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“Language and the Politics of Identity in China in the Age of Globalization,”

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With the forging of modern China, China's languages as well as cultures have also undergone profound transformation. In *The Languages of China*, Ramsey begins an account of how China's language reforms have produced the Putonghua, which marked the triumph of the North over the South in terms of dialects.¹ Others have considered how China's revolutionaries manipulated the Chinese language linguistically to serve the cause of revolution and of reform.² To this date, the debate over simplified characters and Pinyin Romanization continues. Taipei (Taipei), in particular, has been at the center of the recent storm over Romanization and a simmering debate has also been going on overseas, among the schools that teach Chinese.

On Mainland China, language remains a key aspect of nation-building today. And the promotion of the Putonghua (Mandarin) as the lingua franca for all of China has stimulated considerable discussion about language, the politics of national integration, and national identity among the Chinese. This essay considers schematically some of the salient issues that have informed these debates in the hope that this could serve as the starting point for a future research project.

Law, Language, and Putonghua Promotion

Even though most of China's revolutionary leaders such as Mao Zedong spoke in heavy dialects, they nonetheless were keenly aware of the importance

of promoting a unified language. In 1956, the State Council or executive branch of government called for the promotion of Putonghua.

Yet it is in the reform era that the promotion of the Putonghua has truly gathered pace. In 1998, the Chinese government declared the third week of September as the National Putonghua Promotion Week and set the target for making Putonghua the standard spoken tongue nationwide by the mid-twenty-first century. In its work, the State Language Work Committee has focused its attention on Putonghua use in schools and colleges and as the communication medium for public activities.

Surveys show that the popularity of Putonghua has reached 80 percent in China's large and medium-sized cities.³ Yet, in a testimony to the enormous linguistic and cultural diversity of the country, a national survey of 470,000 completed in 2004 found that 47 percent of the respondents still could not speak the Putonghua.⁴ Such data, whilst not necessarily scientific, have been repeatedly adduced by integrationists in their drive to promote a common spoken language in the service of national cohesion.

On October 31, 2000, the National People's Congress Standing Committee approved the People's Republic of China Common Language Law, which came into force on January 1, 2001. The law gives Putonghua (commonly spoken Chinese) and standard Chinese characters the legal status as the national common language so as to promote communication among different

nationalities and regions. Art. 5 states that the use of common language is conducive to the safeguarding of national sovereignty and dignity, national unity.

Unlike the French or the Japanese laws that prescribe strict national language models, the PRC Common Language Law allows for different levels of Putonghua proficiency. It also states that ethnic minorities have the freedom to use and develop their own languages.

Yet there is little doubt that this law has given an adrenalin shot to the various initiatives to promote the Putonghua. The Law stipulates that government organizations must use Putonghua unless otherwise required by law; employees of these organs are required to have the ability to speak in Putonghua. Likewise, schools and other educational institutions as well as radio and TV stations are required to use the Putonghua. Art. 13 further calls for the service industry to speak Putonghua.

Art. 16 of the law does permit the use of dialects as required by public service, for programs as approved by the state or provincial Radio and Television administrations, for operas, films and other artistic works as needed, and as truly needed for publications, teaching, and research. But these are only the exceptions that prove the rule. For the law stipulates that different levels of government and related government departments should adopt measures to promote the use of Putonghua and standardized Chinese

characters.

In practice, what has given the law real teeth is that radio and TV announcers, anchor people, movie actors and actresses, theater performers, teachers and government employees as well as others have to pass a Putonghua level test and reach the grade specified by the state.⁵ In effect, the ability to speak a certain level of Putonghua has become a key to the ladder of success. A Ministry of Education official revealed that it was in talks with other government agencies regarding interviews of officials appearing on TV. Broadcasters would urge officials being interviewed not to speak in local dialects or risk not being shown on TV.⁶ Some local authorities, such as the city of Ningbo in Zhejiang province, already informally requires civil servants to speak in Putonghua when conducting interviews.⁷ The routinization of testing and other requirements has thus given the Putonghua a status that previous campaigns for Putonghua promotion did not possess.

The Putonghua Promotion Week, first launched in 1998, has received a strong boost from the enactment of the Common Language Law. In 2004, for example, the joint directive for the Putonghua Promotion Week was issued by the Central Propaganda Department, the Ministries of Education, Personnel, Culture, the SARFT, the PLA General Political Department, the State Language Work Committee, and the Communist Youth League. The directive states that the target for the promotion of Putonghua is to popularize the use

of the Putonghua on a preliminary basis by 2010 and fully so by the middle of the century. To fulfill these targets, the Putonghua promotion uses schools as the base, the Party and government offices as the “dragon head”, the broadcasting profession as the example, and the public services as the “window” so as to lead the entire country in the drive to popularize the use of Putonghua. By requiring teachers, civil servants, broadcasters, and others to meet Putonghua proficiency goals, tens of millions of people have taken the proficiency tests. Indeed, an industry has grown up to administer the tests.⁸

The Common Language Law has also become a powerful framework for a range of government actions by sub-national governments. In Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, where locals tend to speak in a thick Sichuan accent, the municipal government has decreed that civil servants, teachers, and professions that provide public services (including media, commerce, posts and telecommunications, culture, transportation, railways, airlines, tourism, banks, insurance, hospitals) should use the Putonghua. 90 percent of the employees in these must pass tests on the use of Putonghua and those that fail may lose coveted promotion opportunities.⁹

Shanghai, well known for its local dialect, has been at the forefront in the promotion of Putonghua. The Shanghai municipal government promulgated a set of implementing rules for the PRC Common Language Law. According to these rules that went into effect on March 1, 2006, Putonghua skills are

ranked in three classes and six levels. College and vocational school graduates are required to reach the Level II-B (二级乙等). The requirements for students who major in teacher's training and performing arts are higher. As a result of these requirements, growing numbers of college students have taken the Putonghua tests at the Shanghai Putonghua Testing Center.¹⁰

With steadfast efficiency, the Shanghai authorities have also undertaken a range of other actions to curb the influence of the Shanghai dialect and promote the Putonghua. Apart from the Yue Opera, Shanghai newspapers cannot publish articles using the local dialect. Cinemas and TV stations cannot show films and TV dramas using the local dialect. For one time even broadcasts in the local dialect were stopped.¹¹

The efforts to promote the use of Putonghua have been strongly facilitated by the central government's program to bring radio, television, and film to less developed areas, especially to bring radio and television to every village. China already has a radio and TV broadcasting penetration rate of 95 percent. During the eleventh five-year plan period (2006-2010), the central government aims to bring radio and television signals to every natural village with more than 20 households—a program that is projected to cover about 300,000 villages with 42 million people. It will seek also to increase the number of radio and television stations available in rural areas so that 80 percent of the rural population will be able to receive multiple programs for

free.¹²

What Dialect Should Mao Speak?

The vigor with which national and local authorities have promoted the use of Putonghua has provoked some controversy. In October 2005, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a directive to “further reiterate the use of standardized language in TV dramas.” The directive stipulated that Putonghua should be the standard spoken language for TV dramas, except in rare circumstances such as regional operas. Generally TV dramas should not resort to local dialects and non-standard Putonghua. The directive specified that national leaders that appear in TV dramas ought to be speaking Putonghua.¹³

The SARFT directive, together with an earlier one banning the use of Taiwan and Hong Kong speaking styles, is yet another step by the SARFT to promote the use of Putonghua throughout China. Because a TV drama series cannot be shown in China without the SARFT’s regulatory approval, these directives can have a chilling effect on the production of programs dubbed in local dialects.

The SARFT has also imposed strict restrictions on the dubbing of foreign films and TV programs. In October 2004, the SARFT banned the dubbing of foreign Films and TV programs into local dialects.

The SARFT directive has elicited strong reactions from producers and artists. Commentators noted that Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and other historical figures would no longer be speaking their thick dialects. They complained that the SARFT directives show how the regulators have ignored the citizens' demands for cultural diversity.¹⁴

The SARFT now claimed that the audience was unhappy with the use of dialects in various TV news programs and stipulated that TV and radio stations should not broadcast in dialects without approval.¹⁵ Yet some experts and audience felt the SARFT's restrictions on the use of dialects were "much ado about nothing". Indeed, much of popular opinion has been in favor of protecting the dialects and is against the "one knife cuts all" sort of decree.¹⁶ Audiences in different parts of the country found that Tom and Jerry, dubbed into different Chinese dialects, more to their liking.

The Politics of Disappearing Dialects

The increasing success for promoting the Putonghua, aided by the National Common Language Law and modern technologies, has also spurred discussions about the fate of dialects. Chinese officials have denied that they wish to eradicate the dialects. Speaking at the 89th World Conference on

Esperanto, Yang Guang, a Ministry of Education official overseeing language, stated that the goal of promoting the use of Putonghua is to make citizens capable of speaking both their own dialect and the Putonghua.¹⁷ Some dialect speakers, however, increasingly feel at siege.

Whereas Cantonese was able to gain more influence in the 1980s as Guangdong led in China's reforms, the Putonghua is on the march throughout China, including in Cantonese-speaking Guangdong and the dialect-rich Pearl River Delta.

Generally speaking the local dialect has been under the most pressure in the largest cities with large influxes of immigrant population. The native Shanghai residents were famous for speaking the Shanghai dialect among themselves and for their condescending attitudes toward outsiders. By the 1990s, however, growing numbers of Shanghai residents lost their jobs while more and more outsiders came to Shanghai. Subtly but steadily, Putonghua has become the lingua franca in the public spaces of Shanghai and the local residents have adjusted their condescending attitudes toward outsiders. As the old Shanghai neighborhoods are replaced by new high rises and a new mixture of residents, the Shanghai dialect has lost its prominence.¹⁸ Instead, Residents need to express written and media information using Putonghua and limit the use of the local dialect to the most private realms (food, sleep).

Some Shanghai dialect-speakers feel that they are increasingly bereft of the capacity to convey complex ideas in the local dialect.

Throughout the country, from Chaozhou, Shantou, to Guangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, to Qingdao, dialects are gradually on the retreat. Even in Fujian, perhaps the most diverse in terms of accents, the disappearance of accents has also accelerated. Hakka speakers had an especially strong tradition of preserving their dialect but the tide is also appears to be turning for the Hakka under the strong onslaught of the drive to promote the Putonghua.¹⁹

To be sure, locals, especially older ones, still speak in the local dialect among themselves but the old dialect no longer confers the aura of high culture and status it once did. The power of schools is evident when I try to talk with kids in Shanghai and Suzhou. In my travels in Shanghai and several major neighboring cities including Hangzhou and Suzhou, all places famous for their versions of the wu dialect, it has become increasingly common for the kids of the local residents not to speak the local dialect among themselves. As one friend noted, “they can understand the local dialect, but cannot speak it well.”

The same is increasingly true in smaller cities. In Zhejiang’s Jinhua, a survey found that, between kids aged 6-14, almost everyone could speak Putonghua but 52 percent cannot speak the Jinhua dialect and only 22.7 percent can communicate well in the Jinhua dialect. Many young kids think

the local dialect is “parochial” (tu) and prefer to speak Putonghua.²⁰ One somewhat sardonic comment conveys today’s reality in China: kids in major cities spend more time learning English and yet no longer speak the local dialect.

Amid the relentless promotion of Putonghua, some speakers of local dialects have acquired a sense of inferiority and even some officials feel diffident when they sport a heavy accent. Zhao Leji, Qinghai Party Secretary who sports a thick Shaanxi accent, says that he’s “not eager to meet with reporters because I don’t speak Putonghua well.”²¹

The issue is not limited to Han Chinese dialects. The Miao, an ethnic group in Guizhou province, also faces the same challenge and some have warned that the Miao spoken language is in danger of disappearing. A study by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Guizhou Provincial People's Political Consultative Conference found that residents in Miao villages speak in their own language less and less. In Tianzhu County of the Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture of Miao and Dong Nationalities, only 32 out of 112 Miao language-speaking villages communicate in their own language. Generally it’s the elderly who still speak in the native tongue while the young have mostly gravitated toward written and spoken Chinese.²² For other ethnic minorities that practice bilingual education, the young are also

more likely to be eager to acquire Chinese language skills so that they could gain better opportunities for career and economic advancement.

There is now growing recognition that China's dialects are weakening or even disappearing and, along with them, local cultures and identities. Strong regional dialects including Shanghaiese, Cantonese, Fujianese, already spoken by millions of people, will most likely be able to maintain their sphere of influence.²³ But, like many of the world's languages spoken by relatively small numbers of people, perhaps only a small number of China's regional dialects can hold their own.

Some of the changes are inevitable in an age of globalization and the internet. For Zhou Youguang, an eminent linguist, it is natural for large metropolitans such as New York or Shanghai to adopt a common language. The advent of the Putonghua is thus a sign of progress. In this context, the age for preserving dialects in China is over.²⁴

Yet some of the losses are more than local, as various dialects contain elements of old Chinese. There is widespread lament in various internet chat-rooms that valuable cultural and historical resources may be lost and the value of diversity undermined. Some people have even called for protecting the once powerful Shanghai dialect.²⁵ Qian Nairong, deputy director of the Center for Language Studies in Shanghai, has linked the defense of cultural diversity with the respect for human dignity. For him, "every person has the

right to use one's chosen language, especially one's mother tongue, to express one's thoughts." He and others have called for giving equal treatment to different dialects relative to the Putonghua.²⁶

Partly in response to such criticism, there is increasing attention to the study and perhaps even rescue of endangered dialects, such as Hainan's Liyu.²⁷ Various localities have launched initiatives to record the local dialects so as to preserve and rescue part of the local cultural heritage. Even here, the amount of work that can be done may be limited. Chinese linguists have only had the wherewithal to record the dialects at the county-level and have not been able to conduct a "census" of dialects for decades.²⁸

Language, Soft Power, and China's International Identity

While the Chinese government promotes the use of the Putonghua domestically in the furtherance of the goal of national unity, it has also begun to bankroll the study of Chinese language and culture overseas in recent years. Such initiatives are part of China's strategy to enhance its global influence in terms of "soft power" and stand in contrast to the previous sense of inferiority about things Chinese.

In the early twentieth century, one of the Chinese leading thinkers (Zhang Binglin, discussed in Ramsey, *verify*) argued that the Chinese nation had fallen behind at least partly because the Chinese language was ill-suited to the

modern age. He advocated the abolition of the Chinese script in favor of an alphabet. For several decades Esperanto had a following in China partly because some of the Esperanto promoters considered it a possible candidate for replacing the Chinese language. While advocates of the abolition of the Chinese language are no longer with us, some of their concerns have been reflected in the reforms the Chinese language has gone through, including the adoption of the vernacular and of the simplified characters. Gone is the “baguwen” that had characterized the imperial examinations.

Nowadays the use of English is much appreciated in China as part of its efforts at internationalization. Yet there is concern that according English such official status, coupled with the emphasis on bilingual education and the craze for learning English in China, might make English the dominant tongue and consign Chinese to an inferior position. For example, Shanghai plans to realize bilingual (Chinese/English) education in more than 400 primary and middle schools by 2010. The Ministry of Education has made bilingual education one of the performance indicators for institutions of higher learning and urged universities to use English to teach various subjects, including even Chinese history. In the view of Ma Qingzhu, a professor of Chinese at Nankai University, these efforts to promote the use of English at all levels of education and for publications and public functions is in violation of the Putonghua promotion law and will lead to the further retreat of the Chinese language.²⁹

Ma's concerns are not totally baseless. There is little doubt that the lingua franca for science and for international commerce is English. Recently, for example, some Chinese publications have noted that most international conferences held in China use English as the working language even when most of the participants are Chinese and can speak Chinese better than English and even though many people in the audience could not understand English well. Implicit in this practice is the sense of awkwardness, even inferiority, felt by Chinese scientists who cannot communicate in English.³⁰ The situation is even worse in publications. Chinese scientists and the Chinese government have bestowed greater prestige on publications in top English-language journals. This practice has made it even more difficult for Chinese-language journals to attract top-quality submissions.

For scientists who visit China, the Chinese language is more used to appreciate the local Chinese culture, such as the Peking Opera. Some scholars therefore continue to worry about the relative status of the Chinese language vs. English (this is not unique to China).

In this context, the Chinese leadership has begun to systematically promote China's cultural influence around the world, particularly the learning of the Chinese language. Since 2004, the Chinese government has helped set up Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture overseas and by mid-2006 such Institutes had been set up in at least 36 countries. There

are also growing numbers of foreign students studying in China (give numbers and increase). Thus the establishment of the Confucius Institutes is an effort to meet a pent-up demand. This is indicated by the number of non-native speakers taking the Chinese language-proficiency test. In 2005, some 90,000 took this test, compared with only 2,000 in 1991.³¹

Conclusions:

Since the Qin Dynasty, unificationists have laid great emphasis on the unification of language as part of their drive for a unified empire. Today the promotion of the Putonghua, facilitated by the programs to bring official radio and TV programs to every village around the country, carries the same goal, and the political objectives are even more explicit than before. With the combination of a strong national government and the reach made possible by modern technology, unificationists are succeeding like never before, not only unifying the written script but also the spoken language.

The effectiveness of Chinese central government in promoting the use of the Putonghua has occurred in an era of greater political, economic, and technological integration.³² There is growing sentiment in China that the unificationists may have become too successful. The momentum of their range of programs means that there won't likely be a let-up anytime soon and certainly no reversal of the current trend to ward growing cultural and linguistic uniformity. Yet, with the growing awareness of the riches of regional

cultures and dialects, it is likely more wealthy and more culturally confident China would give somewhat increasing attention to the value of these dialects and cultures even as it expands its programs to promote the study of the Chinese language and the appreciation of Chinese culture overseas.

Endnotes

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