

BOOK REVIEW

## The Emergence of the Modern Chinese Language: Four Studies

### *Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958*

By Yurou Zhong. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.  
xii + 279 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), \$25.00 (paper), \$34.99 (eBook)

### *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960*

By Gina Anne Tam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.  
xii + 261 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), \$29.99 (eBook)

### *The Sounds of Mandarin: Learning to Speak a National Language in China and Taiwan, 1913–1960*

By Janet Y. Chen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.  
xii + 412 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), \$25.00 (paper), \$34.99 (eBook)

### *Codes of Modernity: Chinese Scripts in the Global Information Age*

By Uluğ Kuzuoğlu. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.  
xi + 309 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), \$25.00 (paper), \$34.99 (eBook)

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doi:10.1017/jch.2024.24

The last few years have seen the publication of a number of books in the Anglophone world dealing with a topic that we may all have taken for granted: the emergence and reform of the modern Chinese language. In 2008 Elizabeth Kaske published a fine volume in this area,<sup>1</sup> but the field did not pick up on it for roughly a decade, and she

<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Kaske, *The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895–1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

moved on to other topics.<sup>2</sup> We now have the books on review here and others in the works, marking real progress. The development of the modern Chinese language, it turns out, is actually a plethora of sub-topics. While on the surface the books reviewed here may seem to cover the same or highly similar material, and indeed there is a certain amount of overlap, they each treat discreet areas of academic pursuit, another indication of a scholarly gold mine (rather than a rabbit hole). In what follows, I shall do little more than lay out their accomplishments, register a few concerns (as is my wont), and offer some final suggestions and future desiderata. But, let me start by saying that all of these works in their own distinctive ways make important contributions to the field.<sup>3</sup>

The first to appear was Yurou Zhong's *Chinese Grammatology*. Generally, paeons to the late Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) do not enhance clarity. Although in this case it helped me understand—slightly—what Derrida was writing about, *Chinese Grammatology* does little to indicate why a native speaker of Chinese as intellectually talented as Zhong would use Derrida as an avenue to better understand the topic at hand. The long paragraph on pages 184–85, for example, remains totally opaque. The book does, however, make a number of signal contributions.

Zhong and all the other authors here perforce address the extraordinary work of Yuen Ren Chao (1892–1982), the great polymath and scholar of the Chinese language. Zhong, however, provides the most extensive treatment and indeed a biography of the man. She also has great material on the role of Qu Qiubai (1899–1935) in the romanization movement and his radicalism, a topic also covered by Kuzuoğlu. I found particularly fascinating her treatment of the role of workers in post-World War I France and the *baihua* movement—the effort to make the written language conform precisely to orality and phonocentrism, a topic of special concern for her—in which James Yen (1890–1990) worked to sharply enhance literacy among the Chinese employed there, Chinese who came from many different “dialect” backgrounds.

Dealing with the many facets of *baihua* affords Zhong the opportunity to assess a number of literary themes not covered in the other works. Her reading of Ye Shengtao's (1894–1988) writings and advocacy of what he dubbed *yutiwen* 語體文 (“colloquialized written language,” 100–101), basically synonymous with *baihua*, added a salient dimension to the complexity of the nuances inherent in *baihua* and literary China. She also offers readers an incredibly intricate intellectual portrait of the paleographer and linguist Tang Lan (1901–1979) and his “ideo-phonographs” (*xingsheng* 形聲), which I found very hard to understand.

Zhong deals in various ways with the many efforts to romanize the Chinese language, and she raises the intriguing conundrum of how those efforts ultimately led not to a romanized Chinese script in use throughout the country (replacing Chinese graphs) but to a push toward a uniform sound system nationwide, what she dubs “from phoneticization to phonocentrism” (9–14). We all know that *pinyin* was the ultimate victor (in the PRC), but she and the other authors reviewed here show us that there were a lot of casualties along the way (some based on the roman alphabet, some on other systems of symbols). She also deftly distinguishes the script revolution from the literary revolution, and their merging.

<sup>2</sup>Personal communication, July 2019.

<sup>3</sup>In a perfect world—or, let us say, in a better world—I would like also to have been able to include Marian Münning's *Sound, Meaning, Shape: The Phonologist Wei Jianguo (1901–1980) between Language Study and Language Planning* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2017), but this was not possible.

When Zhong strays from the main topic into contemporaneous romanization efforts elsewhere, the comparisons are strained. For example, the Soviet efforts to romanize all the many scripts within its territory seem to suggest that peoples willingly abandoned their age-old, culture-laden scripts for the promised blessings of the roman alphabet. In fact, the Soviet regime and its local advocates compelled peoples to do this (before Stalin changed course in 1938 and compelled Cyrillicization). For example (81–82): “the Mountain Jews of Dagestan and the Central Asian Bukharan Jews abandon[ed] the Hebrew script ... [N]umerous Soviet Jewish organizations passed resolutions to Latinize Yiddish.” In contrast to the adoption of pinyin, these fleeting events produced zero results, although Soviet Yiddish underwent internal orthographic reforms.

Whereas Zhong’s book looks intensively at a forty-two-year period, Gina Tam’s volume covers a century. I was often reminded while reading this fine book of the aphorism usually accredited to the great linguist Max Weinreich (1894–1969): “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” “Dialects” in China and around the world often have far more speakers than national languages elsewhere. Because for some reason languages outrank dialects, many linguists prefer the neutral term “lect” for both. Tam makes the very wise choice of using *fangyan* (in romanization) where one would ordinarily use “dialect” instinctively—dozens of times—except in her title and a few other spots. For similar reasons, many of us prefer to use “Sinitic” rather than “Chinese” when discussing the use of the literary “Chinese” language in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. She gives Victor Mair the credit for suggesting “topolect” (meaning regional lect) as a translation, which she dubs a “new term” (21n51), but linguists have used it for a long time.

Language and national (or ethnic) identity are so deeply intertwined, especially in the modern world, that native speakers often regard statements by non-native speakers about the former as an affront to the latter (Tam discusses this on pp. 134–36). While standardization of the national language has enabled people throughout a huge country like China to communicate in both verbal and written form, it also enables the government to make its directives clear everywhere. As Tam notes, it helps forge a shared citizenship and contributes to nation-building. (Similarly, literacy is certainly a desired capacity for as many people as possible, but a national literacy campaign directed from above should always make us wary of the state’s goals.) Tam’s lengthy introduction effectively lays out the plethora of issues before us.

Early in her first chapter, Tam remarks (35): “The idea of a ‘Chinese language’—a language unified in its sound and script used by and representative of a ‘Chinese nation’—was a foreign concept to Qing elites in the nineteenth century.” Putting aside the issue that the Qing was not, strictly speaking, a “Chinese” government, there must have been some inkling of such an “idea.” One is reminded of Liang Qichao’s first (and perhaps only) audience with the Guangxu Emperor; because of Liang’s inability to speak *guanhua* properly, “the emperor ended the audience with displeasure.”<sup>4</sup> Providing a unified language for the ruling class, indeed, was the whole point of *guanhua*, which, in various forms, would have been in use for centuries to streamline one of the world’s oldest bureaucracies. Certainly, I would agree that, in

<sup>4</sup>According to Wang Zhao 王照, as cited in Saitō Mareshi, “Liang Qichao’s Consciousness of Language,” in *The Role of Japan in Liang Qichao’s Introduction of Modern Western Civilization to China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2004), 248; this is also mentioned in passing in Janet Chen’s book (189) under review here.

the nineteenth century, the crises facing China grew ever more severe, and pressures from without demanded faster, more efficient resolutions. Then, again, China had been conquered by foreign armies on a number of occasions spanning centuries, so it's not as if the later crises could have been more severe than, say, the Mongol invasion. Nonetheless, Tam's point is clear that, by the early twentieth century, a perceived need for a (single) "Chinese language" had now risen closer to the top of the national agenda.

Was China in the twentieth century a nation? When did the government and Chinese intellectuals make the leap from empire to nation?<sup>5</sup> There was a growing international trend from the latter half of the nineteenth century—in Europe, most famously in Italy and Germany—that a nation-state had to have not just geographically well-defined and defended borders and ambidextrous capacity to govern within them, but also a unified national language. Some countries, such as Belgium and especially Switzerland, continue to recognize their multilingual actuality (unlike the United States or Canada, where national multilingualism remains a useful myth). Some Chinese intellectuals in the early Republic looked to Japan to provide a good example of an East Asian nation that had unified speech and script; although it is much smaller than China and lectal differences are not as great, it has had a more modest self-assessment of the importance of its own language in the world, and lacked all pretense of "empire" (until the 1930s).

Tam's discussion of missionary writings about the Chinese language contains some fascinating insights. And, while missionaries are not to be taken at their word, it is a bridge too far to assume, as she does, that European interest in categorizing the Chinese language was part of a wholesale desire to colonize the region. She writes: "Under the guise of discovery, Europeans supported their colonial endeavors through empirical research, which gave them the tools to subjugate not only populations but also their histories and identity-expressions. From the eighteenth century [*sic*] to the present, it is difficult to separate the construction of linguistic models from Western imperialism." (60) Such claims are based ultimately on the work of Edward Said and his epigones, but I have trouble imagining Chinese having lost much sleep because William Jones (1746–1794) or some other comparative linguist concocted a taxonomy in his Oxbridge office. Indeed, Tam herself makes a good case for the importance of the work of Joseph Edkins, unrelated to any colonialist design.

Tam's discussion of how the Beijing lect became the basis of the national language is convincing. Agreed, it was not initially the clear front-runner despite being the language of the central government, but Tam might have noted how few cultural figures of the late Qing and early Republic were native speakers of the Beijing lect. The major centers of Chinese culture had, from at least the Song dynasty, diverged from the centers of government. Bringing Zhang Binglin (1869–1936) into the analysis here, as she does, is wholly welcome, as he was a famed opponent of romanization efforts and any design to replace the Chinese language—to say nothing of his status as a brilliant scholar. One contradiction: on page 79, we read that "Zhang was appalled at proposals to replace or supplement Chinese characters with a Japanese-inspired *kana* system"; then, on

<sup>5</sup>Peter Perdue has argued that even contemporary China has not accepted this transition and continues to behave in many regards as an empire. See his "Where do Incorrect Political Ideas Come From? Writing the History of the Qing Empire and the Chinese Nation," in *The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State: Japan and China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 174–99.

page 85, “Practitioners of the 1913 conference adhered to a *kana* orthography inspired by Zhang Binglin.” These cannot both be correct—the former rings most true.<sup>6</sup>

Tam brings her discussion into the early years of the PRC and examines the conflict between topolectal regionalism and *putonghua* (as national language), a phenomenon that remains important down to the present. It will be fascinating to see how the language battles unfold in China in the years to come. She concludes (230, and I wholeheartedly agree): “[T]he most important ... argument I wish to make here is that any discussion about languages absent the identities they represent misses the point. To view languages solely through the lens of practicality is to miss the textured ways people defend, use, and attach meanings to them. Any future of languages in China will be shaped by how the subjectivities on which they hinge shift in tandem.”

Janet Chen’s is the only second monograph in the group, and it is the longest, perhaps a bit too long (e.g., there are 1,132 footnotes). She traces, from the early Republic into the early PRC, the formation of a unified national language in both Mainland China and Taiwan. As she correctly notes, it would be hard to overestimate the difficulty involved in spreading the use of a uniform vernacular throughout “China.” Instead of five mutually unintelligible major “dialects,” the number is closer to seventy, not to mention the multiplicity of non-Sinitic languages spoken by minority peoples throughout the country, especially along its borders.

Chen also addresses the elephantine question in the room: Why even bother? Some Chinese people in the waning years of the Qing, a number of them strategically living in France, even called for abandonment of the “barbaric” Chinese language and the adoption of Esperanto. As Qian Xuantong (1887–1939) wrote in the pages of *Xin qingnian* (5.2 [1918]): “we Chinese truly can be rid of our barbaric, useless, old writing and adopt this one [i.e., Esperanto]. This is just like throwing off the highly cumbersome old garb of the official class and donning the new garb of the highly convenient, short coat with narrow sleeves.”<sup>7</sup> Replacing the Chinese language with an alternative is not Chen’s concern, but I offer it to indicate just how frustrating radical linguists found the very problem Chen confronts. The desire for a unified national language led to suggestions almost as radical as adopting Esperanto. I had to laugh at Qu Qiubai’s dismissive comment (83) that a huge “impediment to alphabetization” and its “most annoying problem” was the tonal system of Chinese; as I read this, it meant that tones (which all of us who learned Chinese as a foreign language had drilled into our heads) could be ignored in the interest of transforming Chinese into an alphabetical language. Similar remarks (224–25) about the tones of the Beijing lect are cited from the writings of Ni Haishu. Even earlier (38), the National Language Unification Preparatory Committee, established in 1917–1918, agreed: “In teaching the national pronunciation, it is not necessary to adhere rigidly to the tones.”

*Guoyu*—the final winner of the search for a national language—did not drop out of the sky. It was a negotiated phenomenon, a “defensive war” (as Chen puts it), with a

<sup>6</sup>There are also a few odd locutions in this volume: “most unique” (p. 69), “oral speech” (p. 69), “rather profound” (p. 70), and “Beijing University” (75, 111). Concerning the last of these, technically speaking, no such place exists (in English), a point I have stressed elsewhere: *Journal of Chinese of History* 7.2 (2023).

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Meng Qingshu 孟庆澍, “‘Yong shi tiao ya tuobei’ de yifa: Wuzhengfuzhuayi yu Qian Xuantong de jijinzhuyi yuyanguan” 「用石条压驼背」的医法：无政府主义与钱玄同的激进主义语言观, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 2 (2005), 126; and Li Dongmei 李冬梅 (Yi Tong-mae), “Cong Esperanto dao Shijieyu: Dong-Ya de Shijieyu yundong” 从 Esperanto 到世界语：东亚的世界语运动, *Dong-Ya pinglun* (2018), 205.

variety of advocates; and the victory of the Beijing lect was far from a foregone conclusion. Imagine the difficulties in China's war against Japan, a topic she deals with. With the Communists from all over the landscape converging in Yan'an and the Nationalists moving further and further to the southwest, there was no time for the niceties of national conferences, fancy dinners, and *maotai* toasts. How were military orders communicated, especially with all the static over military radios? Did anyone not from Hunan really ever understand the Chairman? Something on the order of a modern *guanhua* must have organically emerged. Even model soldier Lei Feng (1940–1962), as Chen recounts for us (273–74), was never able to overcome his Hunanese accent, despite making putatively great efforts for the cause of *putonghua*. More likely in the realm of reality was Chen Boda's apology to Red Guards (in 1966) that they may not have understood his heavily accented Mandarin—and thus his need for an interpreter (275).

While Japan's success in unifying a single national language, as noted above, may not provide the best comparison, one useful point of contrast might have been how the Japanese colonial regimes in prewar Korea and Taiwan were (or were not) able to impose their language on the local population in the several decades of their presence there. How deeply did Japanese language education penetrate in the two societies?

A few quibbles: toward the end of her fine book, Chen mentions the phrase frequently cited during the early years of more recent reforms: *shishi qiushi* 實事求是 (seek truth from facts); she basically attributes the phrase to Mao and Deng Xiaoping. Needless to say, like everything in China, it's much older. Morohashi Tetsuji actually cites a biography in the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the [Former] Han dynasty).<sup>8</sup> One other term that needs a little clarification: in addressing the important issue of the imposition of standards for the creation of a “national language,” Chen notes (8, and 298n19) that the Chinese term for “standard” *biaozhun* 標準 “dates to the Warring States period.” Chen provides no evidence, but both Morohashi and the *Hanyu da cidian* 汉语大词典 (Great Chinese dictionary) claim more modest Six Dynasties and Tang sources as antecedents.<sup>9</sup>

On several occasions, Chen notes in passing the contemporaneous efforts at language modernization in Turkey under Kemal Pasha, about which Chinese language activists were aware. We now turn to a book which does far more than merely fill in this blank—demonstrating a genuine Turkish connection. Uluğ Kuzuoğlu, who knows Turkish well, not only addresses the cultural and intellectual history of Chinese script reform, but also traces the roots of those reform efforts, assesses numerous Latinization and other symbolic schemes for representing Chinese, and discusses psychology and brain science in the context of language learning and a host of other novel topics. His discussion of various typefaces created to represent Chinese is fascinating, as is his description of nineteenth-century missionary contributions to the study of Chinese topolects. The latter is mentioned in the other studies reviewed here, but not to the same depth. Chapter 4 on the history of the simplification of Chinese graphs is a treasure trove of valuable data.

In an earlier life, I studied a figure (Ai Siqi 艾思奇) (1910–1966) who was important in the early Chinese Communist movement and was an essential figure in the formation of Mao's philosophical brain trust. In that research, like anyone who has studied the

<sup>8</sup>Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, *Da Kan-Wa jiten* 大漢和辭典 (Tokyo: Taishukan shoten, 1984), 3:1091c.

<sup>9</sup>Morohashi, *Da Kan-Wa jiten*, 6:528d; *Hanyu da cidian* (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1995), 4:1261.

early Mao, I found the mysterious character of Xiao San (Emi Siao), Mao's first biographer in Chinese, who had a superior knowledge of Russian, to be always just that: mysterious. Kuzuoğlu fleshes him out, and what a fascinating character he was. His friendship with Nazim Hikmet, the Turkish poet and Communist publisher who also spent years in Russia, becomes an essential link to the story of modern Chinese—in a way it has never been told.

Ultimately, Kuzuoğlu reminds us that, despite the uninhibited praise that the invention of *pinyin* has gained in other quarters, it is an utter failure for China's minority nationalities. I would add that, unlike Yuen Ren Chao's romanization scheme, it does not indicate tone. It also, for example, does not distinguish the 'i' in *zhi* and in *ji*, at least not in *Putonghua*, something that the Wade-Giles scheme did effectively (*chih* vs. *chi*). If it has enhanced literacy in China, I for one have not seen the data.

A small number of dubious points that in no way diminish the importance of this excellent book: (1) I found the introductory chapter an odd mixture of insight and base-touching (namely, making sure that certain people and ideas would be invoked, perhaps a "necessary" feature of first books); I almost put it down and refused to read further, which would have been a huge mistake. (2) Was the 'Phags-pa script of the Mongols "failed," as he notes (25)? True, it did not catch on, as the Mongols had wished, and we don't as a rule use it much anymore, but they did at a certain point in time. Would we deem Egyptian hieroglyphics a failure? (3) Citing a Chinese-language essay by James Yen, Kuzuoğlu translates *ci zhimindi* 此殖民地 as "semi-colony" (three times); why "semi" (111, 112)? (4) Kuzuoğlu also missed a chance to compare the Chinese experience with that of Japan by not addressing the award-winning book by Seth Jacobowitz, *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture* (Harvard Asia Center, 2016)—perhaps a topic for a future conference panel.

The reader might expect, from books on language reform, care in dealing with other languages. But one realm in which all four of these books fail miserably—and Kaske succeeded fifteen years ago—is attentiveness to secondary Japanese scholarship on the subject, both a truism and a perennial complaint of my own. At the advice of council, I shall confine these points to a footnote.<sup>10</sup> Kuzuoğlu speaks Turkish and apparently also has an excellent command of Russian, as he uses contemporaneous as well as

<sup>10</sup>Zhong cites not a single Japanese work. Tam cites two: Hirata Shōji 平田昌司, the author of an essay cited here in Chinese translation, finds his name missing a macron; and a work by the great Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 has the wrong characters in its title (117, 253)—should be 鍋牛考, and the publisher should be Shōgensha. She also mis-romanizes the Japanese term for the nineteenth-century effort to merge the language of writing and speech, which should be *genbun itchi* 言文一致 (91, 258). And, on the Chinese front, the Chinese surname 歐 is mis-romanized as "Qu" (92n64). Chen takes a novel approach in this realm. She lists one Japanese article in her bibliography, but after the author's name, Morita Kenji 森田健嗣, she skips directly to the characters and *kana*, obviating the need to render the title of the article and journal in Latin letters. With romanization, the article is: Morita Kenji, "Sengo Taiwan sanchi shakai ni okeru genko seisaku no tenkai" 戦後台湾山地社会における言語政策の展開, *Ajia keizai* アジア経済. What she renders as "Japanese 'national language institutes'" (179) is missing one macron while misplacing another and should be *kokugo kōshūjo* 國語講習所. Kuzuoğlu's multi-lingual bibliography cites two Japanese sources, both incorrectly romanized: (1) the author, Matsumoto Shūji 松本秀士, is missing the macron in his given name, and the title, which is missing the tail ending and mis-romanizes the first term, should be: "Shinmatsu kankō no Chūgokubun jintai kaibōgakusho" 清末刊行の中国文人解剖学書について. The second essay is by Murao Susumu 村尾進, and the title (also missing its tail end), 万木森々: 『時務報』時代の梁啓超とその周辺, should be romanized as "Bankoku shinshin: *Jimuhō* jiki no Ryō Keichō to sono shūhen."

archival documents in that language. Zhong makes several mistakes with respect to non-Chinese languages. As quoted above, she writes that “Central Asian Bukharan Jews abandon[ed] the Hebrew script,” but it was not, technically, “Hebrew,” but Jewish, as it was used for all written Jewish languages (not just Hebrew). When Zhong wanders into nuances in European languages, it is unclear whether she actually knows those languages or is relying on others who may or may not know them. Examples include: page 81 for Russian where “Пролеткульт” has an unwanted acute accent; page 216, note 48 has a reference in romanized Russian packed with errors; page 87 for several German terms from Marx, relying on Gayatri Spivak whose knowledge of German is in doubt; and page 200, note 48 for French where *pied-noir* is defined as “Algerian Jew”—like Levy’s Rye Bread, you don’t have to be Jewish, just of European origin born in Algeria prior to 1962 when Algeria acquired independence from France.<sup>11</sup> Like Zhong, Tam does not seem to understand Russian well. She is right to include Soviet influence on Chinese language planning, but wrong when she writes (160): “The category of language was unique among other speech patterns due to its inextricable link to the *natsia*. A term taken from the writings of Marx and Engels, *natsia* is often translated into English as ‘nation.’” The work being cited as the influencer was Stalin’s one and (thankfully) only venture into linguistics. The proper romanization of the Russian word is *natsiya*, which indeed does mean “nation.” The term could not have come from Marx and Engels, neither of whom was literate in Russian, and I frankly doubt that Stalin knew German terribly well. Like Zhong and Tam, Chen recognizes that there was a Soviet contribution to the development of *pinyin*, but she wisely does not try to cite any sources or even Russian words.

One final criticism: A little more attention to indexes would have been salutary. Tam’s and especially Kuzuoğlu’s are really deficient, and it’s a shame because the cursory reader who searches the index for references that s/he may wish to find may miss out on something important. For example, Kuzuoğlu does not even have an entry for “Stalin” in his index; good thing for Kuzuoğlu the Georgian died over seventy years ago.

I don’t want to end on a negative note. The four books are all, in their own ways, contributions to a field of scholarship—the emergence of modern Chinese—that has been much overlooked by all but historical linguists. The oversight is unfathomable, except insofar as “philology” has, until recently, been the object of severe denigration, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Perhaps that is changing now, all to the good. The process by which we have all siloed ourselves—among other things, separating philologists from historians—has had a deleterious impact on cross-Asian and cross-cultural comparisons. Hyper-theorization has also split research on individual countries in half (at least), while sucking up precious time in graduate school from learning truly important skills.

<sup>11</sup><https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672650/>.