

1 **Introduction**

Chinese is the native language of approximately a billion people distributed over vast geographical areas of the world. It is the official language of mainland China and Taiwan. It is one of the two official languages in Hong Kong, where ethnic Chinese constitute more than 95 per cent of the local population. It is one of the four official languages of Singapore, where about 75 per cent of population are ethnic Chinese. It is also reasonably maintained by about 30 million Chinese scattered in other parts of the world.

Genealogically, Chinese belongs to the family of Sino-Tibetan. The earliest reliable records of Chinese in the form of *jiǎgǔwén* ‘oracle bone script’ date back more than 3,000 years. Much controversy surrounds the periodization of the language since then, partly due to lack of sufficient documentary evidence on the chronological changes in the language, particularly in the pre-modern periods of its evolution, and partly due to the fact that periodization based on each of the three main components of the language, namely, phonology, grammar, and lexicon may not always be co-extensive (Peyraube 1988, 1996; S. Jiang 1994; Chan and Tai 1995). The periodization adopted in this book is first and foremost based upon changes in grammar, which may sometimes be co-extensive with phonological, and to a lesser extent, lexical development of the language. As elaborated in Lü (1985a, 1985b), Norman (1988), Peyraube (1988, 1996), Ohta (1991), Mei (1994), inter alia, each period is marked by some conspicuous innovations in syntax and morphology, the details of which need not concern us here. A sketch of the periodization is presented in Table 1.1.

Archaic Chinese (*Shàngǔ Hànyǔ*) is represented by the language used in classic works of the pre-Qin period and the Western Han dynasty. Writings from the Eastern Han onward, while basically following the style of Archaic Chinese, displayed an increasing number of innovations in grammar and vocabulary, which are believed to be reflective of changes in the contemporary vernacular.¹ It is referred to as Medieval Chinese (*Zhōngǔ Hànyǔ*), which represents a transitional period. Archaic Chinese and Medieval Chinese constitute Old Chinese (*Gǔdài Hànyǔ*). The appearance of substantial texts in mainly vernacular style in the late Tang dynasty marked the beginning of Pre-Modern Chinese (*Jīndài Hànyǔ*). A growing number of emergent grammatical, lexical, and phonological features are attested in texts of this period and thereafter, which presumably

1

Table 1.1 Periodization of Chinese

Archaic Chinese	Shang dynasty (ca. 1700–1100 BC)
	Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1100–771 BC)
	Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC)
	Warring States period (475–221 BC)
	Qin dynasty (221–206 BC)
Medieval Chinese	Western Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 25)
	Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220)
	Wei-Jin period (220–420)
	Southern and Northern dynasties (420–589)
Pre-Modern Chinese	Sui dynasty (581–618)
	Early and Middle Tang dynasty (618–907)
	Late Tang dynasty
	Five dynasties period (907–60)
	Northern Song dynasty (960–1127)
	Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)
Modern Chinese	Yuan dynasty (1206–1368)
	Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
	Qing dynasty (1616–1911)
	Twentieth century

reflect corresponding developments in the language shortly before and during the period. The next ten centuries or so constituted the formative years of Modern Chinese (*Xiàndài Hànyǔ*) during which period almost all the most important characteristic features gradually took shape. By the early Qing dynasty, all the major changes in grammar, phonology, and basic vocabulary that characterize Modern Chinese had been completed. Influences from Western languages and Japanese aside, present-day Chinese differs little in grammar, phonology, and basic vocabulary from the vernacular found in *Hónglóu mèng*, a novel written in the mid eighteenth century.²

What is known as the Chinese language comprises dozens of dialects which may be mutually unintelligible.³ Again, opinions differ as to their grouping. This book follows the framework in Norman (1988) and B. Xu and Zhan (1988) in classifying all the dialects into seven major groups, differentiated mainly on the basis of phonological features, and, to a lesser extent, also in terms of vocabulary and grammar. The major dialect

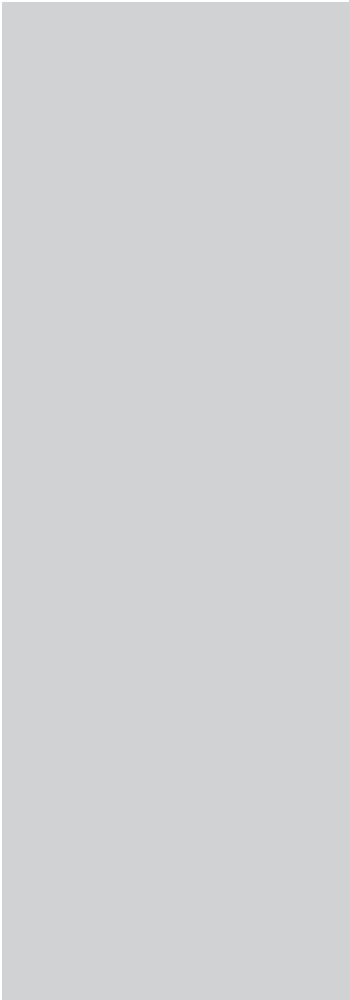
groups are Beifanghua (Mandarin),⁴ Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Min, Kejia (Hakka), Xiang, and Gan, of which Mandarin is by far the largest group, with its native speakers accounting for the majority of the Chinese population.⁵ The non-Mandarin groups are also called the Southern dialects. Each of the major dialect groups is in turn comprised of a large number of varieties that are related to each other in terms of a hierarchy with three main levels, sub-dialect, vernacular, and accent. For example, following the traditional classification, Mandarin is composed of four major sub-dialects, namely, Northern, Northwestern, Southwestern, and Jiang-Huai, all of which may be further divided into different groups of vernaculars and accents. The standard form of Modern Chinese is known by several names. It is called *pǔtōnghuà* ‘the common language’ in mainland China, *guóyǔ* ‘national language’ in Taiwan, and *huáyǔ* ‘Chinese language’ in Singapore.

This book attempts to present a historical and sociolinguistic profile of Modern Chinese. It will focus on its development and major features of structure and use from the late nineteenth century up to the 1990s, and in the context of a modernizing Chinese society. The book is composed of three parts, concentrating on the spoken form, the written form, and the writing system respectively.

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Part I

Modern Spoken Chinese



2 **Establishment and promotion of Modern Spoken Chinese**

2.1 **Development of Standard Spoken Chinese before the late nineteenth century**

2.1.1 **Base of Standard Spoken Chinese in early times**

The Chinese civilization originated in the Yellow River areas. It is recorded that there were as many as 1,800 clans and tribes inhabiting areas along the Yellow River towards the end of the Shang dynasty. As commercial and military activities among these speakers of different languages increased, the need for a lingua franca naturally arose. The earliest form of such a lingua franca, it is generally believed, took shape on the basis of the language spoken in what is now known as Yinxu in the west of Henan province, which was the capital of the Shang dynasty between about 1324 and 1066 BC. The so-called *jiǎgǔwén* is the written, and highly condensed, counterpart of this lingua franca.

The subsequent Zhou dynasty marked the beginning of the feudal system, with more than 130 states established in the early period of the dynasty, covering various dialectally differentiated areas. Subsequent wars among the states resulted in the collapsing of the smaller polities into several large states. Local dialects distinctive of the major states developed, marking the beginning of the differentiation of Chinese dialects into several major groups.

As the major dialects of Chinese respectively evolved in different parts of the land, the importance of a standard spoken Chinese, both as a standard for formal purposes and as a lingua franca across dialects, increased as there were more and more administrative, diplomatic, cultural, and military exchanges between the central government and local states, and among the states themselves. There is considerable consensus among scholars that such a standard spoken Chinese is what is called *yǎyán* ‘elegant speech’ in the Confucian *Analects*. It is in the Western Zhou period that *yǎyán* won full recognition both in terms of its importance, and its distinctness from other local dialects.

According to historical records, *yǎyán* was the standard language taught in schools in all the states in the Zhou dynasty, and used extensively in educational, cultural, and diplomatic activities. As observed in the *Analects*, *yǎyán* was the language used in classic literary works like *Shū jīng* (*Book of history*) and *Shī jīng* (*Book of odes*) and as well as on all ceremonial functions. The authors of *Shī jīng* were scattered across

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different states, yet they all followed basically the same rhyming patterns, a fact which could only be explained by mastery of a standard language in addition to their local dialect. Proficiency in the standard language was an important part of the attainments of scholars. Although a native speaker of the Lu dialect from the present-day Shangdong province, Confucius himself customarily used *yǎyán* for educational and diplomatic purposes.

Yǎyán was based upon the language that evolved from the lingua franca of the Shang dynasty and was spoken in Central China around what is today's Henan province, which had been the main focus of political, commercial and cultural activities since the Xia dynasty (ca. twenty-first century – seventeenth century BC), and the Shang dynasty. Based on the geographical features of the area, the language was also known as the dialect of the He Luo 'Yellow River and Luo River' or Zhongzhou 'Central China' area. The close connection between *yǎyán* and its base language, the Zhongzhou dialect, has led quite a few scholars to interpret the terms as synonymous. Following what is general practice in the literature, I will use the more common name, the Zhongzhou dialect, to refer to the base dialect of *yǎyán*.

From the Eastern Zhou onwards, the two major cities in the area, Luoyang and Kaifeng, served as the capitals of many imperial dynasties, which further consolidated and enhanced the status of the Zhongzhou dialect as the base of the standard spoken Chinese across the whole country. This status was more or less maintained through successive dynasties over the next two thousand years or so. On several occasions during this period, China disintegrated into more than one autonomous part. More than once, to flee from the harassment or attack of the nomadic tribes to the north of China proper, dynasties founded in the north of China moved their capitals south of the Yangtze River, where the local dialects were very much different from that of Zhongzhou. The first large migration from the north to the south occurred in the Wei Jin period. Wealthy and prestigious noble families as well as people from all walks of life followed en masse when the royal court of Jin Yuandi (317–22) moved from Luoyang to what is the present-day Nanjing. This effected the spread of the Zhongzhou dialect to the south of the Yangtze River. During the same period, states were established in the North of China, mostly by non-Han ethnic groups. They were readily assimilated into the Han

culture, adopting the Chinese language as their main official language. This was largely due to the fact that, for all their military feats, the Han culture as a whole was considered far more prestigious than their own. As a result, in the ensuing Southern and Northern dynasties and thereafter, the Zhongzhou dialect was the base of the standard spoken language both in the north and the south, displaying some variations as a result of close contact with either other Chinese dialects or non-Chinese languages. Since at the time competence in standard pronunciation was generally associated with respectable background and status, elevated society was sensitive to the sociolinguistic differentiation of the standard and the substandard languages. Linguistic features and uses of the standard pronunciation, and the difference between the standard and other dialects, were common topics in writings from that period. Commenting on accents of his contemporaries, for example, Yan Zhitui (ca. 531–90), a prominent man of letters, observed that the dialect of Luoyang in the north and that of Jinling (Nanjing) in the south represented the standard pronunciation in his times.

It is also beginning from his times that the standard pronunciation was codified and promulgated across the land. What is known as the institution of *kējǔ* ‘imperial examination system’, initiated in the Sui and the Tang dynasties, in which officials at all levels were selected from people who passed rigorous examinations administered by the imperial court, no doubt played a significant motivating role in the process. As rhyming writing constituted an important part of the official examinations, it was imperative that at least for educational and literary purposes, aspiring scholars follow a standard in pronunciation. Among the most influential rhyming dictionaries compiled to codify and promulgate the standard pronunciation was *Qìyùyùn* (601). First compiled in the Sui dynasty, and annotated and revised later in the Tang and the Song dynasties, it served as the most reliable source of the phonological system of the spoken standard at that time. Although there are many disagreements as to the phonological details of *Qìyùyùn*, scholars have reached consensus on two points. First, it represents the phonological system of a language that was officially sanctioned as the standard one, at least as far as the imperial examinations were concerned. Second, it is essentially based upon the Zhongzhou dialect, although some phonological features prevalent in other dialects, most notably the Nanjing dialect, may have

been included (Shao 1982; X. K. Li 1987). Dozens of similar rhyming dictionaries were published after *Qièyùn*, recording either the phonology of the officially sanctioned standard, or that of the particular dialects in successive periods and in major geographical areas.

2.1.2 Standard Spoken Chinese in pre-modern times

While the Luoyang and the Nanjing dialect did not differ significantly in Yan Zhitui's times, the divergence between the north and the south widened in the course of natural evolution. Since the beginning of Pre-Modern Chinese, two major groups of the Northern, or Mandarin, dialects could be identified, the northern group in the Yellow River region and Northeast China, and the southern group south of the Yangtze River and in Southeast China. The Standard Spoken Chinese in the pre-modern times was based on Mandarin, although it is controversial which particular Mandarin dialect served as the national standard during particular periods.

Although references to the standard pronunciation in the late Tang and the Song dynasty were scanty, and mostly anecdotal, it seems safe to assume that the spoken standard in the Northern Song was based on the Zhongzhou dialect, as in medieval times. The imperial court moved to Lin'an (Hangzhou) in the Southern Song. Immigration on a large scale from the North turned the dialect of Hangzhou into one that was very similar to the Zhongzhou dialect.

There has been much debate over when the Zhongzhou dialect started to give way to other dialects as the base of Standard Spoken Chinese. The traditional view is that it was replaced by the Beijing dialect as early as in the Yuan dynasty, which was established with Beijing, then called Dadu, as its capital (Bao 1955; R. Li 1990).¹ After a close examination of the relevant literature, however, Li Xinkui (1980) argues, quite convincingly, that the Beijing dialect's gradual assumption of the role as the base of the national standard did not begin until much later. Whereas the national standard pronunciation in the Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty was also called *guānhuà* 'mandarin', *zhèngyīn* 'standard pronunciation', *Hànyīn* 'Han pronunciation', *guānyīn* 'official pronunciation', *tōngyīn* 'general pronunciation' etc., the dialect of Beijing, known as *běiyīn* 'the Northern pronunciation', was treated in the literature as a local dialect in contrast to the national standard under the various names.

While Li Xinkui claims that the Zhongzhou dialect represented the standard pronunciation of *guānhuà* before its replacement by the Beijing dialect, many other scholars, most notably Lu Guoyao (1980), Zhang Weidong (1992), Paul Fumian Yang (1995), and South Coblin (1997, 1998), propose that it was the Jiang-Huai Mandarin based on the Nanjing dialect that assumed the role as the national standard from the beginning of the Ming dynasty. The latter proposal was mainly based on studies of the writings of the Jesuit missionaries who went to China in the late sixteenth century, like Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628), and Francisco Varo (1627–87), who left us with detailed descriptions of the sociolinguistic situation of China as they found it, and the phonological system of the then national standard. According to their observations, Nanjing at that time surpassed European cities and other Chinese cities in beauty and grandeur. In spite of the move of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421, Nanjing was apparently still the symbolic centre of Chinese culture, and its dialect prevailed over other dialects as the basis of a national standard.

It was as late as around the mid nineteenth century that the Beijing dialect gained ascendancy over the Nanjing dialect as the base of the national standard. There seem to be several factors that contributed to the replacement of the Nanjing dialect by the Beijing dialect. First, as the capital of three successive dynasties spanning several hundreds of years, Beijing had become increasingly influential as a political and cultural centre, and this in turn enhanced the prestige of the local dialect. Second, as Giles remarked in preface of his 1892 dictionary, ‘Since the T’aip’ing rebellion [i.e. 1850–64], Nanking (Nanjing) has lost much of its pretension to give a standard pronunciation, for the simple reason that its enormous population almost ceased to exist; and the moderate number of thousands who now occupy a tithe of the city area are many of them unlettered immigrants from other provinces or districts’² (quoted from Coblin 1997:51). The drastic change in the relative strength of the two cities further facilitated the final acceptance of the language of the imperial court by the general public as the national standard.

As will be discussed in detail shortly, the status of the Beijing dialect as the base of the standard spoken Chinese was not formally recognized until the late 1920s. Strictly speaking, before the modern language reform came into full swing around the turn of the twentieth century, the

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concept of a standard pronunciation was rather vague. It was more of an attitudinal stance on what was supposed to be the standard language in polite society, or koine for practical purposes of interdialectal communication, rather than a reference to a specific speech form that was clearly defined, effectively promoted, conscientiously learned, and extensively used. Sound recording and transmitting devices were out of the question, and people in general did not feel the need for proper instruction in pronunciation beyond the literary reading of characters. For several centuries before modern times, what actually served as the national standard was an ill-defined, generalized form of *guānhuà*, based successively on the Zhongzhou dialect, Nanjing dialect, and Beijing dialect for most of its de facto norms and also incorporating features from a wider region.³ Though the status of the Beijing dialect as the base of the national standard was already assumed by some scholars before the twentieth century, there was little effort on the part of Chinese scholars – other than the textbooks and dictionaries compiled mainly by missionaries for the benefits of Western learners – to provide an explicit characterization of the spoken standard. It was only later in the early twentieth century that the need for a clear definition of the standard spoken Chinese was keenly felt.

On the other hand, in the absence of efficient and convenient means of transport and oral communication, distance imposed limitations that prevented mass acquisition of the national standard before modern times. Chinese has adopted a logographic writing system in which the sound values of characters are not indicated in a way that is as direct, explicit, and decomposable as in a phonographic system. In the traditional rhyme books and dictionaries, characters are annotated in terms of categories, rather than sound values. In other words, the knowledge of the standard literary pronunciations consists of the grouping of characters according to how similar or dissimilar they sound, not according to the actual sound values of the characters. It was not until the earlier years of the twentieth century that Chinese developed a set of bona fide phonetic symbols that could be used across the country to annotate sound in a clear and dialect-neutral manner. Even though basic education ensured a knowledge of the literary pronunciation of characters that was sufficient for all literary purposes, this by no means guaranteed proficiency in Standard Spoken Chinese even at the most rudimentary