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The Chinese Language and Language Planning in China

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This brief introduces the Chinese language and its varieties and describes Chinese language planning initiatives in China.

The Chinese Language

Chinese is a member of the Sino Tibetan family of languages and encompasses a number of regional varieties (Norman, 1988), called dialects by Chinese scholars. Dialects are viewed differently by Chinese as contrasted with western people. In the west, dialects are considered mutually intelligible varieties of a common language, whereas in China, dialects are not all mutually intelligible. A Mandarin speaker, for example, may not understand Cantonese speakers at all. Broadly speaking, the Chinese language is classified into seven major dialect groups called *Fangyan*, each with its own sub-varieties: Mandarin, Wu, Gan, Xiang, Hakka, Yue, and Min (Ramsey, 1987), mainly based on geographical and linguistic-structural characteristics (Li, 1994). Northern varieties of Chinese are known as Mandarin dialects. Almost all Mandarin dialects are mutually intelligible (Ramsey, 1987). The other six dialect groups fall under the category of southern dialects, which are unintelligible to one another. Cantonese, which is widely used in Hong Kong and Guangdong province, is a sub-variety (dialect) of the Yue dialect group.

Despite the unintelligibility among many Chinese dialects, "the speakers of all [Chinese] dialects look toward a common model… when most Chinese think of a language that unites them as a people, the 'common language' they have in mind is still fundamentally their written language" (Ramsey, 1987, p. 17). Though this written form is the corresponding form for Mandarin, it can be adapted to other dialect groups, which means that all literate Chinese share one written form no matter what dialects they speak (Li, 1994). Figure 1 illustrates Chinese characters.

Language Planning in China

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese government has been actively involved in language planning. Language planning involves the formation and implementation of policies designed to prescribe, or influence, the languages and varieties of language used in specific contexts. Corpus planning and status planning are two interrelated components of language planning (Wiley, 1996). Corpus planning refers to activities such as coining new terms, reforming spelling, and adopting a new script. In this arena, the newly established China put enormous efforts into two main tasks: simplifying traditional Chinese characters and designing a system of phonetic symbols for

Mandarin Chinese. Status planning has been linked to the official recognition that national governments attach to various languages (Cooper, 1989). From the 1950's, one of the chief goals of status planning in China was to standardize and promote Mandarin Chinese as the common spoken language of the PRC (Zhou, 2001).

Corpus planning

The Chinese language is notorious for its difficulty as a written language. In modern Chinese there is an average of eleven strokes per character, and the configurations of these strokes are complex (Chen, 1999). Because the graphic shape of the characters provides little indication of their pronunciation, learning to read and write thousands of graphically complex characters becomes a massive mnemonic task. It is estimated that 30 percent of the total class hours in Chinese elementary and secondary school education are devoted to learning the Chinese language, and much of the time is spent on learning characters (Chen, 1999). After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the country was faced with low literacy among the population. In order to eliminate mass illiteracy, the government actively supported the simplification of Chinese traditional characters. On October 10, 1949, The Chinese Script Reform Association was established, to be succeeded by the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Written Language on December 23, 1954 (Rohsenow, 2004). A complete list of 2,236 simplified characters, the General List of Simplified Characters, was published in 1964. This list was republished in 1986 with minor revisions and is now the official standard (Rohsenow, 2004). Figure 1 contrasts traditional and simplified characters. Currently, simplified Chinese characters are adopted in the PRC and Singapore, while in Taiwan and Hong Kong, traditional characters are used.

Traditional characters	語	見	間	銀	飯	魚	紅
Simplified characters	语	见	间	银	饭	鱼	红
English	Language	See	Middle	Silver	Meal	Fish	Red

Figure 1: Traditional and Simplified Chinese Characters

The Romanization of the Chinese writing system was another task in new China's corpus planning. In 1951, Chairman Mao pointed out that Chinese characters must be reformed and based on an alphabetic script like most of the world's writing systems (Zhou, 2004). By 1958, the Hanyu Pinyin Scheme to represent the pronunciation of Mandarin was completed as planned and approved by the National People's Congress. In the Hanyu Pinyin Scheme, Roman alphabets (used in English) were used to represent Chinese sounds (Lam, 2005). Many of the designers of Hanyu Pinyin had high hopes that this Romanized alphabetic system would evolve into a full-fledged independent writing system to exist side by side with, or even eventually replace, the system of Chinese characters. Nevertheless this system, now almost a half century old, remains officially only a system for annotating and teaching the sounds of standard Mandarin and the Chinese characters (Rohsenow, 2004).

Figure 2 illustrates how Hanyu Pinyin represents pronunciation of Chinese characters.

Hanyu Pinyin	yǔ	jiàn	jiān	yín	fàn	yú	hóng
Chinese characters (simplified)	语	见	间	银	饭	鱼	红
English	Language	See	Middle	Silver	Meal	Fish	Red

Figure 2: Hanyu Pinyin and Chinese characters

Status planning

The national government of China has been promoting Mandarin as the official language since its establishment. Mandarin dialects are spoken by about 70 percent of the Chinese population (Norman, 1988). This vast number of speakers provides a valid foundation for Mandarin as the common language of China. Before Mandarin was officially adopted on October 26, 1955, *People's Daily* published an editorial, "Strive to promote the reform of the Chinese script, the spread of Mandarin, and the standardization of Chinese." The editorial shows that the official position in the 1950s was that Mandarin was advocated on public occasions. At the beginning of 1956, Mandarin Chinese was officially adopted as the common language, *Putonghua*, for the PRC (Guo, 2004). On September 14, 1998, the *People's Daily* published a commentary titled "To promote Mandarin vigorously." This language policy was implemented into language practices by different mechanisms. According to Shohamy (2005), these mechanisms include laws, rules and regulations, language education policies, language tests, and language use in public spaces.

The first law in the PRC on language and script was passed on July 5, 2000, titled "Law of the People's Republic of China on the National Commonly Used Language and Script." Before the passage of the law, the working group carried out extensive investigations of language and script use in thirty cities and counties throughout China's major metropolitan regions, provinces, and autonomous regions, as well as of language laws in other countries (Rohsenow, 2004). In the formulation and evolution of the language law, a realistic understanding of the limits of "social engineering" resulted in allowing daily use of local varieties, combined with promotion of Mandarin and simplified Chinese characters. Increased use of Mandarin by government officials and in public interactions is encouraged, but not harshly enforced by unrealistic, excessive measures; use of dialects in necessary and appropriate situations is authorized. The rights of China's minorities to maintain their spoken languages and scripts are affirmed. With this language law passed, Mandarin was promoted in public and formal situations by local governments. For example, the local dialect of Shanghai, which is not mutually intelligible with Mandarin, is the preferable language by most Shanghainese and used on the streets and in the workplace. However, the metropolis is working on a campaign to promote standard Mandarin and Chinese characters in the workplace. According to the new policy, only Mandarin should be used on occasions like the official activities of government, lessons in schools and other educational institutions, radio and television broadcasting, and films and TV dramas (Pan, 2005).

As for language education policies, from the autumn of 1956, except for in ethnic minority regions, all elementary and secondary schools should begin to include the teaching of Mandarin in Chinese classes. From 1960, students from grade three and above, secondary school students, and those in teacher training colleges should be able to speak Mandarin. Mandarin should be used as a medium of instruction in elementary schools and teacher training colleges for all subjects. Younger teachers and teaching assistants in higher education should enroll in short Mandarin courses if they do not speak Mandarin (Lam, 2005).

In the 1980s, the move toward standardization in assessing proficiency in Mandarin was proposed at a 1986 national conference, and the standards were distributed in December 1997. The standards describe six levels of proficiency in reading and conversation. A Mandarin proficiency test in line with the standards is intended for native speakers of Chinese, with particularly high requirements for broadcasting personnel and teachers. In the meantime, a test for non-native speakers was designed by the State Leading Group for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language to coordinate the teaching of Chinese to non-native speakers within and outside China. In 1988, this national standardized test, called the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK or Chinese Proficiency Test of China) was established to measure the Chinese proficiency of foreigners, overseas Chinese, and non-native speakers of Chinese from ethnic minorities in China (Lam, 2005).

Conclusion

The Chinese language is not one variety, but rather includes a number of regional dialect families. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government has launched several language planning initiatives, including but not limited to simplifying Chinese characters, designing a system of phonetic symbols for Mandarin, and promoting Mandarin as the common language of China.

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