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## **Harmony as language policy in China: An internet perspective**

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# Harmony as language policy in China: an Internet perspective

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## Abstract

This paper provides an ethnographic understanding of harmony as language policy in China. We ground this understanding in a historical analysis of ‘harmony’ as a distinct traditional Chinese ideal that gradually finds its new expressions through policy in contemporary China. Based on this, we focus particularly on language practices surrounding ‘harmony’ that are emerging from the Internet, a discursive space and site of policing that is highly diverse while also heavily contested with respect to policing processes, and notably so in the context of the PRC for its stringent measures of censorship and sensitization to language use. From this perspective of the Internet in China, we show empirically that although the state is arguably the strongest stakeholder in implementing the policy of harmony – or, better, harmonization – the actual processes of harmonization through policing online develop in detailed, multidirectional and unpredictable rather than abstract, linear or monofocal ways. The outcomes of such processes are paradoxically alternative ideologies of harmony, as well as non-normative uses of language. The general implications to language policy are also discussed.

**Keywords:** harmony, language policy, China, the Internet

## 1. Introduction

Whereas language policy at the state or institutional level generally aims for the ideal of harmony and social cohesion by emphasizing normativity and order, language practices embedded in everyday life at the ground level demonstrate far more features of divergence, heterogeneity and polycentricity. This is exceedingly so in view of the current stage of globalization and its outcome of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2006). The mediascapes, for instance, especially the Internet and digital communication, open up a new, unprecedentedly complex and less controllable space in which effects of formal policies are seen accompanied and, in many cases, de-centered and transformed by those of multiple agency in a variety of sociolinguistic settings (see e.g. Androutsopoulos 2006; Pietikäinen & Piirainen-Marsh 2009). This poses challenges to the question of how harmony is discursively negotiated and (co)constructed in and as social reality, as much as how language policy and perhaps society at large may be better conceptualized and understood when grounded in such reality.

These observations are relevant to the current paper in two ways. On the one hand, they raise broad concerns about language policy research as theory and methodology, and they point us towards calls for a paradigmatic shift in this field (Ricento 2006; Shohamy 2006; McCarthy 2011): from a traditional focus on the formal policy (policy-as-text), often in the strict sense of the term, as a set of official documents, directives and regulations produced by authorities such as the state, to a Hymesian (1980, 1996) ethnographic

perspective on policy (policy-as-discourse) as dynamic, multifaceted and situated social practices. Following this perspective, and drawing on Foucault's notion of police, disciplinary power and governmentality, Blommaert et al. (2009) further suggest that language policy should be seen in terms of processes of 'policing', i.e. processes of rational production and management of a normative structure that involves various social and political actors and institutions with unequally distributed agency. This locates language policy in complexes of ideology and webs of cultural meanings (Geertz 1973) and, as such, in constellations of micro discursive practices that are anchored in different and often conflictual ideologies, and are indexical and constitutive of the macro patterns of normativity and order. In such constellations, as argued by Blommaert and his colleagues, the state functions as but one of a wide range of possible centers of norms.

On the other hand, the questions of harmony and language policy, which are central to this special issue, draw our attention to China as both a comparative context (to African and other contexts) and an interesting case in its own right. Harmony and language policy go hand in hand in China. Evolving from a well-entrenched classical Confucian ideal, 'harmony' has in recent years become a proper name that stands for the explicit discourse on the rationalization, maintenance and enforcement of stability and order by the state in reaction to the rapid economic-political changes and sociocultural diversifications resulting from the country's modernization and globalization processes. This can be seen in the presently prevalent slogan of 'Harmonious Society' championed by President Hu Jintao. Not only the formal policy specific to language, which already advocates the monoglot ideology (Silverstein 1996), but almost all official policies in China, have adopted the state motif of 'harmony'. This has huge impacts on the way language and communication ought to be and are actually practised in (at least) the public sphere in China, including in its newly emerging online environment, to ensure the kind of harmony as envisaged by the state. Harmony, therefore, is a crucial aspect and driving force of language policy and policing in the context of China.

What we will explore in this paper is an ethnographic understanding of harmony via - and thus *as* - language policy in China, a topic largely under-researched. This will be grounded in a historical analysis of 'harmony' as a distinct traditional Chinese ideal that gradually finds its new expressions through policy in contemporary China. Based on this, we will focus particularly on language practices surrounding 'harmony' that are emerging from the Internet, a discursive space and site of policing that is, as mentioned earlier, highly diverse while also heavily contested with respect to policing processes, and notably so in the context of the PRC for its stringent measures of censorship and sensitization of language use (e.g. Tsui 2003; Zhou 2005; MacKinnon 2008; Yang 2009). From the perspective of the Internet, we will show empirically that although the state is arguably the strongest stakeholder in implementing the policy of harmony - or, better, harmonization - in the case of China, the actual processes of harmonization through policing online develop in detailed, multidirectional and unpredictable rather than abstract, linear or monofocal ways. The outcomes of such processes are, paradoxically, alternative ideologies of harmony as well as non-normative use of language.

In what follows, we start with a consideration of the historicity of the discourse of harmony by examining, first, the Confucian traditions in which 'harmony' was

philosophized as a recognizable system of values and beliefs in Chinese society and, then, its recent development and reinvention into a dominant discourse of order in contemporary China. This is followed by an investigation of China's state implementation of harmony on the Internet and its online discursive appropriation with its wider societal impact. In the final part of the paper, we discuss the implications of these observations in our understanding of harmony as language policy, with reference to China and Chinese.

## 2. Harmony as a Confucian Ideal

The word 'harmony' can find its origin in *he* (和 in classical Chinese), a word that automatically evokes the connotation of affirmative acceptance and balanced coordination, i.e. coherent, orderly arrangement, of different parts of a whole, such as in music or visual art. It also suggests a reasoned compromise or reconciliation between these different parts, which leads to a peaceful 'agree-to-disagree' situation with potentially constructive outcomes. As a lay term, *he* is well liked by Chinese people as one of the core symbols of their cultural essence, alongside words such as 'fortune', 'longevity' and 'double-happiness'.

It is important to make clear at the onset that when we speak of harmony in a Chinese context, we should bear in mind that, unlike elsewhere, the use of the term conjures up a distinctive ideological load that is deeply seated in over two millennia of Chinese history and cultural tradition of Confucianism. Harmony is one of the central tenets of the Confucian system of ethical philosophy and political governmentality (cf. Yao 2000). The Confucian doctrines of *he* are incorporated by generations of Chinese in their ways of conceptualizing norms and orders that inform individual behaviours in relation to the moral self, the family, the state, and other levels of society. In this sense, *he* represents a specific set of historically enregistered and internalized discourses about what it is meant by harmony, why harmony is important and how to achieve it socially and politically. This is a crucial point for understanding the significance of harmony in terms of language policy in Chinese societies.

Despite the voluminous work on Confucianism and its developments, *he* was rarely addressed as a focused topic of academic concern, at least not until very recently when 'harmony' arose as a catchword from China and grew into a synonym, if not a representation, of Confucianism and Chinese traditions. Some of these recent writings, such as those of Chenyang Li (2006, 2008a, 2008b), pay specific attention to the traditional Confucian notion of harmony, thus offering a good basis for us to examine more closely the idea of *he* in its classical form. These writings take *he* as an ethicospiritual belief that is deeply rooted in the ancient Chinese perceptions of human-centeredness in organizing social life and the whole of the cosmos, and as aspirations for social unity, peace and prosperity.

Even though today *he* is invariably credited to Confucianism, its genesis predates Confucius (551–479 BC). Li (2006), for instance, traces its existence back to as far as the earliest dynasties of Shang (16<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century BC) and Zhou (1066–256 BC). Through

examining *he* in a range of classics by various schools of thoughts until the Confucian era, Li observes that the concept gradually evolved from its initial meaning of describing how different sounds or flavours respond to one another in ancient music and food rituals (see also Li 2008b), to an aesthetic, ethical, philosophical, political and metaphysical ideal that emphasizes and embraces harmony as the optimal way of constructing society and the world. Such ideas of *he* were elaborated and resonated in the writings of many thinkers and scholars, particularly during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (770–221 BC) when China was occupied by divided small kingdoms, and when Confucius and other philosophers of the time flourished in competing to forge an advanced vision of governance strategies that would lead to a utopian cosmological order of harmony.

It is believed that Confucius was the first to bring together the scattered thoughts about harmony and placed *he* at the centre of his philosophy. The previously variegated ideas were quoted and appropriated by Confucius and his followers to promote their beliefs about the social and political significance of harmony. *He* was held as ‘the highest ideal’ (Li 2006: 588) of what was later to become Confucianism, one the most influential thoughts and cultural traditions in China (and other Asian-Confucian societies).

What is interesting in Li’s discussions on *he*, and also of relevance to our concerns about harmony in this paper, are the distinctions between harmony and sameness and the dynamics between sameness and difference. Confucius famously made harmony a criterion for *junzi* (the real gentleman) in The Analects, the most known Confucian classics, arguing that *junzi he er butong* , *xiaoren tong er buhe*, namely, ‘The *junzi* harmonizes but does not seek sameness, whereas [an unscrupulous man] seeks sameness but does not harmonize’ (Li 2006: 586). *He er butong* (harmony with distinction) is a popular saying people still use today to defend their stance and settle disputes. What is inscribed in these lines is the subtle differentiation between harmony and sameness, between valid harmony based on the acknowledgement of difference versus sameness, or invalid harmony, based on the diminishing of difference; it also states the moral-ethical categorizations – either a harmonious honourable man or a disharmonious low rascal – according to, not harmony as the end effect, but as a process leading to that effect in which the order of good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate is negotiated and established.

For Li, such dynamics are crucial to the understanding of *he*. *He* does not equal *tong* (sameness), even though sameness is an important ingredient of harmony and must be valued and maintained ‘at an appropriate level’ (Li 2006: 590). Not any kind of sameness leads to harmony. In fact, Li contends that the Confucian belief of harmony rejects the ‘over-presence’ of sameness and deems it as being in danger of imposing uniformity and, as a result, disharmony. Difference, on the other hand, is a precondition and cornerstone of harmony because *he* is essentially about the harmonious, i.e. *appropriate*, interplays of differences. This implies that harmony presupposes the entailment of difference-as-tension and conflict, what Li calls ‘strife’ (see also Liu & Allinson 1988). Whether cooperative opposition (the preferred and more conducive way towards harmony for Li), or severe struggles, strife is the process through which harmony is negotiated and sought.

In this sense, ‘harmony is not only a state but, more importantly, a process, [and] disharmony is necessarily present during the process of harmonization’ (Li 2006: 592).

Hence what Confucius had in mind with *he* entails ‘harmony’ (*hexie* 和谐), ‘peace’ (*heping* 和平) and ‘reconciliation’ (*hejie* 和解), an equilibrium that can only be acceptable and appropriate through the strife and harmonization of sameness and difference – managed diversity, so to speak. This includes the management of different roles and the knowledge of ‘ought-ness’ for one’s behaviours based on the roles one assumes in society, what is known as ‘rites’ or *li* (礼) in Confucianism. For Confucius, *li* is not only ceremonial rituals to be performed on specific occasions for specific functions. It is one of the five basic virtues (i.e. humanity, appropriateness, rite, wisdom, and trust) in the Confucian ethics, and is deemed the right way, ‘the way of humanity and the way of Heaven’ (Li 2006: 588), of behaving oneself as well as managing society. *Li* embodies a comprehensive system of routinized and internalized norms people engage with in their everyday social life. The realization of harmony needs to go through the ‘rites of passage’, as indicated in Li’s analysis of five scale-levels on which harmony can be implemented according to *li*.

Li (2008a) identifies five hierarchical but interrelated scale-levels on which harmony operates by cross-referring to The Analects and a few other Confucian classics. The elementary one is the individual-personal awareness and desire to self-cultivate one’s internal harmonization as a sense of morality, and this is the foundation of a moral society. Maintaining one’s own inner balance and harmony is not only a virtue for self-interest, but also a moral duty to the keeping of order in society. The second level concerns ‘a nexus of human relationship’ (ibid: 429), or the Confucian notion of five major human/ethical relationships in which the individual self exists. This level requires a harmonious relationship – in accordance with *li* – between ruler and minister, between parent and child, between husband and wife, between siblings, and between friends. For instance, ‘[t]he father is to be caring, the son filial, the husband appropriate, the wife deferential, the elder brother gentle, and the younger brother respectful’ (ibid: 430). Harmony in family is essential for it fosters both personal and social harmony. The next level of Confucian harmony is to do with the governance politics of the state, i.e. ‘governance with virtue’. The harmonious governance is to bring about order in society through the functioning of government officials rather than penal laws. The fourth level involves promoting harmony as peaceful coexistence beyond the state borders, in the world. And finally, at the most fundamental level, harmony is applicable as a universal law that is generated by the interactive process of balancing human, nature and society, a cosmological order as depicted in I Ching. Li emphasizes that harmony, in the classical Confucian sense, works as a metaphysical as well as a moral concept. It centers on human awareness and intervention at all five scale-levels, thus, is mediated, relational and dynamic. Its ultimate goal is to realize the ‘grand harmony’ (*taihe* 太和) throughout the cosmos, which in turn derives from harmony at the lower levels.

Harmony, therefore, is carefully constructed as a normative complex in Confucianism that relies on the cultivation of virtues and maintenance of ethics. Its argument about

sameness and difference is ultimately one about societal diversity in which *he* serves as an early model of humanist ideal about how life should be organized at multiple levels in order to achieve desired balance and order. In the harmonization process towards diversity, differences and conflicts are controlled and regulated, mostly as strife between individuality and collectiveness. Appropriateness and order are central to this work of harmony. So is hierarchy, which, as we have seen, is bound to and maintained by the moral duty of loyalty, obedience and filial piety based on criteria such as age (the older above the younger), gender (the male above the female) and social ranking (the senior above the junior, the superior above the inferior) and so on. In fact, hierarchy is considered a pivotal tenet of Confucianism in addition to harmony (e.g. Buttery & Leung 1998). The two rely on and reinforce one another.

Returning to our earlier discussions on police and policing, it is now not difficult to see that the Confucian ideal of harmony, especially with a long historical trajectory of being the state-sponsored political and ethical system since Emperor Han Wudi's rule (156–87 BC), can serve as a coercive force that impacts on people's perceptions about 'how to be' or 'how to act' and the normative organization of society in a Chinese context. This ideal, as we will see in the next section, has been intertextualized, updated and reinvented – eventually, established as policy – so as to fit in with the development of a modern China.

### 3. The Reinvention of Harmony

As already pointed out, 'harmony', or *hexie* (和谐, in modern Chinese), has recently become a visible pattern of political discourse in China, embodied in pervasive phrases like 'Harmonious Society' which are initiated by the Chinese government and constitute a striking feature of the new discursive order. If one travels to China nowadays, one would expect to find the overwhelming presence of the word *hexie* in the public sphere: on the TV, in newspapers, on public transport, in classrooms and offices, and on street billboards and banners. Blommaert's (2010: 142-144) insightful account of the 'harmonious golf' sign in a street in Beijing, about how the national political slogan of harmony is superimposed onto the global corporate discourse of golf, offers a representative example.

As a matter of fact, this is an arduous comeback of Confucianism after being largely marginalized in China, its own center, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This return signals a discursive shift that centers upon the Confucian 'jargon' of harmony, the revamping and redeploying of which reflect the state attempts to establish new orders as its engagement with globalization processes deepens. Harmony, thus, becomes a strong contemporary rhetoric that dominates the discursive order of meaning making, as seen, for instance, in the official policy of 'language harmony' or *yuyan hexie* (语言和谐).

Our concern with the discourse of harmony in China's language policy certainly will benefit from an understanding of the philosophical-epistemic dimension of *he* as primarily conceived in the Confucian traditions, something we have examined in detail in the previous section; but, in the same way as the example of 'harmonious golf', this

concern also needs to be situated in the latest framework of talking and behaving, a framework under the name of *hexie*, that is emerging from the processes of globalization. To establish this framework is to investigate the social-historical dimension of *hexie* in which harmony is not only a historically conditioned and social reproduced discourse, but also a discursive feature of wider processes of social and political changes closely connected to globalization in China. We will see that *hexie* involves considerable discursive shifts, not just a reactivation of *he*.

### 3.1 New Confucianism

To be sure, the discursive shifts of *hexie* are by no means random. Yet, this only becomes clear when we consider it as one of the series of turbulent shifts in discourses about Confucianism that took place in China over the course of last century. Prior to that, Confucianism stayed more or less as a stable, mainstream system of value in an enclosed Chinese society ever since the Han Dynasty. The downfall of the last monarchy of Qing and the incoming of Western ideologies such as capitalism, liberalism and communism in the early 1900s witnessed the death of the concrete embodiment of the orthodoxy of Confucianism in China. A new generation of intellectuals emerging from the May Fourth movement (circa 1919) denounced the oppressive hegemony that centuries of political manipulations of Confucianism had exerted, especially over the equality, freedom and creativity of women and youth. On the other hand, a total breakaway and disregard of Confucianism, at least of its emblematic and intellectual values, also proved a devastating identity dilemma for a new nation-state at its moment of birth. In fact, Confucianism was never really off the scene. As Dirlik (1995: 234) asserts, ‘These same intellectuals [who argued against Confucianism] would, in ensuing years, engage in efforts to find some reconciliation between “Western” and “Chinese” values, out of which would emerge what has come to be called “New Confucianism”’.

New Confucianism is an umbrella term that captures the ongoing movement of the neo-conservative transformation and reinvention of the Confucian traditions since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of which three generations (1921-1949, 1950-1979 and 1980-present) of exponents have developed (Bresciani 2001; Liu 2003; Makeham 2003; Fan 2011). Over each of these three periods, the status, focus and impact of Confucianism shifted with the economic and political climate change at the time (see Dirlik 1995; Yao 2000; Bell 2006, 2010 and Louie 1980, 2011 for various discussions).

To put it in a nutshell, the first generation of the three returned to Confucianism in searching for a sense of self from within a crisis-ridden China, amidst desires to depart from its condemned ‘feudal’ past. The second one was led by scholars outside Mainland China which was then occupied by the Cultural Revolution and a drastic ideological alienation from Confucianism in favour of Maoist communism and nationalism. This period was engaged mainly in a dialogue between the Oriental-Chinese Confucianism with the Western-Kantian philosophy. And the most recent decades saw a pan-China ‘rediscovery’ of Confucianism (Bell 2006) accompanying the East Asian economic booms in the 1980s as – not so much its content, but – ‘the *evaluation* of that content with respect to the question of modernity’ had changed (Dirlik 1995: 236, our emphasis).

In this newest wave of Confucianism, China reemerged as its center and leading advocate in full swing, as it embarked on the post-Mao ‘reform and opening-up’ course in order to reengage with the wider globalization processes. It is this third phase of what is termed a ‘renaissance’ of Confucianism (Little & Reed 1989; Fan 2011) that gives rise to the political discourse of harmony.

### 3.2 The Harmonious Society

China’s reengagement with globalization since 1979 has hugely enhanced the country’s economic-political power and, consequently, its social diversification and restratification. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, and in merely 10 years, its GDP had increased almost five times and it was ranked the second-largest economy in the world. Yet, the inequality of wealth is widening at an alarming speed, with its Gini coefficient index reaching 0.47 in 2010<sup>1</sup>. Reclaiming and revaluing Confucianism, under such conditions, becomes once again necessary and all the more important. On the one hand, it reasserts the part of the cultural and national identity that China had been alienated from under the dominance of western ideologies and self-inflicted disruptions. On the other hand, this re-forges a domestic political-ideological framework that can appeal to nationalistic nostalgia and, at the same time, reestablish order to a rapidly changing and restructuring society. It is in such a context that the Chinese government initiated the current wave of New Confucianism – what Wang (2011) describes as a more politically oriented Mainland China New Confucianism – by reintroducing *hexie* as the spearhead jargon that calls into question the need of new orders which is legitimized by the reuse of Confucianism.

‘Harmonious Society’ or *hexie shehui* (和谐社会) was first put forth in September 2004, when President Hu Jintao made an important speech on ‘building a harmonious socialist society’ at the fourth plenary session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. This was propounded in the following year, at CPC’s sixth plenary session which passed the strategic document ‘Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s Resolution on Major Issues of Building a Socialist Harmonious Society’. According to President Hu, a harmonious society is ‘a scientific development concept’ which consists of six elements: democratic rule of law, fairness and justness, honesty and friendliness, vitality and liveliness, stability and orderliness, and coexistence of man and nature. It is urged that a harmonious, in other words, *orderly*, political environment and social structure with regained morale are needed in China to deal with the deepening social divide, discontents and tensions as well as to fill the perceived ideological and ‘moral vacuum’ left by the Cultural revolution (Louie 2011).

‘Harmonious Society’ can be taken as a real effort in building a culturalist/humanist image of the state by re-cherishing the core Chinese values as encoded in the Confucian

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<sup>1</sup> The Gini coefficient index measures income inequality, with < 0.25 generally considered the most equal and > 0.6 the most unequal; 0.4 is the internationally recognized warning line. See China Daily report *Country’s Wealth Divide Past Warning Level* at [www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/12/content\\_9837073.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/12/content_9837073.htm), last viewed on 9 April 2012.

concept of *hexie* while turning it into a new rhetoric ‘to react and redress an increasingly less balanced and less fair domestic landscape’ (Yu 2008:123) and, ultimately, to reassert the state authority. In such a context, *hexie* becomes a metonym for a self-defendable form of power and coercion that can be used to impose certain order and normativity. The recentering of harmony is reflected, implicitly or explicitly, in the way language policy in China has been (re)formulated and expanded over the past decade or so, gradually incorporating *hexie* as the main trope and motif.

### 3.3 Language Harmony

The monoglot standard of Putonghua and its hegemonic dominance over other varieties of Chinese has evolved out of sociohistorical practices (e.g. Dong 2010), and can thus be seen as a continual process of harmonization in the sense of Confucianism. The hierarchical order as harmony in the domain of language is made transparent and justifiable as it merges with the political discourse of social harmony in recent years. This is illustrated in the official poster used in 2009 (see Figure 1) for the 12<sup>th</sup> annual National Putonghua Promotion Week organized by the Chinese National Commission on Language and Script Work, in which the layers of significance of harmony is inscribed in:

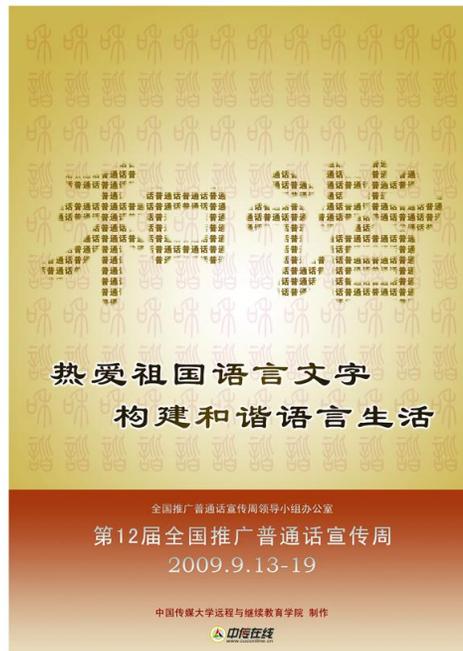


Figure 1: ‘harmony’ in the poster of the 2009 National Putonghua Promotion Week (text reads: *Harmony: Love the motherland language and script; build a harmonious language life*)

- a) *hexie* as an oversized word placed in the top-center, announcing the theme of the state-led language campaign,
- b) the same word as the background in the calligraphic font ‘seal’ (*Zhuan*, originated from the Confucian period over 2000 years ago) and written vertically – an aesthetically and archaically organization of semiotic indexicals of *hexie*’s historical and cultural roots – which frames the poster as well as, symbolically, the language campaign, and
- c) two sentences that spell out the updated (sociolinguistic) meaning of *hexie* in modern-day China: ‘love the motherland language and script; build a harmonious language life’.

Government propaganda like this has been practised ever since the founding of the People’s Republic to install a monoglossic order in Chinese society. This order is not only about which languages or language varieties are more prestigious than others, i.e. Putonghua compared to dialect or other languages, but also about the different and therefore unequal degrees of legitimacy and authenticity language as social capitals may have (or not) to afford people voice (e.g. Wang 2010). Regulation of language is regulation of voice, and thus a clear form of policing as formal policy. For Painter (2008) language facilitates the reproduction of the state, and is an instrument of national unification, standardization and mobilization, and therefore also an instrument of inclusion as well as exclusion, empowerment as well as violence. The first law of language in China, the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese issued in 2000, is a typical example, also a pretext of the ‘harmonious society’ discourse that followed a few years later.

What we see in the above poster is that the state policing of a monoglossic order is being relabeled with *hexie*, an ideal that assumes order and normativity as appropriateness by virtue, and, as a result, becomes a *bone fide* voice. Such a voice is further sanctioned by the nationalist or patriotic sentiment (the call to love the motherland language and script) aroused by Confucianism from which *hexie* originates, and is seen symbolic of the Chinese history and culture (the use of the archaic style of harmony). Any voice implying an alternative, heteroglossic order is, hence, against harmony and inappropriate, and may be regarded as an act of subversion and sabotage.

Sociolinguists in China (e.g. Feng 2006, 2007; Zhou 2006; Zhang 2009; Zhang & Xie 2010) also argue that maintaining harmony or *order* of language use should be an indispensable aspect of constructing a harmonious society. They contend that, apart from official policy, the realization of language harmony relies on language users and their awareness of the norms of conduct and willingness and ‘sensitivity’ in conforming to the norms (Feng & Zhang 2006). It is suggested by some that nonstandard, non-normative and creative uses of language in various domains, such as commercial language, literary works and online communication, all risk violating and harming linguistic and social harmony (Feng 2007). Following this line of argument, it can be said that harmony has to do as much with self-awareness of normalization as with top-down policing and active aggression of state power.

So far, we have discussed the notion of ‘harmony’ with respect to *he*, in its classical Confucian sense, and *hexie*, in its evolution into the latest political discourse and reinvention of Confucianism emerging from China. Together, they provide important philosophical-epistemic as well as historical-cultural contextualization (Baumann & Briggs 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996; Blommaert 2005) that enables us to dissect the meanings of harmony as observable texts and practices in China. These aspects contribute to the formation of harmony as an ideological imperative for rationalizing and policing the use of language as social resources in China, as a response to the rising social diversity and shifting social order instigated by the globalization processes there. This, in an era of the ‘network society’ (Castells 2009), gives rise to the powerful state Internet censorship apparatus in China.

In the next section, we examine harmony as processes of policing in China’s virtual space. We will demonstrate that, alongside the state policing, there are considerable non-state-oriented interactions and influences from grassroots users of the Internet. Such practices imply that ‘language harmony’ is not only about policies and legislations of language (as linguistic features) *per se*, but more about the policing of voice and the validity of using certain linguistic features to make oneself understood (Blommaert 2005).

#### **4. The (Dis)Harmonious Chinese Internet**

Recent development of the information and communication technologies in China has created the largest population of Internet users, or ‘netizens’, in the world, exceeding 500 million in 2012 (compared to merely 60 million in 2002) based on the estimation of Wang Chen, chief of the Information Office of the State Council. The latest statistics from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the government agency responsible for Internet affairs, suggest that the broadband penetration rate in China is now over 98%, and the average time spent by a Chinese netizen online is 2.6 hours a day. The sociopolitical implications of this are multifaceted regardless of the still unequal distribution of infrastructure and digital divide.

Above all, the Internet has profoundly transformed the way people access information and communicate with one another. It offers unprecedented potential of freedom and democracy to an authoritarian state and exposes its citizens to alternative norms, values and ideas that were unavailable before. With the new technology, the speed and velocity of such changes are extraordinary, posing new challenges to the existing social order. One of the main challenges is related to ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2006), new forms of diversity that use the Internet either as the space and medium of production, or as a tool for inventing new resources for meaning making (e.g. Varis & Wang 2011; Du & Kroon, forthcoming). What’s more, the Internet allows wider, more active and democratic participation to economic and sociopolitical discussions and public civic life, especially for the grassroots people (e.g. Zhou 2005; Yang 2009). In the case of China, all of these may interfere or even endanger the building of a harmonious society in the eyes of the state. Not only may online communication dispute the state prerogative of defining practices of meaning making, it also decreases the exclusive power of state control and opens various aspects of social and political issues for negotiation and debate.

## 4.1 Online Policing and Harmonization

Structuring and maintaining virtual order is, therefore, on the top of the agenda for constructing, maintaining and reinforcing language harmony in China. Devising and implementing Internet censorship policies have been a vigorous and sometimes aggressive way of policing and controlling online behaviors (see Varis et al. 2010 for a discussion). For instance, in addition to rules on language use in general, such as the Language Law of 2000, it is common practice to use automatic screen-masking to block the use of ‘disharmonious’ language – ranging from profanity to politically sensitive words or topics – either substituting with asterisks or deleting them altogether. Sometimes an entire webpage or website is removed. The state also contrives a system that inflicts self-monitoring online. CNNIC has issued new legislation every year since 1999 regarding the management of Internet Protocol address in order to accurately track the activities of individual end users online. The panoptic surveillance is conjointly carried out by the online police (see Figure 2) who inspect and enforce judicial punishment against disharmonious behaviors. The presence of law enforcement and policing online had of course started much earlier, in 2003 when the Ministry of Public Security put in operation the massive Golden Shield censorship project, known to many as the Great Firewall of China.



**INTERNET POLICE:** Meet JingJing and Chacha, the friendly faces of Chinese state censorship who pop up regularly to remind people of the rules

Figure 2: Internet policing in China

(source: [www.techradar.com/news/internet/from-china-to-the-uk-net-censorship-worldwide-622428](http://www.techradar.com/news/internet/from-china-to-the-uk-net-censorship-worldwide-622428))

In a blog entitled ‘25 Shocking Facts about Chinese Censorship’, Britney Wilkins lists all of the above and other measurements, including the use of spyware and the ban on transnational social networks such as Twitter, Youtube and Facebook, in order to censor and control what is happening on the Internet in China. Similarly, in a recent article entitled ‘Internet Censorship in China’, the New York Times points out that the Internet censorship in China is the most stringent in the world. More people are employed by the government to monitor and ‘guide’ online conducts, such as the notorious ‘50 Cents Party’

(*wumao dang* 五毛党) who are allegedly paid at the rate of half a yuan per post to write in disguise as grassroots netizens, to steer public opinions into a ‘harmonious’ direction. When Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the IMF, decided to charm China by appearing on its most popular social media Sina Weibo during her official visit to China in November 2011, she was instantly cautioned by a netizen named Damo Duhang, ‘Please be careful to write! Here is not France. If your word is sensitive, someone would *hexie* you.’

While the state doctrine of *hexie shehui* is used as a mandate to justify the tight control of communication and the quashing of potentially ‘disharmonious’ speech online, the word *hexie* has become over the years a satirical placeholder for ensuring stability and political status quo at all costs. The Chinese netizens started to use the word *hexie* as a euphemism for Internet censorship. When netizens say that a user has been ‘harmonized’, the suggestion is that the person has somehow been brought into compliance by government agency, whether by physical force or by losing access to his/her account. Through the appropriation of this word, they in fact voice criticism of governmental claims that censorship is employed to maintain a harmonious society. This attitude is illustrated in a widely circulated picture online (see Figure 3), which shows the word 和諧 (harmony) in traditional characters with the radical 口 (meaning ‘mouth’) in both characters being covered with plasters. Through this image, grassroots netizens argue that harmonization is in fact a policing strategy adopted by the authorities to silence their voices, to muzzle them.



Figure 3: ‘harmony’ with no ‘mouth’  
(source: [http://webfee.blogspot.com/2011/10/blog-post\\_30.html](http://webfee.blogspot.com/2011/10/blog-post_30.html))

#### 4.2 Hexie, River Crab and Grass Mud Horse

The parodist appropriation of ‘harmony’ has, ironically, turned the word itself into a so-called sensitive word, namely, an object of policing. When the word *hexie* got censored and ‘harmonized’ online, Chinese netizens creatively adopted the word ‘river crab’ (河蟹) to replace the direct use of ‘harmony’ since the two words are homophones that are only tonologically different: *héxié* for ‘harmony’ and *héxiè* for ‘river crab’. Images of

river crabs (see e.g. Figure 4) are also circulated online to imply discontent with the state censorship and suppression of freedom of speech. In fact, ‘river crab’ has gradually become an Internet buzzword or meme that symbolizes, euphemistically, the ideological battling between ‘harmonization’ and ‘counter-harmonization’ in the Chinese cyberspace.



Figure 4: *hexie* (river crab) on the national flag  
(source:<https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/ln62-netspeak/author/ln62/>)

The move from *héxié* 和谐 to *héxiè* 河蟹 indicates an extraordinary effect of policing. Rather than uniformity and loss of voice, the enforcement of language harmony online has stimulated and facilitated new forms of (super)diversity and new opportunities to express self in alternative ways. This is important to our understanding of language policy as ethnographically informed process of policing. Even though harmony and Internet censorship are forcefully implemented as a top-down policy, this policy can be negotiated and resisted by the powerless group and by individual agency, and lead to oppositional responses and unexpected outcomes. To further illustrate this point, we turn to one of the most known Internet phenomena since 2009: a modern myth (Hopkins 2009) about ‘river crab’ fighting ‘grass mud horse’ (another Internet meme created by netizens). In the story, ‘river crab’, euphemism of harmony as Internet policing, and ‘grass mud horse’, homophone of a crude curse and poetic symbol of freedom of speech, enable netizens to figuratively enact struggles against state censorship through a fantasy drama of war woven in metaphors and puns, thus being ‘disharmonious’ without being ‘harmonized’.

‘Grass mud horse’ comes from *cǎonímǎ* (草泥马) in Chinese. It may look like a nonsense word, but it is the homophone (with different tones) of another Chinese expression, *càonǐmā* (你妈), which means ‘fuck your mother’. While the Chinese censorship system aims to block obscene uses of language, the phrase ‘grass mud horse’ actually allows netizens to transgress as well as to satirize the policy of censorship with impunity, which eventually makes the word an icon of grassroots aspirations for freedom of speech. They even invented a written form for this three-character-phrase, by combining part of each of the three characters 草, 泥 and 马 (see Figure 5). As a netizen named Kenneth Tan

explains, ‘The 艹 radical refers to ‘grass’ (草), 尼 resembles 泥 and both are homophones, while 马 is the character for ‘horse’. The new character even has a recommended pronunciation *jiayu*<sup>2</sup>.



Figure 5: ‘grass mud horse’: a new Chinese character  
(source: [http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/23/character\\_of\\_the\\_day.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/23/character_of_the_day.php))

In the beginning, the invention of ‘grass mud horse’ became popularized among the Chinese netizens only as a clever euphemism of a swearing word that can escape the touch of harmonization. But gradually, *caonima* took on a whole new life beyond this function. A mythical animal depicted as a furry, amiable-looking alpaca was created to give a physical embodiment of *caonima*, a previously nonexistent creature, and started roaming on the Internet. Then, a story was invented about the grass mud horse, which tells that the magical beast lives in a desert ‘Mahler Gobi’ (*malegebi* 马勒戈壁) and feeds on ‘fertile grass’ (*wocao* 沃草). Although the environment in Mahler Gobi desert is extremely harsh, the grass mud horse lives a happy life there. But one day, the river crab moves into Mahler Gobi. The grass mud horse and the river crab have a fierce fight and, finally, the grass mud horse wins the battle (see Figure 6) and goes on living in the fantasy land of Mahler Gobi desert thereafter.



Figure 6: ‘grass mud horse’ swallowing ‘river crab’

<sup>2</sup> [http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/23/character\\_of\\_the\\_day.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2009/03/23/character_of_the_day.php), viewed on 9 April 2012.

The story (with several slightly varied versions) is a dramatic elaboration of resistance against Internet policing by grassroots netizens in China, in which the protagonist, the grass mud horse, represents the repressed and the river crab represents the repressor. The use of stories becomes here the ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott 1990) of public political discourse, by developing euphemistic lexicons, images and narratives through which language use and meanings are coded in such a way that they are recognized and shared by subordinate groups, but lie beyond the patrol and surveillance of the authority. Both ‘Mahler Gobi’ and ‘fertile grass’ are such examples: the former is the homophone of the Chinese vulgar expression *malegebi* 妈了个屌 (your mother’s vagina), and the latter is that of *wocao* 我肏 (I fuck). In using extreme profanity, subversive puns as well as the metaphorical plot of the grass mud horse defeating the river crab, netizens are able to utter deep resentment and symbolic defiance of China’s Internet censorship. This triumph was celebrated across the Internet and spawned reproductions in more vivid forms of language by using Internet technology.

One such example is an online music video called ‘the Song of the Grass Mud Horse’ that went viral (available now even on Youtube) after its release in 2009. The song (again with a number of versions) features a digital voice of children’s chorus singing about the life of the grass mud horse in the theme tune of the famous children’s cartoon television series *The Smurfs*, as if to highlight the cuddly creature’s unambiguous decency, innocence and vitality. Its lyrics go like this<sup>3</sup>:

In the remote but beautiful Mahler Gobi desert  
There is a group called the grass mud horse  
They are lively and smart  
They are cheeky and sensitive  
They live freely on Mahler Gobi desert  
They are strong and brave in overcoming harsh conditions  
Oh excellent grass mud horse  
Oh superb grass mud horse  
They defeated the river crab to save fertile grass(land)  
The river crab disappeared from Mahler Gobi desert forever

The infectiously funny yet perplexingly distorted presentations intertwined with digital productions like this suggest powerful yet humorous attacks against the normalization force online. The narrative about *caonima* as feisty survivors and warriors who fight bravely against invaders to protect their scarce resources is, in fact, a hidden political dissent and activism through language violence against harmony-as-hegemony. This kind of struggle extends even beyond the Internet, as the image of *caonima* goes offline, enters people’s everyday life and is turned into consumable goods and identity statements in popular culture (see Figure 7).

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAI4>, Translation is our own.



Figure 7: *caonima* T-shirt and toys

Not only has *caonima* been transformed into a new cultural product of online spoofs (Meng 2011) and symbolic interactions (Wang 2012) for mass consumption, it goes on to expand deeper into Chinese society and becomes an exploitable material with multiple meanings that inspires and provokes more explicitly ‘disharmonious’ democratic movement, especially by public intellectuals. The Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei makes himself a leading actor of such movement by posting on his website and blogosphere photo images of himself posing naked with only a small furry *caonima* doll blocking or ‘harmonizing’ his privates. This is highly controversial not least because of the public display of nudity (which later led to criminal accusations of ‘pornography’ against Ai Weiwei): the composition of these images comes with a highly offensive caption which rests on the pun between ‘grass mud horse covering the middle’ (*cǎonímǎ dǎngzhōngyāng* 草泥马挡中央) and ‘fuck your mother the Central Party’ (*caonima dǎngzhōngyāng* 你妈党中央). This visual and semiotic reframing of *caonima* broadens further the sociolinguistic repertoire of the word and makes it a transparent symbol of ridicule and contempt over the control of online communication imposed from the above (as depicted in a cartoon impression of Ai Weiwei’s act of art by the Chicago artist Tom Tian, see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Ai Weiwei with *caonima*  
(source: <http://www.tomtian.com/#s=2&mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&p=4&a=0&at=0>)

As Hopkins (2011) observes,

‘The image both celebrates the grass mud horse’s symbolic status as a champion of natural human freedom and evokes the constraints of censorship, as the artist protects himself from full exposure by using the grass mud horse as both a black bar and a perversely exaggerated phallus. Much like the phrase “grass mud horse”, Ai’s alpaca doll announces what it obscures by replacing the unmentionable with a hysterical, unavoidable substitute’.

By leaping over the heads of the police, a naked Ai Weiwei, with one hand shielding himself with the grass mud horse and the other raised in a fist high in the air, shows ultimate condemnation, rebellion and subversion against the hegemony of policing exercised by the authority.

### 4.3 Discussion

From *hexie* to *caonima*, what we have is a complex story about harmony and harmonization, Internet censorship, hegemony and suppression, resistance and struggle, semiotic innovation and digital creativity from Chinese cyberspace (see Nie 2009 for a discussion). In the name of traditionalism and nationalism represented (selectively) by the Confucian idea of harmony, the state is keenly restructuring order and rebalancing social disparity while maintaining the authoritarian system. This ambition of harmony

inevitably leads to the ‘harmonization’, i.e. coercion and even denial, of diversity and voice, which are only enhanced by the Internet as a new social arena and new package of resources for constructing alternative identities. The Chinese Internet censorship is a new and overt form of policing in response to this phenomenon of globalization. Nevertheless, it is challenged from below.

The above discussions illustrate how innovative manipulation of the linguistic, semiotic and literacy resources via computer-mediated communication creates a new genre of protest and contention through which the process of state policing is sabotaged and disputed. The invention of ‘river crab’ and ‘grass mud horse’, together with their associative lexicons, puns and jokes, relies on the sophisticated interplay of visual, verbal and symbolic texts that is able to express multiple meanings through the same form. This transformation of language function is made possible by the Internet technology and propagated and transmitted from online to offline, making these words a socially recognizable and enregistered set of codes that offer linguistic, aesthetic, symbolic and political capitals, thus allowing Chinese netizens to develop their own voice in the presence of tough policy.

Subversive Internet memes like the ones examined here are an important and distinctive part of micro-politics in China that ‘takes advantage of unique possibilities of the Chinese language, as well as the technological possibilities of the Internet’ (Hopkins 2009). Although memes tend to be contingent, unstable and temporary – also depending on the extent of policing – their instant usability and trendiness can appeal to mass audiences, and can therefore potentially generate mass campaigns against censorship (or other forms of) policing through fast, informal, micro language transgression. The word *hexie* offers a good example of how ‘harmony’ is turned on its own head and changed from a symbol of policing and homogenization to that of contention and counter-homogenization, totally opposite to what it was intended to mean by the official. Moreover, it spawns a string of new memes, all of which are developed into codes with multiple functions that can be used and appropriated in a range of settings and environments as anti-policing instruments.

Ironically, in the process of harmonization, ‘harmony’ has caused considerable ‘disharmonious’ behaviour and noise. In the context of globalization, such politics of (dis)harmony on the Internet can be taken as an indication of the diversification of voices and thus superdiversity. Nevertheless, what seems a semiotic carnival that draws wide participation in a range of formats cannot really escape the control and inhibition of the state power. According to Global Voices (a multilingual community of bloggers who report about citizen media stories from around the world), as a consequence of over-popularity, the online appearance of the legendary Chinese Internet memes *hexie* and *caonima* is officially suspended. They reported that a notification to the Chinese forum managers is repeatedly tweeted about the banishing of these words<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> *China: Goodbye Grass Mud Horse*. See <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/03/18/china-goodbye-grass-mud-horse/>, viewed on 9 April 2012.

“ 草泥马相关内容不得进行任何推荐，不得炒作（包括××神兽、河蟹），点名批评猫扑。目前该事件已上升到政治高度，境外媒体炒作该事件为网民与政府对抗。”

One shouldn't promote any content related with Grass Mud Horse, don't turn it into hyperbole (including xx legendary creatures and river crab). It names and criticizes mop.com. The issue has been elevated into a political level, overseas media has turned it into a story of netizen and government confrontation.

The hands of policing seem omnipresent, but so do phenomena of *hexie* and *caonima*. The banality of power (Mbembe 1992) in the name of harmony already presupposes the existence of disharmony. The question to ask, then, is ‘not whether the Internet will democratize China, but rather in what ways the Internet is democratizing (or will democratize) communication in China’ (Tai 2006:184).

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the genesis of ‘harmony’, a political term at the level of policy in China from its early philosophical sources to its contemporary deployment as a notable concept of social order. Harmony, as we have seen, has never been an unambiguous concept and has always been contested, remodelled and challenged, by means of shifts in the intertextual links of the concept. In this sense, harmony joins the ranks of political core terms such as ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, ‘development’ and so forth: semantic floaters that, when used skilfully, can stand for entirely different realities in ways already described by Dwight Bolinger (1971). As Bolinger argued, the ‘pure’ or ‘original’ semantics of a term can never stand for the total array of its actual forms of usage. Word meanings, in short, are poor indicators of the actual life of words in human social and cultural practice.

We are now in a position to formulate some conclusions, and two sets of reflections need to be addressed. First, we want to extract some general points from our case analysis and look at what this analysis tells us about harmony as larger patterns of political and ideological struggle. Second, some general observations can be made regarding the nature of language policy and the ways of investigating this. Let us begin with the first set of reflections.

We have seen that the intensive use of the term ‘harmony’ in contemporary China is guided by a desire, or demand, for social order. This demand appears to be spurred by the accelerating social differentiation in the People’s Republic in the wake of its rise to global economic prominence. With the emergence of a sizeable professional middle class and a smaller nevertheless important class of super-rich people (e.g. Tomba 2009), China is rapidly becoming a class-stratified society characterized by growing differences

between rich and poor. This is accompanied by the availability of new information and ideas and new opportunities and resources for identity making provided by the Internet.

It is in the context of such an escalating social and political divide and ramification that ‘harmony’ must be seen and understood. It is a slogan that responds to the rapid fragmentation and diversification in society by putting some ‘spin’ on it – in spite of such growing diversities, the Chinese must have a common focus and invest themselves in a project of social cohesion and ‘harmony’. This concern with ‘harmony’ is thus an attempt towards re-emphasizing the modernist *monocentric* ideal inscribed in the state structure of China. Harmony should produce, legitimize and enforce centripetal forces in society and politics, and prevent society from spinning out of control.

This, as we have seen, does not always work according to plan. The monocentric orientation of ‘harmony’ clashes with the increasing polycentricity in Chinese society, where we see an increasing social, cultural and political fragmentation – that is, an increasing divergence of values, opinions, modes of analysis and other objects of what is traditionally called ‘ideology’. The Internet is a carrier for such accelerating forms of polycentricity, and we have shown some of the many ways in which Chinese netizens address in practice the state’s and their own understandings of harmony. Obviously, the Internet is a platform not just for centripetal forces in society but also (and perhaps even more so) for centrifugal forces, forces that take subjects out of the monocentric orbit of the state. This tension between a centripetal and monocentric social politics, and a centrifugal and polycentric potential offered by the Internet, is well understood by the Chinese authorities, and could be at the core of the state’s attempts to monitor and constrain Internet use. Similar reactions against the ‘chaotic’ dimensions of the Internet by the state can be observed elsewhere too – think of the knee-jerk reactions by several Western states when Wikileaks started publishing previously confidential documents.

The future of ‘harmony’ as a useful concept in Chinese politics will depend on the way in which it can be deployed as a ‘niched’, non-totalizing concept targeted perhaps at the policing and regulation of certain aspects of social life. If it is applied to the totality of social life, it will backfire, because it is an entirely inadequate descriptor of social processes and, consequently, can only be used against specific social processes, as a means to repress and eliminate certain forms of social processes. That is, it can only be used successfully as a potentially repressive policing instrument. It will then share the fate of many other concepts deployed by central authorities in attempts to ‘control’ and ‘reduce’ escalating social diversity. ‘Integration’, ‘social stability’, ‘social cohesion’ and other widely used terms will almost inevitably become (or have already become) targets of contestation and conflict, since they are irrelevant as descriptors of the social realities (cf. Blommaert & Verschueren 1998). A monocentric understanding of legitimate identities, identities that come with important material and immaterial entitlements, is likely to lead to coercive and excluding practices in the age of globalization and superdiversity.

So how do we understand language policy in view of the evidence presented here? It is clear that language policy, any language policy, is not a singular object, the features of which can simply be ‘read off’ core documents in a semantic analysis of the core terms in

the language-political vocabulary. It is best to see it as a highly complex and nonlinear set of practices that are lodged in specific sociolinguistic contexts. The forces that create language-political effects are not unified either, perhaps not even readily identifiable or entirely unpredictable, as can be seen in our case of online harmonization. A more ethnographically-based analysis would bring out the specific factors influencing the direction of these processes, and show us why sometimes coercion will prevail, and why sometimes resistance and transformation occur.

It is also unwise to see language-political statements and key terms as descriptors of sociolinguistic realities. This ‘fallacy of internalism’ (Thompson 1990) assumes that political realities are contained in political texts, an assumption that has inspired many scholars in language policy. Texts and terms, however, do not predict their own uptake and implementation. In fact, uptake and implementation are fields of research in their own right and require entirely different approaches than the critical textual analysis of language policies. They demand ethnographic inspection, and when such ethnographic inspection is performed, researchers will often encounter unexpected outcomes (cf. McCarty 2011). We can then see formal language policies – texts and their concepts – as flexible and unstable instruments. They may be designed for dogmatic deployment but in reality, they receive defiant interpretations and adverse consequences, as illustrated in this paper. We can also see formal language policies as just one instrument for shaping the sociolinguistic lives of people, though this rarely occurs as the only instrument. Societies and their sociolinguistic environments are polycentric and become increasingly so. Language policies such as that of harmony will therefore have to share their space of manoeuvring with other sets of prescriptions and normative expectations.

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