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Unstoppable Speech

Diverging Putonghua Pronunciations and the PRC
Government's Efforts to Curtail Their Emergence in Media

by

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the phonological changes and variations of Putonghua, the standard language spoken mainly in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It examines how linguists and other scholars regard these changes and also how the PRC government has reacted to their recent upsurge in broadcast media. While some scholars view language developments, including phonological such, as something expected, others argue that they are merely a sign of inadequate standardisation and insufficient promotion of the standard (i.e. "correct") form of Putonghua. This has also been the attitude of the government, which has issued prohibitions on speaking Putonghua with a nonstandard pronunciation on the radio and on TV on several occasions since 2002. The reasons for banning the use of nonstandard pronunciation is questioned in the thesis, as most ordinary people seem to have no problems with radio and TV presenters and hosts speaking Putonghua with a less than "perfect" pronunciation. In any case, the prohibitions appear to have had no effect, as nonstandard Putonghua is still heard on various TV programmes today.

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1 Introduction

Speaking properly is probably one of the most common demands that teachers and parents put on us when we are young. But what is ‘proper’ speech? A Chinese citizen would most likely answer that to speak properly is to “speak the standard language”. This answer would then prompt a new question: What is a ‘standard language’? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* defines it as “[a form or variety] which is learned and accepted as correct across a community or set of communities in which others are also used”.¹ In actuality, this does not necessarily mean that it has been recognised for use in legal institutions or political administrations etc., which is the case of an *official* language², although certain languages arguably fall into both categories. An example of the latter is Putonghua, which is taught in kindergartens and schools in mainland China as the standard, while at the same time being the language used in official administrations in the country.

The case of Putonghua is particular in that it has been created and defined by the Chinese government to serve as a national standard instead of using an already existing language, such as Beijing Mandarin or Shanghainese; in other words, it is an artificial language, created in order to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages, such as Wu, Min and Mandarin.³ Since Putonghua was created and its use promoted across mainland China more than half a century ago, it has undergone grammatical and phonological changes, as would be expected from any non-isolated language. These changes have brought forth vernacular varieties diverging from the stipulated standard, to the extent that it already on numerous occasions has prompted government administrators to call for an end to speaking Putonghua with a non-standard pronunciation in broadcast media. This is not the only way in which the government seeks to control the standard language, however, and in 2001 the “Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written

¹ "standard" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. P. H. Matthews. Oxford University Press, 2007. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed through Lund University Library.

² "official language" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. P. H. Matthews. Oxford University Press, 2007. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed through Lund University Library.

³ See 1.2 for an explanation of the use of the term ‘language’ in this thesis.

Chinese Language” was officially put into effect.⁴ This was the first time such a law was passed in mainland China, in which it was stipulated that “Putonghua shall be used by the broadcasting and TV stations as the basic broadcasting language”.⁵

Prompting the ordering of TV and radio stations to stop presenters from speaking Putonghua with a non-standard pronunciation, was the influence of popular programmes in Mandarin from Hong Kong and Taiwan which has led to mainland presenters “imitating” the Hong Kong/Taiwan accents.⁶ Given that the so-called Hong Kong and Taiwan accents do not present any apparent intelligibility problems for mainlanders (evidenced by the fact that they are watching TV programmes from Hong Kong and Taiwan without problems), one might ask why the national government feels a need to restrict the use of them in broadcast media. The linguist’s point of view is usually that languages are constantly evolving and that “any attempt to fix it in a particular time and place will prove to be futile”.⁷ If this is true, then adapting the standard according to the variety/varieties actually spoken would seem like a more rational choice than trying to enforce a standard that no one manages to uphold.

1.1 Purpose of thesis

In this thesis I will look at the efforts of the Chinese government to inhibit the unwanted developments of Putonghua, as well as scholars’ views on the divergence between the standard stipulated by the government and the vernacular varieties that have emerged since Putonghua became widespread in mainland China. My aim is to find out how the mainland standard language has changed phonologically among the general public in recent years, why the government maintains there is a need to control such changes and what impact (if any) the attempts to do so have had on the spread and existence of Putonghua varieties, particularly in broadcast media.

⁴ Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (Order of the President No.37), Gov.cn: The Chinese Central Government’s Official Web Portal, http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-09/19/content_64906.htm.

⁵ Ibid., Article 12.

⁶ Qiang Li 李强. ”大陆禁止电台电视’港台腔’ [Mainland Forbids ‘Hong Kong and Taiwan accents’ on Radio and TV Stations]”, *The Epoch Times*, 17 Sep, 2005, China News Section, Taiwan edition.

⁷ Chris Wen-Chao Li, “Conflicting Notions of Language Purity: the Interplay of Archaising, Ethnographic, Reformist, Elitist and Xenophobic Purism in the Perception of Standard Chinese”, *Language & Communication* 24 (2004): 97-133.

1.2 Circumscriptions and clarifications

Since this thesis concerns Putonghua, it will focus on discussions about the spoken standard Mandarin of mainland China. It will also only be concerned with the *phonology* of Putonghua, and will consequently only refer to the written standard peripherally. Grammar and lexicon will also only be touched upon in passing, as they are not the main focus of the thesis. Pinyin has been used to denote pronunciation throughout the thesis except when there is a need to give a detailed description of certain sounds, in which case IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols in square brackets have been used.

I would also like to clarify that throughout the thesis I have chosen to use the term ‘language’ when referring to what is normally (but incorrectly) called ‘dialect’ or ‘dialect group’ by scholars as well as ordinary Chinese people. In other words, the seven major groups Mandarin, Yue, Hakka, Wu, Min, Xiang, Gan will all be referred to as Chinese *languages*, not dialects.⁸ The term ‘dialect’ will in this thesis be used to refer to topolects within these languages, which means that the Nanjing dialect, Beijing dialect and Dalian dialect for example will be categorised as dialects of the Mandarin language.

My choice of terminology has to do with the fact that the lack of intelligibility between these seven groups is far greater than many people, including scholars, believe. This has been pointed out by several linguists like John DeFrancis, who maintains that “to speak of *the* Chinese language is to suggest a uniformity which is far from being the case”.⁹ Chris Wen-Chao Li observes that the incorrect terminology has to do with differences between Western and Chinese linguists by pointing out that

while in the Western linguistic tradition ‘mutual intelligibility’ lies at the heart of the distinction between language and dialect (Hock, 1988, pp. 380–381), in Chinese scholarship intelligibility plays no role; instead political unity, genetic affiliation and shared orthography decide whether two speech varieties are to be labelled dialects of the same language or not. Thus under the Chinese system ‘Chinese’ is a single ‘language’, with Mandarin, Wu, Min, Yue, Xiang, Gan and Hakka being dialects of that language, a classification differing markedly from the western approach to the issue, which treats ‘Chinese’ as a language family, and Mandarin, Wu, Min, Yue,

⁸ This is the usual division quoted in most works on the Chinese languages such as Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004 and Ping Chen, 1999 (see footnote 11), though other divisions exist as well.

⁹ John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 39. Italics of the author.

Xiang, Gan and Hakka as separate languages, considering that they are not mutually intelligible despite shared orthography and common roots.¹⁰

In this thesis I have thus chosen to follow the Western linguistic tradition of categorisation quoted above.

Finally, I would like to add that I have tried my best to translate terms and quotes from Chinese to English as accurately as possible, although I am not a professional translator. To reduce the possibility of misunderstanding, I have in some cases given the exact Chinese terms in brackets next to the English translations.

1.3 Thesis outline

In order to give the general reader a better understanding of how the language has developed in modern times, **Section 2** contains a brief summary of the history of Standard Chinese, the focal point being the latter period when the Chinese Communist Party decided to revise the standard created during the Guomindang rule and name it Putonghua instead. **Section 3** presents a few of the most commonly discussed features that differ from the standard Putonghua pronunciation. In **Section 4** the different standpoints on how to deal with the phonological developments (politically or educationally) are discussed. **Section 5** contains a brief summary of the attempts of the authorities to put an end to the use of nonstandard speech in media, which is followed by **Section 6**, where my conclusions are presented.

¹⁰ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004: 111.

2 Historical background of the national standard

2.1 Standard Spoken Chinese before the nineteenth century

The earliest type of a lingua franca used in the Chinese civilization is believed to have been based on what was spoken in the capital of the Shang dynasty (~1700-1100 BC), a city now known as Yinxu, located in the western part of present-day Henan province. As the following Western Zhou dynasty (~1100-771 BC) saw over 130 small states established in linguistically diverse areas, there was a further need for a spoken standard to facilitate communication among the states, but also between the local states and the central government. Historical records have shown that this standard, referred to as Yayan (雅言) in the Confucian Analects and taught in schools of all states during the Zhou dynasty, was also based on the language spoken in Zhongzhou, which is today's Henan province. As both Luoyang and Kaifeng, two major cities situated in Henan, became capitals of several subsequent dynasties of China, the Mandarin dialect of Zhongzhou was preserved as the standard spoken form until the beginning of the Ming dynasty, when the Mandarin dialect of Nanjing replaced it. Despite the fact that the capital had already moved from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421, the Beijing dialect did not gain status as a standard until the mid nineteenth century, due to an increase of political and cultural influence of Beijing and a significant reduction of population in Nanjing following the Taiping Rebellion, which took place during 1850-64. However, formal recognition of the Beijing dialect as the basis of Standard Spoken Chinese did not occur until the mid 1920s after the establishment of the Republic of China, when the 'New National Pronunciation' was decided upon.¹¹ As can be seen from the geographical locations of dialects serving as bases for the historical national standards, standard spoken Chinese has mostly, if not always, been based on the Mandarin branch of Chinese languages, a feature that is to this day still evident in the present standard.¹²

¹¹ Ping Chen, *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7-11.

¹² For a more detailed account of the history of Standard Chinese, please refer to Ping Chen, 1999 (footnote 10) or Jianguo Li 李建国, 《汉语规范史略》 [*A Brief History of Standard Chinese*] (Beijing: Yuwen Chubanshe 语文出版社, 2000).

2.2 Modern Spoken Chinese

2.2.1 Establishment of a modern standard

After China was defeated in the first Opium War (1839-1842), the fact that the country had not kept up with the development of the Western countries which had gone through the Industrial Revolution became obvious. It was therefore decided that the country must be modernised and one of the elements deemed to be in critical need of reform was the standard language. Establishing and spreading the use of a modern spoken as well as written standard was seen as the most important aspects of the language that needed to be altered. The large number of mutually unintelligible Chinese languages was seen as impeding the achievement of universal education – a crucial step for catching up with the Western countries.¹³

A national standard given the name Guoyu (国语, ‘national language’) was put forward and its nation-wide emulation promoted, after several leading intellectuals such as Wu Rulun (吴汝纶) had seen a successful promotion of a standard spoken language in Japan and concluded that the popularisation of it had significantly facilitated modernisation there. This initiated the National Language Movement (国语运动), which argued that China should follow the example of Japan in language standardisation. The movement was successful in stimulating the desire among bureaucrats and scholars to create a standard language for the nation. Problems centred on phonological features arose, however, as there were several different opinions on what features to include in this new official standard.¹⁴

2.2.2 Deciding the standard pronunciation

Although the Beijing dialect was already the approved language of the officials (官话) in China by the turn of the twentieth century, when the time came to decide upon the phonological characteristics of the standard language, there was no consensus on which Chinese language and which dialect to use as the pronunciation base. Whereas some proposed using the existing Beijing dialect, others argued that it should be the Nanjing form of

¹³ Ping Chen, “Development and Standardization of Lexicon in Modern Written Chinese”, in *Language Planning and Language Policy: East Asian Perspectives*, ed. Nanette Gottlieb and Ping Chen (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 50-51.

¹⁴ Ping Chen, 1999: 14.

Mandarin; others yet insisted that Shanghainese, a dialect of Wu, was most suited. It was also proposed by some that the standard language should incorporate features from several dialects/Chinese languages and thus give it a more universal form.¹⁵

One thing that most participants of the National Language Movement could agree upon was that in order to indicate the exact pronunciation and thereby facilitate the promotion of the new standard, a phonetic script for sound indication should be created. The argument was that “if the spoken language were standardized in the form of a phonetic script, there would be uniformity from north to south”.¹⁶

As the Qing dynasty fell and the Republic of China subsequently was founded, the actual work of creating a national standard language began. With the aim of settling on a normative pronunciation, a Commission for Unifying Reading Pronunciation was set up in 1912. Two representatives from every province were selected by the Ministry of Education to work in the commission, in total eighty experts of either phonology, traditional philology, foreign languages or Chinese dialectology. These language experts were given the daunting task of deciding on how commonly used characters should be pronounced, what would constitute the phonological repertoire of the spoken standard, and what kind of phonetic alphabet would be used to denote the basic sounds of the repertoire. When the National Pronunciation Dictionary was presented as the standard language phonology in 1919, it was mostly based on the phonology of the vernacular Beijing dialect, except for some features non-existent in the Beijing dialect but commonly occurring in other Mandarin dialects and in Wu, which were also incorporated. As such, it was an artificial language not spoken natively by anyone.¹⁷ The artificiality of the phonological standard provoked complaints as soon as the dictionary was published, most notably from Zhang Shiyi (张士一), who argued that the standard pronunciation should be based on “the pronunciation of educated natives of Beijing”, a standpoint that quickly garnered more and more support by others.¹⁸ This in turn led to The Preparatory Committee for the Unification of the National Language being set up to revise the phonology of the standard language, which resulted in a new pronunciation standard dubbed the New National Pronunciation. The new standard pronunciation was based entirely on the Beijing dialect, meaning that the features taken from other Mandarin dialects and Wu had

¹⁵ Ping Chen, 1999, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Haishu Ni, 1958, as quoted in Ping Chen, 1999: 15.

¹⁷ Ping Chen, 1999: 16-18

¹⁸ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004: 103

been removed, and was adopted for the revised edition of the National Pronunciation Dictionary published in 1932.¹⁹

With this seemingly more natural standard pronunciation, the Ministry of Education started the nation-wide promotion of the new standard language in 1935; the progress was however cut short by the Japanese invasion in 1937 which lasted until 1945, after which the civil war followed, allowing for little chance to resume a further promotion of Guoyu on the mainland.²⁰

Though most features of the standard language were kept as they had been decided for Guoyu, after the People's Republic of China had been established, some parts of the phonology were further revised. In 1955, Putonghua (普通话) was declared to be the national standard language. Putonghua – literally ‘common/ordinary speech’ – was defined as having its lexical and grammatical base in Northern Chinese (i.e. Mandarin) with the Beijing pronunciation as its phonological base. As Chris Wen-Chao Li has observed, it is worth noting that the new definition no longer incorporated the word ‘educated’, presumably to appeal to the majority of the population at that time.²¹

After this, the pronunciation standard was revised three times between 1957 and 1962. In 1982 the Putonghua Pronunciation Inspection Committee (普通话审音委员会) was established to further revise the standard pronunciation, this time with the aim of “approaching [the task] while acknowledging reality” and modifying it according to the phonological developments of Putonghua, in order to facilitate Putonghua learning for the people. Following the establishment of the committee, a new standard was set at the end of 1985 and the Table of Authorised Pronunciation Variants in Putonghua (普通话异读音审音表), which was subsequently jointly issued by the National Language Committee (国家语言文字工作委员会), the National Education Committee (国家教育委员会, today's Ministry of Education) and the Ministry of Broadcasting and Television (广播电视部).²² Since then, the Table of Authorised Pronunciation Variants in Putonghua has not undergone any further revision, which means that the presently twenty-four year old standard still serves as the basis for

¹⁹ Ping Chen, 1999: 20.

²⁰ Ibid: 22-23.

²¹ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004: 103.

²² 《关于《普通话异读音审音表》的通知》 [Concerning the announcement of the ‘Table of Authorised Pronunciation Variants in Putonghua’], 中国语言文字网 [China Language and Script Online], <http://china-language.gov.cn/gfbz/shanghi/012a.htm>.

school textbooks and the National Putonghua Proficiency Test (普通话水平测试, PSC henceforth).²³

²³ National Putonghua Proficiency Test (普通话水平测试, abbreviated as PSC): A standard oral test used in Mainland China to determine the proficiency in standard pronunciation of teachers, radio and television presenters, news broadcasters, actors etc.

3 Phonological variations

3.1 Authorised variant pronunciations

Certain characters do not have one but several standard pronunciations in Putonghua. These characters are pronounced differently depending on when they occur in certain compounds or when they are used by themselves with different meanings. How these variant pronunciations are employed and what variants are allowed are standardised in the previously mentioned Table of Authorised Pronunciation Variants in Putonghua. The table is in fact a long list and gives examples of when the character 差 is pronounced as chāi, chā, chà or cī, and when 都 is pronounced as dōu or dū for instance.²⁴ It does not, however, allow for any kind of pronunciation that reveals influence from the speaker's local dialect or language, a subject raised in 3.2 below.

3.2 Deviations from the standard pronunciation due to influence from local dialects and languages

While there are many types of pronunciations that differ from the standard, I have chosen to present only four of the most common nonstandard features, which are frequently brought up when discussing phonological features that deviate from the standard pronunciation.²⁵

3.2.1 Retroflex initials zh, ch, sh vs. alveolar initials z, c, s

In standard Putonghua the retroflex initials zh [tʂ], ch [tʂʰ] and sh [ʂ] are phonemes separate from the corresponding alveolar initials z [ts], c [tsʰ] and s [s]. To give some examples, according to the standard pronunciation the syllables zhī and zī are not allophonic, which is also the case of the two syllables chū and cū. Nevertheless, in many varieties of Putonghua,

²⁴ 《普通话异读词审音表》 [Table of Authorised Variant Pronunciation in Putonghua], 中国语言文字网 [China Language and Script Online]. <http://www.china-language.gov.cn/wenziguifan/managed/012.htm>.

²⁵ See for example Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004; Ping Chen, 1999; and Ju Xiang 项菊, 《普通话轻声的规范与方言的轻声》 [Standard Weak Stress in Putonghua and Weak Stress in Dialects], 语文建设通讯 [*Chinese Language Review*], no. 68 (2001) http://www.hkedcity.net/iclub_files/a/1/74/webpage/chinese_words/chinese04.html.

particularly in the southern parts of mainland China and Hong Kong, the three retroflex initials are often replaced with their alveolar counterparts. This is also a common feature of nonstandard Guoyu spoken in Taiwan, even though in zhuyin fuhao (注音符号, the phonetic system used in Taiwan) the retroflex sounds are denoted with symbols separate from the alveolar ones. The main reason for the lack of retroflex initials in the forms of Putonghua spoken in the southern areas is that many Chinese languages lack these sounds. As a consequence, the easiest way of pronouncing them for southern Chinese people (especially older ones or those who have not had Putonghua teachers speaking with a standard accent) is to simply replace them with the corresponding alveolar sounds.²⁶

3.2.2 Nasal finals -n and -ng

The alveolar nasal -n [n] and velar nasal -ng [ŋ] are the only consonants apart from -r [ʃ] (see 3.2.4) that are found in final position of Putonghua syllables. In accordance with the standard pronunciation, they are not allophonic, thus yīn and yīng should not be pronounced interchangeably in standard Putonghua. As with the retroflex/alveolar initials mentioned above, the nasal finals are nonetheless either inconsistently separated or not separated at all, which most often means that -n substitutes -ng. This, too, is a feature more commonly found in Putonghua varieties of southern mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as in nonstandard Guoyu in Taiwan.²⁷

3.2.3 Syllables with weak stress

Syllables with weak stress (轻声), also called neutral tone, are normally found in the northern parts of China. Excluding functional words, they only occur in compounds and always in non-final syllables. In addition, weak stress syllables are marked by their lack of tone and their shorter duration compared to syllables with normal stress.²⁸ Apart from functional words like -ma (吗, question particle) and -a (啊, phrase suffix), weak stress usually falls on the second syllable of reduplicated words like kànkan (‘to look/watch’) and jiějie (‘older sister’) and in other lexical items such as mǐngbài (‘to understand’) and yīfu (‘clothes/clothing’). In the southern parts of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, weak stress is less common and is usually

²⁶ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004:121.

²⁷ Ibid.: 122.

²⁸ San Duanmu, *The Phonology of Standard Chinese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135.

substituted by either the etymological tone of the syllable, such as *juéde* ('to feel/think') which is pronounced *juéde* in standard Putonghua. In some cases the etymological tone is replaced by a different tone, for example *tóufǎ* ('hair on the human head') which is pronounced *tóufa* in standard Putonghua and which has an etymological fourth tone on the second syllable, i.e. *fà*

Lexical weak stress can be divided into three different groups according to the function it serves. First, it can serve as a semantic contrast when paired with the normally stressed forms, such as *dōngxi* ('thing') and *dōngxī* ('east-west') or *dàodao* ('authentic') and *dàodào* ('tunnel'). Secondly, some varieties of Putonghua usually have weak stress in words, which has no semantic difference from the corresponding words with normal stress, like *dòufu/dòufǔ* ('tofu'). Finally, there are also words like that are allophonically pronounced with weak stress or normal stress, e.g. *xìngfú/xìngfǔ* ('happiness/happy'). Most of the weak stressed words that serve no semantic contrast are pronounced with normal stress in standard Putonghua.²⁹

3.2.4 The r-suffix (儿)

Suffixation of the r-sound [ɹ] is a phonological feature found mainly in northern China. Like weak stress, it may serve as a semantically contrasting feature, as part of the established pronunciation of certain words or as an allophone to the words without the r-suffix in some Putonghua varieties.³⁰ For people studying Chinese (which typically means studying Putonghua), the first thing that strikes them when arriving in Beijing for the first time is probably the abundance of r-suffixation among Beijing speakers. The r-suffix is only included in spoken standard Putonghua when it serves a semantic contrastive function or when it is habitually included in words, for instance in *xiǎoqǔr* ('popular song/tune') and *hǎowánr* ('fun/amusing').^{31 32}

²⁹ Ping Chen, 1999: 40-41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 39.

³¹ 《2009年教师资格考试普通话水平测试试题(二)》[Exam Questions of the 2009 National Putonghua Proficiency Test for Teacher Qualification no 2], 中国教育在线 [China Education Online], http://teacherexam.eol.cn/pu_tong_hua_8125/20090714/t20090714_391044.shtml.

³² 《2009年教师资格考试普通话水平测试试题(三)》[Exam Questions of the 2009 National Putonghua Proficiency Test for Teacher Qualification no 3], 中国教育在线 [China Education Online], http://teacherexam.eol.cn/pu_tong_hua_8125/20090714/t20090714_391047.shtml.

4 Popular Putonghua and standard Putonghua pronunciation

4.1 Discussions on Popular Putonghua pronunciation vs. standard pronunciation

The term ‘Popular Putonghua’ (大众普通话) was used in an article by Yao Dehuai published in 1998 in the Hong Kong journal *Chinese Language Review* (语文建设通讯). In the article Yao discusses the meaning of Putonghua; to scholars, it usually means ‘standard Putonghua’, while to ordinary people, it means ‘ordinary Putonghua’. This ordinary Putonghua is what Yao has decided to call ‘Popular Putonghua’.³³ After Putonghua phonology was determined by the language planning institutions of mainland China, a certain strict “academy faction” (“学院派”) has emerged, according to Yao. This academy faction is very particular about strict definitions as well as the shapes and forms of the standard, while among other things conducting pronunciation surveys under what he deems as “not very transparent circumstances”. Furthermore, Yao criticises this academy faction for disqualifying those not belonging to them, for instance when Guo Moruo published a letter in the communist party’s foremost theoretical journal *Red Flag* (红旗), in which he expressed that the Beijing dialect (in its pure form) should be promoted nationally as the standard language. This opinion was retracted by Guo in a later issue of *Red Flag*, where he stated that his previous view was not accurate, and that it should have been in accordance with the Putonghua promotion directives issued by the government.³⁴ It is worth pointing out, however, that this incident occurred in 1972 and that 16 years had already passed when Yao’s article was published.

While the average person, even intellectuals, normally cannot recite the definition of ‘standard Putonghua’, either because it is not clear even to scholars or because its meaning is too obscure, Yao claims that everyone knows the rough meaning of ‘ordinary Putonghua’. Popular Putonghua should according to Yao be defined as:

[the language which] is mainly popular in airplanes, on steamers, trains, in airports, on docks, at bus stops, restaurants, liquor shops, hotels, guesthouses, inns, eateries, bars, dining halls, amusement parks, night clubs, karaoke bars etc. The so-called Putonghua has been generated

³³ Dehuai Yao 姚德怀, 《‘规范普通话’与‘大众普通话’》 [‘Standard Putonghua’ and ‘Popular Putonghua’], 语文建设通讯 [*Chinese Language Review*] 57 (1998): 1-2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 6.

because of transportation, communication media and the developments of telephone communication, and also because people from all kinds of places travelling from one place to another need an easy way of communicating and negotiating. It is not only popular on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, but also in Southeast Asia and all larger Chinese populations found elsewhere.³⁵

As an example of the importance of knowing Popular Putonghua, Yao remarks that while presenters from CCTV (China Central Television, the state television broadcaster of mainland China) speak standard Putonghua when conducting interviews, most interview subjects speak Popular Putonghua. This means that the presenter and the audience must be able to understand the so-called standard as well as Popular Putonghua. Although most people cannot speak standard Putonghua, everyone understands each other's Popular Putonghua with some effort. Moreover, Yao emphasises that it is Popular Putonghua which is the true lingua franca of Chinese people (as opposed to the standard form, as the mainland government claims).³⁶

Yao's article has sparked many comments, mostly supportive, in the discussion forum of Chinese Language Review. Since Popular Putonghua as defined by Yao is the variety spoken by the majority of Putonghua speakers, it is actually not surprising. After all, as Chen Jianmin remarks, which academic scholar would dare to speak ill of "the masses" ("大众")? He adds that to spread the use of Putonghua is in practice to "spread the use of Popular Putonghua, of a mixed north-south accent, of ordinary Putonghua", and that ordinary people do not actually mind nonstandard pronunciations; what they care about, however, is that everyone can communicate with each other.³⁷

Shen Huaixing not only agrees with Yao Dehuai's views on the excessive strictness of the phonological standard, but goes so far as to describe the fact that Yao has brought attention to the importance of studying and doing research on Popular Putonghua as "a remedy that treats the diseases of linguistic centralisation and autocracy".³⁸ Although the above statement is somewhat extreme, he develops it by pointing out that through studying the common features of Popular Putonghua, textbooks could be more suitably adapted to teaching Putonghua to ordinary people.

³⁵ Ibid.: 7.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jianmin Chen 陈建民, 《关于'规范普通话'与'大众普通话'》的讨论 [Discussions on 'Standard Putonghua' and 'Popular Putonghua'], 语文建设通讯 [*Chinese Language Review*] 57 (1998): 12.

³⁸ Huaixing Shen 沈怀兴, 《关于'规范普通话'与'大众普通话'的讨论》 [Discussions on 'Standard Putonghua' and 'Popular Putonghua'], 语文建设通讯 [*Chinese Language Review*] 57 (1998): 13.

Wang Huidi does not explicitly discuss Popular Putonghua, but expresses that the “top-level PSC³⁹ Putonghua heard on CCTV news broadcasts is standard to the degree that it is completely out of touch with reality and far distant from the language of society”. He compares it to the Putonghua spoken at Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television, where he observes that the only top-level PSC Putonghua heard is probably from commercials and the speaker voice announcing what channel you currently are watching.⁴⁰ Whether this is a jocular remark or not is not clear, but anyone who has watched CCTV and Phoenix Television can nonetheless confirm that there is at least some truth to it. Wang also criticises the over-emphasis on “correct pronunciation” of TV presenters by pointing out that although a reporter or presenter might not have flawless standard pronunciation, the focus should be on his or her journalistic capabilities, which he claims is the reason for the increasing popularity of Phoenix Television.⁴¹

Wang is not the only person who makes a comparison between news readers of mainland China and those from Hong Kong or Taiwan. Ding Yi remarks that some people prefer the pronunciation of news readers from Taiwan, which has a slight southern accent, to that of mainland news readers. He argues that many Chinese people (either Chinese nationals or people of Chinese descent) do not consider the form of Putonghua which neatly differentiates the retroflexes zh, ch, sh from the alveolars z, c, s and the nasal final -n from -ng as something very pleasant to hear and that many even regard this as “speaking with an accent”, even though it is in accordance with the standard pronunciation desired when taking the PSC for example. Ding is also one of very few who questions the English term ‘standard Putonghua’ and suggests that instead of ‘standard Putonghua’, ‘received Putonghua’ could be used to denote the “exact” pronunciation, much like the term ‘Received Pronunciation’ is used for English.⁴²

Of course, not everyone agrees with the notion of adapting the standard form of Putonghua to resemble its popular form/forms more. Zhou Youguang, often attributed as “The Father of Pinyin”, maintains that the reason behind the problems of promoting and spreading the use of a standard Putonghua is the Chinese people’s reluctance to progress towards

³⁹ See footnote 22.

⁴⁰ Huidi Wang 汪惠迪, 《凤鸣和谐 – 普通话和华语的和諧》 [The Phoenix Voices Harmony and Nestles Close to the Audience – The Harmony of Putonghua and Huayu], 语文建设通讯[*Chinese Language Review*], no. 90 (2008), <http://www.huayuqiao.org/DOC9000/9015.html>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Yi Ding 丁乙, 《关于‘规范普通话’与‘大众普通话’的讨论》 [Discussions on ‘Standard Putonghua’ and ‘Popular Putonghua’], 语文建设通讯[*Chinese Language Review*] 57 (1998): 15.

modern times. He even compares the belief of not needing to learn a standard common language (i.e. standard Putonghua) with the mentality of feudal times when people were unwilling to move from where they lived. Although Zhou observes that there is a possibility of a recent tendency towards a reduction of typical standard features such as weak stress syllables and the r-suffix among radio and TV presenters, he also states that this needs to be confirmed by studies. Moreover, he notes that many people believe that Putonghua standard tests should not put stress on the acquisition of these phonological features, and that people generally oppose the excessive “academicism” of Putonghua promotion and testing.⁴³

Going over the main points of the discussions on Popular Putonghua, it seems the main issue for many who support the modification of standard Putonghua to bring it closer in line with Popular Putonghua is a reluctance to accept that everyone ought to sound like northerners, or more specifically, like Beijing people. Zhuang Zeyi particularly disapproves of the fact that many of those who go to Hong Kong to promote the use of Putonghua “are all retroflexes, weak stress syllables and r-suffixes whenever they speak”, and that “not only Hong Kong people, but even Mao Zedong would fail the PSC if he were to take it”. Zhuang concludes that the issues of diametrically opposed goals and methods of Putonghua promotion should indeed be the subject of criticism.⁴⁴

Another issue slightly related to the opposition of the mostly Beijing-influenced phonology is what the earlier mentioned Shen Huaixing considers to be excessive centralisation when it comes to linguistic policy. Many intellectuals are not necessarily opposed to the northern Mandarin pronunciation (with its retroflexes, r-suffixes etc.) in itself, but rather the “autocratic” aspect of current linguistic policies. As Xu Maoyong states:

I endorse the standardisation of Chinese and welcome the establishment of rules and legislations by experts. But I believe that these legislators should be more democratic and more rational, in order to facilitate for the people to adhere to the standard and also to make them glad to do so. Otherwise, it will really only leave people at loss.⁴⁵

⁴³ Youguang Zhou 周有光, 《漫谈蓝青官话》 [Informal discussion on Non-standard Mandarin], 中国选举与治理 [China Elections and Governance], <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=118976>.

⁴⁴ Zeyi Zhuang 庄泽义, 《关于‘规范普通话’与‘大众普通话’的讨论》 [Discussions on ‘Standard Putonghua’ and ‘Popular Putonghua’], 语文建设通讯 [Chinese Language Review] 57 (1998): 14.

⁴⁵ Maoyong Xu 徐懋庸, 1983, as quoted in Yue Zhao 赵越, 《普通话水平测试两谈》 [Two Discussions on the National Putonghua Proficiency Test], 语文建设通讯 [Chinese Language Review], no. 71 (2002) http://resources.edb.gov.hk/~chinjour/no71/71_07.htm.

4.2 Other discussions on the standard pronunciation

Apart from the subject of Popular Putonghua, many articles have covered various other aspects of Putonghua phonology. On the subject of standardising weak stress syllables Xiang Ju writes that those that exist in both Putonghua and in other dialects should be granted standard status, those exist in other dialects but not in Putonghua “should not be taken into account”, and the weak stress syllables that exist in Putonghua but not in dialects are not to be included in the standard pronunciation. She maintains that “since Putonghua is Han people’s common language and belongs to the people, standard weak stress syllables should follow the norms accepted in the whole country”.⁴⁶ Xiangs proposal may seem reasonable at first glance, but since there are so many dialects of the Chinese languages, the amount of time and effort required to examine whether or not a certain weak stress syllable exists in both Putonghua and any other dialect would probably not be worth it. It would therefore be impossible to even imagine how much time and effort it would take to examine *all* weak stress syllables that have been included in standard Putonghua.

Another problem of weak stress syllables that needs to be taken into account is that no actual standard exists for them, which Zhao Yue points out while discussing issues of the PSC. She argues that the syllables which can be read with normal or weak stress by choice should be disregarded during the proficiency test in order to reduce the amount of occurring weak stress syllables, since many speakers of other dialects and languages have difficulties with this phonological feature. Zhao Yue also suggests that exact points should be deducted depending on what type of errors examinees make during reading tests of the PSC. For instance, if the two initials n and l are not differentiated, 0.7 points should be deducted, if the retroflex ch is substituted with c, then 0.8 points should be taken off.⁴⁷ Why a “faulty” pronunciation of the retroflex would prompt a larger point deduction than the n/l substitution is explained by the fact that characters having the initial n occur 7 times in the example test referred to in the article, while characters with the initial ch occur 8 times, which does not seem to be a valid reason. Zhao Yue furthermore states that while for some professional groups the demands of the PSC are not exaggerated; to most ordinary people they present great difficulties because most people speak nonstandard Putonghua. She goes on maintaining that the particular stress on perfecting Putonghua pronunciation for some professional

⁴⁶ Ju Xiang 项菊, 2001.

⁴⁷ Yue Zhao 赵越, 2002.

categories, such as radio and TV presenters, is “in accordance with public demands” and that for ordinary people, more importance is attached to the ability to express oneself accurately, coherently and smoothly. Because of this, they “can even overlook some major pronunciation flaws” of ordinary people. However, it seems Zhao Yue contradicts herself when she adds that “popular TV presenters like 刘仪伟⁴⁸ have had some influence on the public view of the difference between the ‘expert standard’ and what people consider as being standard. In such instances, the society’s approval serves as a very important norm”.⁴⁹

Criticism has also been made against other types of what should be authoritative guidelines of standard pronunciation. One of those guidelines is the earlier mentioned Table of Authorised Variant Pronunciation in Putonghua (henceforth referred to as ‘the Table’), which Zhao Xiande observes “does not suit the developments of the language” due to the fact that it has not been revised since 1985 and adds that “some of the pronunciations authorised in it are certainly difficult to carry out nowadays [i.e. 2009]”.⁵⁰ It is not just in recent years that demands for a revision of it have been put forward. In an article published 12 years before that of Zhao Xiande, Gao Hongnian already argued that because of changes in the phonology of Putonghua, there was a need to revise ‘the Table’ in order to serve dictionaries, language teachers, media presenters etc.⁵¹ Both Zhao Xiande and Gao are of the opinion that the standard needs to be more exact, though they differ in what they suggest should be modified. Zhao Xiande argues that the existence of variant pronunciation is an obstruction of the globalisation of Putonghua and wants to reduce them to a minimum, while Gao argues that the standard needs to be frequently updated in order to aid language teaching.⁵²

Another person who advocates further standardisation of Putonghua is Guo Longsheng, who insists that the media serves as a language model and that it therefore should be used to the fullest extent to set an example for the people, since TV and radio is the principal source of Putonghua acquisition apart from formal education. Besides discussing the

⁴⁸ 刘仪伟 is a well-known TV presenter who speaks Putonghua with an obvious Sichuan accent and who has hosted several shows on CCTV.

⁴⁹ Yue Zhao 赵越, 2002.

⁵⁰ Xiande Zhao 赵贤德, 《试论《普通话异读词审音表》修订的必要性》 [On the Necessity of Revising the ‘Table of Authorised Variant Pronunciation’], 湖州师范学院学报 [Journal of Huzhou Teachers College] Vol. 31, No. 4 (2009): 31.

⁵¹ Hongnian Gao 高洪年, 《从《审音表》看普通话语音变化的几种情况及语音教学等相关问题》 [Circumstances of Putonghua Phonological Changes, Language Pronunciation Teaching and Other Related Problems Observed from the ‘Table of Authorised Variant Pronunciation’], 萍乡高等专科学校学报 [Journal of Pingxiang College] No. 2 (1997): 31.

⁵² Ibid.: 33, Xiande Zhao 赵贤德, 2009: 32.

responsibilities of the broadcast media, Gao also points out that “inadequacies of [Putonghua] promotion” have led to misconceptions of what is correct, which have then been established as “standard” forms. According to Gao, the fact that these forms have been established by habit is just an excuse for using the language improperly and should be prevented with additional promotion of what he believes is the “correct form”.⁵³

This centralised and strict attitude towards the standard language and its pronunciation of Zhao Xiande, Guo Longsheng and others is opposed by Chris Wen-Chao Li. According to him, Putonghua will always have regional forms and since this kind of language variation is unlikely to disappear any time soon, Li believes that “Chinese language planners would be better off designating Mandarin as the official language and embracing all mutually intelligible regional varieties of the Mandarin language”.⁵⁴ Moreover, the difficulty of upholding an exact pronunciation standard based on Beijing Mandarin is complicated by ongoing changes of this dialect. Li has observed examples of the words previously having an r-suffix, such as yīdiǎnr (‘a little bit’), now often pronounced by younger generations without the r-suffix, i.e. yīdiǎn.⁵⁵ If this is true, it would mean that the basis of standard Putonghua has changed, which should (at least in theory) prompt a revision of the standard pronunciation, given that Putonghua phonology is officially based on that of Beijing Mandarin. Li also notes that the r-suffix is almost never heard in news broadcasts, which is confirmed by Ping Chen who has found that in radio and TV broadcasts aimed at a national audience (as opposed to a regional) there has been a noticeable decrease of r-suffixation in recent years.⁵⁶

Criticism has also been aimed at the over-emphasis of what in essence are minor pronunciation flaws instead of expressional skills. This is particularly addressed in an article by Shi Zhongmou who writes:

When teaching [Putonghua] pronunciation the main point is not to know “how ‘啊’ pronunciation changes when read in connection with other characters”, the “pronunciation changes of

⁵³ Longsheng Guo 郭龙生, 《论中国当代语言规划方法》 [Discussion on Contemporary Language Planning Methods in China], 北华大学学报 (社会科学版) [Journal of Beihua University (Social Sciences)] Vol. 8, No. 4 (2007): 77-78.

⁵⁴ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004: 113.

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 125.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 128, Ping Chen, 1999: 39-40.

reduplicated adjectives”, the “pitch of weak stress syllables” or “pronunciation changes due to r-suffixation”, but to know real, practical examples and usages [...]⁵⁷

In any case, these types of phonological features are often ignored by many speakers, who only bother with spending as much effort learning Putonghua as will make them understood, disregarding their remaining accents. This does not only apply to the average person, but also academics and government leaders, and is particularly true for those whose native language is one of the other dialects of Mandarin, since Putonghua is also a Mandarin variant, albeit man-made. San Duanmu comments that “As a result, most SC [Standard Chinese] speakers, or most of those who think they are speaking SC, do not have a perfect pronunciation”.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Zhongmou Shi 施仲谋, 《从中学语文教学到大专中文课程》 [From Middle School Language Teaching to Chinese Courses at College], 语文建设通讯[*Chinese Language Review*], no. 72 (2002), http://resources.edb.gov.hk/~chinjour/no72/72_12.htm.

⁵⁸ San Duanmu, 2000: 5.

5 The authorities' reactions to vernacular varieties of Putonghua and subsequent results

5.1 Standard Putonghua and its vernacularisation

As previously mentioned in the introduction, languages, in particular those that are not isolated from outside influence will continuously develop over time. This can affect the grammatical and phonological structure as well as the lexical inventory of any language. Since spoken language serves as a means of communication for human beings, we demand as little effort as possible when pronouncing sounds. This economical pronunciation is not necessarily, but can be, induced by influence from other languages or dialects in contact.⁵⁹ Given this and the fact that it has been more than fifty years since the initial launch of Putonghua promotion, it is only natural that it has undergone vernacularisation. Claire Saillard compares the vernacularisation of Putonghua with that of other languages:

all languages which have undergone a geographical extension outside of their traditional territory, such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese etc., can be shown to have passed through a similar cycle: a first phase of spread, accompanied by linguistic simplification, followed by a geographical fragmentation phase, leading to larger scale variation, and finally a vernacularization phase. This last phase sometimes leads to the development of new and more complex features in language structures, independent of the norms of the original standard (or superstrate) language.

Saillard makes a further observation that although the vernaculars can diverge greatly from the original language, they are nonetheless regarded as variations of one language.⁶⁰ These variations may or may not be acceptable according to the language planning institutions of a certain country; an issue which is addressed in Section 5.2 of this thesis.

Earlier, I mentioned that languages tend to develop towards economisation of phonology. This is something commonly heard in southern varieties of Putonghua, where some phonemic contrasts are neutralised, e.g. the contrasts between retroflex and alveolar

⁵⁹ Futang Wang 王福堂, 《汉语方言语音的演变和层次》 [*Phonological Developments and Stratifications of Chinese Topolects*] (Beijing: 语文出版社 Yuwen Chubanshe, 1999), 1; 19.

⁶⁰ Claire Saillard, "On the Promotion of Putonghua in China: How a Standard Language Becomes a Vernacular" in *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China*, ed. Minglang Zhou (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 163.

initials and between the two nasal finals (described in Section 3 of this thesis). According to Saillard, the local varieties of Putonghua which include such “new” phonological features could develop into new vernacular languages. Since these varieties are not idiomatic like the approximation languages of foreign language learners but shared by linguistic communities, they serve as local norms and are likely to be passed on to younger generations.⁶¹

5.2 Efforts from the authorities’ side to curtail phonological developments

Despite the fact that many linguists regard phonological changes in languages as something completely natural and being of no hindrance to communicability, the authorities of mainland China have in various ways tried to hold back or even ban what they consider to be non-standard pronunciation.

On October 31, 2000, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language was adopted at the 18th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, and subsequently put into effect on January 1, 2001. This law is the first one which regulates the standard language in mainland China and is said to be adopted in order to promote interregional and interethnic communication and the national unity, among other things.⁶² In the law it is explicitly stated that “For purposes of this Law, the standard spoken and written Chinese language means Putonghua (a common speech with pronunciation based on the Beijing dialect)”.⁶³ It also states that Putonghua should be used as the main broadcasting language of TV and radio stations and that those who need to use Putonghua as their work language, such as TV and radio broadcasters, programme presenters, teachers etc., must reach certain standards set by the Chinese government. Those who fail to reach these standards are to “receive training”.⁶⁴ If anyone of these persons (TV and radio presenters, teachers etc.) uses the language in violation of the stipulations of the law, the work unit concerned “shall, by way

⁶¹ Claire Saillard, 2004: 168; 171.

⁶² 《努力营造规范的语言文字环境: 祝贺我国第一部语言文字法诞生》 [Working Hard to Build a Standard Language Environment: Congratulating China on the Birth of the First Law on Spoken and Written Language], 中国语言文字网 [China Language and Script Online], http://www.china-language.gov.cn/94/2008_3_7/1_94_3371_0_1204870645505.html.

⁶³ Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, Article 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: Article 12, Article 19.

of education, criticize the persons who are directly responsible; anyone who refuses to put it right shall be handled by the units concerned”.⁶⁵

What being “handled by the units concerned” means is not stated, but it should be pointed out that the law merely clarifies that the standard spoken Chinese means Putonghua; it is not written anywhere in it that *standard* Putonghua must be spoken in schools, on the radio, on TV or anywhere else where it is the required language. This is the case of both the English translation (which has been used in the quotes above) as well as the original Chinese version of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language.⁶⁶

Apart from regulating the spoken (and written) standard language through legislation, the authorities have also tried to ban the Putonghua pronunciations which deviate from what they regard as being standard. In January, 2002, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) announced that they would prohibit TV stations of every province from letting presenters and hosts speak with “nondescript Hong Kong/Taiwan accents”. This was the first time such a prohibition was issued by the SARFT, most probably prompted by the rising popularity of TV programmes from Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁶⁷ It was followed by the issuing of four documents in May, 2004, through which TV and radio presenters were forbidden from “imitating Hong Kong/Taiwan accents”.

This was only one of the things forbidden in the documents; the others being dressing in excessively revealing clothes, having bizarre hairstyles and adding miscellaneous foreign words in their speech.⁶⁸ All these things can be seen as government efforts to stop outside cultural influences, be it fashion or language related such. The banning of Hong Kong/Taiwan accents and foreign words is a manifestation of what Chris Wen-Chao Li calls “linguistic purism”, more specifically “xenophobic purism”, caused by language insecurity and fear of losing identity and image due to language developments. This intrusion of nonstandard pronunciations of Putonghua together with (mostly English) loan words and expressions, “threatens the notion of ‘Chineseness’, in which the Chinese are supposed to take

⁶⁵ Ibid.: Article 26.

⁶⁶ For the Chinese version, see 《中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法》 [Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language], 中华人民共和国教育部 [Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China], <http://www.moe.edu.cn/edoas/website18/95/info5895.htm>.

⁶⁷ 《中共禁播《不伦不类的港台腔》》 [Mainland Forbids Broadcasting of ‘Nondescript Hong Kong/Taiwan Accents’], The Epoch Times, January 24, 2002, <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/2/1/24/n166065.htm>.

⁶⁸ 《广电“禁令”中的语言硬伤》 [Language Mishaps of the Radio and Television ‘Prohibitions’], 人民网 [People’s Daily Online], May 14, 2004, <http://www1.peopledaily.com.cn/BIG5/guandian/1034/2497414.html>.

pride” according to Li.⁶⁹ Although southern forms of Putonghua should be categorised as Putonghua variations and not foreign languages, they often contain phonological influences from non-Mandarin languages like Yue, Xiang and Min. As such, they are viewed as deviant or nonstandard and might be considered to be a threat to the notion of a “unified standard Putonghua”, spoken by a “unified nation”.

Following the prohibition of Hong Kong/Taiwan accents of 2004, the Joint Pledge of Self-Discipline for Chinese Radio and Television Presenters and Programme Hosts (from now on referred to as the ‘Joint Pledge’) was issued in September 2005, of which Article 10 states that “apart from when it is necessary, Putonghua will be used; regional pronunciations and expressions will not be imitated and accents, intonations, coarse language, slang and professional jargon which harm the standard language will not be used. When speaking Putonghua unnecessary foreign words will not be used, and Hong Kong/Taiwan accents will not be imitated”. Those who failed to comply with any of these demands could be dismissed from their job.⁷⁰ Most presenters and hosts alluded to by this particular part of the ‘Joint Pledge’ were from southern provinces like Hunan, Sichuan and Guangdong and assumed that this was the reason why they were mistakenly accused of speaking with Hong Kong/Taiwan accents. However, none of them believed that they were doing so; in their opinion, they were speaking Putonghua all the time. Some presenters furthermore argued that standard Putonghua might not be suited for all types of programmes, such as variety shows, which have a more relaxed language.⁷¹ The ‘Joint Pledge’ also sparked questioning of why presenters and hosts speaking with obvious nonstandard northern pronunciations were never criticised, while it was explicitly forbidden to speak with a southern Putonghua pronunciation.⁷² This had actually been disputed already after the 2004 prohibition was made official.⁷³

⁶⁹ Chris Wen-Chao Li, 2004: 104-105, 107.

⁷⁰ 《《中国广播电视播音员主持人自律公约》全文》 [The ‘Joint Pledge of Self-Discipline for Chinese Radio and Television Presenters and Programme Hosts’ in Full Text, 新华网 [Xinhua Online], September 14, 2005, http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2005-09/14/content_3488443.htm#.

⁷¹ 《一纸禁令突显神州《第一嗲女》》 [A Prohibition that Puts China’s No. 1 Coquette Girl in the Limelight], 中国评论新闻网 [China Review News], September 17, 2005, <http://zhgpl.com/doc/1000/3/9/2/100039277.html?coluid=21&kindid=268&docid=100039277&mdate=0911123624>.

⁷² 《禁止主持人“港台腔”引发争议》 [Prohibiting Hong Kong/Taiwan Accents of Programme Hosts Triggers Dispute], 文摘报 [Digest Newspaper], October 2, 2005, http://www.gmw.cn/01wzb/2005-10/02/content_312601.htm.

⁷³ 《广电“禁令”中的语言硬伤》 [Language Mishaps of the Radio and Television ‘Prohibitions’], May 14, 2004.

In 2007 yet another official document was issued, in which Article 20 stated that there is a need to protect the “purity and standard of the national language” and that radio and TV presenters and programme hosts must adhere to the use of standard Putonghua in order to aid minors learning how to use and master standard Putonghua. Due to this, they must not “because of seeking to be fashionable add foreign words when speaking Putonghua or imitate expressions or pronunciations from Hong Kong and Taiwan”.⁷⁴ The main point was still the same as in the ‘Joint Pledge’ issued two years earlier, but this time the SARFT had stated the purpose of banning the use of nonstandard pronunciations; supposedly to protect minors from the “dregs of foreign influences” and to prevent them from learning nonstandard Putonghua pronunciations.

⁷⁴ 《印发《广播影视加强和改进未成年人思想道德建设的实施方案》的通知》 [Notice on Printing and Distributing the ‘Plan to Implement the Strengthening and Improvement of Minors’ Ideology and Moral Construction Through Radio, Film and Television’], 国家广播电影电视总局 [The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)], <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2007/02/27/20070914165147430512.html>.

6 Conclusions

Many linguists have observed that phonological changes are inevitable and that efforts to curtail them will more or less be futile. Despite this, the PRC government insists on trying to stop the growing influence of southern varieties of Putonghua through several prohibitions. The fact that the authorities have had to issue them at least four times seems to indicate that the prohibitions have had no apparent effect on how media hosts and presenters speak, which is also proven by the fact that one can still hear nonstandard Putonghua on many TV programmes. This is, however, beside the point. The key question which should be asked is: What good comes out of condemning phonological features which do not hamper intelligibility? Although the document released in 2007 states that the purpose of the included prohibitions are to prevent minors from bad ideological and moral influences and learning how to master standard Putonghua, it is hard to see how this is related to having a southern Putonghua accent.

As several scholars have pointed out, most people do not mind hearing slightly “flawed” pronunciations on TV or on the radio, be it northern or southern such, but place more importance on the presenters’ ability of expression and journalistic capabilities. Moreover, many have also observed that most ordinary people do not speak *standard* Putonghua, although they do speak Putonghua. It thus seems strange that the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television argues that there is a need to have broadcasting presenters and hosts speaking with “perfect” pronunciations, given that while many of the younger generations grow up nowadays with nonstandard Putonghua as their mother tongue, the standard form is no one’s mother tongue and has probably never been so.

There is also the question of the term ‘standard’ to be considered. While the authorities and some scholars keep stressing the importance of speaking with a standard Putonghua pronunciation, there are some parts of the so-called standard which have not been properly standardised, leaving room for interpretations. This is the case of weak stress syllables as well as r-suffixation, which has lead linguists and Putonghua teachers to demand either a more relaxed attitude towards them or that they should be more exactly standardised. The fact that news readers on CCTV, who supposedly speak with the most standard Putonghua pronunciation, rarely or never use weak stress syllables or r-suffixes is also a

reason to question why such great emphasis is put on mastering them when learning Putonghua in school. Another aspect of the term ‘standard’ is that many scholars have argued that while there is a need for a fixed standard, it needs to be revised to better suit the recent developments of the language. The failing to do so from the authorities’ side can be seen in the Table of Authorised Variant Pronunciation in Putonghua, which has not been revised since 1985.

Furthermore, there also seems to be biased views both from some scholars and from the government. Many speakers of southern languages and dialects have questioned the reason for having nothing but northern Chinese features in the standard language, when there are allegedly people who view these particular features as nonstandard. At the same time, the orders from the government concerning nonstandard pronunciations have all shown a clear bias against southern varieties of Putonghua.

As mentioned earlier, however, most people seem to be of the opinion that as long it is comprehensible, it does not matter what variety of Putonghua others speak, whether they are radio and TV presenters or just ordinary people. Since Putonghua varieties are unlikely to disappear, as observed by Chris Wen-Chao Li and seemingly proven by the lack of effect from prohibiting their appearance in the media, it does seem like the best way of dealing with them for the PRC government is simply to adopt a tolerant attitude and to acknowledge them as acceptable forms of Putonghua. After all, a language serves the people using it, not the other way around.

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