

Book Reviews



Wang Dachang (汪大昌)

Beijing: fangyan yu wenhua 《北京：方言与文化》 (*Beijing: Language and Culture*). Beijing: China International Radio Press, 2015. 250pp.

In 1956 the government of the People's Republic of China announced the adoption of a new official language to be known as the "common language" (*putonghua* 普通話). The language would be based on the northern dialect of Chinese (*guanhua* or Mandarin Chinese) as spoken by the people of Beijing. Because China has many mutually unintelligible dialects, it was necessary to have one standard language so that the Chinese Communist Party could govern the country as a single nation.

The linguist Wang Dachang, who teaches at Capital Normal University, is a native speaker of Beijing dialect. To him, that dialect of Chinese sounds the most pleasant and the most correct. In his new book *Beijing: Language and Culture*, he describes many aspects of Beijing dialect and compares it to *putonghua*.

The language spoken by the people of Beijing, he tells us, is a language that evolved over the course of a thousand years, when the politics and economy of Beijing was most heavily influenced by northern peoples, such as the Khitan, Mongols, Jurchen, and Manchus. The population movement of the Han was away from the northern rulers toward the south, where they continued to speak a Chinese that was less influenced by northern non-Han peoples. Today those southerners are the people who speak Cantonese, Shanghaiese, and other regional southern dialects. One can say that the southern peoples speak an older and more original form of Chinese, while northern Beijing speech represents a simplification of the earlier Chinese language brought about by its use as spoken by the northern peoples, for whom Chinese was a second

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language. Today, whereas Beijing Chinese has four standard tones and thirty-eight vowel sounds, Cantonese has nine tones and sixty-eight vowel sounds, and the Chaozhou 潮州 dialect spoken by many Chinese in the Boston area, where I am writing this review, has eight tones and eighty-five vowel sounds.

For native and non-native speakers of Chinese alike, one of the most distinctive features of Beijing speech is the use of the *er* 兒 sound added to many words and phrases. For example, the large flea market in Beijing, called Panjiayuan in standard Chinese, is pronounced in Beijing dialect as Panjiayuar 潘家園兒. Peking natives happily add the *er* sound at many points in their speech, and Wang presents many pages of examples of words and phrases that include this distinctive sound. He explains some rules for when the sound is added and when it is not but, in the end, concedes that the rules for this usage are too complex to list comprehensively and often depend on the whim of the native speaker.

A central point Wang makes is that *Putonghua* and Beijing dialect are not the same. Speakers of Chinese outside Beijing do not seem able or willing to use their tongue to produce the ending *er* sound. For most speakers of southern dialects, he says, making the *er* sound is difficult and does not come naturally, so it does not appear in those versions of *putonghua*. Even beginning students of Chinese come to recognize this example. In contrast, northern-style pronunciation calls for the tongue to curl so that the tip of the tongue goes back in the mouth and touches the palate. In that case, the *er* ending is a natural way to finish a word, as in Panjiayuar.

I have reviewed several Chinese dictionaries to see which add the *er* sound to their entries and which do not. Wang has done a similar review in his book. My informal review showed that some go very far in treating Beijing dialect as standard Chinese by adding the *er* sound in many of the examples they provide, while an equal number of dictionaries recognize *Putonghua* as different from Beijing dialect and the examples they give do not so closely follow Beijing usage. Wang discusses this situation of trying to define *Putonghua* as the standard versus retaining Beijing speech as the purest form of the standard language, leading to a dilemma that has bedeviled all dictionary compilers in China in recent decades. It also appears from my experience that most Chinese consider the pronunciation close to the northern pronunciation as closer to standard *putonghua*. Wang comments on these issues without being dogmatic or prescriptive.

Wang says that Beijing natives have a habit of dropping the tones of some words, especially when the word seems so familiar that it would be easily understood by all other people in the city. As an example, he gives the place name Baoding 保定, a major city to southwest of Beijing. Natives would say *Bao* (third tone)-*ding* (with no tone). But people who are exposed to *Putonghua* as

spoken in the rest of the country retain the tones for both syllables, saying *Bao* (third tone)-*ding* (fourth tone). Most people in China do not have a special identification with Baoding as the people of Beijing once felt they had, so they use the dictionary pronunciation.

One of the effects of the standardization of Chinese is that even people who are Beijing natives no longer follow this practice of omitting tones from some syllables, and they speak more like speakers of *putonghua*. A similar transformation is taking place in the use of the *er* sound: Wang's survey showed that less than 70 percent of students born and raised in Beijing regularly use the *er* ending. Lest one conclude that the old Beijing dialect is fading away, Wang says this is not yet so. Current practice in the city reveals that even some phrases from the past few decades regularly use the *er* ending in common parlance. Among these, he gives the examples *ditie X harxian* (地鐵 X 號兒線 number X subway line) and the ubiquitous *shenfenzher* 身份證兒 (identification card).

Wang presents an overview history of the Beijing region to make the point that its geographic location has allowed it to be one of the pivotal population centers in China. For centuries, soldiers either were garrisoned in the area or were passing through en route to even more far-flung border posts. There were traders and merchants in the area, making it an active economic and commercial center.

Beijing dialect emerged from these long-term interactions and was the product of all the peoples who met there. Because the most recent northern people to rule Beijing were the Manchus (1644-1911), one could say that, for the past three hundred years, the Manchus have had the greatest impact on the development of Beijing dialect. Wang acknowledges the Manchu influence and gives examples of Manchu expressions that have entered Beijing slang, but says the spoken Beijing dialect we hear today has a much shorter history, having formed in the 1920s and 1930s. That is the speech he is most interested in explaining and analyzing in this book.

Wang goes into detail about many aspects of Beijing speech, from cultural influences to linguistic analysis. Some of the statistics in the book come from his own surveys of how Beijingers actually use the language. His endlessly interesting book is clearly written and well organized. He mentions the work of numerous Chinese linguists and their publications, he tells how literary works have preserved the color and style of Beijing speech, and he describes television personalities who have performed using Beijing dialect. The first edition includes a short CD with Professor Wang outlining some of his points, along with excerpts of notable native speakers of Beijing speech, including Pu Yi, the last Qing emperor.

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