

Some Reflections on Chinese Dialect Island Research in the Post-Covid-19 Period

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Abstract

The topic of dialect island has been gradually recognized and studied by Chinese linguists in recent years. Due to the impact of the pandemic of SARS-CoV-2, China has shifted her economic focus on domestic market. Therefore, dialect varieties shall not become obstacles for efficient communication in domestic economic activities. The current research attempts to discuss the significance, theoretical framework and methodology in studying dialect island and seek an optimal solution in dialect preservation, Mandarin promotion, as well as facilitating domestic communication, especially during the post-COVID-19 period.

Key words: Dialect; Dialect Island; Mandarin Chinese; Language planning;

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BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

Mandarin (*Putonghua*) is the lingua franca of the Han Chinese in modern period, which adopts the phonology of Beijing dialect as the standard phonological system and the Northern Chinese dialect as the basic dialect, and uses the grammar system of modern literary works written in Vernacular Chinese (*baihua*). According to the

news report of *People's Daily*, China will form a new development pattern centered on “internal circulation,” (Lu & Li 2020) and speed up a “dual circulation” (ibid) growth model in which “internal circulation” (ibid) and “international circulation” (ibid) promote each other, said the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee during a meeting convened on July 30. The meeting demanded the country to establish a medium- and long-term coordination mechanism for COVID-19 control and economic and social development, keep its strategies in restructuring, rely on technological innovation, improve cross-cyclical macro-control design and regulations, and realize long-term balance between growth stability and risk control.

However, we must be clear that there are numerous Chinese dialects in Chinese Mainland. Generally speaking, Chinese dialects might be classified into seven major groups: Mandarin (Northern Mandarin, Northeastern Mandarin, Northwestern Mandarin, Southwestern Mandarin), Wu, Cantonese, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, and Hokkien (Min) dialects. Among these dialect groups, there are huge amount mutually intelligible as well as un-intelligible sub-dialects, which have brought a set of obstacles for oral communications. Thus the dialectal could also compromise the internal circulation of the Chinese domestic market. The current study attempts to survey the key points in the study of dialect island and propose applicable solutions for the dialect issue in the context of post-COVID-19 period.

DIALECT ISLAND – A KEY CONCEPT IN DIALECTOLOGY

The Chinese language comprises many regional varieties, or dialects. The most significant is Mandarin or *Putonghua*, from which *Putonghua* originates. Besides Mandarin, other main dialect groups have been

identified. The classification of Chinese dialects and their interrelationships remain uncertain because new data are constantly emerging; in addition, each main dialect group could be further divided into branches or subbranches, and because Chinese dialects have evolved for hundreds or thousands of years, mutual intelligibility is not always possible. Also, within a dialect group, it is common that a single sinogram (Chinese character) may have different literary and colloquial readings. By analyzing these readings, the history of a certain dialect can be partially reconstructed. The most observable geographical boundary in classifying Chinese dialects is Changjiang (the Yangtze River). North of Changjiang is Mandarin-speaking while south of it is non-Mandarin-speaking. This classification, however, is only an approximation. In fact the distribution of Mandarin has one beyond Changjiang for at least a millennium. For example, the Nanjing speech spoken on the south bank of Changjiang is a subvariety of Mandarin. Mandarin is also spoken in most part of Sichuan and Yunnan, which stand across both the north and south bank of upstream Changjiang. The non-Mandarin-speaking areas south of Changjiang are increasingly shrinking. In many cities Mandarin spoken with a regional accent is used as a lingua franca, the so-called regional variant of Mandarin. This phenomenon has existed for at least centuries. The promotion of Putonghua in the past few decades has further accelerated the loss of non-Mandarin dialects (Ho 2015). Although most Chinese speakers share a unified writing system based on Chinese characters, the same characters are pronounced differently in various dialect regions. For instance, in Pekingese (a variety of Northern Mandarin), the sentence “Are you going to get off the bus/train?” is pronounced “*ni yao xia che ma?*” However, in Shanghainese (a variety of Wu), local speakers would say, “*nong yao wu chu va?*” Similar sentence would be pronounced “*lei luo che a??*” in Cantonese. Generally speaking, in most cases, Pekingese, Shanghainese and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible, which creates some obstacles for the public’s oral communications. What’s worse, there are numerous dialect islands in the Chinese Mainland, which cause the issue even more complicated.

Mandarin is generally believed to be a northern dialect which is based upon Pekingese. Around the Yangtze Delta and almost the entire Chekiang Province, the Wu dialect is traditionally spoken there. Cantonese is quite popular in the Pearl River Delta, including Hong Kong and Macau. Thanks to the waves of migration, Cantonese dialect is still very influential in Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Another important southern dialect is Hokkien, which generally used in Fukien, Taiwan, and parts of Canton and Hainan. Xiang and Gan are another two southern dialects, which are respectively adopted in Hunan and Kiangsi. While the dialect of Hakka is quite unique compared with other dialects, it exists in

a form of dialect island. “Dialect islands are the result of the migration of people from a single area to another part of the same language area, while language islands are the consequence of migration to an entirely different language area” (Kerswill & Trudgill 2005). The distinction is important because, in dialect islands, we can expect leveling to occur in relation to the surrounding dialects, made possible by mutual intelligibility. At the same time, of course, there will be internal levelling to the extent that there are dialectal differences between the input speakers – as there almost invariably are. Although dialectology has always been an important part of traditional Chinese linguistics (*xiao xue*), Chinese linguists (e.g., Guo 1995, Zhuang 1996, Cao 2005) started relevant researches on various Chinese dialect islands surrounded by other dialects in the 90s of the last century.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ISSUE UNDER THE CURRENT SITUATION

As we mentioned previously, the existence of Chinese dialect islands as well as mutual unintelligibility of the major Chinese dialects have caused certain set of real obstacles for internal circulation as China has already shifted its economic focus to domestic market in the post-pandemic period. The current study attempts to survey the previous related researches and discuss an applicable theoretical framework for this topic. According to a Xinhua Net’s report (Li 2014), nowadays approximately 30% (i.e. more than 400 million) Chinese nationals still can’t communicate in Mandarin. Among the 70% Chinese citizens who can speak Mandarin, only 10% of them can communicate effectively in standard Mandarin. Mandarin promotion does not mean deliberate elimination of dialects. Instead, it aims at decreasing the boundary caused by dialects so as to facilitate social communications. Likewise, Pan (2008) ever expresses his concern on the dilemma of language planning, i.e., Mandarin promotion vs. dialect preservation. On the one hand, Mandarin promotion is a nationwide government policy, which could effectively facilitate people’s communications. While on the other hand, dialectalism in some areas such as Shanghai (Wu), Canton (Cantonese), and Hong Kong (Cantonese) might cause communication difficulties and even regionalism, which definitely can not be tolerated in the new era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We believe that linguists shall waste no time in launching field work so as to describe and report the endangered Chinese dialects such as *zhan hua* (a dialect in Northeast China) and *chuan hua* (several dialects which were ever popular in South China). Maybe these dialects are no longer in use, future generations could still find them in

library archives. Secondly, some primary and secondary schools (e.g. Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong) located outside of Northern Mandarin area have already promoted dialect classes, which might preserve some dialectal elements in the process of the students' first language acquisition (Mandarin).

However, the real dilemma for Chinese dialect researchers is the lack of a unified and compatible theoretical framework because traditional Chinese dialectology is largely confined within geographical investigation. While the integrated model proposed by Chambers & Trudgill (1998/2002) incorporated sociolinguistics and dialectal geography, which could be borrowed for reference. Wang's (cf. Cavalli-Sforza & Wang 1986, Ogura 1990, Ogura, Wang, Cavalli-Sforza 1991, Ogura & Wang 2004) "lexical diffusion", "glottochronology", and dynamic dialectology also brought enlightenment for Chinese scholars. Wang's (1994) simulated model reveals that Pekingese and Southern Min dialect have already departed for approximately 1500 years. Guo's (1995) study on Henan dialect islands surrounded by Wu dialect in Jiangsu implicates that the issue of dialect is simultaneously associated with "linguistics, history, and sociology."

AN OLD TOPIC IN POST-COVID-19 PERIOD

As we stated previously, the question of dialect island is by no means something new. However, under the current situation of stimulating demand of domestic market, the issue of dialect island turns out to be especially practical and urgent. However, Chinese linguists (Guo 1995, Zhuang 1996, You 2000, Huang 2004, Cao 2005) haven't reached a generally accepted definition for the concept of dialect island. Secondly, the complexity of the issue has been underestimated in previous researches.

4.1 Definitions

Various definitions of dialect island have been proposed by Chinese linguists ever since 1990s. Due to the lack of a compatible and unified theoretical framework, Chinese linguists have yet to reach an agreement on the definition of dialect island.

Guo (1995) distinguishes the concepts of "*qun dao* (archipelago)" and "*dao qun* (island groups)", and the latter seems to be more isolated than the former. Zhuang's (1996) description of dialect follows the framework of geography:

"In Chinese history, immigrants who spoke the same or similar dialects moved into the territory of residents who spoke different dialects. The dialects brought by the immigrants are surrounded by the local dialects. They are just like islands on vast ocean, which are usually called dialect islands. Most of the existing Chinese dialect islands were formed during the Ming

and Qing dynasties."

You (2000: 58-60) provides a more detailed definition of dialect island by offering strong and weak versions:

"In dialect geography, dialect A which is surrounded by dialect B (or language) could be defined as a dialect island... Generally speaking, dialect islands often exist in the form of cities featuring special dialects; strictly speaking, dialect islands are some kind of language enclaves with distinct characteristics compared with neighboring dialects."

Cao's (2005) opinion on the definition of dialect island is relatively neutral as he believes that the most fundamental feature of dialect islands is that they are separated from their parent dialects. At the same time, they are mostly surrounded by different dialects or languages, and their geographical area is comparatively small. Huang (2004) disagrees with the strong version of dialect island proposed by You (2000: 58-60), and prefers to use a broadly defined version:

"1) The dialect islands are in most cases surrounded by two or more dialects.

2) Multilingualism might exist in dialect islands.

3) The outer boundary of dialect islands might be quite vague."

It could be found that the definitions provided by Zhuang (1996) and You (2000: 58-60) are highly consistent with the theoretical framework of dialect geography, but to some extent they lack compatibility with sociolinguistics (urban dialectology) and spatial variation. Cao (2005) discusses three ways of dialect island formation, i.e. 1) new immigrants' dialects got surrounded by original residents' tongues; 2) the original dialects were sliced and surrounded as new immigrants outnumbered the original residents; 3) the evolution velocity differences accelerated the dialectal variations. We agree with Cao's (2005) argumentation about the origin and formation of dialect islands. However, according to the definition given by Zhuang (1996), urban dialect islands such as Hangzhou, Jinhua, and Quzhou are excluded in the issue of dialect island, which obviously contradicts the language facts demonstrated by field work on Wu dialect, i.e., Hangzhou dialect still bear some distinct features of Northern Mandarin. In addition, current criteria on dialect island fail to describe the dialectal status of big neighborhoods, plants, or battalions speaking unique dialects, which requires theoretical fusion of dialectology and sociolinguistics.

4.2 Complexity of the issue under current situation

Until the moment when we are composing the present paper, the world outside China is suffering from the second or third wave of COVID-19. It is a wise move for China to shift her economic focus to internal circulation as well as domestic market, which demands smooth and efficient communications. Yet the dialectal differences among Chinese varieties might cause some unnecessary

obstacles in this process. Chinese linguists shall first maintain some balances between Mandarin promotion and dialect preservation. Secondly, the corresponding researches on dialect islands are somewhat chaotic due to absence of a unified and compatible framework. The definition of dialect island by You (2000: 58-60) strictly follows the theoretical framework of dialect geography. According to the definition of You, the *jun hua* (military dialect) dialect island in Hainan could not be defined as a dialect island. Likewise, the Hokkien dialect islands in Yuhuan and Zhoushan in Zhejiang are not dialect islands according to You's (ibid) definition, which is also not consistent with the results of dialect investigation. You's (ibid) strict definition even denies the existence of the following dialects as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Some dialect islands in Chinese mainland

Dialect islands	Neighboring dialects
Jiaoliao Mandarin in Hulin & Ertun	Northeast Mandarin
Jianghuai Mandarin in Zhushan & Zhuxi	Southwest Mandarin
Northeast Mandarin in Panzihua	Southwest Mandarin
Lanyin Mandarin in Aletai	Pekingese
Pekingese in Shihezi	Lanyin Mandarin
Pekingese in Qingzhou	Jilu Mandarin
Southwest Mandarin in Liuba	Central Mandarin
Tientsin dialect	Pekingese and Jilu Mandarin

Field work shows that Tientsin dialect (surrounded by Pekingese and Jilu Mandarin) is closely related to Jianghuai Mandarin. However, its dialect island status is still not accurate. Its outer boundary is also quite vague due to linguistic erosion and fusion.

CONCLUSION

Chinese dialect islands have increasingly become a hot issue in the field of dialectology, and the corresponding studies are still at the stage of exploration and creation. The current study does not solve substantial questions simply by reviewing previous researches. The influence of Mandarin on the vocabulary and pronunciation of the dialects has become more obvious, and the velocity of lexical diffusion has been greatly accelerated in the new era. We believe that future research on dialect islands must follow the framework of field investigation and statistical simulation. Sociolinguistics (urban dialectology), dialect geography, spatial variation, computational linguistics, and genetics should be integrated under a consistent and unified theoretical framework to meet China's language

planning requirements as well as communication needs.

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