Chapter 1
Dialect Issues in Multilingual China: A Dog That Has Barked

China is a multilingual country with hundreds of different languages spoken within its borders. The Chinese language, with more than a billion speakers, can be divided into seven or eight regional dialect groups that consist of hundreds of mutually unintelligible dialects. Cantonese is an influential regional dialect with a large number of speakers in the Pearl River Delta region, Southern China, and in overseas Chinese communities. Sociolinguists, dialectologists, and language activists will find the three sentences above problematic in various ways. The debates are heated and open as to whether the "Chinese language" should be in plural form, how to distinguish "language" and "dialect", and whether it is institutionally downgrading a linguistic variety (Cantonese) by defining it as a "dialect" while "it is in fact a language". These issues are controversial and highly relevant for any academic who tries to think clearly about languages in multilingual China. Therefore, we will come back to them later in the book, but for the time being, we will be temporarily content with this oversimplified definition of Chinese multilingualism to examine debates on language issues beyond academia.

1.1 The Report and the Denial of the "Cantonese Day"

On the morning of December 24, 2008, a news item was published on the front page of Guangzhou Daily (Fig. 1.1). Guangzhou is a major city in southern China, my hometown, and the setting of the current book. Guangzhou Daily is a widely circulated local newspaper issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee in Guangzhou.

According to a report (He 2008), a downtown school started a campaign called "Cantonese Day" because they allegedly found that many Guangzhou children were no longer able to speak Cantonese. The news contained a number of features that would excite a fledgling sociolinguist like me. Firstly, the main title was written in vernacular Cantonese, or Cantonese vernacular written language—to emphasise the existence of a distinct written language for Cantonese. Two of the three follow-up

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Fig. 1.1 Main title in *bold:* Many Guangzhou kids cannot speak Cantonese. Smaller subtitle *underneath:* XLZ Primary School designates 1 day each week to be “Cantonese Day” in order to eliminate “Cantonese illiteracy”. It is advocated that the students should not speak more than 20 Putonghua sentences on that day

articles in the same newspaper also used titles written in vernacular Cantonese. On the other hand, the subtitles and the body of the reports were written in Standard Modern Chinese (SMC), just like other articles. As these reports talked about literacy and illiteracy in Cantonese, it was interesting to see how both the construction and consumption of the texts required some level of biliteracy in Cantonese and SMC (see more detailed sociolinguistic analysis of the title in Liang 2014). Secondly, one issue often mentioned but glossed over by the reports is language identities and language loyalty in the multidialectal city of Guangzhou. What defines “Guangzhou kids”, why are they bound by the responsibility to speak “good Cantonese”, and additionally, what is “good Cantonese”? Thirdly, the school in the report officially promoted Cantonese on campus, which may or may not be interpreted as going against the current Putonghua[1]-promoting language policy. I had only seen reports about schools banning Cantonese on campus before, so what does such an unusually proactive role of the school imply? These questions became the inspiration for my doctoral research project from which the current book draws data.

The idea of doing fieldwork in that particular school was very tempting. Three months after the report, I wrote a letter to the headmistress of XLZ, introducing myself and indicating my interest in the “Cantonese Day” activity. The letter was passed through an acquaintance of hers and I was surprised to be told by this acquaintance that there was no such activity in that school. Nevertheless I managed to make an appointment with the headmistress on a school day in late March 2009, hoping that a face-to-face discussion might be helpful. The first thing she did after we sat down in her office was to accuse the newspaper of dishonest, exaggerated, and distorted reporting only to get public attention. She even had to explain to the municipal officials about this matter. She stressed that the so-called “Cantonese Day” was a really small part of a series of activities introducing the culture of Guangzhou, for support of the 2010 Asian Games. Then she formally refused my request of carrying out fieldwork there and gave a number of different reasons. Towards the end of the meeting, she came back to the topic of the “Cantonese Day” and talked about national language policy. She said national language laws required that Putonghua must be promoted at school. It would be against the law if she, in the capacity of a

[1] Putonghua is also widely known as Mandarin. It is spoken SMC and the official lingua franca of China. More discussion of its history and relationship with other Chinese linguistic varieties will come in later chapters.

headmistress, had promoted Cantonese instead of Putonghua on campus. That was why the Municipal Bureau of Education paid close attention to this matter. After the meeting, an anonymous source told me that the local education authority gave the headmistress a hard time because of the "Cantonese Day". That seemed to explain her preoccupation with the event and defensive attitude during the meeting.

This "setback" gave me a hint of how controversial and sensitive the topic of my study could be. I took note, learned to be "diplomatic", and chose other schools for fieldwork. At the time, I thought the news report about the "Cantonese Day"—while causing debates and attracting follow-ups from even central media like the People's Daily (the overseas version) —would be yet another story quickly forgotten by the masses. I was wrong. It was the prelude to a "saga" that caught national or even international attention.

1.2 The Protest triggered by a Survey

What made the "Survey Incident" different from others is a historians' puzzle. Maybe it was because the introduction of Sina Weibo (a Chinese hybrid version of Twitter and Facebook) in September 2009 shook the authority and monopoly of the state media. Now ordinary people not only have instant access to information, but they themselves can be the sources of information for anyone, not just their friends. Censorship is not lifted but delayed because of massive internet traffic. People also learn to dodge censorship for as long as they can by using euphemisms, writing in dialects (!) and foreign languages, and creating new words, some of which eventually become widely used. The website China Digital Times provides an interesting collection of comics and articles on these Chinese netizens' vocabulary, and there is scholarly research on the topic too (Meng 2011; Tang and Yang 2011). On the other hand, maybe it is just time for accumulated social problems to break out in the guise of language issues: massive internal migration that completely changed the city's demography, systematic unequal allocation of socially valuable resources according to household registration status[2], and residents struggling between multiculturalism and local identities.

In any case, on June 7, 2009, a Monday morning, a locally well-known Sina Weibo user posted a shocking tweet claiming that the Guangzhou Television Station (GZTV) was planning to stop broadcasting in Cantonese. He/she asked everyone to participate in the online survey by clicking the link provided to show their positions. It was a survey on the website of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Guangzhou Committee, a political organisation that plays an important and regular role in policy-making under the leadership of CCP (China Consulate 2007). By the time I saw the tweet in the evening and went to the website, the visitor count of the webpage was already over 7 million (I took a screenshot), while on any regular day that number would not go over two digits.

[2] The exact Chinese terminology is *Hukou*, which will be explained later in the book.

The questionnaire was short, containing only ten multiple choice questions and one open question. The questions asked about the participants' biographical information, usual language preference, and preference for television broadcasting language. The whole questionnaire was rather badly designed, but the most controversial questions were number eight and nine. Question eight asked: "Is it better for the Guangzhou Channel and the News Channel (the two major channels) of GZTV to broadcast in Putonghua or Cantonese?" The participant had to choose one from the two options: Putonghua or Cantonese. Question nine asked which adjustment to the broadcasting language the participants approved of. There were three options this time. Option one was to use Putonghua as the sole broadcasting language during the prime time of the Guangzhou Channel and use Cantonese during other periods. Option two was to change the broadcasting language of the Guangzhou Channel completely from Cantonese to Putonghua and set up another Cantonese channel. Option 3 was to maintain the status quo. The centre of the debate was on whether the questionnaire indicated the government's intention to replace Cantonese with Putonghua as the main broadcasting language of GZTV. Some "sidetracks" included whether Cantonese would be endangered, whether or why people in Guangzhou do not abide by the national Putonghua-promoting language policy, and who exactly are "the Cantonese". Cantonese soon became a trending phrase on Sina Weibo. Many personnel working in the printed and broadcasting media participated in the debate. It certainly seemed that the debate would be on the front page of newspapers on the next day. There was nothing. Mr. Han Zhipeng, a CPPCC Guangzhou Committee member and owner of a local newspaper, posted a tweet on Sina Weibo in the afternoon. He claimed that the local newspapers did write a lot on the matter but could not put the articles in print because they received certain directions that stopped them (Han 2010)

June 9, the next day, Yangcheng Evening Post, another influential newspaper founded and owned by CCP, covered the news. The report quoted comments from Sina Weibo, interviews of the person (unnamed) in charge of the matter at the CPPCC Guangzhou office, and a respected dialectologist in Guangzhou (Zhang 2010). The points included that (1) the questionnaire had been misread, and (2) Putonghua is not the enemy of Cantonese. Several reports or editorials appeared in the local newspapers in the following 2 weeks and the debate seemed to quiet down.

However, the CPPCC Guangzhou Committee did not launch the online survey for nothing. On the morning of July 5, the standing committee held a meeting and passed a motion on how to improve the "soft environment" of Guangzhou for the Asian Games in the coming year. One suggestion was to use Putonghua as the base broadcasting language for the Guangzhou Channel or News Channel of GZTV. The motion was submitted to the mayor of Guangzhou who also attended the meeting. The CCP-supervised Yangcheng Evening Post briefly reported on the motion. As can be expected, discussion about the matter on Sina Weibo exploded immediately. The next day, all major local newspapers gave heavy weight to the debates. Through these reports, readers knew that the online survey page had over 520,000 visitors in half a month, and more than 30,000 people participated in the survey. The CPPCC committee was well aware that nearly 80 % of the participants approved the use of Cantonese, but they decided to go ahead with their motion. They intended to "guide

the vast majority of television viewers in Guangzhou through publicity and education, to the correct understanding of the relationship between Guangzhou as a 'national core city' and Putonghua as the base broadcasting language of GZTV"[3] (Sun 2010). That was all the report had to say to irritate the pro-Cantonese communities online and offline. Then a report by Yangcheng Evening Post on July 9 (Hu and Zi 2010) further fuelled the heated debates: a downtown primary school required its students to speak Putonghua at all time on campus. An unprecedented sense of urgency was felt by many in the city.

Local newspapers devoted columns or even whole pages every day to discussing the matter. Nonlocal media started to pay attention to the debate, such as Lianhe Zaobao in Singapore, People's Daily in Beijing (not the overseas version this time) and various newspapers and television stations in Hong Kong. On July 11, a "flash mob" of around 100 young people gathered in a downtown park, sang a few famous Cantonese songs, and quickly dispersed (Zhu and Tan 2010).

The municipal officials remained silent for 2 weeks until there was a "rumour" that people were planning a "walk"[4] on July 25. "Planning" may not be the right word because there was no chief organiser or leader. Time, location, and dress code (anything white) had been nominated and people spontaneously spread the information using social networks. On July 20, the vice secretary of CCP Guangzhou, Mr Su Zhijia's interview was published on major local newspapers, in which he denied that the Guangzhou government had ever had the intention to abolish Cantonese (Qin 2010). In the case of "serious" events, it is now an open secret that the media cannot report the story in their own way, but only disseminate the official version. Several initiators of the "walk" had been summoned by the police for questioning. The tension increased. On July 25, the "walk" happened regardless of the disapproving, if not intimidating, official attitudes. There was a huge crowd: protestors, spectators, media workers, the police, and passers-by. No reliable estimate is available as no one was in charge and as it also depended on who was counting. The "authorities" said there were hundreds, some participants and spectators said thousands, and some overseas media said 10,000. Photos of the event quickly spread on Sina Weibo, but were also soon taken down by website administrators (or whoever was doing it). Keywords such as the location of the "walk" (Jiangnanxi Underground Station) became taboos. Weibo users could neither search for those words or post tweets containing those words. It also became extremely difficult to upload any photos to Weibo. That was less than a year after Sina Weibo was introduced and, thanks to the dialect issues in Guangzhou, for the first time for many of the ordinary users to experience real-time censorship.

Hong Kong television stations reported the event in their evening news, but their broadcast through the cable network in Guangzhou was interrupted. No local

[3] "通过宣传教育，引导我市广大电视观众，正确认识国家中心城市的地位与广州电视台以普通话为基本播音用语的关系。"

[4] This is a euphemism for "protest" because assemblies or protests that have not been officially approved are illegal in China. Therefore, using the word "walk" instead strategically portrayed the campaign as more moderate and less threatening to the government, although the government apparently did not agree. Using euphemisms also helped to dodge censorship for a long time.

newspapers covered the event on the next day for sure, but some overseas media paid attention such as Reuters (Blanchard 2010), The New York Times (Branigan 2010), and The Guardian (Wong 2010). Two days later on July 27, the municipal government held a press conference and made two main points, whose exact quotes appeared on all local newspapers the next day. Firstly, the so-called "Promoting Putonghua and Abolishing Cantonese" policy is totally a "false proposition". "Whether it is according to legal regulations or sentiments or common senses, the Guangzhou government will by no means abolish Cantonese". Secondly, the official warned that the acts of spreading rumours and organising any illegal rally would be strictly punished according to law. However, the next Sunday afternoon, August 1, was July 25 all over again, except that there was a parallel protest in Hong Kong the same afternoon.

An Economist author (Johnson 2010) wrote: " …when I saw the second report of such protests—admittedly small—in the past few weeks, I took note. Language policy (and language resentment) has been the dog that hasn't barked in China. Now it has barked meekly—twice." This is where the title of this chapter comes from. People who are used to protests of larger scales may find these protests small. However, I hope my descriptions of the development of the events and media censorship can give the readers some sense about what these protests and debates felt like locally.

The book is not about these social movements per se, but they shaped it in important ways. Firstly, these movements provide a window on the kind of sociolinguistic situation that the book is about and the context in which the empirical study was embedded in. Dialect issues have become a delicate and politically precarious topic in contemporary Chinese cities, especially in highly multidialectal cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Secondly, while only a few thousand participated in the movements directly, the questions they raised applied to the everyday life of all living in multidialectal cities. What are our mother tongues? What are our relationships with the languages we know or use? Who are the locals and who are the outsiders in this multidialectal city? These questions are about language attitudes and identities, both of which are inextricably linked at the heart of the current study. Another vital question asked is what language we are going to teach our children in Guangzhou. The ban or restriction on dialect use in public spheres such as the media and schools, especially kindergartens and primary schools, raises concerns about language loss among the younger generation. This is the reason why I chose to study language attitudes and identities in two primary school communities.

Thirdly, the attention the debates got from regional, national, and international media suggests that the issues of "local dialects" are not merely local issues. People from other dialectal regions, Shanghai for instance, sympathised with the situation in Guangzhou as they had similar concerns for their local dialects. People in Hong Kong, where more than 90 % of the population speak Cantonese, showed particular strong support by initiating a parallel protest. A number of media serving the Chinese population overseas also expressed concerns. After all, Chinese dialects are not just China's languages, but are world languages. In particular, many dialects

have spread widely around the globe. The change, shift, and maintenance of these dialects in one community are likely to affect the situation in others. Hence, the issues we examine in these small-scale case studies of language attitudes in Guangzhou are simultaneously local, national, and global. It is an analytical perspective essential to the book.

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