

Chapter 2

The Politics and Sociolinguistics of Chinese Dialects

2.1 The Language–Dialect Issue in the Chinese Context

The perception and definition of a linguistic variety as a “language” or a “dialect” can be an ideological issue at the societal level and an attitudinal decision for each individual. If there is any consensus among linguists on the distinction between “language” and “dialect”, it would be that a clear-cut distinction is largely unattainable. In a descriptive, synchronic sense, a language may refer to a group of related linguistic norms or a single norm, and a dialect is presumably one of the norms (Haugen 1966). Hence every dialect is a language, but not every language is a dialect. Language as a generalised notion means that every speaker of a language is a speaker of at least one dialect (Chambers and Trudgill 2004)—standard English is, for example “just as much a dialect as any other form of English” (p. 3). The generalised and specific dual sense of the term “language” in its synchronic dimension adds to the muddle of the issue, and thus scholars have proposed the term “variety” to be used instead as a descriptive label for a single linguistic entity in a “neutral” and ad hoc manner. While this is methodologically convenient, the superordinate–subordinate model of the language–dialect relationship cannot avoid the question of genetic relationship. How closely related would a group of linguistic norms need to be considered as dialects of the same language? When would these norms be considered separate languages? To what extent does mutual intelligibility play a role in determining answers to these two questions?

Suffice to say that the criterion of mutual intelligibility is highly problematic, and it is never the sole criterion determining the identification of languages and dialects. The ideological desire to minimise internal differences and maximise external ones (Haugen 1966) frequently overrides linguistic criteria. The differentiation of the Scandinavian languages (Chambers and Trudgill 2004) and between Hindi and Urdu (Wardhaugh 2006) are well-known cases of the maximisation of external differences. Conversely the major “dialects” of the Chinese “language” are mutually unintelligible (see Tang 2007 for quantitative research on the linguistic distance between Chinese dialects). By this criterion, each of these major dialects is a lan-

guage, while their subvarieties are dialects, but instead they are all officially defined as dialects of the Chinese language.

Then there is the functional approach, which focuses on the social role of linguistic varieties. A “language” has wider functions than a “dialect”—it may be the medium of communication between different dialects; it may be more “developed” in the sense of being codified and standardised. A “language” also usually enjoys higher prestige than a “dialect”. This approach reflects many nonlinguists’ perception of the difference between language and dialect: a “mere” dialect being compared to an underqualified, undeveloped language. The risk with this approach is that what is an ideological phenomenon becomes naturalised. As pointed out by Haugen (1966), all the “great” languages of today were once undeveloped. There is not a linguistic variety that is inherently handicapped so that it cannot be developed to serve the full range of social functions. The prestige of a linguistic variety or, in other words, people’s attitudes towards the variety hinges on its degree of development and the ideological significance of such development.

The case of Chinese dialects again is an exception to the functional approach. Within each major Chinese dialect group, there are usually one or two more prestigious varieties that serve as the regional lingua franca, such as the Guangzhou variety in the *Yue* (Cantonese)¹ dialect group, the *Meixan* variety in the *Kejia* (Hakka) dialect group, the *Suzhou* or *Shanghai* variety in the *Wu* dialect group, and the *Xiamen* (Amoy) or *Fuzhou* (Foochow) variety in the *Min* dialect group. This would justify consideration of the major dialect groups as languages.

Two frequently cited linguistic arguments against regarding Chinese dialects as separate languages include the existence of a shared written language and the lack of an established writing tradition in dialects (apart from Mandarin) (Norman 2003; Chen 1999). Yet these arguments are only partially true.

Sharing One Written Language or Not From 211 BCE, when the first Qin emperor burned books and buried scholars who wrote in scripts and languages other than the standard (Zhou and Ross 2004; Hansell 2003) till the “Mandarin Movement” in the early 1900s (Barnes 1982), *Wenyan* (“literary language”) or Classical Chinese has been the unified written language for over 2000 years without interruption. It was a sacred language used in a large body of respected literature and mastered only by a very small privileged group. Also, it was strictly a written language. Regional dialects, which were the contemporary vernaculars used for daily communication, were completely divorced from Classical Chinese. In this sense, although Classical Chinese was a unified written language used by the literate and “shared” by all, this language did not transcribe the spoken forms of the dialects. With a stretch of the imagination, the divide between Classical Chinese and the regional dialect vernaculars is comparable to that between Latin and the contemporary Romance tongues in Europe in the Middle Ages (Ramsey 1987).

Writing Traditions of the Regional Dialects The written language of the dialects were the written vernaculars, which first appeared in the form of Buddhist texts dur-

¹ Terms in brackets are those more frequently used overseas by ordinary people and in previous research literature.

ing the Tang Dynasty (618–907) (Snow 2004). By the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), vernacular literature written in “白话” (*Baihua*, “plain speech, the vernacular”) was flourishing, which was a written language that approximated to the Mandarin dialects. The current written Standard Modern Chinese (SMC) is a modernised version of *Baihua*. However, Mandarin was not alone in developing its vernacular written language in this period. Other major dialects, such as the *Yue* and *Wu* dialect groups, also had popularised vernacular written languages used in religious texts, local operas, folksongs, and published literature. The circulation of these vernacular written texts helped to spread basic literacy among ordinary people, and contributed to the development and standardisation of the vernacular written languages. From the mid-nineteenth century, vernacular writing styles became associated with the modernisation and democratisation of China. During the language reform of the early twentieth century (to be discussed later), the vernacular written language based on Mandarin dialects was chosen as the prototype of written SMC and rigorously promoted. The vernacular written forms of other Chinese dialects gradually became marginalised and faded away in the process. However, some have remained strong against the odds, such as vernacular written Cantonese, which we will discuss in the next section.

In summary, while Classical Chinese used to be and written SMC continues to be the officially shared written language, neither corresponds closely to the vernaculars of the regional dialects. Some regional dialects do have established writing traditions. The two linguistic arguments mentioned earlier cannot withstand close scrutiny. A more powerful reason for regarding Chinese as a single language is related to ideology. The unification and standardisation of the written language and writing system more than 2000 years ago marked a symbolic Han Chinese ethnic identity and a cultural unity. The Chinese language has since been known as the Han Language until today (Zhou and Ross 2004). Although the interconnections between Chinese dialects are as complicated as those connecting a family of languages, such as the European languages, most Chinese people feel that they belong to the same nation “in ways that no European alliance could begin to approximate” (Ramsey 1987, p. 6).

The complicated language–dialect issues mentioned above have significance for the current study in several ways. Firstly, mutual unintelligibility between the major dialect groups means people are less likely to perceive dialectal vernaculars as “deviant”, “incorrect”, or “corrupted” forms of the standard variety, Putonghua. The standard/nonstandard dichotomy is highly inappropriate for characterising the relationship between Putonghua and Chinese regional dialects. The dichotomy, driven by a Standard Language Ideology (Milroy 2001), assumes the standard variety as definitive and central, while dialects are regarded as “satellites that have orbits at various distances around a central body—the standard” (p. 534). Even if we accept that ideology for the moment, the Southern dialects do not orbit around Putonghua. While Putonghua is a standardised variety and the official common language for all Chinese citizens, it is technically “just” a standard variety within the Mandarin dialect group. The other unstandardised dialect groups have their own more-or-less recognised “standard varieties” (Downes 1998; Snow 2008), and thus do not look to Putonghua for norms. With some stretch of imagination, it is like the way in which Spanish and French would not regard the Received Pronunciation of English

as their standard variety. This means that the relationship between Putonghua and other Chinese dialects is different from that of the usual “standard-and-dialects” or “standard-and-nonstandard” relationships. Dialect-influenced Putonghua varieties instead of the regional dialects should be regarded as the “nonstandard varieties” in such a dichotomy. Such differences must be taken into account when comparing studies of attitudes towards Chinese linguistic varieties and studies of attitudes towards standard and nonstandard varieties elsewhere.

Secondly, as we shall see in the next section, the Mandarin-speaking area is larger, both in area and population, than the sum of all the other dialectal areas, mainly due to continuous political domination by the Mandarin-speaking North (Ramsey 1987). While the size of each dialect group is just as big as that for any national language of an individual European country, when compared to Mandarin dialects, all the other dialects may be considered “minority languages” in terms of ethnographic and political power. It is therefore worthwhile to take note of language-attitude studies conducted in minority language situations, while noting potential differences.

Thirdly, the fact that Chinese dialects are officially regarded as dialects of a single Chinese language means that there will not be any “multilingual” language education policy for the Han Chinese population. The role of regional dialects is either completely disregarded or seriously underrepresented in teacher training, school education, and most institutional domains. While people in practice know that different dialects are mutually unintelligible, they unfortunately have to live with a reality that assumes otherwise. This is why I have decided to use the term “Chinese dialects”, despite the objection of some linguists (Mair 1991). I choose to use terms that are phenomenologically meaningful to the participants, in order to foreground the ideological and linguistic paradoxes. Due to the complications, it is only proper to draw on studies conducted in both bi-/multilingual and bi-/multidialectal language situations.

2.2 A Historical and Sociolinguistic Overview

2.2.1 General Introduction

The subgrouping of Chinese dialects is debatable, but the most commonly used scheme classifies Chinese dialects into seven or eight major dialect groups (Ramsey 1987; Chen 1999): *Beifang* (Northern, also known as Mandarin or *Guanhua*), *Wu*, *Xiang*, *Gan*, *Min* (some distinguish between Northern *Min* and Southern *Min*), *Kejia* (also known as Hakka), and *Yue* (often loosely referred to as Cantonese). The last six dialect groups are also collectively called the Southern dialects.

As can be seen from Fig. 2.1, the Mandarin dialect group is by far the largest among the seven groups in terms of area. It is estimated that at least 70% of native Chinese speakers speak a dialect of Mandarin as their mother tongue (Norman 2003). The word “mandarin” was believed to be first used by foreigners in China during the Ming Dynasty to refer to “Chinese officials” in the 1580s, and the

Map 4: Dialects of Mandarin and Southern Chinese

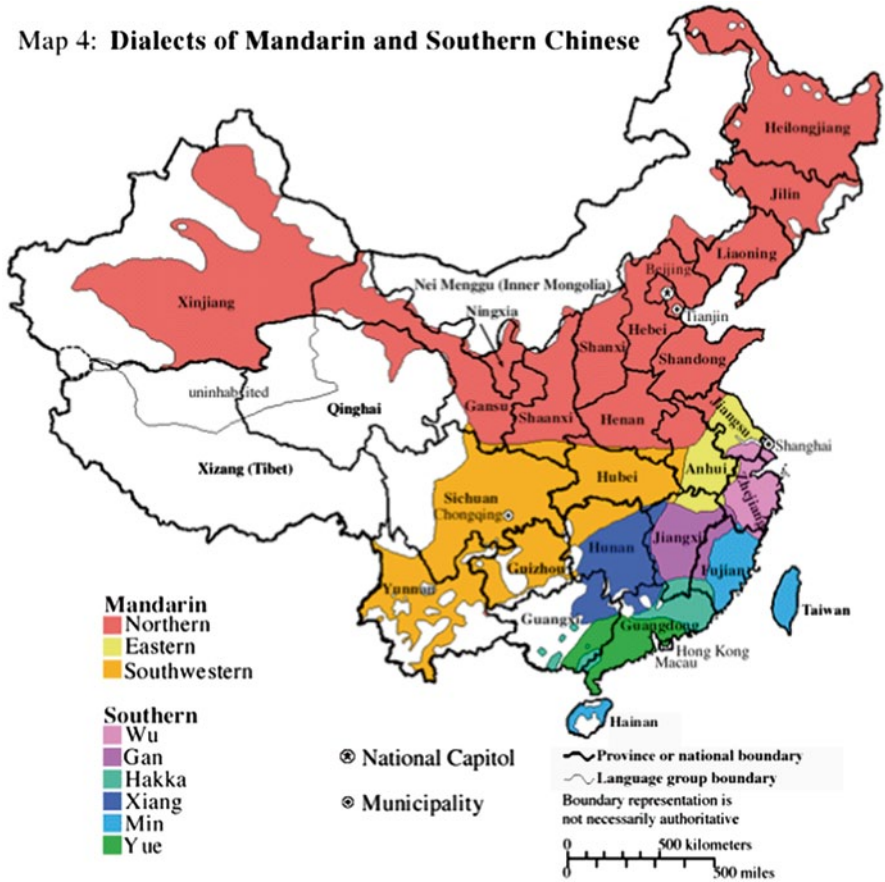


Fig. 2.1 Geographical distribution of the Northern dialects and Southern dialects (Mowry 2003). (Copyright © 2003 Trustees of Dartmouth College. Reprinted by permission of Professor Hua-Yuan Li Mowry)

dialects spoken by such officials since 1600 (Harper 2001). As successive political capitals of the country have been in the Mandarin-speaking areas, the common speech for officials has always been dialects of Mandarin. However, this “language of officials” was by no means the “standard language”. Without standardisation, mass education and frequent interdialectal migration, this “language of officials” played a very limited role as Southern-dialect speakers carried out all sorts of business in Southern dialects.

Compared to the Southern dialects, the Mandarin dialects are much more homogeneous. In the process of convergence, the Mandarin dialects have lost many phonetic features documented in ancient dictionaries, such as *Qieyun*², including

² The oldest existing rhyme dictionary, published in 601 CE, the Sui Dynasty and revised in the Tang Dynasty.

tones³ and consonant endings (Norman 2003; Ramsey 1987; Ho 2003). Consequently, Classical Chinese works no longer rhyme properly when read aloud in the Mandarin dialects. In contrast, the Southern dialects often outperform the Mandarin dialects in this aspect. This historical linguistic heritage is an important component of Southern dialect speakers' pride in their own dialects.

Among the Southern dialect groups, some groups are more well-known than others in language-attitude studies. For example, the Wu dialect group is the second largest dialect group with 80 million speakers and a long-established vernacular writing tradition. The most representative varieties are the Suzhou variety and Shanghai variety (Shanghainese). In language-attitude research, Shanghainese is known as a strong regional variety competing with Putonghua (Zhou 2001; Angus 2002).

More relevant to the current study are three major dialect groups: the Hakka, Min, and Yue dialects. They are the three major dialect groups in Guangdong Province, the location of the study, and the majority of participants spoke at least one variety of these dialects. They are also the dominant ancestral mother tongues of the overseas Chinese communities around the globe.

The Hakka-speaking population is widely scattered in Southern China, as well as in Southeast Asia. Hakka or "*Kejia*" means "guest family" in Chinese, which reveals a core historical aspect of the group: migration. Hakka people believe that their ancestors originally migrated from the Central Plains (cultural and political centre of Ancient China) in successive waves to settle in South China. In the clashes between the Hakkas and the Puntis (literally "local people") in Guangdong Province during the Qing Dynasty, the Hakkas used the label "guest family" to differentiate their group from the "local people" (Eitel 1867; Yan 2006). The Hakkas are famous for preserving their language and cultural heritage, which is articulated in the Hakka family maxim: '宁卖祖宗田,不卖祖宗言' (One would rather sell one's ancestor's land than one's ancestor's language) (Yan 2006, p. 167).

Min-dialect speakers are mainly found in Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan, and Taiwan. A large Min-dialect-speaking population also lives in South Asia and the USA. For example, more than 60% of the Chinese-speaking population (which make up 78% of the country's population) in Singapore speak a variety of the Min dialects (Li et al. 1997). The population of Min-dialect speakers around the world is estimated at over 70 million (Ethnologue 2009). The Min dialect group is the most heterogeneous among the seven dialect groups, comprising several mutually unintelligible subgroups, but scholars differ in their exact categorisation (Yan 2006; Norman 2003). The Southern Min subgroup consists of several varieties well-known in the language-attitude research literature. These include the variety of Amoy (named after the city of Amoy (*Xiamen*⁴) opposite Taiwan across the strait), Taiwanese, and

³ The Sinitic/Chinese languages are tonal languages, which means changing the tone of a syllable changes the meaning of the word.

⁴ Xiamen is the romanisation according to Hanyu Pinyin, the phonetic script constructed in the 1950s for transcribing Putonghua. "Amoy" is the transliteration according to the dialectal pronunciation of the name of the city, which has been in use for centuries possibly due to early contacts

Teochew dialects. The former two are very similar and are also collectively known overseas as Hokkien. Teochew dialects are named after the city of Teochew (潮州, *Chaozhou*⁵). The term “Teochew Speech” (*Chaozhou Hua*) in its everyday usage refers to the collection of Min dialects spoken in the north-eastern part of Guangdong, as Teochew was historically the most important cultural capital of the region. In more official and formal usage, it is called “潮汕话” (“Teochew and Swatow Speech”, *Chaoshan Hua*)—named after the two major cities in the region.

The Yue dialect group is the most well-known Chinese dialect group in the field of language attitudes, thanks to the unique status of Cantonese, the most prestigious variety in the group. Speakers of the Yue-dialect-speaking population in China are mainly found in Guangdong Province, Southeastern Guangxi Province, Hong Kong, and Macau. Overseas, the Yue-dialect-speaking (mostly Cantonese-speaking) diaspora is scattered over South Asia, North America, and Europe. The total population around the world is estimated to be more than 55 million. Traditionally, the speech of the municipality of Guangzhou (also known as Canton) is considered the standard variety of Cantonese. It has been the genuine regional standard and lingua franca at least since the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) (Ramsey 1987, pp. 98–99) until quite recently.

2.2.2 *Nearly a National Standard?*

Until the language reform of the twentieth century, the prestige of different dialect groups was more or less equal. Nevertheless, the sheer size of its area, speaker population, the popularity of the Baihua literature (although not prestigious) based on the Northern dialects, and the political dominance of the Northern dialect group gave it a lopsided advantage in competing to become the norm for spoken SMC when the time came.

Political unrest and the quest to modernise China at the turn of the twentieth century became an opportunity for language reform. The once glorious Classical Chinese was associated in the revolutionary minds with backwardness, while dialectal diversity was seen as a hindrance to a strong, united, and modernised nation (Chen 1999; Zhou 2006; DeFrancis 1984). *Baihua*, the vernacular written language based on the Mandarin dialects, was chosen as the new written standard. As mentioned earlier, vernacular literature during the imperial times was mainly in the form of popular culture, and cannot be compared with Classical Chinese in terms of status. Reformers, such as Hu Shi, strove to elevate the status of the new written standard by producing “serious” writings in *Baihua*, as well as rewriting the history of Chinese literature, so that previous *Baihua* literature was represented as mas-

between the local and the foreigners. These dialectal transliterations such as Hakka, Teochew, and Swatow are more frequently used in the overseas research literature, while the Hanyu Pinyin counterparts—Kejia, Chaozhou, and Shantou—are used instead in research done by Chinese scholars from the mainland of China, and increasingly by others too.

⁵ See Footnote 8.

terpieces rather than “vulgar” literature (Snow 2010). In effect, the prestige of the new written standard comes not so much from respected literary tradition, but more from its assigned role in modernising, or even “saving”, the nation (Barnes 1982). Since *Baihua* is based on Mandarin dialects, and the distance between Mandarin dialects and the Southern dialects is substantial, this choice met with opposition. Some proposed that the Southern-dialect speakers deserved to have separate written languages based on their vernaculars. Yet this proposal for diversity was apparently not in line with the mindset favouring unity at the time, and eventually, a policy of “强南就北” (to force the South to follow the North) was decided upon (Li 2003).

The process of deciding on a national, commonly spoken language was much more complicated. Within a few months of the establishment of the Republican (or “Nationalist”, “Kuomintang”) government in 1912, the new Ministry of Education commissioned a “Conference on Unification of Pronunciation”. The aim of the conference was to decide on the standard pronunciation of Chinese characters (each character can be read differently in different dialects) and the phonetic transcription system for the standard pronunciations. As Ramsey (1987) points out, in commissioning such a conference, the officials did not seem to realise how ambitious these aims were and how important these decisions would be for years to come. Delegates from the South and the North, who spoke different dialects, met and debated fiercely at the meeting. With some surprising drama lasting for 3 months (See Ramsey 1987), the Mandarin-speaking participants succeeded in setting the new standard according to Mandarin pronunciation. The new spoken standard was named *Guoyu* (“national language”), a term borrowed from Japanese. Yet it was not until 1932, when a new dictionary was published, that the national standard pronunciation was set to follow the pronunciation of the Beijing dialect. In the 1950s after the People’s Republic of China was founded, *Guoyu* was officially redefined as “Putonghua” and promoted as the common speech across the country.

A century has passed since the Conference on Unification of Pronunciation, and stories about the conference are widespread among ordinary people. You would hear different versions at different places. The main storyline is always how the local dialect, Cantonese for example, was a strong competing nominee for the national language at the conference, and only lost by the small margin of one vote. There was nothing close to that storyline in historical documents, but people tend to believe what they want to believe. They want to believe that their dialectal mother tongues were once at least as good as Putonghua since they were equal competitors for the same position. There is also a sense of regret that their dialects lost the once-for-a-lifetime opportunity to become the most powerful language of the country.

2.2.3 *Cantonese: A Dialect of Prestige and Exception*

Cantonese is perhaps the single most studied Chinese dialect in the literature of language-attitude research. Cantonese has wider influence in- and outside China than any other Chinese dialect because of a number of historical, social, and lin-

guistic conditions, some of which are quite exceptional. Cantonese has not only been learned by the numerous immigrants to Guangzhou, but it has also reportedly been replacing other regional varieties in nearby areas and is advancing northwards (Zhan 1993; Snow 2008). The widespread Cantonese diaspora overseas and the economic superpower of its base Guangdong Province (the leading economy in China since the 1980s) are two obvious factors. However, the historical, geographical, and cultural connections between Guangzhou and Hong Kong have also significantly influenced the status of Cantonese.

To resist the impact of Hong Kong media on the Cantonese-speaking Guangdong Province, the National Broadcasting Bureau (now the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television [SARFT]) gave permission to several television channels in Guangzhou to broadcast in Cantonese, including a satellite television channel (Wu 2004). Such “privilege” makes Cantonese stand out as the only regional dialect in mainland China that is extensively used in the broadcasting media.⁶ Such policies were not widely publicised so that many assumed that the permission was tacit until the recent debates on what the legitimate broadcasting language of the GZTV should be (Deng 2010). That is the scenario described in Chap. 1—how a survey about changing the broadcasting language eventually triggered a joined protest by Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

Moreover, at the end of 2011, the news came out that Guangdong Province was going to enact a new language regulation (Wu 2011). The main point of the regulation was that all broadcasting media must apply for permissions to use dialects. Heated debates were immediately sparked by the news, and the major concern was that Cantonese might be abandoned as a legitimate broadcasting language. The regulation came into force from March 2012, but so far there has been no noticeable change in this respect. Similar debates have happened more frequently in recent years and government officials have often accused the media for overreacting to language issues. It has been repeated again and again in official statements that Cantonese would not be abandoned, but the continuing suspicion voiced in the media indicates an increasing sense of insecurity about the future of Cantonese in the face of rigorous national Putonghua promotion campaigns.

Having a well-established written language is what differentiates modern Cantonese from other regional dialects (except Mandarin dialects). Despite the absence of clear prescriptive norms for written Cantonese, there is a high level of consensus on how most of the words should be represented in writing (Li 2000; Bauer 1988; Snow 2004). Moreover, written Cantonese looks to spoken Cantonese rather than written SMC for its norms. Such a degree of autonomy and norms are considered as attributes of a standard language (Downes 1998). However, in mainland China, written SMC is the only legitimate written language to be used in public domains and the only written language taught in school. Nevertheless, the use of spoken Cantonese in Guangzhou broadcasting media has helped written Cantonese to “creep in” in the form of subtitles. Once in a while, vernacular Cantonese words or

⁶ Some other dialects, such as Shanghaiese and Teochew dialects, are also used in regional broadcasting, but not as extensively as Cantonese.

quotes may be found in newspapers and magazines in articles written predominantly in SMC. *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), a major local and nationwide newspaper⁷, dedicates one whole page to articles written in Cantonese.

In people's private lives, written Cantonese is much more pervasive. It is usually used in text messages, online chats, and on social network websites. As David Crystal (2006) observes, written languages in such media approximate actual speech to give a sense of "talking texts". Hence the younger generation of internet users are more likely to use written Cantonese. Several small but active groups⁸, which advocate speaking and writing Cantonese correctly, also mainly consist of young people. As important vehicles for computer-mediated communication, some Cantonese input software has been developed (e.g. CPIME 2009). Moreover, Hanyu-Pinyin-based input software has also paid attention to facilitating dialect input (LALS 2009). Siri, the newly launched, built-in, intelligent speech-recognition software developed by Apple Inc., can understand, transcribe, and respond in Cantonese (Pantovich 2012). These commercial products indicate that there is clearly a market for written and spoken Cantonese in and beyond mainland China. Significantly, "Hong Kong" is put in parenthesis after "Cantonese", which seemingly indicates that the Hong Kong variety of Cantonese is commercially more well-known and important.

It can be seen in this section that the status of Chinese dialects has been changing over time. These changes, however, influence not only speakers in mainland China, but also other Chinese communities. The mutual influences exist not only in social scientists' minds or in the form of figures, but also in very concrete forms such as the protests I described in Chap. 1, the language policies to be discussed in the next section, and the daily lives of the participants to be presented later in the book. Therefore, a study of language attitudes and identities in multilingual China would not be complete without an international dimension.

2.3 Language Policies Regarding Chinese Dialects since the 1950s: an International Dimension

As mentioned earlier, Classical Chinese was replaced by *Baihua* and a new spoken standard (*Guoyu*) emerged during the language reform of the early twentieth century. These were life-changing events and a shared sociolinguistic history that have affected the Chinese community at home and abroad. After the Second World War, these Chinese communities went through separate courses of language modernisation. Despite the different routes, however, spoken SMC (Putonghua, *Guoyu*, *Huayu* or whatever it is called in the community) has grown to prevail in most

⁷ It is a member of the *Nanfang (South) Daily* Group which is one of the top ten media corporations in China (Lu and Lan 2009). *Southern Metropolis Daily* started distribution in Hong Kong from December 2010.

⁸ For example, see the website of 粤语协会 (Cantonese Association), URL: <http://www.cantonese.asia/>

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