

*Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*, by Jing Tsu. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 306; 16 illustrations. US\$45.00.

Shifting geopolitics and technological progress steadily alter the linguistic landscape. Given alphanumeric texting, the rise of Chinese, and linguistic mixing, the terrain is sure to bear new linguistic flora and fauna. Will Chinese soon rival English on the international scene? And in what linguistic form? Will the reigning linguistic currency be Chinese characters, or the *pinyin* system of notation—its Mandarin alphanumeric equivalent, which is adaptable to all current gadgetry? Despite the idea that technology has made humans more efficient and globally connected, global connectivity existed, vibrantly and at times heatedly, long before the internet—and this is quite traceable in linguistic and literary history.

A stunningly detailed historical account of script activity in Sinophone circles, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* recounts how various versions of Chinese could potentially be alive today had history decided to sway in a different direction. The versions that now exist owe much, as do their systems of notation, to the determined individuals who created and defended them. Individuals engaged in notating Chinese all harbored a passion for writing, philology, and linguistics; moreover, they were alert to linguistic power in effecting political change and to the value of interpretation in international discourse. Tsu's book follows these linguistic visionaries as well as their scripts. *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* shows how Mandarin Chinese became a global language, together with the political and emotional compromises, demands and struggles that its rise to representative status incurred. Tsu asserts that because of the significance that literary individuals played in developing global connectivity, the term "literary governance" is no overstatement. To make this claim she painstakingly details the multiple events behind linguistic maneuvers that could also count as political strategies (for example, fighting for Taiwanese as a native language against the intrusion of Japanese and Mandarin). The literary in "literary governance" is given the status of political arsenal. The gravity of this claim makes

the book a politicized linguistic history rather than a treatment of Chinese and Chinese dialect literature. There are hints that many of its protagonists were fun and quite eccentric, but the book's claims leave little space for playful literary analyses. While the politicking these enterprising individuals engaged in are intriguing, the writing they created is presented so politically that aesthetics is lost in the shuffle. To retain the book's scope, detailed readings of literature are sacrificed; on the other hand, the author's undeniable command of the material and the lucidity of her prose draw the reader into the swirling mass of historical detail.

Throughout, the reader is reminded that translation, notation, and transcription all require negotiation. A script reformer needs, at a minimum, a precise linguistic ear, patience, leisure time and an ability to collaborate, but also luck, historical chance, and an ability to be politic. Notating Chinese was never a straightforward practice—systems competed with each other and had to be peddled. Not only are notation systems distinctive in orthography, but dialects have their own specific notation systems. The submission of the regions to a universal Mandarin was not easy to obtain. Provinces fought to have their sounds included in any standardized system. It is not just dialect against “national language.” “Each of the seven current major topolect groups, for example, features a dominant dialect” (7). Thus, Cantonese, Shanghainese, Xiamen, and Hakka dominate their various regions, and “Mandarin itself, to name the standard, consists of four northern subdialect groups.”

In the 1890s, Mok Lai Chi 莫禮智 (Mandarin: Mo Lizhi) introduced one of the first phonetic systems based on Isaac Pitman's shorthand. Mok Lai Chi “worked as a translator for the foreign missionaries” (25) and demonstrated social agility within the foreign Christian network. While foreigners began to set up phonetic transcription relationships, as language aids, between the alphabets and Chinese, “other Chinese script reformers saw their projects as distinctively Chinese and were implicitly disdainful of the missionaries' efforts” (25). These distinctively Chinese projects included the “speech-sound script,” a “transliterated alphabet that was derived from the fifteen tones identified in the earliest extant rhyme book of the Zhangzhou dialect in southeastern Fujian province.” The linguist Lu Zhuangzhang trumped this system with one proposing fifty-five *zimu* (“alphabet” elements); and it was also Lu who introduced the hyphen to cluster romanized characters into units. The construction of romanization systems led governments to consider the redesign of sinographs. Under such examination, the status of the sinograph as authoritative and immutable was imperiled. Eventually Chinese script was simplified by official decree, after sixty years of a national quest to find a common representation of the nation in script.

China was not the only country studying its linguistic identity. I.A. Richards and C.K. Ogden's system of BASIC (British American Scientific International Commercial) English was an attempt to simplify English and accelerate its learning by foreigners. Tsu writes, “Basic English was a subset of a natural language that did not require additional diacritical marks or a confusing number of rules” (59). The global

ambitions for Basic English were apparently undone by its unsuccessful adoption in China.

The creators of Basic English, who envisioned it becoming an international auxiliary language that Chinese could use to substitute for and translate their own language, were essentially out-smarted by the essayist, philologist and cultural critic Lin Yutang. Lin bypassed alphabetism altogether by separating the Chinese character into parts, designing a typewriter and a dictionary on this logic. The typewriter allowed character parts to be combined in different configurations, replacing the view of Chinese characters as pictorial. Lin showed Chinese script to be no less supple a writing system than the alphabet. Though the Chinese typewriter was not reproduced widely, Lin Yutang's reconception of the Chinese language served as the basis for prototypes such as Itek's 1964 Modified Sinowriter or Chicoder (Chinese encoder), capable of encoding 10,500 characters (75). According to Tsu, Lin Yutang's role in shaping machine translation pushed Chinese onto the international scene of global languages.

Lin Yutang may have demonstrated the adaptability of Chinese to other mediums and technologies, but aesthetically Chinese does not necessarily translate well into English. A number of scholars, writers, and bloggers have called attention to the awkward English seen in China. "Chinglish" boasts its own Wikipedia entry; samples of it have been received with varying degrees of humor, cynicism, and critique. Language contact often produces nonsense. But Tsu's concern is with the consequences of translation flow, or translation blockage, for literary, and eventually national, politics. She explores the question of why the renowned Chinese writer Eileen Chang was unable to find success on the American scene. Here Tsu's own conflicted loyalty to Chinese aesthetics surfaces; she explains how "gold mask" (*jin mianju*) and "idol" (*shenxiang*) are "striking in the Chinese translation" but excised from the English version and almost impossible to restore in English translations. Tsu is wary of western-style analysis of Chinese literature, but nonetheless invokes the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich* to critique Chang's "gold mask" and "idol" tropes. Chang also exhibits conflicts and neuroses in her translations, inserting clauses and explanations in her prose about the incompatibilities between languages. Tsu writes, "By attempting to preserve the idiomatic characteristics of her mother tongue, Change overly defamiliarized it" and as a result, "while not completely foreign, [Chang's English was] not close enough to pass the native ear." (97). Thus, "one language submits to another as its stranger and guest" (95).

In contrast, Ha Jin raises suspicions for being far too good a cultural informant. As Tsu writes, one critic of Jin says that if his work were to be re-translated back into Chinese it would be insignificant. But Jin's readers in English find a powerful and economical artistry in his creation of Chinese worlds using the English language. Ha Jin's reception demonstrates the mistrust and chaos that cross-cultural translations generate, since they insist on multiple-entry linguistic visas rather than on fidelity to a single passport.

Tsu's historical analysis shows that polylinguality leads to interlinguality and to exchange between nations. This has made literary and linguistic politics, at least in the past, a province of the elite. Though writers can be criticized for choosing one language over another, displaced people, impelled by war or poverty, produce varying versions, dialects and creoles of an official language. Tsu writes that "renewed by post-colonialist thinking, the idea of cosmopolitanism appears to be inflated with a facile optimism" (114) and that the fashionable idea of "de-nationalism," as in Pascale Casanova's work, "turns a deaf ear to the fact that languages are still predominantly considered, written, and standardized along national lines" (115). Even the most apparently cosmopolitan of writers must acknowledge the ways shifting identities and psychological play, game face, street credibility, and soul interfere in the formation of identity. Shuang Shen's *Cosmopolitan Publics: Anglophone Print Culture in Semi-Colonial Shanghai* brings this forth through a discussion of nineteenth-century pidgin writing. Thus the polylingual author is activating not simply one national space or multiple ones, but a third space that asks to be read in a cosmopolitan way, a space that Shen calls internationalism.

The most straightforward and persuasive example of "literary governance" is Chen Jitong's 1895 attempted creation of Taiwan as a republic after the Treaty of Shimonoseki, signed between Japan and China, ceded the island to the Japanese. Chen invoked international law and sought to secure European and American support for this first of Asian republics. "European legal categories doubled as exploitable political tokens" (133), making the Republic of Formosa an effect of (mis)translation. Psychologically the six-month interval of republican governance may have compounded what was already problematic about Taiwanese linguistic life—its original ownership by China, intermittent presence of Portuguese and Dutch, re-colonialization by Japan, and variety of dialects written and unwritten made its very identity problematic.

Tsu does offer another version of cosmopolitanism, in linguistic form: a concrete mélange of different symbols. In the case of Taiwan, linguistic hybridity runs deep. Due to the presence of the Dutch East India Company, "the earliest extant writing system indigenous to Taiwan is in alphabetic letters" (148). It took an active Han presence to erase its circulatory influence, and yet, as Tsu relates, "romanization provided the phonetic model for a possible written vernacular" (149). The reformer Cai Peihuo, showing both cosmopolitanism and adaptability, "developed a Taiwan vernacular script first in Romanization, then Japanese kana, and finally, Chinese characters, a project that spanned the colonialist and nationalist periods" (147). Cai's system favored "ease of circulation" over "national standardization" (147). Eventually, the lack of a genuine writing system to pair with Taiwanese, the language considered primary in Taiwan, allowed Mandarin to position itself as the representative language of the island. Meanwhile, Zheng Kunwu, who participated in the debates over whether to use Chinese or Japanese, engaged in creating a written equivalent for Taiwanese from its repertoire of folklore and songs (154). Eventually, in 2006, the

*Taiwan Minnanyu Luomazi Pinyin Fang'an*, a mixed phonetic system of the Taiwanese vernacular, was adopted by Taiwan's Ministry of Education (1972). This system, driven by the idea of a nativist vernacular, was envisaged as warding off the complete conversion of Taiwanese people to Mandarin.

A similar conceptual battle took place in 1913 when 44 delegates met from several regions of China to decide on a national policy of language standardization. Chinese at this point possessed a variety of notation scripts including "numerical shorthand, Japanese kana, Romanized and alphanumerical scripts" (193). Sly strategies resulted in the standardization of Wang Zhao's alphabet despite great protest from Southern Chinese province delegates who said that it did not represent their vernacular sounds. Southerners were simply not invited to the congress where it was decided that no southern voiced tones would be incorporated into the alphabet. Southerners however, continue to speak non-Mandarin dialects. Both a vital need for national literacy and some arbitrary linguistic politics have caused their dialects to have a more restricted global circulation than Mandarin Chinese, Malaysian Chinese or Taiwanese.

Jing Tsu demonstrates that her initial question of whether Chinese will be an international language, and in what form, does not yield a straightforward answer. The myths of nativism, of script dominance over phonetic dominance, and the immense power of systems invented simply to mediate between cultures collectively complicate that answer. To contemplate an answer is to have insight into the impact a few individuals had on the linguistic destiny of China and its regional linguistic relatives, as well as to comprehend the convergence of technology and language that drove the invention of new mediating systems that could adapt countries to the global scene. Rich in detail, adventurous in its source material and colorful in its account, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* tells stories of notation, language battles and varying levels of symbolic play that extend beyond the linguistic histories that it recounts.