

# *Attitudes towards Dialects: Taking the Application of Various Chinese Dialects in Movies and Media as Example*

**Wang Zihan**

*Master of Arts in Chinese Language and Literature, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China*  
*sandra2020sq@126.com*

**Keywords:** Dialect, Chinese, movie, media, attitude

**Abstract:** Chinese dialects can be divided into seven categories by areas. People's attitudes towards local dialects can be positive or negative. Some dialects can play an active role within a community. However, the use of some dialects will create stereotypes or discriminate, which is a negative attribute. This article will discuss attitudes towards local dialects and draw conclusions through positive and negative examples of dialect use in Chinese films and media. As a special cultural symbol, the dialect element in the dialect film can not only show the unique regional culture, but also render the film's comedy effect and restore the real living state of the society. Dialect enriches the form of the sound language of the film, enriches the subject of the film, and reflects the regional characteristics. At the same time, the use of dialects narrows the distance between the characters and the audience. From the perspective of protecting and inheriting dialect culture, we should also avoid excessive labelling of the language image of dialects in film and television dramas.

## **1. Introduction**

Dialects can be divided into two categories: regional dialects and social dialects.<sup>[1]</sup> Although regional dialects and social dialects are both variants of language, the forms of variation are different. Regional dialects are self-contained and relatively complete language systems. As a result, dialect is more suitable to refer to regional variation of language. The word dialect in film and media studied in this paper refers to the category of regional dialects. Most scholars divide modern Chinese into seven dialect areas,<sup>[2]</sup> represented by the northern dialect area, the Hunan dialect area, the Gan dialect area, the Wu dialect area, the Cantonese dialect area, the Hakka dialect area, and the Fujian dialect area. The above seven dialect areas are divided based on modern Chinese. Therefore, the word dialect films in this article are defined based on Chinese dialectology, and do not include minority languages (Zang, Mongolian, etc.).

Attitudes towards local dialects can be positive or negative. Some dialects can play an active role within a community to promote a sense of collective solidarity, trustworthiness, and friendliness, all of which are positive attributes. However, the use of some dialects will create stereotypes or discriminate, which is a negative attribute. This article will discuss attitudes towards local dialects

and draw conclusions through positive and negative examples of dialect use in Chinese films and media.

Regarding the use of dialects in film and TV series, the earliest discussion was "whether dialects can be used in film and television dramas". Chen Qinghu put forward the viewpoint of "opposing the use of dialects by characters in film and television dramas (especially leaders)".<sup>[3]</sup> However, those who held different opinions believed that historical figures could use Mandarin with strong dialect characteristics. At the beginning of the 21st century, there was a "dialect fever" in film creation. Scholars believed that dialects had unique value and effect on film and television creation due to their defamiliarization and documentary characteristics, as well as comedy effects.<sup>[4]</sup> With the rise and development of the concept of language resources, recent research believes that dialects are one of the important language resources that films relies on.<sup>[5]</sup> Most of the existing research focuses on the policy basis, scale standard, functional role and artistic level of the use of dialects in film and TV series. There are few research reports on the use of dialects in China, and few survey reports that comprehensively sort out or systematically summarize the types of dialect film and television dramas, the distribution of dialect varieties, and the social characteristics of dialect users.

## **2. Data analysis and discussion: Dialect usage in Chinese films and media**

In the previous article on the study of the dialect language image in Chinese film and TV series,<sup>[6]</sup> by summarizing 400 Chinese dialect films and TV series in the past 10 years from these three perspectives, types, dialect variety and annual distribution, and analyzing social variables of over 620 dialect speakers in Chinese dialect films and TV series (there will be tables to analyze the data in detail in the third part). The results are as follows: Cantonese dialect, Southwest Mandarin, Central Plains Mandarin and Northeast Mandarin have been fully used and displayed in dialect films and TV series and have become important language resources for literary and artistic creation. The concept film and TV series in this article refers to the dialect film and TV series with dialect as the main medium. The most common types are dialect films and dialect TV series. They are the highest and most deeply involved dialect cultural and artistic products. The selection of dialect varieties in films and TV series and their frequency of use, the scope of dissemination and social evaluation, the social characteristics of dialect users in films and TV series and other factors jointly construct the language image of dialects in film and television dramas. It reflects mainstream values and attitudes of the mass media towards dialects and dialect users. At the same time, driven by the huge dissemination of mass media, especially online media, the language image of dialects will certainly affect the public's language attitudes towards dialects, and further influence the use, inheritance and development of dialects.

From the perspective of the use of dialects in films and TV series, they can be divided into the following three types.

### **2.1 Pure dialect type**

Refers to the use of dialects in films and TV series, with little or no use of Mandarin. A total of 66, including 58 movies, 8 TV series. For example, the movie *A Cool Fish* (2018) in Southwest Mandarin, *The Wasted Times*(2016)in Wu dialect, *Hold Your Hands*(2017)in Xiang dialect, and TV series like *The Foreign Daughter-in-law and Her Local Husband* (2000) in Cantonese dialect, and *Cuobian Head and Tail*(2010) in Fujian dialect.

### **2.2 Mandarin plus dialect version**

Refers to the production of both the Mandarin version and the dialect version of the film and

television drama. A total of 259, including 157 movies, 102 TV series. For example, the movie *Let the Bullets Fly*(2010), and *Bonnie Bears: Blast into the Past*(2019), the TV series *Mining Town*(2021), etc.

### 2.3 Simultaneous use of Mandarin and dialects

The use of Mandarin and dialects in film and TV series based on different scenes and character settings. The use of dialects accounts for about one-third or more of the entire movie or the TV series and plays a key role in character building and plot advancement. For example, the main characters Shen Tao, Zhang Jinsheng, and Liang Zi in the movie *Mountains May Depart*(2015)communicate in Jin dialect; in each episode of the TV series *Installing a Platform*(2020)some characters use Central Plains Mandarin to communicate.

## 3. Attitudes towards Chinese dialects in films and TV series

The following article will take specific works and lines as examples, combined with statistical methods to study the public's positive and negative attitudes towards the use of Chinese dialects in movies and TV series.

### 3.1 Positive attitude

Dialects have developed in a long history, become a continuation culture, and formed their unique social significance. Films and TV series use dialects in their creation to show unique artistic aesthetics. Dialects can not only be used as a symbol to inherit regional culture and increase cultural identity, but also play an important role in recording the original appearance of life and rendering comedy effects.

#### 3.1.1 The positive significance of dialects in searching for the roots of culture

Zhou Xian mentioned in *Identification of Chinese Literature and Culture* (2008) that "The mother tongue is one of the root factors of the sense of home and cultural identity".<sup>[7]</sup> A dialect is a variant of a language. A certain dialect is used in a region or a specific group of people, which is the continuation of a culture. Dialects are special cultural symbols. According to the spread or evolution of dialects, the historical development of a certain region can be traced. This is a kind of root-seeking. The formation of various dialects has a long history. It not only reflects the strong local characteristics and plays the role of inheriting and reflecting culture, but also carries the historical changes of a place, customs and other regional cultures. Through dialects, we can have a clearer and more thorough understanding of the continuation of local civilization, people's migration, geographical conditions, ethnic integration and language evolution. Dialects can also reflect the development history, administrative divisions, traffic conditions, customs and life concepts of a region.

Table 1: The dialogue of characters in the TV series *Installing the Stage*

Shaanxi Mandarin	English
● di é	● eat, bite
● ha'ren	● bad people
● ren sui ma haixiang die damo	● People want to eat more than they can
● jiner huo ying	● I ate well today

For example, the dialogue of characters in the TV series *Installing the Stage* (2020) is a major attraction of this drama. The application of a large number of Shaanxi Mandarin has left a deep

imprint of Shaanxi on this TV series. The lines in Shaanxi dialect are spoken in a unique tone from the mouths of actors from Shaanxi, which appear real and down-to-earth, making the sense of substitution of the plot invisibly enhanced (Table 1).

Plus, the opening song *No Worry* (2021) was sung by Shaanxi singer Sun Hao in Shaanxi dialect (Table 2).

Table 2: The dialogue of characters in the opening song No Worry

Shaanxi Mandarin	English
● wo gujin yaole yikou mantou	● I took a bite of the bread
● suiran shenghuo youxie jianlou	● Although my life is a little rough
● buguoshi qizaotanhei	● I work very early in the morning and sleep late at night
● wanshang haineng hegejiu	● As long as I can have a drink at night
● kuxie leixie, buchou	● Even if life is hard and tiring, I don't worry much

The opening song sings about the life attitude of the characters in this TV series. In Shaanxi dialect drama, the moment the characters speak out, the audience will think of their hometown. This is a conditioned reflex and an instinctive reaction. The dialect can make the audience return to the root that haunts their dreams with personal memory. Therefore, Shaanxi dialect records and preserves the national roots of the Central Plains culture. Audiences in non-dialect areas can experience the humanities of the current historical stage in the film, and the freshness brought by the unique and unfamiliar language and environment makes them more receptive and prompts them to comprehend the dialect elements and regional culture reflected in the film.

### 3.1.2 The positive role of dialects in cohesion of ethnic groups

Groups who speak the same dialect are generally a specific ethnic group or live in a specific region. The language expressions between them are more natural and familiar, and the use of common sayings is handier. By understanding their dialects, you can indirectly understand their living habits, relationship patterns, regional culture, etc. The meaning of dialect is not only to express emotions, but also to continue the regional culture. Just imagine, if a person is in a different place or a foreign country and meets someone who speaks the same dialect, he will definitely feel a sense of intimacy, because they belong to the same group. Only when you use your mother tongue to speak, can you feel the most real and sincere emotions in your heart.

For example, the movie *Just for Fun* (2012) tells the story of Cai Youcai leading the villagers to overcome many difficulties to make a movie. The dialogues among the characters are in Henan dialect (Table 3).

Table 3: The dialogue of characters in the movie Just for Fun

Shaanxi Mandarin	English
● wenjian mo	● did you smell it
● nen dou buqu xiangta	● y'all don't think about it
● ele qingshi dingbuzhu	● I'm so hungry and I can't stand it anymore
● sha biesun jianfeiyao a	● What shit weight loss pill is this

These villagers belong to the same regional group. They use Henan dialect to express nature among themselves, and their living habits are roughly the same. Even swear words can be understood by each other. This reflects the centripetal force of the ethnic group.

### 3.2 Negative attitude

From the statistical data in the research led by Wang Lining and Pan Yingying about language

images of dialects in movies and TV series (2021), we can draw some conclusions. They collected a total of 400 videos from January 2009 to August 2021 from major video platforms such as 1905 Movie Network, Tencent, iQiyi, Youku, Bilibili, CCTV, and Mango TV. Dialect films and TV dramas, including 262 movies and 138 TV series. We can see from the following tables (4&5) that the occupational distribution of dialect users in dialect films and TV plays presents certain characteristics. From the perspective of specific occupational categories, the top 5 occupations with the largest number of occupations belong to manual workers. Among them, there are 105 farmers, it is the occupation with the highest frequency. The numbers of technicians, self-employed and migrant workers are roughly the same. Among them, technicians include folk shadow puppet artists, taxi drivers, car repairers, blacksmiths, etc. Migrant workers are mostly lower class engaged in the service industry, such as waiters, porters, cleaners, nannies, etc. Their common feature is that although the education level is not high, they all have skills and engage in legitimate occupations. It is worth noting that most of the homeless people are negative characters in the play, such as criminals, suspects, thieves and gangsters. Such characters have become frequent users of dialects in film and television dramas, and even formed highly relevant with a certain regional dialect. This may lead audiences to have stereotypes of the linguistic image of certain dialect.

For example, Southwest Mandarin has become the dialect with the highest correlation with villains such as criminals, suspects, thieves and gangsters in the current dialect film and television dramas. Both the Central Plains Mandarin and the Northeast Mandarin have the highest frequency of peasant. The images of farmers in film and television dramas are mostly shaped by these two dialects, and their relevance to rural areas will be higher. On the contrary, dialects such as Beijing Mandarin, Cantonese dialect, Wu dialect, Jianghuai Mandarin, Gan dialect, etc. lack the image of farmers, and have a relatively high degree of relevance to the city.

Table 4: The Occupation of Dialect Users in Movies and TV Plays

The Occupation of Dialect Users in Movies and TV Plays													number of people	
Types of Plays	Occupations											Police and Soldiers	Unknown	
	Mental Workers					Manual Workers								
	Officials	Experts	Teachers	Students	Total	Farmers	Machanics	Self-employed	Migrant Workers	Homelesses	Tatol			
Pure Dialect	22	1	8	29	60	51	44	37	29	29	190	6	52	
Simultaneous use of Mandarin and dialects	15	3	6	6	30	54	43	36	33	26	192	25	65	
Total	37	4	14	35	90	105	87	73	62	55	382	31	117	

Table 5: Correlation between Occupations and Dialects

Types of Dialects	Occupations										
	Officials	Experts	Teachers	Students	Farmers	Mechanics	Migrant Workers	Self-employed	Homelesses	Military	Unknown
Southwest (123)	9		4	17	10	29	18	24	17	7	38
Central(126)	13	1	1	3	43	17	12	8	10	5	13
Northwest (97)	7	1	1		26	8	10	14	8	5	17
Yue(57)	1	1	2	9		4	6	5	1	1	7
Beijing(35)	2		1			7	5	5	1	2	12
Ji& Lu(33)	1				7	3	3	6		3	10
Wu(30)	1	1	3	2		4	6	2	1	2	8
Jin(29)	2		1		7	2	2	7	4		4
Min(17)			1	2	3	1	1	3	6		
Jiao& Liao (14)					4	6			1	2	1
Jianghuai (13)				2		1	2		6		2
Ke(7)					1			1		1	4
Xiang(4)	1				2					1	
Lan& Yin(4)					2					1	1
Gan(1)										1	
Tatol (620)	37	4	14	35	105	82	65	75	55	31	117

In addition, most of the mainland dialect films and TV dramas are based on the background of villages and towns, while the Hong Kong dialect film and television dramas are all based on Hong Kong, which can easily lead the audience to produce an impression that the Cantonese dialect is closely related to the metropolis, and other dialects other than the Cantonese dialect are mostly related to the township. The relationship between dialect and township reflects the actual life to a certain extent, but it also creates a stereotype of dialect users.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a special cultural symbol, the dialect element in the dialect film can not only show the unique regional culture, but also render the film's comedy effect and restore the real living state of the society. Dialect enriches the form of the sound language of the film, enriches the subject of the film, and reflects the regional characteristics. At the same time, the use of dialects narrows the distance between the characters and the audience. From the perspective of protecting and inheriting dialect culture, we should also avoid excessive labelling of the language image of dialects in film and television dramas. At present, the social characteristics of dialect users in Chinese film and television dramas are relatively simple. Most of them are middle-aged men, most of them are farmers or other manual workers, and their education level is generally not high. Artistic creation originates from life. Although this reflects the social characteristics of some dialect users at present to a certain extent, it should not be generalized, and it is simply equivalent to the whole picture of dialect usage scenarios in language life. Especially when a dialect variety is closely related to the social characteristics of the characters, it is easy to deepen the audience's stereotype of the dialect and the region to which it belongs.

#### References

- [1] Li, Xiaofan. & Xiang, Bingqing. *Basic Course of Chinese Dialectology*[M]. Peking University Press, vol. 2009, pp.3.
- [2] Kong, Weichang. *Henan Dialect Film Research (2001-2018)*[J]. *Master's Thesis of Nanjing Normal University*, vol. 2020, no.7, pp. 15-18.
- [3] Chen, Qinghu. *Discussion on Language Norm*[M]. *Language Construction*, vol.1987, no. 3.
- [4] Wang, Jingru. *Cold Thoughts on 'Dialect Fever' in Films from the Perspective of Linguistics*[J]. *Sichuan Opera*, vol.2016, no.4.
- [5] Guo, Kaimin. *A Brief Talk on Several Language Problems in Film and Television Works*[J]. *Language Strategy Research*, vol.2021, no. 3.
- [6] Wang, Lining. & Pan, Yingying. *The Language Image of Dialects in Movies and TV Series*. *language Life Research*[J]. *Language Life Research*, vol.2021, pp.87, 88, 93-95.
- [7] Zhou, Xian. *Chinese Literature and Cultural Identity*[M]. Peking University Press, vol.2008, pp. 173.