

## **Ethnic Identity, Language Use and Language Attitude of the Pumi in Yunnan, China**

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### **Abstract**

*Language endangerment is a severe problem for the ethnic minorities including the Pumi people in Yunnan, China. To explicate the reasons why the Pumi language endangered, we investigate the relationship between language attitudes and ethnic identity of the Pumi. We have undertaken a data collection from 40 subjects from Lanping County. The results show that the Pumi people have an objective and positive attitude towards their native language and their ethnic identity. A Spearman correlation analysis shows that ethnic identity positively correlated with language attitudes, and the euphonic and cordial degree of language is also positively related to the proficiency of the native language. However, the proficiency has the scarce correlation with ethnic identity. An analysis of the interviews indicated that the local government of Pumi had promoted the publicity of language preservation which played an important role in awakening the passion of the Pumi people to learn their language.*

**Keywords:** Minority language, Ethnic identity, Language attitudes, Language use, language endangerment.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background**

In the context of globalization, China, as a multi-ethnic country, has developed a series of new problems caused by social change and economic development. In particular, many ethnic minorities in China began to face the two serious problems of ethnic identity and language endangerment because of cultural reorganization. As we all know, language is not only the tool of human communication information but also the carrier of cultural transmission. The ethnic language is a medium for maintaining ethnic identity, heritage culture, and an exchange of information. It can keep the behavior, emotion, and cognition of the ethnic members in line, and through the ethnic language, minorities can enhance their ethnic identity (Yang, 2013). Language attitude refers to an individual or some group's evaluation of language or language varieties. From the sociolinguistic perspective, language use and language attitude are two crucial indicators that represent the endangerment level of language. Ethnic identity is a multi-dimensional concept. It mainly includes a group's sense of belonging, the ethnic status identity, the knowledge and attitudes of the ethnicity as well as the ethnic cultural traditions and pride (Ashmore et al., 2004; Cokley, 2007). Thus, the language is a bridge to connect the relationship between ethnic identity and language endangerment. Investigating the relationship between ethnic identity and language endangerment can help us to understand the problems of language endangerment, which are of great importance for solving the ethnic problems. However, most of the previous studies concentrate on investigating the present status of language endangerment of specific minority groups. There are still an area of research exploring the relationship between language endangerment and ethnic identity.

#### **1.2 Previous Research**

##### **1.2.1 Ethnic Identity**

The concept of ethnic identity initially appeared in the 18th century Enlightenment. Malinowski (1944) argues that the idea of "ethnic identity" derives from the meaning of "identity" in the field of ethnic studies. Also, many other scholars have also given a variety of definitions (McCowan et al., 1998; Miville et al., 2000). Among them, the concept of ethnic identity proposed by Phinney (1990) is widely recognized by the academic community. Phinney insists that ethnic identity is a complex structure that constitutes ethnic self-identity, a sense of belonging, ethnic attitudes, and ethnic involvement. He proposed four elements for assessing ethnic identity, ethnic self-identification, a sense of belonging, ethnic attitudes and ethnic involvement. Furthermore, he developed a Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale. Other studies also commonly refer to Phinney's MEIM scale (Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Lee & Yoo, 2004; Sneed et al., 2006). The study of ethnic identity mainly focuses on three fields: "Social Identity from the Perspective of Social Psychologists," "Cultural adaptation from the perspective of social psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists", and "Identity formation from the perspective of psychologists". The Chinese scholars paid more attention to study the ethnic identity of ethnic minorities in China (Huiying, 2007; Zhilong et al., 2010; Suping & Yuxian, 2012).

### 1.2.2 Language Attitude.

Many scholars carried out a series of pioneer studies and in-depth interpretation regarding the concept of language attitude (Osgood et al., 1957; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Our study in this research is mainly based on Wang Yuanxin's research that defines the language attitude in bilingual or multilingual society, because of ethnic identity, emotional cognition, language motivation, behavioral tendencies and other factors such as people's understanding or evaluation of the social values of their native language (Yuanxin, 1999). Measuring language attitudes have been difficult mainly because different scholars have different assessment criteria. But, most scholars use three elements to assess language attitude: "social status", "attraction", and "power", (Ladegaard, 1998; Ray & Zahn, 1999; Liu & Mizerski, 2002). In one specific case study, the public surveys of the world include the Self-report survey of Gardner & Lambert (1972). In China, the investigation and research of minority language attitudes are one of the most particular aspects of Chinese language attitude research. The Chinese language attitude studies cover the Tibetan, Mongolian, Uygur, Miao, Tujia, Zhuang, Yao, Xibo, Yi, Bai and other 22 ethnic minorities (Qingxia & Weidong, 1993).

### 1.2.3 The relationship of language attitude and ethnic identity

Generally speaking, language is an important symbol of ethnic identity and an important basis for ethnic identity. The native language recognition strongly characterized in various ethnic groups, and thus often becomes the basic symbol of different minorities (Mei, 2006). In China, based on the analysis of the language identity and ethnic identity of the Tu ethnic people of Tong Ren in Qinghai, Yuanxin (2009) concludes that the language identity and ethnic identity of TongrenTu ethnic are inseparable; behind the ethnic identity, mainly language and its cultural identity are at work. Chengfeng (2011) found that the degree of ethnic identity has the relationship of the linguistic and cultural differences, the frequency and the scope of communication. If the language and cultural differences are large, and external community is widespread, the contrast of each of them will be stronger, the perception of their ethnicity is clearer, and will more likely produce a strong dependence on their ethnic feelings.

### 1.3 Objective of this study

In China, as the main living areas of the minority, the ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province, in a bilingual and even multilingual environment, are a typical representative. How will they use their language? What is their language attitude? How about their ethnic identity? Is there a relationship between ethnic identity, language attitude, and their language level? These studies are of great significance and value - it can improve the theory regarding ethnic identity and language sustainability, as well as provide some reference for Chinese language planning and policy. Hence, it will further strengthen the ethnic people's identity, promote bilingual education and protect ethnic minority endangered languages.

## 2. Case Study

This research is a case study of the Pumi language. The Pumi ethnicity (普米族) recognized as an official minority nationality has a very long history. The ancient Pumi ethnicity is called "Xifan"(西番) and "Baju" (巴苴) (Shaozun, 2001), which is one of the branches of ancient Qiang people. Its ancestors mainly lived in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. They were the nomadic people of Qinghai, Gansu, Northern Sichuan areas, and later gradually migrated to Southern China. In the 7th century AD, they lived in West Sichuan Province, such as the Hanyuan, Mianning, Shimian, and Jiulong area.

In the middle of the 13th century, the Pumi ethnicity migrated to Yunnan Province with the Mongolian army. Therefore, at present, the Pumi people in the Yunnan Province are concentrated in counties of Lanping, Lijiang, Weixi and Yongsheng, as well as in the Yi Autonomous County of Ninglang. Others live in Muliand Yanyuan County of the Sichuan Province and Tibetan Autonomous County. The Pumi live on the hillside and in wood houses. They believe in several gods. The Pumi people of Ninglang County practice cremation and the Pumi people of Lan Ping, Lijiang and Yongsheng area implement both cremation and burial ceremony. According to China's sixth census in 2010, the number of Pumi people in the country was 42,861, accounting for 0.0032% of the proportion of China's total population, which still is one of China's less populous minority ethnic (**Ying, 2010**).

The Pumi language belonging to the Tibetan-Myanmese language family of the Chinese-Tibetan system has no character. Only a few Pumi people in the Muli and Ninglang areas once used an engraved symbol for the wizard to record religious ceremonies, called Han Gui or Ding Ba character. The Pumi language divides into two dialects in the North and South, and each dialect divided into several languages. There are also some differences in speech and vocabulary between the two dialects. The southern dialect located in Lanping, Weixi, Lijiang, Yongsheng, Yunxian and Ninglang County of Yunnan Province. The number of the users was about 22,000 people. The northern dialect is located in Ninglang county of Yunnan Province and the Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Yanyuan County and Jiulong County of Sichuan Province. The number of users was about 55000 people, 7,000 people for the Pumi ethnic, the rest for the Tibetan (**Shaozun, 1983**). In fact, because the core language part of the two Pumi dialects is still relatively close, in addition to Pumi language variation, it has a reasonably regular correspondence; it is easy for the speakers from the South and the North to communicate with each other through their native language. Sizhi Ding, a scholar of the Hong Kong University, has said that Pumi language was an excellent example of preservation because their characteristic efficiently prevents it from changing too much, causing it to not break down into various dialects (**Ding, 2007**).

From the 1990s onward, large-scale field investigations and analysis of some of the endangered minority languages in China began. Some other larger minority languages, such as Tujia language, Xiandao language, Gelao language, Hezhe language, and the Man language, have a lot of in-depth language case studies (**Shixuan, 2001; Hongkai, 2001; Qingxia, 2004**). However, the Pumi language with a very small population and belonging to the Qiang languages has few studies (most of other research pays attention to the Yi or Mian languages) that rarely are related literature on language case.

### **3. Questionnaires and interviews**

The surveys and interviews were carried out among Pumi people of the Lanping town in Yunnan Province, China in December of 2016. In the case of the lack of investigation partners, harsh objective conditions and limited time, the survey finally received a total of 40 questionnaires from two representative villages. Twenty-six of them come from Luoguqing Village and the other 14 come from Gaoping Village. The varieties in the gender, age, educational background and occupation in the questionnaires demonstrate that the samples are representative and therefore valid. In the interview, the author emphatically visited 3 Pumi people, including the village head, a civil servant, and a secondary school teacher. They gave the comprehensive introductions regarding ethnic identity, language attitudes, and language skill level of the Pumi language.

#### **3.1 Ethnic Identity Questionnaire.**

Regarding the Ethnic Identity Questionnaire, this article mainly refers to the Phinney& Ong MEIM-R scale (2007). The scale score divided into –“Strongly disagree”, “Disagree”, “Not clear”, “Agree” and “Strongly agree” these five levels, which respectively marked as “1”, “2”, “3”, “4” and “5” points. These 12 questions include two dimensions: the exploration and commitment to their ethnic. The exploration mainly refers to the current or past efforts to understand their ethnic history, practice and belief, and the meaning of their ethnic identity. The commitment is a clear sense of belonging to their groups and a positive attitude and pride in the group.

#### **3.2 Language Attitude Questionnaire**

In terms of the Language Attitude Questionnaire, this article mainly includes these 7 questions: 1) Pumi language is euphonic; 2) Pumi language is cordial; 3) Pumi language has important social impact; 4) Pumi language is practical; 5) I have great willingness to learn Pumi language; 6) I hope my relatives to learn Pumi language; 7) I hope the local Pumi people to learn Pumi language. The scale score is divided into –“Strongly disagree”,

“Disagree”, “Agree” and “Strongly agree” these four levels, which respectively marked as “1”, “2”, “3”, and “4” points. These values are finally scaled to the range of 1 to 5 for better comparison.

### **3.3 Language Proficiency Questionnaire**

With regard to the Language Proficiency Questionnaire, this article mainly investigates the Pumi people’s language proficiency level of Pumi language and Chinese dialect. The language level options are in turn “Not at all”, “Poor”, “Medium” and “Skilled” respectively, which are respectively marked as “1”, “2”, “3”, and “4” points. These values are finally scaled to the range of 1 to 5 for better comparison.

## **4. Methodology**

Firstly, the questionnaires and interviews were conducted in the field to construct the database of this study, and then the description of the datasets regarding the ethnic identity, language attitude and language proficiency level were presented, respectively. Secondly, the Spearman correlation analysis method was employed to study the relationship between ethnic identity, language attitude and language proficiency level to further get the solution of dealing with the problem of endangered language. Finally, this study analyzed semi-structured recording interviews for getting more comprehensive understanding regarding the relationship between ethnic identity, language attitude, and language proficiency level.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

### **5.1 The ethnic identity of Pumi people**

According to the results of consent degree of Pumi people on each question (Table 1), on the whole, both of the average values of the two dimensions of ethnic identity are greater than 3 points. The results indicate that the Pumi people have a rational and positive understanding of their own ethnic identity in the context of multicultural environment. Among them, the mean value of the exploration dimension is 4.48, slightly higher than that of the committed dimension (mean 3.96). The low degree of affirmation and sense of belonging indicates that the Pumi people’s attitude to the ethnic affirmation and sense of belonging is still not quite sure, but this phenomenon also demonstrates that Pumi people still have enough exploration willingness to develop it. Regarding the aspects of the understanding of ethnic beliefs, practice, history, and culture, they are willing to devote enough energy and time to understand the significance of their own ethnic identity. Language plays a significant role in the maintenance of ethnic identity and can have an impact on their ethnic identity. Therefore we should enhance language learning methods to increase Pumi people’s awareness of the ethnic identity and their sense of belonging.

### **5.2 The language proficiency of Pumi people**

As shown in Table 2, the language proficiency investigation indicated that 65% respondents can speak Pumi language skillfully. One-third of the respondents do not speak Pumi language at all. Most of the respondents can also speak Chinese dialects, the proficiency of their Chinese dialects proficiency is slightly worse than that of the Pumi language. 47.5% of the respondents were able to use Chinese dialects skillfully, 35% of the respondents have moderate Chinese dialects skill, and the proportions of both respondents who can speak poor Chinese dialects and those who cannot speak Chinese dialects consist of 7.5%. This phenomenon shows that Pumi and Chinese dialects are widely used in the daily life of the Pumi people. It may indicate that, in the context of globalization, the Pumi people have a higher demand to learn other languages to better adapt to society.

### **5.3 The language attitude of Pumi people**

According to the analysis results in Table 3, 67.5% of respondents insist that Pumi language is the most euphonic language. Seventy percent of the respondents agree that Pumi language is their favorite language among the four choices, which is followed by the Chinese dialect, Mandarin, and other minority languages have the lowest percentage.

**Table 1 Mean Scores of the ethnic identity dimension of the Pumi people.**

Descriptions of Pumi ethnic identity		
Category	Item	Mean
Ethnic identity exploration (4.48)	I spent some time learning my ethnicities, such as historical traditions and customs.	4.3
	I took the initiative to participate in the group activities of our national citizenship.	4.9
	To know more about my ethnic history, I often talk about my people with others.	4.5
	I have done a lot of things, such as reading books, newspapers and magazines, etc., to understand my ethnicity.	3.8
	I always participate in various activities of my ethnicity, such as diet, music, customs, and religious activities.	4.9
Ethnic identity Commitment (3.96)	I know my national identity and what it means to me.	4.7
	I feel that my minority status will affect my future.	1.8
	I have a strong sense of belonging to my people.	4.9
	I wish I belonged to another nationality.	1.5
	I am proud of my ethnic people and the achievements we have made.	5.0
	I have a strong attachment to my ethnicity.	4.9
	I like my own culture or ethnic background.	4.9

\*( ) enclosed parenthesis represents average of scores on the right for each category.

**Table 2 Percentage of the language proficiency of the Pumi people**

	Percentage of language proficiency for Pumi and Chinese Dialects			
	Skilled	Medium	Poor	Not at all
Pumi language	65	0	2.5	32.5
Chinese dialects	47.5	35	7.5	7.5

The score in these aspects of most useful language, 60% of respondents insist that Chinese dialect is the most useful language, and only 22.5% hold the opinion that Pumi language is the most useful language. From this comparison we can easily conclude that the Pumi people have a positive and objective view of their language, even so, they still realized that Chinese dialects were the most useful language.

**Table 3 Percentage of language attitude of the Pumi people**

Item	Pumi	Mandarin	Chinese dialect	Other languages
The most euphonic language	67.5	0	7.5	25
Your favorite language	70	2.5	20	7.5
The most useful language	22.5	7.5	60	10

Regarding the same language, the score varies with different attitude dimensions. As shown in Table 4, Pumi language gets a high score in the aspects of “Euphonic degree”, “Cordial degree” and “the willingness to learn Pumi language”, but they get a low score in social influence. Pumi language as the mother tongue is regarded as the most cordial and euphonic language, but because of the awareness of the situation that Pumi language is only limited to a limited type of interactions and thus has a narrow range, they think the social effect of Pumi language is relatively small. In addition, we found that the respondents had a strong willingness to study the Pumi language, they expect their relatives or local Pumi people also to learn Pumi language. It shows that they have a strong feelings to their native language and hope that the language can be revived.

**Table 4 Mean scores of the language attitude dimension of the Pumi people**

Category	Item	Mean
Language attitude	Euphonic degree of Pumi language	3.9
	Cordial degree of Pumi language	4.5
	Social impact of Pumi language	2.1
	Practical degree of Pumi language	4.4
	The degree of personal willingness to learn Pumi language	4.8
	Personal willingness of your relatives to learn Pumi language	4.5
	Personal willingness of Pumi people to learn Pumi language	4.8

#### 5.4 Correlation analysis of Pumi ethnic identity, language level, and language attitudes

In this study, a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted in SPSS software to analyze the relationship between language attitude and ethnic identity and language proficiency. As shown in Table 5, Ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment both have a positive correlation with “Cordial degree of language”, “Social impact of language”, “Practical degree of language”, “The degree of personal willingness to learn Pumi language” and “Personal willingness of your relatives to learn Pumi language”. This shows that Pumi people’s attitude to Pumi language increases with an increase in the degree of their ethnic identity. Table 6 shows that there is no correlation between ethnic identity and language proficiency, this indicates that the ethnic identity and language proficiency do not affect each other. Table 7 shows that the proficiency of Pumi language is positively correlated with the euphonic degree of language and cordial degree of language, this indicates that the euphonic degree of language and cordial degree of language will affect the proficiency of Pumi language.

**Table 5 Correlation coefficient of ethnic Identity and language attitude**

Correlations				
			Ethnic identity exploration	Ethnic identity commitment
Spearman’s rho	Euphonic degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.112	.131
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.491	.421
	Cordial degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.618**	.632**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	Social impact of language	Correlation Coefficient	.605**	.588**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	Practical degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.492**	.501**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001
	The degree of personal willingness to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	.558**	.548**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	Personal willingness of your relatives to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	.634**	.622**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	Personal willingness of Pumi ethnic people to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	.276	.316*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.085	.047

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 6 Correlation Coefficient of ethnic identity and language proficiency**

			Ethnic identity exploration	Ethnic identity commitment
Spearman’s rho	Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	-.027	-.049
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.870	.765
	Chinese	Correlation Coefficient	.046	.052
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.780	.751

**Table 7 Correlation Coefficient of language attitude and language proficiency**

			Pumi language	Chinese
Spearman's rho	Euphonic degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.511**	-.022
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.893
	Cordial degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.479**	-.062
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.704
	Social impact of language	Correlation Coefficient	-.294	-.016
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.065	.922
	Practical degree of language	Correlation Coefficient	.305	.044
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.055	.786
	The degree of personal willingness to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	.100	.131
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.541	.420
	Personal willingness of your relatives to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	-.296	.183
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.064	.258
	Personal willingness of Pumi ethnic people to learn Pumi language	Correlation Coefficient	-.103	.202
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.528	.211

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 5.5 Interviewer analysis of Pumi ethnic identity, language level and language attitudes

### 5.5.1. The first Pumi interviewer: a secondary school teacher, 46 years old, male.

**Language use:** Because of environmental restrictions, our village people do not speak Pumi language--they use Lisu language, and our Pumi children are also mainly used Lisu language.

**Language attitude:** I think the Chinese is more practical because we cannot use the Pumi language when we communicate with the non-local people. I believe this is the most critical limit. I like the Pumi language, and I hope that the Pumi language can be inherited. But the reality is that the Pumi language will slowly die. So to protect the Pumi language, I think the most important thing is the government to encourage the people to retain their language vigorously. Besides, the Pumi language has no bilingual teaching; I believe it is necessary to develop the bilingual education. In fact, we Pumi people faced with the contradiction between entering the mainstream society and the preservation of our native language and culture.

**Ethnic identity:** our village also retains most of our traditional native activities, such as rallies and funerals, but the other part is replaced. The Pumi people who cannot speak our native language, like me, feel like missing some-thing—everything is not perfect. When talking with the people who can talk to Pumi language, I am not only a sense of loss, but also more aware of my own ethnic identity.

### 5.5.2. The second Pumi interviewer: A village head, 64 years old, Male.

**Language use:** This village has no other minorities, all of us can speak the Pumi language, and we mainly use it in our daily life, but when we go outside, we often talk Chinese with other minorities. Our children also used the Pumi language, but they use Chinese in their school. A lot of Pumi children receive the university education now. The Young people who go out to work or study will learn other languages, but they will not lose their native language.

**Language attitude:** Pumi language is the most euphonic and the most cordial, but I also like Chinese, which is the most practical language. Pumi language has no social influence outside. At present, our country government advocates the small ethnic minorities to retain their native language and culture. I support it. If the language maintained well, we could keep a lot of traditional cultures. I think, in the future, Pumi language will be retained. I believe that as the Pumi people, we should speak our native language. For those people who can't say Pumi language, we can't blame them; because they need to adapt to the changing environment. But now the government pays more attention to the language inheritance; I hope

they start to learn their native language. I also hope our children can receive the bilingual education. I think the Pumi language and culture revival mainly need the government policy support.

**Ethnic identity:** The Pumi customs preservation of our village is relatively complete. We all participate in these usual traditional activities. I have more knowledge of our culture. I have a strong sense of belonging to our ethnic and always very proud of its achievements. Chatting with other ethnic groups, I like to talk about my ethnic issues.

### 5.5.3. The third Pumi interviewer: a civil servant, 33 years old, female.

**Language use:** Our villagers live with the Bai ethnic people, so, in this case, with the evolution of language, the primary language has shifted into Bai language. Indeed the vast majority of Pumi people cannot speak our native language. Usually, I only use the Pumi language when talking to people who can speak Pumi language.

**Language attitude:** I like the Pumi language, and I am sad that so many Pumi people can't speak it. I hope to improve Pumi language level of all the Pumi people. I think that it is necessary to raise the self-esteem of the ethnic first, and then the government should be more involved. The relevant units should pay much attention to the countermeasures, especially in the implementation of bilingual education. The protection and development of Pumi language and culture require the efforts of both the ethnic and government.

**Ethnic identity:** Most of our Pumi villagers here are still following the traditional Pumi customs, such as weddings, funerals, and festivals, etc. In these activities, we use our own Pumi music, Pumi clothing, and Pumi dance. Personally speaking, I am very proud of being one of the Pumi people.

## 6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have focused on investigating the relationship between language attitude, language proficiency level and ethnic identity of Pumi minority in Yunnan province, China. Our findings suggest that the Pumi people have an objective and positive attitude towards Pumi language and ethnic identity. Concerning the correlation between language attitude, language proficiency level and ethnic identity of Pumi, we found that ethnic identity positively correlated with language attitudes. Besides, the euphonic and cordial degree of language is also positively associated with the proficiency of Pumi language attitudes. However, the proficiency of language has almost no correlation with ethnic identity. This finding suggests that language attitudes have a significant influence on ethnic identity and language proficiency level. The recording interview analysis indicated that the local government of Pumi ethnic increased the propaganda of endangered language protection and this action played a decisive role in awakening the passion of Pumi people to learn Pumi language. Therefore, to better protect minority languages, we should devote more energy to improving the language attitude of minority people. Regarding the measures to enhance language attitudes, government advocacy is essential. Also, bilingual education in ethnic minority areas will be a meaningful practice.

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