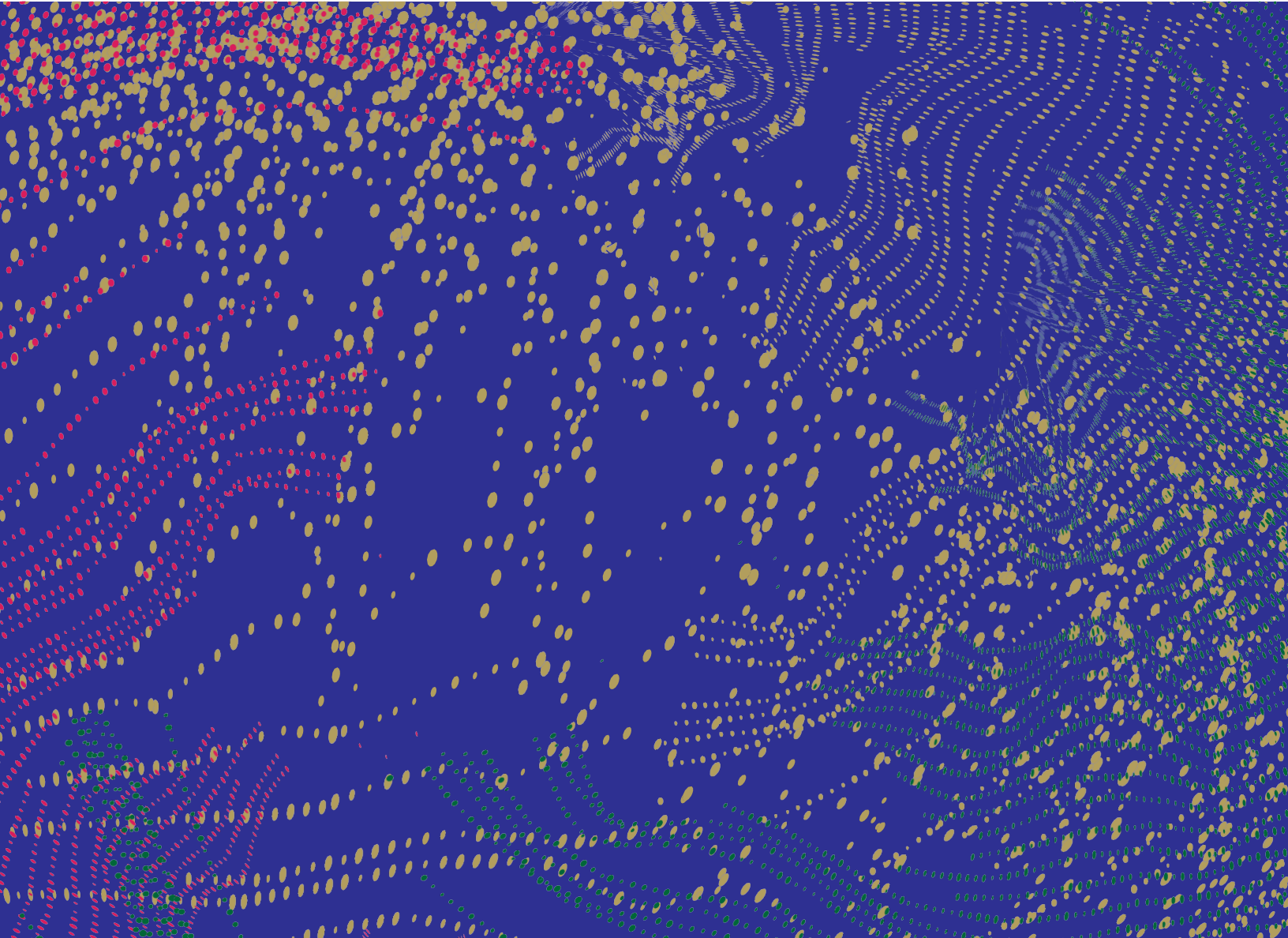


The World Humanities Report

Promoting Mandarin for China's Economic and Social Development

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Promoting Mandarin for China's Economic and Social Development

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China is a multiethnic, multilingual, and multidialectal country. According to the *Languages of China*,¹ there are 129 languages in China that belong to the Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Austronesian, South Asian, and Indo-European language families. The Chinese language, with the largest number of native speakers in the world, has many dialects, whose differences vary greatly. Communication difficulties between dialects occur, with an inability to communicate between some branches of the same dialect system, but China has had a common language to overcome dialectal barriers, from the pre-Qin Yayan to the Han dynasty Tongyu, as well as the “Mandarin” of the Ming and Qing dynasties. In 1911 the Qing government established Beijing Standard Mandarin as the national language, but due to the turbulent times, the implementation of Mandarin as the common national language was slow. At the beginning of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country's illiteracy rate was over 80 percent.² In 1955 a national conference on script reform and an academic conference on the standardization of modern Chinese were convened to carry out language planning for the new China, and in 1956 the State Council issued the Instruction on the Promotion of Mandarin, which defined Mandarin with Beijing pronunciation as the standard, northern dialect as the base dialect, and exemplary modern vernacular writings as the grammatical norm. In the same year, the Chinese

¹ Sun Hongkai, Hu Zengyi, and Huang Xingzhu, *Languages of China* [In Chinese] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2007).

² Yang Jia, “70 Years of National Common Language Popularization Capacity Building in China: Review and Outlook” [in Chinese], *Journal of Yunnan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 5 (2019): 41–47.

Character Simplification Program was announced, and in 1958 the Hanyu Pinyin Program was issued.³ The groundwork for language reform was laid.

Later, Article 19 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted on December 4, 1982, stated that “the state shall promote the common use of Putonghua⁴ throughout the country,” making the promotion of Mandarin a statutory task written into relevant laws and regulations. The Law of the People's Republic of China on a Common Spoken and Written Language, passed on October 31, 2000, and implemented on January 1, 2001, gave Mandarin the legal status of a national common language, specifying that the state shall promote Putonghua and implement standardized Chinese characters.

The Instructions on the Promotion of Putonghua issued in 1956 had proposed that Putonghua should be promoted in cultural and educational systems and in all aspects of people's lives. The results of the Survey on the Use of Chinese Language and Script, released on the website of the Ministry of Education in 2004, showed how successful these efforts have been.⁵ The share of people who can communicate in Putonghua is 53.06 percent, the proportion who can communicate in a Chinese dialect is 86.38 percent, and the proportion who can communicate in minority languages is 5.46 percent. The share of the population using standard Chinese characters in writing is 95.25 percent, and those who have mastered Hanyu pinyin has reached 68.32 percent. The survey results also show that there is a gap between urban and rural areas in the proportion of people who can communicate in Putonghua. The proportion in urban areas was 66.03 percent, 21 percentage points higher than that in rural areas. The survey also found that there is a correlation between age and education level in the prevalence of Putonghua. In the 15–69 age group, the lower the age, the higher the proportion of people who can communicate in Putonghua, and the higher the education level, the higher the proportion of people who can communicate in Putonghua. Nearly 31 percent of people in the 60–69 age group can communicate in Putonghua, while the proportion of people in the 15–29

³ Hanyu pinyin is the transcription system for writing the pronunciation of Chinese characters using the Latin alphabet.—Trans.

⁴ *Putonghua* means literally “common speech.” Mandarin is the name of a type of Chinese language. The term Putonghua is often used interchangeably with Mandarin. In this text, the author seems not to be differentiating the two words, and so I am following the specific word choice of the author.—Trans.

⁵ “Major Results of the Survey on Language Usage in China Released,” Ministry of Education of the People's Republic, China Government Portal, accessed May 22, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A18/s8357/moe_808/tnull_10533.html.

age group is as high as 70.12 percent. The share of people who could communicate in Mandarin was 10.36 percent for those in the “have not attended school” group and 86.77 percent for those in the “attended technical college or beyond” group. In recent years, new progress has been made in the promotion of Putonghua, and the penetration rate of Putonghua reached about 73 percent by 2015 and nearly 81 by 2020.⁶

The promotion of Putonghua has reduced the differences caused by language and dialect barriers, especially in south China provinces like Fujian where there are diverse and mutually incomprehensible dialects, and, as Zhao Xiaoya argues, is conducive to more direct and extensive communication and understanding among people of all ethnic groups. Improved communication and understanding in turn lead to the formation of identities at the emotional, ideological, cultural, and political levels; enhance interaction, exchange, and intermingling among ethnic groups; facilitate the development of ethnic areas; and allow everyone to have access to more opportunities that can create a better life.⁷

The degree of Putonghua penetration correlates with the level of local economic and social development and with the ability of individuals to create wealth. Data released by the State Council’s Poverty Alleviation Office in early 2019 showed that, as of the end of 2018, there were still more than 16.6 million people living in poverty in China, with a larger proportion of the deeply impoverished households living in remote and mountainous areas where minority languages or Chinese dialects are spoken and Putonghua penetration is low. Putonghua proficiency correlates with higher incomes among migrant workers in the labor market and with the annual personal income of the rural population in ethnic areas.⁸

⁶ Yang Jia, “70 Years of National Common Language”; “Basic Facts about Chinese Languages (2021),” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic, China Government Portal, accessed May 22, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/wenzi/202108/t20210827_554992.html.

⁷ Zhao, Xiaoya, “Chinese National Community Consciousness Cannot Be Achieved without Language Interconnection” [in Chinese], *Ethnic Education of China*, no. 10 (2020): 1.

⁸ Lei Ming, Zhao Yao, Liu Xifei, and Zou Pei, “A 70-Year Focus on China’s Language Poverty Alleviation Process: Models, Mechanisms, Paths, and a Look Ahead” [in Chinese], *Jiangnan Science*, no. 10 (2020): 5–20; Wang Hailan, Cui Meng, and Nima Tsering, “A Study on the Income Effect of Putonghua Proficiency in the ‘Three Regions and Three States’ Area—a Survey in Bomi County, Tibet Autonomous Region” [in Chinese], *Journal of Yunnan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, no. 4 (2019): 49–58; Bian Chenglin, Liu Jinlin, Yang Liuyan, and Su Dan, “Analysis of the Economic Development Effects of Putonghua Promotion in Ethnic Minority Regions: Evidence from Intercity Panel Data in Guangxi” [in Chinese], *Institutional Economics Research*, no. 3 (2017): 220–33.

The lack of Putonghua proficiency restricts the introduction of cultural and technological knowledge, and, as such, so-called language poverty leads to economic poverty. As a result, language assistance has become an important part of China's general poverty alleviation strategy. In 2016 the State Council issued the 13th Five-Year Plan for Poverty Alleviation, which emphasized the role of language in poverty alleviation. In January 2018 the Ministry of Education, the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office, and the State Language and Written Script Working Committee jointly released an Action Plan to Use the Promotion of Putonghua to Alleviate Poverty (2018–2020). It set out goals for the alleviation of language poverty: by 2020, the poor families newly entering labor force should all have the ability to communicate with and use the national common language and written script; the existing young labor force in poor areas should have basic Putonghua communication ability; the Putonghua penetration rate in local areas should be significantly increased; and the basic language environment for Mandarin communication should be available, so as to promote the ability to become “self-sufficient,” as well as to lay a good language foundation. Thus, the work of popularizing and promoting the national common language has been given a new mission of opening up the “last mile” of language poverty alleviation.

Both the promotion of Putonghua and the development and use of the languages of all ethnic groups are national policies. They both have the legal status stipulated in the constitution.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hull

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