

# *Varieties of Spoken Standard Chinese*

# Publications in Modern Chinese Language and Literature

*Publications in Modern Chinese Language and Literature* is a new series intended for intermediate- and advanced-level students and teachers of Chinese, as well as for others who may be interested in modern Chinese studies from a disciplinary viewpoint of linguistics or comparative literature. In the light of rapidly expanding cultural contacts between China and the West, there is a clear need for newly designed, systematic study materials which will reflect the ever-widening range of linguistic and literary realities facing the contemporary student or scholar. The aim of the editors is to produce readable, reasonably priced books of responsible scholarly content which will be suitable for use either as classroom textbooks or as introductions-in-depth to specific areas of language and literature which are treated inadequately, or not at all, in other sources.

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# VARIETIES OF SPOKEN STANDARD CHINESE

*Volume I: A Speaker from Tianjin*



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## Preface

The great majority of Chinese speak standard Chinese with a dialectal accent, which may be so mild as to be scarcely noticeable or so heavy as to make normal conversation impractical. These accented speech variants are usually unknown even to an advanced western student of Chinese until he arrives in China and finds himself experiencing much difficulty in communication. To prepare students to cope realistically with actual speech situations, we have decided to design a set of materials specifically for the training of comprehension in standard Chinese as spoken by native speakers of varying dialectal background. This first volume introduces a taped conversation between two native speakers on the subject of xiàngsheng. One of the speakers speaks standard Chinese; the other speaks standard Chinese in the accent of the Tianjin dialect.

The xiàngsheng or comic dialogue has been a popular folk art enjoyed by high and low alike in China for many centuries. It is a composite form of many genres of artistic expression. Above all, it is a spoken art, or an art form the successful performance of which depends almost exclusively on the linguistic skill of the performers. As such, we think it is a good medium not only for the teaching of some aspects of modern spoken Chinese but also for introducing the students to one facet of Chinese cultural life. The content of a xiàngsheng is always humorous; it thus serves the further function of ameliorating the monotony of the classroom.

In the conversation presented here, various aspects of xiàngsheng are explored: historical background, social setting, composition, and techniques. Passages of a taped professional performance are inserted at appropriate points for purposes of illustration. Users of this material should benefit in two ways: the exposure to features of spoken Chinese not heretofore treated in textbooks, and the pleasure of acquaintance with an art form dear to the heart of the Chinese.

Mr. Han, in addition to being one of the two speakers for the tape, endured, in the capacity of native informant, hours and hours of questioning regarding his intuitions on the use of spoken Chinese, particularly of the Tianjin dialect, his mother tongue. He also provided the characters for the annotations. Professor DeFrancis joined the project shortly after the recording was made, and spent nearly three months working in Leiden. He meticulously checked the transcription, shaped the annotations into the next-to-final stage, and directed my attention to many points of importance in the structures of spoken Chinese. Indeed, there is virtually no point in these two sections which did not receive his repeated examination and scrupulous consideration. The conception of this project (see also the Introduction) and its execution in published form are my contributions -- a fact which, incidentally, requires me to claim full responsibility for all errors of omission and commission.

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1982





## *Introduction*

Textbooks on modern Chinese currently used in universities in the West present a language that is largely fictionalized: it is formal, it is educated, and above all, it is regional. That is, it is a language of educated Pekingese speakers on formal or semi-formal occasions. On the phonological level, this language seems to exist in dictionaries in that every syllable, as the pronunciation of each word is found there, demands full enunciation and little account is given to phenomena such as assimilation, intonation contours, and variations of other kinds. The vocabulary becomes progressively more learned and academic, at once creating an ever wider distance from daily speech and failing to give due attention to usages of simple vocabulary that are idiomatic, dialectical, or idiosyncratic in nature. Above all, only well-formed sentences are presented, thus giving the impression that a Chinese always speaks with perfect grammar. Little attempt has been made to expose students of Chinese to such commonplace phenomena as deletion, repetition, false starts, displaced elements, etc., that are characteristic of the so-called broken sentences occurring in actual spoken speech in any language. The result is that the language we teach with the current textbooks is an abstracted version of Chinese, much as a vintage wine is a product of grape juice.

Factors of time and place have been largely responsible for this situation. For decades, western sinologists were restricted to doing their work in libraries in their home countries, and had no visible hope of journeying through China for any purpose. They needed to learn Chinese as a tool for their research, and our textbooks were developed to meet this need. However, this rather monastic approach is daily becoming unrealistic in view of the changing world situation, and written literature will no longer be the sole source of information on China. As time marches onward, an increasing number of China specialists will be faced with the need for personal contacts, field investigations, and many other activities that can only be achieved on location. Such a prospect requires a different view of the teaching of the Chinese language: attempts must be made soon to equip members of this field with the spoken skills necessary for their tasks. Conditional to any such attempt is, however, a more realistic recognition of the nature of the speech community in China herself.

Four major language families are represented in China -- in receding order of importance, the Sino-Tibetan, Altaic, Indo-European, and Austro-asiatic. The Sino-Tibetan is numerically as well as in area the most important, with the Altaic family forming a belt along the northern border from Inner Mongolia to the province of Xinjiang and the Indo-European and the Austro-asiatic each occupying a small pocket respectively at the extreme western and southern tips of the country. The Tibetan branch of the Sino-Tibetan family occupies a vast territory (approximately 1/4 of the Chinese continent), but is spoken by no more than one percent of the population. Over 95% of the population speak one or another of the many tongues which are collectively known as Chinese.

Chinese, however, is by no means a monolithic tongue spoken by one billion people. Indeed, there are in China many dialects which are not mutually intelligible. In fact, if mutual intelligibility is taken as a criterion, the term 'dialect' is a misnomer with respect to the larger divisions of the Chinese community, and should be understood as meaning 'language'. Yet the common script, which constitutes something of a thoroughfare among a myriad of patois much in the same sense as the Arabic numerals unite western mathematics, introduces a strong intuitive bias for the retention of this term. Terminological difficulties notwithstanding, Chinese is traditionally seen as encompassing seven major groups of dialects, each with its own territorial distribution:

- 1) Hà: Northern Mandarin: Manchuria and the provinces of Héběi, Hénán, and Shāndōng  
Northwestern Mandarin: Shānxī, Shǎnxī, and Gānsū  
Southwestern Mandarin: Húběi, Sìchuān, Guìzhōu, and Yúnnán  
Eastern Mandarin: Ānhuī and the northern part of Jiāngsū
- 2) Wú: Two varieties centering respectively around Shànghǎi and Wēnzhōu
- 3) Xiāng: Húnán
- 4) Gān: Northern Jiāngxī
- 5) Hakka: Southern Jiāngxī and northern Guǎngdōng
- 6) Mǐn: Fújiàn
- 7) Yuè: Guǎngdōng and Guǎngxī

Even within the same dialect group, the differences between two sub-dialects may be so great as to deny two un-initiated speakers any degree of mutual comprehension (e.g., the Shànghǎi and the Wēnzhōu sub-dialects of the Wú group). Still further, the variant tongues within a single sub-dialect may be sufficiently different to make understanding difficult to an unpracticed ear (e.g., Héběi and Hénán). Finally, the local patois within a province such as Héběi are different enough to create problems. Among native speakers, such accents may provoke no more than amusement, ridicule, social discrimination, or even an occasional point of confusion, but, for a student of Chinese from a foreign country, more often than not, a nearly total blockage in comprehension may be expected to result.

For almost a century now, efforts have been made in China to promote a standard tongue (known at different stages in time as guānhuà, guóyǔ, and currently pǔtōnghuà) for the whole of the country, the most vigorous attempt having been in existence for the past three decades. This standard Chinese is officially defined in two respects: phonologically, it takes the sounds of Pekingese as its base, and lexically, it incorporates expressions from other dialects.

The net result of a definition such as this is the creation of an artificial language which is neither native to anyone outside the city of Peking nor to the Pekingese themselves, as the language by definition tolerates an unstated (albeit small) number of phonological features from elsewhere. The Pekingese, then, must learn to incorporate these "foreign" elements into their speech; and a person of any dialectical background other than Pekingese has considerably more to master in his learning of this standard language. In this sense, it is almost imperative to conclude that every Chinese person is at least bi-lingual, as his mother tongue, no matter what it is, cannot be the same as the language he must acquire in order to enter society. As no two individuals can be said to be identically equipped in terms of linguistic ability, we naturally observe varying degrees of control of the acquired language.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise to a western student of Chinese that, upon arrival in China, he is confronted not with one single standard tongue but with a host of standard tongues, none of which is, alas, corroborated by his previous experience in the classroom. It costs him, initially, much time and energy to orient himself to his immediate speech environment, and as his sphere of activity broadens, he undergoes an ever-widening struggle in coping with new linguistic experiences. The exceptional individual may in time become a sort of polyglot in Chinese, but the greatest majority will probably gain competence in deciphering only a small number of these dialectical variations, and remain permanently deaf to the rest.

The present book, with its accompanying tape, is the first installment of a projected series of materials focusing specifically on standard Chinese as it is spoken by people of different dialectical backgrounds. It must be stated in the strongest terms possible that this set of material is not meant for the teaching of the Chinese dialects themselves. Instead, the intention is to expose a western student to a selected sample of dialect-flavored, or mildly accented, varieties of standard spoken Chinese before he goes to China. The material will minimally present speech samples of all seven major dialect backgrounds, with each being treated in a monograph with an accompanying taped conversation. For a dialect group which has many sub-dialects, where these sub-dialects are sufficiently different from standard Chinese, there may be additional treatments of some sub-dialects. The present book is a case in point, and presents the speech of the city of Tianjin. The selection of the Tianjin speech as the subject of study rests on both its difference from and its similarity to standard Chinese. The city of Tianjin is only 75 miles southeast of Peking, and its speech is still sufficiently close to standard Chinese so as not to become an insurmountable stumbling block from the very beginning. At the same time, there are differences which, to a native speaker of, say, the Peking standard Chinese, constitute nothing more than a source of irritation, but may well be serious enough to render the Tianjin speech nearly incomprehensible to the ears of a foreigner. Examined more closely, however, we find that there are only a limited number of differences; furthermore, these differences are so patterned that once they are taken into account, a foreigner can reasonably be expected to accustom his ears to the Tianjin speech with ease.

This book, then, as shall be the case with further publications in this series, will first give a brief overview of the principal phonological features of the dialect being treated. This overview is not a complete description of the phonology of the Tianjin dialect; instead, it strives to identify the major points of difference between standard Chinese and the Tianjin dialect with a view toward helping the student to grasp what he will find in the speech sample on the tape. In other words, this book is based on the hypothesis that the most efficient way to come to understand a given dialect-flavored standard Chinese is first to have the differences pointed out, and then to practice listening to actual speech samples.

## *The Tape*

The tape records a spontaneous conversation between two native speakers of Chinese: J. Liang speaking standard Chinese, and Y. H. Han speaking a standard Chinese with faint traces of the Tianjin dialect. Both speakers are members of the modern Chinese staff at the Sinological Institute, University of Leiden, the Netherlands. The conversation was scheduled and recorded in a language laboratory, and to that extent differs from a casual conversation; yet, the subject matter being a favorite amusement for a pair of friends allows a good measure of informality in the course of the taping. Aside from the topic, there was no prior agreement as to the content of the discussion, and certainly no written manuscript to read from. At different points of the conversation, some demonstration passages were spliced onto the master tape. These passages were taken from a taped performance of a comic dialogue by Mr. Hóu Bǎo-lín and Mr. Guō Qǐ-lù. Both are native speakers of Pekingese and have an accent typical of that city. In one demonstration, Mr. Hóu imitates three other dialects: those of Shànghǎi, Shāndōng, and Hénán. The imitations are very short and give an impression as to how different these dialects can be from standard Chinese; they are, however, not the focus of this material. The tape totals 50 minutes of running time, recorded at two sittings on the same day.

There are many factors which can hinder the comprehension of speech. Of the more obvious ones, we may mention such things as background noise, disparity in knowledge between speakers with respect to the subject matter of a given conversation, or even intentional obscurity in expression on the part of one person. However, there are other factors or characteristics inherent to casual speech, which more often than is recognized pose problems for the interpretation of aural signals. Such characteristics include relative tempo in delivery, variations in volume, placement and length of pauses, afterthoughts, functions of fillers, to name but a few. These characteristics are never encountered by a student using the existing teaching materials; nor should this fact be any cause for wonder, since there has been no research whatsoever done on these phenomena with respect to Chinese. This book gives a first glimpse of the above-mentioned aspects, and invites the students to study these language phenomena with the authors. In other words, the tape contains a full battery of such things.