

# The Continuity of Northern Pinghua: Investigating Intergenerational Heritage Language Transmission in China

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the intergenerational transmission of Northern Pinghua (NP) within the contexts of language policy and planning, language endangerment, and multilingualism in China. Using a survey with closed-ended questions and a four-point Likert scale, the research examines how NP is transmitted across generations in multilingual families. A total of 34 villagers participated in the study. The findings reveal a disruption in intergenerational language transmission, with NP being classified as “threatened” or “vulnerable/endangered.” The study discusses implications for the preservation of NP and offers recommendations for future research.*

**Keywords:** Northern Pinghua, Family Language Use, Intergenerational Heritage Language Transmission, Multilingualism in China

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## 1. Introduction

Language endangerment and maintenance have become significant global concerns, as many languages face the risk of extinction due to urbanization, globalization, and shifting language policies (Bradley & Bradley, 2013; Crystal, 2002; Lee et al., 2022). Among this global trend, China is also facing the challenges in preserving its linguistic diversity, with many languages and dialects at risk of extinction. Researchers have documented this trend across various regions, including Manchu in northeast China (Zhu et al., 2018), Oroqen in northern China (Wang, 2022), and Tibetan Sign Language in Lhasa (Hofer, 2017). The pattern these languages have been dying is in an intergenerational switching way, leaving no time for rescue and protection (Cao, 2001, 2014). Northern Pinghua (NP, 桂北平话) is also facing the same language endangerment threat.

Pinghua, a Sinitic language primarily spoken in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, is one of the Chinese dialects with many users (Wurm, 1987/1989). NP is a subgroup of Pinghua. It is not a language but a group of dialects with low mutual intelligibility. Geographically, NP is widely used in northern Guangxi, a multilingual province in south China. More specifically, this group of dialects is mainly used in the rural areas of Guilin, the bordering city Hezhou, and some other rural places in northern Guangxi (Yang et al., 1985).

Until the 2000s, NP remained active with the largest user base in these rural communities (Li, 2007). However, recent reports indicate that NP is now classified as an endangered or unsafe

language. The UNESCO World Atlas of Languages categorizes NP as the endangered/unsafe language (UNESCO, n.d.). In 2020, linguistic scholars who had been engaging in the current national Chinese Language Resources Protection Project also reported that unclassified dialects, such as Tuhua and Pinghua spoken in the border areas of Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi, are the endangered dialects (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). The Pinghua mentioned in the report refers specifically to NP, as evidenced by the language usage areas. This linguistic shift raises critical concerns regarding the sustainability of NP in local families and its prospects for maintenance and revitalization.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Despite NP's historical significance in rural Guangxi, its recent classification as an endangered language signals a drastic shift in language use patterns. The intergenerational transmission of NP is weakening, and younger generations are increasingly adopting Mandarin or Guiliu Hua as their primary languages. While Spolsky's Theory of Language Management has been widely applied in studies on language policy and multilingual societies, limited research has focused on its language practices component in examining dialect shift in rural China. The absence of empirical data on NP language use within families further complicates efforts to understand and address this decline.

This study employs Spolsky's Theory of Language Management (2004, 2009) to investigate NP language practices in local families, with a particular focus on the language intergenerational transmission pattern in regional language settings.

### **1.2 Research Question and Objective**

This study seeks to answer the following question: How is NP transmitted across generations in indigenous families? By addressing this question, this study aims to explore the patterns of intergenerational transmission of NP within families in China. The findings will contribute to future research on the language policies adopted by local villagers regarding NP.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Language Practices**

Language policy and planning involves deliberate efforts to influence language acquisition, structure, and functional allocation, shaping language use within societies (Cooper, 1989; Spolsky, 2004, 2009). It encompasses explicit and implicit decisions made by governments, organizations, families, or individuals in bilingual or multilingual contexts.

By highlighting the dynamic and multi-layered nature of language regulation, Spolsky (2004, 2009) introduced the Theory of Language Management. This theory posits that language policy in a given context can be analyzed through three interrelated components, namely language practices, language ideology and language management. This given context is a language functioning setting, or a "domain" as Fishman (1991) introduced.

Language practices refer to "the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire" (Spolsky, 2009, p.14). Language policies often aim to preserve minority languages, promote national identity, or facilitate international communication (Wiley, 1996). In minority language maintenance, family plays a critically important role because it is the location where the intergenerational language transmission works (Spolsky, 2012). A focus on the language practices in the family domain will help find out the pattern of regional languages transmission in families in the constant changing language communities.

## 2.2. Age and Intergenerational Language Transmission

Some non-linguistic factors show great influence on or significant correlation to the language choices, such as demographic factors which normally including gender, age, education level, income level, marital status, and occupation. Among all these demographic factors, age plays a crucial role in indigenous language maintenance. In the intergenerational language transmission, younger generations, particularly children, are essential for language continuity (O'grady & Hattori, 2016). However, these days witness an increasing disruption of language transmission, as observed in various contexts, including Indonesian, Spanish, and Chinese communities (Sagimin, 2020; Stavans & Ashkenazi, 2020; Yu et al., 2023). In these communities, the young generation are preferring the more advantaged languages such as the dominant or official languages, while the older generations remain the heritage language (Sagimin, 2020; Stavans & Ashkenazi, 2020). This generational language divide not only reflects individual language preferences but also signals broader patterns of intergenerational language transmission.

Scholars such as Fishman (1991), as well as institutions like Ethnologue and the UNESCO, all highlight that the intergenerational language transmission is a critical indicator of language vitality. Fishman (1991) highlighted that intergenerational language transmission process is a critical factor in determining whether a language remains active or not. Generally, in an immigration family, the first generation is monolingual with the heritage language, the second generation is bilingual adapting into the new linguistic environment, and the third generation is monolingual again using the new language. Based on this finding, he provides 8-level GIDS (Graded intergenerational Disruption Scale) for language vitality measurement and revitalization.

The Ethnologue (2024) expands Fishman's Scale into the 13-level EGIDS (Expanded Graded intergenerational Disruption Scale), providing a more comprehensive tool to measure the risk of language loss. This scale emphasizes intergenerational disruption and identifies critical stages for language maintenance efforts.

UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Scale is another comprehensive measurement to evaluate the language vitality, with a 6-level of vitality ranging from "safe" to "extinct". Though UNESCO's vitality range just includes six levels, but it provides a combination of using six major evaluative factors. These factors are intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, proportion of speakers within the total population, trends in existing language domains, response to new domains and media, and materials for language education and literacy (UNESCO, 2003).

In conclusion, this review emphasizes the need to investigate language intergenerational transmission in the family domain, particularly in relation to the language use and vitality of a rapidly changing language, which this study aims to explore.

## 2.3 Northern Pinghua Maintenance

Previous studies find that NP has been in a process of language shift. Li (2007) reported that NP was an active communicative language with the largest group of users in 2000s in the rural areas in Guangxi, based on a large scale linguistic study on 47 Pinghua-using locations. However, about a decade later, when trying to give a brief introduction to Pinghua in Guangxi, Lin and Yu (2012) reported that due to the linguistic ecological environment, NP in Guilin area was in a state of loss in terms of geographical distribution, rich linguistic variation and low

mutual ineligibility. They also predicted that in some villages, Mandarin Chinese would replace the NP dialect in as short as 30 to 40 years.

However, the preliminary purpose of these studies is trying to find answers to the rich diversity of NP and provide sufficient evidence of language change in the linguistic level, not the sociolinguistics level. Besides, these studies are largely descriptive, often neglecting the social variables on the language shift such as age. A more sociolinguistics-centered approach could help reveal how the regional language transmit across generations in family domain.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs questionnaire to explore the language intergenerational transmission of NP in family domain. The variables include respondents' basic demographic information, such as age, as well as the frequency of language use across generations.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The respondents of the study were local villagers from NP-speaking households in Dacun Village, Dahe Township, Guilin City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Three languages are currently widely used in Dahe Township. Northern Pinghua serves as the heritage language for local villagers; Guiliu Hua, a regional Chinese dialect, functions as the lingua franca in Guilin, especially in urban areas; and Mandarin is the official language used in education and government, and formal communication settings across the region.

The sample included three generations to provide a comprehensive view of how language practices had evolved over time. These respondents were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure that the sample represents a diverse cross-section of the NP-speaking community.

To account for potential variability, the sample was stratified by age group and gender. From each stratum, participants were randomly selected, resulting in 5 individuals younger than 18 years old, 17 youth aged from 18 to 34, 6 adults aged from 36 to 50, 3 adults aged from 51 to 60, and 3 adults older than 60. With a total sample size of 34, there were 17 males and 17 females. This approach ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives on the frequency of NP use across three generations.

#### **3.3 Instrument**

A self-reported questionnaire was useful to provide information from a large group of respondents, and can be objectively compared and interpreted through data analysis (Park & Kim, 1997). Therefore, this study used a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions, to collect the data on the family language practices of the heritage language NP in the context of China. This questionnaire is designed based on Spolsky's (2004) theory of language management. Because this study mainly focused on the language practices in the family domain, particularly the intergenerational transmission, the questionnaire consisted of the demographic information and the language frequency of use of family members across three generations. Respondents reported the frequency of language use of family members using a four-point scale: 1= Rarely, 2=Seldom, 3= Sometimes, 4=Always. The variables are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: List of Variables**

Factor	Variables
Demographics	Gender Age group
Language use frequency in family domain (NP, Guiliu Hua, Mandarin)	Language use frequency within G1 Language use frequency within G2 Language use frequency between G1-G2 Language use frequency between G1-G3 Language use frequency between G2-G1 Language use frequency between G2-G3

*Notes. G1 = First Generation; G2 = Second Generation; G3 = Third Generation*

### 3.4 Data Collection

The research was conducted during April 8th to April 23th, 2024. The printed papers were sent to the local respondents and collected immediately. This research adhered strictly to ethical guidelines and standards throughout its process. During participant recruitment, the purpose of the research was clearly explained. Stringent confidentiality measures were implemented during data collection and processing to ensure that respondents' personal information was neither disclosed nor misused. In the presentation of research findings, all data and discoveries were reported honestly and accurately.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Using IBM SPSS 29.0, the following statistical tests and analyses were conducted on the survey data: the descriptive analysis and inferential statistical methods (Shapiro-Wilk Test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test).

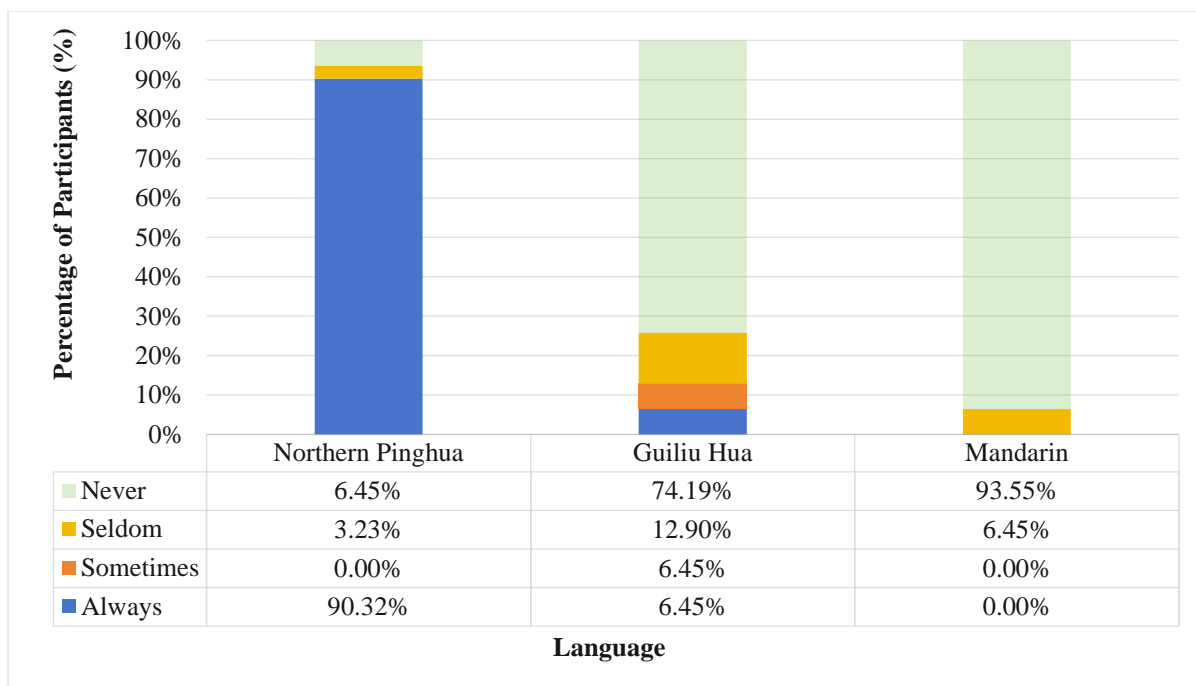
At first, given the small sample size 34, Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to test the normality of the variables (Yazici & Yolacan, 2007). The p-values of all variables were lower than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant deviation from normality. Then, subsequent analyses were conducted under the assumption of "approximate non-normality."

Descriptive analysis was used to summarize and describe the respondents' demographic characteristics. Then, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was conducted to examine whether changes in NP language use occurred within a generation when the speaking audience varied in the family.

## 4. Results

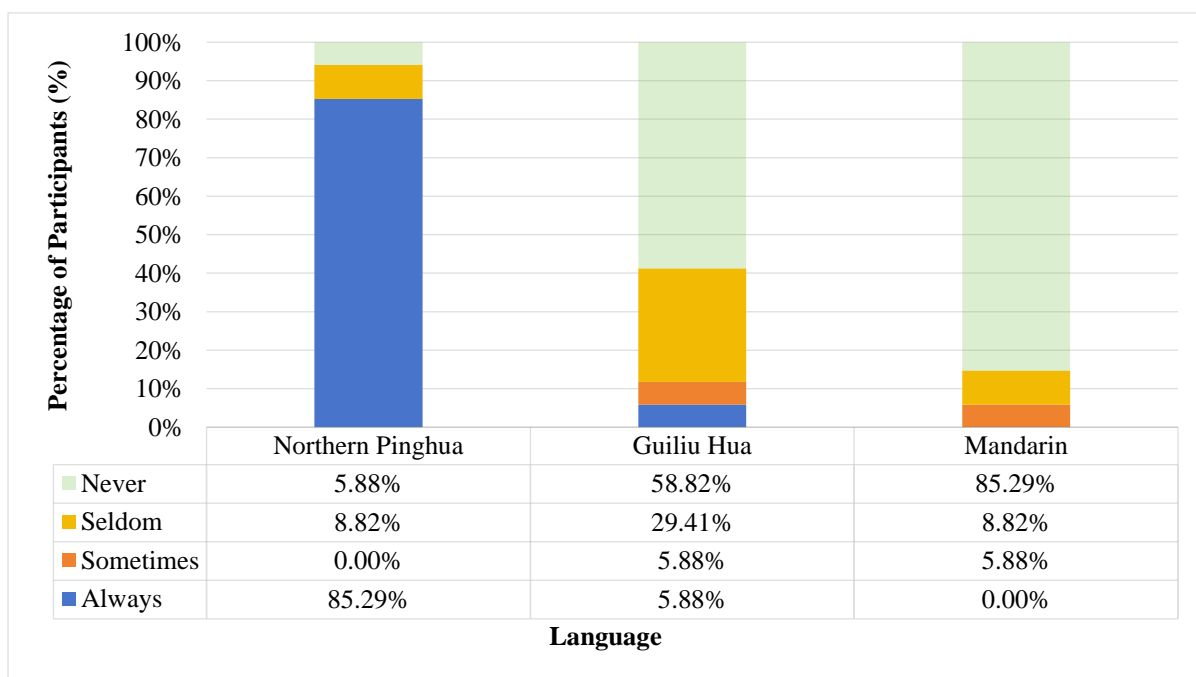
### 4.1 Language Use across Generations

This section presents descriptive findings on the home use frequency of three languages — Northern Pinghua, Guiliu Hua, and Mandarin — across three generations of Northern Pinghua speakers of the sample size.



**Figure 1: Language Use Patterns in the First Generation (G1)**

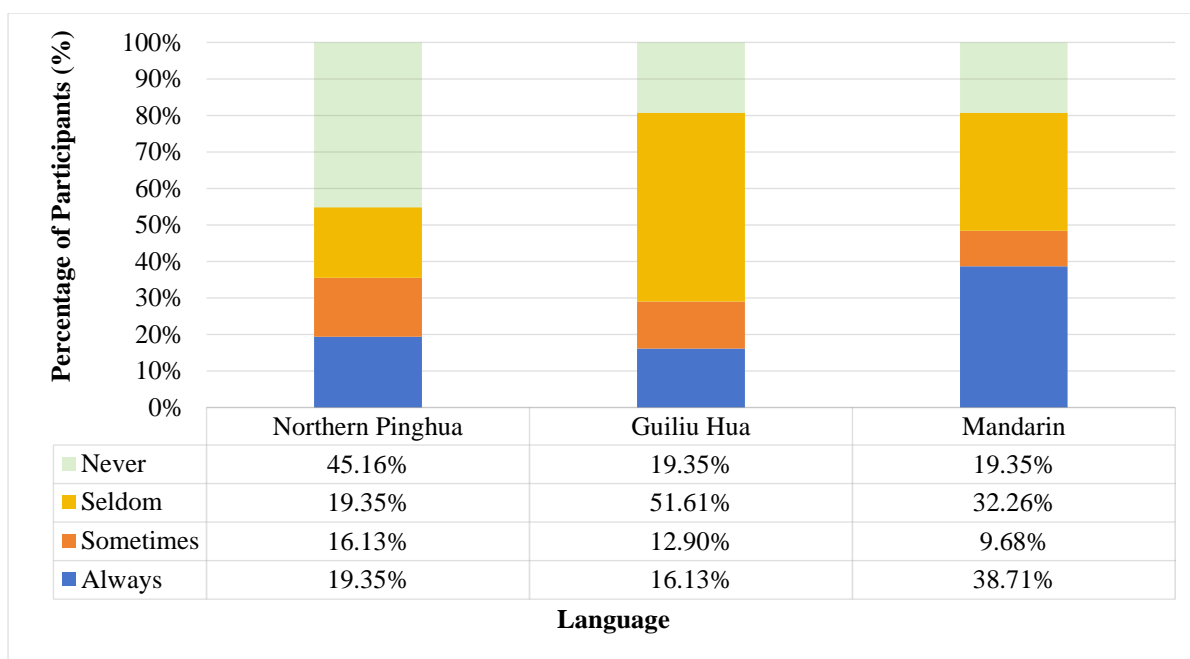
Figure 1 shows the language use patterns among the first generation in Dahe Township. Among this generation (valid  $n = 31$ ), Northern Pinghua was overwhelmingly dominant, with 90.32% ( $n = 28$ ) reporting consistent use, and only 6.45% ( $n = 2$ ) using Guiliu Hua regularly; Mandarin was virtually absent, with 93.55% ( $n = 29$ ) never using it.



**Figure 2: Language Use Patterns in the Second Generation (G2)**

As shown in Figure 2, in the second generation (valid  $n = 34$ ), Northern Pinghua also remained the most frequently used language, with 85.29% ( $n = 29$ ) always using it, though the presence of Guiliu Hua and Mandarin began to rise modestly, with 29.41% ( $n = 10$ ) seldom using Guiliu Hua and 5.88% ( $n = 2$ ) using Mandarin occasionally.





**Figure 3: Language Use Patterns in the Third Generation (G3)**

However, as shown in Figure 3, a significant linguistic shift was observed in the third generation (valid  $n = 31$ ). Only 19.35% ( $n = 6$ ) of the youth or children always used Northern Pinghua, while 45.16% ( $n = 14$ ) reported never using it. Guiliu Hua became more widely used, with 51.61% ( $n = 16$ ) reporting occasional use. Most notably, Mandarin was with a relatively large number of users: 38.71% ( $n = 12$ ) reported always using Mandarin, and only 19.35% ( $n = 6$ ) reported never using it.

These findings indicate a gradual decline in Northern Pinghua use frequency and a concurrent rise in Guiliu Hua and Mandarin use across generations, highlighting ongoing shifts in language transmission within multilingual family settings in rural Guilin.

#### 4.2 Intergenerational Variation in the Home Use of Northern Pinghua

Analytical statistics reveal intergenerational NP use frequency variation across family generations. A series of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests were conducted to examine whether changes in NP language use occurred within a generation when the speaking audience varied in the family. In Language Vitality and Endangerment (UNESCO, 2003), when evaluating the vitality of a language regarding to the intergenerational language transmission factor, the three generations are defined as child, parents, and grandparents. So, in this study, the third generation refers to the youngest generation in the family who do not have an offspring, the second generation are parents, and the the first generation are grandparents in the family. Table 2 presents the complete results.

**Table 2: Intra-Generational NP Use Frequency Variation across Generations**

Variable 1	Variable 2	Z	p
NP use frequency within G1	NP use frequency between G1-G2	-.756b	0.45
	NP use frequency between G1-G3	-3.662b	<.001
NP use frequency within G2	NP use frequency between G2-G1	-1.179b	0.238
	NP use frequency between G2-G3	-4.174b	<.001

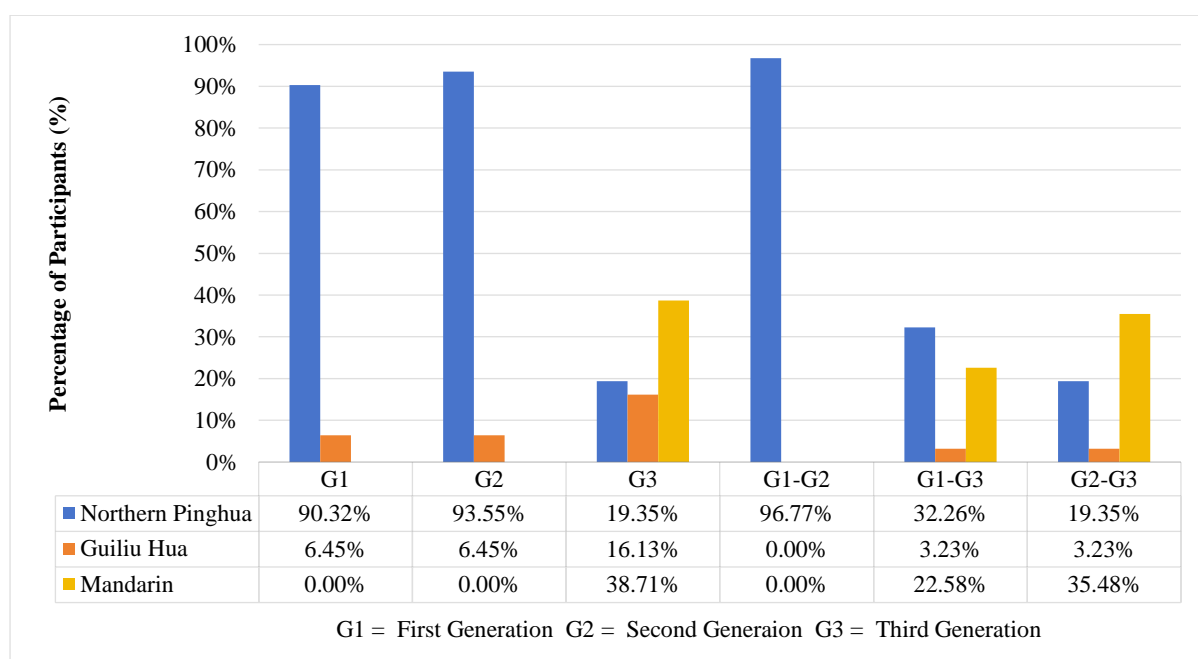
**Notes.** a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. b Based on positive ranks. c Based on negative ranks.  
G1 = First Generation; G2 = Second Generation; G3 = Third Generation.

Among the four pairs analyzed, Z-values ranged from -4.174 to -0.756, with p-values ranging from < .001 to .45. Two pairs showed statistically significant differences, while the remaining two did not.

A significant difference was observed in the use of NP when communicating within the first generation compared to speaking with the third generation ( $p < .001$ ). However, no significant difference was found in conversations with the second generation ( $p = 0.45$ ).

A significant difference was observed in the use of NP within the second generation compared to speaking with the third generation ( $p < .001$ ), while no significant difference was found in conversation with the first generation ( $p = 0.238$ ).

Figure 4 illustrated the detailed intergenerational distribution of consistent use of three languages — Northern Pinghua, Guiliu Hua, and Mandarin — across three generations.



**Figure 4: Intergenerational Distribution of Consistent Language Use: Northern Pinghua, Guiliu Hua, and Mandarin**

The results revealed that Northern Pinghua (NP) remained the predominant language used in conversations within and between the first and second generations. As shown in Figure 4, 90.32% ( $n = 28$ ) of participants reported that their grandparents primarily used NP, while 93.55% ( $n = 29$ ) stated that their parents also predominantly spoke NP. Mandarin was not reported to be in use among these two generations.

In contrast, language use among the third generation showed greater variation. A total of 38.71% ( $n = 12$ ) of the youth and children primarily used Mandarin, while 19.35% ( $n = 6$ ) used Northern Pinghua (NP), and 16.13% ( $n = 5$ ) used Guiliu Hua. When communicating with the first generation, 32.26% ( $n = 10$ ) of respondents reported that third-generation family members always used NP, 19.35% ( $n = 6$ ) used Mandarin, and 3.23% ( $n = 1$ ) used Guiliu Hua. Similarly, in interactions with the second generation (i.e., their parents), 35.48% ( $n = 11$ ) reported that the third generation always used Mandarin, 19.35% ( $n = 6$ ) used NP, and 3.23% ( $n = 1$ ) used Guiliu Hua.



## 2. Discussion

The research objective is to investigate the pattern of the intergenerational transmission of NP. The findings showed that NP was still widely used in the first and the second generations, but witnessed a decrease of use in the third generation. It also revealed that there was an increase in the use of Mandarin in the third generation. It suggests that NP is the primary choice of older generations in communication, but this dialect is losing users in the younger generation. What's more, parts of the old generation and parents did not communicate with their children in NP, indicating that there is a trend that NP is not likely to be transmitted to children. These results are consistent with previous studies by Sagimin (2020), Stavans and Ashkenazi (2020), and Yu et al. (2023), all of which reported disruptions in intergenerational language transmission in Indonesia, Spain, and China, respectively.

On the Ethnologue Language Vitality Scale (EGIDS), Level 6b (Threatened) is “the language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.” and Level 7 (Shifting) is “The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.” The study revealed that part of the third generation were still using NP, but some were not, which means that NP is losing users. Therefore, the vitality of NP of the sample size would likely be classified as Level 6b (Threatened).

On the language vitality and endangerment scales (UNESCO, 2003) regarding to the intergenerational Language Transmission, if most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home), then this language would be classified as “Vulnerable”. If children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home, then it would be under the level “Definitely endangered”. This study revealed that parts of the second generation do not talk to their children in NP, and as Figure 3 shows, in the third generation, the most frequently used language in the family domain is Mandarin (38.71%,  $n = 12$ ) but not NP (19.35%,  $n = 6$ ). Therefore, the degree of endangerment of NP would be somewhere between the Level “Vulnerable” and the Level “Definitely endangered” of the sample size.

Therefore, measuring NP vitality by either scale, it can be concluded that within the sample in Dacun village of Guilin, NP was already in a state of “threatened” or “vulnerable/endangered”. This result aligns with the reports by the UNESCO World Atlas of Language and the claims made by the linguistic experts involving in the Chinese Language Resources Protection Project, defining NP is now an endangered language.

## 3. Conclusion

The study findings suggest several limitations for the NP language policy and planning reviewers. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 34 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, while the use of surveys provided valuable insights into intergenerational language transmission in families, there is the absence of qualitative data such as in-depth interviews or participant observation. Therefore, this approach limits the in-depth understanding of the language practices of NP.

Despite its limitations, this study enhances our understanding of language use and the intergenerational transmission of Northern Pinghua (NP) in multilingual Chinese families. Future research should build on these findings by using larger samples and mixed methods to explore the complexities of language maintenance. It is also important to examine additional factors, such as urbanization, migration, language contact, attitudes, exposure time, and strategies to encourage younger generations to learn and use NP.

Preserving NP is crucial for safeguarding linguistic and cultural heritage. Villagers must recognize the challenges ahead and actively use NP not only within families but also in daily interactions with friends, neighbors, and local businesses. Government support, such as funding for language documentation, NP education programs, and cultural recognition, can play a key role in maintaining the vitality of NP.

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