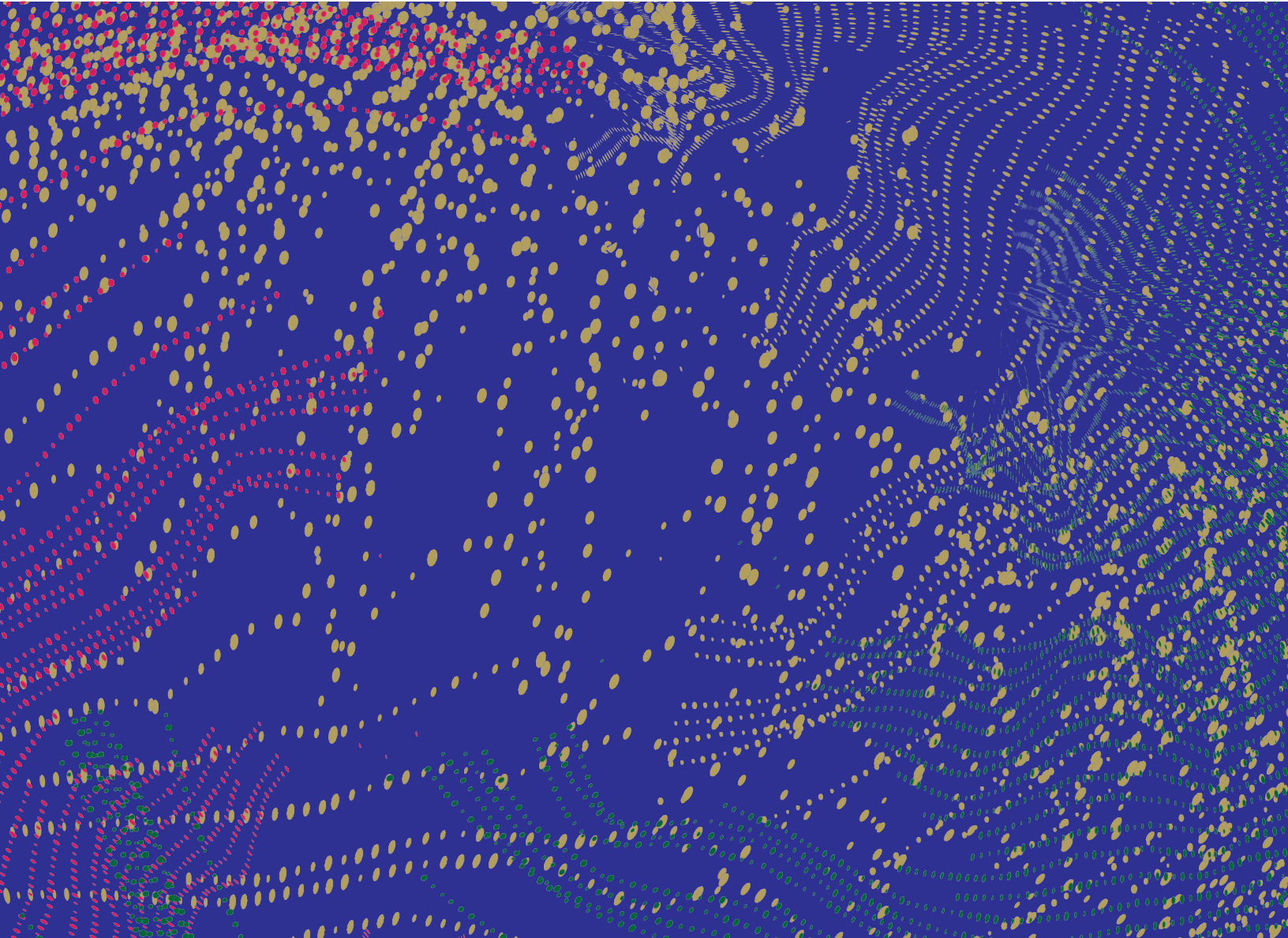


The World Humanities Report

Research on Chinese Dialects

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Research on Chinese Dialects

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From the Beginning of Dialect Studies to Their Height

Starting in the 1950s, with the introduction of three major language reforms—developing simplified Chinese characters, the popularization of standard speech (*Putonghua*, Mandarin Chinese), and drafting and putting into operation the pinyin system for Romanization (using the Roman alphabet and diacritical marks to show tonality)—survey-based research of the dialects of contemporary Chinese was assigned high priority. There was pressing need for a relatively complete understanding of Chinese dialects throughout the country, as a step toward popularizing *Putonghua* (standard speech) throughout the nation. From 1956 on, the task of conducting a universal survey of Chinese dialects was set into motion in all of the dialect regions of China. In the two following years, a total of 1,849 site surveys were completed from a total of 2,298 dialect sites across the nation, using individual cities and individual counties as sites that are the basis for the survey. The breadth and scale of the survey were unprecedented. Based on the survey, the teams produced twelve hundred reports, more than three hundred handbooks for studying standard Chinese, and more than twenty works introducing the situation in dialect regions in each province. Some of the survey reports were later published, including the *Jiangsu sheng he Shanghai shi fangyan gaikuang* [Overview of dialects in Jiangsu Province and Shanghai] in 1960, *Sichuan sheng fangyan yinxi* [Tonal systems of the dialects of Sichuan Province] in 1960, *Hebei fangyan gaikuang* [Overview of dialects in Hebei Province] in 1961, and *Anhui fangyan gaikuang* [Overview of dialects in Anhui Province] in 1962. The *Overview of Dialects in Jiangsu Province and Shanghai* was exemplary for the way it reflects the findings of the dialect survey.

In 1959 the dialect group in the Linguistics Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted a survey of dialects in Changli County, Hebei Province, under the direction of Ding Shengshu and Li Rong. The *Changli fangyan zhi* [Dialect gazetteer of Changli], printed the results of the survey in 1960, edited jointly by the Changli County Gazetteer committee of Hebei Province and the Linguistics Institute of the Chinese Academy of Science. The *Changli*

fangyan zhi was the first instance of a survey of dialects conducted in a single county and included 193 sites. The book was the first dialect gazetteer published after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and drew on the experience of survey research on dialects in the several decades prior to that; it is a classic work. At roughly the same time, Peking University and other institutions of higher education established courses in the study of Chinese dialects and published works introducing the dialects of Chinese language and source materials on the phonetic features of characters and dialect vocabulary that have continued to influence scholars in this field, such as Peking University Yuan Jiahua's *Hanyu fangyan gaiyao* [Introduction to Chinese dialects] published in 1960; *Hanyu fangyin zihui* [Chinese dialect phonological glossary] published in 1962, and *Hanyu fangyan cihui* [Chinese dialect vocabulary], edited by the Peking University Linguistics curriculum office in the Department of Language and Literature and published in 1964.

In February 1979 the Institute of Linguistics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) published the first issue of *Fangyan* [Dialect], the only professional journal devoted to dialects in Chinese linguistics and the only publication in the world that focuses on dialect investigation and research. The journal ushered in a new phase in the study of Chinese dialects. In 1981 the Institute of Linguistics joined with Xiamen University and other institutions of higher education and research to establish the National Association for the Study of Dialects of the Chinese Language. Li Rong of the Institute of Linguistics served as director general and guided the association for many years. He reminded members that for investigating the dialects of Chinese, surveys should reflect actual practices, and research should expand our thinking. The association took on a large number of tasks, uniting academic colleagues in the discipline and helping them to organize collaborations and to brainstorm about the study of dialects, popularizing the discipline of dialect study, training specialists, and strengthening international connections in the field. In the roughly forty years since reform and opening up, investigation and research of dialects of the Chinese language has made unprecedented progress and seen great accomplishments not only in increasing the number of professional scholarly organizations involved in investigation and study of dialects and strengthening research teams, but also in broadening the scope of investigation of dialects of Chinese language, so that description of the phonology, vocabulary, and grammar of the dialects is more fine grained and thorough. As China's opening to foreign countries has expanded and deepened and scholarly exchange between China

and international academic communities developed, various linguistic theories were introduced to Chinese linguistics and dialect studies, including studies of dialects of Chinese and historical linguistics, linguistic geography, linguistic typology, experimental phonology and other disciplines informed one another and interacted and greatly expanded the horizon and the space for study of the dialects of Chinese language. In this new toolbox, the methods of grammaticalization and language typology used in historical linguistics led to a progressive deepening and broadening of studies on dialects of Chinese. The research of dialects of the Chinese language has already become a complete and mature discipline and system. It has its own well-rounded theoretical framework and models for analyzing the dialects of Chinese and its own independent discourse that applies to research on dialects of Chinese in mainland China and abroad, demonstrating the successful integration of theories of linguistics and the practice of investigation and research of the dialects of Chinese language.

Drawing Up the Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects

The first edition of the *Language Atlas of China* was a major national science project funded as part of the Sixth Five-Year Plan, and the large-scale project arranged contractually in 1983 between the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Australian Academy of the Humanities was also the first major collaboration with a foreign counterpart since the establishment of CASS. Hong Kong Longman's (Far East) Publishers issued the atlas in 1987 and 1989, printing two different editions, Chinese-language and English-language.¹ The maps of Chinese dialect regions and explanations of writing forms in the *Language Atlas of China* were composed by researchers of Chinese dialects who were recruited from around the country by the Institute of Linguistics of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, and Li Rong, Xiong Zhenghui, and Zhang Zhenxing (b served as editors in chief.

The *Language Atlas of China* proposed a method for mapping Chinese dialects at five levels—point, minor area, area, region, and major region—and categorized ten dialect regions based on the regional divisions used by previous

¹ *The Language Atlas of China*, part 1, was formally published in two installments, for the Chinese and English versions (Hong Kong: Longman Group (Far East) Publishing Limited, 1987 and 1989).

scholars: Jin dialect region (which preserves the entering tone),² Wu dialect region (current in Suzhou, parts of Zhejiang Province, and Huzhou in Anhui Province), Hui dialect region (found in mountainous areas including Anhui and parts of neighboring Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces, and highly differentiated from place to place), Gan dialect region (spoken in Jiangxi and neighboring provinces), Hunanese dialect region (*Xiang* in Chinese, spoken in Hunan and parts of northern Guangxi, parts of Guizhou and Hubei), Minnan (or Fukkienese, *Min* in Chinese) dialect region, Cantonese dialect (*Yue* in Chinese, spoken in Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao, and parts of Guangxi Province), Ping speech region in Guangxi, Hakka-speaking regions (written *Ke* in Chinese), and Mandarin-speaking regions (*guanhua*, in Chinese). The *Language Atlas* proposes two basic criteria for a Chinese dialect region: one is the evolution and change in ancient words with entering tone, and the second is change and transformation of ancient words with voiced consonants. Practice has already proved that these two criteria offer objective standards to distinguish the structural characteristics of the phonetic system of the various dialects and also provide a fairly comprehensive reflection of the pattern of historical evolution of Chinese dialects. Using structural features and the mode of historical evolution as a means to distinguish Chinese dialect regions is, to the present date, the best way to find the most favorable and operable standard to distinguish regions, and in theoretical and practical terms has raised the understanding of Chinese dialect regions to a new scholarly level. The *Language Atlas of China* represents a major development in the study of Chinese dialects, and it is a basic element in building Chinese scientific culture. The project has had a great response in the scholarly community in the Chinese mainland and abroad.

Cao Zhiyun at the Beijing Language University was chief editor of the *Hanyu fangyan ditu ji* [Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects], published in 2008 in three volumes, which is the first work to map the language characteristics and reflect the main features of twentieth-century Chinese dialects that is based on field investigations.³ The three volumes cover phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, with 205 diagrams in the phonology volume, 203 diagram maps in the vocabulary volume, and 102 diagrams in the grammar volume, and each

² The Jin dialect region covers much of northern China, parts of Shanxi, and much of Shaanxi, Henan, and Hebei, is disputed, and is often classed as Mandarin-speaking. Li Rong argued for a separate classification because the regional speech preserves the entering tone.—Trans.

³ Cao Zhiyun, Chen Hui, Chen Ziping, Deng Nan, Fang Yaobing, et al., eds., *Hanyu fangyan ditu ji* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2008).

diagram consolidates information from 930 survey sites in mainland China and Taiwan. The *Linguistic Atlas of Chinese Dialects* describes and displays synchronic distinctions as well as geographic distribution of language use in Chinese dialects relatively comprehensively and scientifically. It provides basic source material that is extremely important to research in the various disciplines of Chinese linguistics and to the study of China's regional cultures.

The second edition of the *Language Atlas of China* [*Zhongguo yuyan ditu ji*], published in 2012, was written by members of the Institute of Linguistics at CASS, as well as the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at CASS, together with the Center for Language and Information Sciences of City University of Hong Kong, involving more than fifty professional linguists in the Chinese mainland; the team spent ten years to complete the editorial work. Xiong Zhenghui, Zhang Zhenxing, Huang Xing, Dao Bu, and the sociolinguist Benjamin K. T'sou (T'sou Ka Yin, written Zou Jiayan in Mandarin) made up the editorial committee, with Zhang Zhenxing serving as editor in chief.

The new edition of the *Atlas* was drawn up on the basis of the original 1987 *Language Atlas of China*, but it did more than faithfully transmit the theoretical framework of the first edition, innovating and expanding it theoretically and in practice. The Chinese-language edition comprehensively reflected the major advances in the twenty-plus years since 1987 in language surveys and their main findings.

Editing Dialect Dictionaries and Collecting Audio Materials

The *Xiandai Hanyu fangyan da cidian* [Modern Chinese dialect dictionary] was overseen by Li Rong of the Institute of Linguistics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.⁴ Part of the purpose of housing the project in the Institute of Linguistics at CASS was their faculty's relationship with dialect researchers in many institutions of higher education around the nation. The project was divided in two parts: The first part involved editing forty-two individual dialect dictionaries, each based in a different place, including the dialects of major cities and second- and third-tier cities or towns that cover the ten major Chinese dialect regions, at a projected 22 million characters to be published by Jiangsu Educational Press. The second step was to edit a single comprehensive *Modern Chinese Dialect Dictionary* on the basis of the forty-two dialect dictionaries from

⁴ Li Rong et al., eds., *Xiandai Hanyu fangyan da cidian*, 6 vols. (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002).

distinct areas, to be published in 2002 by the Jiangsu Educational Press with a total length of more than 13 million Chinese characters.

Both the multivolume dialect dictionaries and the comprehensive *Modern Chinese Dialect Dictionary* were vast in scope, with numerous volumes. This is yet another building block for the scientific study of language in China. The publication of the dialect atlases drew notice and respect in the academic community in the Chinese mainland and abroad. *The Modern Chinese Dialect Dictionary* is both an investigation of Chinese dialects and a major step forward for the entire field of Chinese linguistic research. Its most important contribution was to utilize a large quantity of data about language to reveal the rich linguistic resources of Chinese dialects and to reflect both the commonalities and divergent features of Chinese dialects. Furthermore, the *Atlas* furnished a large quantity of fresh linguistic facts for the entire field of Chinese linguistics and for studies of general linguistic theory. It may quite possibly raise the level of research in every area of Chinese linguistics.

Hou Jingyi of the Institute of Linguistics of CASS was editor in chief of the *Xiandai Hanyu fangyan yinku* [Modern Chinese dialect sound bank],⁵ which created audio files for forty dialects that are representative in nature. Each audio tape recording approximately one hour in length, accompanied by a booklet that concisely introduces the dialect phonology, vocabulary usage, and grammar. Using an audio file to preserve contemporary Chinese dialects brought an end to publishing that was ultimately restricted to descriptions of the history of dialect usage in various regions.

Initiating Projects to Preserve Chinese Language Resources

Beginning in 2015 the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the National Working Committee on National Language and Writing organized efforts to roll out projects for the preservation of Chinese language materials. On a national level, they started core aspects of the work, focusing on survey of language resources, preservation, exhibition, and developing uses. This project in the area of language and culture is directly funded by the state, and to date it is the largest project in the world for the preservation of language resources. Some of the project's outcomes are already published, with signal achievements in the *Zhongguo yuyan wenhua diancang* [Chinese language and

⁵ Hou Jingyi et al., eds., *Xiandai Hanyu fangyan yinku* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994–98; CD version Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004).

culture collection] and *Zhongguo binwei yuyan zhi* [Record of Chinese endangered languages].⁶ In 2019 the first phase of the five-year project came to a smooth completion, and surveys resulted in collection of 123 language types and a database containing more than 10 million entries for primary materials related to dialects in all parts of China. Five million of these items are video recordings with sound, and the database contains 100 terabytes of information. In 2021 the second phase of the project was officially launched, with the participation of more than 350 research labs in institutes of higher education. More than 4,500 technical staff and professionals are dedicated to the project, and over 9,000 speakers of dialects are involved.

Translated from the Chinese by Kathryn Lowry

⁶ *Zhongguo yuyuan wenhua diancang*, 20 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017); Zhuang Chusheng et al., eds., *Zhongguo binwei yuyan zhi*, 30 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2019).

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