

# 中国话 普通话

zhōng - guó - huà      pǔ - tōng - huà

## 汉语

hàn - yǔ

**Constructing the Chinese Language: Linguistic Ideology,  
Culture, and Nation-State Politics**

## 中文

zhōng - wén

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## 漢語

hàn - yǔ

## 國語 唐話

guó - yǔ      tòhng - wá

## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to critically examine “the Chinese language” and all of its variant forms as examples of *language* or *linguistic ideologies*, a term many linguistic anthropologists have used to describe conceptualizations of language and their perceived social function. More specifically, I adopt Judith Irvine and Susan Gal’s (2000) semiotic approach to language ideology by examining how it is reinforced through what they call *iconicity*, *erasure*, and *fractal recursivity*. Ideologies are articulated from many different sites and are often contested with competing ideologies. I will discuss how these ideologies inform current debates about language and writing system reform as well as efforts to promote a standard national language. Ultimately, this paper challenges the notion of the homogeneity of *a* Chinese identity and of *a* Chinese language.

Keywords: language ideology, language and national identity, Chinese language, writing reform – China

### **Introduction: The Problem of ‘1 Language = 1 Culture = 1 Nation’**

The concept of language and national identity often seems to be a rather straightforward one to understand. After all, English is spoken by the English in England; French is spoken by the French in France; and Chinese is spoken by the Chinese in China. An underlying assumption seems to be that these national languages allow everyone in these countries to communicate with each other. One of the aims of this paper is to show that thinking about languages of the world in such neatly defined geographical and ethnic terms is inadequate and based on ideological beliefs that ‘a nation’ and ‘a language’ must be connected to each other. The equation ‘1 language = 1 culture = 1 nation’ fails to balance because it ignores much of the social complexity and linguistic diversity that has been and still is quite common in human societies.

The Chinese language and how it is ideologically constructed is a very interesting case study to explore because of the incredible diversity of its spoken forms and because of how its writing system has come to represent the “essence” of Chinese culture, whatever this means. Many of those in frequent contact with Chinese communities are aware that the Chinese language consists of a variety of spoken forms commonly called “dialects” (i.e. Mandarin and Cantonese). Yet, many also fail to realize the problematic nature of the dialect-language distinction, how many dialects there really are, and how exactly the writing system functions as a common code consisting of “ideographs.” There are hundreds of dialects spoken in China but the writing system does not exactly unite all of them as a universal code. To believe that it does is to become a testament to the power of language ideologies. Take a look at the characters sprinkled on the cover page of this paper. They show seven different ways of writing ‘Chinese’ in both the traditional and simplified scripts. They represent multiple forms of expression and anything but a unified homogenous language and identity.

In order to show how different “dialects” of Chinese really are and how the writing system actually works, I present below how speakers from four different parts of China might say the sentence: “They are here eating Chinese food”<sup>1</sup> in local colloquial speech. The first is a Mandarin speaker from the Chinese capital while the second is from Shanghai, the country’s largest city. The other two speak two varieties of Cantonese: one from the city of Canton and the second from a rural area.

**Běijīng:** Tāmen zhèngzài zài zhèr chī zhōngguó cān.<sup>2</sup>

**Shànghǎi:** ila tson̩tse lahe gədəʔ tɕəʔ dzoŋguoʔ ve.<sup>3</sup>

**Guǎngzhōu**<sup>4</sup>: Kéuihdeih háidouh sihk-gán tòhng chāan.

**Kāipíng**<sup>5</sup>: kʰæt ɔ: kʰœy hæk-kɪn hɔŋ tʰa:n.

Whether or not readers know how to pronounce these sentences, the differences in pronunciation and vocabulary should be quite noticeable. Even the word for “Chinese,” which I have underlined, seems to be different.<sup>6</sup> This is a point I will explore in detail later but for now, let’s take a look at how this sentence is written in Chinese characters:

他們 正在 在 這裡 吃 中國 餐。

**Mandarin:** Tāmen zhèngzài zài zhèlǐ chī zhōngguó cān.

**Cantonese:** Tāmùhn jingjoih joih jeléuih hek jūnggwok chāan.

Below the Chinese characters, I have included the reading pronunciation in both Mandarin and Cantonese. As can be seen, the reading pronunciations for Mandarin and Cantonese are more similar to each other than the colloquial equivalents. Also, the Běijīng colloquial pronunciation is almost identical to the reading pronunciation. To address how a unified writing system unites the Chinese language, Chinese speakers must learn a common code based on a form of Mandarin in order to read and write just as Medieval European scholars needed to learn Latin to become literate. With thousands of characters to learn, this is a very difficult task especially for speakers of dialects that differ significantly from Mandarin.

Consequently, literacy has historically been restricted to the educated elite and not universally accessible to the masses.

For staunch supporters of nationalism and modernization, the linguistic picture of China is cause for concern. How can China be a great unified nation if its citizens cannot all communicate with each other? How can China become modernized if its rural peasantry continues to live in its backwards world speaking diverse incomprehensible tongues? These are questions that government officials have spent decades trying to address with a series of reforms that include simplifying the Chinese writing system to increase literacy, establishing Mandarin as the official language, and instituting laws and other programs to promote the development of a common script and common tongue.

In this thesis, I will show how *language* or *linguistic ideologies* (Schieffelin et al 1998), a term many linguistic anthropologists have used to describe conceptualizations of language and their perceived link to various social phenomena, inform these language reform efforts. In recent years, many anthropologists have critiqued their predecessors' treatment of 'cultures' as distinct, bounded, and unchanging entities. Adopting this critical approach, as have a number of linguistic anthropologists, I would argue that language should also be seen in a similar way. Language boundaries are socially constructed and there are multiple ways they can be drawn to reflect various ideological beliefs. I will begin by discussing key theoretical ideas important to understanding nationalism and how language ideology operates. This discussion will involve a number of examples that show that the linguistic situation in China, though unique in a number of ways, is not unusual. I will then show how Judith Irvine and Susan Gal's (2000) semiotic approach to language ideology can apply to the Chinese case by examining what they call *iconization*, *erasure*, and *fractal recursivity*. Finally, this discussion of language ideology

ultimately leads to questions of identity. I will argue that language ideology plays a very important role in creating and challenging constantly changing notions of identity.

**Imagining Nation, Imagining Language: Theoretical Approaches to Understanding the Intersection of Language, Culture and Politics**

In his very influential book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991 [1983]), Benedict Anderson examines how nationalism as a “cultural artefact [sic] of a particular kind (Ibid: 4)” came into historical being and how it has spread around the world leading the masses to develop deep emotional attachments to an entity called “the nation.” Central to Anderson’s argument is the emergence of what he calls “print capitalism” as an important ingredient in creating national consciousness. For centuries in Europe, as was the case for China, written language was often the exclusive domain of the educated elite. Following the invention of the printing press, it became easier to mass-produce texts not only in Latin, but also in the vernacular languages spoken by the common people. Anderson says that these newly published print languages allowed people who had never met before to communicate with each other through paper, put language in a fixed form to give it “an image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation,” (Ibid: 44) and created “languages-of-power” (Ibid: 45) by privileging particular varieties of speech. All of a sudden, as the masses obtained access to written texts, many began to realize, or “imagine,” that they were part of much larger communities. The spread of print languages, facilitated by the spread of capitalism, thus, sowed the seeds for the development of nationalism via the mass production and consumption of books and newspapers.

Attempting to avoid Eurocentric modeling, Anderson mentions that this happened first in the Americas rather than in Europe. He argues that here, the descendents of European colonists grew increasingly distant from the Old World and increasingly connected to the local colonial

population by reading newspapers and other printed media. With the success of the American Revolution and other independence movements in Latin America, the Old World had a usable model to develop its own form of nationalism, which swept the European continent roughly from 1820-1920. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came the “last wave” of nationalisms, which primarily affected former colonies in Africa and Asia. By this time, “nation” had become such a global norm that it could be imagined without a single common print language and in many new ways (Ibid: 135).

The fact that a common written language has been fundamental in the unification of China for at least 2,000 years makes Anderson’s link between written language and nationalist sentiments a very keen insight. Nevertheless, Anderson also seems to have some confused ideas about the nature of language variation. On the one hand he acknowledges the diversity of human tongues and describes print languages as assembling varied idiolects (Ibid: 43). This seems to suggest that print languages create particular languages by arbitrarily putting selected forms of speech together, but he states explicitly that “print language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se” (Ibid: 134, emphasis in original). Thus, he assumes that even though the diversity of spoken languages has always far exceeded the number of written languages, “the bulk of mankind [has always been] monoglot” (Ibid: 38). As I will show in a few examples, multilingualism was more common in pre-modern and pre-colonial settings than Anderson realizes.

A number of linguistic anthropologists have critiqued Anderson’s work for his confused ideas about language. Michael Silverstein (2000), for example, has described Anderson’s conceptualization of language and national identity as classic ‘Whorfian’ thinking. According to Benjamin Lee Whorf, cultural conceptions are linked directly to linguistic structure. The concept

of time, for example, is often seen in objectified terms for speakers of what Whorf called Standard Average European (SAE) languages. This is characterized in English by the use of adjectives normally used to describe physical concrete objects such as “long,” “short”, and “quick” to describe time (Whorf 2001 [1956]: 370). The Hopi language, in contrast, does not treat time as an object and consequently its speakers do not think of time as being long, or short, or moving quickly. Whorf attributed this difference to SAE having tense as a grammatical category and Hopi lacking tense. Silverstein asserts, however, that tense does not actually refer to time but rather to the referential relationship of one event to another (2000: 106). Whorf also treats language and culture as both internally homogenous and deterministically linked together. Interestingly, Anderson describes a similar relationship between nationalities and languages. Silverstein summarizes Anderson’s concept of nationality by saying that it “is a taxonomy of differentiation of individuals as members of such groups, together with essentialized nondifferentiation of individuals within group boundaries” (2000: 111). This view of nationality, thus, ignores internal conflicts and treats nationalist consciousness as inherently homogenous. Anderson also treats the boundaries of language as if they are self-evident when, in fact, “contestation occurs around definitions of language as much as around community” (Gal 1998: 325).

Judith Irvine and Susan Gal also argue against Anderson for his ignorance of the dynamics of language by stating that “homogeneous language is as much imagined as is community” (2000: 76). The two have defined three semiotic processes actively involved in shaping these language ideologies that make such beliefs about language appear real. The first is *iconization*, which involves turning linguistic features or varieties into indexes of social groups and thus naturalizing the link between particular languages and particular social groups. The



second is *fractal recursivity*, which refers to the projecting of an opposition onto another level that can in turn recur at other levels. The third is *erasure* in which facts that challenge an ideology are either unnoticed or are attempted to be removed.

Irvine and Gal illustrate these processes with examples from three different parts of the world. The first place is southern Africa where speakers of the Nguni languages acquired click sounds from the neighboring Khoi languages through the three semiotic processes they have described. When Nguni speakers first came in contact with Khoi speakers in pre-colonial times, they found Khoi click sounds rather exotic and consequently associated these sounds as *icons* of foreignness. The *fractal recursivity* of this involves the Nguni projecting these icons used to differentiate them from the Khoi to a different level of social differentiation – the *hlonipha* register, a speech style used to show respect or deference in Nguni languages. The incorporation of click sounds into a form of speech associated with deference created and reinforced a social boundary between Khoi and Nguni speakers. This boundary *erased* the fact that the Nguni and Khoi previously had close relationships with each other.

Irvine and Gal's second example is the language classification work of 19<sup>th</sup> century European linguists in Senegal. The basis of their classification system was the essentialist ideology that language and ethnicity are intimately linked together. Thus, "inferior" cultures must have "inferior" features in their languages, following this logic. The maps they created assumed that language, ethnic group, and territory mapped neatly onto the exact same places (*iconization*) and ignored the fact that most of the people they surveyed were multilingual and that many of the languages they were mapping had overlapping ranges (*erasure*). These linguists explained multilingualism and "complex" grammatical patterns found in Senegalese languages as borrowed features adopted through Muslim contact. This is *fractal recursivity* because the

linguists projected their hierarchical view of race onto their interpretation of why certain languages had complex “European” features. The original opposition of European/African maintained itself through a new opposition of Muslim/African and kept African languages and peoples in an inferior position with respect to all other languages and groups.

Irvine and Gal’s final example is Macedonia and is especially interesting to compare to the Chinese case because of the contestations over nationalism involved. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Macedonia was a very multilingual region. This was seen negatively by many Western European visitors and officials who traveled through the region. They saw this linguistic variability as backwards and uncivilized. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the height of nationalistic fever, Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian nationalists actively debated over how the language boundaries in the region should be drawn. Each group wanted the Macedonian languages to be part of their region. This involved choosing very selective linguistic features as *icons* of the language while all other linguistic data was *erased*. For example, Bulgarian linguists emphasized the analytic morphology of the Macedonian dialects and claimed that this similarity to Bulgarian made these languages Bulgarian. Serbian linguists emphasized the phonological similarities to Serbian and claimed that this was proof that these languages were Serbian. *Recursivity* occurred through the codification of literary languages and the purification of languages to reinforce distinctions between “our own national language” and “foreign language” (2000: 70). This example shows that what is defined as Serbian, Greek, or Bulgarian was a very political issue. Both national language and national identity were clearly invented ideas according to this example.

It is interesting to note that the Western European travelers that visited Macedonia found the region barbaric and uncivilized because of the many tongues spoken. They created an opposition between Western and Eastern Europe and *erased* the fact that even in Western

Europe, national language was a recent invention. Eugen Weber (1976) points out that in France, linguistic and cultural unity did not always exist and was actually difficult to achieve. As recently as the late 1800's, urban travelers who visited rural France remarked how difficult it was to communicate with the French peasants who did not speak French but rather a wide variety of unintelligible languages and dialects called *patois*. The existence of a unified French culture, French traditions, and a pure French language (*icon*) as envisioned by the l'Académie Française, are relatively recent creations of the Parisian bourgeoisie. These "civilized" urban dwellers projected the opposition of West/East to a new level of social differentiation in their own country of urban/rural. *Fractal recursivity*, thus, applies once again as a way of dealing with the perceived chaos of rural France and of reaffirming the concept of 'nation'. Weber says:

"If the French were (are?) as French as we have been led to believe, why so much fuss? The fact is, the French fuss so much about the nation because it is a living problem, became one when they set the nation up as an ideal, remained one because they found they could not realize the ideal. The more abstractly the concept of France-as-nation is presented, the less one notes discrepancies between theory and practice. When one gets down to facts, things become awkward" (1976: 112).

The fact is most 'French' people at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the south, had no sense of national consciousness. They lived in many different worlds that were culturally and linguistically distinct from the Parisian region. They had to be told they were French and socialized through education, government campaigns, and even military service before they realized they were French and before they actually started to speak French. This idea of a unified nation with a common language was clearly an invention of the educated urban elite. The rural masses did not imagine they were united until the bourgeoisie insisted that they were.

The examples that I have just presented show how linguistic boundaries are socially and politically drawn. Furthermore, the three semiotic processes described by Irvine and Gal, prove to be powerful tools in analyzing the ideological basis of imagining language. In spite of his

worthwhile effort to avoid Eurocentric modeling, Anderson's model still relies on the *European* invention of the printing press and *European* colonization of the Americas. Irvine and Gal have argued that the three semiotic processes they have presented operate worldwide and "are not dependent on the historical contexts of European colonialism (although they do appear conspicuously there)" (2000: 79). As I will show in the rest of this paper, these semiotic processes work very well in explaining the sociolinguistic situation in China.

### **Chinese Characters as *Icons* of an 'Imagined' Identity**

With the main theoretical ideas of this paper presented, I will now return to a discussion of Chinese characters and the powerful language ideologies behind them. Many people, both Chinese and non-Chinese, would describe the Chinese writing system as embodying a very essential element of Chinese culture since it is one of the oldest scripts in continuous use in the world and has succeeded in uniting a large population with a common written code for over 2,000 years. With such a long well-established connection with Chinese civilization, it should be no surprise that Chinese characters have easily become perceived as *icons* of an essentialized Chinese culture. It is worth exploring how this perception develops.

Bob Hodge and Kam Louie (1998) argue that one of the reasons why this may be so is the difficulty of learning to read and write this complex written code. Even though the largest dictionaries contain about 50,000 characters, knowledge of 6,000 is already considered sufficient for a well-educated person but nevertheless, learning half this number still requires a lot of time and effort. Educational experts estimate that on average it takes a Mandarin-speaking child seven to eight years of schooling to learn to read and write 3,000 characters and an extra year or two for a Cantonese speaker to reach the same level of proficiency. French and Spanish school children, on the other hand, can reach a comparable level of reading and writing proficiency in their languages in half that amount of time (DeFrancis 1984: 153). Historically, very few

foreigners have managed to become literate in Chinese, although the numbers are increasing. Still, as Hodge and Louie describe, this complex writing system acts “like a dragon guarding the gates that lead into the Chinese mind and the texts that communicate it, dividing the world into two categories: those who can read characters, and ... those who can’t, who are forever outsiders, dependent on translators to select and give the sense of the meanings that they need” (1998: 46). It is this exclusionary effect that *iconizes* the Chinese writing system as a marker of Chinese identity.

Another way that Chinese characters are involved in the production of ideology is in the learning of folk stories explaining the origin of various characters. With such a large number of characters to memorize, such stories are very helpful and essential as mnemonic aids in learning to read and write Chinese.<sup>7</sup> An example of this given by Hodge and Louie is the character for ‘good’ (好), which consists of the radical for ‘female’ (女) and the radical for ‘son’ (子). According to one story, ‘man’ combined the radicals for ‘female’ and ‘son’ to form the character for ‘good’ because it was desirable for a man to have both a wife and a child (Hodge and Louie 1998: 56). As evident in this story, the character for ‘good’ represents the patriarchal ideals of Confucianism. Such stories, thus, function as more than simply tools to help the learner memorize individual characters. They also transmit traditional cultural ideas in the process of learning. To extend this analysis, the radical for ‘female’ also happens to be a component of many characters with negative connotations such as ‘slavery’ (奴), ‘prostitution’ (妓), ‘adultery’ (奸), ‘jealousy’ (妒), and ‘avarice’ (婪) (Ibid.: 60). Here, hidden in these particular characters are beliefs about gender and the submissive role of women in traditional Chinese society. Learning Chinese characters involves “in part a process of committing to memory cultural values – about power relationships, categorizations and social norms” (Ibid: 61). All of these cultural meanings

embedded in the writing system serve to reinforce the link between Chinese characters and Chinese identity. To learn them is to become socialized into the Chinese world of thought while others without the privilege to learn are excluded from this world. This, according to essentialist logic, makes Chinese characters icons of Chineseness because of their long history of preserving Chinese traditional cultural ideas. These ideals continue to be passed on to future generations of Chinese.

### **Motivations for Language and Writing Reform: The Erasure Process**

The problem with essentialist thinking is that it ignores who is speaking and it leads to attempts to *erase* facts that do not match the ideological foundations of these beliefs. In discourses about Chinese writing and Chinese identity, it is often ignored that throughout much of Chinese history and even into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most Chinese people have been illiterate.<sup>8</sup> Can Chinese characters even be part of an essence to Chinese culture, if most Chinese cannot even understand them? This contradiction in the belief of Chinese writing as an icon of Chinese culture and the reality that its difficulty prevents many Chinese from having full access to writing is one that informs many of the debates about Chinese language and writing reform that have persisted since the 1890's when Chinese nationalist sentiments first began to rise.<sup>9</sup>

As in France and much of Europe, nationalism in China was a movement that started with the intellectual elite and involved civilizing the rural masses, speakers of diverse unintelligible tongues. Consequently, most language and writing reform proposals have been put forth by members of this exclusive social class with the effort of improving communication within the country and hence increasing unity as a nation. Twentieth century Chinese history has taken many tumultuous twists and turns including a series of revolutions. The Mao years (1949-1976) brought a number of language reforms including the establishment and popularization of pǔtōnghuà (Mandarin) as the national standard language, the simplification of Chinese

characters, and the adoption and popularization of the phonetic Pīnyīn Romanization system. While the standardization and popularization of Mandarin seems to be moderately successful,<sup>10</sup> it has been far more difficult to achieve the goals of writing reform. This is partly because of the often contradictory goals of increasing literacy and preserving Chinese culture through continued use of characters.

The current script situation in China is a state of digraphia, defined as “one language with two writing systems” (Su 2000: 120). Some scholars including Peicheng Su (2000) argue that digraphia is perhaps the best policy because it takes advantage of the benefits of both Pīnyīn and characters. Advantages of Pīnyīn include ease of learning, ease of communication with the international community especially in the use of computers, and the promotion of a standard Běijīng pronunciation. Characters, on the other hand, are useful in helping distinguish the many homophones of the Chinese language but offer little else in terms of practicality. Nevertheless, they remain the primary system because of their continued ability to keep the Chinese state unified and because of strong essentialist beliefs about their importance to Chinese culture. Furthermore, character simplification has also made Chinese characters easier to learn and quicker to write but at the cost of increasing ambiguity and in introducing new characters unfamiliar to many overseas Chinese populations making the language incomprehensible for some. The ultimate goal of digraphia would be the universal use of Pīnyīn, but currently Pīnyīn is rarely used outside of the classroom, where it has otherwise been functioning as a very helpful tool in accelerating the learning of characters (Su 2000: 117-118). Thus, characters, in spite of their disadvantages, still serve as China’s primary writing system. Pīnyīn seems to act more as a transitional script to aid in full proficiency in characters than as a permanent replacement.

Amid all of these debates about language and writing reform, one ideological belief seems to underlie all of these points of view. The belief that the nation must be connected to a common communication system, no matter what form, remains strong. Although ideas about how to improve communication in China are diverse, the goal of many of these plans is to solidify a common Han Chinese identity and to erase all chaotic facts that challenge this ideology. Yet, the iconic link between the traditional character-based writing system, even with simplification, and a unified Chinese identity operates as a powerful hurdle against complete elimination of the complex writing system.

The semiotic process of *erasure* is also apparent when examining what exactly is meant by the term ‘the Chinese language’. According to popular views among English speakers, ‘Chinese’ is a language and forms such as Mandarin and Cantonese are ‘dialects.’ Many linguists, on the other hand, point out the inconsistency of such labeling given that European languages, which exhibit a similar range of linguistic diversity as ‘Chinese,’ are called languages rather than dialects. Timothy Light says that the terminology should not really matter as long as words are used in a consistent manner:

“In short, if we are to call the Romance tongues ‘languages’ then we should call the Han tongues ‘languages’ also. Or, if we call the Han tongues ‘dialects’, then we must refer to the languages of France, Spain, Italy, Romania, and Roman-speaking Switzerland as Roman ‘dialects’” (1980: 278).

Whether or not linguists agree on formal definitions, language is a very political concept best described by a well-cited saying attributed to Max Weinreich: “A language is a dialect with an army.” Acknowledging the inconsistency in the usage of the words ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ makes it clear that many facts about ‘Chinese’ are *erased* in the ideological use of the term ‘the Chinese language’.



The dialect-language distinction, however, does not appear to be a serious vocabulary issue in the written Chinese language. As Hodge and Louie say, “the word ‘language’ itself ... is part of the English language referring basically to the spoken and written forms” (1998: 7-8). While Chinese also has a word analogous to its English counterpart that refers to both spoken and written language (yǔwén), it also has words used exclusively to describe oral speech (huà, yǔyán). The latter can be used to describe any level of differentiation and can even be used interchangeably with yǔwén under certain contexts. Perhaps the problem of calling Chinese a ‘language’ and its mutually unintelligible forms ‘dialects’ is a problem of English vocabulary not conforming exactly to the meaning of Chinese words. This should be seen as a natural problem in translation but still, understanding how the Chinese use various terms for forms of speech is helpful in understanding the fluidity of language boundaries and the facts about Chinese linguistic diversity that are ideologically ignored in discourses about language and national identity.

John DeFrancis proposes adopting English terminology similar to Chinese official terminology, which uses ‘dialect’ in both loose and strict terms. Following the 1955 Technical Conference on the Standardization of Modern Chinese held in Beijing, Chinese officials divided spoken Chinese into 8 *fāngyán*, which DeFrancis translates as “regional speech” and uses to coin the term *regionalect* (1984: 57). These mutually unintelligible regionalects include Mandarin, Wú (Shanghai), Yuè (Cantonese), Xiāng, Kèjiā (Hakka), Gàn, Southern Mǐn (Fukienese), and Northern Mǐn (Fukienese). Beyond the regionalects are more local and *usually* but not always mutually intelligible forms of speech referred to as *dìfang-huà* or *dìdiǎn fāngyán*. This is the level of speech where DeFrancis sees the term ‘dialect’ as more appropriate (Ibid.).

Mandarin, with over 700 million speakers, is the largest and most widespread regional dialect as well as the tongue spoken by the most number of people on earth. In spite of the wide geographical range of this speech community stretching from Manchuria in the northeast to Sìchuān and Yúnnán provinces in the southwest, most forms of Mandarin are mutually intelligible. The other regional dialects, which are all spoken south of the Yangtze River, exhibit far greater diversity than Mandarin does. This extreme variation in the southeast of the country is partly a result of linguistic divergence caused by geographic isolation in a region of rugged terrain (Ramsey 1987: 23). Even geography, though, is not enough to give a complete picture of the linguistic diversity of Chinese. Education levels and other categories of social differentiation also correlate to different forms of sometimes mutually unintelligible speech even within particular regional dialects (DeFrancis 1984: 61). An example of this is the radically different reading pronunciation and colloquial expression of the same idea in Cantonese that I showed in the introduction. To round out this picture, few Chinese are true monoglots. Code-switching and mixed languages are very common. The spread of Mandarin as the lingua franca makes this even more true with Chinese acquiring varying levels of competency in the national language while maintaining usage of local forms of speech in various contexts (Chen and Chen 1990). Still, few Chinese especially in rural areas in the south are completely fluent in two or more regional dialects. To sum it all up, the diverse forms of spoken Chinese create a chaotic situation from a modernist and nationalist point of view. Yet, this should also sound very similar to the account of Early Modern France described by Weber and of the Macedonia and West Africa described by Irvine and Gal. Language and writing reform are attempts to *erase* the potentially divisive nature of these differences.

### **The Chinese Ideological Machine and *Fractal Recursivity* in Action**

Hodge and Louie have said that “ideology is itself never unitary or homogenous but operates as a complex which contains contradictions at its core” (1998: 48). They call the complex associated with the Chinese language “the Chinese ideological machine” because it “seems to operate so elegantly without external interference” and because of its amazing power and longevity of maintaining an idea of China all across the world (1998: 49). Acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of Chinese language ideology is helpful in understanding how *fractal recursivity* gives actors the resources “to create shifting ‘communities,’ identities, selves, and roles, at different levels of contrast, within a cultural field” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 38). Ideologies about Chinese involve multiple levels of dichotomies recursively produced by many different actors and their relationships to the Chinese state. Understanding the ideological formation of these dichotomies leads to a view of China as anything but a homogenous entity.

### ***Orient / Occident***

The very idea of linguistic boundaries conforming to ethnic boundaries is an idea tied to the rise of the nation-state. Anderson, as I have already discussed, has shown that this “cultural artefact” has spread all over the world and has been “pirated” by many different groups. The Chinese state has clearly accepted many of the ideas associated with nationalism as exemplified by the obsession of reforming the writing system and establishing a standard form of speech to create greater linguistic unity among its people. In order to see the fractal recursivity involved here, one must first examine how China is part of a much larger global dialogue that deals with how China and the West represent themselves and each other. These dialogues are part of competing discourses and ideologies that attempt to justify the superiority of one state over all others through the construction of dichotomies.

A good starting point in this discussion is Edward Said's work on how various 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European scholars, politicians, and writers have looked at the Orient as a way for the West to define itself against the "other." The name he gives to this particular way of thinking that treats the differences between the East and West as inherently distinct is *Orientalism* (1978). According to Said, the West often sees the Orient as a homogenous, static, mysterious, and exotic place. This type of reasoning, he says, categorizes humanity in either "large collective terms or in abstract generalities" (1978: 154) and ignores the social construction of these categories. The construction of both the "East" and the "West" also functions as a way for the "West" to reaffirm its superiority over all other groups of people on earth. Said points out that ironically, the modern globalized economy has also led to some widespread acceptance of Orientalist ideas even in the Orient (1978: 325). Louise Edwards (1995) agrees pointing out how the Chinese are currently undergoing this process of "self-Orientalization" by accepting exotic myths about themselves and using them to sell literature and other forms of entertainment to the Western market.

The Chinese clearly have accepted various ideas about nationality and language from the West, but to view this acceptance simply as blind "self-Orientalization" ignores other discourses in circulation and the fact that the Chinese also had their own ethnocentric ideas about the West. The China constructed by Orientalism, thus, "was not simply a Western invention" (Hodge and Louie 1998: 13). For centuries, the Chinese have had many of the same mirror images of the West as the West had of the Chinese. In fact, just about anyone that did not belong to the ethnic Han majority was considered a barbarian to the eyes of Chinese for many centuries. One of the Chinese names for China, Zhōngguó, literally translates as 'Middle Kingdom'. The Chinese, thus, viewed themselves as the center of the civilized world and saw their complex writing

system as one of the many symbols of their advanced culture. Much as Orientalism helped Westerners define themselves, constructions of an uncivilized Western world helped the Chinese define themselves.

### *Han / Minority*

The Han ethnic majority, which comprises a little over 91% of China's total population according to the most recent statistics available (Lei 2001), is not and never was the only ethnic group living in China. Many non-Han indigenous groups have lived along the peripheries of the Chinese state for centuries and have been viewed by the dominant Han group as barbarians. Along with these indigenous minority groups are minority languages, which further diversify the overall linguistic picture of China. Much as Said has argued that the Orient was used to help define the Occident, China has also defined itself not only against the West but also against its minority groups. A study of how the state treats minority groups and their languages illustrates another level of *fractal recursivity* in Chinese language ideologies. This should sound very similar to the Western European perspective of Macedonia described by Irvine and Gal.

During the Mao years, minority languages were seen as threatening to the overall unity of the state. The Post-Mao reforms of the 1980's radically reversed this Cultural Revolution policy and gave minority groups official recognition, special economic aid, and generous political representation with many women holding high offices (Ibid.). Along with this official recognition of 55 minority groups is the promotion of use of their native languages, which number at least 120 (Jun 2001). The Chinese government has also actively supported efforts to preserve endangered languages among its minorities (Ibid.) and to develop writing systems for these languages (White 1992). In addition, there has also been a shift in the usage of the word "Chinese" to refer to national citizenship rather than to ethnic identity (Ramsey 1987: 158).

“Han” would, thus, be the preferred name for China’s ethnic group and “Chinese” (zhōngguó rén) would be an inclusive term that includes the Han and all of China’s 55 minority groups.

This recognition of linguistic diversity among minority groups seems contradictory in light of China’s policies of trying to unify the Han Chinese language. Yet, it is still based on the same language ideology that views cultural and linguistic identity as both fixed and inherently linked to each other. Ramsey says that although a common language was the best criterion in defining a minority group following the Stalinist criteria adopted in the 1950’s, the classification of minorities has been arbitrary and often based on selective use of ethnographic and linguistic data (1987: 166). For example, the Miao group of Southern China speaks several mutually unintelligible tongues, but all are considered part of the same ethnic group because the comparative linguistic data shows that their ancestors spoke a common language (Ibid.). On the other hand, there are also groups of people with rather fluid identities living side-by-side with the Han and speaking the Han Chinese language but are classified as non-Han even though they lack consciousness of a non-Han identity (Ibid: 167). There are also the “boat people” of mysterious ancestry, which include the Hoklo, the Tanka, and the Xumin, who sail around the South China coast. They have applied for minority status but have been rejected because they speak Chinese dialects (Ibid: 169). This, according to the government, makes them Han.

However arbitrary and inconsistent minority classifications appear to be, they function as an ideological tool that reinforces an idea of an inherent Chinese identity formed sometime in an imaginary past. China’s minorities serve as something against which the Han majority can identify itself as Han. Thus, as was shown earlier, language was used as a way of defining Chineseness as something in contrast to Western identity. This dichotomous relationship recurs here with language once again used as a means of differentiating the Han majority from other

groups that live in China. The inconsistency in classification can be understood as based on an ideology of ethnic groups as fixed rather than as constantly in flux. It is simply a matter for ethnologists and linguists to decide based on collected data whether or not a group is Han. This is similar to the Macedonian case of linguists selecting certain features to emphasize to show the desired relationship of languages. Chinese officials are clearly selective about who they want to define as Han and who they want to define as minority. This recursivity applies to reaffirm the boundaries of Han identity.

China's current minority policies might also reflect the changing meaning of the nation-state by incorporating a belief in "unity in diversity." This seems to be a growing trend in nation-state discourses. Having an ethnically diverse but unified population is increasingly seen as projecting a positive image of how well a country is doing. After all, "minorities happily and enthusiastically integrated into the life and functioning of the Chinese state are the best kind of advertisement for a successful and benevolent government" (Ramsey 1987: 158).

Another place in the world where people also seem to be adopting a similar redefinition of nation as a diverse but united entity is in Zambia. Debra Spitulnik (1998) has studied the choice of languages used during radio broadcasts in this country and explores the ideologies involved with such choices. Zambia is home to 73 ethnic groups who speak roughly 15 to 20 different languages, 8 of which are officially authorized to be used by mass media. Rather than having "democratic linguistic pluralism," Spitulnik shows that certain languages seem to be privileged over others such that there is "hierarchical linguistic pluralism" (1998:169). This seems to be a contradiction in the state's overall goal of "unity in diversity" because the diverse groups of Zambia are not all treated equally. She coins the term *culturalization of ethnicity* to describe this particular belief about "diversity" that she sees developing in these airwave

discourses that seems to have produced contradictory results (1998: 167). Citing Patricia Spyer, she sees this belief as “a compartmentalization and ‘codification of diversity [in which] all diversities become exchangeable’” (1998: 184). Put in other words, this belief acknowledges that there are many different but distinct ethnic groups and that each ethnic group has its own unique traditions, dances, songs, and in short “culture.” National identity is defined in terms of a philosophy of ethnic pluralism but this pluralism is strictly defined in these compartmentalized terms that are seen as all being equal but at the same time also fixed and essentialized. Spitulnik adds, though, that in reality most of Zambia’s population is multiethnic and multilingual (1998: 183) but somehow the dominant ideology still treats people’s language and ethnicity as falling into neat categories.

As Silverstein would describe, this is very ‘Whorfian’ logic. This discussion should also sound similar to how the Chinese state currently views ethnicity and diversity within its borders. The state sees recognizing minority groups as producing positive images of the state because they show that the state can unite in spite of differences. Yet, in defining diversity, both China and Zimbabwe rely on defining fixed ethnic and linguistic groups. This definition erases facts about the fluidity of identity and language in both countries. In the Chinese case, this is an example of *fractal recursivity* involving the projection of the East/West dichotomy to the level of Han/Minority to explain differences between the Han majority and minority groups.

*Guóyǔ / Pǔtōnghuà: Taiwanese Contestations of Chineseness*

The final examples of fractal recursivity that I will show involve defining regional identity as Han Chinese people. They should sound similar to Weber’s account of the dichotomy of urban/rural in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Though the Han Chinese group is arguably the largest ethnic group on earth, a unified Han identity is also an actively contested idea. What emerges



from the following accounts is a variety of responses from both Taiwanese and Cantonese-speaking Chinese. Here, it can clearly be seen that these regional responses to dominant Chinese state linguistic ideologies show how recursively created oppositions provide the resources to create shifting identities as described by Irvine and Gal.

One way to understand the oppositions involved here is the use of different terms to describe the Chinese language. As a first example, *Guóyǔ* means “national language” and it was designed to serve exactly that purpose during the Republican era of Chinese history roughly from 1912-1949. Following the 1949 Communist Revolution, many pro-nationalist supporters fled to the island of Taiwan, which then became the Republic of China (ROC). In 1955, *Pǔtōnghuà* (“common speech”) was declared the name of the official language of Communist China. Interestingly, both *Guóyǔ* and *Pǔtōnghuà* have “been defined in such a way that it is difficult to see how [they] actually” differ from each other (Norman 1988: 137). Both are based on a form of Mandarin spoken in Běijīng. While *Pǔtōnghuà* is now the normal word for ‘Mandarin’ in mainland China, the Taiwanese have stuck with the word *Guóyǔ* to refer to their national language.

As a result of differing nationalist ideologies that continue to this day, many Taiwanese have been developing a stronger sense of a national identity. Language still continues to serve as a medium of creating oppositions with the mainland Chinese government. Besides different names for Mandarin, different romanization systems and scripts are used in Taiwan. Until 1999, the ROC insisted on using the Wade-Giles romanization system created in 1912, instead of adopting Pīnyīn (Su 2001: 123). Taiwan also continues to use traditional Chinese characters without even considering the idea of script reform and character simplification. In fact, until the early 1990’s, the ROC banned the importation of all materials printed in simplified characters as

an act of opposition against the mainland Chinese government (Rohsenow 2001: 130). Once again, we see an ideology essentializing the link between language and Chineseness or the *iconization* discussed by Irvine and Gal. Yet, this ideology is not viewed in the same way. For many Taiwanese, a Taiwanese identity is characterized as one that aims to preserve “traditional Chinese culture” and Chinese language (Ibid). Preserving the traditional script and resisting measures that reinforce the commonalities between Mainland and Taiwanese Mandarin such as not using the Pīnyīn system can be seen as means to create a distinct Taiwanese identity that identifies itself against mainland Chinese. For government officials on the mainland, modernity and a common code of communication in any form are more important than preserving a traditional written language that has failed to reach the masses. Both Taiwan and China are operating on an ideology connecting language with identity but each one sees Chineseness in different terms. This is an example of the complex, contradictory results of the Chinese Ideological Machine described by Hodge and Louie. This example also supports Irvine and Gal’s insight about how *fractal recursivity* gives the resources to create shifting identities. Chineseness, then, takes multiple meanings.

To further complicate the picture of Taiwanese identity, the composition of the island consists of 13% Mandarin-speaking Chinese mainlanders (on the island since the Communist Revolution), 12% Hakka, 1.8% Austronesian Aborigines and an overwhelming 73.2% native Taiwanese who are descendents of Fukienese-speaking Chinese settlers that have inhabited the island since the 1640’s (Huang 2000:144). A whole other range of language and identity issues arises from conflicts among these diverse groups but a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper. I will say, however, that this leads to other examples of *fractal recursivity*.

*Tòhngyàhn/Zhōngguó rén: Cantonese Contestations of Chineseness*

Going back to the introduction of this essay, I presented four different ways of expressing the same idea in four different forms of colloquial Chinese speech and mentioned that they even differ in the word they use for “Chinese.” The Běijīng form (*zhōngguó*) can be used and understood throughout much of the Chinese-speaking world but the Cantonese form is used almost exclusively among Cantonese speakers. The word *tòhng* (Mandarin: *táng*) refers to the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) and reflects the migration of Chinese from the North to inhabit the area that is now Guǎngdōng Province during this period (Chun 1996: 112). For Cantonese speakers, *tòhng* is a colloquial adjective used to describe anything Chinese. Examples of this include *tòhngsāan* (‘Tang Mountain’), which many overseas Chinese use to refer to their homeland, and *tòhngwá*, which broadly means ‘Chinese language’ without reference to any particular form of the language. These words are part of the everyday speech of many Cantonese speakers but neither of these terms translated literally into Mandarin carry the meaning ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’. They simply mean ‘Tang Mountain’ and ‘Tang language’ in Mandarin.

The wide use of the word *tòhng* reflects a strong sense of regional identity in Guǎngdōng. In fact, the Cantonese-speaking part of China has shown some of the strongest resistance to adopting Mandarin. Some reasons explaining why Mandarin has not been as widely adopted in this region include the difficulty of learning Mandarin for these speakers because of major linguistic differences between the two regionalects, lack of access to education, and a historical association of Pǔtōnghuà with wartime northerners and backwardness (Pan 2000: 23-24). Furthermore, the Cantonese-speaking south has also been much more economically prosperous than the north and so consequently Cantonese has developed high prestige as the southern Chinese lingua franca as well as in many overseas Chinese communities. Cantonese speakers have no urgent need to learn Mandarin because their language already has a special social status

in the south. In spite of this resistance, the number of Mandarin speakers in the south is gradually increasing. Nevertheless, local perceptions about language prestige pose serious challenges to official state discourses.

With Cantonese, it is interesting to think back to what Anderson said about vernacular writing and national consciousness because Cantonese as well as several other regionalects do have vernacular writing associated with them that differs from the national norm. These vernacular characters, however, have never had wide use and have been viewed negatively even among speakers of these forms of speech. Even in Hong Kong where over 90% of the population speaks Cantonese, dialect writing is considered low class and uneducated (Chen 1999: 117). The use of dialect writing and romanization systems based on regionalects would probably be a very efficient way of increasing literacy because these forms of writing are closer to actual forms of speech (Ibid: 119). Government officials, however, have vehemently rejected such plans because they have the potential to lead to the disunity of the state and the further development of a regional southern Chinese identity (Ibid). Ping Chen speculates that the adoption of regional writing systems could cause the Chinese languages to follow the fate of Latin when vernacular languages became printed on paper (1996: 239). This is a scenario very reminiscent of Anderson and is a road that government officials do not want to risk taking. This reluctance to adopt writing systems that could help tremendously in increasing literacy shows the value the state sees in maintaining a unified Chinese language and identity. This is a linguistic ideology that remains strong, though not unopposed.

#### **Language Not a ‘Fact’ But a ‘Production’: A Conclusion**

To conclude this paper, it would be refreshing to think about the words of Stuart Hall when he says that “identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact ... we should think, instead, of identity as a

‘production’, which is never complete” (1990: 222). This can apply to language and linguistic identity too. I have shown in this paper that language boundaries are not self-evident; they are often politically defined. Language is, thus, not an accomplished fact, but something that is constantly in the process of being defined. Debates about language and national identity show that language continues to be a contested concept because it is seen as having such a close relationship to national identity. The semiotic processes described by Irvine and Gal clearly show how language ideology is used to maintain perceptions of a unified China, which in reality is both culturally and linguistically diverse in spite of how languages are identified. I have argued that China and the Chinese language are anything, but homogenous as often depicted in Western popular and official state discourses. These perceptions of homogeneity underscore the power of language ideologies in creating and recreating socially produced ideas about how to make sense of the natural Babel of human linguistic diversity.

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*Note: Unless otherwise stated, Chinese terms are in the Pīnyīn Romanization system. Cantonese terms, where noted, are written following the Yale Romanization system.*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This sentence is my own creation chosen to demonstrate as much contrast as I was able to think of among the selected forms of Chinese. Both the Guǎngzhōu and Kāipíng forms are based on my own native-speaker intuition and sound like normal utterances from a Chinese-American perspective. The Běijīng and Shànghǎi forms, on the other hand, might sound a little unusual and verbose to native speakers because of the use of the word “Chinese” to describe the meal and the emphasis on the event as an action taking place at this minute. But this is intentional and underscores the fact that the Chinese ‘dialects’ differ in more than just phonology but also in the connotations conveyed with the use of various words and in syntax. The concept of a Chinese ethnic or national cuisine has not been as well solidified in Northern China as well as it has in the South. Also, Cantonese has a progressive aspect marker (-gán / -kɪn, in Kāipíng) similar to the English (-ing) that makes this sentence an event that is unambiguously taking place at this moment rather than a habitual event. Both Mandarin and Shanghainese lack this grammatical morpheme and require the use of an adverb such as *zhèngzài* to indicate an event that is unambiguously taking place at this moment.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Conny Tse for her fluent knowledge of Mandarin.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank my informant Lynn Lin, a fellow UCSC student, for her knowledge of Shanghainese. I have transcribed her speech using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) without tone markings.

<sup>4</sup> This is the pīnyīn spelling of the city of Canton. The sentence here is romanized according to the Yale System.

<sup>5</sup> One of the Sìyì counties, the ancestral home of most Chinese-Americans, located about 90km/56 miles southwest of Guǎngzhōu. I have transcribed this sentence in IPA without tone markings.

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<sup>6</sup> Many words in standard Cantonese beginning with a <t> correspond to words beginning with <h> in the Siyi dialects. So the words used here for “Chinese” in Guǎngzhōu and Kāipíng are actually cognates that are different from the words used in the other two dialects.

<sup>7</sup> DeFrancis (1984) points out that the phonetic element present in a majority of characters is often ignored. The characters I present here are purely ideographic, but it is worth noting that phonetic clues, if present in a particular character, provide another valuable mnemonic aid in learning characters.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Literacy’ has not been a clearly defined term. DeFrancis (1984) is skeptical about official government statistics on literacy because they are often inconsistent about how many characters one needs to know to be considered literate. Furthermore, gathering accurate data in rural areas, where illiteracy rates are likely to be the highest, is very difficult.

<sup>9</sup> According to a conservative estimate reported by Ping Chen (1994: 367), about 2,000 different schemes to reform the writing system have been introduced since 1892. This has clearly been a rather heated issue connected to the rise of nationalism.

<sup>10</sup> This is especially true in urban areas, the places in China where foreigners are most likely to visit.

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