Chinese Dialects

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Abstract and Keywords

The Chinese language comprises many regional varieties, or dialects. The most significant is *Mandarin* or *Guanhua*官话, from which *Putonghua*普通话originates. Besides Mandarin, other main dialect groups have been identified. The classification of Chinese dialects and their interrelationships remain uncertain because new data are constantly emerging; in addition, each main dialect group could be further divided into branches or subbranches, and because Chinese dialects have evolved for hundreds or thousands of years, mutual intelligibility is not always possible. Also, within a dialect group, it is common that a single sinogram (Chinese character) may have different literary and colloquial readings. By analyzing these readings, the history of a certain dialect can be partially reconstructed. This chapter focuses on geographical distribution, three models of dialect formation, phonological characteristics, evolution rate and dialect history, literary versus colloquial readings and linguistic strata, lexical and syntactic differences, and unclassified dialects.

Keywords: Chinese dialects, Guanhua, Putonghua, literary versus colloquial readings, linguistic strata

11.1 Geographical Distribution

THE most observable geographical boundary in classifying Chinese dialects is *Changjiang* (the Yangtze River). North of Changjiang is Mandarin (Guanhua)-speaking while south of it is non-Mandarin-speaking. This classification, however, is only an approximation. In fact the distribution of Mandarin has gone beyond Changjiang for at least a millennium. For example, the Nanjing speech spoken on the south bank of Changjiang is a subvariety of Mandarin. Mandarin is also spoken in most part of Sichuan and Yunnan, which stand across both the north and south bank of upstream Changjiang. The non-Mandarin-speaking areas south of Changjiang are increasingly shrinking. In many cities Mandarin spoken with a regional accent is used as a lingua franca, the so-called regional variant (*xiangyin bianti*, 乡音变体) of Mandarin. This phenomenon has existed for at least centuries. The pro-

motion of Putonghua in the past few decades has further accelerated the loss of non-Mandarin dialects.

The vast distribution of Mandarin can be attributed to the following. First, for several dynasties China's political and cultural center were mostly located in the north, except during some brief periods. It follows naturally that northern dialects often became the prestigious language with nationwide influence. This was especially the case for about a thousand years after the formation of Mandarin. Second, long-term garrison forces and large-scale immigration lasted for almost six centuries during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These two official policies turned many provinces in southwestern, northwestern, and northeastern China into Mandarin-speaking areas, including Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Liaoning, Jilin, Helongjiang, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Furthermore, wars, refugees, and spontaneous migration have also contributed to the diffusion of Mandarin.

Non-Mandarin areas are all situated south of Changjiang. Wu is spoken in Shanghai, Zhejiang, and the Jiangsu province south of Changjiang; Min in Fujian and Taiwan; Yue in Guangdong and Guangxi; Xiang in Hunan; Hakka in the borders of Jiangxi, Fujian, (p. 150) and Guangdong as well as in Taiwan; Gan in Jiangxi; Hui in the Anhui province south of Changjiang; Pinghua in Hunan and Guangxi. Note that this description fails to capture accurately the realistic distribution since dialect boundaries do not always correspond to administrative divisions.

Jin is spoken in Shanxi and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Historically it shares a similar source with Mandarin, so strictly speaking it can hardly count as non-Mandarin. In addition to Jin, whose exact status is disputed among linguists, both Hui and Pinghua are also recognized as separate branches of Chinese only recently (Wurm et al. 1988; Cao 2008).

Figure 11.1 Distribution of Chinese dialects

The region enclosed within the thicker line is where Chinese dialects are spoken. The three rivers from north to south are *Huanghe, Changjiang,* and *Zhujiang* (The Pearl River). The circles represent distribution areas, while the number inside indicates, respectively, 1. Mandarin, 2. Wu, 3. Hui, 4. Min, 5. Gan, 6. Hakka, 7. Xiang, 8. Yue, 9. Pinghua, and 10. Jin.

In addition to large-chunk distributions, there are numerous fragmented and scattered dialect settlements, such as the Hakka in Sichuan and the Min in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan. These isolated dialect settlements are called dialect islands in dialectology (FIGURE 11.1).

(p. 151) 11.2 The Formation of Dialects: From the Perspective of Demographic Dynamics

The absolute existence time for any Chinese dialect is as long as the history of the Chinese language. What discriminates these dialects from one another are the changes they have gone through and the speed of their change. Some dialects are characterized by the retention of old linguistic features, while others are characterized by more innovations. The primary factor that causes variation in the content and speed of change is the kind of dialect contact or language contact induced by demographic mobility.

The mobility of the Chinese people has unique characteristics. First, China has long been an agricultural country. The levies and taxes paid by farmers were a major source of national finance. Farmers had to be registered in the census records of their location and controlled for residency in order to guarantee government revenue (called household registration, *bianhu*, 编户). Household registration was constrained by land and tax so that free migration was not allowed. Nonetheless, in order to open up primitive country, guard the frontier, strengthen the population of the capital, or to send criminals to exile, the government also frequently and extensively forced people to move, resulting in varying

degrees of mixed settlements of different social and ethnic origins. Such demographic mobility is termed the resettlement model (*ximin moshi*, 徙民模式). What is best known about this resettlement model is the establishment of four prefectures to the west of *Huanghe* (the Yellow River) along the Silk Road (*Hexi si jun*, 河西四郡). Prior to 200 BCE, this region was originally populated by the non-Han *Yuezhi* 月氏 (an ancient Central Asian people that lived between 3rd century BCE to 1st CE). The Yuezhi were later expelled by the *Xiongnu* 匈奴 (ancient nomadic-based people that formed a confederation north of the Chinese empire of the Han Dynasty) and migrated to Central Asia. The Han dynasty later took possession of their original territory. Cities and towns were established there, and farmers and criminals were recruited from all over the empire to reside in these districts. They were given special deduction in tax and commutation for penalties and settled down as registered households. Evidently new dialects came to be formed in this manner, and this is the principal way of dialect formation in times of peace.

In times of war or during crop failure, a great many people fled from their registered residence and settled down in more peaceful and stable regions. This kind of population mobility is not forced by the government and comes to be called the refugee model (*liumin moshi*, 流民模式). A lot of such mobility involves large-scale and organized migrations of the entire village or clan. Regarding dialect formation, the refugee model involves two diverse situations. First, if the regions where the refugees were settled already had registered households of the Han Chinese, the newly moved-in refugees were called guest households (*kehu*, 客戶). Guest households could do farm work only (p. 152) in discarded or undeveloped lands, resulting in the formation of new settlements outside the urban areas and bringing about dialect contact for these areas with new residents. Second, if registered households of the Han Chinese were absent and only indigenous non-Han people were present, the dialects of the newly settled Han Chinese were transplanted. As time went by, due to land development by the moved-in Han Chinese and a natural increase of the population, the transplanted dialects of the Han people had close contact with the indigenous non-Chinese languages. The refugee model is hence the principal way of forming new dialects in times of war or of natural disasters such as draught or floods.

The third is an invasion model (*ruqin moshi*, 入侵模式). China was constantly invaded by the northern and western non-Han people since historic times. These invasions brought about wars as well as ethnic mixture. The invasion model denotes such population mobility driven by the invasions of these non-Han people. One characteristic of this model is that a relatively large number of people from the invading ethnic group came to be settled in Han areas and were eventually sinicized. Although they shifted to speaking the Chinese language, many non-Chinese linguistic elements entered their Chinese and became new features of the language.

In addition to the three aforementioned models of migration, we should also pay attention to social mobility within the whole country. In the Chinese empire before the 10th century CE, spatial movement of the population was limited, and the channels for, and dimensions of, social mobility were insufficient and restricted. After the 10th century CE, thanks to the prosperity of merchandise economy, the promotion of the imperial examination sys-

tem (*keju zhidu*, 科举制度), and the invention of printing, which led to the flourishing of educational and cultural enterprises, social mobility increased extensively and stimulated interaction and mutual influence among different dialects. One effect of such exchange was the appearance of a literary reading in many modern dialects.

The formation of modern Chinese dialects can generally be attributed to the different types of demographic dynamics described earlier. However, the formation process of each dialect may involve more than one route. Specifically, all modern dialects are formed under the interaction of several factors identified previously, the only difference being the duration and extent of such interactions.

11.3 Phonological Characteristics

Among the Chinese dialects, differences in syntax and morphology are relatively insignificant. What best distinguishes these dialects are their phonological characteristics. The following are some features that can be employed for comparison (Ting 1982; Norman 1988):

(1) The evolution of ancient voiced initials (*quanzhuo shengmu*, 全浊声母) *b-, *d-, *g-, etc.
(2) The evolution of ancient stop codas *-p, *-t, *-k.
(p. 153) **(3)** The evolution of ancient tones *A (*ping* 平, even or level), *B (*shang* 上, rising), *C (*qu* 去, departing) and *D (*ru* 入, entering).

For comparison of these features please refer to Table 11.1.

Table 11.1 Comparison of phonological traits

	Initials *b-, *d-, *g-, etc.	**Final stops *-p, *-t, *-k**	**Tones *A, *B, *C, *D**
Mandarin	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh- (even tone) or to p-, t-, k- (rising, departing and entering tones)	Lost or reduced to -ʔ	*A split into two registers *yin* 阴 (dark) and *yang* 阳 (light); *D got lost. Basically four tones are identified.
Wu	b-, d-, g-	Reduced to -ʔ	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register. Basically seven or eight tones are identified.
Hui	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh- (majority) or to p-, t-, k- (minority)	Lost or reduced to -ʔ	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register. Basically four to eight tones are identified.
Min	Devoiced to p-, t-, k- (majority) or to ph-, th-, kh- (minority)	-p, -t, -k, -ʔ	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register. Basically seven

			or eight tones are identified.
Gan	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh-	-p, -t, -k, or lost, or reduced to -ʔ, -t, or reduced to -ʔ	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register. Basically five to seven tones are identified.
Hakka	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh-	-p, -t, -k	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register. Basically five or six tones are identified.
Xiang	b-, d-, g-, or devoiced to p-, t-, k-	Lost	*A split into the dark and light register; *D got lost. Basically four to six tones are identified.
Yue	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh- (even and rising tones), or to p-, t-, k- (departing and entering tones)	-p, -t, -k	*A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register; *D split into three or four tones. Basically seven to twelve tones are identified.

Pinghua	Devoiced to p-, t-, k-	Lost (in the north) or became -p, -t, -k (in the south)	*A split into the dark and light register; *D got lost. Basically four to six tones are identified (in the north); or *A, *B, *C and *D all split into the dark and light register; *D split into three or four tones. Basically seven to twelve tones are identified (in the south).
Jin	Devoiced to ph-, th-, kh- (even tone) or to p-, t-, k- (rising, departing and entering tones)	Reduced to -ʔ	*A split into the dark and light register (majority). Basically four to six tones are identified.

Some other particular features are also mentioned frequently as characteristics that typify a certain dialect group. A few examples are the nondistinction between bilabials (p. 154) and labiodentals (*bang fei bufen*, 帮非不分),[1] as well as the nondistinction between alveolars and palatals (*duan zhi bufen*, 端知不分)[2] in Min; the change of the rising tone to the dark even tone for secondary voiced (sonorants) initials (*cizhuo shangsheng gui yinping*, 次浊上声归阴平)[3] in Hakka; and the syllable division words (*fenyin ci*, 分音词)[4] in Jin. Scholars often disagree as to which features are representative and whether they can be applied to the classification of dialect groups.

11.4 Dialect History: From the Perspective of Evolution Rate

Evolution of dialects means the loss of old features and the introduction of new innovations. The degree of an innovation, or preservation, becomes a criterion that can be used to measure the evolution rate. For instance, the nondistinction between bilabials and labiodentals and that between alveolars and palatals, and the *ge*-group words read as -a (*gebu zi du a*, 歌部字读-a)[5] in Min, are all archaic features that characterize Old Chinese (Ting 1983). All other dialects no long preserve these traits. Therefore, in terms of these characteristics, Min is the most preservative dialect and can be traced to the language of 2,000 years ago. Other dialects are more innovative, and their formation must be subsequent to that of Min.

Based on such a viewpoint, it is fair to claim that Mandarin dialects are more innovative, while non-Mandarin dialects are more conservative. That is to say, the evolution rate of Mandarin is faster than that of non-Mandarin. Among the non-Mandarin dialects, the speed of change varies depending on the phonological characteristics in question. In the evolution of ancient voiced initials *b-, *d-, *g-, and so on, Wu is the slowest, Xiang is the second slowest, followed by other dialects. In the evolution of ancient stop codas *-p, *-t, and *-k, Hakka and Yue are the slowest, Min and Gan are the second slowest, and other dialects follow. In the evolution of ancient tones *A (even), *B (rising), *C (departing), and *D (entering), Wu and Min are slower than all the other dialects. Together with evidence from the history of the Chinese language, we can infer that some preserved traits of Min have the greatest time depth and can be traced to ancient times. Others traits of Wu, Yue, Hakka, and Gan developed later, while those of Hui and Pinghua came still later, corresponding respectively to early and late Middle Chinese. The preserved traits of Mandarin are hence the most recent, with a time depth equivalent to early modern times, that is, after the 10th century CE.

The reason the Mandarin dialects evolved faster than the non-Mandarin is Mandarin-speaking areas were subject to frequent and drastic blending processes with the invading non-Han ethnic groups. According to historic documentation, it is speculated that such fusion had undergone immense impact within an extremely short period of time. In consequence, dialects with single inheritance retain the most ancient traits, while those with pluralistic fusion processes are the most innovational.

(p. 155) One point that needs to be borne in mind is that all of the southern Chinese dialects were brought to their present areas by the northern immigrants in different eras. The encounter between new and old residents may have involved divergent spatial movements and gives rise to various possibilities of linguistic blending. Consequently, just as today’s distribution does not necessarily correspond to the initial distribution, the dialects today may not be equivalent to the dialects in former days. Take Min as an example: multiple evidence reveals that early distribution of Min was further north than where it is distributed today, whereas the origin of some varieties of the Wu dialects spoken today

might have been the native land of Min. Another example can be noted in some phonological traits of Hakka, which are found sporadically across a large territory in the Central Plains and south of Changjiang, where Hakka is not spoken currently; thus the early distribution of Hakka must have comprised a much larger terrain than today.

11.5 Differing Literary and Colloquial Readings

In many documents about the Chinese dialects, it is mentioned that a single sinogram has differentiated readings, one literary and the other colloquial. This phenomenon is generally called differing literary and colloquial pronunciations (*wen bai yi du*, 文白异读). For instance, many ancient entering-toned words in Pekingese have diverse literary and colloquial pronunciations, as exemplified in Table 11.2:

Table 11.2 Differing literary and colloquial pronunciations in Pekingese[7]

	熟	剥	学	白	勒	色
Literary reading	ʂu 2	po 1	ɕye 2	po 2	lɤ 4	sɤ 4
Colloquial reading	ʂou 2	pau 1	ɕiau 2	pai 2	lei 1	ʂai 3

Differing literary and colloquial pronunciations are a result of dialect contact and reflect the coexistence of native and foreign pronunciations. The literary readings of Pekingese in Table 11.2 represent the native pronunciation, while the colloquial readings originate from other dialects (Ting 2006).

Pekingese has the fewest examples of differing literary and colloquial readings among the Chinese dialects. Non-Mandarin dialects typically have more such instances. Their examples are not only numerous, but detailed analyses into them may even bring to light divergent phonological systems. Since Beijing is a long-time capital, its doublets of readings can be ascribed to the natural flow of population into the first city. The doublets in non-Mandarin regions are instead a result of education and instruction. With the promotion of imperial examinations, the literary language based on Middle Chinese (p. 156) was gradually diffused across the empire from the 7th or 8th century on. Therefore, the more a dialect diverged from this literary language, the more it had to learn and adopt. The distinct phonological systems underlying the literary and colloquial reading in Min demonstrate the great distance that separates it from the literary language. In some dialects, differing literary and colloquial pronunciations involve more than two pronunciations, since they are influenced not only by the national literary language but also by the regional lingua franca.

The idea that a single sinogram may have different pronunciations implies the existence of dialect contact and dialectal strata. In fact, not only does dialect contact play a role here but contact with non-Han languages leaves traces as well. For instance, some dialects of Wu, Min, Gan, Yue, and Pinghua have implosives [ɓ] and [ɗ]. Such a phonetic feature actually reflects Tai-Kadai substrate. Both differing literary versus colloquial readings as well as linguistic strata have profound linguistic implications. Comprehensive investigation into these aspects will definitely enrich our understanding of the history of Chinese dialects (Ting 2007).

11.6 Lexical and Syntactic Differences

A closer look at the lexical differences reveals the diversity of the Chinese dialects (Cao 2008). Take the high-frequency personal pronouns as an example; the pronouns for first-, second-, and third-person singular are *wo*/*ni*/*ta* 我你他 in Mandarin, *ngu*/*nong*/*hi* 我侬渠 in Wu, *gua*/*li*/*i* 我汝伊 in Min, and *ngai*/*ngi*/*ki* 厓尔渠 in Hakka. Another instance concerns the commonly used verbum dicendi *shuo* 说 'to speak' in Mandarin. In Wu, Hui, Min, Yue, Xiang, and Pinghua the verb 讲 is used, while in Gan and Hakka the counterpart verb is 话.[6] Three points deserve our special attention here. First, in both vocabulary and phonology, many southern dialects have preserved more ancient features in comparison with Mandarin. The word *guo* 锅 in Mandarin for a cooking vessel is actually a recent usage. Wu, Yue, and Hakka use the sinogram 镬 to denote the same cookware, whereas in Min the equivalent noun is *tiann* 鼎, both words coming directly from Old Chinese. Similarly, Mandarin uses the word *jiao* 腳 for "foot," while in Min it is *kha* 骹, which has an older origin than *jiao*. Second, although occasionally the same words are used across different di-

alects, the southern dialects retain the archaic meanings of the words. For instance, the equivalent verbs in Min for the Mandarin *zou* 走 'to walk' and *pao* 跑 'to run' are *kiann* 行 and *tsau* 走, respectively. This Min usage dates back to ancient times. Finally, although disyllabification is a common tendency in the development of Chinese lexicon, this process proceeds obviously more slowly in southern dialects. Whereas Mandarin uses the disyllabic words *yifu* 衣服 and *xifan* 稀飯 for "clothes" and "congee," Min still uses monosyllabic words *sann* 衫 and *mue* 糜. More examples include *kuaizi* 筷子 'chopsticks' in Mandarin but 箸 in Wu, Min, and Pinghua; *bozi* 脖子 'neck' in Mandarin but 颈 in Gan, Hakka, Yue, and Pinghua; *shetou* 舌头 'tongue' in Mandarin but simply 舌 in Gan and Min and *lei* 脷 in Yue; *zuiba* (p. 157) 嘴吧 'mouth' in Mandarin but *tshui* 喙 in Min and *zoi* 啜 in Hakka. In these last four examples, Mandarin achieves its disyllabification by adding a suffix. Southern dialects, by contrast, are characterized by the absence of such suffixation.

Diminutive suffixes abound in Chinese dialects, but each dialect behaves differently with its own unique characteristics. Mandarin-speaking areas resort more to suffixes like –zi 子 or –er 兒, with further processes of retroflexion or rhotacization. Sometimes this phonological process of adding an r-coloring sound at the end of a syllable is also accompanied by variation in tones and in finals, which are generally referred to as tone change (*biandiao*, 变调) or rime change (*bianyun*, 变韵). In Wu a nasal ending is added for the same purpose, which often results in the further nasalization of finals. Min uses the suffix –a 囝 while Yue takes advantage of tone sandhi. Let's cite the popular card game *mahjong* 麻將 as an instance. It is derived from adding a diminutive nasal coda to the word 麻雀 'sparrows' to get [mu tsiaʔ ŋ], which is the original name for the game in Wu. The game was originally called this because of the design of sparrows on the tile.

Syntax in Chinese does not vary significantly among the dialects. The major divergence usually consists in the choice of grammatical markers and word order. To begin with, aspect markers are differently represented in the south and north. For example, while Mandarin can employ *-zhe* following the verb to indicate a progressive meaning in *chi-zhe* 吃着 'be + eating', in Xiang, Gan, and Min the same progressive meaning is expressed through the preverbal form *zai* in *zai chi* 在吃. Mandarin has the suffix *guo* attached to the verb for experiential perfective as in *quguo* 去过 'have been to', but in Min, some varieties of Hakka, and Yue, the grammaticalized verb "to have" is used as an auxiliary as in *youqu* 有去. Next, in some constructions word order difference is remarkable. In Mandarin adverbs precede verbs, as in *ni xian qu* 你先去 'you go first', but in some dialects of Wu (such as in Wenzhou), Hui, Gan, Yue, and Pinghua the same adverb 先 'first' follows the verb to become 你/侬去先. In the comparative construction, it is customary in Mandarin to use the morpheme *bi* as in *wo bi ni gao* 我比你高 (I-*BI*-you-tall) 'I am taller than you', but in Yue and Pinghua 过 is attached to the stative verb to yield the sentence 我高过你, for example, *ngo gou gwo nei* (I-tall-*GUO*-you). Gan uses another morpheme 似 in the same position as in 我高似你 (I-tall-*SI*-you), while in some varieties of Min the same construction is expressed by means of the morpheme *khah* preceding the verb, for example, *gua khah kuan li* 我较高汝 (I-*KHAH*-tall-you).

11.7 Not Easily Classifiable Dialects

Among the Chinese dialects, some are still not easily classifiable, including the Cunhua 村话 and Junhua 军话 in Hainan, the Tuhua 土话 in northern Guangdong, the Waxiang Hua 瓦乡话 in western Hunan, the Tuhua in southern Hunan, and so forth. One characteristic that these dialects all share is that they have very few native speakers. Their relationship with the neighboring Chinese dialects or minority languages remains (p. 158) unclear. Some unclassified dialects are even on the verge of extinction. How to boost language vitality of these dialects to maintain linguistic diversity will be a challenge we must tackle earnestly in dialectology and in language ecology.

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Notes:

(1.) *Bang* has a bilabial initial, while *fei* has a labiodental initial. Only bilabial initials existed in Old Chinese, and labiodentals were split from bilabials in Middle Chinese. The nondistinction between *bang* and *fei* suggests that labiodentals have not yet differentiated from bilabials.

(2.) *Duan* has an alveolar initial, while *zhi* has a palatal initial. Only alveolar initials existed in Old Chinese, and palatals were split from alveolars in Middle Chinese. The nondistinction between *duan* and *zhi* suggests that palatals have not yet differentiated from alveolars.

(3.) *Cizhuo shangsheng* or "secondary voiced initials (sonorants) with the rising tone" refer to rising-toned words with nasal or lateral initials, such as *ma* 马, *mi* 米, *ling* 领. The phenomenon for the rising-toned secondary voiced initials to change to the dark even tone (*yinping*) signifies that all sonorant rising-toned words are now pronounced with the dark even tone instead of the rising tone.

(4.) Syllable division words are a way of forming new words. This is done by inserting -ʌʔl- between the initial and final of a syllable, thereby splitting a monosyllabic word into two. For example, in the Pingyao 平遙 dialect spoken in Shanxi, the syllable division word kʌʔlaŋ 格懶 is derived from inserting -ʌʔl- into kaŋ 桿.

(5.) "*Ge*-group" is a rhyme group in Old Chinese phonology, the primary vowel being *-a-. The "*ge*-group words being read as *–a*" refers to the fact that *ge*-group words are still pronounced with the final vowel *-a* nowadays. For instance, words like *qi* 骑, *ji* 寄and *yi* 蚁from the *ge*-group are pronounced as *khia, kia,* and *hia* in Min, retaining the Old Chinese *-a-.

(6.) 话 is also used as a verb in Cantonese.

(7.) The numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicate the four tones *yinping* 阴平 'dark even or level', *yangping* 阳平 'light even or rising', *shangsheng* 上声 'dipping tone' and *qusheng* 去声 'falling tone' in Pekingese.

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