

CHAPTER 6

Language Politics

6.0 Introduction

Séagh Kehoe

In September 2020, mass protests took place across Inner Mongolia after the Chinese state announced plans to replace the language of instruction in Inner Mongolian schools from Mongolian to Putonghua 普通话, or ‘standard mandarin Chinese’. The proposals, which the Chinese state argued would improve employment chances and enhance ethnic unity, led hundreds of students, parents, and language activists in Inner Mongolia to fear that they had become the latest target in the Chinese state’s attempts to further assimilate ethnic minorities into Han Chinese culture (Davidson 2020).

The state’s actions in Inner Mongolia represent the latest instance in recent decades of increasing restrictions on language instruction to be introduced across the PRC. In 2010, local officials in Qinghai province pushed for reforms of the ‘bilingual’ education system that effectively relegated Tibetan language to the status of a subject in an otherwise Putonghua-medium curriculum. Schools across Xinjiang have also faced a similar ‘restructuring’ of ‘bilingual’ education, while reports of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region’s extensive network of detention camps describe forced training in Putonghua and standard Chinese characters (Roche 2020). Language activism and media

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programming in non-Putonghua languages across these regions and elsewhere have also been met with increased crackdowns under Xi Jinping, all in the name of ‘stability maintenance’.

Such developments throw into sharp relief the longstanding everyday intersection of language and politics in the PRC. Since 1955, Putonghua, literally ‘the common language’, has been promoted, often aggressively, in the PRC as the official national language of government, education, mass media, public service, and all other formal purposes. 65 years on and efforts to make the ‘common language’ more common are very much ongoing. In 2007, Putonghua was only spoken by only 53% of the population, rising to 70% in 2015, while in September 2020, as part of the country’s 23rd annual week-long nationwide campaign to promote Putonghua, the Ministry of Education declared that just over 80% of the population now speak the language, though this falls to just 61% in impoverished areas (CGTN 2020). This persistent drive to promote the ‘national language’, as one professor at Minzu University recently told the *Global Times* (2021), is ‘to ensure the unity and integrity of the country and the smooth flow of government orders’.

The articles in this section examine linguistic practice and governance in both modern and contemporary China. Whether in the case of ‘ethnic minority’ languages, ‘dialect’, (un)gendered pronouns, or even research ecosystems, our contributors showcase the myriad ways in which language politics have always been at the heart of China’s nation-building project, central to its quest for modernity, and increasingly, part of its broader soft-power efforts.

As we have seen above, Putonghua promulgation often goes hand in hand with suppression of languages spoken by the state’s 55 officially recognised ethnic minority (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) populations. In the first article of this section, Grey describes how a key part of the problem lies in the fact that *shaoshu minzu* languages are only constitutionally afforded ‘the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages,’ which does not require state action for its vindication. In contrast to Putonghua, the primacy of which is enshrined in the constitution in far less ambiguous terms, *shaoshu minzu* languages are characterised as a matter of group responsibility and choice, rather than a duty of the state. It is also important to examine the changing systems of values about language through which these language laws are now being interpreted. Grey identifies a distinct and growing tendency of the state to assess language value on the basis of its contribution to national development, which is mainly understood in economic terms. According to Hillman (2016), efforts to promote *minzu* languages are further pitted against pressures to encourage ideological loyalty and social stability at the expense of local language practices. As such, while Putonghua is seen as the solution to various social and economic inequalities, *shaoshu minzu* languages are often characterised as the obstacles.

Shaoshu minzu language endangerment is not just about subordination to the national language; it is also about practices of active erasure. Linguistic policy

in the PRC is guided by the state's imagining of ethnic minority languages as 55 'linguistically homogenous blocs' (Roche 2019, 493). In contrast, linguists have identified between 130 and 302 languages spoken among *shaoshu minzu*, though there are likely far more. In Inner Mongolia, for example, there are at least six distinct languages, but only 'standard Mongolian' is officially recognised and even this, as we have already seen, is under threat (494). Speakers of unrecognised languages have no standing within the law and do not officially exist. Regional variants of Mandarin Chinese, or *fangyan* 方言, such as Shanghainese, Cantonese, and dozens of others that are categorically different from Putonghua, often find themselves in a similar position (Luqiu 2018). However, as Tam argues in her piece in this section, the interests of national and local government, and those of *fangyan* movements, can variously overlap and converge. Indeed, while the state's promulgation of Putonghua as the primary national language is unambiguous, efforts at the level of local government, sometimes backed by the state itself, can be both supportive of and responsive to local language needs. Promoting *fangyan* as a form of local cultural heritage preservation, for instance, can be used to showcase official commitment in this area (see Section Five in this collection), while at the same time affirming the supremacy of Putonghua as the 'national language' of socialist modernisation.

As the dominant language, Putonghua is also the subject of much scrutiny and meticulous management. The incorporation of loanwords into the language, for instance, has regularly been the subject of scorn across the pages of state media for 'harming the purity and health' of the national language (China Daily 2014). Rhetoric of this kind, as well as the various laws in the PRC that restrict the use of foreign loan words, neglect the ways in which languages have always and continue to undergo phonological, lexical and syntactic change (Li 2004). We see this clearly in Jortay's article where she describes the heated debates surrounding pronominal politics in the late Republican period and the early years of the PRC. She shows how, as early as 1920, writers and activists argued over whether or not a new set of gender-differentiated pronouns should be introduced in the name of visibilising women. By 1953, these same pronouns had become the object of explicit party directives aimed at regulating how to 'properly' refer to men and women.

The politics of language within the PRC also extend well beyond the country's borders. As Zhou (2019) has argued, there exists clear linguistic association between China's domestic drive and global outreach since the turn of the century, perhaps most evident in the Confucius Institute project. This is also the subject of the final article of this section, where MoChridhe connects changing language policy in China's research evaluation reform with the state's growing power and confidence on the global stage. He explains why the Chinese state shifted to emphasising Mandarin-language publications in early 2020, putting Mandarin-language journals on an even footing with English-language ones in domestic assessments. While the move has some scholars in China concerned that journals published in Mandarin will be inaccessible to international

scholars, MoChridhe wonders whether Mandarin might one day sit alongside English in a bilingual research ecosystem and what this would mean for the language politics of research in China and around the world.

The ideas and insights shared across and between these articles give us much to think about in terms of how language governance, ideologies, and genealogies unfold and intersect at local, regional, and national levels across the PRC. There is much more to be said about how the insights and questions shared here relate (or do not) to understandings of cultural china more broadly. How, for instance, do the language politics explored in this section compare, contrast, and interact with language practices in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in the diaspora? How do references to a ‘Chinese language’, so often found in the media, classrooms, policy and everyday conversation around the world, fit into such discussions and to what extent does this normalise and reinforce the hegemony of Putonghua as a ‘national language’? So often ‘Chinese language’ is used in monolithic terms, reproducing what Chow (1998) described in the 1990s as the ‘myth of ‘standard Chinese’ and reifying notions of a homogenous, unified, and univocal China. Today, as the PRC becomes ever more assertive in ‘telling China’s story well’ internationally, it has become increasingly important to critically examine the ways in which ‘Chinese language’ neatly packs away and conceals the various forms of linguistic diversity, change, continuity, tensions, and erasures that have always been core to the lived realities and politics of cultural china. In this light, perhaps the clearest takeaway from this section is that no single version of a ‘Chinese language’, whether Putonghua or otherwise, has ever or could ever in any way adequately represent Cultural China and that it is more vital than ever to resist any such assertion.

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6.1 China's Minority Language Rights: No Bulwark Against Upcoming Change

Alexandra Grey

China sees linguistic diversity and language use as matters to be governed. It has therefore enacted laws and promulgated official policies about (non-Mandarin) minority languages, national standardised Mandarin (*Putonghua* 普通话) and Mandarin dialects over the course of the twentieth century.

First, fundamental minority language protection is enshrined in the current (1982) *Constitution*. It is expressed as a freedom to use and develop (officially recognised) minority languages. This current protection follows the inclusion of more or less the same provision in each of the three preceding constitutions (Article 3, 1954; Article 4, 1975; Article 4, 1978) and in the 1949 *Common Program* (Article 53), which served as the constitution from the throes of the PRC's founding in 1949 until 1954. A minority language freedom is one of the types of language right found in laws around the world. This form of language right has its own legal limitations, but expressing such a language right in the *Constitution* is nevertheless part of a commitment by the State to protect the interests of China's 55 official minority *minzu*.

Second, from the turn of this century onwards, there has been an important piece of national legislation (National People's Congress 2000) underpinning a suite of protective and promotional policies relating to Putonghua. It is extensive and detailed, and it mobilises legal authority to monopolise certain



Fig 6.1.a: Dong Xiwen 董希文. 1956. *The Founding of the Nation*. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

domains of language use for Putonghua. Moreover, this law expresses a positive right to learn and use Putonghua. This law enshrines what was already developing in practice: the lingua franca usage of Putonghua across the nation. It builds on historic state practices of language standardisation; before the PRC, the Imperial and Republican Chinese states also prescribed varieties of Mandarin as their official, national language.

There are also a number of more specific, derivative language rights in various national, regional, and local laws. These include rather toothless criminal penalties for state employees who seriously encroach on minority cultural customs, a legal permission for schools in minority areas to use a minority language for instruction in the early years – the legal weakness of which is clear from the current, contentious reductions to bilingual schooling in Inner Mongolia (Baioud 2020) – and a legal obligation on schools to popularise Putonghua.

There is a tension between China's minority and majority language rights. Yet both underpin China's state practice in regards to language.

A long-standing flaw (or design feature, depending on your perspective) of the legal system is that it does not empower individuals or even minority groups to take much agency in the future of the languages they speak, nor does it offer much of a resource if people wish to fight against encroachments on their free language use. The legal framework is sensitive to top-down beliefs about languages, and these, of course, have changed markedly.

While official language policies get updated, the laws about minority languages have remained virtually unchanged. And yet the linguistic and



Fig 6.1.b: Artist unknown. n.d. The Census is Everyone's Duty. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

socio-economic contexts in which those laws operate has changed markedly since 1949. Intrigued by this, I began researching Chinese minority language laws and policies in practice in 2013. I have looked at the overarching national framework and then delved into the specifics of the governance and practice of Zhuang (*zhuang yu* 壮语), the language associated with China's largest official minority, the Zhuangzu (*zhuangzu* 壮族). The Zhuangzu was not one of the 'five nations' foundational to the politics of the Republic of China. Iredale and Guo (2003, 8) report that in the 1949 pre-census, people nominated themselves as falling into over 400 ethnic groups with Zhuang not among them; Zhuangzu was introduced by the state as a category on the 1954 Yunnan census (Mullaney 2006, 142).

Thus, the social significance of Zhuang language changed alongside changes in the lead up to the founding of the PRC, and continued to evolve once the PRC was established. This was true of the social significance of linguistic diversity more generally.

The politics of diverse languages—by the 1950s, diverse *officially-recognised* 'shaoshu minzu' 少数民族 (minority) languages—fell prey to the perception that ethno-linguistic difference was threatening during the Cultural Revolution. Perceptions changed again with Opening and Reform. Opening and Reform paved the way for an ongoing drive towards 'modernisation'. Modernisation also loosened the tight binding between people and place through the rural and urban household residency system, and developed structures by which

employment and welfare could be organised other than through workplaces. Migration—mainly to the quickly-growing cities of East China—resulted from this structural modernisation and from relaxing the central control over both university placements and the job market. This started to create—and is still creating—minority diasporas, rather than tightly concentrated communities sharing languages. This affects language use and creates divergence between where minority languages are believed to be in place and thus to be governed, and where the people who can speak them actually live.

As the modernisation progressed, the current era of globalisation emerged. Globalisation manifested in China in many ways including the state-backed but also highly commercial spread of English language teaching and learning.

English was not the only language to spread as modernisation and globalisation fused in China; Putonghua did too. By the turn of this century, Zhou and Ross (2004, 16) observed that ‘coupled with globalisation and the forces of market economy, China’s modernisation drive appears to favour only two dominant languages, [Putonghua] Chinese as the national commonly-used language and English as the world language’. Moreover, as the twenty-first century began, China was preoccupied with harmonising a nation-wide society. In this context, the old fear of ethno-linguistic difference as threat re-emerged, gradually hardening into securitised language policy, especially in areas of unrest in the North-West. Thus, in my view, even as a ‘pluralistic’ language policy phase was being named by scholars in the 1990s–2000s, a new and more minoritising phase was emerging.

Moreover, ethnolinguistic minoritisation still tends to intersect with poverty, even as China’s overall wealth has vastly increased, and the current patterns of residency also mean that more change is coming for most minority peoples. Adamson and Feng (2009, 322) report that the minority *minzu* are mainly ‘living in 155 largely resource-rich but economically under-developed ethnic autonomous areas, many of which are located near the country’s frontiers’. Change is afoot within these very areas and in terms of their centrality to the nation. In the era of international trade (including Belt and Road), these areas’ border locations make them strategically important, and they now have greater potential for extractive industries and urban settlement than the already industrialised, densely-populated East.

A possibility for ‘double domination’ of Putonghua and English over Zhuang and other minority languages is created by these changes (Grey 2018[2017], 58). Yet this is not what China’s mid-twentieth century language laws and policies were designed to respond to. We may wonder what sort of sociolinguistic orders the minority language governance framework is now aspiring to, reproducing or resisting. Within what system of values or beliefs about language are language laws now being interpreted?

It is a system of beliefs about heritage protection, rather than about maintaining minority languages as valuable and viable parts of modern life. This is

seen in China's new, national Yubao 语保 'Language Protection' project. Shen and Gao (2019, 7) explain that Yubao explicitly and officially frames linguistic diversity as a resource and 'is supposed to address the problems that may be generated by [the state's] commitment to unity, such as disappearing diversity'. Yubao considers only some languages as resources to maintain for international economic exchange (but not many minority languages), but considers all language to be cultural resources. To operationalise this belief, it focuses on documenting minority languages as they disappear. This Yubao approach builds on the 'developmentalist' beliefs about language which I have argued have been embedded in the legal framework all along; minority languages are valuable, and worthy of the State's backing, only in so far as they contribute to national (primarily economic) development. Thus, in my view, China's language rights now produce, or at least allow, 'aspiring monolingualism', to borrow the apt phrase that Hult (2014, 209) used in the context of another massive nation, the USA.

Will Yubao's resulting, disembodied records of minority languages – historic language artefacts – remain meaningful as cultural and identity resources in the future, if people do not also still speak those languages?

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6.2 Linguistic Hierarchies and Mandarin Promulgation: An Excerpt from *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960*

Gina Anne Tam

This excerpt is from my book Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960 (Cambridge UP, 2020). The book centres the history of the Chinese nation and national identity on fangyan—languages like Shanghainese, Cantonese, and dozens of others that are categorically different from the Chinese national language, Mandarin. I trace how, from the late Qing through the height of the Maoist period, fangyan were framed as playing two disparate, but intertwined roles in Chinese-nation building: on the one hand, linguists, policy-makers, bureaucrats, and workaday educators framed fangyan as non-standard ‘variants’ of the Chinese language, subsidiary in symbolic importance to standard Mandarin; on the other hand, many others, such as folksong collectors, playwrights, hip-hop artists, and popular protestors, argued that fangyan were more authentic and

representative of China's national history and culture than the national language itself. These two visions of the Chinese nation—one spoken in one voice, one spoken in many—have shaped the shared basis for collective national identity for over a century, and their legacies are still significant to the ongoing construction of nationhood today. The section below looks at these contemporary legacies, examining how PRC language policy today reflects a long-established state-driven emphasis on the political, cultural, and linguistic hierarchy between Chinese fangyan and the Chinese national language.

In 2003, a local journalist filed a report on language reform in seaside Qingdao. The largest city in Shandong province, it is known among linguists as a distinct branch of the *Guanhua* 官话 dialect region—mutually intelligible with *Putonghua* 普通话, the Chinese national language known commonly as Mandarin, but unique in its phonetics and tones. The journalist was tasked with measuring the effects of *Putonghua* promulgation by interviewing a line of workaday bank tellers, hotel concierges, and nurses. ‘Why are you not speaking *Putonghua*?’ the reporter asked a bank teller incredulously. The equally perplexed man stated, ‘I am speaking *Putonghua*, no?’ She moved on to a handful of middle-aged workers, demanding to know why they did not speak in the national language. These things come slowly, they maintained with a hint of defensiveness. Some remained confused as to why a journalist would challenge their claims about the language they were speaking. Still others simply laughed sheepishly at her questions. In concluding the piece, the journalist interviewed a younger Qingdao resident, who, in perfect *Putonghua*, expressed outrage over falling standards. If its residents cannot properly speak the nation’s common language, she asked, ‘how could Qingdao claim to be a modern city, ready to be featured on a global stage?’ Qingdao, the two summarised, was falling short of its responsibility to properly represent the Chinese nation (*Tuiguang Putonghua* 推广普通话 2003).

This report, a bizarre mix of investigative journalism and public shaming, had a clear message: speaking *Putonghua* was an expectation for being part of modern Chinese society. Its message also poignantly reflects current government priorities. While the PRC’s government deemed *Putonghua* the national language in 1956—defined as ‘Beijing’s pronunciation as standard pronunciation, Northern dialect as the base dialect, and modern vernacular literature as standard structure, vocabulary, and grammar’—the push for *Putonghua* promulgation became more targeted, ubiquitous, and aggressive in recent decades. The 1982 constitution declared that the state was responsible for promoting *Putonghua* as the nation’s language, paving the way for a series of local and national policies targeting education, public service, and art (Article 19, 2004). Today, *Putonghua* is taught in all schools, dominates public announcements, and is the sole focus of language learning initiatives abroad. Teachers and broadcasters are required to pass a *Putonghua* proficiency exam with high marks. These measures have been matched by crackdowns on non-standard language use in the early 2000s. In 2001, a new language law designated *Putonghua* for

public use, and other non-Chinese languages, called *fangyan* 方言 in Chinese, for private use (*Zhonghua Renmin* 中华人民, 2005). In 2005, a new media law sought to eliminate overly vernacular language and code-switching. While content performed entirely in some *fangyan* is permitted in certain contexts, journalists, media personalities and actors are no longer permitted to pepper their language with phrases or slang from other tongues (Liu 2013, 69; 79).

It would be easy to interpret these policies and accompanying media reports as state attempts at linguistic erasure. Despite laws explicitly permitting *fangyan* use, it is entirely unambiguous which one the state sees as the national representative. Yet other evidence imply that the central government has not attempted to eradicate *fangyan* entirely. In contrast, local governments, with support from Beijing, have unveiled events meant to 'save the dialects' from the fast-paced urbanisation threatening the vagaries of local culture. In Suzhou, some primary schools, in collaboration with a 'Suzhou *fangyan* training center,' began experimenting with short daily lessons in Suzhou *fangyan* (*Suzhou fangyan* 苏州方言2012). In Beijing in 2014, the subway was adorned with public service announcements teaching passersby vocabulary particular to 'Beijingshua' (or 'Beijing-ese). In 2015, the city of Leizhou, in conjunction with hot-sauce syndicate Modocom, hosted its first annual 'Zurong *Fangyan* Film Festival'. Offering awards for films made exclusively in Chinese *fangyan*, they summarized their goals in a short sentence: 'Zurong Village Dialect Film Festival from beginning to end expressed the following idea: Love *fangyan*, love cinema, love home' (*Zurong fangyan* 足荣方言 (Zurong Dialect), 2016). Chinese academia has also contributed to these efforts. In 2013, the State Council's National Social Science Fund of China approved a research project to create a 'sound digital database of Chinese *fangyan*'. The database, designed to 'save' China's *fangyan*, is guided by the belief that it is the responsibility of the scholars and the state to protect their nation's heritage (*Quanguo* 全国 2015).

While at first blush these 'save the dialect' measures seem at odds with state efforts to promulgate *Putonghua*, I argue that both serve the same underlying goal: the promotion of a stark hierarchy between a standardised national language and all other Chinese *fangyan*. The hierarchy between national language and *fangyan* in China has its roots in the late nineteenth century. In the final years of the Qing dynasty, a state beleaguered by foreign imperialism and domestic turmoil, modern Chinese elites proclaimed that the nation's survival depended upon its ability to transform into a modern nation. For many of them, modern nations had a national language, and a lack of one was seen as proof of China's lack of national modernity. After decades of debate about the constitution of such a national standard, in 1925 reformers designated Beijing's language as the national standard; in so doing, what had once been one *fangyan* among many was suddenly transformed into the sole linguistic representative of the Chinese nation. The language's unique political status quickly seeped into the discourse of elites and the structures they built, quietly reinforcing and normalising the notion that the national language, because of its relationship with modern



Fig 6.2.a: ‘Leng shenr: Beijinghua.’ Advertisement in Yonghegong subway station, December 6, 2014. Photo by the author.

state-building, stood apart from all others. And as evidenced by the report from Qingdao and the policies it supports, the legacies of these earlier discourses still inform state actions today. By seeking to outlaw code switching and seamless mixing, or demonstrating disdain towards poorly-spoken *Putonghua*, the state and its affiliates continue to promote the strict hierarchical separation of *Putonghua* and *fangyan* just as their predecessors had done.

Fangyan preservation efforts also reinforce that same hierarchy. These measures are not meant to make *fangyan* serve the same communicative, cultural, or subjective roles as *Putonghua*; rather, they are geared towards preserving them solely as historical legacies. This framing has roots in early PRC language policy. After the Communist revolution of 1949, scholars associated with the new state began to justify the promulgation of a standard language—and the framing of *fangyan* as subsidiary branches—through a Stalinist model of history and language. This teleological view of history saw languages as direct representatives of the communities that spoke them, and maintained that only

national languages could ‘progress and develop’, whereas dialects could only be remnants of a stagnant past, curios to be placed in museums. ‘Save the dialects’ activities today reflect this view of history, presenting dialects as part of the nation’s history but only significant insofar as they contribute to a teleological narrative of eventual national unity. Even those advocating for the preservation of Suzhou fangyan confirmed this distinction: ‘*Putonghua* and *fangyan*, one is our country’s common language and script, the other is an important linguistic resource’ (Suzhou 2012).

In short, aggressive *Putonghua* promulgation strategies, including though certainly not limited to on-camera shaming, exalt *Putonghua* as the national language, while measures to ‘save’ China’s dialects subtly institutionalise *fangyan* exclusively as local cultural heritage. These policies are but two sides of the same coin. They draw a clear divide between the language that serves as national representative, and local manifestations of that national culture that should be preserved for posterity and little more. As the state and its allies have actively promulgated *Putonghua* as an archetype of Chinese national identity and carefully curated *fangyan* as little more than data, heritage, or private curiosities, the apotheosis of the hierarchy between national language and *fangyan* lives on.

It is critical to remember that the implications of these policies extend far beyond language. Designating *fangyan* as subsidiary ‘dialects’ and *Putonghua* as the ‘common language of the Chinese people’ implies that *Putonghua* can represent a unified sense of national identity and citizenship in a way that no *fangyan* could. Our Qingdao journalist and our ‘save the dialect’ aficionados are not simply concerned with linguistic taxonomies —it is a hierarchy of identity they wish to maintain. And in their actions, they ultimately reinforce today’s vision of Chinese identity under the current PRC state: an essentialised, homogenous identity where other representatives of national identity are held as subsidiary to the state-defined standard.

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6.3 The Hidden Language Policy of China's Research Evaluation Reform

Race MoChridhe

In February, China's Ministries of Education and of Science and Technology released two documents that reshaped the research landscape: 'Some Suggestions on Standardising the Use of SCI Paper Indexes' and "Some Measures to Eliminate the Bad Orientation of "Papers Only" (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology 2020). Elaborating the academic reform that President Xi has pursued since 2016, they provide the first detailed steps for dramatically reducing the role of the Science Citation Index (SCI) in evaluating Chinese research (Sharma 2020).

For twenty years, the SCI—a prestige listing of 'high impact' scientific journals—controlled the careers of Chinese researchers. It and various derived indices are commonly used for university rankings and research evaluation (the UK, for example, uses SCI-derived data to allocate funding) (REF 2018), but China relied on the SCI to an unusual degree (Huang 2020). There, quotas for publishing in SCI journals governed hiring and advancement, pay bonuses, and even graduation from doctoral programs. In using the SCI as a 'gold standard', Chinese administrators sought to increase productivity, enhance national prestige, and benchmark the closure of gaps between China's research sector and cutting-edge work internationally.

To a significant extent, these goals have been met. China has risen rapidly up international rankings, and Chinese research productivity routinely exceeds the world average (Li and Wang 2019). Since 2016, China has been the world's largest producer of published research (Tollefson 2018), accounting for over a third of all global activity (Xie and Freeman 2018, 2). Since 2017, Chinese research has been the second-most cited (after US research). The *Nature* Index now ranks Beijing as the world's number one 'science city', with Shanghai as number five (the other three are American) (Jia 2020). Despite US status as the world leader for the past several decades, one analysis (Lee and Haupt 2020) concluded that US research outputs would have fallen over the last five years

except for collaborations with Chinese researchers, while Chinese outputs would have grown regardless.

So why change a winning formula? The ministries' announcements have focused on eliminating perverse incentives created by over-reliance on the SCI that saw researchers prioritising quantity over quality, nepotistically inflating citation counts, and falling prey to predatory journals (Mallapaty 2020). The Chinese government has, accordingly, allocated tens of millions of dollars to initiatives for improving Chinese journal quality and combating corrupt publishing practices (Cyranoski 2019). At the same time, commentators have noted the potential cost savings of de-centering SCI metrics (Creus 2020).

Another factor, however, has been largely overlooked. Ninety-seven percent of papers indexed in the SCI are in English (Liu 2016)—the *lingua franca* of scientific communication. To remain competitive in major international journals, almost all of the top research-producing countries now publish the majority of their articles in English, with the share of native-language publications declining every year in virtually every country (Van Weijen 2012)—except China.

This is not for lack of trying. The Chinese government has done everything in its power to channel its research outputs into English to boost their global impact, but, although it has been a decade since China technically became the world's largest English-speaking country (Coonan 2009), the quality of ESL instruction remains uneven (Baldi 2016). Studies show that even the most advanced L2 speakers of English experience disproportionate rejection rates in scholarly publishing (Pearce 2002), as well as a slew of other systemic barriers (Huttner-Koros 2015), compared to their native-English-speaking peers, and most of China's English students never reach such advanced proficiencies to begin with.

Moreover, the growth of ESL capacity in China has simply been outstripped by the growth in research. As Xie and Freeman (2018, 7) noted, between 2000 and 2016, 'China more than doubled its number of faculty and tripled its number of researchers—all of whom had to find venues for publishing'. China now graduates twice as many university students per year as the US and employs the largest number of laboratory scientists of any nation on Earth (Han and Appelbaum 2018), with the result that China is now the only country whose native-language scientific publication in domestic journals is rising *alongside* its growth in international, English-language publications (Xie and Freeman 2018, 5). China simply needs—and is creating—new university faculty and new labs far faster than it can create new English speakers, and it can no longer afford to limit growth in the former category to meet metrics that depend on the latter.

Reading between those lines, the shift in language policy embedded in the new assessment policy becomes clear, as it does not merely eliminate requirements to publish in SCI journals, but adds requirements that at least one-third of the publications used for evaluating researchers must be published in domestic journals (Xu 2020). Not all domestic journals publish in Mandarin, but nearly half of those identified as priority venues in the Ministry's

action plan do (Tao 2020), and, given the constraints in China's ESL systems, the Mandarin-language journal sector will doubtless expand faster than the domestic English-language one, such that a substantial increase in Mandarin-language publications is almost guaranteed.

Chinese authorities have repeatedly shown themselves willing, if not eager, to rewrite the rules of the international game. One thinks of efforts to challenge the dollar's status as global reserve currency (Bansal 2020) and notes that the status of English as scientific *lingua franca* poses a similar constraint on Chinese ambitions, bottlenecking new research capacity and disadvantaging Chinese researchers in the international arena. As one engineering professor expressed it, by encouraging Mandarin-language publications, 'This [policy change] will, to some extent, isolate the Chinese researchers from the global research community' (Mallapaty 2020)—a sentiment echoed by the chief managing editor of the Chinese journal *Research*, who suggested that Chinese researchers would still largely eschew journals published in Mandarin owing to their 'inaccessibility... to international scholars' (Jia 2019).

Such pessimism assumes, however, that China can only emerge into the world and not change it. For most of modern history, there was no single scientific *lingua franca* (Gordin 2015). Until the Second World War, English, French, and German all held substantial shares of global research activity, and a reading knowledge of two, if not all three, of those languages was a common expectation of professional researchers. After the war, German and French receded, but Russian remained a viable competitor to English in many fields through the middle of the century. Only in the 1970s did English emerge as *the* language of science. Unleashing China's full potential would not require replacing English as the hegemonic standard for scientific communication, but only establishing Mandarin alongside it in a bilingual research ecosystem, effectively claiming for the 2020s the role that German and French held in the 1920s.

If the Chinese Communist Party can establish the country as a world leader in AI, data science, robotics, and other twenty-first-century fields (Cher 2020), the world will not be able to ignore a third (or more) of its total research output, no matter what language it is published in, and the Party knows this. Putting Mandarin-language journals on an even footing with English-language ones in domestic assessments may be a modest first step, but it opens onto a road whose destination was envisioned years ago by academics like Chun-Hua Yan, the former associate editor-in-chief of the Beijing-based *Journal of Rare Earths*, who dreamed that journals published in Mandarin would one day be 'followed by scientists around the world' (Cyranoski 2012).

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6.4 War of Words and Gender: Pronominal Feuds of the Republican Period and the Early PRC

Coraline Jortay

Let us consider for a minute this 1953 new-style New Year's print (*nianhua* 年画) captioned 'His labouring work is the best'. On a first level, the print was described by its contemporaries as representing women washing clothes in a creek and chatting, while admiring a rather strong fellow among a mutual-aid team of male labourers coming back from the fields (Li 1954). The image was said to embody women's newfound freedom to contemplate better, self-determined marriage prospects under the new Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC). On a second level, the visual tension between two kinds of labour (the men tending to the fields and the women washing clothes) present in the image is echoed in its caption through the archetypal characterisation of the character 他 (*ta*) as 'him': his (the man's) labour is the best, a question that ties back to what was considered 'labour' (*laodong* 劳动), and what kind of women's labour was valued in the early PRC and beyond (Hershatter 2013, 195).

What is interesting then, to the historian of Chinese language politics, is that the very linguistic underpinning upon which rests both of these levels of interpretation— 他 as meaning unequivocally 'him' in referring to a man—was merely 30 years old at the time. What is more, in 1953 pronouns were still the object of explicit party directives aimed at regulating how to 'properly' refer to men and women. Not only would this caption not have made much sense as recently as three decades earlier: this seemingly most mundane word (他

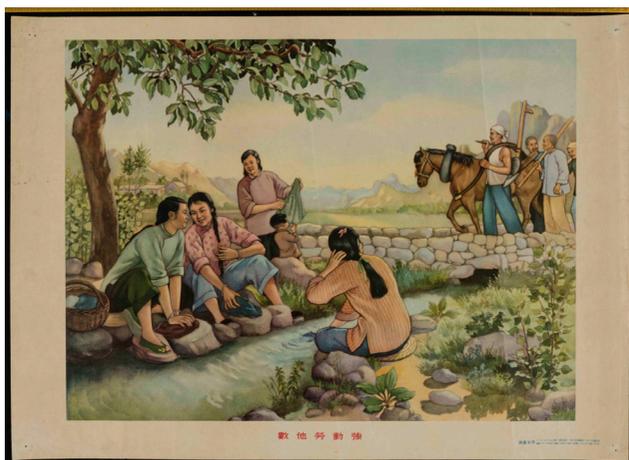


Fig 6.4.a: Shang Husheng 尚沪生. 1953. His Labouring Work Is the Best. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

for ‘he,’ and only ‘he,’ with another differentiated pronoun for ‘she’) was the subject of heated debates throughout the Republican period and the early PRC – debates the crux of which was not too far removed from today’s questions of gender-inclusive language.

But let us rewind.

Prior to 1917, there was no third person feminine pronoun in Chinese as an unequivocal translational equivalent for ‘she.’ In his 1933 *Kaiming English Grammar*, the great master of humour Lin Yutang discussed the colliding course that linguistic gender and social representations of gender could take in different societies:

It is strange also that, while the Chinese talk so much about sex distinctions (男女有別 [nan nü you bie]), they have not developed a distinction between he and she in their language, while the European people who talk so much about sexual equality should insist on this he-she distinction. The Chinese character for ‘she’ (她 [ta]) dates back only to 1917 (Lin 1933, 103–4)

Of course, that is not to say that speakers did not have vastly nuanced ways of referring to a third person feminine prior to 1917, especially given the prominent importance of gendered terms of kinship and occupation which *de facto* functioned as pronouns in an open-ended lexical category. However, ‘pronouns’ as a closed system of first/second/third person had not been an operational category prior to missionaries’ attempts at moulding the language onto the grammatical structures of Latin, English, or other languages which were most familiar to them. And indeed, the apparent ‘lack’ of gender concord and clear-cut gendered pronouns bothered missionaries very much, as is apparent in the words of American missionary Arthur Smith in *Chinese Characteristics* (1894, 86). Many bilingual dictionaries throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century registered similar hesitations and colonialist hints at the view that Chinese would somehow be an ‘imprecise’ language because linguistic gender functioned differently than it did in other languages (Figure 6.4.b.).

This view that linguistic gender was somehow ‘lacking’—and acutely so in the pronominal system – came to infuse the textbooks of a generation of educated children who would grow up to become prominent linguists and writers, the proponents of ‘new literature’ and its Europeanised grammar in the May Fourth era. Figure 6.4.c. shows the English textbook that Liu Ban-nong – the famed ‘inventor’ of the Chinese character for ‘she’ and a prominent linguist who first recorded the oscillatory patterns of tones of various topolects – used as a teenager to learn English. In this 1893 textbook, *He, she, and it* are translated using the same character, which is then followed by an explanation ‘[when] designating men,’ ‘[when] designating women,’ and ‘[when] designating things and beasts’ (Tenney 1893, 11).

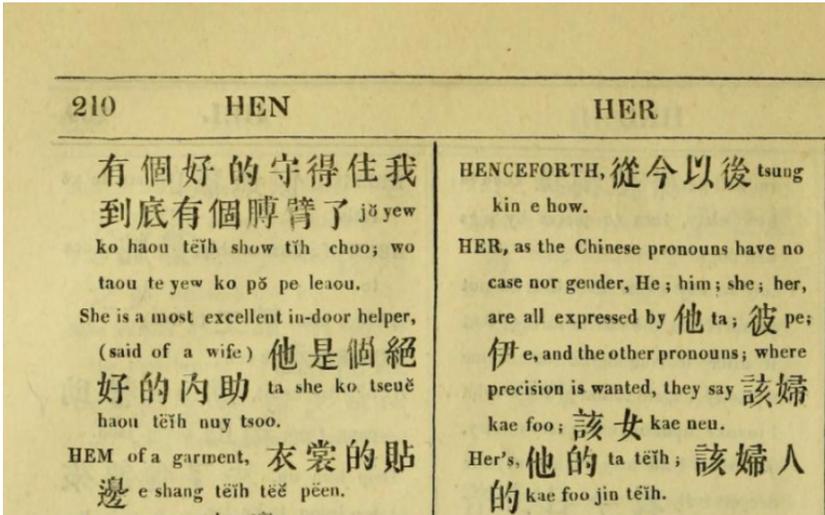


Fig 6.4.b: Entry for 'Her' in Robert Morrison, *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1822).

LESSON XI. 11
Pronouns. 代名詞
Singular.

| Before a noun. | | Alone. | |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|--|
| I. 我 | my. 我的 | mine. 我的 | |
| you. 你 | your. 你的 | yours. 你的 | |
| he. 他(指男人) | his. 他的(指男) | his. 他的(指男) | |
| she. 他(指婦女) | her. 他的(指女) | hers. 他的(指女) | |
| it. 他(指物件禽獸) | its. 他的(指物) | its. 他的(指物) | |
| Plural. | | | |
| we. 我們 | our. 我們的 | ours. 我們的 | |
| you. 你們 | your. 你們的 | yours. 你們的 | |
| they. 他們 | their. 他們的 | theirs. 他們的 | |

Fig 6.4.c: Pronominal Table in C.D. Tenney's 1893 *Yingwen Facheng*.

As for the origins of 'she' in Chinese, the story goes that Liu Bannong – facing difficulties translating fiction heavily laden with pronominal density – proposed the new pronoun during an editorial board meeting of *New Youth* as a way to forego recourse to expressions such as 'this woman said' instead of 'she said'. Other writers proposed a few alternatives of their own, some inflected with Japanese, some with Wu topolects, before new literature settled on using 她 as

'she'. Recent research on the topic acknowledges some degree of opposition to the new pronoun, but concludes that 'she' was quickly coopted on the road to 'linguistic modernity,' especially by women writers keen to make use of a new visibilising tool amidst the centrality of the 'woman question' (Huang 2009).

My research shows quite a different story: as early as 1920, a number of writers and activists were appalled by the hierarchies that the new set of gender-differentiated pronouns introduced in the language in the name of visibilising women. A frequent concern was that the 'woman' radical on the left-hand side of the pronoun (*nü* 女 in 她) introduced a pronominal hierarchy wherein men owned the 'person' radical (*ren* 人 in 他, formerly a general third pronoun) while women were now 'just women' and animals and things were 'cows' (*niu* 牛 in 牠). Many saw this pronominal hierarchy as intrinsically sexist, even asking whether marking linguistic gender was warranted at all. Anarcho-communist circles in the early 1920s rejected the masculine/feminine/neuter division and proposed their own 'common gender' pronoun. Essayist Zhu Ziqing reported that girl students often crossed off the 'person' radical in the new masculine pronoun, replacing it with a masculine (*nan* 男) out of spite (Zhu 1928, 109–110). The notable novelist Cheng Zhanlu argued that gendering pronouns inevitably pigeonholed people who eschewed the gender binary such as eunuchs into a forcible 'masculine' or 'feminine' (Cheng 1924). So many more examples could be cited, from playwrights decrying having to deal with discrepancies between how pronouns were to be voiced (*ta* in all cases) and how they were written in scripts (differentiated pronouns) to poets such as Liu Dabai using alternative pronouns in poetry where gender-inclusivity or indeterminacy required so.

Meanwhile, as soon as the *he/she/it* pronominal split became mainstream in the late 1920s, constructions akin to 'he or she', 'she/he', '(s)he', or even concatenated plural forms started to appear in the periodical press. They effectively worked to re-introduce an inclusivity or ambiguity that was the norm barely 15 years before. Many of these constructions lived in the periodical press throughout the 1930s and 1940s, although they always seem to have been the result of individual contributors' linguistic politics rather than any widespread editorial policy. If quantitative corpus studies would be needed to ascertain exactly how widespread they were, they had gained enough ground by the early 1950s to warrant their own set of directives when the central government started calling for the 'purification' of Chinese grammar and vocabulary (Altehenger 2017, 634) doing away with 'excessive' Europeanised grammatical features. Programs for normalising the written language were directly spearheaded by Mao's aide Hu Qiaomu, leading to the compilation of Lü Shuxiang and Zhu Dexi's 1952 *Talks on Grammar and Rhetoric* (*Yufa xiuci jianghua* 语法修辞讲话), which devotes an entire section to the question of 'he and she'. The manual specifies that forms such as 'he and she', 'he (she)', 'he or she' and concatenated plural forms should be thoroughly banned, and that forms such as 'men and women

workers' (*nan nü gongrenmen* 男女工人们) could be used as substitutes when the context required that emphasis on women be made. The *Talks on Grammar and Rhetoric* went on to become *the* manual of prescribed style for normalising all forms of writing for editors across the country.

In a similar fashion, in the lead-up to the drafting of the first *Scheme for Simplifying Chinese Characters* in the early 1950s, the possible re-simplification of gendered third-person pronouns into a single, pre-1917 gender-inclusive pronoun was debated, but *in fine* never materialised. When the *First Table of Verified Allographs* was jointly promulgated by the Commission of Chinese Script Reform and the Ministry of Culture in 1956, other gendered pronouns were abolished (the feminine second-person pronoun *ni* 妳 and the neuter third-person pronoun *ta* 牠). Interestingly however, the masculine/feminine pronominal dichotomy had been deemed – despite all the initial pushback initiated in anarcho-communist circles in the early 1920s – a category useful enough for the young PRC to keep...

Through all of these debates, Chinese language politics invite us to rethink familiar debates of our time on pronouns and gender-inclusive writing, whether they concern the singular *they* in English, the interpunct in French, or the -x ending in Spanish. These very controversies, which we generally assume to be recent predominantly Western, battles (and perhaps a whim of late-twentieth and twenty-first century feminists?) effectively took place in China starting one century ago. In this regard, China's pronominal feuds are illuminating: there, the gendering of pronouns and the pushback occurred over such a short period of time that no one could have argued that pronominal gender binaries were part of any 'natural and immutable' law of the language.

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