

**Do You Speak Chinese, Mandarin, or Cantonese?  
An Explanation Based on a Native Chinese Speaker's Early Experience**

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**Abstract**

This article reports on my early experiences with learning and speaking varieties of Chinese, responding to the curious questions on the power relationship between Mandarin and other dialects in China today. A series of important life events and experiences are presented and discussed with regard to the historical and cultural context within which I learned Mandarin, Cantonese and other dialects at an early age. I argue that different varieties of Chinese are not only integral to Chinese history and culture, but also constituent of my identity as a native Chinese speaker. This study emphasizes that the dominance of Mandarin in contemporary China needs to be discussed under the umbrella of Chinese civilization and in consideration of rural-urban migrants' benefits.

*Keywords:* Native Chinese speaker; Mandarin; Cantonese; language policy; dialect

As a native Chinese speaker, I was asked many curious questions on the language(s) spoken in China during the years I lived in St. John's, Canada as an international Ph.D. student. The most frequently received questions concerned Chinese, Mandarin, and Cantonese. "Do you speak Chinese, Mandarin or Cantonese?", "Is the Chinese class in your school, in fact, a Mandarin class?" "Do the Cantonese people in Chinatown speak Cantonese or Chinese?" I was shocked when I first received these questions since my Canadian friends knew more about varieties of Chinese than I had expected. When I replied that Mandarin was the Standard Chinese and Cantonese was one of the Chinese dialects, many of my friends seemed unsatisfied with my simplification of the relationship between Mandarin and Cantonese. Their questions then focused on the dominance of Mandarin and the subjugation of other dialects. They obviously understood Mandarin in terms of the linguistic situation in Canada. Taking the history of British colonization into consideration, I understand that my friends are very likely to associate the dominance of Mandarin in China with the tragedy of the Indian residential school and the dominance of English over other languages in Canada. However, "the dominance of Mandarin in China" can not be compared to "the dominance of English in Canada". Since it was hard for me to convince my Canadian friends with simple words and short answers, I felt a need to explain in detail how Chinese, Mandarin, Cantonese and other dialects are related in Chinese cultural and historical contexts. Jacques (2013) indicated that the Western debate about China is often problematic in its "refusal to understand and engage with Chinese culture, the insistence on making sense of China in solely western terms" (p. A11). This article draws on my early experience with varieties of Chinese, in order to illustrate how they are related to each other and integrated into a native Chinese speaker's linguistic and cultural reservoir.

This article demonstrates my early experiences with speaking, writing and using Chinese, Mandarin, Cantonese and other dialects, and how these experiences contribute to me as a native

Chinese speaker. I recall and narrate critical events and moments from my memories of childhood literacy development of Chinese and my early life experiences with Mandarin and Cantonese, illustrating a typical example of a Chinese child's development of linguistic and cultural repertoire particularly in the 1980's. I also make self-reflective discussion on how these early experiences guided me thereafter to my interest in varieties of Chinese and then to my cultural adventure to the West. This article provides a native Chinese speaker's lens of the power relationship between Mandarin and other Chinese dialects.

### **An Innocent Chinese Calligrapher and Poetry Reader**

Even though it is not unusual in China for parents to teach their preschool-aged children Chinese characters, I am surprised at my parents' strong awareness and unique strategies of early childhood literacy development for their children. When I was three years old, my dad started to teach me Chinese calligraphy writing and my mum taught me ancient poetry reading.

I was very short at the age of three, only my head above the massive desk where I practised calligraphy. When I was writing, I stood straight in front of the desk, holding a calligraphy brush and lifting high my elbow parallel to the desk. With a calligraphy copybook beside, I observed each character in detail, imitated one stroke after another and wrote with brush and ink on the waste newspapers. This process I kept repeating until my own writing looked very similar to the original in the copybook. I practised writing for one or two hours every day while my dad was monitoring beside. He either pointed out my problems and errors while I was writing, or gave critical comments when I finished practising. My dad at that time was a strict calligraphy teacher. I had to keep practicing until my dad said, "It is fine now". During the long hours I was practicing calligraphy, I often distracted myself with such ideas like "Is there any candy left in the cupboard?" or "I will invite Jingjing to ride my little bike this afternoon?". This type of early education once was questioned by one of my dad's friends. When he came to visit my family, he was amazed at how good a young kid I was at writing calligraphy. Suddenly he pointed to a character I was writing and asked me, "Do you know what this Chinese character is? Do you know the meaning of it?" I was only four years old then and was never taught the pronunciation and the meaning of the character. When I said I did not know, he laughed. He turned to my dad, "This is not right, Bro. The kid is too young to learn calligraphy. She even doesn't know the character." My dad said, "It doesn't matter whether she can remember it for now. She will learn those characters fast in the future". My dad was right. When I went to elementary school years later, I became a quick character learner and a smart student in the Chinese class. Although I did not quite enjoy writing calligraphy then, I was keen on the ancient calligraphers' stories that my father told me. For example, Yan Zhenqin, a knowledgeable scholar and a military officer in the Tang Dynasty, lived a life of integrity, compassion and devotedness but was killed by a traitor after the war. When I grew older, my dad explained to me that writing calligraphy was not only for the purpose of learning literacy and culture, but to foster my sense of aesthetics and train my spirit of concentration and perseverance.

Unlike many kids who are often prepared to sleep with lullabies or bedtime stories, my childhood bedtime ritual was immersed in poetry. My mum read and taught ancient Chinese poetry to me every night when I was lying in bed. Every night, she sat on the edge of the bed and taught me to read one poem. She read the poem aloud in Mandarin to me and explained the meaning of the verses one after another in the dialect--Kunming dialect. I then followed her in chanting the poem several times until I could recite it on my own. The next day, my mum would ask me to recite the poem again and taught me a new one. I did not quite understand the implied

feelings and messages in the poem, but I enjoyed chanting the verses with rhymes and rhythm. These ancient poems were like nursery rhymes to me, never boring to chant and recite. Interestingly, I encountered many linguistic shocks when I received formal poetry teaching in the Chinese class at school. I noticed that the teacher's tones of particular Chinese characters were different from my mum's. For example, the word "guest" was *kè* in the teacher's speech, while it was *ké* as pronounced by my mum. Then I needed to correct my accented-Mandarin tones that were learned from my mum. I was also shocked when I learned the Chinese characters of the word "yīshān" in a poem. It sounded to me like "clothes", but turned out to mean "behind the mountain" when I learned characters. I had been able to recite hundreds of ancient poems before going to elementary school, which saved me much school work of poetry reciting assigned by the Chinese teacher. It remained a common practice until today for most Chinese families to teach their preschool-aged children to recite ancient poems. The five-character or seven-character verses written in the Tang Dynasty are especially popular in early childhood education. Almost all Chinese children and adults can recite verses written by Li Bai and Du Fu, the two most well-known poets in the Tang Dynasty.

The early childhood education I received at home included considerable work of copying, memorizing and rote learning, with little emphasis on learners' interest and comprehensibility of the text. This is contrary to the modern educational theories that focus on the development of creativity, imagination and critical thinking (e.g. Mott-Smith, 2013). However, my experience is a good example of what Jin and Cortazzi (2006) indicate about a typical Chinese literacy process that consists of demonstration, mimesis, practice to performance in turn. Reflecting on my childhood experiences with Chinese calligraphy and ancient poetry, I do not simply regard them as a means of literacy education, but rather the starting point for learning to appreciate Chinese history, tradition and culture. I am grateful to my parents for their persistence in their own thoughts and ways of early childhood education. From this unique form of education, I developed a strong sense of aesthetics and a keen interest in diverse cultures.

### **A Curious Imitator of Beijing Opera Actor/Actress**

I spent my childhood in a residential complex for the Yunnan Beijing Opera Company where there were apartment buildings, canteens, studios and rehearsal halls and rooms. My father worked for the Company as a stage designer. In my memory, most of my father's workmates were artists who played musical instruments, designed stage backgrounds, or made props and costumes. I was most curious of the Beijing Opera actors/actresses who spoke differently from the local people. Their speech sounded soft and melodious, usually in a higher pitch and volume. Most of them came from Beijing and spoke the Beijing dialect. When speaking with these neighbours, my mum used her own Kunming dialect and my dad the accent of his Dali (a town in Yunnan) dialect. I, unlike my parents, imitated the Beijing dialect, even though I knew they could understand the Kunming dialect.

Early in the morning, I was often woken by the sound of vocal exercises from the neighbours. When I got up and looked out of the window, I always saw a beautiful young lady rehearsing the opera lines aloud at her doorstep. Her vocal speech sounded like Beijing dialect, but much softer and higher-pitched. Although her lines were not easy for me to comprehend, I enjoyed imitating her. I followed her to slide the voice up and down, imagining I was the actress on the stage acting sad, angry or excited. These Beijing Opera actors/actresses' stretching exercises were also impressive. Our next-door neighbour, an actress in her 50's, often brushed her teeth outdoors in the morning, putting one of her legs against the wall over her head. It was a shame that I could

not do it even though I tried a thousand times. My favourite day was when a new martial arts Opera was rehearsed. In a large rehearsal hall, actors and actresses, dressed in sophisticated and colourful costumes, gathered in the centre, while the musical band was in the corner. I fought my way to the front through the crowd of people who were watching, cheering and applauding. I enjoyed the combat scenes in which the leading role defeated his/her enemy with martial arts and acrobatics right in front of my eyes. I often dreamed of becoming like such heroic figures as Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying after watching the Opera rehearsing in the day.

It turned out later when I grew older that the Beijing dialect spoken by the Beijing Opera actors/actresses was *Putonghua* (meaning “the common dialect”) or Mandarin. Mandarin or Mandarin Chinese is not a different language from Chinese but rather a Chinese dialect or variety. The dominance of Mandarin in China today, though related to the current language policy, is also a historical and cultural product. Based on Ye’s (2001) research on the history of Mandarin, the current accent of Mandarin evolved from the official language used for reciting poetry and books and by the scholars and officials in Ming and Qing Dynasty. In 1909, the Qing Dynasty government formally established the Beijing dialect or Mandarin as the national language (*Guoyu*). This accent is spoken widely today in Mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore. Mandarin is certainly a dominant accent among the Chinese people, but not a dominant language. As Received Pronunciation is an accent of British English used by native speakers from certain regions and of upper-class origin (Roach, 2004), we can not say that it is a dominant language in Britain. Similarly, it is problematic to say that Mandarin is a dominant language in China because Mandarin is only a Chinese variety.

### **An Obsessed Fan of Cantopop**

I started to take an interest in Cantonese songs when I watched Hong Kong serial dramas on television for the first time. There was a small orange-colored black and white television in my home, which was rare to most families in the early 80’s. The only entertainment after hard work for my family was to watch the only channel for a couple of hours on which only news and traditional Chinese operas, Beijing Opera and Huangmei Opera for example, were aired. Against such a background, the martial arts serial drama *Huo Yuanjia* imported from Hong Kong, swept over the country. It appealed to a large audience with its Kung-fu fighting scenes, patriotic spirit, tragic love story and energetic music. It was interesting that while the drama dialogues were in Mandarin, the songs were in Cantonese (*Yueyu*). I got excited each time I heard the theme song at the beginning of the episode. The lyrics were poetic, emotional and infectious and the tune in ancient style were elegant and energetic. When sung in Cantonese, the song gave out amazing chemistry. I could not help singing along, staring at the lyrics shown at the bottom of the screen. My enthusiasm for Cantonese songs kept growing over elementary school years during which I watched many Hong Kong serial martial arts dramas on TV. When I was in junior high school, I became a passionate fan of Cantopop. I could sing numerous Cantopop songs, talked about my favourite stars’ profiles and recognized the singers on hearing their voices. Most of my pocket money went to purchasing cassette tapes. Because of this special connection with Cantopop, I took Cantonese as an elective course when I was in university. When going to Karaoke, I always picked and sang Cantopop songs although my friends laughed at me for my outdatedness.

Although Cantonese is just one dialect of Chinese, to the regions of Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao, its weight is much heavier than other dialects in China and overseas. Bauer and Benedict (1997) viewed the prominence of this dialect as the product of regional economic development and its increasing impact on the world market. The impact of this regional dialect

and culture is unprecedented particularly in the 80's when the economy of Hong Kong and Guangdong flourished. Moreover, since many of the earliest residents in Chinatowns in North America originated from Guangdong Province (Canton), the cultural and historical impact of Cantonese overseas is significant (Huang, 1997). In the new millennium, while Cantopop gradually lost its role of a trendsetter of the Chinese popular music (Chu & Leung, 2013), it played a significant cultural role in building the regional Hong Kong identity (McIntyre, Cheng & Zhang, 2002). Cantopop and Hong Kong serial dramas have lost their popularity in Mainland China today, but they remain a precious part integral to my life, recording much of my childhood fun, dreams and understanding of the world.

### **A Native Chinese Speaker**

I have spoken the Kunming dialect for most of my lifetime. This dialect is similar to Mandarin grammatically but characteristic of its strong fricative consonants, low pitch and no velar nasal sound (Wang, 2016). I use the Kunming dialect almost every day in Canada to chat online with my husband, my parents, my siblings and my friends in Kunming. I often watch my favourite Kunming dialect talk show online, too. Although the Kunming dialect cannot be compared to Cantonese or Shanghaiese in the speaker population and the impact nationwide, my feeling and appreciation for it never fades. I still remember that when the Disney cartoon *Tom and Jerry* dubbed with the Kunming dialect was aired on TV about 20 years ago, it captivated a large local audience of different ages and brought my family so much amusement and laughter. Then there were an increasing number of Kunming dialect programs on the local TV channels, for example, serial dramas, talk shows and comedy skits. Since these dialect programs were broadcasted at the prime time, my family often sat together in front of the television holding the rice bowl and chopsticks in hand. We ate, watched, chatted and laughed, spending the coziest time of the day. When the program ended, our dinner always continued.

I like learning to speak different types of dialects by listening and imitating when I travel to other cities in China. In Chongqing, I talked with the cab driver in the Chongqing dialect, while in Dalian, I bargained with the vendor in the Dalian dialect. However, not all dialects are intelligible to each other and easy for me to learn. In Shanghai and Nanning for example, it was hard for me to understand the local people and pick up their words and sentences. I then used Mandarin to communicate with them. As a traveler, I enjoy learning to speak different dialects from the local people, attaining a unique sense of the local culture. Based on these pleasant experiences in China, I developed my desire to explore more linguistic and cultural experiences and afterward embarked on the new journey west to Australia and Canada.

### **Conclusion**

I speak Kunming dialect, Mandarin, Cantonese and some other Chinese dialects. These Chinese varieties are intrinsic to my linguistic identity as a native Chinese speaker. I feel fortunate to be blessed with such abundant linguistic and cultural resources inherited from Chinese ancestors that have endowed me with a permanent solid spiritual home. While living in Australia and Canada in the past ten years, I experienced different cultures and languages. I was never afraid of losing my way home. The light of my spiritual home is always on navigating me back wherever I go and whenever I want. However, within China, the tension between the official language policy and the regional language and identity is indeed getting intense in particular local contexts as the number of rural-urban migrants increases rapidly. Take Shanghai, a megacity with over 24 million people, as an example. While the dominant use of Mandarin and the local children's poor

proficiency of the Shanghai dialect caused linguistic insecurity in the local resident community (Shen, 2016), the second generation of rural migrants to Shanghai used Mandarin to construct their *waidiren* (people from outside locales) identity and community (Lan, 2014). I am not denying the dominant use of Mandarin in China. What I am arguing is that it is problematic to declare that Mandarin is a dominant language and it is problematic to simplify its relationship to other dialects into a dominance-resistance structure. The widespread use of Mandarin in China needs to be discussed under the umbrella of Chinese civilization and in consideration of the benefits of rural-urban migrants.

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