone is insufficient without a supportive home English environment, yet creating such an environment remains difficult due to limited linguistic training. This gap between aspiration and capacity reflects a key challenge in supporting early language development. (Interview, 04/21/2024)

This parental dilemma is further contextualized by divergent views on the functional necessity of English proficiency. For example, Father10 offered a contrasting perspective regarding workplace English utility:

Father10: English functions mainly as a communicative tool. Early exposure alone rarely leads to fluency, which often depends on personal motivation or immersion rather than classroom hours. As English is not essential in many professions and skills fade without use, learning should be purpose-driven and tailored to individual communicative needs rather than treated as a generic requirement. (Interview, 06/24/2024)

These reflections reflect a broader pattern among participants, who noted that parental language ideologies are shaped by past experiences and guide aspirations for their children's English learning. Family language decisions increasingly consider pragmatic factors such as economic returns and market demands, alongside the growing availability of digital learning resources.

Parental language ideologies and children's linguistic investment

To address Research Question 2, this section analyzes the strategic translation of parental language ideologies into domestic practice. It demonstrates how parents, as active language managers, operationalized their contrasting perceptions of *fangyan* (cultural heirloom), Putonghua (socio-educational imperative), and English (strategic investment) into distinct regimes of home language use, resource allocation, and extracurricular planning.

Constructing heritage and locality: parental investment in fangyan and identity

Interviews and family visits revealed similar patterns in fangyan management across families. Most participants reported using fangyan at home to varying degrees, motivated by the desire to maintain inherited culture and customs. Families adopted a range of strategies to promote fangyan use (see Table 3), often combining multiple practices, though no single approach was universally adopted.

Parental beliefs and emotions about cultural roots and identity interacted with and were sometimes centered in fangyan practices. Widespread concern about the loss of minority languages is illustrated by the following:

Father3: Fangyans embody regional culture and are vital for preserving heritage. Putonghua, which evolved from fangyans, is not mutually exclusive with them. While promoting the official language is essential, losing fangyans would mean erasing valuable regional identities. (Interview, 01/17/2024)

Mother3 also emphasized the importance of speaking fangyan at home, viewing it as central to regional and cultural identity and a source of belonging. She noted, however, that the current environment is not supportive of fangyan use:

Mother3: If we do not actively use fangyan, children will likely shift to speaking only Putonghua. While Putonghua suffices for daily, educational, and professional needs, the cultural loss would be regrettable, as fangyans are essential for preserving heritage. (Interview, 01/20/2024)

The following excerpt was observed during family visit for recorded conversation. It shows how Mother3 actively engaged in transmitting traditional nursery rhymes and ballads in fangyan (Teochew dialect) to her children, reflecting her belief that fangyan functioned as a vital cultural bond and a means of heritage preservation.

Excerpt 1

1. Son: 潮州湘桥好风流, 十八梭船廿四洲, 廿四楼台廿四样, 二只銚牛一只溜。潮州湘桥好踢跔, 十八梭船廿四垛。妈妈, 踢跔是什么意思?

2. Mum: 踢跔就是普通话的“玩耍”的意思。

3. Son: 那“天上一粒星, 地下开书斋”的书斋是什么意思?

4. Mum: 就是开学堂。你读读一整首给妈妈听一下。

5. Son: 我不要。我要去找姐姐踢跔。

6. Daughter: 跟你说过多少次了, 小声一点, 吵到我学习了! 信不信我打你! 讨厌!

1. Son: The Xiang Bridge in Chaozhou is so charming, with eighteen pontoon boats and twenty-four isles, twenty-four pavilions each unique, and two iron bulls with one missing. The Xiang Bridge in Chaozhou is great for ‘titoh’. Mum, what does ‘titoh’ mean?

2. Mum: ‘Titoh’ means ‘to play’ in Putonghua

3. Son: Then what does ‘a star in the sky’, a ‘shuzhai’ on the ground mean? What’s ‘shuzhai’?

4. Mum: It means opening a school. Recite the whole poem for me.

5. Son: No, I don’t want to. I’m going to play with Sister!

6. Daughter: How many times have I told you? Keep it down! You’re disturbing my studies! Do you want me to hit you? So annoying!

7. Son: 妈妈, 姐姐又这样, 老是这样, 打打打打!

7. Son: How many times have I told you? Keep it down! You're disturbing my studies! Do you want me to hit you? So annoying!

8. Mum: 姐姐在学习, 你先把书收一下, 去玩玩具先。快点, 收完书再玩!

8. Mum: Your sister is studying. Put your books away first, then go play with your toys. Hurry up—no playing until you've cleaned up!

9. Son: 不公平! 姐姐刚刚也有看, 姐姐要一起收! 我就不收!

9. Son: Not fair! Sister was reading too—she should help clean up! I won't do it!

*The italics indicate the use of fangyan during the conversation.

(Recorded Conversation, 01/20/2024)

Mother3 believed that fangyan functioned as a vital cultural bond and a means of heritage preservation. Within the family's daily interactions, Teochew remained the dominant code for communication, though the children's responses exhibited code-mixing between fangyan and Putonghua. Notably, a marked language shift occurred during emotionally charged exchanges, with the children frequently reverting to fangyan to express heightened affect, such as frustration or defiance. This pattern suggests that fangyan retained a stronger affective function for the children, even as Putonghua increasingly influenced their linguistic repertoire.

The participants also expressed worries about cultural loss. For example:

Mother2: Many parents value Cantonese highly and insist their children speak it well, often correcting them when they use Putonghua at home. This insistence can strain parent-child relationships, making children less willing to speak Cantonese. Despite its role as a regional lingua franca, many children today cannot understand it, leaving parents frustrated by the perceived erosion of Cantonese culture. (Interview, 01/17/2024)

Mother2 expressed concerns about children's reluctance to speak Cantonese because the dominant role of Putonghua is deeply ingrained in both formal and informal settings, even though some parents are highly involved in fangyan management.

Language serves as a tool of both communication and cultural identity, and some parents noted that it can impart promising possibilities in certain settings. For example:

Mother9: Fangyan is valuable for my child's social integration. I cannot predict his career path, but Teochew will serve both as a cultural identity and a practical ice-breaker, especially within the extensive Teochew business networks in the Greater Bay Area. (Interview, 01/17/2024)

The follow-up recorded conversation also shows this family employed a Teochew-speaking domestic caregiver from the child's infancy, creating a consistently fangyan-dominant home environment.

Excerpt 2

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Son: 老姨, 明天早上早点叫醒我, 我要吃去肠粉!吃两条!</p> <p>2. Caretaker: 好, 如果你起得来, 就去你喜欢的那家吃!</p> <p>3. Mum: 吃两条肠粉后还要在学校吃早餐, 太饱了儿子! 只能吃一条!</p> <p>4. Son: 没事, 我吃得下!</p> <p>5. Dad: 明天我就不去接你放学了, 我要去广州。</p> <p>6. Mum: 老姨, 你明天菜市场买一条鱼, 买些牛肉, 再多买点水果回来, 明天初一要拜神。</p> <p>7. Son: 老姨, 妳买点番石榴和杨桃给我, 我喜欢吃!</p> <p>8. Caretaker: 知道了。明天送完你上学我就去买。</p> | <p>1. Son: Auntie, wake me up early tomorrow morning! I want to go eat rice noodle rolls! Two servings!</p> <p>2. Caretaker: Alright, if you get up on time, we'll go to your favorite spot</p> <p>3. Son: Eating two servings plus school breakfast? That's too much, son! Just one</p> <p>4. Son: No problem, I can handle it!</p> <p>5. Dad: I won't pick you up after school tomorrow—I'm going to Guangzhou</p> <p>6. Mum: Auntie, buy a fish, some beef, and extra fruit at the market tomorrow. It's the first day of the lunar month; we need offerings for the altar</p> <p>7. Son: Auntie, get me some guavas and starfruit too! I love those!</p> <p>8. Caretaker: Got it. I'll go right after dropping you off at school</p> |
|---|--|

*The italics indicate the use of fangyan during the conversation.

(Recorded Conversation, 01/17/2024)

Because the caregiver used only Teochew and had limited Putonghua proficiency, the child naturally code-switched to fangyan, supporting both receptive and productive acquisition. The parents deliberately maintained fangyan as the primary household linguistic resource to preserve cultural continuity and viewed Teochew as a potential sociolinguistic asset. As a result of sustained early exposure, the child demonstrated the strongest fangyan competence among participants.

Prioritizing national integration: parental alignment with Putonghua for institutional access and social mobility

Almost all of the participating families acknowledge the cultural functions of fangyan and speak fangyan to each other but initiate the parent–child interaction in Putonghua. However, Mother5 was the only parent who had made a purposeful choice to use only Putonghua as the parent–child language due to concerns that the child might be confused in a multilingual family environment. She clarified her family language practice by providing the following explanations:

Mother5: As non-linguistic professionals, we were concerned about our son's potential language mixing. Cared for primarily by his fangyan-only grandmother until age three, he initially could not understand Putonghua. We then shifted to using only Putonghua at home to ensure his social integration. While fangyan connects him to cultural roots, Putonghua is essential for his future. (Interview, 02/01/2024)

Driven by this language ideology, Mother5 intentionally organized structured weekend activities for her son, involving peers who are fluent Putonghua speakers. Through these regular social engagements, she aimed to facilitate his deeper immer-

Table 3 Fangyan maintenance practices at home

No	Fangyan learning management	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14	F15	F16	F17	F18
1	Offer supplemented resources like picture-books and audios	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Teach nursery rhymes and ballads	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Organized weekend childplay with children of heritage languages	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Parents insist on speaking fangyan with children most of the time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Watch fangyan-dubbing local dramas or cartoons	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Hire fangyan speaking caretakers or helpers at home	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

*F, Family

sion in the local cultural environment and enhance his acquisition of Putonghua as a medium of daily interaction.

Some parents in the focus group (e.g., Mother6, Mother10, Mother11) also believed that the utility of Putonghua outweighs that of fangyan, as there is little possibility that her two children would return to their hometown for work or studies. Neither does she perceive her Hunan fangyan or her husband's Hokkien as vital for her two children to learn.

Mother11: We use Putonghua at home to support our son's adaptation to kindergarten and social interaction, especially during shared reading. As it is also the language of instruction, our family has shifted to Putonghua for learning activities. (Focus group 2, 01/24/2024)

Mother10 also emphasized the importance of Putonghua as the language of instruction in the curriculum, highlighting its role in laying a linguistic foundation for children's academic development.

Mother10: In today's digital world, children's expression can easily become disjointed, making strong Putonghua skills especially important. Clear communication and emotional connection will remain valuable in an AI-driven era. For this reason, we deliberately expose our child to high-quality Putonghua documentaries and reading materials to develop not only language proficiency but also clear and organized expression. (Focus group 2, 01/24/2024)

During family visits, researchers observed that some children began to favor Putonghua after entering kindergarten. Although parents valued fangyan, the dominance of Putonghua in school and peer interactions often led it to gradually replace fangyan as children's primary language. Peer influence played a key role, as children tended to use Putonghua when communicating with classmates. At the same time, children made purposeful language choices within the family. For example, the elder child in Family 7 used fangyan with grandparents to facilitate communication but switched to Putonghua with parents. Similarly, the elder child in Family 3 who spoke fangyan fluently before kindergarten shifted almost entirely to Putonghua after starting school, using fangyan only occasionally with grandparents. Many parents reported similar patterns, particularly children's increasing refusal to use fangyan at home, which has become a major parental concern.

Cultivating global capital: parental orchestration of English for transnational mobility and digital citizenship

A number of similar practices related to English learning management were identified. It was found that parents provided various ways of English supplementary provision at home, which showcase the impact of English commodification on the family linguistic environment. Most families adopt multiple strategies, with providing English books and resources being the most common, while hiring international tutors is the least adopted because it is costly to hire a family tutor. A number of

Table 4 Family english supplementary provision

No	English learning activities	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14	F15	F16	F17	F18
1	Provide linguistically-rich environment before kindergarten, like picturebooks and nursery rhymes, etc	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
2	Enrolled in bi-lingual or international kindergarten	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
3	Enrolled in private institutes for extra English tutoring	✓			✓	✓				✓				✓			✓		✓
4	Enrolled in online English tutoring courses	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓				✓		✓
5	Hire international teachers as family English tutors				✓														
6	Provide English books and other learning resources at home	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
7	Provide English cultural learning summer camps				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓					✓

similar practices related to English learning management were identified during the interviews and family visits. Table 4 illustrates the types of resources provided by parents, which showcase the impact of English commodification on the family linguistic environment.

Parents emphasized the importance of telling Chinese stories in ways that are accessible to global audiences through English. For example, Mother1 explained that learning English enables children to understand and communicate Chinese traditions internationally, especially as China's global voice continues to grow.

Mother1: Learning English helps our children communicate Chinese traditions internationally. At home, we support this by providing English reading materials and watching English programs together. (Interview, 03/02/2024)

Multiple participants (Mother1, Father2, Father3, Mother4, Father7, Father9, Father13, and Father16) highlighted the need to supplement mainstream English education, especially in light of the burden-alleviation policy and the transition from primary to lower-secondary school. This approach helps children cope with the increasing academic load as they grow. For example:

Father16: Nearly all my daughter's friends attend a private English institution to build a strong foundation, and I do not want her to fall behind. Learning another language is like opening a new window. (Interview, 02/08/2024)

Mother9 strongly emphasized the need for English learning, particularly in response to recent policy-driven reductions in school-based English instruction and after-school tutoring. She viewed English as essential not only for cross-cultural communication and international opportunities but also for accessing high-quality literature and art.

Mother9: While Putonghua remains dominant within China, English continues to serve as the foremost global language, making it an essential element of a competitive education. (Interview, 05/31/2024)

As shown in Table 4, many parents sought supplementary provision to compensate for the reduced school curriculum, and they showed a preference for adopting multilingual policies to cultivate children's linguistic competence. For example, Father4 explained his practice in the following way:

Father4: Recognizing the value of English education, we engaged native English-speaking tutors before our daughters turned three for linguistic and cultural exposure, aiming to develop accurate pronunciation, English thinking patterns, and cultural awareness. In primary school, we transitioned to local teachers capable of integrating subject knowledge bilingually. (Interview, 01/25/2024)

This was the only family that reported an attitudinal shift from hiring only native English-speaking teachers to working with local teachers; this family also provided

one-on-one tutoring in Spanish and French after the first round of interview. During the follow-up family visit, Father4 clarified and revised the family's language management practices.

Father4: We now prioritize learning with local teachers, as they understand my children's specific challenges. Language acquisition is a long-term process requiring a rich environment, and local teachers, having been learners themselves, can offer more relevant support. (Interview, 02/22/2024)

Father 4 strongly believed in the economic value of multilingualism and invested in both international and local teachers according to his children's language development. He also arranged immersive experiences, including travel with language teachers, and was the only parent committed to enrolling his children in a high-end private school.

Discussion and implications

This study analyzed how households negotiate the interplay of Putonghua, English, and fangyans from the perspective of FLP. The findings reveal the intricate and often ambivalent negotiations parents undertaken when navigating the various linguistic resources. Parents demonstrated a profound awareness of the fanyans as a crucial bond of cultural heritage and emotional connection, investing substantial human and material resources to create opportunities for their children to use it. However, this conscious effort often co-existed with an unconscious shift to Putonghua during daily homework supervision or routine conversations. Concurrently, parents acknowledged the practical utility of English as a global lingua franca, while also recognizing fanyans' potential to become a distinctive asset for their children in the future job market. Furthermore, Putonghua was regarded as both a domestic social currency and workplace lingua franca, with growing recognition of its potential global importance. This complex and dynamic negotiation of language choices across contexts reveals the necessity of attending to family language practices and management in all their fluidity and contradiction. The findings reveal a dual-oriented strategy among middle-class families, which simultaneously accommodates pragmatic communicative demands and consciously cultivates fanyan competence as cultural inheritance (Chen & Liu, 2026; Huang & Fang, 2024). Children are shown to be active agents in this process, adapting and at times re-interpreting parental language ideologies in response to institutional norms, peer influence, and situated communication needs (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). By situating domestic practices within broader policy shifts such as the "Double Reduction" initiative, the study frames the home as a critical site of policy interpretation and cultural negotiation (Lyu & Lam, 2025).

Regarding the first research question, the study reveals that parents' attitudes towards Putonghua, English, and fangyans are deeply rooted in their perceptions of the value of these linguistic resources in terms of cultural identity, social mobility, and economic opportunities. These attitudes are shaped by broader societal trends, including the dominance of Putonghua in formal settings, the global importance of

English, and the cultural significance of fangyans. Parents viewed fangyans as central to maintaining cultural identity and family bonds, expressing strong emotional attachment to their regional dialects as carriers of heritage and tradition. Fangyans were seen as more than communication tools; they connected children to cultural roots and fostered belonging, especially amid concerns over their rapid decline among younger generations in a Putonghua- and English-dominant society. Children's already limited fangyan abilities are further eroded by the lack of immersive linguistic environments and diminished Fangyan exposure, both at home and in broader social contexts.

This phenomenon reflects a critical challenge in intergenerational language transmission, where the institutional dominance of Putonghua has an impact on fangyan, leading to a downward spiral of linguistic competence. Parents also acknowledged the challenges of maintaining fangyans in a linguistic environment dominated by Putonghua (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). Many parents reported that their children, once they entered kindergarten, began to resist using fangyans at home, preferring to communicate in Putonghua. The observed linguistic transition derives from a dual causation mechanism: (1) the normative influence exerted through peer group dynamics on language selection, and (2) the structural embedding of Putonghua as the privileged linguistic code within educational institutions. As a result, parents expressed anxiety about the potential loss of fangyans and the cultural heritage they represent (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Huang & Fang, 2024; Liang & Shin, 2021). Putonghua is universally regarded by many parents as a key linguistic resource for their children's future success. It is seen as essential for academic achievement, social integration, and professional mobility, both within China and internationally. Parents emphasized that Putonghua is the default language of instruction in schools and the primary medium of communication in professional settings. As such, they prioritized its use at home, even in families where fangyans were traditionally spoken. Parents also recognized the instrumental value of Putonghua in securing educational and career opportunities (Huang & Funoi, 2024; Zheng & Mei, 2021), as they noted Putonghua as indispensable for daily life and future success. This pragmatic view reflects the broader societal expectation that proficiency in Putonghua is a prerequisite for upward mobility in China's competitive job market (Curd-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Fang & Yao, 2025).

Parents perceive English as a critical asset for global competitiveness and academic success. Many of the parent participants viewed English as a "language passport" that would open doors to international opportunities, including higher education and global careers. The parents invested heavily in their children's English education, enrolling them in bilingual kindergartens, private tutoring, and online courses. This investment was driven by the belief that early exposure to English would give their children a competitive edge in both academic and professional spheres (Gao & Zheng, 2019). However, parents also expressed concerns about the effectiveness of English education in public schools, particularly in light of the "Double Reduction Policy," which has reduced the emphasis on English in early education (Liu, 2023; Lyu & Lam, 2025). Many parents turned to private tutoring and supplementary resources to compensate for what they perceived as inadequate English instruction in schools. This reflects a broader anxiety among middle-class parents about ensur-

ing their children's success in a highly competitive educational environment (Sah & Fang, 2025; Wang & Liddicoat, 2026).

Addressing the second research question, the findings reveal that parental ideologies about the values of different languages directly influence family language planning and management strategies. These strategies are shaped by a combination of cultural, social, and economic factors, as well as by parents' own experiences and aspirations for their children. Parents' efforts to maintain fangyans in the home domain are often in tension with the dominance of Putonghua in educational and social settings. Many parents reported consciously using fangyans at home to ensure that their children retained a connection to their cultural heritage. However, as children began to prefer Putonghua, parents found it increasingly difficult to maintain fangyan use. This tension highlights the challenges of balancing cultural preservation with the practical demands of a Putonghua-dominant society (Fang & Yao, 2025; Peng & Wan, 2025). Parents also recognized the importance of multilingualism, believing that exposure to multiple languages would enhance their children's cognitive and linguistic abilities. However, the reality of the language shift towards Putonghua suggests that parents' efforts to maintain fangyans are often met with resistance from children, particularly as they become more integrated into formal educational settings (Curd-Christiansen, 2022; Huang & Fang, 2024). Parents' beliefs regarding the instrumental value of English lead to proactive language planning strategies aimed at ensuring their children's proficiency in the language. Many parents reported investing in private tutoring, bilingual education, and immersive learning experiences to provide their children with a strong foundation in English. This investment was driven by the belief that English proficiency would not only enhance academic performance but also catalyze future career opportunities (Gao & Zheng, 2019; Kramsch, 2020). However, the emphasis on English also creates challenges for parents, particularly those who lack the resources or expertise to support their children's language learning. Parents expressed frustration with the limitations of public-school English education and the high cost of private tutoring. This reflects a broader concern about educational inequality, as families with greater financial resources are better able to provide their children with access to high-quality English instruction (Liu et al., 2025; Sah & Fang, 2025; Wang, 2023).

The "Double Reduction Policy" has had a significant impact on parents' language planning strategies, particularly in relation to English. Some parents expressed anxiety about the reduction of English instruction in public schools and the potential impact on their children's future opportunities. In response, parents turned to private tutoring and online courses to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of the public-school curriculum. This shift reflects the broader trend of parents taking an active role in their children's education, particularly in areas where they feel the school system is inadequate (Liu & Bray, 2022). At the same time, these policy changes have exacerbated existing inequalities, as families with greater financial resources are better able to provide their children with supplementary English education. This highlights the complex interplay between policy, SES, and parental involvement in language planning (Tao & Xu, 2022; Wang & Liddicoat, 2026).

Rather than simply reflecting linguistic hierarchies, the findings reveal an underlying ideological tension in middle-class FLP, marked by the simultaneous prioritization

of Putonghua, cultivation of English, and selective maintenance of fangyan. Fangyan is valued for fostering emotional bonds, cultural identity, and early value formation, and is also perceived as a potential future asset amid declining proficiency among younger generations (Huang & Fang, 2024). Putonghua is viewed as essential for educational attainment and social mobility, functioning as a key resource for access to domestic institutions and labor markets. English, in turn, is framed as a foundation for academic success and future opportunities, prompting parents to invest actively through extracurricular learning and tutoring (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2021). Together, these practices reflect parents' strategic mobilization of social, economic, and cultural capital in response to policy shifts and perceived market demands, aligning with existing research on family multilingualism, language prestige, and identity negotiation in the home domain (Fang & Hu, 2025; Tao & Xu, 2022).

In sum, the findings highlights the ways in which parental ideologies about Putonghua, fangyans, and English shape family language planning in urban families. Parents' attitudes towards these languages are influenced by a combination of cultural, social, and economic factors, as well as their own experiences and aspirations for their children. While fangyans are valued for their cultural significance, Putonghua and English are prioritized for their instrumental value in securing academic and professional success. The findings underscore the challenges parents face in balancing these competing linguistic priorities, particularly in the context of policy changes and socioeconomic inequalities.

Conclusion

This study examines middle-class parents' language decisions, focusing on their language ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes. Parental involvement in FLP is often inconsistent or conflicting, and such involvement can be influenced by socioeconomic and sociocultural realities, as well as by changing expectations at different life stages. These conflicts arise from family language practices and ideologies, around and within which social realities shape perceptions of language value. Parents prioritize languages based on children's ages and educational needs, often following a consistent hierarchy in which Putonghua is prioritized over English, which in turn is ranked higher than fangyans. Notably, some parents exhibit a forward-looking perspective, anticipating that as English proficiency becomes increasingly commonplace in the future, competence in fangyans may evolve into a distinctive competitive advantage. This value extends beyond mere communicative utility and encompasses cultural identity and localized social capital, which may, in certain contexts, emerge as a salient asset in interpersonal interaction and identity expression. These findings contribute to understanding how parents' social status, educational empowerment, and socioeconomic goals influence family language management (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Fang & Yao, 2025).

This study contributes to FLP by examining how urban middle-class Chinese families negotiate multilingual practices to sustain local cultural identity. Moving beyond a focus on language acquisition or intergenerational transmission, it conceptualizes the family as a dynamic grassroots site where parents balance global linguistic capital

with the maintenance of local dialects through evolving language ideologies and gendered roles. By foregrounding family-level agency, the study challenges top-down language policy perspectives and highlights the role of everyday practices in sustaining linguistic diversity amid social change.

With the significant contributions, we also need to recognize some limitations of this study. First, as primarily due to its focus on middle-class families, the findings are not intended to be generalized across all middle-class families in different Chinese cities. Future research could explore language use and management across families of varying SESs and how children perceive and respond to their parents' language planning strategies. Another limitation is that it does not differentiate between local city fangyans and parents' hometown fangyans, nor between the two parents' respective dialect repertoires. Future research could adopt a more detailed approach to examine how such distinctions shape children's language choices and family language practices. Additionally, it is essential to explore children's perceptions of their parents' language management and the impact of that management on their language competencies. This study calls for collaboration between institutions and educators to inform parental decisions, further investigate children's views, and provide a comprehensive understanding of family language policies.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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