

BOOK REVIEW

Gina Anne Tam,

Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860-1960 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

Coraline Jortay, University of Oxford

Dialect and Nationalism in China offers a history of the national language project from the inside out: taking *fangyan* – dialects or local tongues – as its core. *Fangyan* (方言) is, of course, a highly charged term with complex linguistic, geographical, and translational implications. Indeed, the question of what qualifies as a “language” and what merely as a “dialect” is often a politically charged one.¹ Rather than being impeded by these complexities, Gina Anne Tam’s lucid book explores the crucial role that *fangyan* as a category played in Chinese nation building from the late nineteenth century onwards. She argues that *fangyan* came to be “translated as, imagined as, [and] framed as the equivalent of a dialect” (26) by a generation of Chinese linguists who grappled with one of the thorniest reforms of their time: providing China with a national language – and *which* it should be.

In historicizing *fangyan* as a category which informed national policy, *Dialect and Nationalism* constitutes a welcome addition to the recent wave of scholarly interest for the history of linguistic reforms, linguistic debates, and their reciprocal interactions with print culture and nation building.² While most recent scholarship has focused on script and grammar, Tam’s book shines through its primary concern for phonetics and phonology. Read as a phonological companion to Zhong Yurou’s *Grammatology*, this volume furthers our understanding of the processes through which national linguistic taxonomies were enacted in modern China. Tam contends that the two seemingly opposing positions that dominated the twentieth century – proponents of a single national language as the epitome of a unified national identity or proponents of *fangyan* as markers of a more polyphonic but somehow more *authentic* national identity – were premised on the very same ideals of Han unity (14). To the advocates of these respective positions, either there was one true *Chinese* language and *fangyan* were its dialects, or *fangyan* were indeed distinct but all stemmed from an even more authentically *Chinese* historic phonological core. Like a photography negative, Tam’s focus on the underlying *fangyan* crucially reveals as much – if not more – of the history of national linguistic construction than focusing *a posteriori* on the result photograph – Mandarin – would have been. In this light, Tam’s crystal-clear recapitulation (27-32) of what Mandarin, Chinese, *guanhua*, *guoyu*, *putonghua*, etc. referred to historically should be required reading for students and scholars alike, given how often many of us – myself included – tend to stumble upon the

finer distinctions between these terms at different points in history.

Chapter 1 retraces how notions of *fangyan* and *dialect* first became superimposed onto one another by exploring frameworks and narratives on the nature of *fangyan* articulated in the late imperial period. Readers are given a tour of the representation of oral languages and localized vernaculars in different media: Qing dynasty rime tables, dictionaries, Buddhist chant booklets, Ming-Qing songs, Kunqu opera, and missionary writings. Tam shows how comparative linguistics, romanization advocacy, and language-dialect hierarchical models often worked as a tool of European colonialism (51-60) as they were presented as the basis of linguistic modernity, and linguistic modernity was presented in turn as the basis of the modern nation state. The chapter is also a useful reminder of how much twentieth century Chinese linguists *de facto* quietly borrowed from imperial dictionaries, rime tables, and methods of the Kaozheng school for their own methodologies, all while vocally discrediting Kaozheng as an intellectual posture.

Chapter 2 flips inside out the oft-told story of the late Qing and early Republican linguistic projects – retelling “the story of the national language with *fangyan* at its center” (73). Starting off with the Hundred Days reform and the model of Japanese linguistic standardization, Tam shows how, for some late-Qing reformers such as Zhang Bingling, ideas of linguistic purity quickly became conflated with notions of racial purity (79). Skilfully weaving the threads of a linguistic history that is extremely complex and immensely broad, she traces the shifting political landscapes of the Republic and their linguistic implications. She shows how the 1913 conference sought to create a hybridized national “language that represented the ethnically Han” (95) through the hybrid phonological sum of the country’s major *fangyans*. She follows the intellectual trajectories that led to the eventual abandonment of this project in favour of the *fangyan* of Beijing by Yuen Ren Chao, Qian Xuantong, and Li Jinxi in the mid-1920s. She sketches the rise of the different iterations of *zhuyin fuhao* from the 1913 conference through to the Nanjing decade. Having presented us with the view from above, that of prescriptive linguists in their official governmental capacity, Tam then provides as a counterpoint descriptions of *fangyan* in gazetteers and vernacular periodicals (俗話報/白話報) from Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian (100-108). Although few of these publications addressed language directly and often advocated

baihua when they did, these sources provide remarkable descriptive accounts of *fangyan* such as lists of unique vocabulary or pronunciation systems that attest to regional linguistic identity.

The move from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3 is one from politics to the academy, as Tam explores how *fangyan* were incorporated into scientific paradigms of linguistic modernity through the emerging fields of folksong studies, dialectology, and ethnography. Tam surveys the work of Liu Bannong and Zhou Zuoren in the Folklore Collection Movement, the influence of comparative linguistics on first-generation dialectologists such as Lin Yutang, the debates over the categorization of Hakka, and Li Fang-kuei's studies of Tai in southwest China. Tam's account of the links between phonology and ethnology (民族學) shows very tellingly how linguistic research often "implicated the making of ethnicity in China" (135-136). However, the distinction being made between politics (Chapter 2) and academia (Chapter 3) might be a little too stark given how many prominent dialectologists of the time were also actively involved in linguistic policy. For instance, Liu Bannong is presented solely within the context of the Folklore Collection movement (114-115), while he was also a prominent member of the Committee for the unification of the national language heralded by the Ministry of Education, and a major contributor to the description of the phonology of *fangyan*. He was one of the first to record the tones not only of Cantonese, but of many *fangyan* from Beijing, Wuhan, Nanjing, Changsha, Yunnan, Anhui, and Wuxi in the early 1920s. In this light, the boundary between the political and academic realms is perhaps at times more fluid than is otherwise suggested.

Chapter 4 is where the book really shines in leveraging archival material and oral history interviews. It shows how the CCP co-opted pre-existing narratives on *fangyan* and highlights the discrepancies between ideology and reality in the national language survey of the 1950s. Tam narrates in detail the story of the promulgation of *putonghua* and its organization, working with a wealth of primary material from the Guangdong Provincial Archives, the Shanghai Municipal Archives, and personal interviews with dialectologists who participated in the 1957 *fangyan* survey. She traces the shifting meanings of terms such as *putonghua* which, before coming to mean the official language of the PRC, were used during the Yan'an years to refer to the "everyday modes of speech within the public sphere – at factories, shipyards, stations, and inns" (152-53). The chapter is key in understanding what ultimately led to the coalescing of *putonghua* into *hanyu* and the radical shift away from the advocacy of a multiplicity of topolects as the true natural expression of the masses that had characterised early CCP practices (163-67). In her account of the 1957 national *fangyan* survey (173-176), Tam unpacks the tension that existed between a seemingly straightforward project of standardization (record *fangyan* pronunciation and capture their differences with *putonghua*) and the problems faced by surveyors on the ground: lack of training, unclear instructions, setbacks as collaborators fell afoul of the Anti-rightist campaign, etc. She shows how theatre emerged as a site of tension and negotiation in the 1950s as "local *fangyan* theatre" was exempted from the

compulsory *putonghua* rollout (182-183). Could one national language accurately represent the masses, beyond uniting them? Chapter Four is most illuminating when it unravels the early PRC conundrum that was choosing between the "language of the people" as the true natural expression of the masses, or a single language for a unified People's Republic.

The fifth and last chapter examines the relative exile of *fangyan* after 1958, when a huge push for literacy and national language education occurred. Which language one spoke came under scrutiny for revealing political loyalty and patriotism. A striking example is the case of the Putonghua Teaching Achievement Exhibitions (普通话教学成绩观摩会) (188-195), heirs to the Republican-era *guanmohui* and sort of faraway ancestors to the language-proficiency televised contests of today. In these competitions, seventy to eighty percent of the participants' score was based on correct pronunciation in *putonghua*, while twenty to thirty percent was based on correct political content. In the context of the 1960s, one could not ask for a better demonstration of just how extremely political correct pronunciation was, to be given a higher weighing than political content. Eventually, the rhetoric of *fangyan* as subversive that pervaded the Cultural Revolution, waned as the 1980s provided dialectologists and artists with renewed linguistic freedoms to resume their work. Nevertheless, the later sections of Chapter 5 show very tellingly the persistence of the idea that language use reflects political loyalty in the PRC.

In conclusion, *Dialect and Nationalism in China* offers a fresh and deeply researched contribution to the history of linguistic reform in modern China. It demonstrates how the ways in which we view and study language today are deeply embedded in categories formed at the turn of the twentieth century. As reformers grappled with whether China should be a unified monolingual whole or a multilingual country, Tam shows how both camps shared a common understanding that *fangyan* crystallised national identity and Han ethnicity, blurring in the process the boundaries between nation, ethnicity, and culture. Whether *fangyan* were understood "as local subsidiaries of a broader Chinese language or [as] representatives of the Chinese nation in their own right" (211) is where both sides disagreed. In a sense, Tam's book is thus the history of not just how the term *fangyan* was constructed as a category, but of two opposing visions of the word *guoyu*: one singular and one plural.

This raises a host of tantalizing questions that further interrogate the fraught historical relationship between *fangyan* and *guoyu*, not least in outlining how, to a certain degree, *fangyan* were often conceived at times as *guoyu* in their own right. An example of such tension can be found in Liu Bannong's 1925 PhD dissertation *Les Mouvements de la langue nationale*. In the introduction, Liu Bannong starts off by deliberately highlighting the polysemy of *guoyu* as used by himself and his contemporaries in the wake of the 1913 congress. *Guoyu*, he writes, is polysemous and is "not always equivalent to the national language." For instance, he adds, "in a sentence such as 'unify the *kuo-i*' [plural] (統一國語), it is equivalent to the word 'dialect'."³ If *guoyu* can indeed also refer

to “dialects” at times, as Liu Bannong lets on, Tam’s argument would be even more compelling. In this light, how could we re-envision, for instance, the work of the Preparatory Committee on the Unification of the National Language (國語統一籌備會) from the perspective of *fangyan*? Would we read some of our primary sources differently if we untethered the Committee’s work from its official received English translation (“the National Language,” singular) to envisage that *tongyi guoyu* could be read by its contemporaries as “unify the dialects” (plural). What would change and what would stay the same if *guoyu*, plural, effectively also sometimes meant *fangyan* during that fleeting historical moment?

On the other hand, as Tam makes clear, those “trumpeting the significance of *fangyan* were not simultaneously claiming that just any language – existing or invented – could represent China,” (9) as both sides viewed *fangyan* as unequivocally Han. Here, languages “existing or invented” can potentially bring us fruitfully much beyond the hybrid *fangyan* amalgamation attempted by the first Republican convention that is described in Chapter 2. In many ways, what struck me in reading the book was how similar the methods underlying this hybrid construction and the first iteration of *zhuyin fuhao* were to the construction of Esperanto itself. And, as Tam notes on a few instances, several reformers were strong believers in linguistic

engineering and proponents of Esperanto themselves. When the 1913 conception of a crafted hybrid language came under fire in the 1920s for defying logic, some of those critics had previously been die-hard Esperantists. In this light, I wonder how a discussion of Esperanto might have helped further the book’s argument that what was at stake was naturalizing the link between language, nation, and ethnicity. If the “hybridity” of an artificial language was not deemed problematic, what do the changing attitudes towards hybridized *fangyan* tell us of the shifting political climates of the 1920s? And how might a discussion of *fangyan* and linguistic policy in light of, for instance, Brigid O’Keeffe’s recent *Esperanto and Languages of Internationalism in Revolutionary Russia* nuance and enhance Tam’s theoretical argument?⁴

As *Dialect and Nationalism in China* opens up such new lines of enquiries, its breadth, depth, and welcome emphasis on continuities from the late imperial period throughout to the PRC should make it tremendously helpful to scholars and students. And quite importantly, it is most definitely a thoroughly enjoyable read, too.

¹ *Fangyan* is also translated as “topolect” see Victor Mair “What Is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 29 (1991), David Prager Branner, *Problems in Comparative Chinese Dialectology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), and Tam’s own discussion of the term (25-27).

² Zhong Yurou, *Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019; Jeffrey Weng “What is Mandarin? The Social Project of Language Standardization in Early Republican China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 77(3) (2018), 611–633; Robert Culp, *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire*

to Maoist State Socialism. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

³ In the original: “l’expression *kuo-ü* n’a pas toujours une signification fixée, c’est-à-dire qu’elle n’est pas toujours l’équivalent de “la langue nationale”. Exemples: I) Dans une phrase comme “unifier les *kuo-ü* 統一國語”, elle est l’équivalent du mot “dialecte”. Translation mine. Liu Fu [Liu Bannong]. *Les Mouvements de la langue nationale en Chine*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1925, p. 1.

⁴ Brigid O’Keeffe, *Esperanto and Languages of Internationalism in Revolutionary Russia*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing (2021).

Response

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First, let me start by expressing my deep appreciation for Coraline Jortay's engaging review of my book, *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860-1960*. It is no small task to carefully and engage another person's work, and, through that engagement, enhance that work's meaning by offering additional insight. I am genuinely honoured that Jortay has taken the time to share her thoughts, and I am delighted to respond to her shrewd observations.

This thoughtful review clearly benefits from Jortay's wealth of expertise on the relationship between translation, gender, and language reform in twentieth-century China. As she correctly explains, my book traces two co-evolving discourses about *fangyan* and nation over the twentieth century: one that saw *fangyan* as subsidiary to a dominant national language and thus an obstacle to the realization of a unified national citizenry, and a second that saw *fangyan* as representative of a more authentic Chinese nation that spoke in not one language but many. With a striking metaphor, Jortay compares my unique examination of language reform through the lens of *fangyan* to a "photography negative"—an approach that tells us just as much, if not more, about the image than if we were to look at the result photograph (Mandarin). Such a visualization helps to bring into sharp relief, no pun intended, the fact that *fangyan* were not simply peripheral concerns in the making of today's linguistic regime, but in fact, central to understanding its creation. Jortay also highlights how my book doesn't *just* address the titular nationalism it promises in the title, but explores other topics as well, such as how so much of what we know about language today emanates from the violence of Western imperialism, or how the construction of Chinese nationalism relied upon the simultaneous gatekeeping of the Han ethnoracial identity.

Jortay's summaries of my chapters reinforce the core narrative trajectory of my book, which traces the complex history of how discourse on *fangyan* evolved from the end of the nineteenth century through the height of the Maoist period. While she generally finds this arc compelling, she also raises an astute critique: that the thematic focuses of Chapters 2 and 3, which cover, respectively, how language reform efforts and changes in academia shaped the meaning of *fangyan* in the Republican period, overstate the separation between the two. This is a criticism well taken, as it is a decision with which I long struggled. The separation came as a result of trying to create a thematic focus for each chapter that reinforced the evolution of the discursive meaning of *fangyan* over time. But this narrative arc that neatly compartmentalizes particular spaces in which that evolution unfolded had the unintended but very real effect of compartmentalizing the human complexity and full lives of the men who drove that evolution. As I wrestled with this problem, I began to wonder if this is, perhaps, something with which many cultural historians struggle—that in our efforts to

achieve clarity in our explanations of cultural shifts, we tend to artificially impose order onto something that is by its nature diverse, complex, and fluid. To this day I am not entirely sure how I could have organized my book in a way that both maintained clarity and accounted for these overlapping narrative threads. I hope that, as I develop as a researcher, I can learn to strike a better balance.

Beyond this thoughtful criticism, Jortay also raises two fascinating questions. First, she asks about how a discussion of Esperanto might have helped "further the book's argument that what was at stake was naturalizing the link between language, nation, and ethnicity." The history of Esperanto in China, embraced by a small but influential number of language enthusiasts seeking to break the tether between language and the nation-state imposed by global imperialism, is a fascinating one. To me, the history of Esperanto in China adds two new insights to the books' narrative. First, the popularity of Esperanto among a subset of revolutionaries in early twentieth century China reveals the effects of alternative visions of how language related to the nation beyond those my book narrates. In my book, I argue that *fangyan* provided an alternative nationalism not reliant on a homogenous vision of Chinese-ness tied to state power. Esperanto, like *fangyan*, offered that alternative; unlike *fangyan*, however, Esperanto did so by denying the importance of linguistic borders altogether. This was the main reason Esperanto was so heavily criticized. Many Chinese reformers railed against Esperanto enthusiasts in large part because in their advocacy, they negated the importance of language's relationship to ethnicity, history, and nation altogether. In other words, Esperanto, by imagining a world untethered to nationalized linguistic borders, highlights the numerous ways early-twentieth century Chinese language enthusiasts attempted to challenge a homogenous nation; the fierce criticism against it, on the other hand, reveals just how committed *fangyan* enthusiasts were to ensuring the tether between language and ethnicity remained intact.

Yet there is also a second way to answer Jortay's question: Esperanto can also be used as an analogy for highlighting the creativity involved in early-twentieth-century national language construction. When I present on the history of China's first *Guoyu* from 1913, audiences often deftly point out its similarities with Esperanto. The creators of both boldly embraced their languages' artificiality, their newness, and their purported inclusivity by combining qualities of many extant languages into a new, singular tongue. Yet the usefulness of this particular analogy raises a bigger question—what do analogies do for us as scholars? In an ideal world, analogies offer clarity and insight, bringing into sharp relief unexplored or unprobed assumptions that we miss when looking at an event or topic in isolation. What the process of writing this book has taught me

is that so much of what we know about language comes from histories specific to Europe. Jortay's question thus actually emphasizes how much we need new work that expands our go-to frameworks so that we are not so confined by the hegemonic influence of the Euro-American context. How, for instance, might the history of Esperanto be clarified if it was compared to China's *Guoyu*? What if we were less concerned about whether or not Cantonese is a dialect, but rather, whether or not Italian is a *fangyan*?¹ What new intellectual inquiries might open up to us if we began to treat Asian history as an analogy that brings the European experience into focus rather than the other way around? I have no doubt that Jortay's own work will be a critical part of exploring this question in the future.

Jortay ends her review with a particularly insightful observation that, in some contexts, our historical subjects imagined the term *Guoyu* not as the singular (as in a national language) but as plural (national *languages*). Jortay's point—that our tendency to always translate *Guoyu* in the singular may obscure particular histories or, worse, reinforce the very hegemonic narrative my book seeks to undercut—would have been a terrific addition to the book. Indeed, this question of translation brings into sharp focus just how many prominent voices in early-twentieth-century China imagined a linguistic future not defined by top-down homogenization.

Jortay's question applies not just to how we think about the past, but also the future. In conversations about my work, I often encounter well-meaning challenges to my intimation that

¹ Arguably, there are efforts to do precisely this among a group of scholars who prefer the translation of *fangyan* as “topolects,” a term popularized by Victor Mair in his “What Is a Chinese ‘Dialect/Topolect’? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 29 (1991). Advocates of this term clearly recognize the limitations of the Euro-American linguistic frameworks and seek to use new terms to move beyond it, which I applaud. Yet sometimes, the term is

national linguistic homogenization was neither foreordained nor necessary. Even if the enforcement of one singular national language creates homogenization through cultural violence, I am asked, are there really viable alternatives to linguistic standardization in the modern world? These questioners often presume that a singular national language is inherent to the nation-state, and struggle to imagine world where language is not constrained by national borders or given legitimacy and power by the state. Jortay's fascinating point reinforces a core message of my book: we needn't rely solely on our imagination to conceive of the disaggregation of language and nation. We can, instead, look to history. As long as there have been people trying to twin a singular nation and a singular language, there have been people questioning whether this one-to-one twinning is inevitable.

I am grateful that many of the questions Jortay raises are, in my mind, still fodder for exciting new inquiries. It is a reminder that writing a book can be as much the end of a research journey as the beginning of one, as a book's publication opens the opportunity to talk openly and honestly about ideas unexplored or questions unanswered.

used solely in a Chinese context so as to note the empirical linguistic differences among Chinese *fangyan* while avoiding grappling with the inherent politicization of “language” or “dialect.” This particular usage concerns me, as it has the rather more insidious effect of obscuring how unequal power dynamics affect how we assign particular languages unequal cultural and material values.