Using Media as a Potent Vehicle of Culture and Language Preservation: A Rhetorical Analysis of Uyghur Tik Tok Videos under the Mandarin Language Policy

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Abstract

Xinjiang, one of the Chinese ethnic autonomous regions with millions of Uyghur population, had seen the implementation of Mandarin language policy in Uyghur education for a decade (Wang & Gesang, 2020). Standardizing Mandarin in education resulted in cultural and linguistic assimilation among Uyghurs (Wang & Gesang, 2020). Despite retaining ethnic ties through family interactions, Mandarin and Han culture had reshaped Uyghurs' language attitudes and imprinted on their cultural beliefs and everyday practices (Wang & Gesang, 2020). While monolingual Mandarin education in Xinjiang marginalized the Uyghur culture and language, they found representation and experienced popularity in Tik Tok, a short-video media platform favored by youngsters. Uyghur Tik Tok users made an ever-growing number of videos in the Uyghur language to story their ethnic culture, attracting and engaging scores of viewers within and outside the Uyghur community.

Keywords

Mandarin Language Policy; Uyghurs; Tik Tok; Rhetorical Analysis.

1.   Introduction

Through a rhetorical analysis of three Tik Tok videos made by Uyghur creators, I discovered that these Uyghur Tik Tok videos constituted a robust response against the language policy of standardizing Mandarin. Uyghur creators disseminated messages about the distinctiveness of Uyghur culture and language using pathos, reminding Uyghur viewers of their unique ethnic identity to reverse assimilation brought by the Mandarin language policy. Boosting persuasive appeals through emotions to Uyghur viewers allowed Uyghur creators to challenge the ideology within the Mandarin policy while avoiding causing conflicts. In my eyes, under continuous and vigorous enforcement of Mandarin language policy in ethnic minority region Xinjiang, these Uyghur Tik Tok videos acquired tremendous importance. They served as a potent vehicle to preserve endangered Chinese ethnic culture and language, which had significant implications for maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity in China.

I began this article by reviewing previous literature on Mandarin language policy in Xinjiang and Tik Tok following a thematic structure. Past studies on the two themes provided me a perspective to examine Uyghur Tik Tok videos as a potent vehicle to preserve the Uyghur culture and language under the Mandarin language policy. Next, I described my rhetorical analysis methodology and investigated three Uyghur Tik Tok videos through its theoretical lens. My rhetorical analysis focused on message themes Uyghur creators try to convey through their Tik Tok videos' visuals, captions, sounds, and rhetoric of Uyghur creators to craft their messages. In the findings section, I presented a recurring message theme and the central rhetoric of Uyghur creators that emerged from three Uyghur Tik Tok videos. And in the following discussion section, I illustrated the implications of this overlapping message theme

and rhetoric shared by the Uyghur creators. Finally, I concluded my article by claiming that my investigation of Uyghur Tik Tok videos filled in research gaps in the Mandarin language policy and Tik Tok. Also, my study inspired further exploration of Uyghur Tik Tok videos and Tik Tok's roles in different contexts.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to establish a perspective to examine Uyghur Tik Tok videos as an instrumental vehicle of Uyghur language and culture preservation under the Mandarin language policy. Following the thematic structure, my literature review explores existing studies on two main subjects. Mandarin language policy and its implementation in Xinjiang constitute the first; the other lies in the short video platform Tik Tok. The current literature on the Mandarin language policy and its practice in Xinjiang illustrates how the Chinese government's ideology operates within the language policy, and speaks to the pressing need for investigating avenues to protect Uyghurs' culture and mother tongue. Although a large and growing body of literature has studied Tik Tok and concluded Tik Tok video's role in impacting viewers around a particular field, this theme has not been explored in the Chinese Uyghur context. Also, my literature review demonstrates there are extensive studies on the Mandarin language policy and Tik Tok, respectively. However, research integrating these two areas, that is, research Tik Tok as a tool to protect the dying Uyghur language under the Mandarin language policy, is scarce. My study, hence, aims to fill in these gaps.

3. Mandarin Language Policy in Xinjiang and Its Embedded Ideology

Throughout the literature on the Mandarin language policy and its enforcement in Xinjiang, there is consistent evidence that the ideology of uniformity is embedded in the policy and has led to cultural and linguistic assimilation among Uyghurs. In an investigation into the Mandarin language policy, Liang and Shin (2019) pay particular attention to the relationship between language ideology and policy. Liang and Shin (2019) offer a historical overview of the Chinese government's efforts in promoting a shared spoken and written language with the goal of nation-building. Liang and Shin (2019) insist that because present China is home to 55 ethnic minorities of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a common language is needed to construct national unification to achieve national development ends. Xue and Li (2020), like Liang and Shin (2019), maintain that Mandarin language policy manifests the government's ideology. However, they contextualize their research in Xinjiang's ethnic minority education system to find the ideology operated in the policy. Xue and Li (2020) claim that promoting Mandarin in Uyghur education represents the government's consideration of enhancing harmony and stability in the region. With significant Uyghur populations in Xinjiang, the Chinese government expects Mandarin to play a role in encouraging Han and Uyghur communication and interaction to reduce conflicts. Overall, these studies comprehensively explain the policy's preference for the Mandarin language from the ideology perspective, laying a solid foundation for my investigation.

Wang and Gesang (2019) take this area of research one step further by evaluating the policy's impacts on the Uyghur minority, echoing Han and Johnson (2021)'s finding that the policy has contributed to cultural and linguistic assimilation among Uyghurs. Wang and Gesang (2019) put forward the concept of selective assimilation. As they illustrate, although Uyghurs retain emotional ties to their ethnic cultures and language through family interactions, Han culture has imprinted on their cultural beliefs and everyday practices (Wang & Gesang, 2019). In the interview, Mandarin-educated Uyghurs emphasize the role of monolingual Mandarin education in improving their educational level and access to social resources, which makes Wang and Gesang (2019) advocate that assimilation doesn't always lead to a complete cultural and

linguistic conversion. However, it can still significantly shape Uyghurs' perception of their ethnic cultures and language (Wang & Gesang, 2019). In the same vein, Han and Johnson (2021) assert that the language policy of promoting Mandarin reshapes Uyghurs' attitude towards Mandarin. According to Han and Johnson (2021), the policy has reinforced Uyghurs' idea that speaking Mandarin represents their national identity: they must talk Mandarin to be Chinese. Han and Johnson (2021) attribute it as a manifestation of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Collectively, these studies outline how government ideology of uniformity drives language policy in Xinjiang to favor and promote Mandarin and bring about cultural and linguistic assimilation among Uyghurs. Given that few studies have concluded how to protect the Uyghur culture and language under the policy, it highlights the urgency of researching the ways to preserve Uyghur culture and language in Xinjiang.

4. Tik Tok Platform and Videos

As an emerging social media platform, the bulk of existing research has explored Tik Tok, focusing on its characteristics, affordances, and roles. Kaye et al. (2021) conclude Tik Tok as a media platform featuring short-length video, fast-circulation content, and user-orientation design. Cervi (2021)'s study adds to Kaye et al. (2021)'s understanding by considering user profiles. She claims that these unique characteristics make Tik Tok perfectly cater to the youths seeking visual sensation and having a short attention span (Cervi, 2021). Besides features, Tik Tok's affordances and roles have gained increasing attention among scholars. In a recent study conducted by Hautea et al. (2021), it is argued that Tik Tok's affordances enable visibility, edibility, and association of video content, which makes for engaging viewers in reflecting and discussing severe issues such as climate change. Comment on Tik Tok's role, Hautea et al. (2021) state that Tik Tok is influential in generating social activism by raising public awareness of an unrepresented problem. Chen et al. (2021) also work in this direction but specify their research in China. Instead of studying Tik Tok as a tool for promoting general discussion on a significant social issue, Chen et al. (2021) position their perspective on politics. In their research, Chen et al. (2021) investigate how Tik Tok facilitates the Chinese government's efforts in spreading positive energy ideology and political agenda related to it. Chen et al. (2021) observe that Tik Tok has become a powerful instrument in disseminating the government's political agenda and desired ideologies. Together these studies provide an important insight that Tik Tok is more than an entertainment platform for amusement, which illuminates a new lens to examine Uyghur Tik Tok videos. Uyghur Tik Tok creators may use Tik Tok videos to message warning against the Mandarin language policy and spread the awareness of preserving Uyghur culture and language.

Literature on the Mandarin language policy in Xinjiang presented in this section suggests that the policy manifests the government's ideology of fostering the consciousness of shared nationality. While the language policy of standardizing Mandarin in Xinjiang makes for enhancing national unification, it has taken a toll on Uyghurs with a unique cultural and linguistic identity. Nevertheless, the ways to protect the Uyghur language under the policy have less attention among scholars. Other lines of literature in this section indicate Tik Tok features distinct characteristics and affordances and has potential outside entertainment. These previous studies urge further exploration of Tik Tok video roles in different situations. Since a growing number of Uyghur Tik Tok videos thrive on the platform, it provides a context for my research, which will examine Uyghur Tik Tok videos as a tool to promote Uyghur culture and language preservation under the Mandarin language policy. My study will contribute to the existing literature on Mandarin language policy in Xinjiang by investigating Tik Tok as an avenue to preserve the Uyghur culture and language. Also, it will enrich studies on Tik Tok by

investigating its role in culture and language preservation in the Chinese Xinjiang context, which has not been explored.

5. Method

My literature review provides me a perspective to examine Uyghur Tik Tok videos as a potent vehicle to preserve the Uyghur culture and language against the Mandarin language policy. To understand how Uyghur creators crafted Tik Tok videos to achieve culture and language preservation ends, I selected three Tik Tok videos made by Uyghurs as my analytical artifacts. Greatly inspired by Marcotte and Stokowski (2021)'s framework of rhetorical analysis, my article applied their theoretical lens to the investigation of my artifacts. Marcotte and Stokowski (2021) propose that rhetoric concerns how to create messages that exert particular effects on audiences in a meaning-making process. Accordingly, they maintain rhetorical analysis assesses rhetoric in different processes involving message construction (Marcotte & Stokowski, 2021). Because Uyghur Tik Tok videos communicate messages to viewers through visuals, captions, and sounds, they constitute a rhetorical situation. With rhetorical analysis, I can identify the message themes of three Uyghur Tik Tok videos and the rhetoric used by the Uyghur creators.

The research site I chose for my study is the short video platform Tik Tok, which experiences wide popularity in China. Tik Tok allows users to create videos shorter than 5 minutes with a wide selection of filters and simple-to-use editing services (Hautea et al., 2021). Besides, Tik Tok's algorithm feeds users with a significant number of videos based on their activity on the platform, greatly facilitating Tik Tok videos' viral (Cervi, 2021). Due to the short-length format, user-generated designs, and fast-circulation content, Uyghur videos on the platform have a greater chance to reach and exert influence on Uyghurs. For this study, I collected three Tik Tok videos through the hashtags #UyghurCulture and #Videoin UyghurLanguage to guarantee the videos' content focused on the Uyghur culture and language or were made in the Uyghur language. In addition, I checked their publishing accounts to make sure they had Uyghur creators. The three videos I selected for rhetorical analysis were viewed, commented on, and shared by a relatively high number of viewers, particularly the Uyghurs. Despite having the same primary topic about the Uyghur culture and language, these three videos varied in their representation forms, standing out in Uyghur creators' selection and devise of videos' visuals, captions, and sounds.

Drawing on Marcotte and Stokowski (2021)'s framework, my rhetorical analysis proceeded in four phases. First, I looked at the videos' visual components, focusing on the setting, light, character, action, facial expression, and prop. Second, I investigated the videos' texts through captions, aiming at identifying the modes of argumentation. Here, I referred to Aristotle's ideas of ethos, pathos, and logos to conclude (Marcotte & Stokowski, 2021). Third, I studied the videos' audio, including types of background sounds and perceptions of these sounds. Finally, I defined the recurring message themes and central rhetoric of the Uyghur creators based on the findings of previous steps. However, before delving into the analysis, I must acknowledge that my study had some limitations. Since I only collected Uyghur Tik Tok videos on two hashtags, and I only analyzed three Uyghur Tik Tok videos through the lens of rhetorical analysis, my findings could not reflect all message themes about the Uyghur culture and language hosted on Tik Tok and rhetoric adopted by Uyghur creators. Instead, my findings reflected some critical perspectives.

6. Findings

Through a rhetorical analysis of three Tik Tok videos made by Uyghur creators, my study found that Uyghur creators of three Tik Tok videos used pathos to disseminate messages about the Uyghur culture and language distinctiveness to Uyghur viewers.

6.1. Why the Uyghur Language Is Not Suitable for Expressing Love

In this video, the Uyghur creator presented herself as the video's character, dramatically performing love scenarios that frequently happen between Han lovers in the Uyghur language. She played three scenarios following a similar pattern, beginning with a description of Han girls' behaviors in a romantic context and ending with a performance of what Uyghur girls would do in the same situation. In the first scenario, the Uyghur creator claimed that Han girls would nest in the arms of their boyfriends in cold weather, while Uyghur girls would only comment on how freezing they felt. In the second scenario, the Uyghur creator described a Han girl who would say "little fool" to a wrong boyfriend, while an Uyghur girl would frankly blame her lover for the mistake. And in the third scenario, the Uyghur creator said Han girls would use the words "Dear, you are awesome!" to express generous and sweet compliments to their boyfriends. However, Uyghur girls would offer their praises half-jokingly, claiming that their lovers "show themselves too much." The Uyghur creator's performance of three romantic scenes represented that Han girls verbalized their affections gently, whereas Uyghur girls expressed their feelings candidly.

In addition, the Uyghur creator provided Mandarin instead of Uyghur captions for viewers, employing Mandarin words to represent the Uyghur language with similar pronunciation. The result of the captions was Mandarin created comical meanings different from what the Uyghur language initially expressed, which indicated that Mandarin could no substitute the Uyghur language.

Moreover, the Uyghur creator addressed Uyghur girls as "we" and Uyghur language as "Our language" throughout the video. Funny emojis that easily draw a laugh and sound effects that mimic people's laughter came along with her performance.

6.2. #Xinjiang #hip-hop #dance Long time no see my friend

In this video, the Uyghur creator adapted the lyrics of Mandarin hip-hop and sang the song in the Uyghur language. The lyrics told Uyghurs' experiences of pursuing dreams in a place distant from their hometown. The Uyghur creator sang "People don't understand the pain inside you" to describe Uyghurs' inner loneliness of separating from family and friends. And he sang "You may have forgotten friends like us" to represent Uyghurs' situation of surrounding by Han cultural practices and Mandarin when leaving the Uyghur community. However, in the latter part of the song, the lyrics shifted from depicting Uyghurs' hardships to offering encouragement. The lyrics spoke, "Dad and dude in my heart so I keep going," which inspired Uyghurs to overcome loneliness and difficulties by keeping family and friends in mind. The song boosted emotional appeals among Uyghur viewers. However, Han viewers who were unfamiliar with the Uyghur language and culture could not understand the lyrics and resonate with the song.

6.3. Fighting high school candidates! Blessing from Nig Maiti, host of the CCTV, to the examinee

In this video, CCTV Uyghur host Nig Maiti became the character. He did not wear a suit to report serious news like on CCTV but instead wore a casual white shirt and chatted with Uyghur viewers in a way that he was a member and a friend in the Uyghur community. At the beginning of the video, Nig Maiti pointed out the general misunderstanding of him by Uyghurs. He said: "A lot of people think I've been working in Beijing, so I probably cannot speak the Uyghur language." In order to change this misconception, Nig Maiti read aloud the text in his new book in the Uyghur language. Throughout his reading, Nig Maiti affectionately addressed Xinjiang as "the place where my life began" and emphasized his success in Beijing never changed his affection for his hometown. The text that Nig Maiti read to viewers proved his ability to speak the Uyghur language and showed his emotional connection with Xinjiang and the Uyghur community despite working in Beijing. At the end of the video, Nig Maiti promised Uyghur viewers, "Next

time I will work harder to learn the Uyghur language, and communicate with everyone more smoothly."

7. Discussion

The findings section presented that all three Tik Tok videos conveyed messages about the Uyghur culture and language distinctiveness, confirming that the Mandarin language policy had led to cultural and linguistic assimilation within the Uyghur community. Instead of using logos or ethos, Uyghur creators of three Tik Tok videos adopted pathos to move Uyghur viewers to preserve their ethnic culture and language. Boosting persuasive appeals through emotions to Uyghur viewers allowed Uyghur creators to resist the governmental ideology within the Mandarin policy while avoiding causing conflicts. These Uyghur Tik Tok videos constituted a robust response against the Mandarin language policy, which illuminated that media could facilitate cultural and language preservation by shaping viewers' understanding of a particular culture and language.

Reminding Uyghur viewers of their unique cultural and linguistic identity emerged as the overlapping message theme among three Uyghur Tik Tok videos, which indicated that Uyghur creators intended to reverse assimilation brought by the Mandarin language policy. As mentioned in the literature review, Wang and Gesang (2019), Han and Johnson (2021) observed the Mandarin language policy had led to cultural and linguistic assimilation among Uyghurs who received monolingual Mandarin education. Cultural and linguistic assimilation blurred Han and Uyghur cultural borders in Uyghurs' minds (Wang & Gesang, 2019) and made them attach necessitation to speaking Mandarin (Han & Johnson, 2021). Because cultural and linguistic assimilation had happened within the Uyghur community and reshaped Uyghurs' perceptions about their ethnic culture and mother tongue, Uyghur creators amplified their ethnicity's distinction by drawing a clear-cut line between Uyghurs and Hans in their Tik Tok videos, in order to appeal Uyghur viewers to reject assimilation. In their Tik Tok videos, Uyghur creators brought a dichotomous portrait of Han and Uyghur girls, sang experiences unique to Uyghurs, or had a chat directed at the Uyghur community. Thus, this recurring message theme observed in my study corroborated those of the previous studies that have identified the assimilation effect of the Mandarin language policy on Uyghurs.

However, Uyghur creators of three Uyghur Tik Tok videos avoided making persuasive appeals to Uyghur viewers through logos and ethos but motivated their resistance to assimilation and preservation of Uyghur culture and language through pathos. In the character lines of three Uyghur Tik Tok videos, there was no logical reasoning to prove the significance of preserving the Uyghur culture and language, and there was no explanation to show the credibility of the video. On the contrary, the Uyghur creators of three Tik Tok videos associated Uyghur culture and language with the Uyghur viewers' identity, family, and friends in the lines of the characters, which could easily trigger Uyghur viewers' emotional responses. These associations enabled Uyghur viewers to attach importance to Uyghur culture and language to the extent that they valued self-identity, and prompted them to radiate the emotions of family and friends into their ethnic culture and language. Therefore, my findings provided support for the selective assimilation ideas of Wang and Gesang (2019), claiming that the Mandarin policy does not always lead to a complete cultural and linguistic assimilation. Uyghurs retain their emotional connection with their ethnic culture and language when they link to family and friends (Wang & Gesang, 2019).

The adoption of pathos by Uyghur creators to promote Uyghur culture and language preservation under the Mandarin language policy was wise, given that the strong ideological power of the Chinese government is operating within this language policy. Previous studies on the relationship between the Chinese government's ideology and the Mandarin language policy

have explained that the Chinese government views the promotion of a common spoken and written language as essential to establishing a unitary "Chinese" identity among ethnic groups, which attributed by the Chinese government as a means for national integration and development (Liang & Shin, 2019). Also, the Chinese government expects Mandarin to serve as the medium of Han-Uyghur communication and interaction, which plays a role in reducing conflicts and enhancing stability in the Xinjiang ethnic autonomous region (Xue & Lin, 2020). With the governmental ideology of national unity and political stability operating in the Mandarin policy, Uyghurs' activism on ethnic culture and language preservation could be challenging. To avoid the tensions caused by resisting the hegemony of the Chinese government, Uyghur creators resorted to pathos to get Uyghur viewers to feel the significance of preserving their ethnic culture and language in contrast to persuading them to take radical actions against the Mandarin language policy. Pathos, the rhetoric used by Uyghur creators in their Tik Tok videos, made Uyghur culture and language protection actions different from previous ethnic culture and language activism, which were generally conflicting and aggressive. An Uyghur culture and language preservation activism through pathos identified by my study indicated a harmonious way to achieve cultural diversity and multilingualism.

In addition, my findings revealed that Uyghur creators used Tik Tok videos as a tool to achieve Uyghur culture and language preservation against the Mandarin language policy, which seemed an echo of Hautea et al. (2021) 's research, suggesting that Tik Tok is influential in generating social activism by raising public awareness of an unrepresented problem. However, in contrast to Chen et al. (2021) 's findings, which identified Tik Tok as a powerful instrument in disseminating the government's political agenda and desired ideologies, my findings showed Tik Tik also has the potential to unleash challenges to the governmental ideologies that operating within the Mandarin language policy. In China, video-based social media has long been regarded as an entertainment platform for amusement. Therefore, my findings enriched the understanding of social media use by shedding light that media Tik Tok could play a role in promoting ethnic culture and language preservation.

8. Conclusion

As an ever-growing number of videos made by Uyghurs emerged on the Tik Tok platform, my study set out to investigate what kinds of messages Uyghur creators try to convey through their Tik Tok videos. Drawing on Marcotte and Stokowski (2021)'s framework, my rhetorical analysis revealed Uyghur creators disseminated messages around Uyghur culture and language distinctiveness using pathos to promote Uyghur culture and language preservation against the Mandarin langue policy. My study has investigated, for the first time, the actual efforts of Uyghurs to protect their endangered ethnic culture and language under the Mandarin language policy. Moreover, this is the first time Tik Tok has been examined as a potent vehicle to preserve Chinese ethnic culture and language. Thus, my study adds to the current literature on the Mandarin language policy in Xinjiang and Tik Tok by shedding light on leveraging Tik Tok as an Uyghur culture and language preservation tool when the Mandarin language policy makes Uyghur culture and language marginalized.

However, my study has limitations as only three Uyghur Tik Tok videos were collected and analyzed with the rhetorical analysis method. The results of my study cannot reflect all message themes about Uyghur culture and language hosted on the Tik Tok platform and rhetoric adopted by Uyghur creators. Thus, my study only presents some critical perspectives. Follow-up studies should then explore further Uyghur culture and language themes in Uyghur Tik Tok videos to understand how Uyghur creators harness Tik Tok to facilitate culture and language preservation of the Uyghur ethnic minority, which had implications on maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity in China. Also, further research is encouraged to draw on this study's

theoretical framework to investigate Tik Tok's roles besides culture and language preservation and the Chinese Uyghur context to enrich understanding of media use.

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