

Yuming Li

Language Planning in China

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Review of Li, Yuming (2015). *Language Planning in China*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 490 pp.

This book is a collection of translated works by Li Yuming, which discusses the state-of-the-art issues in Chinese language management and planning. The author, Li Yuming, is a seminal expert in Chinese sociolinguistics, in particular in the fields of child language acquisition and language planning. His research touches also on modern Chinese grammar, psycholinguistics and applied linguistics. Li Yuming is the president of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics (IACL) and the National Research Centre for State Language Capacity. He is also the chief editor of the *Chinese Journal of Language Policy and Planning*, and he has published over 10 books and 300 journal articles. Having dedicated his attention on language policy and planning (henceforth, LPP) in China for many years, he has excellent insights in the evolution of Chinese language policy and planning.

The book is laid out in thirty chapters; each provides readers with a lucid view of what can be expected in each chapter. It is thus possible to read only some parts of the book. The chapters basically cover five themes: dissemination of Chinese, acquisition of foreign languages in China, language life in modern China, history of Chinese language planning and policy, and modernization of Chinese in our current information age. The book places its main focus on the Chinese language, the mother tongue of the Han majority, but also briefly mentions other ethnic languages in China as reference. By examining the development of LPP in China from past to present, the



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book delivers a comprehensive account with a wide range of in-depth perspectives.

Despite the fact that LPP in China has been a very active field since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), research on LPP in China still remains at an early stage. This book presents thus a very welcome attempt at theorising China's experiences within international LPP frameworks. It serves as an excellent resource for scholars and students interested in China's linguistic situations and its evolution of LPP in the twenties and twenty-first century. His expertise and the wide range of topics he treats allow Li Yuming also to critically reflect on sociolinguistic research of LPP and possible ways of improving it.

LPP in this book is mostly, but not exclusively, concerned with governmental interventions on the sociolinguistic situation. Whilst stating that it is necessary to develop and popularise a standard variety in order to facilitate the flow of information, the author accentuates that a non-hostile language ecology calls for the maintenance of multilingualism and bidialectalism. Li evaluates China's LPP from three angles: first and foremost, standardisation and promotion of the General National Language (*guójiā tōngyòng yǔ*); secondly, preservation and utilisation of various language resources in China's territory; thirdly, planning of foreign language acquisition. The author attaches due importance to enhancing language capabilities in China by repeatedly emphasising the importance of foreign language skills in globalising milieus.

Grounded upon widely known LPP frameworks, discussions in the book embark on status planning, corpus planning, language-in-education planning, and prestige planning in China. Chapters 1-3 establish major issues that LPP sought to influence, followed by chapters 4 and 5, which discuss foreign-language acquisition. By way of exploring the economic resources that specific languages convey, the author calls for more importance of foreign language proficiency. Arguing that at the very early phase of China's LPP, i.e. at the beginning of the twentieth century, most attention was paid to ensuring communication across communities and to eliminating language barriers, this has also led to marginalising the cultural and economic values of other languages and dialects in China. The author therefore implies that Chinese LPP should take into account the peculiar value and role of each language in their specific functional domains. Many readers will probably find the author's differentiation between 'mother tongue' and 'first language' intriguing. Li asserts that one's language is closely, and primarily intertwined with one's identity. Mother tongue is one's ethnological identity that also implies one's belonging to a community. In other words, it is not a matter of the order in which it was acquired – an ethnic language can be 'mother tongue' and 'second language' at the same time.

Chapters 6-9 inspect various aspects of the language life in contemporary China. Li divides language life into three principal levels: macro-national, meso-regional, and micro-individual. This division concurs with the typological schema that Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) suggested towards an effective understanding of the diversity and complexity of language life. After illustrating different developments in the language life from ancient China until the present, and by paying due attention to the various effects of LPP in China in developing and spreading the national common language, Li underlines the importance of a thorough analysis and examination of the sociolinguistic situation. LPP should aim to adjust linguistic behaviours to changing social circumstances. In the information era, language life in China should be viewed and therefore managed also from an international perspective. According to Li, elevating the importance of and proficiency in a foreign language in the predominantly monolingual Chinese society is an urgent task in contemporary China.

In reading these chapters, readers are reminded of various limitations of monolingualism. Plurilingual competence entails benefits for individuals and on a national level. Among the many functions of language - instrument of communication, carrier of culture, symbol of belonging, etc. - it can also generate economic profits in globalising economies. Li emphasises language as resources, both the indigenous national minority languages and extraneous foreign languages.

While emphasizing that external factors provide the necessary condition for internal development, the author illustrates in chapters 10 and 11 that an indigenous prestigious dialect served as the foundation for language standardisation and serves as the main lingua franca inside the nation. Li Yuming discusses the case of the Beijing dialect as an instance of language prestige planning, expounding that in promoting Putonghua and standardising the lingua franca across China, prestigious pronunciation often plays a vital role. While chapters 13-17 depict the past and present, chapters 18-22 look into the future of Chinese LPP, discussing the subject in its interrelation with the information age. Dealing largely with corpus planning, these chapters address four larger themes: preservation of audio recordings and literature, standardisation of lexicon and terminology, modernisation of the lexicon, and digitalisation of spoken and written language. After introducing the governmental attempts of improving language standardisation, and in keeping pace with the times, chapters 23-25 provide for discussions of Chinese language spread across globe. Chapter 24 presents the history of Chinese language dissemination back to the Qin dynasty (second century BC), and chapter 25 looks into possible future developments in the international spread of Chinese. Li asserts that in order to extend the needs of learning Chinese, language planners and policy makers should first consider promoting the language's value that is tied to its linguistic, cultural, and economic advantages.

The remaining five chapters of the book are devoted to the formation of nation-wide language management in modern China. In these chapters, Li focuses on the *Qieyinzi* Movement that occurred in the late Qing dynasty. It was the first governmental-guided language planning movement, and it kicked off a strand of LPP activities that influence all the way to present-day China. Li states that this Movement has had a seminal impact on modern Chinese linguistics. It laid the cornerstone for standardisation works that followed it. As widely known, Chinese is a non-alphabetical language. The Movement was the first attempt using phonetic alphabet for Chinese characters, which substantially facilitated school education of the population at the time. *Qieyin*, literally ‘cutting the phonemes’, is in essence an annotating of Chinese characters on the basis of phonetic alphabets. Both the Latin alphabet and Japanese kana were initially proposed in the Movement. Worthy of attention is the author’s discussion of shortcomings of the Movement (chapter 28), where he states that the reformers’ understanding of dialects was insufficient and non-scientific. Such problems notwithstanding, the author highlights the nexus between the historical *Qieyinzi* Movement and present-day language management, such as the popularization of Putonghua. The book concludes that ongoing works on LPP in China are well advised to critically draw from the experiences of prior efforts.

With a comprehensive discussion of past and present LPP works in China, this book provides insights into China’s linguistic life and shifts under the impacts of LPP activities. The first half of the book deals with basic sociolinguistic notions in the Chinese setting, such as ‘mother tongue’ (chapter 2) and ‘linguistic resources and power’ (chapters 4, 5, 9, 12). Thereafter, it proceeds to specific discussion on the modernization and improvements of LPP in China (chapters 13-22). The last eight chapters review language activities in China’s history, and its indissoluble link to current language situation.

The book is highly informative and insightful, but it has occasional shortcomings, too. One is an imbalance in content. It tends to over-emphasize nation-state interventions, whilst paying relatively little attention to the individual as a bottom-up actor. Also, the actual impact of national LPP works on the population is often not sufficiently scrutinized. Despite having a large list of references, these are for the most part made up by literature in Chinese. Influential studies by foreign scholars are overlooked, for instance, work done by Bökset (2006) or Kaplan and Baldauf (1997). The literature revolving around ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native speaker’ is extant (e.g. Coulmas 1981; Davies 1991; Singh 1998), but none of these works is referred to in the book. Certain sources appear to be overly optimistic and must be taken with a grain of salt. One case in point, the author claims that the Manchu-speakers “now amount to only 0.01% of the Manchu population” (31), but experts who have conducted long-term fieldwork in

present Manchu villages state the number of native Manchu speakers is by no means over 100. Also, some sections of the book lack in-depth analysis. For instance, chapter 17 could be enriched, and hence more enlightening for the readers, with crucial evaluation alongside description on the *Lübishu* (Green Paper on the Language Situation in China). The book could have been improved by featuring a concluding chapter that summarizes all discussion in the previous chapters. There are some slight editing errors and organisational incongruities in the book and they may cause some misunderstandings.

All in all, Li's new book is well-constructed, informative and insightful. The theoretical discussions are easily comprehensible. The book is unique in providing a stimulating study of how institutional decision-making at the state level intervenes the language development in China. This adds crucial insights into a classical sociolinguistic question: what came first? Nation or language? The book is a pioneering work that demonstrates with the aid of many details that LPP requires the management of language functions. Furthermore, it offers a wide range of solutions and suggestions with regard to the future of languages and LPP in China. Although some of the solutions may not be feasible in present-day China, they nonetheless offer deep insights for a long perspective, and this may stimulate many more scholars to pursue further studies into this field.

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