

A Survey on Language Life in Lanxi Under the Rural Revitalization Strategy

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2025.05.05

Abstract

Lanxi City, Zhejiang Province, a typical representative of ancient villages in southern China, once faced hollowing out of traditional villages due to urbanization but has since achieved integration of cultural heritage protection and modern industries through the Rural Revitalization Strategy. Field investigations reveal that socioeconomic transformations in villages have triggered profound changes in language life, including: 1) The evolution of linguistic landscapes from single slogans to diversified systems, where official signs, commercial markers, and stone carvings of local elites jointly construct regional cultural narratives; 2) Intergenerational and situational differentiation in communicative codes, manifested as the transition from ‘dialect preservation—bilingual interaction—trilingual service’ (Mandarin, dialect, and English); With the empowerment of digital technology, cultural institutions and residents exhibit high internet dependency, forming new “language + digital” ecosystems such as dialect livestreaming and cultural creative products.

Keywords: rural revitalization, language life, language landscape, language technology

1. Introduction

In October 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the Rural Revitalization Strategy, emphasizing the priority development of agriculture and rural areas and accelerating their modernization. By 2021, China had fully built a moderately prosperous society, bringing about profound changes in the socio-economic landscape of rural areas. To accurately capture the contemporary transformation of rural society, my team conducted an 18-day “observation, listening, questioning, and diagnosing” language survey in Lanxi City from July 15 to August 1, 2024. The survey was based on a theoretical framework, employing methods such

as participant observation and in-depth interviews, using a combination of chance sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling, adhering to the principle of data saturation (Sun Xiao’e, 2011) to advance the research work. Ultimately, we produced seven observation logs, three interview recordings, and 475 linguistic landscape data points.

It can be seen from the survey that the rural revitalization strategy has significantly reshaped the language life of villagers, and at the same time highlights the practical space for language and writing to feed back the development of rural areas, providing a fresh sample for understanding the interaction logic between language life and economic society.

2. The Change of Language Life in Lanxi, Zhejiang

Language life is an essential component of social life, and the changes in village society are also vividly reflected in the language lives of villagers. Li Yuming believes that “language life encompasses various activities involving the use, learning, and study of language and writing, linguistic knowledge, and language skills (Li Yuming, 2016).” Based on this understanding, we analyze the survey results of language life from three aspects.

2.1 Language and Writing Life

(1) Changes in the landscape of language

The language appearing on public road signs, billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, and public signs on government buildings collectively form the linguistic landscape of a certain territory, region, or city cluster. This concept of “linguistic landscape” was first proposed by Canadian scholars Landry & Bourhis (Rodrigue Andry & Richard Y. Bourhis, 1997). The primary finding of this survey is the linguistic landscape. Compared to the urban linguistic landscape that resembles ‘a “jungle of symbols,”’ most local residents in Lanxi recall their childhood rural linguistic landscape as very monotonous, with only two wall slogans remaining: “Only socialism can save China” and “The people have infinite creativity.” During our field visits, we found that rural linguistic markers had significantly increased, and according to the identity of the marker creators, there are three types: official, commercial, and private.

The first category of official signs is indicative signs. At the entrances of traditional villages in Lanxi, there are unique wooden signs with a Jiangnan style, featuring gilded calligraphy that reads “Zhuge Bagua Village,” “Youbu Ancient Town,” and “Zhiyan Ancient Village.” Some of these signs also come with QR codes, which can be scanned to access dialect audio guides. Within the Youbu Ancient Town scenic area, signs such as “Provincial Historical and Cultural Town” and “Youbu Morning Tea Street” stand; inside Zhuge Bagua Village, signs like “Premier’s Shrine” and “Old Site of Tianyi Hall Traditional Chinese Medicine Shop” exude an ancient charm. These signs not only facilitate

visitors’ tours but also highlight Lanxi’s rich historical and cultural heritage. The second category is public notice boards. With the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, numerous public notice boards have appeared on the streets and alleys of Lanxi, such as the “Lanxi City Traditional Village Protection Project Notice Board” and the “Ancient Building Restoration Project Progress Notice Board.” These boards document achievements in “village restoration” and “cultural revival,” witnessing the process of protecting and revitalizing traditional villages in Lanxi. The third category is promotional signs. Focusing on key tasks of rural development, Lanxi City has launched diverse promotional slogans, forming distinctive linguistic landscapes. For cultural tourism promotion, there are slogans like “A Thousand-Year-Old Commercial Port, Ink-Wash Lanxi,” “Fish with You — Folk Art Workshop,” and “Lanxi Days, Full of Fun and Flavor,” along with their associated cultural and creative products. For ecological protection, there is “Guarding the Three Rivers’ Clear Waters, Building a Beautiful Home Together.” For intangible cultural heritage preservation, there is “Tasting Youbu Morning Tea, Inheriting Millennium Skills.” These promotional slogans create a strong cultural atmosphere and play a significant role in enhancing residents’ cultural identity and promoting the image of rural areas.

The first category of commercial signs includes fixed wall advertisements and signs, such as the wooden signs “Zhuge Lianlu Craft Store” and “Bagua Banquet Restaurant” around the Zhuge Bagua Village scenic area, and the wooden signs “Lang Jingshan Memorial Hall Cafe” and “Old Teahouse” within Youbu Ancient Town. There are also three-dimensional check-in spots like “Come to Youbu Early in the Morning” and “Welcome to Lanhu Tourism Resort,” which are wall-painted advertisements. The second category consists of mobile commercial flyers and posters. During holidays or peak tourist seasons, promotional leaflets for events such as “Intangible Cultural Heritage Handicraft Exhibition” and “Lanxi Yangmei Picking Festival” appear around the scenic area, along with discount posters from homestays and agritourism sites. These commercial signs reflect the thriving development of Lanxi’s cultural and tourism industry and the vitality of its local economy.

Private signs are commonly found among

¹ All the linguistic landscape mentioned in this paper is preserved in its original written form.

returning entrepreneurs and local virtuous figures. For example, in Zhuge Bagua Village, the entrance to the “Kongming Woodcraft Workshop,” founded by a young returnee, features a wooden sign carved with the words “Ancient Craftsmanship, Craftsmanship Inherited.” In Youbu Ancient Town, the “Li Yu Book House,” established by a retired teacher, has a bluestone sign at its alley entrance inscribed with “The Legacy of Jiezi Garden, Fragrance of Books Passed Down Through Ages.” Additionally, some local virtuous associations set up cultural stone carvings at their courtyard entrances, such as “Cultivating and Reading Passed Down for Long, Poetry and Books Continuously Passed Down,” and “Lan Water Nurtures Beauty, Stream Rhythms Flowing Fragrance.” These not only showcase personal cultural refinement but also add cultural charm to the countryside, becoming unique humanistic landscapes in the revitalization of rural culture.

In terms of quantity, the Lanxi language markers have increased significantly, but there is a problem of missing some signs in type. The lack of directional signs on rural road signs is particularly evident in officially established ones. When my team and I visited the ancient town of Youbu in Lanxi as tourists, we had to take multiple detours due to the absence of clear road signs while looking for the “Lang Jingshan Memorial Hall,” ultimately missing the best time for our visit. It is evident that a scientific and systematic road sign system is a key factor in enhancing visitor experience and promoting high-quality development of the cultural tourism industry. Lanxi still needs to strengthen its foundational language landscape construction.

(2) Changes in language communication

Dialects are undoubtedly the core language medium for daily communication among the people. However, with the continuous advancement of Mandarin’s popularization, significant changes have occurred in the intergenerational transmission of Lanxi dialect. The vivid and regionally distinctive colloquialisms used by the older generation are gradually fading from the everyday speech of the younger generation. For example, terms like “tian guang” (Lanxi dialect for ‘morning’), “yan zhou” (noon), and “ye kua bian” (evening) are rarely heard in the speech of middle-aged and young adults.

In specific communication scenarios, the linguistic ecology of Lanxi is more diverse. On one hand, young parents unconsciously align their language with the Mandarin used in early childhood education when interacting with toddlers. When assessing children’s self-study achievements, besides traditional literacy and arithmetic tests, English expression has increasingly become a new focus. Phrases like “What does the cat say? Cat!” and “Where is the dog? Dog!” have frequently appeared in many families with young children, becoming a new norm in family language interaction, reflecting society’s emphasis and pursuit of multilingual education today. On the other hand, some teenagers who have lived in cities for a long time lack an environment to use their hometown dialects. When visiting relatives back home, they can only rely on Mandarin to communicate with their grandparents. To achieve smooth communication, the grandparents also try to use less standard Mandarin, striving to bridge the generational gap in language. For example, Uncle Zhang, influenced by his grandson’s Mandarin, occasionally replaces his usual “Nong qu wu qu” phrase with “You qu bu qu.” This mutual influence in language use not only demonstrates the efforts made by different generations to maintain emotional connections but also indirectly reflects how Mandarin permeates the usage contexts and habits of dialects.

The evolution of language is not merely a simple replacement of vocabulary; it vividly reflects the transformation of rural economic structures, changes in social interaction patterns, and the expansion of information dissemination channels. The massive influx of commercial and internet terms highlights how villages are rapidly integrating into the modern market economy and the digital information age. Under the impact of new economic waves, the traditional agrarian language system is undergoing profound changes and reshaping. In this process, balancing the modernization of language with the protection of traditional language has become an urgent issue for rural revitalization.

2.2 Language Knowledge and Life Conditions

(1) Changes in language knowledge and life

In the revitalization of traditional village cultural heritage in Lanxi, Zhejiang, the group of local virtuous figures uses language and writing

as core tools to construct a regional cultural narrative system, forming a revitalization model characterized by “shaping the soul through words.” The ancient town of Youbu is named after its “First Morning Tea Street in Southern Jiangnan,” integrating elements from Lang Jingshan’s photography with dialect-based promotional texts to create immersive intangible cultural heritage experience scenes; Xiaoli Village, the hometown of Li Yu, retains the historical place name “Qie Ting Pavilion,” conveying cultural spirit through handwritten couplets, complemented by a series of illustrated exhibition boards that interpret the ideas of famous people. Additionally, digital technology empowers cultural dissemination, such as the full-platform video commentary on Zhuge Bagua Village achieving 74,000 likes per video, and the discussion volume of the “Youbu Morning Tea” topic in Youbu Ancient Town reaching tens of millions. These practices transform historical resources into perceptible cultural IPs through the reconstruction of place names, interpretation of landscape texts, and integration of digital language technologies, enhancing regional recognizability and tourism appeal. This demonstrates the creative transformation value of language and text as cultural capital in rural revitalization, providing a practical example of the theory of “language knowledge life” for the cultural revitalization of ancient villages in southern Jiangnan. The Publicity Department of the Lanxi Municipal Committee fully utilizes the “Cultural Hall Senior School” cultural platform, forming a senior university silver-age art troupe, actively building a “senior cultural circle,” and launching the “Folk Art Plan” and elderly university cultural outreach activities across the city, bridging the “last mile” of education for the elderly in rural areas.

These practices not only include the contemporary translation of historical and cultural symbols, but also poetic expression of life wisdom, showing the villagers’ subject consciousness to empower cultural tourism with language knowledge, verifying the practical effectiveness of grassroots language practice in cultural transmission and economic transformation, and providing a “bottom-up” language empowerment sample for rural cultural revitalization.

(2) The construction of language knowledge and life as the focus

Despite the active use of language and text by local virtuosos and villagers to revitalize cultural heritage, some villages suffer from inefficient dissemination of place names due to inadequate professional planning, such as the confusion caused by the lack of systematic narrative after the early renaming of Zhuge Bagua Village. However, the situation has improved. In response, Lanxi has adopted a path of “professional empowerment + multi-party collaboration” to deepen the construction of a standardized system for “place names + culture.” For example, Zhuge Bagua Village has set up a “village name interpretation” archway, and Youbu Ancient Town has erected a stele explaining the history of the “Youbu” commercial port, clarifying the cultural connotations of core place names like “Zhuge Bagua Village” and “Youbu Ancient Town.”

Another prominent issue is the lack of clarity in language and text standards, primarily manifested in the improper use of Chinese characters and inconsistent styles in tourism language products. For example, in Zhuge Bagua Village, ancient building couplets are mixed with simplified and traditional characters, while in Li Yu’s hometown, stories are written in both classical and vernacular Chinese. To address this problem, Lanxi has established a layered language system, using “written language as the mainstay + dialect accents” for core cultural explanations, and adopting “internet-savvy dialects” for cultural and creative products to enhance their appeal. Additionally, they have collaborated with universities to establish the “Lanxi Dialect Resource Bank,” providing standardized language samples for intangible cultural heritage interpretation and creative product development, promoting the transition of dialect products from fragmented to systematic. These measures not only uphold national language standards but also preserve regional cultural characteristics, offering the Lanxi experience to solve the issue of “confused expression” in rural cultural venues.

2.3 Language Technology Living Conditions

(1) Changes in language technology and life

The deep penetration of Internet technology is reshaping the rural language life. The language life in Lanxi is gradually transitioning from a “physical village” to a “digital community”, and

constantly promoting the transformation of villagers into “digital citizens”.

The first step is to lay the foundation for residents’ digital language life through network infrastructure. At the provincial level, Zhejiang Province launched the “Silver Age Science Popularization Action,” providing smartphone training resources on the “Zhe Li Ban” platform, including demonstrations of practical functions such as binding bank cards with WeChat and making appointment appointments. In 2024, 16 senior schools in Youbu Town offered multiple courses involving the application of digital technology, such as using health codes and online payments, helping seniors bridge the digital divide. The Nubu Subdistrict of Lanxi also initiated a series of activities titled “Silver Age Bridging the Digital Divide,” gradually reducing the number of “digital outsiders” through mobile service points and family assistance programs like Qingyin Qinfamily.

The second step is to reshape the information interaction model through the widespread use of smart terminals. Villagers in Meijiang Town use the mobile APP “Lanxi Language School” to learn dialect nursery rhymes, while Zhuge Bagua Village has developed an “AR Guide for Bagua Village” mini-program that triggers dialect audio explanations when scanning ancient buildings. Lanxi Rural Commercial Bank leads with the “Zhejiang Agricultural Code,” upgrading its existing “Digital Doorplate” system and collaborating with the city’s Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs to advance the “Smart Village Code.” This initiative establishes a “village household basic data system” and a “one village one code + one household one code” application scenario. Village officials can manage village affairs by scanning codes, and visitors can obtain village introductions, find local homestays, farmhouses, and specialties through scanning codes.

The third step is to leverage integrated media promotion to activate the dissemination power of rural culture. Young people and virtuous villagers in rural areas proactively use digital technology to empower cultural tourism, forming a three-dimensional communication matrix of “official website + Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin.” As traditional TV viewership has declined, short video platforms have become the primary channels for villagers to access content such as “resisting negative information” and “national policies,” like the video on “Weishi

Lanxi” TikTok account about the “Lanxi home purchase subsidy policy,” which achieves down-to-earth policy promotion. The Lanxi City Culture and Tourism Bureau operates the “Lanxi Culture and Tourism” official account, regularly releasing cultural content such as Li Yu’s plays and Youbu morning tea, attracting a large fan base. Villagers are not only beneficiaries but also creators of short videos. Meat Shenzi from Youbu Ancient Town, a local specialty, has become an internet sensation through short video sharing in recent years. In addition, there are many people from Lanxi on various video platforms; for example, the hashtag “#ZhugeBaguaCun” on TikTok has over 60 million views; “Lanxi” on Xiaohongshu has over 34 million views; “Jiangnan Youbu Matchmaker” shares personal life experiences and receives over 300,000 likes; Liu’s sharing of a happy family life on TikTok has received over 170,000 likes.

(2) The direction of improvement of language technology life

While the rural language technology in Lanxi is deepening and developing, the double-edged sword effect of digital technology has become increasingly prominent, manifesting as the “three lacks” issues: lack of interaction, lack of design, and lack of collaboration. For example, the WeChat public account “Xia Li Village, the Hometown of Li Yu” mostly publishes news articles in the form of “XX leader’s inspection” or “XX event held,” with less than 10% of posts receiving over a thousand views in 2023; a merchant’s TikTok account in Youbu Ancient Town posted a video about making morning tea, with the caption only stating “delicious and not expensive,” without incorporating historical anecdotes or dialect terms related to “Rou Chenzi,” resulting in limited dissemination effects. The live stream by the youth team “Zhuge Maker” once received criticism from netizens for being “just wandering around the alley, failing to see any unique features” due to a lack of planning.

Lanxi’s cultural and tourism sector should take the lead, with other government departments playing a supporting role. The core IPs such as “Li Yu Drama” and “Lanxi Days, Full of Fun” should guide the content division for WeChat public accounts, TikTok, and B stations. Led by the government, training sessions on “hit copywriting” should be organized for villagers, incorporating popular phrases like “the essential

meat sink for early morning gatherings,” to enhance the appeal of the content. The “Zhuge Bagua Village Guide” account on Xiaohongshu should adopt a “local guide” perspective, posting content like “Lost in Zhuge Village? Understand these three symbols and you won’t be afraid,” to increase interaction rates. A pilot “digital narrative workshop” will be set up in scenic areas, providing editing software, voice prompts, and other equipment, along with material libraries such as “internet-famous check-in spots” and “dialect hotword banks” to enhance the fun, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the unique rural culture.

3. Epilogue

The linguistic life in Lanxi has harmoniously evolved alongside economic and social life, with the role of language in promoting rural revitalization beginning to show. Practice has shown that the transformation of linguistic life in the digital age is essentially a two-way interaction between “technological empowerment” and “cultural awareness”. When ancient villages encounter digital technology, language not only serves as a medium for information transmission but also becomes a “digital bridge” linking tradition and modernity, countryside and city, continuously injecting linguistic and technological benefits into rural revitalization.

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