

## Language Attitudes in Xining, Qinghai\*

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Following up ethnographic observations that indicated residents of Xining in Qinghai Province generally had low regard for the local dialect, this study is a quantitative investigation of the attitudes of Xining residents towards the Qinghai dialect. Residents responded to a questionnaire designed to measure the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of their attitude towards their local dialect and Standard Chinese. The results of the survey are mixed: the behavioral component suggests a negative attitude, the cognitive component suggests a positive attitude, and the affective component is mixed. Smaller follow-up surveys carried out in Xi'an and Chengdu suggest that, in comparison with those places, residents of Xining have a negative attitude toward their local dialect. This research suggests there are a variety of attitudes toward local dialects in China and that further work should be done to further our understanding of how dialects are changing in China today.

Key words: Chinese dialects, language attitudes, sociolinguistics

### 1. Introduction

My dissertation (Dede 1999) describes and analyzes a rapid, ongoing change in the syntax of locative expressions in the Xining dialect spoken in Qinghai Province, China. The older pattern, in which the locative verb occurs at the end of the sentence, is changing to the Standard Chinese pattern, in which the verb occurs in the middle of the sentence. I speculate that the change is likely to be completed extremely rapidly because the new pattern is associated with highly educated individuals, a social group with great prestige in the community.

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I came to this speculation after hearing Xining residents make disparaging comments about their own dialect while I did fieldwork there in 1995-1996. These comments were in stark contrast with the positive statements I had heard from people of other cities about their own dialects. I therefore decided to carry out a quantitative study to verify the ethnographic data, which suggested that Xining residents have a negative attitude toward their dialect.

## 2. Background material

My initial hypothesis was that predominantly negative attitudes toward the Xining dialect could be shown to exist, and that these negative attitudes would explain what I believed were rapid changes in the dialect.

Most general works on the study of attitudes analyze attitudes into three components: “affect (feelings about the attitude object), cognition (thoughts or beliefs about the attitude object) and behaviorist (a predisposition to act in a certain way towards the object)” (Oakes 2001:29). While these components may or may not have any psychological reality (Eagly & Chaiken 1993:13), they provide a useful framework for discussing language attitudes and a foothold into a method for gauging them. For example, informants may be asked about where and when they are likely to use a particular linguistic variety, thereby revealing something of the behavioral component of their attitude; informants may be asked whether they think the linguistic variety is *beautiful* or *melodious*, thereby revealing an affective component to their attitude; and, finally, informants may be asked the degree to which one linguistic variety is comparable to another, revealing something of the cognitive component of their attitude. This tripartite componential analysis will inform the remainder of this study, structuring the discussion of this research.

There has been very little work done on attitudes towards Chinese dialects. Zhou (2000) is a detailed, quantitative study that compares attitudes towards Standard Chinese held by two national minority groups, Tibetans and Koreans. This study found that there are significant differences between the two, and that these differences correlate to success in the educational system, among other things. We might suspect that positive attitudes toward Standard Chinese among ethnic Chinese groups also correlates with success in the educational system, but this study did not address that question. Zhou does not frame his findings in terms of the three-way componential analysis described above. If the componential analysis were imposed on the results, it would show that Zhou measured cognitive and affective components (both positive toward Standard Chinese for the Koreans and generally negative for the Tibetans), but had little to say about the behavioral component.

Kalmar, Yong and Hong (1987) is, to my knowledge, the only detailed, quantitative study carried out in China on a Chinese-speaking community's attitudes toward the Standard Language, and by comparison, their local dialect. Based on the judgments of 24 students in Guangzhou, by means of a matched-guise test, this study found a "typical" H/L distinction in attitudes: Standard Chinese the ("high" language) vs. same with a Cantonese accent (the "low" language). The high variety is recognized as conferring social advantages, while the low variety retains the affection of its speakers (Kalmar et al. 1987:507). These results probably confirm popular impressions of attitudes towards dialect differences, but the study is limited by both its social and geographic range. Further, the study only investigates affective attitude components, leaving open questions of comparable cognitive and behavioral components.

### 3. Hypotheses

Given my initial impressions of popular attitudes toward the dialect, a reasonable hypothesis would be that Xining residents hold a negative attitude toward the Xining dialect. This would be exhibited in affective, cognitive, and behaviorist components. (1) The affective component would be manifest in the use of negative adjectives to describe the dialect, using terms like *boring*, *stiff*, *crude*, or *restricted*. (2) The cognitive component would be revealed in statements about its communicative ability as compared with Standard Chinese. (3) The behaviorist components would be revealed in statements about situations in which the dialect is used.

Further, I hypothesize that the negative attitude toward the Xining dialect would extend across all social groups, but would be most pronounced in highly educated individuals.

### 4. Methodology

In order to evaluate this basic hypothesis, I created a questionnaire<sup>1</sup> that was filled out by 102 respondents, some with only partial answers. The only restriction on respondents was that they had been born and raised in Xining and environs. In this way, I was assured that all respondents had exposure to the local dialect from an early age and could be sure they had a high degree of familiarity with it.

The greatest challenge to the project was finding people willing to be questioned. Working without benefit of an official host organization, I pestered friends and "friends of friends" to fill out the questionnaire. As a result, the sample population is biased

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix for a translated version.

towards certain social groups. Because many of my friends and acquaintances are associated with institutions of higher learning, many of the respondents have received, or are studying for, advanced academic degrees. The mean educational level of the sample population is the equivalent of an undergraduate college education. This is certainly much higher than the actual educational level of the city, which is probably around the equivalent of a junior middle-school graduate. Nonetheless, because this bias is in favor of a particular social group (the educated class) that is looked up to for setting social norms, the results of this survey may be regarded as indicative of the idealized norms for the population.

The questionnaire relies on self-reporting to gauge the behavioral component of the respondents' language attitudes. That is, the only information the questionnaire produces about language behavior is based on the respondents' recollections, suppositions, and reflections on the situations in which they use one variety or another. Memories being what they are, this is an inherently problematic approach. However, the questionnaire results support much of what I observed in the field, suggesting the questionnaire techniques were valid.

## **5. Results**

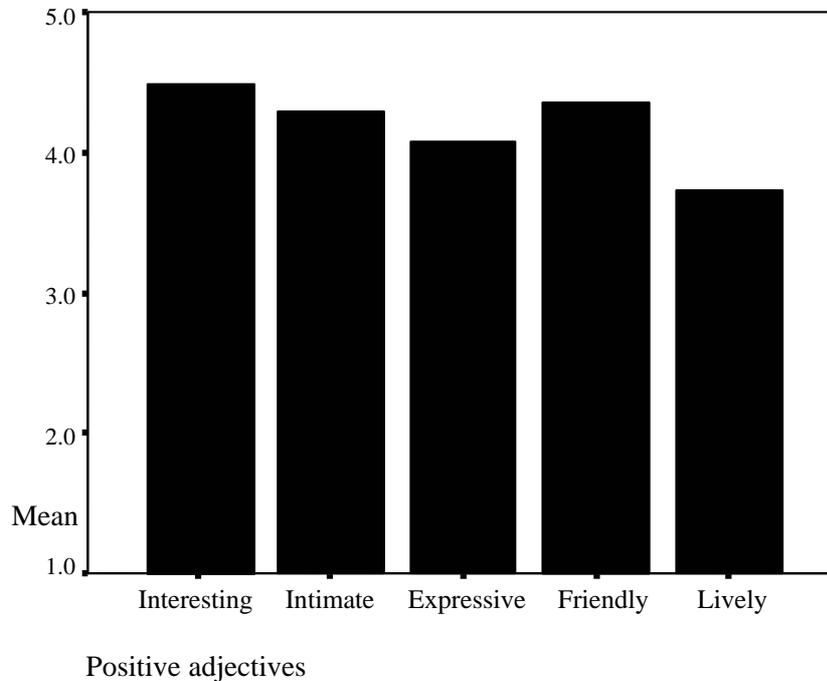
The results of the survey were mixed. The affective component reflects positive and negative attitudes, the cognitive component is positive, while the behavioral data suggest a negative evaluation of the Xining dialect.

As mentioned earlier, the sample is skewed towards more highly educated Xining residents. Therefore, in addition to reporting overall findings, I report the results for two demographic variables: gender and education. The education category was subdivided into two groups: those that have no college education and those that are college graduates or currently studying in college.

### **5.1 Affective component**

The positive aspect of the affective component is clearly demonstrated by the high scores given to adjectives with a positive connotation. Respondents were asked to rate the way the adjectives *interesting*, *intimate*, *expressive*, *friendly*, and *lively* described the Qinghai dialect. As demonstrated in Chart 1 below, their evaluation is quite high:

Chart 1: Mean Values of Positive Adjectives



For each of these adjectives, the mean response was around 4.0, which on a scale of 1-5 is rather high. These results are similar to the findings of Kalmer et al. (1987), supporting the notion that the dialect maintains a place close to people's hearts.

Further evidence supporting the positive affective evaluation is demonstrated in the relatively low ratings given negative adjectives. The adjective *crude* returned a mean value slightly less than 3.0. Given its status as a regional dialect, one might have expected the respondents to rate *crude* higher than they actually did. The fact that it is rated a good deal lower than *intimate*, for example, supports the positive affectual evaluation. No significant differences for gender ( $t_{94} > .01$ ) or education ( $t_{98} > .01$ ) were found for this data.

The negative aspect of the affective component is demonstrated in respondents' affect towards the use of dialect in various situations. Respondents were asked what language they preferred to use in various locations, as distinct from what they usually use in those same situations.<sup>2</sup> Only in the category *home* did they respond with a greater

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix questions 7 and 8.

than 50% preference for the Qinghai dialect, as shown in the summary data in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Situational Preference for Language Variety (n~99)

	Qinghai dialect	Standard Chinese	Both
	%	%	%
Home	<b>63</b>	32	4
Work	2	<b>94</b>	4
School	3	<b>92</b>	4
Friends	38	<b>51</b>	11
Vegetable Market	36	<b>54</b>	9
Mall*	5	<b>91</b>	4
Media	3	<b>97</b>	0

\*Marginal difference for gender  $X^2(1) = .016$

Clearly, in all situations outside of the home, there is a preference for Standard Chinese, suggesting an underlying negative affectual evaluation of Qinghai dialect. No significant differences for gender ( $X^2(1) > .01$ ) or education ( $X^2(1) > .01$ ) were found.

Further evidence for a negative evaluation exists in the comparison of responses to two questions about how respondents would like their children to use Qinghai dialect. The first question asked if respondents would like their children to be able to understand ('by listening' *tingdedong* 聽得懂) Qinghai dialect. The results were overwhelmingly *yes* (80 *yes* vs. 3 *no*, and 19 *no opinion*). The second question asked if respondents would like their children to be able to speak Qinghai dialect. The results for this question were also mostly *yes* (62 *yes* vs. 13 *no*, and 27 *no opinion*), but not by as large a margin. This suggests that some people recognize the potential for discrimination against those who speak Qinghai dialect and the hope that their children will avoid it.

In sum, the adjective data suggests an overall positive affective evaluation, but the situational preference data and the data regarding children's use suggest a negative evaluation.

## 5.2 Cognitive component

This section of the questionnaire was meant to gauge the respondents' beliefs about the Qinghai dialect, particularly with regard to its capabilities. As a linguist, it is my belief that all languages are equally capable of communicating whatever their speakers require it to communicate. However, I know that non-linguists have different ideas about the complexity of different languages. Questions 1-4 in the Appendix are

designed to tap into “non-scientific” ideas the respondents may have about the Qinghai dialect. My assumption was that non-linguists would regard a prestigious variety as difficult, because it would have obtuse ways of communicating nuanced meanings and abstruse thoughts, while on the other hand they would consider a less prestigious variety as less difficult, because it would not need to communicate such things.

The first question asked the respondents to rate the difficulty of the Qinghai dialect. The mean of 3.9 (1=difficult, 5=easy) suggests respondents do not consider it a difficult medium, which, according to my assumptions, would indicate a negative attitude. However, the second question asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of the Qinghai dialect as a means of communication. The mean of 3.4 (5=can, 1=cannot, reverse-coded) indicates that respondents generally believe the Qinghai dialect is an effective communicative tool suggesting a positive attitude.

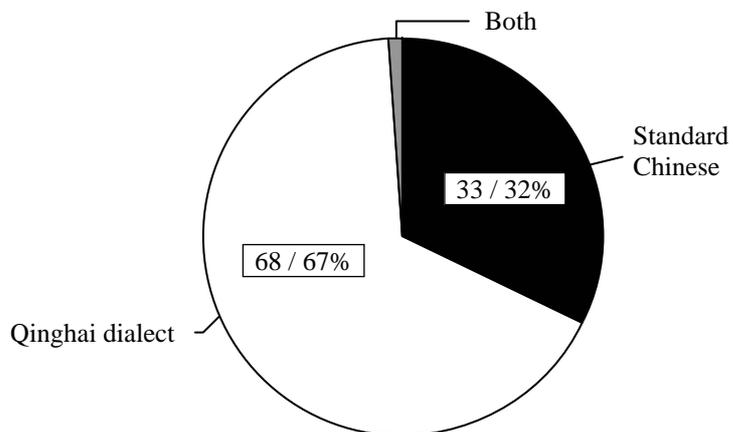
The third and fourth questions ask respondents to make direct comparisons between Standard Chinese and the Qinghai dialect. Respondents were asked whether all the meanings of Standard Chinese could be expressed in the Qinghai dialect, and vice versa. First, respondents’ views on the dialect’s ability to express all the meanings that can be expressed in Standard Chinese returned a mean of 3.4 (5=can and 1=cannot, reverse-coded). Second, respondents’ views on Standard Chinese’s ability to express all that can be expressed in the dialect returned a mean of 2.4. Respondents believe the dialect’s ability to express meaning is significantly higher than Standard Chinese’s ability ( $t_{100} < .01$ ), suggesting there is a positive cognitive component to their attitudes about the dialect. No significant differences for gender ( $t_{94} > .01$ ) or education ( $t_{98} > .01$ ) were found.

### 5.3 Behavioral component

Finally, the behavioral component reflects a functionally very restricted dialect. The data from the questions, which ask respondents to reflect on which linguistic variety they use when speaking with various people, show that Qinghai dialect is functionally restricted to use with family.

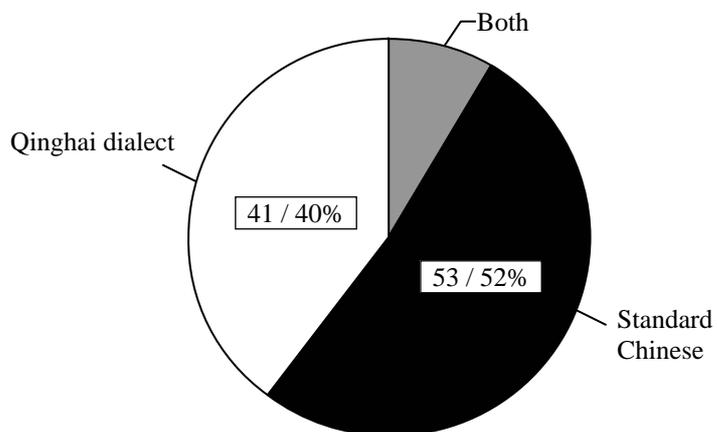
To demonstrate this, consider Chart 2, showing the difference in the number of respondents reporting they mostly use Qinghai dialect (n=68; 67%) with their parents, as opposed to using Standard Chinese (n=33; 32%):

Chart 2: Use of Language Variety with Parents



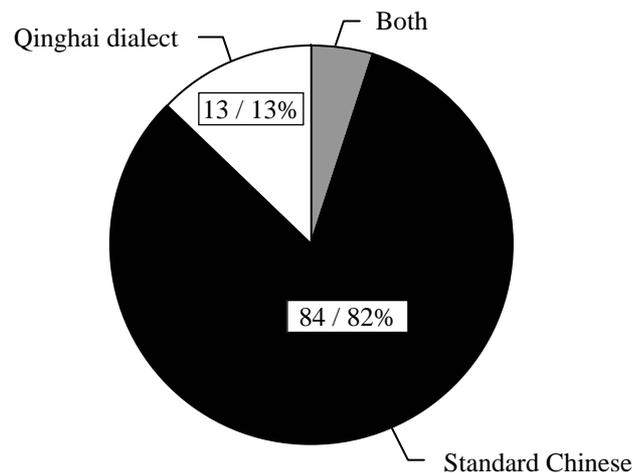
By contrast, Chart 3 shows the difference in the number of respondents saying they use Qinghai dialect with their friends (41; 40%) as opposed to Standard Chinese (53; 52%):

Chart 3: Use of Language Variety with Friends



Finally, consider Chart 4 comparing use of Qinghai dialect (13; 13%) with co-workers versus using Standard Chinese (84; 82%):

Chart 4: Use of Language Variety with Co-workers



The data suggest that Qinghai dialect is heavily restricted to use with family members. The data also suggest that as one moves out from the family into larger societal units, dialect use diminishes. Respondents nearly exclusively report using Standard Chinese with police ( $n=98$ , 96% vs. Qinghai dialect  $n=3$ , 2%) and teachers ( $n=97$ , 95% vs. Qinghai dialect  $n=3$ , 2%). Taken as a whole, this behavioral data suggest the dialect is functionally restricted to use with family members.

A significant difference in gender was found in reported use with parents ( $X^2(1) < .01$ ). Females reported using dialect with parents more than males. No other significant differences were found for gender or education.

## 6. Discussion

While these results do not entirely confirm the original hypotheses, there is clearly a mix of positive and negative attitudes toward the Qinghai dialect. For example, there was data in the affect section, primarily regarding children's use, which indicates there are negative affective attitudes towards the dialect. A second study designed specifically to assess the affective component of Xining speaker's attitudes would provide more sound data on which to draw conclusions about the affective component of speakers' attitudes toward the dialect.

Similarly, the cognitive and behavioral data are mixed. The cognitive component seems to represent a positive regard for the dialect, while the behavioral data suggest it is regarded negatively.

Returning to the ethnographic data comparing language attitudes in Xining with other places in China, I gathered some very preliminary data from Xi'an and Chengdu, two large provincial capitals in the Mandarin dialect area. This preliminary data indicate that Xining residents' evaluation of their dialect is somewhat lower than that of Chengdu and Xi'an residents.

During the summer of 2001 I made brief visits to Xi'an and Chengdu and administered the same questionnaire with three differences. First, I administered the questionnaire orally, because the written version had the words *Qinghai dialect* on it, which would have been confusing for the respondents. Second, I rearranged the order of some of the questions and deleted a few of the others. Finally, due to time and other constraints, I found only 15 respondents in each location. So, although the results obtained have to be taken as preliminary, still they are not without interest.

Compared to Xining, Xi'an respondents exhibited a more positive attitude toward the local Shaanxi dialect, and Chengdu respondents exhibited the most positive attitude toward their local Sichuan dialect. The cognitive and affective components are much like the data for Xining shown above, only more so. Further, as far as the affective component is concerned, the data support the observation above. Compare the preference data in Tables 2 and 3 below with that of Table 1 above:

Table 2: Situational Preference for Language Variety, Xi'an (n=15)

	Shaanxi dialect	Standard Chinese	Both
	%	%	%
Home	33	<b>67</b>	0
Work	7	<b>93</b>	0
School	0	<b>100</b>	0
Friends	<b>47</b>	33	20
Vegetable Market	<b>53</b>	40	7
Mall	7	<b>93</b>	0
Media	0	<b>100</b>	0

Table 3: Situational Preference for Language Variety, Chengdu (n=15)

	Chengdu dialect	Standard Chinese	Both
	%	%	%
Home	<b>80</b>	13	7
Work	27	<b>53</b>	20
School	13	<b>80</b>	7
Friends	<b>87</b>	13	0
Vegetable Market	<b>100</b>	0	0
Mall	<b>53</b>	40	7
Media	13	<b>80</b>	7

In Xining, only in the situation *home* was there a greater than 50% preference for hearing dialect. In Xi'an, the category *friends* and *vegetable market* also show a greater than 50% preference for dialect. In Chengdu, in addition to those categories, *mall* (that is, when shopping at a retail outlet of some kind, like a department store, etc.) also exhibits a greater than 50% preference for dialect.

In the behavioral component, Xi'an and Chengdu also seem to be somewhat restricted, but not as restricted as in Xining. Compare the Xining data in Charts 3, 4 and 5 above with the data for Xi'an and Chengdu in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Behavioral Data in Three Cities

	Xining (n=102)			Xi'an (n=15)			Chengdu (n=15)		
	Dialect	Standard	Both	Dialect	Standard	Both	Dialect	Standard	Both
Parents	67%	32%	1%	60%	40%	0%	87%	6%	6%
Friends	40%	52%	8%	20%	60%	20%	87%	6%	6%
Co-workers	13%	82%	5%	13%	80%	7%	67%	13%	20%

This comparison of the three metropolitan areas is presented in Chart 5 below, which plots the percentage of respondents using dialect with different interlocutors.

Chart 5: Behavioral Data in Three Metropolitan Areas

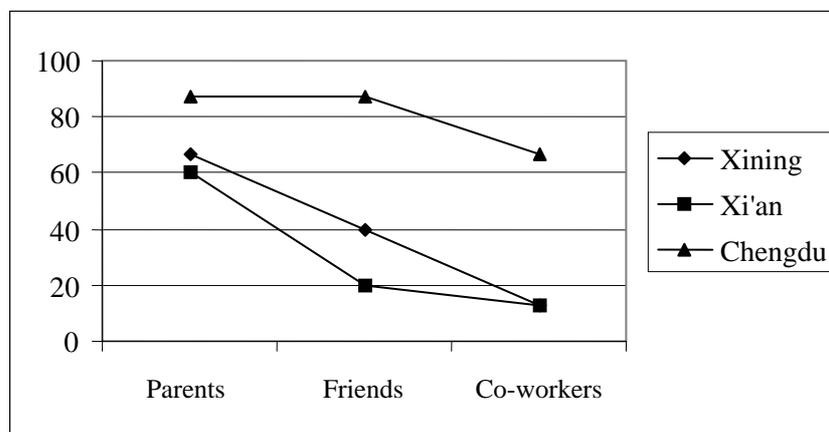


Chart 5 shows the differences between the three cities. While Xining and Xi'an respondents report dramatically decreased use of dialect in social circles farther from the home, the Chengdu residents' reported decrease is far less dramatic.

In the case of Xi'an, as one moves from family to friends to co-workers, the use of Standard Chinese increases, just as in Xining. However, unlike Xining, there is some use of dialect with police (Shaanxi dialect  $n=4$ , 27%, Standard Chinese  $n=9$ , 60%; for both  $n=2$ , 13%).

In the case of Chengdu, there is a similar increase in the use of Standard Chinese as one moves from family to co-workers, but to a much less dramatic extent. Even with co-workers, 67% of Chengdu respondents report they use dialect. More dramatically, with police, there is a clear majority use of dialect (Chengdu dialect  $n=13$ , 87%, Standard Chinese  $n=2$ , 13%).

To sum up the comparative section, this preliminary evidence suggests there are a variety of attitudes toward local dialects across Chinese metropolitan centers. In comparison with other Mandarin dialect cities, Xining's attitudes seem to be less positive.

## 7. Future work

This kind of survey needs to be extended to more metropolitan centers and more sophisticated investigatory techniques need to be included, such as match-guise techniques. It would be interesting to see the extent to which there are a variety of attitudes towards dialect in the country, or to investigate patterns of attitudes towards dialect across metropolitan centers.

This also raises questions about the meaning of *dialect* in China in contrast with the use of the term in Europe, America, and perhaps other places. In Europe and America, the term *dialect* can connote ‘sub-standard, low, or non-normal speech’. Chinese *fangyan* (方言), on the other hand, often translated ‘dialect’, but literally meaning something like ‘regional speech’, does not necessarily carry such negative connotations. If we return to the question of why low prestige varieties persist, we may tentatively respond that *fangyan* are not necessarily low prestige, and so, their persistence is not necessarily threatened in that way.

This is not to suggest that *fangyan* are not changing now under the influence of Standard Chinese, nor is it meant to suggest that some *fangyan* are not threatened with extinction. Indeed, as more of the population flees the countryside for better economic prospects in the cities, some rural varieties are sure to vanish. What this research suggests is that there are urban populations with sufficiently positive attitudes towards their local *fangyan* so that these varieties will likely persist in the future as distinct, autonomous varieties, albeit certainly in altered forms.

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## Appendix I: The questionnaire

Note the following abbreviations: sd=standard deviation, q=Qinghai dialect, p=Standard Chinese, b=Both; y=yes, n=no

1. How do you rate the degree of difficulty of the Qinghai dialect?  
1=difficult, 5=easy (mean 3.9; sd 1.3)
2. Can the Qinghai dialect allow people to communicate effectively?  
1=can, 5=cannot (mean 2.6; sd 1.5)
3. Can the Qinghai dialect express all the meanings of Standard Chinese?  
1=can, 5 cannot (mean 2.6; 1.5)
4. Can Standard Chinese express all the meanings of the Qinghai dialect?  
1=can, 5=cannot (3.6; 1.4)
5. Do you want your children to understand the Qinghai dialect?  
yes (80), no(3), no opinion (19)
6. Do you want your children to be able to speak the Qinghai dialect?  
yes (62), no (13), no opinion (27)
7. In the following situations, which language do you prefer to hear?  
a. home (q=65, p=33, b=4) b. work (q=2, p=96, b=4) c. school (q=3, p=94, b=4) d. with friends (q=39, p=52, b=11) e. at vegetable market (q=37, p=56, b=9) f. at the mall (q=5, p=93, b=4) g. media (q=3, p=99, b=0)
8. In the following situations, which language are you more likely to hear?  
a. home (q=63, p=36, b=3) b. work (q=6, p=89, b=7) c. school (q=16, p=82, b=4) d. with friends (q=39, p=52, b=11) e. at vegetable market (q=46, p=48, b=8) f. at the mall (q=7, p=90, b=5) g. media (q=2, p=99, b=1)
9. With the following people, which language are you more likely to speak?  
a. parents (q=68, p=33, b=1) b. grandparents (older generation) (q=71, p=30, b=0) c. children (q=10, p=90, b=2) d. co-workers (q=13, p=84, b=5) e. friends (q=41, p=53, b=8) f. teacher (q=3, p=97, b=2) g. police (q=3, p=98, b=1) h. salesperson (q=6, p=93, b=3)
10. According to the following adjectives measure Qinghai dialect:  
1=boring, 5=interesting (mean 4.4; sd .82)  
1=cold, 5=intimate (mean 4.2; sd 1)  
1=inexpressive, 5=expressive (mean 4; sd 1.1)  
1=unfriendly, 5=friendly (mean 4.3; sd .84)  
1=stiff, 5=lively (mean 3.7; sd 1)  
1=elegant, 5=crude (mean 2.8; sd 1.1)

### Background

1. Age (mean 28.4; sd 10.7)
2. Sex (female 68; male 27; no response 6)
3. Educational Level  
1=primary school, 8=doctoral degree (mean 5.35; sd 1.1)

## 青海西寧的語言態度

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有觀察指出，青海西寧居民普遍對於自己的方言評價不高，爲了更深入追蹤這個族群現象，本研究對西寧居民進行青海方言語言態度的量化調查。本研究設計了一個問卷，用以測量西寧居民對其本地方言以及普通話在情感上、認知上以及語言使用上的語言態度。調查的結果顯示正負評價參半：語言使用方面的語言態度是負面的，認知方面的語言態度是正面的，而情感方面則是正負面參半。在西安和成都所做的後續調查則顯示，與這些地方相比，西寧居民對他們自己的方言具有較多負面評價。這項研究顯示出，中國各地居民對自己方言的語言態度有很大的差異，必須進行深入的研究，才能更進一步瞭解今日中國方言如何進行變化。

關鍵詞：漢語方言，語言態度，社會語言學