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The Influence of Migrant Population Inflow on the Use of Local Dialect in Hainan Free Trade Port: Questionnaire Survey Phenomenon and Preliminary Causes

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of migrant population inflow on Hainan's local dialect through questionnaire-based research. The findings reveal significant linguistic shifts while identifying underlying causes, providing theoretical foundations and practical insights for preserving Hainan's regional dialects and fostering multicultural harmony. Building on these findings, the study further explores generational differences in dialect use, attitudes toward dialect inheritance, and the influence of social, educational, and media factors. It highlights the tension between cultural identity and practical communication needs in urbanized, multicultural contexts, offering guidance for targeted policies and community initiatives aimed at sustaining linguistic diversity and promoting intergenerational transmission of Hainan's dialects.

Keywords: Hainan Free Trade Port; migrant population inflow; local dialect use; questionnaire survey

1. Introduction

The development of Hainan Free Trade Port has attracted a significant influx of migrants, triggering demographic shifts that have profoundly impacted local society and cultural landscapes. Among these changes, the utilization of regional dialects has drawn particular attention. As vital carriers of regional culture, dialect practices not only reflect social transformations but also shape the preservation and evolution of local traditions. Therefore, studying how migrant influx affects dialect usage in Hainan Free Trade Port holds substantial practical significance for understanding regional cultural dynamics. In addition, such research can provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators in designing strategies to promote cultural integration while safeguarding linguistic heritage. By examining patterns of dialect retention, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission, scholars can better comprehend how local communities negotiate identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity amid rapid urbanization and economic development. Furthermore, understanding dialect dynamics may contribute to broader discussions on multilingualism, language planning, and the role of language in shaping social networks and cultural capital within rapidly transforming urban regions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire design covers multiple aspects including demographic characteristics, language use scenarios, categories of communication partners, linguistic attitudes, and cultural identity. It references the "Report on the Language Life Status in China" and

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classic sociolinguistic scales, with localized adaptations based on the actual usage environments of Hainan dialects (such as Hainanese, Danzhou dialect, and Junhua). The core modules include: the frequency of switching between Mandarin and dialects in daily communication (five-point scale), measurement of language selection preferences in cross-group communication, assessment of attitudes toward the phenomenon of "understanding but not speaking" in dialects, and evaluation of recognition of whether "dialects represent local identity". Some open-ended questions guide respondents to describe specific linguistic conflict scenarios, for example, their active use of Hainanese when communicating with migrant vendors at the market, to obtain qualitative materials supplementing quantitative data [1]. The questionnaire underwent three rounds of small-scale pilot testing (n=45), with a Cronbach's α coefficient reaching 0.83, indicating good reliability.

2.2. Sample Selection

Using stratified quota sampling, survey sites were established in key areas including Haikou Jiangdong New District, Sanya Central Business District, and Yangpu Economic Development Zone, covering industries with concentrated migrant workers such as construction, tourism, retail, and logistics. These locations were specifically selected to capture a representative cross-section of economic activities and demographic characteristics, ensuring that both high-density migrant work zones and residential neighborhoods were included in the study. Local residents were defined as those with ancestral roots in Hainan who have resided in Hainan for three generations or less, while the migrant population refers to non-local residents with a minimum residency of six months in Hainan, allowing for sufficient exposure to local social and cultural practices. Questionnaires were distributed through a combination of community grid worker assistance and targeted online platform distribution, including WeChat and other local community networks, resulting in 1,278 valid responses—583 from local residents and 695 from migrant population, achieving an 89.7% response rate. Respondents were predominantly aged 22-55, with males accounting for 52.4% and 41.6% holding college degrees or higher. The sample structure aligns closely with the characteristics of the migrant population from Hainan's Seventh National Population Census, demonstrating strong representativeness [2]. Additionally, this methodological approach ensured the inclusion of diverse occupational groups and age cohorts, enhancing the reliability of findings regarding social integration, cultural adaptation, and language use patterns among different population segments.

3. Phenomenon Analysis of Questionnaire Survey

3.1. Changes in the Frequency of Dialect Use

Amid continuous influx of migrant populations, local residents' language practices have undergone significant transformations. A community household survey in Haikou's Meilan District revealed that among three-generation cohabiting families, less than 30% of grandchildren in three-generation households actively use Hainanese, while Mandarin dominates their daily communication. Some younger individuals even face difficulties in dialect usage, indicating barriers to dialect return. Data from a Sanya Bay tourist service area shows Mandarin usage reaches 91.3% when local businesses negotiate with migrant workers, while dialects retreat to family circles [3]. Field observations at Yangpu Development Zone construction sites further demonstrate that in multi-ethnic mixed work environments, dialect communication has nearly disappeared. Language choices now prioritize functional efficiency over cultural identity expression. Specific data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Changes in Dialect Use Frequency Across Different Social Contexts in Hainan.

Where it is used	Frequency change of dialect use
family	The frequency of use has decreased, and some young people also mix in Mandarin when communicating with their elders
community	The frequency of using Chinese dialect in neighborhood communication is reduced, and the communication atmosphere is not as strong as before
operational site	When communicating with migrants, most of them use Mandarin and dialects are rarely used

3.2. Differences in Willingness to Communicate Dialects

Field observations in Haikou's Meilan District reveal striking generational divides and identity barriers in linguistic interactions across urban-rural fringe communities. While migrant workers exhibit cultural curiosity toward dialects—some developing basic Hainanese vocabulary through prolonged residence—they predominantly use Mandarin for precise communication. At a seafood market in Sanya Bay, vendors from Hunan and Sichuan admitted: "We understand some phrases, but our speech sounds awkward, fearing price or portion discrepancies." Meanwhile, local youth increasingly adopt pragmatic language strategies in public spaces [4]. A questionnaire survey at Yangpu Economic Development Zone's community service center found that 18-35-year-olds perceive Mandarin as "more neutral and inclusive." Young parents even correct their children's accents during tutoring sessions, with the tendency to avoid rural-sounding accents becoming an implicit linguistic preference. This mutual linguistic convergence isn't mere substitution but an inevitable outcome of urbanization, reflecting informal consensus among groups adapting to efficient communication demands. The marginalization of dialects in public discourse mirrors both the prioritization of communicative efficiency in mobile societies and the gradual erosion of regional cultural symbols amidst modernization. It is worth noting that some middle-aged and elderly local residents express their concern about the shrinking space for the use of dialect, believing that "we can't speak it at home, so the root is broken". However, their daily language practice still makes adjustments according to the real environment, forming a tension structure of emotional identity and behavioral choice [5].

3.3. Attitude Towards Dialect Inheritance

In terms of attitudes toward dialect preservation, a significant disconnect exists between social cognition and practical actions. At an elderly activity center in Qionghua District, Haikou, several local seniors gathered for casual conversation, their words reflecting deep concern over the declining prevalence of Hainanese dialect: "Our neighbors used to speak the local dialect, but now even grandchildren can't keep up." This emotional identification among middle-aged and elderly groups reveals a profound attachment to dialects as cultural roots. However, despite this strong cultural awareness, it has failed to effectively build intergenerational bridges or translate into practical mechanisms for inheritance. In most households, parents who are proficient in dialects still prefer using Mandarin during children's early education stages, believing this enhances language standardization and improves their social adaptability. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in residential areas surrounding key primary and secondary schools, where families rationally incorporate language choice into educational strategies. Migrant worker groups acknowledged the value of dialects in understanding regional culture during interviews, yet generally viewed them as non-essential skills, with participation rates in community dialect corners or folk custom workshops remaining below 15%. A 2023 project report from a public welfare organization in Sanya's Tianya District revealed that activity participation rates correlate significantly with household registration status, with

non-local residents often categorizing such activities as "regional cultural exhibitions" rather than personal cultural practices. The gap between intention and action reflects the structural dilemma of individuals in language inheritance in the process of urbanization: cultural identity is restricted by the functionalist logic of social interaction, and emotional value is difficult to break through the daily life order dominated by practical rationality.

4. Preliminary Cause Sorting

4.1. Language Accessibility Needs

In Haikou's Longhua District urban village renovation area, conversations between vendors and customers at morning markets predominantly use Mandarin. A local seafood vendor with over three decades of experience remarked: "Nowadays more than half of our customers don't understand Hainanese dialect; speaking local dialects actually hinders business." According to the 2022 Migrant Population Monitoring Report by Hainan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, the province's migrant permanent residents have exceeded 2.3 million, accounting for 24.7% of the total resident population. In major cities like Haikou and Sanya, some communities even see migrant populations surpassing 60%. For instance, the 2020 census revealed 1,088,143 non-local residents permanently residing in Hainan, with Guangdong Province topping the list at 138,000. Against this backdrop, language's instrumental value has been unprecedentedly amplified. Mandarin, serving as a neutral medium for cross-regional communication, has gradually become embedded in core social interactions. Even family conversations show linguistic shifts: A parent survey at Qiongzhan Primary School showed 78.3% of respondents prioritized Mandarin when interacting with their children, even between local residents. This linguistic adaptation stems not from abandoning dialects, but rather reflects rational choices based on social cost-benefit analysis in urban environments, marking a profound shift from "cultural symbolism" to "practical orientation" in language usage.

4.2. Cultural Integration and Multicultural Shock

At a weekend cultural salon hosted by a youth activity center in Sanya Bay Road community, Cantonese pop music and Sichuan dialect stand-up comedy took turns on stage, while Hainanese folk songs only briefly appeared as part of the "intangible cultural heritage exhibition" segment. The restructuring of urban demographic composition has fostered a decentralized trend in cultural expression, with the geographical boundaries of dialects becoming increasingly blurred. According to the 2023 Hainan Youth Cultural Identity Survey, only 31.6% of those aged 15-30 can fluently engage in complete conversations using Hainanese, a nearly 20 percentage point decrease from ten years ago. This phenomenon aligns with the overall decline in dialect proficiency across Hainan Province, attributed to changes in educational environments, accelerated urbanization, diversified cultural consumption, social transformations, shifts in family dynamics, evolving social interactions, and shifting linguistic awareness. Notably, the group's positive response rate to "whether dialects represent identity" stands at merely 42.1%, significantly lower than the national average for similar cities. As foreign cultures permeate social networks, commercial spaces, and lifestyles, they are reshaping the cultural cognitive frameworks of younger generations. Consequently, dialects are gradually being marginalized as symbols of outdated cultural identity, with their emotional bonding role in multicultural interactions continually diminishing.

4.3. Education and Media Influence

In classrooms of key primary schools in Haikou City, Mandarin reading voices are uniformly synchronized, and classroom interactions predominantly use Mandarin during breaks. The 2021 Basic Education Language Usage Assessment by Hainan Provincial Department of Education revealed that 93.7% of primary and secondary schools implement Mandarin instruction across all curricula, with dialect usage on campus remaining below

5%. The polarization of media ecosystems has further exacerbated linguistic imbalance. According to the "2024 Status, Issues, and Development Strategies for Dialect TV Programs" report, although dialect programs accounted for merely 2.4% of broadcast time on Hainan Broadcasting Station in 2022, they play a vital role in cultural preservation and regional identity expression, particularly in traditional opera programs. While sporadic dialect content appears on short video platforms, its reach pales in comparison to mainstream Mandarin content. The standardized tendencies in education systems combined with concentrated mass media dissemination have created a hierarchical system of linguistic values. This leaves younger generations without sustained dialect exposure during critical language learning phases, allowing dialect competence gaps to evolve from subtle cognitive biases into visible intergenerational divides.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

The accelerated development of Hainan Free Trade Port has triggered demographic shifts, with the proportion of non-local permanent residents growing at an average annual rate of 12.7% since 2018, leading to profound restructuring in linguistic ecology. Empirical studies reveal that dialect usage among local youth in family settings has significantly declined. For instance, Data from Guangdong Province in 2022, used for comparative reference, showed only 38% of 15–25-year-olds could communicate fluently in Cantonese daily, down from 79% in 2000, illustrating similar trends of dialect decline observed in Hainan. Meanwhile, Mandarin usage increased within family contexts, with 65% of three-generation households in Guangzhou-Shenzhen core areas using Mandarin. This indicates that dialect usage among local youth in family settings dropped from 68.3% in 2012 to 39.1% in 2023, reflecting a continuous weakening of dialect's pragmatic functions. A deeper issue lies in the disconnect between attitudes and practices: although 57.4% of surveyed youth recognize dialects' cultural value, only 18.6% actively use them in daily communication, revealing a phenomenon of "cultural identity retention but behavioral retreat." This cultural fracture stems from complex interactions among multiple social mechanisms. Under the dominance of linguistic instrumental rationality, Mandarin's maximization as a cross-group communication medium leads individuals to strategically avoid dialect use in public spaces. Concurrently, urban spatial restructuring promotes homogenized cultural expressions, with standardized language management implemented in commercial complexes and shared office spaces, inadvertently compressing dialects' survival space. The education system has long implemented the single-language teaching policy, supplemented by the highly centralized dissemination of media content, which results in insufficient exposure of dialect in the key stage of language socialization, resulting in a structural fracture in the intergenerational inheritance chain.

5.2. Recommendations

To advance dialect preservation, a dual approach combining institutional support and social mobilization is essential. Integrating Hainanese dialect into local curricula through weekly cultural immersion classes for lower primary grades—combining phonetic perception, folk recitation, and situational dialogues—enhances language acquisition through embodied experiences. Community organizations should regularly host informal programs like dialect storytelling workshops and local opera apprenticeships, fostering oral heritage networks within families and neighborhoods. Mainstream media should establish quota mechanisms for dialect content, encouraging Hainan TV and local radio to expand public service programs featuring regional dialects, thereby significantly boosting their visibility and influence in public communication. Leveraging digital technology, a dialect audio archive should be created to collect representative pronunciations from various regions, ensuring dynamic preservation and open sharing. Local govern-

ments must incorporate linguistic diversity into cultural governance frameworks by issuing the "Hainan Dialect Preservation and Inheritance Action Plan," clarifying collaborative responsibilities among education, broadcasting, and cultural tourism departments while establishing dedicated funding to transition dialect protection from fragmented efforts to systematic institutional arrangements.

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