

Li Yuming (2015): Language Planning in China **Walter de Gruyter and The Commercial Press, Berlin and** **Beijing, 2015, Hb \$149.99, ISBN 9781614515586**

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It is language life, instead of language per se, that a government should manage.
Li Yuming

In a footnote to a paper on language management in the PRC (Spolsky 2014), I predicted that the appearance of books by Li Yuming, who was deeply involved in the process, would provide additional important information on the topic. Yuming and Wei (2015), with a preface by him and a section of translated papers dealing with the years 2008 and 2009, has since appeared. The addition of this fourth volume is an additional bonus, confirming the PRC's commitment to language management and the sophistication of its scholars, further recognized by Li Yuming's appointment as Director of the Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Language Resources.

This collection of translated papers provides more than just data. By revealing the opinions of a scholar who was also long active in a management role, it forms the basis for an understanding of language management in the PRC and a useful model for those undertaking a similar task elsewhere.

The central contribution of Li Yuming's pioneering work can be seen in the sentence I have quoted above, the recognition that language use and users are of greater central relevance to the field than the language itself. While it is true that he stresses the need for a standard variety to allow the free flow of information, he recognizes the critical value of other varieties, the *fāngyán*, which he translates as “dialects”, the regional varieties or “topolects” which make up Chinese. His acknowledgement of the value of bilingualism and bidialectalism in a healthy language ecology is matched by his repeated calls for the addition of international languages to Chinese language capability. In reading his work, one recognizes

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his belief that monolingualism is a handicap, a lesson that many language policy makers could well learn. He stresses the importance of multilingualism, calling attention to the way in which ethnic minority languages have developed and become part of multilingual proficiency.

In the foreword, Li Yuming lists as the “natural language resources” of China not just the common language, Putonghua, but also Chinese dialects and characters, minority national languages and dialects and writing, and foreign languages, both spoken and written. He maintains further that these resources are not fixed, but developing and changing over time, and that there are important gaps left requiring continued research and development. He calls especially for further efforts to raise the status of foreign languages. This open-minded receptiveness to languages other than the dominant standard is rare amongst language activists, who are often committed to the hegemonic spread of the variety they favor.

Of course, given the enormous size of China and the complexity of its ethnic and linguistic patterning, the attempt at language management has posed a very serious challenge. One advantage the PRC had when it started its major language reforms was that there had already been 2000 years of efforts to encourage the general acceptance of a standard central variety through a common writing system. The success of this endeavor shows up in the popular belief that what some Western scholars call topolects are dialects of Chinese rather than distinct language varieties. This even leads to confusion about the number of people who speak “Chinese”; counting speakers of the *fāngyán* in this way would be like considering Indo-European a single language. But it shows the power of a long-held myth.

PRC language management is supported by the authority of the Party and the central government, more capable than many governments and institutions of implementing policy. This is attested by the regular presence of party representatives on the committees of experts, linguists, educators and IT specialists, whose recommendations are regularly announced by senior political leaders. One thinks of the difficulty faced by a federal system like the United States, where a key political struggle continues between the central and the state governments. At the same time, continuing strong local loyalties to regions and ethnic groups, as well as the size and complexity of China, work to maintain linguistic diversity even as the efficiency of a dominant standard language is recognized. The two competing pressures, the centripetal pressure of the Party and the centrifugal pressures of the diverse ethnic groups and regions, have produced the multilingual ecosystem that Li Yuming encourages.

A distinctive feature of the Chinese situation is the effect of the writing system in producing a strong sense of nationhood and of a common language. Having a single system that can be read in the various topolects provides strong support for the notion of a common language, which is the meaning of Putonghua. But as Chinese language managers realize, there are also high costs involved, both in learning the characters and in using computers. These are met in part by the managed simplification of characters and by the availability of Pinyin as an initial teaching medium and for computer input. Again, this is an issue that needs constant re-evaluation and management, and explains the importance of computer studies in the new Center.

In PRC language management, one sees the priority that the political leadership has assigned to language policy. Similar observations can be made in Turkey under Atatürk, Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew, and Malaysia, where prime ministers intervened directly in language management, and in France, where a large number of agencies now fill the gap left by the Académie française, but where language policy is often left to education ministries and academic purists. In the PRC, while language management policy is formulated by commissions and committees made up of linguists, information specialists, educators, and politicians, the important decisions are announced by national leaders. The underlying differences of opinion that emerge are what explain policy changes: the simplification of the writing system, the recognition of regional topolects, and the acceptance of minority languages and varieties, have all led to considerable debate which has resulted in continual modification.

There are other interesting special features to be noted about the Chinese situation. One that I have not seen widely discussed is the effect of the one-child policy, which one might guess contributes to language stability. When there are large families, as soon as the oldest child goes to school, younger children start to be exposed to the influences of community and the school language; when there is only one child, presumably parental influence lasts longer. This is likely to be a conservative factor. But mass migration from the countryside to urban areas, where diversity encourages shift towards a common variety, is having a profound influence on the linguistic ecology of China. This process is becoming increasingly common throughout the world and the Chinese example is worth studying.

This new translated collection of writing by Li Yuming goes well beyond the topic of Chinese language planning, and could well form the basis for a guide to the field of language management as a whole. It demonstrates the sophistication of Chinese language management, especially in its recognition of the importance of computers and IT. Its publication will help build up the possibility of cooperation between Chinese and Western scholars in the study of language policy and management.

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