

Remaking a Global Cantonese Community with Television and Social Media

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Series in Language and Linguistics



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:

Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:

Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Language and Linguistics

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023949198

ISBN: 978-1-64889-049-9

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To my parents and the younger brother

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Foreword

by Nigel Murphy

Language is culture. Language is identity. Without a language the culture and identity of a people dies, and Cantonese, the language of Guangdong, and in particular the language of the people of the Pearl River Delta, is no different. The Cantonese language is the heart and soul of the Cantonese people and of Cantonese culture. Throughout China – a vast geographic entity – there have historically been thousands of local languages within the Han populations, as well as the myriad of languages spoken by the ethnic minorities of south and south-western China. Throughout Chinese history the people of each province and county in China spoke their own variations of their local languages. Even adjoining villages often spoke different versions of their local district tongues. For countless centuries this did not pose any difficulties for the people or the rulers of the empire. Ninety percent of the population of China were rural farmers who did not move more than a few miles from their home villages throughout the course of their lives. Officials, however, needed to communicate with each other in order to conduct the business of the empire. A common language that would be understood by officials from all parts of the empire was required, and the obvious choice was the language of the imperial capital and imperial court. With the exception of Nanjing, which is in the south-central region of China, lying on the banks of the Yangzi River, the majority of the rulers of China have resided in the north, and since the Mongolian Yuan dynasty, the capital has mostly been in Beijing. The language that came to be the lingua franca of government was the Beijing and court version of the common language of northern China, now commonly known as Mandarin. The official language of the PRC is a further variation of the language used by the government and the royal court in Beijing, known as Putonghua, or ‘the common language.’ Historically, however, the language of the imperial court in Beijing played no part in the lives of the vast majority of the ‘old hundred names’ of the Chinese people. Their local languages remained their sole means of communication and expression of their local culture and identity. For reasons it is not necessary to discuss on this occasion, the languages in the north of China were more homogenous than in the south, mostly being variations of what has now become the common language of China. In South China, however, the linguistic and cultural diversity was a maze of many unique and mutually incomprehensible languages, formed by the histories of the many peoples who resided in that vast region. While the north was demographically static and culturally and linguistically largely uniform, the south was demographically

composed of people from a wide variety of regions and ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including from what is referred to as the 'original center' centered in the Yellow River valley centered in the province of Henan. To the people of the 'original center,' they were the only civilized people, all other people beyond the borders of the 'original center' were barbarians, and this attitude has remained largely unchanged until today. Although the people now known as Han Chinese were surrounded by people they considered barbaric, by the time of the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, the population and cultural center had moved from the original northern region to the south, and this trend was increasingly solidified in the coming centuries. For the past two thousand years, the cultural center of China has resided in the south, while the political power has remained in the north, and this has shaped the entire cultural and linguistic history and character of China as an entity. Over time many waves of migration from the north to the south have occurred, following the expansion of Han control in the south. The south of China, was not, however, an empty land. It was populated by hundreds of different ethnicities who had lived in the south for tens of thousands of years. As the northern Chinese migrated south, their encounters with the native people profoundly influenced the migrants both culturally and linguistically, creating new, hybrid, and extremely vital variations of the original northern Chinese cultures. While the northern people clung to their original cultures as a means to assert their claim to be the originators, source, and guardians of genuine Chinese culture, the encounters of the migrants to the south with the native peoples of the south created new and ever-evolving variations on the original Chinese culture. As Li Simin notes, the Kingdom of Chu was the epitome of the new variations on Chinese culture, and its mix of the original northern culture with the many southern native cultures produced a new culture that profoundly influenced and continues to influence Chinese culture. The region that became Guangdong was also under the political and cultural influence of Chu, while Chu was, in return, deeply influenced by the cultures of the people of the Guangdong region. Different forms of Chineseness arose depending on the region where the encounters between the Han Chinese and the local peoples took place, resulting in a myriad of regional subcultures. The main language groups that emerged from these encounters were the Wu languages, which was centered around what is now Shanghai, the Min language group, arising in the Fujian provincial group, and the Yue group, which arose in the Guangdong provincial region. As these new hybrid cultures and languages emerged in the south, the northern Chinese viewed the southern Chinese as little better than the barbarians among whom the migrants had settled. The worst opprobrium, however, was reserved for the Chinese who migrated to the southeastern region of what is now Guangdong, the most southern Chinese province neighboring Vietnam. Guangdong, like its northern neighboring coastal province, Fujian, was isolated

from the rest of China by a range of hills and mountains that effectively cut it off from the rest of China, resulting in a distinct culture unique to its region. Because of the mountain ranges that separated Guangdong from the rest of China, the region became known as Lingnam, or the region “south of the ridges.” Despite this separation and isolation from the rest of China, Guangdong people – or the Cantonese as they are more commonly known in Western countries – remained, and continue to remain, intensely proud of being Chinese – often considering themselves more Chinese than all other Chinese in China – they were also intensely proud of being Cantonese and of their Cantonese history, culture, and language. Although having taken on significant aspects of the local Bai Yue (Hundred Yue) languages, they maintained the Cantonese language had kept much of the purity of the Chinese spoken in the original cultural foundational region in the north. The successive waves of migrants to Guangdong also took on many of the cultural traits of the Bai Yue people, including their egalitarianism, their independence, their love of freedom, their freedom of thought, as well as their strong affinity to the ocean and their seafaring skills. This led to the emerging Cantonese cultural focus outwards across the oceans for contact with the people of southeast Asia for the purposes of adventure and for trade. While the rest of China looked inward toward the cultural and political center, remaining disdainful and distrustful of the barbarous peoples beyond the borders of the empire, the Cantonese not only welcomed but sought out contact with the peoples beyond the southern borders of their homeland. During the Tang dynasty of 618-907 CE, universally regarded as the first and one of the highest cultural peaks in Chinese history, all things Chinese began to be referred to by the peoples surrounding China as Tang, and this was also applied to the Cantonese and Fujian people who traveled to and from these countries for trade and settlement. One of the earliest references in Chinese to the Cantonese and Fujian peoples who had migrated to southeast Asia was by Zhou Daguan, a native of Wenzhou, Zhejiang, who, in the first year of Emperor Chengzong of the Yuan Dynasty (1296), was ordered to go to Cambodia with a diplomatic mission to Angkor. Zhou Daguan returned to China in July 1297 after staying for about a year and wrote up his notes about his stay into a book. Concerning the Cantonese people he met, Zhou wrote, “The people of the Tang Dynasty were sailors and because they had difficulties in their country, and rice and grain were easy to find, women were easy to get, houses were easy to manage, utensils were easy to obtain, and business was easy, so they often remained there.” This is one of the earliest references to the Cantonese as “Tang people.” Since that time, the Cantonese, and in particular the Cantonese migrants, have referred to themselves as “Tong yan,” their home province as the “Tong Sarn” (Tong mountains), their food as “Tong faan” and later the Chinatowns that grew in the cities of the English-speaking British colonies as “Tong Yan Gai” or “Chinese Peoples’

Street.” A further element that significantly contributed to the distinct and unique Cantonese identity was the existence of a separate “Kingdom of the Southern Yue,” which emerged at the time of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang, and encompassed the regions of current day Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam (Vietnam – Nam Viet -is the Vietnamese language version of Nam Yuet or southern Yue) This kingdom was created by a Chinese official, Zhao Tuo, who was appointed by Qin Shi Huang, to begin the integration of the Lingnam into the newly-created Qin dynasty. Zhao Tuo established his capital at what is now Guangzhou on the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, married a local Yue woman, became assimilated into the local culture, and founded the Kingdom of Nanyue. Nanyue encompassed most of today’s Guangdong and Guangxi provinces as well as most of what is now North Vietnam. The majority of Nanyue’s residents consisted mainly of the native Yue peoples. The Han Chinese population consisted of descendants of Qin armies sent to conquer the south, as well as girls who worked as army prostitutes, exiled Qin officials, exiled criminals, merchants, adventurers, and others. Concerning the relations between the local Yue and the Han immigrants, Zhao Tuo proactively promoted a policy of assimilating the two cultures into each other. Despite the domination of the Chinese over the Hundred Yue, the amount of assimilation gradually increased over time with both groups influencing the other. The Yi people who lived in the neighboring modern provinces of Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and southern Sichuan, pledged allegiance to Nanyue, resulting in a broad southern indigenous and Chinese migrant identity opposed to the north, which has continued till today.

As far as the language used in Nanyue is concerned, the Han settlers and government officials spoke Old Chinese and the native Nanyue people spoke Ancient Yue, a now extinct language that some speculate was related to the modern Zhuang language. It is also probable the Yue spoke more than one language. The Old Chinese used in the region was much influenced by Yue (and vice versa) and many Yue loanwords in Cantonese have been identified. Indeed, modern Cantonese is now known as Yue.¹

The Han dynasty which succeeded Qin (after defeating the southern Chu Kingdom), acknowledged the existence of Nanyue, and Nanyue paid tribute to Han. Soon, however, Han was threatened by the Xiongnu peoples of the north, and, feeling threatened by the possibility of having hostile people in both the north and the south, decided to invade and overthrow Nanyue and incorporate the region into the Han dynasty. Little more than a century after its formation, Nanyue was destroyed, and the region and its people incorporated into the

¹ Zhang Rongfang, Huang Miaozhang, *Nan Yue Guo Shi*, 2nd ed.

Han, becoming the renamed Jiaozhou circuit in 111 BC. After the fall of the Han in 220 AD, the Guangdong region became part of a number of regional political entities until China was unified again under the Tang dynasty in 662 AD. While the southern half of the Nanyue broke away during a revolt against the Wu in 262 AD and formed a state fully independent politically and linguistically from China, now known as the Vietnam. The northern half of Nanyue, unlike Vietnam, chose to remain culturally within the Sino-sphere, despite retaining many elements of the Nanyue shared with its southern neighbor. These historical events resulted in the unique linguistic and cultural phenomena colloquially known as Cantonese. As noted, Cantonese language and culture was based on the capital of Guangzhou and the surrounding Pearl River Delta, including the land north of Guangzhou to the border with Guangxi and the eastern half of Guangxi Province. These historical events, the region's geographic isolation, and the unique cultural mix of the Old Chinese and the Yue tribes resulted in a very independent, egalitarian, superstitious, clannish, free thinking, fun loving and innovative culture and people. For two thousand years Guangdong has been viewed by the north as notoriously independent and difficult to govern. The Cantonese saying "The hills are high and the emperor far away" sums up the Cantonese attitude to authority and to orders and edicts issued from the Imperial capital. The Cantonese would obey imperial orders if those orders suited them and ignored them if they didn't. Imperial orders were seen more as suggestions than edicts to be slavishly obeyed. After all, what was the emperor going to do? The mountains were high, and the emperor was, indeed, very far away.

Officials began to view "the south" and Guangdong in particular as a dangerous and barbaric place, with savage, uncivilized residents, and a terrain hostile and even deadly to northerners. Guangdong was seen by officials very much as a hardship assignment and almost equivalent to being sent into exile. Officials who misbehaved or used the emperor or top officials were sent to Guangdong as a punishment.

A famous example of early Cantonese identity and northern Chinese disdain of them comes from the story of Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch and founder of Chan Buddhism. Hui Neng was born in 638 in Yunfu, in the west of Guangdong. Although he was born and raised in poverty, after hearing a monk reciting a Buddhist sutra, determined to become a Buddhist monk, and traveled to Hubei to see the Fifth Patriarch Hongren in order to study under him. Because Hui Neng came from Canton and was physically distinctive from the local Northern Chinese, the Hongren told him because he was a "barbarian from the south," he doubted his ability to attain enlightenment. The first chapter of the Platform Sutra describes the introduction of Huineng to Hongren as follows:

The Patriarch asked me, “Who are you and what do you seek?”

I replied, “Your disciple is a commoner from Xinzhou of Lingnan. I have traveled far to pay homage to you and seek nothing other than Buddhahood.”

“So, you’re from Lingnan, and a barbarian! How can you expect to become a Buddha?” asked the Patriarch.

I replied, “Although people exist as northerners and southerners, in the Buddha-nature there is neither north nor south. A barbarian differs from Your Holiness physically, but what difference is there in our Buddha-nature?”

These were not the only differences. Cantonese people’s regular contact with the outside world, their eagerness to take up new ideas and innovations from the outside, and their habit of traveling to other nations by sea for trade and migration, as well as the regular visits of people from around the world to Guangzhou, many of whom remained and set up small colonies in Guangzhou, led to the popular Chinese saying, “everything new comes through Guangzhou.” As noted, while the northern Chinese have continued to view the Cantonese as irremediably barbarian, yet there are no more Chinese people than the Cantonese. And overseas, especially in the West, Cantonese culture and food has long been seen as Chinese. As Erica Brinkly wrote in *Ancient China and the Yue* “This book is rooted in a great irony of Chinese history: what was once considered the dreaded ends of the earth during the classical and early imperial periods over time came to represent the epitome of Chinese culture. The ancient Yue, with its associated peoples, cultures, and lands, was transformed in the Chinese South from other to self, foreign to familiar, theirs to ours, and non-Central States to “China.”

Victor Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania, said national authorities had been promoting Putonghua for around 100 years. “Its primary aim, then as now, has been to attempt to unify the country’s language, but it has an underlying secondary agenda, which is the domination of the south -- Cantonese, Shanghainese, Hokkien, etc. -- by the north, Mandarin.” Cantonese had been tremendously weakened in Guangdong since the People’s Republic was established in 1949, he added. “If it weren’t for Hong Kong, Cantonese would soon cease to exist as a significant language.”

Cantonese independence has also meant the province was the center of rebellions against northern control. The famous Taiping Revolution, which took place between 1850 and 1864, originated in Guangdong, as did the 1911 revolution that brought the end of the last empire and brought the first democratic Republic of China. The Cantonese have been almost universally viewed by the north as both barbarians and traitors, and the rulers of China

have long wanted to tame and neuter the inconvenient and rebellious province, up to and including Communist leaders Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping. But subduing the Cantonese has always been a double-edged sword, as the very independence and rebelliousness of the Cantonese has created one of the richest provinces in China and long introduced new and innovative ideas that have benefited China as a whole. To crush Guangdong is to risk killing the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg. Nonetheless, the CCP has consistently perceived regional identities, regional cultures, and regional languages as serious dangers to Communist rule, and since 1949, its policy regarding regionalism and regional languages has been to promote the use of Mandarin at the expense of regional languages. Its ultimate aim is to create a uniform and homogenous culture and language throughout the whole nation.

This language policy has also been introduced in Hong Kong, universally seen by Beijing as a nest of pirates, traitors, fake foreign devils, white-eyed wolves, and Hong Kong and Cantonese separatists. As with Guangdong, Beijing believes that forcing Mandarin on the overwhelmingly Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong population will help with breaking down Hong Kong's resistance to reintegration into the People's Republic of China. Beijing's increasing pressure on taming Hong Kong has led to a series of protests in the city, the largest taking place between June 2019 and mid-2020, throwing the city into chaos for almost a year.

The paradox of the Cantonese situation is that while the Cantonese have always been extremely proud of their Cantonese culture and identity, they have also been among the most loyal to the concept of Chinese-ness in China. It is said there are no more Chinese people than the Cantonese. This has largely been the result of northern Chinese consistently denying that the Cantonese are 'real' Chinese. The issue is not Cantonese loyalty or disloyalty. The real issue is the CPC. It is the combination of the CPC's paranoid insistence on uniformity throughout China as a means of political control, its deep fear of its own people, its fear of separatism, its never-ending need to shore up its own legitimacy, and the traditional perception that the Cantonese are too arrogant and independent for their own good that has led to the determination of the CPC to neuter, to castrate the Cantonese. Their determination to turn the Cantonese into slaves, like most of the rest of the Chinese. Li Simin's book highlights all of these issues. Li quotes an online Cantonese poster stating, "it would be best if Putonghua disappeared from the world...if the northern devils want to exterminate my mother tongue, I will not stand with them in this world...I never view the northern devils as my compatriots." She also notes that the perception of non-Cantonese speakers in Guangdong as being the colonizing behavior of a foreign nation has become increasingly common in Guangdong since 2009. There are two ways of colonizing a land or a people. The first is to physically invade or demographically overwhelm the land by settlers of the invading force. The

second is to colonize the minds of the people who have been invaded and marginalized in their own land by forbidding the use of their native language, of expressing their traditions and customs, to denigrate their culture as backward and degenerate, and lastly to impose the colonizers' education system on the children to break the children's link to their traditional language and customs in the future, further exacerbating the death of the colonized people's language, customs, culture, and traditions. This, in effect, is what the PRC is doing in its remote geographic regions. In Guangdong, the means used to impose Mandarin as the major language with the ultimate aim of erasing the use of Cantonese language in the province is to forbid its use in the media, in all official use, and in the school education system. This policy has similarities with the policies of the Revolutionary government in France of the 1790s, which imposed a linguistic genocide on all regional languages with the aim of unifying the country by imposing the Parisian version of the French language. Apart from the policy of communist China, the French Revolutionary policy of forcibly imposing a common language on a nation appears to be the only other occasion when this occurred. The contention of both China and France that a nation cannot be unified and function unless all the people of that nation speak the same language, and imposing a single language is an essential part of nation building is plainly not true. Internationally, monolingual nations are almost unheard of. For example, there are 22 official languages in India, Mexico has 62 official languages, Russia recognizes and supports 50 non-Russian languages. Indonesia has 746 languages in addition to the official Bahasa Indonesia. Nigeria's official language is English, three languages are used in the parliament, and 529 other languages are recognized. Therefore, China is unusual in having and enforcing a single language policy.

If one looks at the example of nature, monocultures are unknown and only exist because of human intervention, and these environments universally become sterile and tend to damage the environment. The same applies to human society. Multiculturalism and hybridity are vital and highly creative, while monocultural and homogenous societies become bland, sterile, and lack innovation and creativity. These dangers have already been exposed during the Mao era, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when society and culture became stultifyingly uniform and homogenous to the detriment of Chinese society and Chinese people. It seems, however, that the CCP is not at all concerned about these dangers, as its language and cultural policies are about political control and maintaining its grip on power, not on maintaining regional cultures and languages. It is clear that nations that allow the use of multiple languages and cultures do not create separatism, disunity, or national disintegration. The CCP has a great fear of separatism, or areas of China that threaten, or appear to threaten, separating from China and establishing themselves as independent political entities. The CCP's fears are unsurprisingly

focused on Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. All three have proved to be constant challenges to the CCP's legitimacy to rule China, and any threats of separation from these three regions have been brutally suppressed. Perhaps not surprisingly, Canton has a long history of threatening separatism and independence. Indeed, between 1917 and 1937, Guangdong was a de facto independent entity. Under the rule of Chen Jiongming and Chen Jitang between 1925 and 1937 Guangdong progressed significantly, free of the burdens and interference of the rest of China and the official Nationalist government in Nanjing. Both were military men. Chen Jitang became governor of Guangdong and between 1929 and 1936 made very significant contributions to the province's development, growth, and modernization. He paved city streets and built high-rise commercial centers, numerous factories and the first modern bridge across the Pearl River. He oversaw the establishment of a public school system with modern elementary and high schools and prestigious colleges and universities (including the Sun Yat-Sen University). People of the province fondly referred to this period as the Golden Age of Guangdong and called Chen the Heavenly King of the South (南天王). This era came to an end with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937 and the occupation of Guangzhou by the Japanese in October 1938. This history of de facto Cantonese independence, combined with the province's long history of rebellion and free-thinking, made the CCP especially watchful of events in the province.

Beijing's language policy has been consistent since it took power in 1949, maintaining the position that the official language of China is a version of Mandarin Chinese based on the Beijing dialect, known as Putonghua, or the common language. This policy was introduced in 1956. Putonghua was made China's sole official language in 1982, and its status as the only official language in China was confirmed by the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language*, which came into effect on 1 January 2001.

Of course, languages die out from national causes in society, usually when one language becomes more dominant than others. For example, the Seyip (Siyi) language of four counties southwest of Guangzhou has been under threat of extinction even before 1949 due to the rise of standard Guangzhou Cantonese, the prestige version of Cantonese. Languages also die out if they are perceived as rural, crude, backward, unsophisticated, and used by parochial and simple-minded peasants. This trend is exacerbated when the children of the local language speakers are made to use the prestige language at school. In such cases, the children will view the language used by their parents and grandparents as the language of old people and of little to no use to them in making their way in the world. If there is a solid homeland where these languages are used almost exclusively and with pride and as a source of identity, then the language is more likely to survive. The difficulty with Cantonese is that the homelands and

strongholds of the language are exactly the places being undermined by state language policy. The state is actively undermining the status and use of Cantonese in the very homelands of Cantonese: Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau. For a long time, Hong Kong was seen as the last bastion of Cantonese identity and Cantonese language use. As noted, however, Beijing has increasingly been undermining Cantonese culture, identity, and language as a means to neutralize the potential threat of localism and separatism posed by the city state. The CCP has regularly praised Macau as a model of a successful former foreign colony that has re-integrated with the motherland. Unlike the ‘filial and compliant daughter’ that Macau is praised as being, Hong Kong is portrayed as the ungrateful, disrespectful, and disobedient older daughter. The CCP still views the obstinate insistence of the Cantonese in using their Cantonese language and cherishing their Cantonese history, heritage, and identity, as counter-revolutionary, rebellious, traitorous, and evidence of foreign-controlled anti-CCP separatism.

The struggle with Beijing over the future of the Cantonese language, culture, and identity, however, is not just about the paranoia and insecurities of the CCP. It is also the continuation of the struggle between the north and the south of China, and the north’s two millennia-long disdain for the south, based, no doubt, on more than a little jealousy of the southerners’ success and resentment at how the south has taken the mantle of Chineseness from the northern “original center” to the far south and turned what was once the center to the periphery, and what was once the periphery to the center. The long desire to tame, neuter, and bring to heel the insolence and arrogance of the Cantonese. There are therefore two powerful elements from the north that have combined to create a force against the Cantonese and force it into the family of the tamed, biddable, obedient, and unthreatening provinces of China. Unlike in the past, this time the north may succeed in breaking the spirit of the Cantonese. Today, the hills are no longer high, and the emperor is no longer far away. Distance and geography can no longer protect the Cantonese against Beijing.

In July 2010, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Guangzhou Committee proposed to the mayor of Guangzhou Wan Qingliang that Mandarin programming on Guangzhou Television’s main and news channels be significantly increased, pushing out Cantonese. The proposal was criticized in native Cantonese-speaking cities, including Guangzhou and Hong Kong. A mass rally in Guangzhou was held on 25 July 2010 to protest the proposal. Over 10,000 people attended. Similar protests occurred in Hong Kong.

Han Zhipeng, a member of the CPPCC Guangzhou Committee, expressed his opposition after release of the proposal, saying, “Cantonese is the carrier of Lingnan culture, and the mother tongue of Guangdong people; it is also a bond connecting overseas Chinese, for most of them speak only Cantonese.”

Guangzhou deputy mayor Ouyang Yongsheng also stated, “Cantonese dialect is Cantonese people’s native tongue and is also Lingnan area’s dialect. Guangzhou according to law, according to rule, according to heart, according to reason would never do something to ‘promote Mandarin while abolishing Cantonese.’” Guangzhou TV rejected the proposal, citing “historic causes and present demands” as reasons for Cantonese-Mandarin bilingualism.

Nonetheless, Beijing has systematically increased the pressure on local and non-standard languages. In 2012 further restrictions were introduced on the use of the Cantonese language with the Guangdong National Language Regulations, which promoted the use of Standard Mandarin Chinese in broadcast and print media at the expense of Cantonese and other related dialects. The new regulation policy was labeled by Cantonese as a “pro-Mandarin, anti-Yue” legislation (废粤推普 or 推普废粤). The following year, in 2013, China’s Education Ministry stated that about 400 million people were still unable to speak Mandarin. That year the government pushed linguistic unity in China, focusing on the countryside and areas with ethnic minorities. In September 2020, the CCP announced that from mid-2021 Mandarin would be the only language used as the medium for teaching in schools across the country.

These pressures on non-Putonghua language use in China will continue until Beijing’s aim of a single, uniform, national language used by all throughout China has been accomplished. The examples of resistance and the valiant attempts of some Cantonese to preserve their culture, history, language, and identity against the colonization of Guangdong by Beijing, while immensely inspiring, do have the feeling of the mouse standing its ground and spitting in the face of the cat that is about to eat it. It also raises the question of whether these acts of resistance against the forced imposition of Mandarin are merely delaying the inevitable. The reality of the fragility of Cantonese in the face of the seemingly limitless power of the CPC to impose its will on anyone in China fills many, this author included, with great foreboding for the future of the Cantonese in China and internationally. It can only be hoped, for those who wish to see the survival and flourishing and growth of the intangible cultural treasure of the world, that the efforts of the people described by Li Simin in this book, as well as others, will ensure that outcome and ensure the continuing existence of the Cantonese language, history, culture, and identity.

Nigel Murphy
4 November 2023.

Preface

Writing on the relationships between language and identity has proven to be a challenge. I distinctly recall the time when I submitted an incomplete proposal to my then-supervisor, Dr. Guoguang Wu. He seriously quipped that it resembled a declaration of Cantonese independence. Although voices advocating for independence do exist on the internet, academic research on this subject has often felt like a distant dream. Unlike the vigorous research scene in Hong Kong, where the political landscape has undergone rapid transformations since 2014, nationalism in Guangdong is less conspicuous. Consequently, my journey from conceiving the thesis proposal to completing this book has been marked by an ongoing struggle to define its research position within the intricate relationship between language and identity.

Furthermore, the writing process brought unexpected challenges. In the summer of 2019, I had meticulously planned a visit to Guangzhou, reaching out to a professor at Jinan University and another at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to discuss the possibility of a visiting scholar program via emails. My university had also offered funding support for a field trip beyond Canada, where I aimed to gather academic materials on the Cantonese language, conduct interviews with the show producers in Guangzhou, and seek guidance from linguistic scholars. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 and the months long protests in Hong Kong abruptly disrupted my plans. I never imagined that the pursuit of my second master's degree could potentially be life-threatening. Consequently, I had to relinquish my original data collection method and adapt to an online approach.

Additionally, the process of reading and writing was far from smooth. As one of the early English-language researchers in Guangdong Cantonese studies, I grappled with limited reference literature, the reluctance of interviewees to participate online, and the ever-increasing cost of living in Vancouver. Particularly for interviewees within Guangdong, expressing any opinions during the era of Xi Jinping posed significant risks. Hence, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the five interviewees whose contributions are featured in this book. The responsibility to preserve my mother tongue and honor my hometown consistently motivated me to complete this work despite the moments when thoughts of giving up crossed my mind. In this regard, I am deeply appreciative of my parents' financial support for both my research and my livelihood in Vancouver.

This book has something to offer everyone, regardless of age or background. For those residing in mainland China, it's a journey back in time. Older

Cantonese speakers will reminisce about their childhood, with memories of delicious Cantonese food, playful children's songs, and cherished customs. Even those who aren't native Cantonese speakers will recall the Cantonese TV shows, movies, and music that colored their youth. Younger readers will find familiar elements in the short videos they currently enjoy. For language preservation advocates, this book sheds light on Cantonese speakers' efforts to protect their native language and the challenges they face. For readers outside of mainland China, it offers insights into the country's internal changing landscape, especially grassroots practices and identities. By blending the disciplines of linguistics, political science, and communication, this book provides a broad perspective on how language is intertwined with our sense of belonging.

Simultaneously, my research focus underwent a significant shift. Contrasting with the time I spent writing my first book, "Discourses of Asian societies: cases from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan," from 2014 to 2019, I transitioned from social dynamics and international relations in the Asia Pacific region to a more localized approach. The inspiration for this shift emerged from my recent observations and research experiences in Taiwan and Hong Kong, leading me to concentrate on Guangdong and its global diaspora. Guided by my research intuition into China's internal dynamics and its external relationships, I formed the belief that overseas studies would assume increasing importance. Consequently, I hold the expectation that the future will see a surge in Guangdong studies and scholars with Guangdong backgrounds.

Lastly, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Xu, who spared no effort in supporting my research, as well as Dr. Chau and Dr. Chong, friends from London, Victoria, Vancouver, and the United States, who provided invaluable advice or emotional support. Furthermore, I extend my thanks to the scholars from Canada and New Zealand who contributed the book blurb and book foreword. The challenges I encountered during the pandemic were numerous, but I am immensely fortunate to have had these individuals by my side. It is my hope that this book not only offers fresh perspectives on local studies but also serves as an inspiration to emerging scholars.

Simin Li
Vancouver

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