

2. Chinese speech

Chinese

Chinese, as a term for language, is used to refer to the native languages, spoken or written, now or in the past, of the Chinese people. Thus Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Classical Chinese are all Chinese. In other words, while Chinese can be used in a narrow sense to refer to what is sometimes called Modern Standard Chinese, colloquially called Mandarin by most English speakers, it is also used to refer to the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. In that respect it is comparable to the term ‘Romance’, that applies to the modern derivatives of Latin, such as French, Catalan, Romanian, and Spanish, as well as to Latin itself.

Mandarin [Guóyǔ, Pǔtōnghuà, Huáyǔ]

Mandarin is a term that derives from a Portuguese word meaning ‘counselor’ – or ‘a mandarin’. As a name for the language, it dates from early Portuguese contacts with China, when it was used to translate the Chinese term Guānhuà, literally ‘speech of officials’. Guānhuà was the name given to specialized speaking practices which, though they might vary from one historical period to another, served as a *lingua franca* among officials and other educated classes who might come from different parts of China and speak mutually unintelligible Chinese in their home regions. A late form of Guānhuà, based on Beijing speech, can be regarded as the precursor to modern Mandarin. However, while Mandarin has survived as the English name for the modern language, the Chinese make use of a variety of terms.

Taiwan and most overseas communities call Mandarin Guóyǔ (‘national language’), a term dating at least from 1918. The PRC calls it Pǔtōnghuà (‘common language’), another term with a legacy dating back to the early part of the 20th century. In Singapore, where the different linguistic situation makes both terms inappropriate, it is called Huáyǔ (‘the language of the Huá’, Huá being an ancient name for the Chinese people). All three terms refer to a language that continues to be promoted as a national standard by the governments of both the PRC and Taiwan, and is generally conceived of as a norm for educated or formal speech by Chinese speaking peoples the world over.

The origins of Mandarin

In traditional China, the majority of the population spoke regional or local languages and were illiterate. For them, there was no general medium of communication across regional lines. For the educated, however, Guānhuà served in a limited way as a spoken medium; and Classical Chinese, the language of administration, education and high culture (see below), served as a written medium. By the 19th century, it was clear that the lack of a spoken norm that could serve the communication needs of all classes across the country was a major obstacle to the modernization of China, and eventually efforts were made to identify a suitable medium and promote it as the standard. Guānhuà was an obvious candidate, but by the 19th century, it had become strongly associated with the educated speech of Beijing, putting southerners at a disadvantage. And Classical Chinese, though it had no regional bias, was a highly stylized written language with ancient roots that made it unsuitable as the basis for a national spoken medium.

After various interesting attempts to establish a hybrid language to balance regional differences, particularly between north and south, the Chinese language planners settled on the northern strategy, promoting the speech that had also been the basis of *Guānhuà*: the *educated speech* of north China and particularly that of the capital Beijing. However, though Mandarin is based on educated northern usage and in particular, a refined Beijing pronunciation, it has also incorporated material from a broad range of other sources. Words with wide distribution have been adopted over northern or Beijing localisms, for example; and grammatical constructions characteristic of southern languages, such as Cantonese, Shanghainese, often co-exist with northern patterns in the modern language. Spoken Mandarin also absorbed material from written sources that introduced words and phrasing from the important economic and cultural region of the Lower Yangtze Valley (*Shànghǎi* to *Nánjīng*), and words for modern concepts first coined in Japanese.

Varieties of Mandarin

Though both Taiwan and the PRC have always agreed on the relationship between Mandarin pronunciation and educated Beijing speech, political separation and cultural divergence have resulted in the emergence of two norms, as comparison of dictionaries from Taiwan and the PRC will show. These differences, though still moderate in scope, extend from pronunciation to lexicon and usage.

Even more variety is to be found at local levels. The case of Taiwan is illustrative. There, Mandarin is not the first language of much of the population. The most common first language is *Táiyǔ* ('Taiwanese'), a Southern Min language that is very similar to the Southern Min spoken in the province of Fujian across the Taiwan Straits. (Southern Min is also the predominant spoken language of the Singapore Chinese, and many other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.) With so many in Taiwan speaking *Táiyǔ* as a first language, it is not surprising that Mandarin there is often influenced by the pronunciation, grammar and usage of that language. The result is Taiwan Mandarin. The same phenomenon occurs elsewhere, of course, so that no matter where you are in China, Mandarin heard on the street will generally have local features. Native speakers quickly get used to these differences, just as English speakers get used to the regional accents of English. But learners will find the variation disruptive, and will need time and experience to adjust to it.

Though there are probably more and more Chinese whose first language is Mandarin and whose speech is close to the appointed norms, it is still true that the majority of Chinese speak more than one variety of Chinese, and for many of them Mandarin would be a second language. A few years ago, *USA Today* published statistics on the 'world's most common languages, ranked by population that uses each as a first language'. Mandarin was listed first, with 885 million speakers (followed by Spanish with 332 million and English with 322million). The figure for Mandarin would not include those whose first language is Cantonese or one of the other regional languages. But it must include a large number of speakers whose Mandarin would be barely understandable to someone familiar only with the standard.

When describing the best Mandarin (or the best Chinese), Chinese tend to focus on pronunciation, praising it as biāozhǔn ‘standard’ (as in ‘your Chinese is very biāozhǔn’). For this reason, native Chinese speakers, who tend to be effusive in their praise in any case, will sometimes flatter a foreigner by saying s/he speaks the language better than they do. By better, they mean with a better approximation to the standard, educated accent. Apart from language classrooms, the most biāozhǔn Mandarin is heard on the broadcast media, in schools, and in the speech of young, educated urban Chinese.

Regional languages and minority languages

There are some seven major dialect groupings of Chinese, including the geographically extensive Northern group (divided into Southwestern, Northwestern and Northern regions) from which Mandarin was promoted. Of the others, Cantonese (Yuè), Shanghainese (Wú), Fukienese or Hokkien (Mǐn) and Kèjiā or Hakka are the best known. (Yuè, Wú and Mǐn are Chinese linguistic designations, while Hokkien and Hakka are dialectal pronunciations of the Mandarin names Fújiàn and Kèjiā, respectively.) All represent groupings of diverse dialects thought to share a common origin. Even within the group, the varieties are not necessarily mutually intelligible. Cantonese for example, includes many dialects, such as Táishān (Hoisan), which are quite distinct from the standard Canton dialect.

In many respects the dialect groupings of Chinese – represented by Cantonese, Shanghainese, Hakka etc. – are different languages. They are not, after all, mutually intelligible and they have their own standard speeches (Canton for Cantonese, Suzhou for Shanghainese, etc.) In linguistic terms, they are often said to be comparable to Dutch and German, or Spanish and Portuguese. However, as noted earlier, unlike those European languages, the Chinese regional languages share a written language, make reference to a common standard (Mandarin), and identify with a common culture. Recently, the term ‘topolect’, a direct translation with Greek roots of the Chinese term fāngyán ‘place-language’, has gained currency as a more formal term for what are generally called ‘regional languages’ in this text. So we may speak of Cantonese as the standard language within the Cantonese (or Yuè) grouping, and varieties such as Hoisan as dialects within Cantonese.

Regional languages should be distinguished from the languages of the non-Chinese (non-Han) ethnic groups, such as the Mongolians, Tibetans, or Uighurs, that make up about 8 to 9% of the total population of China. There are 56 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China, almost all of them with their own languages or language groups.



Representatives from China's minorities gather around the Chairman. A painting in the Minorities Research Institute in Beijing. [JKW 1982]

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