

usually a strength, but there are moments when one wishes for a more critical attitude. Robert, perhaps, takes the glowing accounts of evangelical success he draws on too much at face value. It doesn't matter whether George Harris really won all the street-corner religious debates he provoked. However, Robert's consideration of the posters as tools of persuasion would only be enhanced by a consideration of missionary accounts of preaching with posters as another kind of persuasive tool, in this instance directed at audiences outside of China, upon whose donations the CIM in part depended. More seriously, it would be valuable for scholars with this sympathy and expertise to openly engage with scholarship that is sceptical about missionary contributions. The most relevant work here might be Larissa N. Heinrich's book *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West* (Duke University Press, 2008), which argues that missionaries helped generate and perpetuate the damaging stereotype of China as the "sick man of Asia."

Taken as a whole, however, this lively, thoughtfully designed volume is a rich contribution to our understanding of Chinese culture in the early 20th century, with each chapter supplying fresh insights and information. It is suited for use in courses on a range of topics, from religion to propaganda, to Chinese history, art history and visual culture, and the transcultural exchange of ideas and images. Its value for teaching is enhanced, as mentioned above, by the Chinese Christian Posters website, which can support a variety of student projects, as well as more advanced research.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023001923

The Sounds of Mandarin: Learning to Speak a National Language in China and Taiwan, 1913–1960

Janet Y. Chen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 412 pp. \$35.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780231209038

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Janet Y. Chen's *The Sounds of Mandarin: Learning to Speak a National Language in China and Taiwan, 1913–1960* examines the history of the standard national language in China and Taiwan, variously dubbed as Mandarin, *Guoyu* or *Putonghua*. She demonstrates how its invention was the product of a long process that included not only elite intellectuals and political parties, but also common people who struggled with, and at times outright rejected, the imposed national standard. Using an impressive array of archival sources from the PRC, Taiwan and the US, she weaves together a narrative that puts social history at its centre. Chen is less interested in elite-level politics (which she nevertheless deftly explains) and more in how students, teachers, movie-goers and radio listeners experienced the process of Chinese linguistic modernization. Some of the stories she tells will be new and entertaining even for scholars with knowledge of the subject. Phonographic records, radio broadcasts, Mandarin and non-Mandarin movies, and (to a much lesser extent) television are the media that Chen uses to explore the "linguistic soundscape" of China.

Many of the historical events that Chen identifies will be familiar, especially the tensions between Mandarin and the regional languages. Yet, Chen also deploys her expert knowledge of sources and her storytelling skills to make a series of powerful claims about Chinese linguistic modernization. The third chapter, for instance, demonstrates the significance – and the persistent difficulty – of

linguistic unification during the War against Japan, a subject rarely discussed in literature. The fourth chapter, the most original one in my opinion, follows the KMT to Taiwan and dissects the fascinating entanglements between the legacy of a colonial language (Japanese), a purported national language (Mandarin) and a local language (Taiwanese), in addition to several other minority languages. The fifth chapter goes back to the mainland to describe the profound difficulties that the CCP faced in making *Putonghua* the national linguistic standard in the 1950s. In fact, one of the most valuable insights of this book is that linguistic standardization was a repeated failure on both sides of the strait. Even as recently as the 1980s, as Chen demonstrates in the epilogue, the number of people in the PRC who were able to communicate properly in the national standard was only 50 per cent (!) of the population. Needless to say, Mandarin is still a contested issue today.

Chen's attention to common people's experiences and her effort to bring together the histories of the PRC and Taiwan without collapsing the two are the strengths of the book. But there are drawbacks to this approach. Indeed, the very depth of the research creates situations in which the forest is less visible than the trees. And while Chen rigorously chronicles this history, she also poses provocative claims that would have benefitted from further explication. For instance, Chen argues that in the 1930s, Chinese reformers abandoned the Japanese model of linguistic modernization (which remains undefined) and embraced the "Turkish model" instead (p. 17). But since she devotes only one page to this story with little evidence (pp. 87–88), it is hard to believe that Turkey offered anything substantive to the process of Chinese linguistic reform.

Some of her other claims also demand closer scrutiny. In her introduction, Chen notes that "in general, the scholarship has privileged writing over speech" (p. 2) and that her book goes "beyond the script" (p. 7). But especially in China where language and writing were interwoven in complex ways, Chen's brisk decision to go beyond the script raises conceptual and historical problems. For instance, Chen often deliberately conflates "language" with "pronunciation" or "phonetics" and does not engage in the discussions surrounding lexicon, grammar and syntax. And it seems as if Chinese characters did not matter to this story, even though many of the reformers were also deeply concerned with standardizing writing and engineering a vocabulary in Chinese characters while also trying to disseminate the national language, as Chen herself briefly mentions (pp. 147–150). In other words, although the phonetics of Mandarin is certainly important and allows Chen to contain the narrative, "learning to speak a national language" also entailed literacy, almost always in characters and sometimes aided by phonetic symbols or other scripts. In fact, one reason for the governmental shortcomings in standardizing speech might have been the powerful place that Chinese characters occupied in national communication. Given the ubiquitous presence of Chinese characters in the history of linguistic modernization, a more robust discussion of the complicated relationship between language, writing and literacy would have significantly improved the quality of this book.

These criticisms aside, Chen's remarkable research demonstrates the complexity of linguistic standardization in China and Taiwan. And given that the problems that emerged out of this process are still not resolved, *The Sounds of Mandarin* is a valuable addition to the growing scholarship on Chinese languages and scripts.

doi:10.1017/S0305741023001911