Review of:
***Southern Min (Hokkien) as a Migrating Language: A Comparative Study of Language Shift and Maintenance Across National Borders,* by Picus Sizhi Ding. Springer, 2016.**

With recent political developments, first among them the May inauguration in Taiwan of president Tsai Ing-wen, research on the languages of the greater China region is as important as ever. This study of Hokkien by Picus Sizhi Ding both is timely and stands as a contribution in two fields: to sociolinguistic research on the language itself and to work on language attrition as an aspect of bilingual development. For the latter in particular, the suggestion in the book for future investigation highlights the need for greater collaboration between studies of language shift as a social phenomenon and research on language attrition from the psycholinguistic point of view. As the book shows, these two subfields have now become more closely related, especially in regard to the future of minority languages of the region.

The overriding merit of the study is its clarity of purpose and objectivity in the assessment of research evidence. Always requirements of science, these twin guideposts of our work take on greater importance as the stakes are raised in the realm of broader implications. There is of course nothing wrong with bringing implications to the forefront in the discussion of research (e.g., for policy considerations). This review, in fact, will conclude with the consideration for future discussion of one in particular. The starting point, however, needs to be a clear and unbiased evaluation of current findings and proposal for follow-up investigation, again starting from how the facts on the ground, so to speak, can be explained with recourse to available theoretical models.

Chapter 1 begins with a valuable outline of the variation among the major dialectal variants of Hokkien (Southern Min): the relationship representing the closest contact obtaining between Taiwanese Hokkien and the related variants spoken in Southern Fujian centered in Xiamen, Quanzhou and Zangzhou. A more distant separation (within, nevertheless, mutual intelligibility) can be marked in regard to Teochew, for example. Readers will appreciate the unambiguous categorization of Hokkien as a separate language belonging to the Sinitic family of languages (p. 2), a linguistic category (as opposed to political) based on verifiable measures of mutual intelligibility. Table 1.7 sets out the Scale of Language Functionality to which all subsequent discussion will refer: from the highest levels V and IV (*vernacular language* and *lingua franca*) down to the lowest II and I (*inner language* and *private language*). The study traces the erosion of Hokkien in two overseas communities, Burma and Singapore, and compares this erosion to the parallel tendencies, down from level V, in its homeland region, Fujian and Taiwan.

In Chapter 2, the account of language shift across four generations of migration begins with the 1940s journey from Fujian to Burma; the report of findings

comes from a participant observer/case study, the author a member of the immigrant family. The descriptions differ from previous studies by including estimates of actual linguistic competence, alongside those of language use (within the family unit). These estimates, in turn, are correlated with an evaluation of shift on the Scale of Language Functionality (within the larger community of speakers).[1] The chapter concludes with the presentation of the Youngest Child Model of language erosion. The author's working hypothesis can be summarized as follows: Minority to majority language shift, as evidenced in erosion within the family unit, does not proceed uniformly within each generation as a whole, but rather the attrition in native language competence tends to be evidenced first among the youngest members of the child generation as the erosion moves upward among older siblings.

The overview of the evolution of Hokkien in Singapore, Taiwan and Fujian (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) forms a separate unit of study all its own. The author's assessment of displacement on the Scale of Language Functionality for the three urban centers (Xiamen for Fujian, Taipei for Taiwan) is stark. Displacement of the language has proceeded from Levels IV or V to Level II for all three. Outside of Taipei, clearly, Hokkien has maintained its broad demographic base slipping from dominant status *vernacular* (Level V) to the maintenance of *ethnic language* status (Level III), according to the author's estimate. In all three cases, national language policy promoting the exclusive teaching of Mandarin (*Putonghua*, *Guoyu*) and its use in the public realm triggered the rapid acceleration of the shift. In the case of Taiwan, the previous compulsory use of Japanese during the occupation years (1895—1945) represents an important antecedent to the actual suppression of Hokkien, carried over by the early KMT regime. In Singapore, its historical role as *lingua franca* came to be undermined by the 1980s and today estimated as *inner language* (Level II). The massive and continuous influx of new immigrants counts as the second contributing factor. Returning to Taiwan, Chapter 4 cites surveys of self-rated proficiency that point to an inverted pyramid distribution of declining ability in Hokkien within the younger age group: above 90% for older adults, falling to below 50% in the child bilingual population. In any case, the southern counties remain as the absolute stronghold of the language.

Parallel to Singapore, the arrival of new waves of immigration (from other provinces of China) to greater Xiamen counts as the second decisive factor in the loss of majority and public status of the language, accounting for its decline to Level II. Drawing extensively from a recent study by Chen and Lin,[2] Chapter 5 presents a complex new distribution between Hokkien and Mandarin. In the study, among informants who were native to Southern Fujian, 75% reported proficient command of the language, with almost all of the remaining respondents maintaining at least passive ability (less than 3%, no ability). Comparatively, in regard to language use in the public domain, for Putonghua, percentages range from 63% in Quanzhou to 82% in Xiamen, with an overall average of 10% for mixed Putonghua-Hokkien. In the private domain, among urban students, speaking to grandparents in Putonghua was

reported at 26% in the Chen and Lin study, while speaking to age mates (relatives and friends) was reported at 86%. Notably, we learn in the conclusion to Chapter 5 that calls have been made for greater public use of Hokkien along with the implementation of select experimental bilingual instruction in kindergarten.

The proposal of a Youngest Child Model for the study of first language attrition is important because it turns out to be broadly compatible with one line of research on first language attrition internationally.[3] At first glance the logic behind the idea that the younger speakers are vulnerable to greater pressure of erosion of their first language seems straightforward and expected. But the explanation for it isn't. To begin with, attrition/erosion is better understood as *replacement*, because first languages are never lost, under normal conditions, without a second taking their place. The difficult part of the explanation for the younger-more-vulnerable hypothesis is that studies have not been able to show that the unfolding replacement is necessarily triggered by inadequate exposure and face-to-face contact with the weaker-to-be language in bilingual children. In fact, children often begin to evidence a dominant-subordinate cleavage between stronger and weaker language even in contexts of equal exposure to both. Younger bilinguals are indeed more vulnerable to this imbalance, such that for them the imbalance can evolve more quickly toward the replacement scenario. The model is termed Replacing Language Development, broadly consistent with the Youngest Child Model (YCM). As applied to the unstable situation of Hokkien-Mandarin bilingualism today, the YCM comes forward as a strong hypothesis with far-reaching consequences. That is, in all regions historically associated with Hokkien, a growing percentage of young Hokkien-Mandarin bilinguals are shifting to Mandarin as their dominant language.

As a closing refection, I will take the liberty of pursuing the policy implications of the author's analysis. I stand corrected if I venture too far beyond the findings presented in the study together with supporting results of the researchers cited. The practical application is especially relevant to the vision of the new Taiwanese democracy, and to the urgent task of defending this vision. Part of the defense of the new Taiwanese democracy has been the revitalization and full recognition of Hokkien, alongside that of Hakka and the indigenous languages. New democratic language policies in place since the late 1990s are in fact the most progressive and advanced of the greater China region, a provocative example to all governments. Picus Sizhi Ding places emphasis on two considerations that flow directly from the empirical facts on the ground, though he carefully defers the questions of policy implication:

(1) The generalized shift by young bilingual Taiwanese toward Mandarin as their preferred, and often dominant, language is an observation consistent with reports from research.[3] The same tendency is evident in Fujian, most notably in central Xiamen. Recall what the claim of book is: that the decisive factor in the direction and rate of language shift is not the absolute number of proficient speakers of Hokkien (nor that of any other minority Sinitic language) but age and generational

distribution. Crucially, this distribution needs to take into account data on which language has become, or is becoming, dominant among child bilinguals. The task of building the broadest base of consensus and support for the defense of democracy cannot be indifferent to these demographic tendencies. Thus, under present and foreseeable conditions, upholding proposals for elevating Hokkien to the status of official language above all others may not serve the objective of building this consensus around a national platform of autonomy and democratic values. The implication of the study is that sustaining such proposals would not only fail to serve the goal of autonomy and democracy, but *in addition* it would not best serve the objectives of Hokkien language preservation itself. Such is the case, perhaps ironically, even for a language that is still spoken/understood by a large majority of the population. From this point of view, the current DPP administration's language policy platform (what I am calling, for lack of a better term, a "moderate-pluralist" policy) is based on an accurate assessment of the current cross-generational language change dynamic. Needless to say, the debate among Hokkien language supporters is complex and beyond the scope of this short review.

(2) In some ways following from the previous point, the interests of Hokkien language preservation (interests that are educational, cultural, historical, scientific, and even political) are best served with the most inclusive approach. The broader effort on behalf of consolidating the language would then take as its starting point the fact that cross strait dialect variation falls entirely within the bounds of a single language. Notions of a separate Taiwanese language are not only unsustainable from a linguistic science point of view, but would undermine the broader effort on behalf of the language. Advocates in Taiwan of raising the profile and representation of Hokkien, and reversing the tendency toward a subtractive bilingual scenario favoring Mandarin unilingualism, have every reason to project this perspective to Fujian. Taiwan's pluralistic language policy is one of the prominently visible products of its democratization, both the former and the latter an example for speakers of all minority Chinese languages. Bilingual speakers on both sides of the strait share a common cause on this language question because it is also an emblem of a larger vision. To give one example: during the previous DPP administration (2000—2008) linguists were not able to arrive at, or effectively promote, consensus on a standardized writing system for Hokkien. This indispensable advance in language corpus development, with the formidable academic resources at Taiwan's disposal, today is presented with a second opportunity. The new system would also accommodate Hokkien speakers in Fujian and remaining overseas communities, and serve as an example of the application of science in the realm of linguistics within the PRC. The immediate and obvious parallel, along with the prospects it shares with multilingual Taiwan, is the trilingual educational policy, still in force today in Hong Kong. These are, for this reader, the far-reaching implications of *Southern Min as Migrating Language*.

Notes

1. Regarding research methodology, readers will find interesting the fieldwork interview technique of the study. Presenting himself as a Hokkien-dominant visitor to Singapore, South Fujian and Taiwan, the investigator prompts response from random informants with monolingual requests for information in public service encounters and similar stranger-to-stranger interaction. As an exploratory/pilot assessment, we can take it as a proposal for developing a large scale standardized procedure for future research.

2. Yan-Ling Chen and H. Lin, "A comparative survey on linguistic life of bilingual students of urban and rural areas in Quanzhou," *Yuyan Wenzi Yingyong/Applied Linguistics* (Volume 1, pp. 72—79, 2013).

3. Relevant studies are summarized in Norbert Francis, *Bilingual Development and Literacy Learning: East Asian and International Perspectives* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2013).

4. Deborah Beaser, "The outlook for Taiwanese language preservation," *Sino-Platonic Papers* (Number 172, pp. 1–18, 2006). Yu-Chang Liu, Johan Gijsena, and Chung-Yin Tsai, "An empirical evaluation of ethnolinguistic vitality and language loss: The case of Southern Min in Taiwan." *Folia Linguistica* (Volume 47, pp. 425–447, 2013).

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