

Chinese language: common misconceptions of a complex language:

‘We must distinguish Mandarin and Cantonese. These are separate languages!’

(Professor of Linguistics, University of York, January 2015)

‘Which variety of Chinese do you speak? Cantonese. What a shame. I only know how to say a few things in Mandarin. I guess we can’t communicate then.’ (Professor of Linguistics, King’s College London, July 2011)

‘What are all those wiggly signs? Can you read them? Wow, you must be from Mars!’ (Classmate, Sherborne School, September 2001)

‘Tones? What are they? How can you speak properly by changing your voice?’ (Classmate, Sherborne School, February 2001)

These quotations from previous conversations reflect some common misconceptions about Chinese, my native tongue. As China ascends to global and international prominence, many Westerners are taking a strong interest in our language and culture. I have never had a shortage of students/clients who have expressed to me their intention of learning Chinese. However, in my first encounter with my students, they always say something similar to the quotations above that really annoy me, since it reflects a total ignorance of the sociolinguistic situation in China (and in the Sinosphere in general). In this article, I intend to debunk some foreign myths about the Chinese language and clarify issues that may prove to be important to your learning of Chinese in the future.

‘There are two types of Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin. They are separate languages. If you speak one, you cannot possibly speak the other. Make up your mind.’

It is widely held in the West that Chinese consists of Cantonese and Mandarin which are mutually unintelligible and exclusive. It is very disheartening to see this type of comment coming from academic linguists (see the first two quotations above), since this is both an underestimation and overestimation of our sociolinguistic complexity. First of all, Chinese consists of tens of thousands of regional varieties, which have been classified into seven macrovarieties (Mandarin, Yue (Cantonese), Min, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka) within which there are many sub-varieties which display microvariations. The dialectal density of China is easily on a par with some of the dialectally richest countries in the world (Italy, Germany, India etc), and given how enormous China is, there are easily thousands (if not millions) of dialects. Secondly, mutual unintelligibility between Chinese dialects may well be true (though this depends a lot on the general education/literacy of the speakers, as it is by no means impossible for a highly educated/literate Chinese to understand another dialect,

especially when pronounced slowly and emphatically) but this is down mainly to the differences in phonology. Grammatically speaking, it has been proven by leading philologists that the amount of variation between Chinese dialects is actually quite minimal and there have been attempts to reconstruct pan-Sinitic grammar. Lastly and most importantly, sociolinguists have established that it is more constructive to define languages and dialects in terms of sociopolitical rather than grammatical properties, since mutual intelligibility is an unreliable diagnostic that ignores the social factors behind the varieties in question. A classic dictum is that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' i.e. languages have official status whereas dialects are confined to the vernacular. From this perspective, China definitely has an official *lingua franca* in the form of standard Mandarin which is the official variety studied in schools and used in formal situations and numerous dialects spoken as regional vernaculars. The idea that Chinese consists of two mutually exclusive languages is utter nonsense.

'Mandarin and Cantonese- which one should I learn? Which is more useful? Please help me make up my mind!'

As mentioned above, many Westerners have been fooled into thinking that they have to choose between Mandarin and Cantonese and once they are down one route, they cannot possibly go back, which is nonsensical, since, apart from my objections above, my experience in teaching Chinese tells me that Westerners come to learn Chinese for a whole variety of reasons, some, predictably, for professional purposes like wanting to communicate with Chinese clients/colleagues and/or move and settle in China, but there are also other reasons like wanting to watch Chinese (especially Cantonese) movies, improve familial relationships, score Chinese boy/girlfriends (!) etc. It makes sense to learn Mandarin, as it is the official variety commonly used throughout the Sinosphere, but the demand for other dialects is also significant (especially Cantonese), especially by those who are interested not just in standard Chinese but also in Chinese vernacular culture. It is highly recommended that students/clients make known their desires for learning Chinese at the outset and negotiate with their teachers which variety to use. And there is no such thing as 'no turning back' so feel free to learn all the Chinese varieties if you like (though it might just take you a bit of time...!).

'Chinese is so hard. It is IMPOSSIBLE.'

Many Westerners, despite their tremendous desire to learn Chinese as outlined above, are daunted by the prospect of actually doing it, since there are many properties in Chinese that look like nothing on earth (hence the Martian comment above with regards to our script). However, my experience in Chinese language and linguistics has given me hope that it is by no means impossible for foreigners to

master Chinese. The two things that put most people off is the script, which is hieroglyphic and non-alphabetical, and our tones, which are fully grammatical and essential for lexical production. With regards to the first hurdle, I have taught many students how to communicate in Chinese orally without the need for writing/reading, since most of my students only want to be able to speak and understand it. Reading/writing Chinese is indeed a specialized skill and will require a lot of effort, but it is perfectly possible to communicate in Chinese without being able to read or write it (though obviously if one wants to go further, one will have to master reading/writing). The second hurdle is unavoidable, since all lexical items come with a specialized tonal contour that needs to be mastered in order to be understood, but this amounts to little more than pure memorisation. I have had a lot of success in teaching foreign students tones, which can be mastered through clear explanation and rigorous practice, and when it comes to vocabulary learning, I also make sure that my students do not just learn the phonetic realization (*pinyin* (Mandarin) or *jyutping* (Cantonese)) but also the tonal contour accompanying. Other than these, Chinese grammar is very accessible to foreigners now, as there is plenty of pedagogical material available much of which is excellent and well set-out by leading experts. The myth that Chinese is impossible to learn is another myth that needs to be taken out of popular conception.

All in all, I hope to have provided bits of information that can serve as disambiguation for the status of modern Chinese in contemporary China (and beyond), and the message I hope to convey is a positive one. Chinese is both more complex and more straightforward than most people think, since there is a sophisticated sociolinguistic system which permits a clear and systematic acquisition of Chinese. It is by no means dead-easy, but there is absolutely no need to be inhibited by the nature of our language. Please stop saying or thinking that our language is a two-faceted (Cantonese/Mandarin) horrible beast. It is an enticing creature waiting for you to explore.