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# Minority language testing: the social impact of the Zhuang language proficiency test in China

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## ABSTRACT

The Zhuang language test (*Vahcuengh Sawcuengh Suijbingz Gaujsi*, VSSG) is the first minority language test in the People's Republic of China. It was designed with multiple goals including improving Zhuang language teaching, recruiting students for relevant majors of tertiary study, identifying proficiency for work-related applications, and piloting the standardisation of national minority languages. Informed by a use-oriented testing perspective that takes into account social consequences and value implications, we examine attitudes of stakeholders (i.e. testers in an official capacity and testees) toward the test and consider how well the VSSG meets its goals. Drawing on documents and interviews, our study suggests that the test falls short of its primary goals due to a mismatch between stakeholder attitudes, the social functions of the tested language, and the value attached to the minority language. As a result, the test is an ineffective agent for promoting the status of the Zhuang language in the ways intended by its designers and policymakers.

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## Introduction

Use-oriented testing views tests not as isolated events but rather as embedded in social, educational and political contexts. This view recognises that tests have multiple purposes, including policy implementation, and can have unintended consequences such as suppression or maintenance of specific languages (Shohamy 2001). While recent testing research (e.g. Heeren, Speelman, and De Wachter 2021) tends to take a use-oriented view, the views of testers in an official capacity (TOCs) and testees, especially in relation to minority languages, are under-represented. As Shohamy (2004) notes, 'minority groups rarely take part in the deliberations over the content of the tests and are not considered as partners in the decision-making process' (76). Schissel and Khan (2021) also highlight the 'entrenched devaluing of knowledge, understandings, and experiences of the communities and peoples that language testers' work impacts and reflects a continuum of implicit to explicit detachment from societal and political power structures' (641). They raise two concerns for language testing and language testing research: research efforts tend to be for other researchers and scholars; research on testing can be co-opted to support existing power structures and vested interests rather than supporting social justice and language minority status.

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Karataş and Okan (2021) identify four dimensions related to the power of language tests as social practice: '(1) the roles of testers, (2) the meaning of tests in public, (3) the feelings and meaning tests evoke in testees, and (4) the functions of tests' (p.79). Shohamy (2004) observes that testees are often in a disadvantageous position because they have no say about test content or the types of decisions that are made based on their results. Depending on how a minority language test is used, as well as which varieties of the language are permitted for testing, the test could impact on individuals' language use and maintenance since tests tend to perpetuate language status.

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), test uses are generally linked to the official national language, Putonghua, and to English as an international language. However, language policy in the PRC also recognises a set of official minority languages (Wei, Jiang, and Kong 2021). According to Huang (2019), minority languages serve four functions in the PRC: 1) to guarantee the language rights of the autonomous ethnic groups in ethnic regions; 2) to give full play to the functions of language and inheritance of diverse minority cultural resources; 3) to form a complementary and irreplaceable development and identity relationship with the national common language (i.e. Putonghua and build a harmonious language ecology; and 4) to maintain a positive balance of national unity, social stability, border security, communication and identity between domestic and foreign minority groups. Thus, minority languages in the PRC can be seen as having a complementary relationship with Putonghua (Wang, Bahry, and An 2022).

Zhuang is one of the officially recognised regional, minority languages. There is support for Zhuang-Chinese bilingual education in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (GZAR), the administrative region with the highest number of ethnically Zhuang people (Wei, Jiang, and Kong 2021). However, Zhuang people have tended to see themselves as closely associated with the Han majority (Adamson and Feng 2015), including adopting Putonghua. In addition, the Zhuang language has gone through periods of revision, including changes to the script which historically borrowed Chinese characters but now adopts a Romanised system (Zhou 2003). In 2012, a Zhuang language proficiency test (*Vahcuengh Sawcuengh Suijbingz Gaujsi*, VSSG) was implemented and promoted as the first standardised minority language test in the PRC, with the goal of supporting bilingual Zhuang-Chinese education and literacy. Against this backdrop, we investigate stakeholder attitudes toward VSSG. Our examination is a response to the call for understanding test uses in view of their social functions within the contexts where they have consequences (Chapelle 2020).

Messick (1989) theorised test validity as a matrix of social dimensions, including value implications and social consequences. The former addresses the social and cultural meanings attributed to test scores; the latter comprises real-world consequences stemming from practical test use. The social dimension in evaluating language test validity is further expanded as a policy tool by Shohamy (1998, 2001, 2007) who addresses test roles and functions for different test-stakeholders and recognised the agency of test-stakeholders as part of test validity.

Specifically, we consider value implications by examining the longitudinal descriptive results of VSSG to understand how policy and test use vacillate between respecting the dominant national language and boosting linguistic diversity. We also examine the social consequences of VSSG from the perspective of language testing as a social tool, drawing on the views and perceptions of the test users, especially those who are minority language stakeholders. We conclude by discussing the relationships between value implications and social consequences for this specific test and implications for use-oriented testing of minority languages. With this in mind, we first present the background of language testing in the PRC and for VSSG in particular.

## The context

The PRC is a multicultural and multilingual country, with over 130 languages other than Putonghua (Zhou 2019). Language planning mainly focuses on Putonghua as the national lingua franca for the sake of national solidarity, inter-group communication, and foreign language education policy and planning for internationalisation. Putonghua is required for all professional and vocational

qualifications, such as teacher certification. At the same time, the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (1982) grants general rights to recognised minority groups or 'nationalities', including language rights, without spelling out specific implementation. In areas where ethnic minorities are concentrated, for example, Inner Mongolia (Wei, Jiang, and Kong 2021) and Yunnan (Wang, Bahry, and An 2022), specific minority (language) policies regulate the local minority groups and languages affairs. National (language) laws guarantee ethnic groups in specific geographic areas the rights to develop their own spoken and written languages, allow the use of these languages for official functions including schooling, and encourage multilingualism with the minority languages and Putonghua. Nevertheless, it is clear that Putonghua is a priority and the minority groups are positioned between an emphasis on assimilation and tolerance of pluralism (Blum 2019; Wang, Bahry, and An 2022).

### **Chinese and minority language testing in the PRC**

Language proficiency testing in China involves Putonghua, minority languages, and foreign languages such as English. There are tests of Chinese proficiency for foreign citizens or non-native speakers, namely the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK, 汉语水平考试) and the Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC, 普通话水平测试). There is also a test of Putonghua for domestic ethnic minorities, the Chinese Proficiency Test for Ethnic Minorities in China (MHK, 中国少数民族汉语水平考试). Notably, the Zhuang people are not among the prospective candidates served by the MHK mainly because Putonghua is widely used in the GZAR and Zhuang people in general are proficient in Putonghua.

VSSG, implemented since 2012, is an annually administered proficiency test for the Zhuang ethnic minority or Zhuang-speaking individuals (Zhuang Language Test Syllabus [Trial] 2020). It distinguishes three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate, advanced (Appendix A). Sponsored by the GZAR government, it is the first standardised proficiency test for a minority language in the PRC. Implemented as the central government's pilot initiative to support minority languages (Li 2005, 2013), VSSG has perceived policy-related validity (Kane 2002). In principle, results could have implications for the minority language planning agenda, ethnic identity formation and monitoring of the quality of bilingual Zhuang-Chinese education.

### **Zhuang education and standardisation**

The Zhuang language has a designated standard variety for school instruction. However, in social use there are multiple varieties with distinctive features, interpreted as topolects (Li, 2015), and dialects (*fangyans*; Huang and Fang 2021), some of which are not mutually comprehensible (Kaup 2002). The modern Romanised Zhuang script, *Sawcuengh*, was developed with standards for grammar and pronunciation based on the Northern Zhuang dialect of Wuming (Grey 2022). The romanised version is reported to have limited societal use (Grey 2019) and is more symbolic than functional (Wu, Silver, and Zhang 2021).

While some Zhuang students attend monolingual Chinese education in urban areas, some schools in rural areas provide bilingual Zhuang-Chinese education. Such bilingual programmes are typically based on a transitional model (Feng and Sunuodula 2009; Grey 2019), transiting to monolingual Chinese in upper primary school. Adamson and Feng (2015) argue that 'subtractive bilingualism' (325) is the usual outcome of such bilingual schooling due to the status differences between Zhuang and Putonghua. At the tertiary level, only specialist colleges and universities provide Zhuang-medium education, literature degree programmes or bilingual Zhuang-Chinese instruction in primary/secondary school teacher education programmes. Therefore, Zhuang language education is mainly concentrated in primary and secondary schools. The VSSG is not directly linked with the education system and 'candidates, in principle, are not restricted by ethnicity, age, occupation, education, geography, etc., and can voluntarily participate in the relevant categories of minority language tests according to their actual needs' (Zhuang Language Test Administrative Provisions 2019).

## The study

### Research questions

As Roever and McNamara (2006) point out, ‘the relationship of the wording of standards to the political goals that they serve is complex and not fully explicit, and it only becomes clear in the light of conceptual analyses of the standards and their organization and how this relates to policy’ (218). Because the content of a minority language test constitutes covert standards, we examined VSSG policy documents including statements of objectives and content, particularly the language skills tested. We also examined stakeholder perceptions of how well the test assesses the target language ability, especially given the varietal differences mentioned above. Finally we analysed stakeholder comments to better understand their attitudes toward the test and perceived social consequences. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How well does VSSG align with national language policies and achieve the goals of these policies?
- 2) How do test stakeholders perceive the language ability assessed by vSSG?
- 3) What do stakeholder attitudes reveal about the social consequences of vSSG?

### Methodology

To address RQ1, we reviewed the test syllabus, purpose, frequency, sources, proficiency levels and descriptors (Appendix A), official data (viz. number of test candidates and pass rate; see Appendix B) and alignment between stated test content and national policies. Relevant policy documents including legislations at different administrative levels relating to languages and education were also examined. To address RQ2 and RQ3, we collected and analysed semi-structured interviews with test stakeholders, including two individuals related to the test in an official capacity and past/prospective testees (referred to as ‘testees’ throughout) about their attitudes toward (learning) Zhuang literacy and their experience with the test.

### Interviews

In addition to the two individuals who were connected to the testers in an official capacity (‘TOCs’), participants who self-reported as being ethnic Zhuang and having lived in the GZAR before entering university and who had taken or would participate in VSSG and/or Zhuang language education were invited to participate. All participation was completely voluntary.<sup>1</sup> Data on the test stakeholders’ views were collected via face-to-face or telephone interviews and online chats. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 university students. All the interviewed students were ethnically Zhuang except one who was ethnically Yao but spoke Zhuang. All the students spoke Putonghua, and 34 of them also spoke Zhuang. The oral interviews were audio recorded. Comments from 20 netizens who responded to questions on learning Standard Zhuang literacy and VSSG posted on the website *Zhihu* (a Chinese version of Quora) were also included. When netizens voluntarily responded to the posted questions, the first author joined the discussion with additional prompts to explore or clarify ideas from the respondents. As a question-answer pattern developed, we refer to these as interviews as well.

### Data coding and analyses

Analyses were conducted on the transcribed interviews, policy documents, and the test syllabus for VSSG. The first author familiarised herself with the data by reading through the whole dataset and making marginal notes. As our aim was to understand the value implications and social

consequences of the test, the first author adopted in vivo coding for the interview transcripts, followed by values coding to ‘assess participants’ integrated value, attitude, and belief systems’ (Saldaña 2016, 124). Evaluation coding, which ‘assigns judgements about the merit, worth, or significance of programs or policy’ (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2018, 68), was employed to examine the policy documents including the test syllabus for VSSG which is considered a type of policy document but with a specific focus on acquisition planning. In addition, notes were taken to record the value implications in policy documents and allow for comparison with the transcripts. The second author examined a subset of the coded and translated interview data, policy documents and notes to identify points of agreement/disagreement and establish the trustworthiness of the coding. After the first and second authors discussed the codes and resolved any disagreements, the first author revised the codes and applied them to the whole dataset. Next, she generated themes from the codes through constant comparison and by taking a use-oriented language testing perspective anchored in ‘analytical attributes’ (Shohamy 2001, 133) as summarised in Table 1. Finally, the third author examined a subset of data extracts collated under the different themes to identify any (dis)agreement and suggest amendments for the sake of dialogical intersubjectivity, that is, ‘rational discourse and reciprocal critique among observers identifying and interpreting a phenomenon’ (Kvale 1994, 152). The first author also conducted member-checking with interviewees for extracts that contained ambiguous information.

Findings

The syllabus, testees and the test

From 2012 to 2020, the annual average number of registered testees for VSSG was 376 (calculated based on Appendix B). This number was rather low compared with the ethnic minority testees taking MHK. For example, in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region alone, there were 2,564 testees of MHK in 2019 (Sohu 2019). Nationwide, from 2003 to 2020, the MHK was taken by 2.9 million testees, most of whom were from minority-concentrated provinces such as Jilin, Qinghai, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (Peng 2021). The popularity of the Chinese language test for the minority groups contrasts with the low uptake of VSSG. The low number of VSSG testees suggests that the test does not function strongly as a reference for institutions wishing to have a standard for Zhuang proficiency in contrast to the stated test purpose (Appendix A).

In the first two years, the majority of testees registered for the advanced level of VSSG but over time there has been a greater dispersion of testees across the three proficiency levels. This might suggest that at the beginning of the test implementation, testees were those who had higher proficiency in Zhuang. More recent testees registered at elementary and medium levels due to the promotion of VSSG to the public. Testees were mainly from the GZAR; those from other regions started to appear only in 2019. Therefore, VSSG is a *de facto* local test.

An examination of the test syllabus reveals the target language skills, designated proficiency levels, and intended test purposes. Table 2 summarises the test components and Appendix

Table 1. Use-oriented language testing analytical attributes (Shohamy 2001, 133–134).

Analytical Attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is testers’ context? What is the context of the topic being tested?</li><li>• Who are the testers? What is their agenda?</li><li>• Why is the test being given? What will its results be used for? What is being tested and why?</li><li>• Who are the test takers? Who is going to benefit from the test? What are the underlying values behind the test?</li><li>• What are the testing methods? What kind of decisions are reached based on the test?</li><li>• Who is included in the design of the test and its implementation?</li><li>• What ideology is delivered through the test? What are the messages about students, teachers and society that the test assumes? Can the test, its rationale and results be challenged?</li></ul>

**Table 2.** Test Content of VSSG at Three Proficiency Levels (based on the test syllabus).

Elementary Level					Intermediate Level					Advanced Level				
Test structure	Test content	Test items	No. of items	Test score	Test structure	Test content	Test items	No. of items	Test score	Test structure	Test content	Test items	No. of items	Test score
Basic knowledge	Vocabulary and structure	Multiple choice	30	30	Basic knowledge	Vocabulary and structure	Multiple choice	20	20	Basic knowledge	Vocabulary and structure	Multiple choice	10	10
Reading comprehension	Intensive reading	Multiple choice	10	10	Reading comprehension	Intensive reading	Multiple choice	5	5	Reading comprehension	Vocabulary comprehension	Cloze	10	10
Making words and sentences	Making words	Making words	10	5	Reading comprehension	Scanning	Cloze	5	5	Reading comprehension	Intensive reading	Multiple choice	8	16
Making words and sentences	Making sentences	Making words	5	15	Reading comprehension	Synonym comparison	Vocabulary replacement	10	10	Reading comprehension	Intensive reading	Short-answer question	2	8
Translation	Zhuang - Chinese	Sentence translation	2	8	Translation	Chinese - Zhuang	Sentence translation	5	10	Translation	Chinese - Zhuang	Passage translation	2	16
Translation	Chinese - Zhuang	Sentence translation	3	12	Translation	Zhuang-Chinese	Sentence translation	10	20	Translation	Zhuang - Chinese	Passage translation	2	10
Writing	Writing	Short passage	1	20	Writing	Writing	Writing	1	30	Writing	Writing	Writing	1	30
Total				100					100					100



presents the proficiency descriptors. The analyses suggests VSSG primarily examines traditional literacy:

- From the elementary to the advanced level, the number of vocabulary items goes down but the writing score increases from 20 to 30.
- The test method for assessing reading comprehension shifts from multiple choice only at the elementary level to a combination of multiple choice, cloze and short-answer questions at the advanced level.
- Items assessing basic grammar (i.e. those requiring testees to make words or sentences) are only found at the elementary level.
- Writing carries less weighting at the elementary level as compared with other two levels, which is somewhat surprising given the stated purpose of testing the modernised Zhuang script (*Sawcuengh*).
- Translation carries the greatest weighting at the intermediate level but is more complex at the advanced level as the test shifts from translation of sentences to passages.

According to the stated test purposes, results are intended to be used for job placement and certification. In addition, the test is expected to 'provide services for the promotion of Zhuang culture' (Appendix A, Purpose of VSSG). However the low registration rate suggests that the test is not widely used for job placement or certification, and the analyses of the test content show that there is little related to Zhuang culture. In sum, the test seems to have few social consequences.

### ***Stakeholder attitudes***

The interviews revealed that one TOC and some testees were positive about the use of VSSG as a tool for social equity and job-seeking, while the other TOC and some testees held a negative view. In the interviews, other negative attitudes emerged with regard to the dwindling vitality of Zhuang, standardisation-related issues for VSSG, and the use of the test to ascertain proficiency (especially in view of varietal differences).

### ***Positive attitudes: fulfilling the policy intention***

As a university professor TOC1 holds that VSSG could support standardised assessment across universities and for certification (Extract 1) and thus has positive social consequences.

#### **Extract 1**

... The Dean of Peking University asked for an evaluation for the minority language for postgraduate admission, but we did not have a standardised test at that time and we used the final test of a minority language course as proof. So the first thing is to have a fair standardised test. The test allows one to compare the scores and distinguish the higher from the lower levels. ... It will be easier for me as a teacher to have a reference. It is also a reference for other schools to admit prospective students. (TOC1)

According to TOC1, another function of VSSG that fulfils the policy intention is social equity in educational activities - it is a fair way to distinguish individuals and provides a standardised reference point for talent selection and evaluation. The function of selecting talents satisfies institutional needs and rewards individuals for their abilities (Extract 2).

#### **Extract 2**

If you use the test as a certificate, there may be a practical effect. If you move to a higher-level school, apply for promotion to a professional title or look for a job, the agencies will recognise you by the certificate. At the same time, this test is also a reward for one's ability. People want to get high marks when playing games, right? Particularly so when the employer may recognise the certificate as a government-sponsored test. This is a reward. (TOC1)



The potential personal reward was also recognised by prospective testees. In Extract 3, Yi, an ethnic Zhuang who spoke Zhuang and majored in Zhuang Studies, noted that the test provided a professional qualification and a means of ascertaining her Zhuang language proficiency. Her comments showed agreement not only with TOC1 but also with the officially stated test purposes. This positive attitude was also shared by an anonymous netizen (Extract 4) who clearly linked social consequences (e.g. certification) and value implications (self-improvement).

### Extract 3

First, I want to take the test because I need a professional certificate as proof for future job hunting. Second, I want to take the exam to see how my Zhuang language proficiency is. Third, we should strengthen and further develop ourselves. (Yi, a Zhuang major, ethnic Zhuang and Zhuang-speaking student)

### Extract 4

I'm not a Zhuang but a Han, but I was born and raised in Guangxi. I'm very willing to learn the Zhuang language, not to mention free of charge. I was willing to pay tuition to learn the Zhuang language, but I didn't find such a class at all. (Anonymous user, netizen)

### *Negative attitudes: unfulfilled policy goals*

Some interviewees expressed doubts about the social consequences of the test in terms of its utility. They were especially concerned about the way proficiency was assessed in relation to varietal differences and community use and about the dwindling vitality of Zhuang. They felt that the test was not a good fit for general proficiency assessment among Zhuang people but was designed only for those who know Standard Zhuang literacy or for Zhuang-Chinese bilingual teachers (Extract 5). On the one hand, certification could be seen as a positive use; on the other hand, it represents limited use in comparison with the stated purposes of the test. These comments implicitly questioned the value implications of the test, which does not adequately take into account social and cultural meanings of the community varieties. In Extract 6, TOC1 acknowledged that VSSG could not meet the needs on the ground, for example, recruitment of civil servants, because the test does not take into account Zhuang varieties, oral language, and social functions.

### Extract 5

There are not many people who take this test every year, because (although) one gets the certificate, it is not recognised in society. The certificate may receive some kind of recognition ... in the education system. We talk about bilingual education, or the Zhuang-Chinese bilingual education, so they think this test is useful in the education field, but in other areas of society ... [the test is little known]. (TOC2)

### Extract 6

A small number of people can pass the test, which may encourage more people to study. Then, many years later, VSSG may be modified and developed. One case is if society allows dialects to play a role, for example, in the recruitment of local civil servants. You don't need to know the Standard Zhuang script, but only to know the local dialect ... (TOC1)

Sharp criticisms of the test were voiced by the testees who claimed to be highly proficient in both oral and written Zhuang but failed to pass VSSG due to varietal differences (Extract 7). In contrast, the TOCs insisted that proficiency assessment should be based on a standard variety (Extract 8).

### Extract 7

I took the test in 2012, when it was first administered, when I was only 25 years old. But these experts could not understand what I wrote: my writing and translation in Zhuang were not what these experts wanted ... . Zhuang language standardisation and promotion now seems old-fashioned and narrow-minded; how can we say that this expression can't be used, that expression can't be used? (Liu, a Zhuang-speaking testee)

### Extract 8

This dialectal issue is ... we should remember that the use and development of the Zhuang script also sacrificed some dialectal words. They are missing in Standard Zhuang, that is, the common language. So if the dialect is too locally restricted, or in other words, it is not used in many places (such as only used in one or two counties), people [in the larger society] don't understand [the dialect]. (TOC1)

Some interviewees commented explicitly on issues of standardisation, literacy and their relationship to proficiency assessment and varietal differences. In Extract 9, prospective testee Feipaopao<sup>2</sup> questioned the testing and learning of written Zhuang, by commenting 'I'm ethnic Zhuang. I think it's good enough to speak Zhuang language. I'm against Zhuang Pinyin. It's really useless.' He associated romanised Zhuang script with Putonghua rather than a support for the Zhuang language and identity. The sharpest criticism from Feipaopao concerned the dissociation of the societal use of Zhuang and standardisation. He felt that speaking for local communication was sufficient. The disconnection between standardisation and the varietal differences of the languages prevents prospective testees from seeing a potential test benefit and result in a lack of alignment between VSSG's value implications and social consequences. Similarly, TOC2 opined that the focus on written Zhuang does not necessarily reflect the language ability of testees (Extract 10).

### Extract 9

The writing function of the Zhuang language is useless. The Zhuang language is not a common language. Zhuang people from various regions can't communicate in the Zhuang language when going to other counties. There is no so-called Standard Zhuang language. Who will inherit it? In rural areas, in counties where many Zhuang people concentrate, it is limited to those places. In Nanning, I often use Zhuang, and it is only limited to communication with the relatives and fellows. Oral proficiency is enough. There is no use for reading and writing. This is my personal opinion. (Feipaopao, a prospective testee, anonymous netizen)

### Extract 10

This Zhuang literacy ability is different from the Zhuang language ability. One is literary ability, and the other is language ability. Let's take the Zhuang language proficiency test for example. It's just about literacy skills. It doesn't tell you about oral language abilities. For example, if someone speaks the Zhuang language, like me, I can speak very fluent Zhuang, because I have been speaking the language since I was a child. My mother tongue is the Zhuang language, but my Zhuang literacy may not be very good. Then, for example, if I use Wuming pronunciation, my standard pronunciation may not be very good. (TOC2)

From a testee's perspective, VSSG is problematic as the test is not based on societal use in Zhuang communities and does not reflect their ethnic identity (Extract 11). Wei Bo contended that Standard Zhuang seems to be a mixed language of 'official Zhuang and Cantonese' and is distinct from his own Zhuang variety.

### Extract 11

Anyway, if I am asked to learn the Zhuang language of Wuming, which is a language mixed with official Zhuang and Cantonese, I will be crazy ... I definitely should be learning the pinyin for my home Zhuang pronunciation. (Wei Bo, a prospective testee, anonymous netizen)

Our analyses show that the negative attitudes toward the test stemmed from its misalignment with social functions, issues of different Zhuang varieties, potential misjudgements on 'real Zhuang language proficiency' and lack of cultural affiliation. There were also concerns about the ethnolinguistic vitality of Zhuang and the expected role of VSSG in helping to promote the language. Notably, 43 of the testees felt that the Zhuang language was unnecessary and thus need not be promoted by a test such as VSSG (e.g. Extract 12). Others, such as TOC2, noted that although Zhuang has some official functions (e.g. in court; see Extract 13), there are insufficient efforts to support standardisation and utility, especially for the written form. While Li (2013) sees VSSG as a step toward Zhuang standardisation, the testees' perspectives indicated that the test is a weak instrument for

promoting standardisation (Extract 12).

### Extract 12

I don't think the Zhuang language is necessary at all. First, it's time to promote Putonghua, so learning written Zhuang is unnecessary. Second, there is no unified standard pronunciation, and there is a lack of a broad mass base for the language. Third, with advancing means of communication and closer contact between people, Putonghua has become a necessary language. The scope of the Zhuang language is very narrow, so there is no need to promote it. Therefore, there is no need to use the Zhuang language, let alone promote it. (New self, a prospective testee, an anonymous netizen)

### Extract 13

Well, now Guangxi is training Zhuang language judges, because there are many local legal cases that require the use of the Zhuang language for trial and judgment. Guangxi courts have been using local dialects for several years. Because in terms of language, Standard Zhuang has not yet become the unified language across all Zhuang groups, the standardised pronunciation has not yet been established, and the central government has not enforced it. You ask if the country enforces the Zhuang language, but it will take decades or hundreds of years to form a common language ... All the people are learning Putonghua [Putonghua] ... If we are to popularise the Zhuang language and written Zhuang, it is of little practical significance. You don't need to take VSSG. (TOC2)

Given these findings, we return to the three research questions that this study set out to answer.

## Alignment with national language policies and achievement of envisioned goals

As demonstrated by our findings, VSSG aligns with policies to some extent. In general, VSSG attempts to support language rights by providing a means of recognition and certification. Those interviewed understood the rationale. Even TOC2, who was largely negative, noted the utility of certification for bilingual Zhuang-Chinese teachers. VSSG is potentially useful in acting as a complementary assessment, outside of the school system, of Zhuang-Chinese bilingual education.

However, the test enactment falls short of the intended aims. The comments made by TOC2 (e.g. Extract 13) and many testees evidence a lack of societal agreement on the utility of Standard Zhuang and of the test (e.g. Extract 9) as a means of giving 'full play to the functions of language and inheritance of diverse minority cultural resources' (Huang 2019, 37). Overall, the value implications of VSSG are seen to be limited and its social consequences are deemed to be low.

## Stakeholder perceptions of VSSG and its value implications

The stakeholders had differing perceptions of VSSG, the way language ability should be assessed in VSSG, and its underlying value implications. TOC1 thought that the test captured and rewarded a testee's personal ability (Extract 2); TOC2 believed that the test reflected only the ability of 'writing', different from the ability of 'language' (Extract 10). Some testees questioned the relationship between VSSG results and their self-perceived Zhuang language ability (Extract 7). They found it problematic to base the assessment of overall Zhuang proficiency on reading, writing and translation alone. This view aligns with assessment theory that problematises the use of a single skill, or sub-set of skills, to gauge general language proficiency (see Powers 2010, for an overview of the arguments in favour of a comprehensive approach to proficiency testing). Oracy, which might be more important in terms of Zhuang functionality (see Extracts 11, 12, 13), is not included in VSSG. The absence of oracy in the test leads to questions about the value implications of the language because community members seem to value Zhuang oral competence over Zhuang literacy.

There were also questions about how VSSG positions itself in relation to known varietal differences. While TOC1 (Extract 2) identified 'practical effects' of taking the test, these were linked to certification. From the testee's perspective, the Standard Zhuang script (*Sawcuengh*) is 'Pinyin', perceived to be a form of Putonghua, not necessarily representing Zhuang because it reflects only one

regional variety (i.e. Wuming; see Extract 9). Thus, the language, as represented by the script, does not align with testees' actual proficiency or with the functions of Zhuang in their lives (e.g. Extract 11).

## Stakeholder attitudes and social consequences

Although TOC1 saw some utility in VSSG (Extracts 1 & 2), he also acknowledged that the construct of language ability defined for the test does not fully attend to the actual use of Standard Zhuang in society, especially the use of spoken Zhuang in social life (see Extract 6). Testees confirmed that VSSG does not align with social uses of the language by the Zhuang community (Extract 9); nor does it adequately reflect their proficiency (Extract 7) or their sense of identity (Extract 11). They questioned the validity of the test in terms of social consequences and value implications. This has led testees to perceive VSSG as a low-stakes test, despite policy visions regarding its purposes.

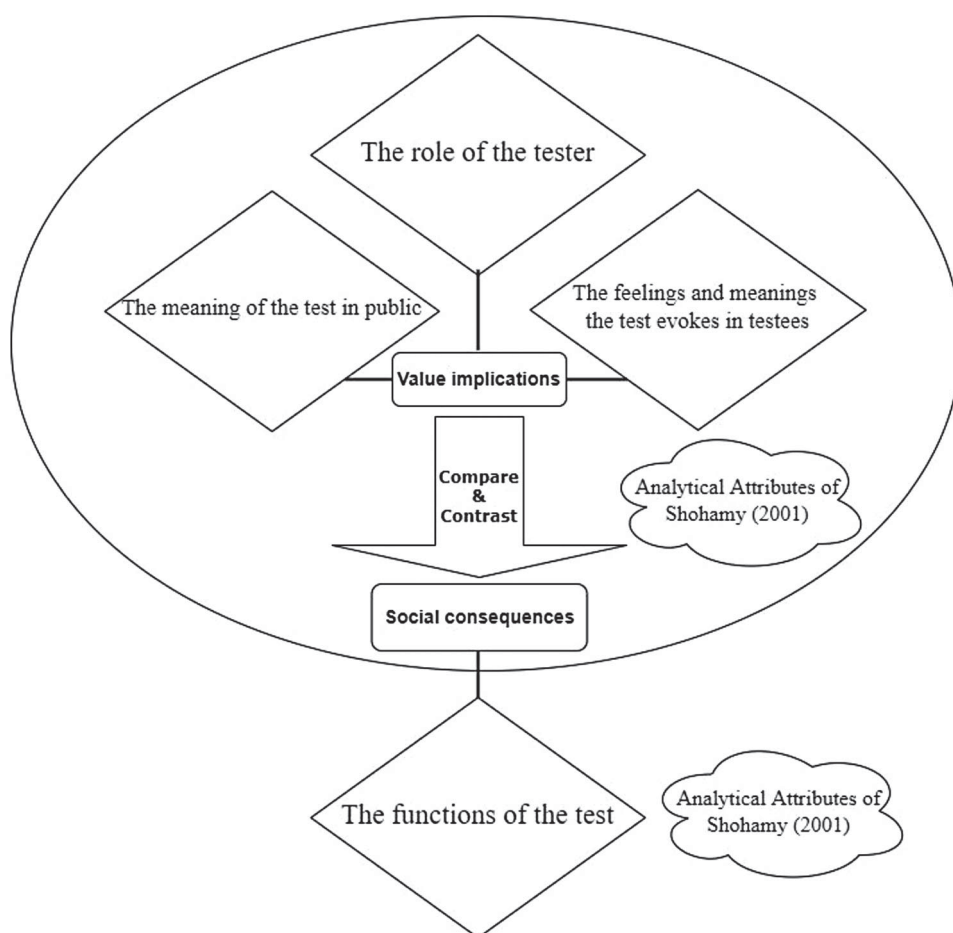
## Discussion

This study has investigated the social impact of the first minority language proficiency test in the PRC from the perspective of use-oriented testing. Specifically, we have examined the alignment between test design, implementation and policy, and stakeholder's perceptions of the language ability evaluated by the test in terms of its value implications and social consequences.

Our analyses have revealed that VSSG is a *de facto* literacy test which partially fulfils its goals in differentiating candidates in their knowledge of *Sawcuengh* and which potentially serves as a reference for employers and institutions. However, returning to Shohamy's comment that minority language users are rarely consulted on test content (2004), our findings also show that the test content was a particular sticking point for the testees. In terms of proficiency assessment, the stakeholders (especially testees) were concerned about the test's inability to address regional variations in the spoken form and disagreed with the choice of a Romanised script linked to only one regional variety to assess literacy. From a test developer's perspective, it is essential to base the test on a standard variety (Li 2013; see also comments from TOC1). However, when testees feel the test does not allow them to represent themselves in the Zhuang language, they are likely to downplay the advantages the test can offer and see few positive social consequences (Extracts 7 & 11). Thus, testee attitudes also raise issues with the stated test goal of promoting Zhuang culture. For testees, the Zhuang language is seen largely as related to family and community, but the use of a 'so-called Standard Zhuang' is not linked to communication with family, friends, and community (Extract 9); the test is 'narrow minded' with pre-determined expressions which can or cannot be used (Extract 7); the romanised script, which does not align with testees' own varieties, is just 'crazy' (Extract 11).

TOC2 confirmed the incongruence between the content specified in the test syllabus and the stated goals of the test. This incongruence could be attributed to the Zhuang language ecology, including social practices and attitudes. Because Standard Zhuang has not been strongly affirmed as an intra-ethnic language (Extract 13; see also Grey 2019, for a discussion on the use of Standard Zhuang), its status has not been recognised by grass-roots Zhuang ethnic people. The majority of the participants in our study felt that the romanised Zhuang script is not necessary and that oral proficiency in Zhuang varieties is sufficient (Extract 9); thus, the test fails to bring about the intended social consequences.

At the policy level, VSSG is seen as having potential market value, but the testees did not see the test results as highly marketable. Stakeholder views suggest that to the extent there is a market for Zhuang speakers, it might be for those who speak regional varieties (Extract 6). Standard Zhuang literacy was seen as being crucial only to the niche market of Zhuang-Chinese bilingual teachers. As for the intended test purpose of universal certification for employment after higher education, those who enter Zhuang language majors must already pass a high threshold of Zhuang language



**Figure 1.** Use-oriented Test as a Social Tool.

education and, consequently, do not require further validation via VSSG, contrary to TOC1's view in Extract 2. Thus, the test falls between two stools: It neither assesses the types of proficiency needed for many social functions nor validates higher education attainment for employment.

Our analyses show that stakeholder voices, especially those of testees, helped unpack the value implications and social consequences of the test. Unlike Grey's (2022) discussion of 'Pinched Zhuang' as a variety that is contested between Putonghua and Zhuang, we found that it is the intra-variety contest between Standard Zhuang and Zhuang varieties that impedes the uptake of the test. A crucial point is that the envisioned purposes of the test might not work for all stakeholders. If the test is to become a high-stakes recognised means of determining Standard Zhuang proficiency for employment and education, there must be a recognised 'Standard' and a need for that Standard. If, on the other hand, the value implications of the test are to assess language competence as users perceive it and to facilitate Zhuang language maintenance, the test would need to tolerate varietal differences of Zhuang and ideally would include the assessment of oracy.

In this study, we are particularly concerned with the linkages between the social and cultural meanings attributed to the test scores (i.e. value implications), the consequences/uses of the test in daily life (i.e. social consequence), and ways to better understand the power of minority language tests. Stakeholder comments show how value implications and social consequences are mutually reinforcing: to the extent that stakeholders do not see social consequences which cater to their

needs, they also see low value implications. Policy attempts to drive value implications higher via the test alone are unlikely to be successful. With these points in mind, we re-examine the notion of use-oriented testing and ways of valuing ‘knowledge, understandings, and experiences of the communities’ (Schissel and Khan 2021, 641). Building on prior studies and our findings, we suggest that the analytical attributes identified by Shohamy (2001), the value implications and social consequences included in Messick’s matrix (1989), and the functions of tests can be synergised by Karataş and Okan’s (2021) four dimensions of tests as social practice. We propose an integrated conceptual framework of use-oriented testing as a social tool (Figure 1) to examine the social impact of minority language tests.

Clearly the function of tests cannot be fully understood only through an examination of test content or stated purpose. Karataş and Okan (2021) propose four dimensions which illuminate the power of language tests as social practice: the role of the tester, the meaning of the test in public, the feelings and meanings the test evokes in testees, and the function of the test. The first three dimensions have to do with roles and meanings. They partially align with Shohamy’s (2001) analytical attributes of a) tester agenda; b) ideologies delivered through the test; and c) test taker agendas, benefits and underlying values. In our analyses, the role of the tester is shown through TOC comments which envision the test (and tester role) as a means of promoting standardisation and certification. The perspectives of testees reveal their ‘feelings and meanings’ as evoked by the test; the perceptions held by all the stakeholders collectively provide a window on the meaning of the test in public – especially in relation to its perceived utility. These three dimensions and the related analytical attributes can lead to an understanding of the value implications of the test, which can then be compared with its perceived (and observed) social consequences. The functions of the test as stated (e.g. statements on test purposes, test content) should be considered in light of Shohamy’s other analytical attributes (e.g. test context, test methods, and test design) and against the analyses of the ‘roles and meanings’ dimensions, value implications and social consequences.

The analytical approach, as outlined above, supports the integration of stakeholder attitudes for a fuller understanding of minority language tests as a social tool and helps to resist the ‘entrenched devaluing’ noted by Schissel and Khan (2021, 641). Our analyses conducted within the proposed conceptual framework were able to reveal that VSSG functions as a low-stakes test, though it is intended to be a high-stakes one. We propose this conceptual framework as a way to undertake use-oriented analyses of tests as social tools. At the same time, by making use of the integrated conceptual framework, we also identify limitations of our study. One dimension that needs more attention is the ‘meaning of the test in public’. Our sample of stakeholders comprised predominantly test takers; a more diverse sample would be useful to map the meaning of VSSG in public more comprehensively. Specifically, it would be useful to engage with testers to find out more about how the tests are scored and to what extent the scoring and tester perspectives align with (or diverge from) testees’ concerns about standardisation and language varieties. In addition, data to support analyses of test functions as realised (not only as perceived), along with perspectives of other community members (e.g. university officials, businesses), would add depth to the analyses.

## Conclusion

Approached from a use-oriented perspective, this study examines the social impact of the first national minority language proficiency test in China. The limited social functions and the inconsistent value implications between the testers and the testees impede the uptake of the test, as suggested by the low number of testees. We consider these findings in light of the social consequences of VSSG and offer suggestions for policy stakeholders. We note that the actual social use of standard Zhuang is low (Grey 2019, 2022; Wu, Silver, and Zhang 2021), which leads to the limited social impact of VSSG since any existing social demand for the test is based on utilitarianism. The test is a policy product but its practical value is negligible. Historically, Zhuang ethnic people have tended to identify with the Han majority, and currently Zhuang language users



recognise and value the status of Putonghua (Huang 2002). VSSG on its own, especially given its low stakes, is unlikely to shift attitudes towards stronger validation of the Zhuang language.

The testees' attitudes show that the validity of a minority language test is not primarily psychometric but sociocultural. This has not been adequately taken into account in preparing, publicising, and promoting the test. We suggest that a stronger use-oriented positioning by test developers would strengthen the test. Specifically, communication among TOCs and testees is vital. Shohamy's (2004) comments on the lack of participation by minority language users in the test development process are still valid, especially if the test is to have any impact on the promotion of minority language culture and education.

## Notes

1. Prior to data collection, the project proposal was reviewed and approved by an accredited, university Institutional Review Board (XXX IRB2021-03-001). In all cases, individual consent was sought in Chinese.
2. All names for 'anonymous internet users' are self-selected pseudonyms used online.
3. Retrieved April 21, 2021, from <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/tzgg/P020200914369096072214.docx>, translated by the first author of the paper.
4. [http://news.cnr.cn/native/city/201312/t20131207\\_514342002.shtml](http://news.cnr.cn/native/city/201312/t20131207_514342002.shtml)
5. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2061484.shtml>
6. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2062017.shtml> Percentage of testees could not be counted as the information of total testees was missing from the website.
7. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2064799.shtml>
8. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2070204.shtml> Testees at different levels were unknown from the website and other sources.
9. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/ztzl/zxzt/zzqmzgzywmzgqkjlzl/t5329454.shtml> Testees at different levels were unknown from the website and other sources.
10. <http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2079247.shtml>  
<http://mzw.gxzf.gov.cn/gzyw/mzdt/t2078499.shtml>
11. [http://k.sina.com.cn/article\\_2878339751\\_ab8ffaa702000tlvq.html](http://k.sina.com.cn/article_2878339751_ab8ffaa702000tlvq.html)
12. Accounting for the total number of testees/registers where the total number of the testees and registers is available
13. Accounting for the total test participants for each level
14. Accounting for the total number of test passing testees for each level
15. Please add the first author's ORCID, Ying Wu <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8322-8072>

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. VSSG Purpose, source materials, proficiency descriptors<sup>3</sup>

Purpose of VSSG	Frequency of test	Corpora and materials of test sources	Proficiency level	Proficiency descriptors
The purpose of the VSSG is to test the implementation of the modernised <i>Sawcuengh</i> (Zhuang script scheme) to understand the differences among various candidates, to provide services for the promotion of Zhuang culture, and a reference for employers and institutions to understand the Zhuang language proficiency level of their employees, to certify the training effect of various training institutions of Zhuang language, and to certify the test candidates reaching a certain level of Zhuang language proficiency for other situations.	Annual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The corpus of the test is selected from Zhuang language materials, including dialogues in daily life, idioms, proverbs, literary works, translation works, popular science reading materials, teaching and reference book of Zhuang language scripts in primary and secondary schools, as well as the sources of radio, TV, films, newspapers, magazines and so on. The test source selection principles are as follows:</li> <li>The content should be healthy with a wide range of topics, including humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and etc. But the background knowledge involved in the test should be known to the test candidates or has been provided in the corpus.</li> </ul>	Elementary	Candidates are required to master a vocabulary of 2,500 words and be able to read accurately, dictate and write Zhuang script according to memory; Master Zhuang language grammar and basic sentence patterns; Master the writing rules and correct use of punctuation marks; Capable of simple translation between Zhuang and Chinese; Have a certain ability to read Zhuang language script; Make brief discussion and explanation according to outline, chart or picture; Write short essays with clear themes, coherent meaning, logical structure, reasonable sentence pattern and relatively fluent wording.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. The genres should be varied, including narrative, expository, argumentative, and practical writing and etc.</li> </ul>	Intermediate	Candidates are required to have a vocabulary of 3,500 words; Be able to use the Standard Zhuang language proficiently; Master the complex

(Continued)

Continued.

Purpose of VSSG	Frequency of test	Corpora and materials of test sources	Proficiency level	Proficiency descriptors
			Advanced	<p>grammar of Zhuang language; Be able to translate between two languages of Zhuang and Chinese; Have strong reading ability; Describe charts and pictures in Zhuang language, discuss and explain in Zhuang language according to hints such as outline, chart or picture; Write articles with clear central ideas, complete structure, appropriate wording and fluent language.</p> <p>Candidates are required to have a vocabulary of 5,000 words and a good command of Zhuang Language grammar; Be able to skilfully use the Standard Zhuang language, can express the meaning accurately in Zhuang, can translate fluently between two languages of Zhuang and Chinese; Be able to discuss and explain in detail according to hints such as outline, chart or picture; Be able to write articles with clear ideas, complete structure, appropriate words to produce cohesive and coherent expression.</p>

## Appendix B. VSSG Results, 2012–2020

Year	2012 <sup>3</sup>	2013 <sup>4</sup>	2014 <sup>5</sup>	2015 <sup>6</sup>	2016 <sup>7</sup>	2017 <sup>8</sup>	2018 <sup>9</sup>	2019 <sup>10</sup>	2020 <sup>11</sup>
Testees No. of Testees & Percentage <sup>12</sup> for Each Level	Elementary 57 testees, 1 7.38%	Elementary 88 testees, 30.03%	Elementary 51 testees, 12.6%	Elementary 70 testees, 18.81%	Elementary 152 testees, 35.35%	Not Available	Not Available	Elementary 163 testees, 35.13%	Not Available
	Intermediate 47 testees, 14.33%	Intermediate 87 testees, 29.69%	Intermediate 235 testees, 58.2%	Intermediate 231 testees, 62.10%	Intermediate 181 registers, 42.09%			Intermediate 232 testees, 50.00%	
	Advanced 224 testees, 68.29%	Advanced 118 testees, 40.27%	Advanced 118 testees, 29.2%	Advanced 71 testees, 19.09%	Advanced 97 registers, 22.56%			Advanced 69 testees, 14.87%	
Total No. of Registers and Testees	336 registers, 328 testees	318 registers, 293 testees	448 registers, 404 testees	Registers unknown, 372 testees	430 registers, 376 testees	Registers unknown, 296 testees	371 registers, testees unknown	538 registers, 464 testees	299 registers, testees unknown
Mean Score	Not Available	Elementary 33.6 Intermediate 59.4 Advanced 66.6	Elementary 61.4 Intermediate 50.2 Advanced 64.2	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Elementary 59.29 Intermediate 64.76 Advanced 65
Test Results (No. of People Passing the Test, Passing Rate <sup>13</sup> ) for Each Level	Elementary 22 testees, 38.6% Intermediate 26 testees, 68.1% Advanced 201 testees, 61.2%	Elementary 11 testees, 12.5% Intermediate 52 testees, 60% Advanced 98 testees, 83%	Elementary 30 testees, 58.8% Intermediate 95 testees, 40.4% Advanced 89 testees, 75.4%	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Elementary 89 testees, 54.6% Intermediate 89 testees, 38.36% Advanced 31 testees, 44.93%	Elementary Testees unknown, 61.64% Intermediate Testees unknown, 66% Advanced Testees unknown, 57.14%
First Class Certificate Holder (Over 80 scores) (No. of Holders/ Rates <sup>14</sup> )	Elementary 5 testees, 22.73%	Elementary 3 testees, 27.27%	Elementary 15 testees, 50%	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Elementary 24 testees, 26.97% Intermediate 14 testees, 15.73% Advanced 7 testees, 22.58%	Not Available
	Intermediate 3 testees, 11.54% Advanced 8 testees, 3.98%	Intermediate 12 testees, 23.07% Advanced 10 testees, 10.20%	Intermediate 20 testees, 21.1% Advanced (8, 9.0%)						
Source place of testees	Nanning	176 testees from Nanning, 107 testees from Baise, 10 testees from Qinzhou	312 testees from Nanning, 92 testees from Chongzuo	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	9 cities in Guangxi (Nanning, Liuzhou, Fangchenggang, Qinzhou, Guigang, Baise, Hechi, Laibin, Chongzuo), testees number unknown	Guangxi (Nanning, Liuzhou, Fangchenggang, Qinzhou, Guigang, Hezhou, Baise, Hechi, Laibin, Chongzuo), Shandong, Yunnan	9 cities in Guangxi (Nanning, Fangchenggang, Qinzhou, Guigang, Baise, Beihai, Hechi, Laibin, Chongzuo)