

The dream of a common language

Popularizing Putonghua in the People's Republic of China



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Picture: “I am a child of China, I love to speak the common language”.

Taken by author in classroom at Yangpu Primary School, Yangpu district, Shanghai.

Summary

The idea of a common language has always existed in some form in China, from the *ya yan* of Confucius to the modern day mandarin – known as Putonghua. During the Qing dynasty the Beijing dialect slowly became dominant, and in the years following the Xinhai revolution this was made formal through a series of decisions aimed at standardizing the language. The current definition dates back to the 1956 decree by the State Council which declares that Putonghua is based on the Beijing dialect. According to recent official figures only 53% of the population can communicate in Putonghua, and only 18% speak Putonghua at home. It is clear that the many dialects of China are still the “home” language of most Chinese.

Tui guang putong hua – popularize the common language - is not merely a campaign, it is an effort that has been going on since 1956, and the perpetuity of this effort is enshrined in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which says simply that the state “popularizes Putonghua”. It recently drew further support from the 2000 Language Law. The main element of the effort to promote Putonghua is the schools, where the language enjoys an unthreatened status. The state further uses the Putonghua promotion week and the Putonghua Proficiency Test to further the goal of the common language. The test makes language proficiency measurable and is a requirement for work in fields like radio broadcasting and television. Despite efforts, recent figures show the goal of uniting China under one language is far from achieved. The Ministry of Education has on several occasions mentioned 2050 as the year when Putonghua is to be spoken by all Chinese. It is an ambitious target.

The potential victim of Putonghua promotion is the many dialects spoken all over China. Heavy-handed school policies that effectively ban dialects in the classroom supposedly ensure that students become fluent in Putonghua from an early age, but also inhibit development of their mother tongue. Recent figures from Shanghai show that while 85% of students speak the dialect at home to some extent, only 37% of fifth graders can communicate in it. Not allowing dialects spoken during school hours is bound to have a detrimental effect on the dialect proficiency of the students, but supporters argue it is a necessary tool of Putonghua popularization. Critical voices from inside China have been few. Nevertheless a debate on the cost of standardization is carefully taking place, within the limits of what the central government will allow. The authorities do carry out research on the situation of some dialects, and make efforts to preserve them. This can be seen in the Shanghai city government’s year-long project to map the Shanghainese dialect. The desirable path for China is a compromise where Putonghua popularization is not done at the expense of dialects and regional identity.

摘要

现代普通话是新造的，但中国一直存在着通用语言的概念，这可以追溯到孔子时代的“雅言”。清代北京方言渐渐地开始占优势，从辛亥革命以来北方方言通过一系列语言规范化的决议并且得到了正式资格。现在普通话的定义来自于国务院 1956 年发布的指示，说普通话是以北方话为基础方言。根据近期官方统计能用普通话交流的人数占全国 53%，在家里讲普通话的只占 18%，很明显表示中国人的“家庭用语”依然是方言。

“推广普通话”不仅仅是一个口号，它是从 1956 年就一直在进行着的事业——国家推广全国通用的普通话，它被永远庄严地载入《中华人民共和国宪法》之中。在 2000 年，它再一次通过《中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法》引起全国的关注和进一步的推广。“推普”的主要地点是学校，在教室内推广普通话是“推普”的首要工作。同时，国家运用“推普周”活动和普通话水平测试来普及普通话这个通用语言。普通话水平测试用的是同样的标准，这个测试是自愿参加的，但是对于想在电台、电视广播等方面工作的人来说，这个证书是必需的。尽管经过多年的努力，近期统计仍表明“让全中国公民能用普通话交流”的这个理想尚未实现。教育部多次提到要在 2050 年前完成这个任务，不过显然这是个宏伟的目标。

“推广普通话”潜在的受害者就是各地的方言。许多学校重拳出击，采取的政策虽然一方面有效地让学生们在很小的年纪就能熟练运用普通话，但是另一方面也抑制了他们运用本地方言的能力。最近关于上海的调查数据显示，虽然 85% 的学生在家里多多少少地会说上海话，但是只有 37% 的五年级小学生能够流利地用方言进行表达。不允许学生在校期间运用方言显然对于学生熟练运用方言是非常有害的，但是支持的人认为这个政策对于普通话的推广是非常有必要的。在中国国内，尽管直接批评这些政策的人还不多，但是在中央允许的范围内，已经渐渐小心地开始公开讨论这种统一标准化到底是否存在问题。同时，一些政府当局已经开始进行研究方言的现状，并努力地进行保护。比如在上海，政府组织人员去各地区研究并且对于不同口音进行了录音。对于中国来说，他们应该意识到在推广普通话的同时保护各种方言是完全可行的。

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Chinese language is a family of many different languages, of varying degrees of mutual intelligibility.¹ Since the 1950s the Chinese government has actively been promoting Putonghua – the common language, to be used as a *lingua franca* for the entire country. The idea of a common language uniting all of China is not new, it dates back to before the Xinhai revolution, and even before then there were always notions of a standard language.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effort to promote a common language in China. The paper will begin with a historic look at the notion of a common language, and then proceed to focus on the effort from the 1950s and onwards, when the modern Putonghua became a concept. The author intends to account for how the common language movement started, where it is today and identify the central elements of the promotion effort. When it comes to the common language and the dialects, increasingly a flashpoint in Chinese language politics, the paper will use the Shanghainese dialect as an example and see how it has been affected by the effort to popularize Putonghua. Questions that will be answered include: what are the origins of the common language, how does promotion of the common language work and what are some possible consequences for the regional dialects?

1.3 Delimitation

The 20th century saw some spectacular debate and developments in policy relating to the Chinese language. This paper will focus on the idea of a common language for all of China. There is no room to examine related but peripheral topics such as the romanization movement or character reform. Furthermore, this paper will not deal with the “why” of Putonghua popularization. The purpose is not to argue in favor or against, but to analyze the effort to promote a standard language in China and identify areas of particular importance. Finally, the thesis deals only with the PRC. A comparison with the effort on Taiwan or Singapore’s Speak Mandarin campaign would be interesting, but regrettably there is no room for the in-depth analysis that such a comparison deserves. The section on Shanghainese is to be treated as a case study and is not representative of

¹ Xiàndài hànyǔ. Shàng cè/Huáng Bóróng, Liào Xùdōng. 3rd edition. Beijing: Higher education press, 2002. 现代汉语。上册/黄伯荣, 廖序东主编。3 版。北京: 高等教育出版社, 2002.7, Xiàndài hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng/Běidà zhōngwénxì xiàndài hànyǔ jiàoyánshì. Beijing: Peking university press, 2003. 现代汉语专题教程/北大中文系现代汉语教研室编。北京: 北京大学出版社, 2003.1

China as a whole, but the author believes the information can be useful for comparison in studies of language politics in other regions of China.

1.4 Terminology

Any discussion on the Chinese language is bound to be hampered by matters of definition. The terminology is confusing enough in Chinese, with a multitude of words overlapping in meaning. It is even more confusing in English, and one reason is the word “mandarin”. Mandarin, coined by the Portuguese, is a translation of the Chinese word *guan hua*, meaning the official language used by the imperial court. However, this has historically referred to very different ways of speaking and different types of *guan hua* can be mentioned in the same sentence. Today it is sometimes used to describe the entire northern dialect group. For this reason it is not appropriate to translate *putong hua* (meaning the common language of the People’s Republic of China) as “mandarin”. At no point has *putong hua* been defined as a kind of *guan hua* by the Chinese government², and the English word used in official Chinese documents is an untranslated and capitalized “Putonghua”.³ For this reason the word “mandarin” will not be used in this paper, although in common English-language usage it corresponds to Putonghua.

2 History

A common Chinese language in the modern sense of the word has its origins in the final years of the Qing dynasty, the word *guo yu* – meaning national language – first appeared around this time. This was, however, not the beginning of the notion of a common language in China. In fact language standards in China have existed for well over two thousand years. Even before the idea of *guan hua* – official language, referring to the language used by imperial administrators, there were standards used for communicating.

2.1 The evolution of standards – north and south

During the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE) the equivalent of a common language was known as *ya yan* – correct (or elegant) language.⁴ This is referenced as early as the Analects of Confucius where it is written that performing of rites should be done in this correct language.⁵ Confucius used this language to lecture before his 3000 disciples, something that would have been impossible in his native Shandong dialect. The *ya yan* of Confucius likely had its roots in the language of the Zhou dynasty.

² For example 1956 decree of the State Council defines Putonghua as “using the northern speech as its base dialect”.

³ See for example the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.

⁴ Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 2.

⁵ “子所雅言，诗、书、执礼，皆雅言也。”

When northern tribes invaded China in the fifth century, during what would be the end of Western Jin, the capital was moved south of the Yangtze and as a result the southern dialects became more influential. Political factions and dynasties would use their capital's pronunciation as the standard for their official language. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties period (420-589 CE) the northern kingdoms generally used Luoyang pronunciation as a standard and the Southern kingdoms used the pronunciation of Jiankang, near modern day Nanjing. The Luoyang dialect at this point already differed greatly from pre-Jin Chinese, a result of northern nomads adopting Chinese. What would become the Jiankang dialect was the result of the Jin seat of power moving south, merging their language with that of the southern locals. At this point the southern phonology of Jiankang became a common standard used by the Chinese literati. When the Sui dynasty united China in 581 CE they chose Chang'an as the capital and the "Qie yun" rhyming dictionary published under Sui was influenced by the southern pronunciation. At the end of the short-lived Sui dynasty Yangzhou had become a financial center of China and as a result the Yangzhou pronunciation, similar to that of Jiankang, became increasingly popular.⁶

During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) the "Tang yun" was composed based on the previous "Qie yun". The new reference set the standard for Tang dynasty pronunciation. Officials as well as those taking the imperial exam were required to use the "Tang yun" system. As a result of Suzhou becoming a center for trade and economy, Suzhou pronunciation became a prestige dialect alongside that of the capital Chang'an. During the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) the pronunciation standard was once again updated, resulting in the "Guang yun". The Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) later replaced this and made the Dadu (modern day Beijing) pronunciation standard. As can be seen each dynasty used its capital city as the basis for what they held to be the correct version of Chinese. The various dialects considered for recognition as standards are now generally divided into north and south.⁷

Under Ming (1368–1644) the Nanjing dialect became the official standard and came to represent the entire south. The Nanjing dialect still maintained several elements of the Middle Chinese spoken in the central plains to the north, a result of migration south at the end of Western Jin.⁸ When the Ming capital was moved to Beijing in 1421 the Beijing dialect became increasingly influential. In 1728 the Yongzheng emperor of Qing decreed that the Beijing *guan hua* should be used by all imperial officials.⁹ For the remainder of the Qing dynasty the Beijing dialect would gradually come to surpass that of Nanjing, paving the way for the ultimate victory of the northern dialects.

⁶ "Pǔtōnghuà" lishǐ.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Pǔtōnghuà de dànsǐng: Nánjīnghuà xuètǒng chúnzhèng yīn hé bàigěi Běijīnghuà.

When discussing the very earliest standards it is important to note that they were not standards in the sense that we use the word today. They were based on *written* Chinese, and as spoken Chinese developed the written standards did not keep up, creating a considerable gap between written and spoken Chinese. The written Chinese of those early times is often called *wen yan wen* – literal language. During the Tang and Song dynasties a form of “written spoken” Chinese emerged, known as *bai hua wen* – plain language - and works written in this less formal Chinese would become very influential. Famous Ming and Qing dynasty novels - *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Scholars* - were written in *bai hua wen*, largely using the northern vocabulary and grammar. The popularity of these works would contribute to the spreading of the northern dialects as a common language.¹⁰ Another contributing factor was the Taiping Rebellion. During the middle of the 19th century the heavenly army of Hong Xiuquan wreaked havoc across southern China, making Nanjing their capital and weakening the economy of the south.¹¹

2.2 Nation-building and a spoken standard – Beijing emerges dominant

The word *guo yu* – national language – had started circulating at the end of the Qing dynasty, possibly inspired by Japan already having a national language. All prior incarnations of a “common language” were intended for official use and had a largely administrative goal. In 1909 a Qing government committee proposed making the *guan hua* – the language used by the imperial court and their officials - into the *de jure* national language of China. This was the first time Chinese was officially labeled as a national language. Interestingly enough the terms *guo yu* and *putong hua*, the latter meaning “common language” and being the term used on the mainland today, emerged around the same time. Three years earlier Zhu Wenxiong, an intellectual active in the romanization movement, had published *Jiangsu Xin Zimu* in which he among other things proposed a “common language” to be used alongside dialects. The common language would become a topic of debate and intellectuals and authors such as Li Jinxi, Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai all weighed in during the following years.¹²

In 1913, two years after the Xinhai revolution overthrew the last emperor, the republican government’s ministry of education convened to create a unified system for pronunciation.¹³ After more than a month of debate a set of standard pronunciation for over 6500 characters was decided. This standard became known as the *guo yin*. *Guo yin* was different from *guo yu* in that the latter refers to the entire language, whereas the former is detailed rules of character pronunciation. The newly devised pronunciation standard was a compromise between the regional northern and southern ways of

¹⁰ Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 3.

¹¹ “Pǔtōnghuà” lishǐ.

¹² Huàshuō tuīpǔ, [Huàtǐ 5] Guóyǔ、Pǔtōnghuà、Huáyǔ.

¹³ “读音统一会”

pronouncing Chinese. Since few people, if any, had previously spoken like the new system mandated it became, for all intents and purposes, an artificial language.¹⁴ Around the time of the *guo yin* standard's inception the government of Yuan Shikai was occupied with consolidating power over rivals and did not have the resources to actively promote the new system. After the failed attempt to overthrow him in 1913 the president became even less concerned with promoting language. It was not until 1918 that the ministry of education officially announced the national pronunciation standard. One year later the National Language Dictionary, edited by Wu Zihui, was published and in 1920 sound recordings of the *guo yin* pronunciation started appearing.¹⁵

The new system was plagued by controversy, with many people feeling that the now officially promoted standard pronunciation, while based on the Beijing dialect, was too influenced by the various southern dialects, a result of compromises between different cliques at the 1913 meeting.¹⁶ It even had the entering tone which did not exist in the Beijing dialect, making for a total of five tones (modern Putonghua has four). Linguist Zhao Yuanren, despite having been the one in charge of producing audio recordings of the new standard pronunciation, is reported later having said that it was so difficult to teach, on account of being a mix of various dialects, that in all of China only he could speak it.¹⁷ The opponents instead advocated a thoroughly Beijing based standard. Zhang Shiyi, director of the English department at a university in Nanjing, published the influential article “The question of unifying the national language”¹⁸ where he called for the old *guo yin* to be completely revised, and preferably replaced by the Beijing dialect.¹⁹ This was eventually successful, and a revised national standard based on Beijing pronunciation was adopted. Over the following decade committees for the purpose of promoting the new Beijing based standard were formed. In 1932 the ministry of education of the Republic of China published the pronunciation dictionary “National pronunciation list of commonly used characters”²⁰, once and for all establishing Beijing pronunciation as the standard for all of China. However, deciding the national standard and implementing it are two different things. It would be two decades before the daunting task of making every Chinese person fluent in the standard language could begin.

¹⁴ Xiàndài hànǚ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 10.

¹⁵ “Pǔtōnghuà” rúhé dànsēng.

¹⁶ This debate is in Chinese called 京国之争, meaning “the debate of of Beijing pronunciation vs national pronunciation”

¹⁷ “在十三年时间里，这种给四亿、五亿或者六亿人定出的国语，竟只有我在说。” Ibid.

¹⁸ 《国语统一问题》

¹⁹ Hànyǔ xiàndàihuà 1980 dièjí p 146.

²⁰ “国音常用字汇”

3 What is Putonghua?

Not long after the Beijing based standard pronunciation had been decided on the war against Japan broke out, effectively halting any efforts at spreading it, and its implementation would be further delayed by the civil war. After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 the development in fields of politics, economy and culture made outright necessary a large scale effort to spread the national standard among the population.²¹ In 1955 two conferences were held by the Chinese Academy of Science and Ministry of Education, respectively, discussing the standardization of modern Chinese and the reform of the writing system.²² After these conferences the common Chinese language would officially be referred to as *putong hua*, literally meaning “common language”.²³ The reason for choosing the term “common language” instead of the previously used “national language”²⁴ was explained by Zhang Xiruo at the National Conference for Reform of the Writing System in 1955: “To emphasize that we are a multi-ethnic country, and to emphasize that all our languages are equal, we cannot use the term ‘national language’. If we say ‘national language’, it could be misunderstood as us putting Chinese ahead the minority languages.”²⁵

The definition of the standard was echoed in an article published in the People's Daily on October 26th 1955, after the conclusion of the first conference: “The current state of the spoken language of the Han people is as follows: on one hand Chinese has plenty of regional dialects and the difference between the regions is very large. On the other hand the Han people are already gradually shaping a common language. This common language is based on the Beijing dialect and uses Beijing pronunciation as a standard. It is necessary to make this common language spread to every corner of the country, use it often and ensure that the common language is standardized in aspects of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.”²⁶ The following year the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued a decree on promoting the common language that augmented the definition. “The basis for unifying the Chinese language already exists. It is the common language that uses Beijing pronunciation as the standard pronunciation, Beijing dialect as the basic dialect and classic works written in modern vernacular Chinese as the basis for grammar. The main method of fully unifying the Chinese language is to promote this kind of common language in every aspect of education and

²¹ While it falls outside the scope of this paper, a similar task was faced by the Guo Min Dang government on Taiwan, where the Japanese administration had promoted use of the Japanese language.

²² Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 8.

²³ Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 4.

²⁴ “National language” (国语) is however still used on Taiwan

²⁵ “Pǔtōnghuà” lishǐ.

²⁶ “The effort to promote character reform, spread the common language and achieve standardization of Chinese”, People's Daily article from 1955, available at <http://www.cssn.cn/news/175394.htm>

daily life of the people.”²⁷ This established three, not two, aspects of the common language: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.²⁸

In 1982 the Fifth Meeting of the Fifth National People's Congress adopted the fourth and current Constitution of the People's Republic of China.²⁹ The nineteenth paragraph of the first chapter contains a reference to language: “the nation popularizes the nationwide usage of the common language”³⁰. Interestingly this is the only mention of language in the Constitution and does not expressly define it as a national language. This is in keeping with the reasoning of the conferences of 1955 – Putonghua is to be the common language of communication, but not to be elevated above recognized minority languages. The right of minorities to their own language is enshrined in the constitution.

The most recent instrument of law relating to the definition of the common language is the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language³¹, adopted at the 18th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China in 2000 and entered into effect in 2001. Article two states 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) and the standardized Chinese characters.”³²

It should be noted that Putonghua being based on the Beijing dialect does not mean that it is identical to the Beijing dialect. While some parts of pronunciation are not the same (mainly use of the retroflex final and neutral tone), the main difference concerns what is considered to be a part of the Putonghua vocabulary. Many expressions that are a part of the Beijing dialect are not included on account of being extremely regional.³³ Some words from other dialects as well as loan words from foreign languages are also a part of Putonghua.³⁴

²⁷ Decree issued by the State Council, February 6th 1956, available at http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-08/02/content_19132.htm

²⁸ See also Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 10, “Xiàndài Hànyǔ tèdiǎn”.

²⁹ 《中华人民共和国宪法》

³⁰ 19th paragraph of 1st chapter, Constitution of the PRC, available at http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2004/content_62714.htm

³¹ 《中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法》, available at http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-08/31/content_27920.htm.

³² Translation as per official English version at: http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-09/19/content_64906.htm

³³ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 12.

³⁴ Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 15.

4 Popularizing the common language

In 1951, only two years after the birth of new China, the People's Daily had published an editorial by Mao Zedong titled "Use the fatherland's language correctly, struggle for the purity and health of the language".³⁵ While it made no mention of standardization it was perhaps the first incarnation of the post-1949 effort to "popularize Putonghua".

Promoting the use of a standardized Chinese based on the Beijing dialect became an official goal of the state five years later with the 1956 decree of the State Council, which followed the two conferences held in 1955. The wording used both then and now is *tui guang putong hua* (推广普通话), literally meaning to spread the common language and often abbreviated as *tui pu* (推普). The official English translation is "popularize Putonghua"³⁶.

After the 1955 conferences the work on standardizing Chinese in accordance with the adopted action plans began. The first step was to implement the decree issued by the State Council in 1956. This included using schools as a center of popularizing Putonghua on a large scale, and ensuring a good performance record among students in this respect.³⁷ Putonghua should also be promoted in business, transportation, post and telecommunications and the army. The problems caused by unstandardized speech were to be eradicated in all areas relating to "politics, economics, culture and national defense".³⁸ The first decade after the decree saw immense work carried out to implement the standardization of the language. In 1958 the romanization scheme *hanyu pinyin* was officially introduced and became an essential tool for teaching and studying Putonghua. Soon after the work on the Modern Chinese Dictionary (现代汉语词典) started, but it was not published until 1978. The first draft of an official table of Putonghua characters with alternative pronunciations (普通话异读词三次审音总表初稿) was published in 1963, which along with the dictionary (of which internal copies circulated long before 1978) were very significant contributions to the standardization of the pronunciation and vocabulary of Putonghua.³⁹

In the early 1980s China started opening up to the world as a result of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and open up" policy. The increased development of industry,

³⁵ People's Daily June 6th 1951, available at <http://www.mzdthought.com/html/mxzz/mzdxwww/2005/0905/5216.html>

³⁶ *Supra*.

³⁷ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 14.

³⁸ 1956 decree.

³⁹ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 14.

economy and communications placed further requirements on work in the area of language and character standardization. More and more people travelled across the country, many of the rural population moved to the new special economic zones and the coastal cities. People speaking different dialects now working together with international business led to the old problem of language barriers reappearing.⁴⁰ Slogans about “uniting the language”, which had been used by the intellectual class during the early 20th century, once again echoed across the country. The city government of the special economic zone Shenzhen proclaimed: “Use Putonghua to unite the languages of Shenzhen”⁴¹. In 1985 a secretary of the Guangdong provincial party committee wrote in a letter to a Shenzhen newspaper: “Our party and country are in the process of opening up towards the outside and revising internal policies. We cannot lock ourselves from the outside world by using dialects. I hope that Shenzhen’s effort of popularizing Putonghua not only will reach the entire province, but also impact Hong Kong and Macau.”⁴² This at the time widely circulated letter illustrates the renewal of the Putonghua fervor as a result of China opening up to the outside world. Another important factor around this time was that computers emerged both as a means of communication and as tools of the industry. This further increased the need of a population that not only masters the common language, but also can use the *hanyu pinyin* romanization system. Pinyin was no longer only a tool of teaching standard pronunciation; it was also the electronic input method for Chinese characters. The *hanyu pinyin* would be further revised in 1988.

In 1985 the newly renamed National Language Working Committee was given by the State Council the main task of implementing national language policies. One year later, along with the National Education Working Committee they hosted a conference for representatives from every province, city and autonomous region – the National Language Working Conference⁴³. This was the second time since the 1955 conferences on language reform and standardization that a nationwide conference had been held. The meeting produced several reports, among them “Language work in the new period”⁴⁴. The most important new guidelines were to “with great force popularize Putonghua and complete the work to standardize modern Chinese” as well as to “further implement the *hanyu pinyin* method and solve the practical problems related to use of the language.”⁴⁵ After the conclusion of the 1986 meeting these decisions would be gradually implemented. In an effort to further standardize Chinese characters and adapt to the needs of education and dictionaries, as well as the use of characters in machine interfaces and

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p 15.

⁴¹ “用普通话统一深圳语言”, see Shēnzhènrén chóngshàng shuō Pǔtōnghuà yòng guīfàn zì.

⁴² Rèn Zhòngyí: Dàzhìdàyǒng de gǎigézhě.

⁴³ “全国语言文字工作会议”

⁴⁴ 《新时期的语言文字工作》

⁴⁵ Summary of the National Conference on Language Work published in the National Language Committee report Language work of the New Period (1987), p 3.

communications, the State Language Affairs Commission, State Education Commission (later renamed the Ministry of Education) and General Administration of Press and Publication in 1988 released the “Modern Chinese Table of Common Characters” and the “Modern Chinese General Character List”.⁴⁶

In the year 2000 the first law in Chinese history relating specifically to language, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, was officially announced and it entered into force on January first 2001. The purpose of the law is “promoting the normalization and standardization of the standard spoken and written Chinese language and its sound development, making it play a better role in public activities, and promoting economic and cultural exchange among all the Chinese nationalities and regions.”⁴⁷ The law provides that the state as well as local governments and departments shall popularize Putonghua.⁴⁸ Further objectives can be gleaned from Article 5: “The standard spoken and written Chinese language shall be used in such a way as to be conducive to the upholding of state sovereignty and national dignity, to unification of the country and unity of the nationalities, and to socialist material progress and ethical progress.” This perhaps shows a shift in attitude and gives the language a more nationalist character. Furthermore, all citizens have the right to learn the standard language.⁴⁹ Article 10 states that “Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters shall be used as the basic language in education and teaching in schools and other institutions of education, except where otherwise provided for in laws.” Article 12 contains “Putonghua shall be used by the broadcasting and TV stations as the basic broadcasting language.” Article 14 concerns circumstances where Putonghua “shall be used as the basic spoken and written language”. It includes “spoken and written language for broadcasting, films and TV programs”. Article 16 provides for exceptions to this rule, saying that local dialects can be used in broadcasting “with the approval of the broadcasting and television administration under the State Council or of the broadcasting and television department at the provincial level”.⁵⁰ The 2011 National Language Working Conference concluded in early 2011, it had among other things discussed the progress made during the ten years since the 2000 Language Law had entered into effect in 2001.⁵¹

Leading up to the 2004 Putonghua promotion week the Ministry of Education issued a statement summarizing the popularizing of Putonghua as follows: “The basic measures of the effort to popularize Putonghua are set goals and follow-up evaluation, the

⁴⁶ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 16.

⁴⁷ Chapter I, Article 1.

⁴⁸ Chapter I, Articles 2,3.

⁴⁹ Chapter I, Article 4.

⁵⁰ Chapter II, Article 16.

⁵¹ 2011 niándù quánguó yǔyán wénzì gōngzuò huìyì zàijīng zhàokāi.

Putonghua Proficiency Test and the Putonghua promotion week. Using the cities as centers and the schools as a base, the party and government organizations as a source, media and news as a role model and the public sector as a window, we will make the entire society popularize Putonghua.”⁵² In 2005 a spokesman for the Ministry of Education said that the goal of the effort to popularize Putonghua is that the entire country will be able to use the common language by 2050.⁵³

The framework provided by central legislation has made it easier and also served as an incentive for local governments to impose tougher requirements on their employees. In 2006 the Chengdu city government decided that Putonghua should become the workplace language of city government functionaries by 2008.⁵⁴ Similar decisions have been made by local governments in other parts of the country. In 2001, following the entering into force of the Language Law, the Shanghai Language Committee encouraged Putonghua to be used by government functionaries in the city and required that any new hires of the city would need to have passed at least the second level of the Putonghua Proficiency Test.⁵⁵

4.1 Putonghua not a fait accompli

Today it is common knowledge in the west that the national language of China is “mandarin”, but it is important to remember that even after 50 years of effort the goal of making Putonghua the common language for communication in all of China is far from realized. In 1997 the working conference of the premier authorized a nationwide survey to investigate the status of the use of Chinese language and writing. The survey was carried out by the State Language Affairs Commission (国家语言文字工作委员会) and after six years they presented their findings. The survey which had been conducted in 31 provinces and included 470,000 people was the first of its kind in the People’s Republic of China. According to the report only 53% of the Chinese population can communicate in Putonghua.⁵⁶ Only 18% speak the common language at home, and 42% speak it at school or the workplace. There is a clear gap between urban and rural areas; 66% of urban residents speak Putonghua while the figure is 45% for the countryside. Young people are more likely to be able to communicate in Putonghua. In the age group 15-29 70% of the respondents could speak the common language, while the figure was only 31% for those 60-69. The greatest difference was that between those without education and the highly educated. Out of the people who answered that they had not attended school only

⁵² Dì qī jiè tuīpǔ zhōu huódòng jiāng zài quán guó zhǎnkāi.

⁵³ Yǒuguān bùmén tíchū 2050 nián zhēngqǔ zài quán guó fàn wéi nèi pǔjī Pǔtōnghuà.

⁵⁴ Chéngdū: guīdìng 2008 nián qián Pǔtōnghuà chéngwéi gōngwù rényuán gōngzuò yòngyǔ.

⁵⁵ Zhōnggōng Shànghǎi shìwěi zǔzhībù, Shànghǎi shì rénshìjú.

⁵⁶ Zhōngguó yǔyán wénzì shǐyòng qíngkuàng diàochá: 53% néng yòng Pǔtōnghuà jiāoliú.

10% could communicate in Putonghua, the corresponding figure for college educated was 87%.

When asked about the biggest obstacle against learning Putonghua the answers were divided almost equally between “no one around me speaks Putonghua so there is no opportunity to speak it” and it being difficult to pronounce⁵⁷. The 2004 study shows clearly that Putonghua is mainly a language of the workplace. The by far most common language used at home is the local dialect of the region or city. China is still a country where the majority of people are effectively bilingual, having one language for home and one for work.

4.2 Schools as promotion centers and the Putonghua Proficiency Test

The main tool of the state in promoting the use of and skill in the common language is the schools. In the State Council decree from 1956 the importance of classrooms in the effort to standardize the language was clear. “From the fall of 1956 and onward, with the exception of ethnic minority areas, in the entire country primary schools and middle schools will start to teach Putonghua. By 1960, primary school students of grade three and above and middle school and normal school students should all be able to speak basic Putonghua.”⁵⁸ Schools will generally not allow the use of dialects and discourage its use even during breaks. Slogans like *qing jiang putong hua* (please speak Putonghua) are commonly seen on signs in schools over the country. The 2000 law on language states that “Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters shall be used as the basic language in education and teaching in schools and other institutions of education, except where otherwise provided for in laws.”⁵⁹

During the 1980s and early 1990s the Ministry of Education issued, and has since revised, a set of rules for primary and middle school, all of which contain provisions on language. The revised “Middle school students’ everyday behavior rules”⁶⁰, applicable to all middle schools, contain “Use polite speech, when speaking take note of the situation, have a friendly attitude and speak Putonghua.”⁶¹ The equivalent set of rules for primary school contains the same provision.⁶² In a decree issued in 2004 the Ministry of Education stressed the importance of implementing these regulations, saying that they aim to cultivate good behavior and a healthy development of body and mind.⁶³

⁵⁷ “不好改口音”, literally difficult to change accent. Ibid.

⁵⁸ 1956 decree, Article 1.

⁵⁹ Law of the Peoples Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, Article 10.

⁶⁰ 《中学生日常行为规范》, available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2004-03-26/22012150269s.shtml>

⁶¹ *Ibid*, para 11.

⁶² 《小学生日常行为规范》 para 5, available at <http://www.edu.cn/20040326/3102379.shtml>

⁶³ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2004-03/29/content_1388820.htm

In October 1994 the State Language Affairs Commission, the State Education Commission and Broadcasting Department launched the Putonghua Proficiency Test (普通话水平测试).⁶⁴ The decision to establish the test drew authority from the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which says that the state "popularizes Putonghua", and further states that popularizing Putonghua is an important part of establishing a socialist spiritual culture. The test is aimed to be taken by members of certain professions where a high level of common language proficiency is desired, and establishes a requirement for those people to hold a certificate in order to be allowed to work in those positions. The professions include teachers, radio broadcasters, television hosts and actors. The test has different attainable ranks and the requirements vary depending on position. Teachers must qualify for the second or highest level. Above county level radio broadcasters and program hosts must reach the highest level. Actors in movies and television series must also generally be of the highest level. In 1995 requirements of a certificate were formally introduced for radio broadcasters, television hosts and teachers. The decision also established a committee to supervise the test.⁶⁵

The Putonghua Proficiency Test gave the work to promote Putonghua a more scientific and standardized aspect, and is an important tool for the popularization effort.⁶⁶ It is now possible to quantify a person's knowledge of the common language, and through the restrictions on who can work in the relevant positions it is possible for the government to ensure that most of what is heard on radio or TV is modern standardized Chinese. The 1994 decision has two attachments giving more detailed information including the attainable ranks.⁶⁷ There are three levels, each with two classes. Only the top level counts as fully "standard" Putonghua.⁶⁸

4.3 Media as a tool of promotion

Media promotes Putonghua in China not only by airing slogans, but by enforcing strict requirements of language skills based on the Putonghua Proficiency Test. Anyone wishing to work in broadcasting or the movie industry will have to hold a certificate to prove he or she can speak the common language with satisfactory pronunciation. As a result of the effort almost all TV programs, and often commercials, are subtitled, to aid viewers who may not be fluent in Putonghua.

⁶⁴ 《关于开展普通话水平测试工作的决定》, available at <http://www.chinalawedu.com/news/1200/22598/22617/22846/22862/2006/3/wu9587162029141360023874-0.htm>

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Xiàndài Hànyǔ p 17.

⁶⁷ 《普通话水平测试实施办法（试行）》 and 《普通话水平测试等级标准（试行）》

⁶⁸ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 18.

The Putonghua promotion week, arranged under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, was launched in 1998 and received further momentum with the enactment of the 2000 law. Every year during the third week of September activities related to popularizing Putonghua are held in major cities across China, and increasingly also the countryside. Integrated with the effort to popularize Putonghua in the classroom many schools organize events and Putonghua competitions during this week.⁶⁹⁷⁰ Themes used have included “love the language of the fatherland, construct a harmonious language life” and “use civilized language, be a civilized person”.

A side-effect of the zeal in establishing a media that not only uses, but also actively promotes the common language is that linguistic realism in movies and TV shows have suffered. For example, any Chinese high school student will have listened to the recording of Mao Zedong declaring the foundation of the People’s Republic with a heavy Hunan accent, and thus be aware that the language of the Chairman sounded nothing like today’s standard Chinese. Yet anyone who watched recent revolutionary epic *The Founding of a Republic*⁷¹ would have heard Mao, portrayed by actor Tang Guoqiang, speaking with a standard Beijing accent. This is no accident, but a result of policy.

In 2005 the State Committee on Films and Broadcast Media issued a decree that the language of TV shows should mainly be Putonghua, limiting the use of dialects and non-standard Putonghua.⁷² This followed a previous decision by the committee aimed at preventing TV hosts from using Hong Kong and Taiwan accents and expressions.⁷³ Such decisions have a profound effect on what is shown on Chinese television, since nothing can be aired without the approval of the Committee. The heavy-handed approach by the Committee, which is effectively a branch of the government, has been criticized. Some people have argued that in the cities language promotion in media has limited results, as the city residents already speak Putonghua in their daily lives and media content regardless of standard won’t improve or worsen their proficiency.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the policies stand and media is *de facto* a considerable part of the promotion effort.

⁶⁹ Héféixiàn dì 14 jiè tuīpǔ zhōu huòdòng qǐdòng.

⁷⁰ Dì 11 jiè tuīguǎng Pǔtōnghuà xuānchuán zhōu 9 yuè 14 rì – 20 rì zài quán guó kāizhǎn.

⁷¹ 《建国大业》(2010) 中影集团等

⁷² Yínmù shàng Máo zhǔxí xiāngyīn cóngcǐ xiāoshī.

⁷³ Guǎngdiàn zǒngjú xiàfā zhǔchírén zìlǚ gōngyuē jìnyóng Gǎngtái qiāng fāngyán.

⁷⁴ Guàngdiàn zǒngjú wèi tuīguǎng Pǔtōnghuà jìn fāngyán yǐn zhēngyì.

5 The common language and the dialects

5.1 Briefly on the Chinese dialects

The Chinese dialects are variants of Chinese spoken in different areas of China. They can be mutually intelligible like many of the northern dialects which are also understandable to speakers of Putonghua, or vastly different, like the southern dialects which are not only different from Putonghua but also very different from each other. All Chinese dialects are in some way related to ancient Chinese; the non-Chinese languages (for example Miao and Yao) are not considered Chinese dialects. Following the development of China and popularization of Putonghua dialects have lost ground, but survey figures suggest that they are still the primary languages used at home.⁷⁵ The northern dialect family is also known as *guan hua*, of which the Beijing dialect that Putonghua is based on belongs to. The *Wu* dialect is mainly spoken in Shanghai, Zhejiang and the south of Jiangsu. *Wu* speakers number around 70 million, 7.2% of the population. This makes it the largest non-northern dialect in China. The *Xiang* dialect is spoken mainly in Hunan province and has 30 million speakers, 3.2% of the population. Like many dialects it can be further divided into north and south. The *Gan* dialect is spoken mainly in Jiangxi province. With 30 million speakers it accounts for 3.2% of the population. The *Kejia*, or Hakka, dialect is spoken by 35 million Chinese, 3.6% of the population. The Hakka dialect is heavily represented in overseas Chinese communities as well as those in Southeast Asia. The *Yue* dialect is spoken in the southern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, as well as Hong Kong and Macau. It has 40 million speakers in China, 4% of the population. Like Hakka it is common in overseas communities. Strictly speaking *Yue* is not identical to Cantonese, but the terms are often used interchangeably. The *Min* dialect is mainly spoken in Fujian, Hainan and Taiwan. It is often further divided into sub-categories. With 55 million speakers it is spoken by 5.7% of the population.⁷⁶

When discussing Chinese dialects it is important to note that speakers may not always self-identify according to the government division scheme. It is also common to hear references to merely a city name instead of the dialect family. The *Wu* dialect has become almost synonymous with Shanghainese, because of the size and importance of that city. Sub-dialects can be referred to by city, such as the “Changsha dialect”, which would belong to the *Xiang* family. People in China may not be aware of the government classification at all and are likely to just use the city name. They may also make further distinctions that the government does not.

⁷⁵ *Supra*.

⁷⁶ Xiàndài Hànyǔ zhuāntí jiàochéng p 343.

Does promoting standardized Chinese damage the dialects? Parts of the effort to popularize Putonghua no doubt infringe upon the dialects, such as the rules providing for a dialect-free classroom. On paper the government policy is not to get rid of the dialects, and hasn't been since the effort started. In 1958 premier Zhou Enlai delivered a report, "The current task of character reform"⁷⁷. On the topic of language standardization he said: "Popularizing Putonghua is to overcome the obstacles posed by dialects, it does not mean we want to ban or eliminate dialects"⁷⁸. Yet the protection of dialects is increasingly becoming a topic of debate in China, with speakers feeling that their languages are in danger of decline. In Hong Kong, where the government promotes a policy of "biliberate and trilingual"⁷⁹ citizens, there have recently been demonstrations in defense of Cantonese.⁸⁰ Such public displays are rare on the mainland, but discontent may be brewing in China's most populous city – Shanghai.

5.2 Shanghainese – a casualty of standardization?

The Shanghainese dialect belongs to the *Wu* language family of Chinese, which includes the dialects spoken in parts of Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Historically the prestige dialect of the region has been the one spoken in Suzhou, once a political and financial center, but *Wu* has gradually come to be all but synonymous with Shanghainese. Shanghai is the financial hub of China and rivaled only by Beijing in terms of political power. Combined with a distinct regional identity and language spoken by millions this makes Shanghai an obvious battlefield in the effort to popularize Putonghua.

The exact number of people who speak the Shanghai dialect is difficult to ascertain.⁸¹ While the city with suburbs has close to 20 million inhabitants, many of those have moved in from other areas and many of the original Shanghainese have stopped speaking the dialect. According to a recent survey of students 45% of those polled speak only Shanghainese at home. 40% speak Shanghainese and Putonghua, and the remaining 15% speak only Putonghua. That same survey showed that the older students are the more likely they are to speak Shanghainese, with the figure as low as 37% for fifth graders.⁸² In early 2011 the Shanghai Language Work Committee in an effort to preserve the Shanghai dialect set out to recruit "spokespeople" to record a database of genuine Shanghainese dialogue.⁸³ With the city boasting millions of self-identified speakers they were surprised to find that some of the recruitment stations could not find "original" speakers. The recruiters reported that with many young people it may sound

⁷⁷ 《当前文字改革的任务》

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See <http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa01/c46.htm>

⁸⁰ "Yuèpǔ zhī zhēng" de bōyì: Yuèyǔ dào "hànwèi" de dìbù ma?"

⁸¹ The *Wu* dialect as a whole is estimated to have 70 million speakers. See 5.1.

⁸² Yǔyán zhuàngkuàng diàochá Niánlíng yuè dà xuéshēng shuō Hùyǔ bǐlǐ yuè gāo.

⁸³ Shǒu pī "Shànghǎihuà fāyīnrén" xià yuè lùyīn.

like they are speaking Shanghainese, but in fact they are merely translating from Putonghua to Shanghainese as they go along. The result is Shanghainese pronunciation, but a Putonghua line of thought and grammar – not comparable to those who *think* in the dialect.⁸⁴ The recruitment drive found that people in downtown Shanghai were more likely to qualify, whereas the suburban centers had a much harder time finding subjects, and the set requirements had to be lowered.⁸⁵

The status of the Shanghainese dialect has increasingly become a topic of discussion. Considerable controversy was stirred up when Shanghai paper *Xinmin Evening News* in early 2009 published the semi-anonymous editorial “New heroes in old Shanghai, regardless of origin they are all excellent”.⁸⁶ The author argued that the “new Shanghainese”, people from other cities who have moved to Shanghai, speak Putonghua and that the Shanghainese dialect has come to symbolize a lack of culture and carries with it an unsophisticated rural feel “similar to that of the native population of America”. The Shanghainese community responded with outrage. The paper had to issue an apology⁸⁷ and the editor was reported as suspended.⁸⁸ Hong Kong media even reported that a “retired leader” had expressed concern, supposedly referring to Shanghai native Jiang Zemin.⁸⁹ While the editorial was inflammatory to the extent that one has to wonder if it was not intentional, it echoes what has perhaps always been the sentiment of some people – that those who do not speak the common language (whatever it may be) are unsophisticated and lacking culture. Recently this has been reflected in the effort to promote Putonghua, with any non-standard speech often labeled as unsophisticated or even uncivilized. The pre-1911 tug-of-war between the various prestige dialects of China was lengthy and unpredictable, with the south sometimes being on top. But it is for other reasons that the current debate over Shanghainese is not without a certain element of irony. The Shanghainese people are often, unjustly or not, stereotyped as being arrogant city-dwellers who consider anywhere that is not Shanghai to be *xiang xia* – the countryside. For this reason it is probably with some satisfaction that commentators get to “turn the table” on the Shanghai residents and accuse them of lagging behind in language and culture. This adds an element of perceived vengeance to what the Shanghai natives see as cultural imperialism.

The government’s grip on education in theory means that no dialects are allowed in school. However, it should be mentioned that the rules appear to be implemented haphazardly and in the end it depends on the individual school. Today some

⁸⁴ Shijīāo nánxún “fāyīnrén”: Shànghǎihuà shuāilù, yǐ shì “tiěbǎndīngdīng”?

⁸⁵ Pǔxī 14 míng Shànghǎihuà fāyīnrén quèdìng.

⁸⁶ Xīn yīngxióng chuǎngdàng Shànghǎi tān Bù xiàn huìjì gègè jīngyīng.

⁸⁷ Hù méitǐ wénzhāng chēng “shuō Shànghǎihuà méi wénhuà” yīn zhēngyì Shànghǎi wǎngmín yāoqiú dàoqiàn.

⁸⁸ Hù bào rǔ Shànghǎirén yǐn kàngyì Qián guójiā língdǎo guānzhù Yú zhèng shēng zéling chǔlǐ.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

kindergartens have classes in Shanghainese⁹⁰, and official curriculum from the Shanghai Education Committee suggests that the city government is increasingly, if carefully, supporting the local dialect. A 2011 list of teaching material for kindergartens includes "We are Shanghainese - local culture education".⁹¹ Where the rule against dialects does apply it is not limited to the teachers speaking Putonghua, but also includes that students are encouraged to speak only Putonghua amongst each other, even during breaks. At the time of writing a picture circulated on the internet of a Minhang district middle school girl's letter of "self-criticism", a letter she had to write and submit to her teacher after speaking Shanghainese in class.⁹² The ensuing online outrage on message boards illustrates how the internet can be used to rally support for the dialect.⁹³

TV and radio shows in dialects have always been scarce, and quintessential Shanghai drama "Evil debt"⁹⁴ is now close to two decades ago. But there nevertheless appears to have been an increase in Shanghainese language culture during recent years. 2006 saw the advent of *hai pai qing kou* – a form of Shanghainese standup comedy. Unlike the northern phenomenon *xiang sheng*, it is performed by one person and deeply rooted in Shanghainese language and culture.⁹⁵ Propelled into fame was its originator and representative - Shanghai comedian Zhou Libo (周立波).⁹⁶ His routines, delivered in the Shanghai dialect, have helped to popularize Shanghainese and certain vocabulary is strongly associated with the comedian who has even published a Shanghainese slang dictionary.⁹⁷ A Shanghainese expression meaning "kill him", from a bit where Zhou Libo mimics 1920s Shanghai gangster Du Yuesheng, has achieved catchphrase like status.⁹⁸ Zhou Libo is also one of the judges on the popular talent show *Zhongguo Daren Xiu*⁹⁹, where he occasionally speaks Shanghainese.

While the status of Shanghainese may not be easy to determine, efforts are being made to protect it by people who fear a decline. Champion of the cause is linguist and Shanghainese dialect expert Qian Nairong (钱乃荣), whose contributions include publishing several Shanghainese dictionaries¹⁰⁰ and pioneering a Shanghainese input method¹⁰¹ for computers.¹⁰² While the "Shanghainese pinyin" may not have caught on

⁹⁰ Bùfēn xiǎoxué shè "Shànghǎi rì" kāikè jiāo Shànghǎihuà.

⁹¹ 《2011 年供本市托幼园所选用的教学资料目录》 available at www.shed.edu.cn/attach/xxgk/4755.doc

⁹² Girl 'ordered to apologize' for Shanghai dialect.

⁹³ See for example <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1198352672>

⁹⁴ 《孽债》 (1994) 上海电视台

⁹⁵ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/40523.htm>

⁹⁶ Zhōu Libō "kàn bù qǐ nóng mǐn"? Jī huó Shànghǎi rén wén huà yōu yuè gǎn?

⁹⁷ Zhōu Libō tuī 《Huī cí diǎn》 yòng "Shànghǎi cài" yōu mù jiě dú Shànghǎihuà.

⁹⁸ Zhōu Libō: xià tàng nǎi yī zǔ tè.

⁹⁹ 《中国达人秀》 (2010-) 东方卫视

¹⁰⁰ The most comprehensive being 《上海话大词典》

¹⁰¹ Available at <http://www.longdang.com/shanghaihua.php>

just yet, the internet has nevertheless given the Shanghainese dialect a boost. The standards for written Chinese have historically been decided by the officials speaking the language of the courts, and thus any other dialects have generally been spoken, not written. There have been ways to write Shanghainese, based on romanization schemes invented during the years of European influence. This was for the purpose of letting westerners learn the dialect (at the time the majority of the population would have been strangers to Beijing Chinese) and they have long since fallen into obscurity. Interestingly, with the increasing prevalence of computers and cell phones recent years have seen a rise of communication in a new incarnation of “written” Shanghainese that uses the Chinese characters. On message boards like KDS¹⁰³ users frequently post in Shanghainese. Another example is the online community Shanghaining¹⁰⁴, aimed at young Shanghai residents with even the domain name in romanized Shanghainese.

The lack of universally accepted standards makes writing dialects a very flexible affair. Some dialectal words have unique characters representing them that are considered a part of the Chinese character set. Famous is 俺 (ǎn), used for 我 (wǒ, “me”) in northern dialects. The most well-known “Shanghainese” character (or more accurately: *Wu* character) is 侬 (nóng), corresponding to the Shanghainese pronunciation of 你 (nǐ, “you”). Written Shanghainese is however largely a result of electronic communication. When you type in “nong”, the romanized pronunciation of 侬, on a computer you are much more likely to get the character 弄 (nòng/lòng, “lane”). As a result, 弄 is more commonly used for 你 than the “correct” character 侬. The Shanghainese pronunciation of 我 (wǒ, “me”) closely corresponds to the Middle Chinese 吾 (wú), but it is also seen written with 无 (wú, “none”) or even 五 (wǔ, “five”). Words that have no phonetic equivalent in standard Chinese and cannot be entered accurately with *hanyu pinyin* can be approximated. The duo-syllabic Shanghainese equivalent of 玩 (wán, “play”) is pronounced “be xiang”. Hanyu pinyin has no “be” sound so it is replaced by 白 (bái, “white”), making the compound word 白相 (Putonghua: báixiāng) which carries no meaning to a speaker of Putonghua. If the roots of the dialectal word can be clearly traced to their Putonghua equivalent, those characters are used even if pronunciation is not similar. Thus the Shanghainese word for 喜欢 (xǐhuān, “like”), pronounced hue xi, is written 欢喜 (Putonghua: huānxǐ). The often-used Shanghainese particle “va” (equivalent of Putonghua 吗 ma and 不 bù) has no obvious stand-in because the consonant v has been lost in Putonghua. A standard replacement has emerged in 伐 (Putonghua: fá).

¹⁰² Yǔyán xuéjiā Qián Nǎiróng: Shànghǎihuà bèi shídài zòu de bīqīngliǎnzhǒng.

¹⁰³ http://club.pchome.net/forum_1_15.html

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.shanghaining.com/>

Zhou Libo and his immensely popular brand of Shanghainese comedy, the rise of written Shanghainese and online Shanghainese youth culture, as well as comprehensive research on Shanghainese by scholars like Qian Nairong are all phenomena no older than a decade. So how do the initial reports by the Language Committee, saying that finding even a handful of Shanghainese speakers is difficult, fit in with what appears to be a re-emergence of Shanghainese culture? While media published the Committee's statements with headlines like "Shanghainese on the decline", it should be noted that the strict purity requirements originally set up for the database barred many young people, as anyone who had lived outside of their native district for more than few years was disqualified. Other surveys carried out show that most Shanghainese students can speak Shanghainese, and that the problem is more a matter of how often they speak it.¹⁰⁵

Another aspect is that the goal of the Language Committee was to map several regional sub-dialects. For example, people from Songjiang, a suburb of Shanghai, are considered to speak their own dialect.¹⁰⁶ As the city grows and the suburbs become less isolated the "downtown" Shanghainese is influencing the suburban dialects, much like Putonghua is influencing Shanghainese. In addition, while the city-center Shanghainese take pride in their dialect, the suburban Shanghainese fear being considered "rural" and try to suppress or change their dialects. The end result is that the suburban dialects are no longer considered pure, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the "contaminant" is Putonghua, nor that it is a result of any external factors other than city development. There is perhaps an analogy here to be drawn with why the Shanghainese are not as eager in adopting Putonghua as people in smaller cities and rural areas are. Shanghai is one of the wealthiest areas in China. While residents of rural areas or even minority language areas have an incentive to learn Putonghua in that they can use it to move to the cities, the Shanghai residents already live in the biggest city and may feel that there is no reason or incentive to "switch".

6 Conclusion

The years following the Xinhai revolution were characterized by a zealous enthusiasm in modernizing every aspect of Chinese society, and this included the language. The extent of the fervor is perhaps best illustrated with Qian Xuantong who argued that Chinese should be scrapped and replaced by Esperanto. Today the zeal persists in the People's Republic in the form of the effort to popularize Putonghua – the common language. Much of the ground work for the promotion effort was laid during the 1950s. When China opened up to the outside world under Deng Xiaoping's reforms language standardization once again became important. Today, in the wake of the 2000 Language

¹⁰⁵ Bùfēn xiǎoxué shè "Shànghǎi rì" kāikè jiāo Shànghǎihuà.

¹⁰⁶ Sōngjiāng fāngyán: "zui Shànghǎi de shēngyīn" zhī yī.

Law we are perhaps experiencing yet another high point of Putonghua promotion. Intellectuals and officials alike are eager to both voice and mandate support for the common language that they hope will one day unite all of China. The Ministry of Education has set 2050 as the year when the goal will be reached, but it is an ambitious target considering that as of 2004 only 53% of the population spoke Putonghua.

The effort to popularize Putonghua is centered around and based on the schools. Policy ensures that the only language used in Chinese schools across the country, with the exception of the ethnic minority areas, is the common Chinese language. Further directions implemented at school level ban the use of dialects during school hours. The Putonghua promotion week, launched in 1998 is a week every year when Putonghua related activities are arranged all over China. It serves as a way of reminding the people that the effort to promote Putonghua is continuous. In 1994 the Putonghua Proficiency Test was instated, a device aimed at making skill in the common language both measurable and certifiable. Teachers, radio broadcasters, television hosts and actors are now required to prove that they have reached the required level of Putonghua proficiency in order to work. Through the State Committee on Films and Broadcast Media the government can ensure that only standardized Chinese is heard on radio, in TV and in movies. Putonghua promotion has made near impossible linguistic realism in television and movies, with everyone from Cao Cao to Chairman Mao speaking with standard Beijing pronunciation.

The possible casualty of the effort is the myriad of dialects spoken in China, which have been an integral part of regional identity for millennia. The grievances of dialect speakers are increasingly being heard, both as a result of criticism becoming less taboo and the internet which makes possible grassroots protests. Many dialect speakers already feel that their language and regional identity are infringed upon by the central government's far-reaching plans. This is not helped by the buffoonery of overzealous officials or the rantings of journalists with an axe to grind. Recent developments in Shanghai are interesting from a preserving versus promotion point of view: the past decade has seen a notable rise in dialect culture and the city government appears to be increasingly treating the local identity as an asset and not an obstacle. It is possibly a sign of a lull in the promotion frenzy, but with the ambitious goal set by the Ministry of Education and all the promotion regulations still in place, it is definitely too soon to say.

The effort to popularize Putonghua rests on a solid legal framework in the Constitution and the Language Law of 2000. However, some outdated measures are still in place. The centrally sanctioned ban on dialects in the classroom dates from a high-point of promotion gusto during the late 80s and early 90s. Today it is time to ask the question: what purpose does it fill? It is debatable if middle school students already fully fluent in Putonghua should really be prevented from speaking their mother-tongue dialect during school hours, when such drastic measures clearly impede their dialect proficiency.

Not even reports of as many as 85% speaking the dialect to some degree at home can alleviate this concern, because the home is a static environment where the language can never fully develop.

Alarmist warnings that dialects are becoming less pure should be taken with a grain of salt. With all dialects comes the issue of definition, what is for example “Shanghainese”? Not 100 years ago Shanghai proper was a fraction of the size it is today, with the surrounding villages hardly qualifying. As a semi-artificial language Putonghua may be clearly defined and taught, but dialects like Shanghainese survive by being passed down from generation to generation and as such, change could be a natural evolution of the language. With economic development and communication improving every year previously isolated language groups are exposed to the outside world. It may be impossible to keep alive and separate for example the distinct suburban sub-dialects of Shanghainese (such as the Songjiang dialect), and perhaps it is not even desirable. Protecting a dialect does not mean the same as freezing it in time. The dialects should be protected, but nevertheless it is clear that the standardized language is a necessity for China to function as a nation. The desirable path is one of compromise, which popularizes the common language but also allows for the dialects to prosper.

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