

1 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

Along with the economic rise of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICs) and the rest of the developing world, the ecology of world languages in the new millennium is undergoing a major restructuring. Apart from Mandarin, Spanish and French, it is hard to imagine any other language likely to gain the global status of English, the first acclaimed world language. Crystal (1997:7) observes that: 'A language does not become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary, or because it has been a vehicle of a great literature in the past, or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion.' Nor does it reflect the number of people who speak it natively. To become an international medium of communication, a language needs to have a strong power-base, be it political, military or economic. Examples are numerous throughout the history of mankind. Languages such as Greek, Latin, classical Chinese, French and Spanish spread far beyond their original boundaries at various times in history: Greek spread around the Mediterranean, Latin throughout Romance Europe, classical Chinese to Vietnam, Japan, Korea and Central Asia, and Spanish to the Philippines and South and Central America. They spread for the same reasons: the political, military or economic might of their native speakers. English, the first acclaimed global language, spread around the globe in the nineteenth century as a result of British colonial imperialism and continued its global presence when America emerged to become the de-facto superpower by the end of the twentieth century.

Since its re-emergence as an economic powerhouse at the turn of the new millennium, China has been exerting immense influence politically and economically in the international arena. Mandarin, recognised as a standard in the People's Republic of China (henceforth China) and the Republic of China (henceforth Taiwan), and as a lingua franca among the Chinese diaspora, is widely believed to be a potential candidate to attain the status of a global language alongside English.

This chapter deals with some of the issues that relate to the status of Mandarin as a global language. We begin by defining what makes a language global, and then consider the impact of China's resurgence on its language

2 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

and culture. This is followed by a discussion of the spread of Mandarin over the past two decades, its current status and some of the problems and issues that have emerged. We then consider the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) as they attempt to come to terms with the proliferating numbers and demands of students of CFL. Finally, the last section summarises the future prospects of global Mandarin.

1.1 Defining the Global Status of a Language

To attain a global status, a language needs to fulfil two requirements. According to Crystal (1997:2), a language achieves global status, firstly, when it develops a ‘special role that is recognized in every country’. This special status can be achieved either by making it an official language of the country or by requiring it to be studied as a foreign language.

Secondly, a global language needs an expanding number of non-native users. As mentioned earlier, a language does not achieve global status through the sheer number of its native speakers. A purely numerical definition would mean that Latin could not have been considered an international language for the simple reason that the Romans were outnumbered by the peoples they conquered. The same is true with English. English was a minority language within the British Empire. Mandarin, on the other hand, may have had more native speakers than any other language during the period of the Cultural Revolution (roughly 1966–76), but at that time it lacked any sort of global presence.

The global status of a language is determined more by the number of its non-native speakers or learners. It is only when non-native speakers seek to learn it that the language has a legitimate claim to global status. They learn it because it provides them with more opportunities, better jobs, brighter prospects and higher status. So it is the number of non-native speakers that indicates the global status of a language – a point that will be taken up shortly with respect to Mandarin. As noted by Graddol for global English, ‘Native speakers may feel the language “belongs” to them, but it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future’ (2000:10).

1.2 The Impact of China’s Resurgence

In the 1980s, after the social instability and economic stagnation of the Cultural Revolution had ended, the Chinese government – in an attempt to revive its economy – made major adjustments to its policies. In the twenty years that followed, under the effect of sound economic policies in a rapidly globalising world, China emerged, rather miraculously, as an economic powerhouse by the turn of the new millennium. In 2007, China’s GDP exceeded US\$3 trillion, ranking it behind the USA, Japan and Germany as the world’s fourth largest economy. By 2013, that figure had grown to US\$9 trillion, surpassing Japan (US\$5.1 trillion)

1.3 The Global Spread of Mandarin

3

and Germany (US\$3.6 trillion), making China the world's second largest economy (http://money.cnn.com/news/economy/world_economies_gdp/, 3 April 2014). A report by economist Albert Keidel of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (*Straits Times*, 10 July 2008) predicted that China's economy, backed by strong domestic demand, would overtake that of the United States by 2035 and that its GDP would reach an impressive US\$82 trillion in 2050, compared to US\$44 trillion for the United States. Clearly, the speed and scope of China's economic development over the past two decades have been remarkable, and its effects have been felt globally.

International economic expansion has transformed China in many ways. During the initial stage of its resurgence when international trade started to expand and the global marketplace was being formed, China adopted an open-door policy, inviting foreign manufacturers to set up mega-scale factories within its confines. Over a span of twenty years, China moved dramatically from the paradigm of *qianlong-wuyong* 'a hidden dragon' (closed-door policy) to that of *feilong-zaitian* 'a flying dragon' (open-door policy) to become an important driving force in the world economy. Lured by low operation and labour costs, foreign investment streamed in, and before long China had become the 'factory of the world', benefiting from the influx of foreign funds, technologies and expertise.

As its economy grew and its people became wealthier, China, with its population of 1.3 billion, gradually changed from being the factory of the world to being a major consumer in the world. Over time, backed by a booming economy, local manufacturing has made tremendous progress and China has shifted from importing technology to exporting products, increasing its economic impact worldwide. In recent years, fuelled by a large-scale expansion of foreign investments overseas, China's economic supremacy has been widely acknowledged and the resulting massive economic growth has led to a stronger than ever *Renminbi* (RMB), the official currency of China. As observed by Crystal in the case of global English (1997:8), 'Any language at the centre of such an explosion of international activity would suddenly have found itself with a global status.' The current economic rise of China has indeed laid a solid foundation for its language and culture to flourish globally.

1.3 The Global Spread of Mandarin

1.3.1 A Paradigmatic World View: The Three Concentric Circles of Mandarin Users

As China and its people venture out into the world, the Chinese diaspora grows, bringing the Chinese language to different parts of the globe. As its economy expands and its currency strengthens, the incentives to learn the

4 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

language increase. The complex situation arising from the spread of global Mandarin can be represented using Kachru's model (originally applied to English) of three concentric circles (Kachru 1989), namely, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. This model represents the ecology of a language (which is a reflection of its history) in the various locales in which it is used.

1.3.2 *The Inner Circle of Native Users*

The Inner Circle in Figure 1.1 represents the traditional core regions of Mandarin use, the '*Zhongyuan*' (Central Plains). The core regions now include mainland China and Taiwan, where Mandarin has served not only as a dominant working language of administration (in both the public and private sectors), education, law, mass communication, science, technology, commerce and so on, but also the common language – or lingua franca – across an otherwise linguistically heterogeneous country. Out of a total population of roughly 1.3 billion in the core regions (of the Inner Zone), Ethnologue estimates the number who can be regarded as native (L1) Mandarin speakers (standard or otherwise) as 840 million. Another 178 million are L2 users (www.ethnologue.com/country/CN/languages).

Despite its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong cannot be placed within the Inner Circle. Instead, it is placed in the next level outwards,

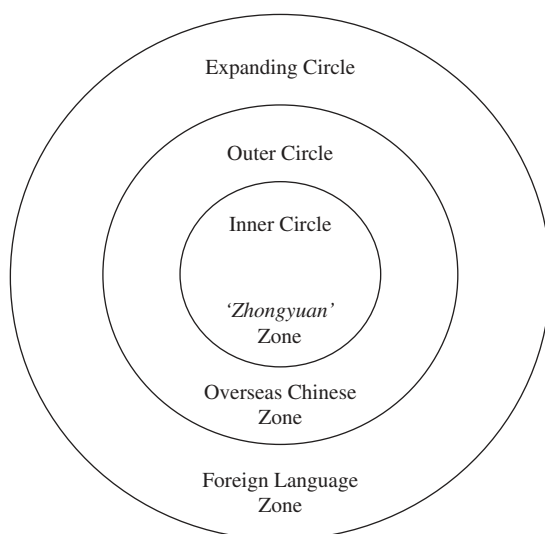


Figure 1.1. The three concentric circles of Mandarin users

1.3 The Global Spread of Mandarin

5

the Outer Circle, indicating a rather different sociolinguistic situation that has arisen from its long history of British colonial rule. The current linguistic landscape of Hong Kong is quite complex. English still enjoys a prestige status and continues to function as the dominant administrative language of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Cantonese, rather than Mandarin, is the de-facto official dialect and remains the preferred tongue for daily communication for the vast majority of its people. Written Cantonese also has a significant role in Hong Kong society, not only in the courts where the verbatim record of Cantonese speech is required, but also in the popular press, in local magazines, and in advertisements and other media where commercial incentives favour the representation of Cantonese rather than Mandarin. Even though Mandarin is high status and gaining some ground, speech in Hong Kong remains primarily Cantonese.

1.3.3 *The Steadily Expanding Outer Circle of Second Language Users*

The Outer Circle represents overseas Chinese communities around the world that have formed over certain periods of time as a result of migration, and where Mandarin has been used as a lingua franca since the early days of settlement and continues to spread through the medium of education.

According to the latest figures listed in the online *New World Encyclopedia* (www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Overseas_Chinese, 7 April 2014), the population of the Chinese diaspora is estimated to be close to forty million. Martin Jacques, a visiting research fellow at the Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics, commented that one distinct characteristic of the Chinese diaspora is that 'it is numerically large and spread all around the globe, from Africa to Europe, East Asia to the Americas'. He gave the following estimates of significant Chinese population in various parts of the world:

there are now at least half a million Chinese living in Africa, most of whom have arrived very recently. There are more than 7 million Chinese in each of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, more than 1 million each in Myanmar and Russia, 1.3 million in Peru, 3.3 million in the US, 700,000 in Australia and 400,000 in Britain – about 40 million in all, which is almost certainly a considerable underestimate.

(<http://chinadaily.cn/opinion/2008-06/18/>)

Jacques also points out that 'China is already a global power and is still developing. And as its rise continues, as Chinese worldwide interests grow exponentially, the Chinese diaspora is likely to expand greatly.'

Differences in the historical development of overseas Chinese communities, particularly in the provision of Chinese education but also in the degree of contact maintained with the Inner Circle, means the role of Mandarin shows considerable variation and the level of mastery may vary accordingly.

6 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

In overseas Chinese communities in North America and the European countries, Thailand, the Philippines, Myanmar and other territories where Mandarin is not the dominant language of their countries of residence, the use of Mandarin is typically confined to the home domain or to interaction within the Chinese community itself. In such countries, Chinese language classes are not included in the mainstream education system. They are conducted mainly on a voluntary basis in ‘Chinese schools’ (usually with limited hours and a focus on cultural activities as well as language) set up by non-official organisations outside curriculum time. Teaching materials are usually provided by overseas Chinese organisations and the contents are either inclined towards Taiwan or towards mainland China.

In states such as Singapore and Malaysia, where Mandarin is a common language within the Chinese community, the teaching of Chinese is either fully administered by a government ministry (e.g. the Singapore Ministry of Education) or sponsored by a non-official independent local federation of the Chinese community (e.g. United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia). Emphasis is placed on the transmission of Chinese culture and traditional values rather than on the mastery of linguistic skills.

Within the Outer Circle, Singapore stands out as the only nation that places a lot of emphasis on the teaching and learning of Chinese language. In Singapore, Mandarin enjoys the status of an official language alongside English, Tamil and Malay, and is a compulsory academic subject for ethnic Chinese students from primary up to secondary or pre-university level, a span of ten to twelve years.

1.3.4 *The Proliferation of the Expanding Circle of Non-Native Users*

The Expanding Circle encloses regions where Mandarin is not spoken natively and has no official role, but where it is recognised for its importance as a language of commerce, trade or culture. The Expanding Circle includes Japan, South Korea, North America, European countries and an increasing number of other regions where Chinese is taught in educational institutions as a foreign language.

In the past decade, with a sharp rise in demand for CFL courses, the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) has been flourishing within and outside the borders of China. The growing popularity of the subject is evident in the numbers of students wanting to learn it. In 1997, the number of foreign students enrolled in CFL courses in mainland China was estimated to be 43,000. By 2005, the figure had grown to 140,000, marking a threefold increase. More recent surveys note that ‘there are more than 330 colleges offering TCFL programs in China, attracting about 40,000 foreign students every year’ (www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s3917/201007/91583.html, accessed 7 April 2014).

1.3 The Global Spread of Mandarin

7

The prospects for the TCFL overseas are promising. The economic and linguistic expansion of China has led governmental and non-governmental organisations around the world to view Mandarin as a language of opportunity. The US government, for example, has instituted a number of programmes to support the teaching and learning of the language, including the ‘National Flagship Language Initiative’, which classifies Chinese as a ‘critical need language’. In 2006, the College Board officially established an Advanced Placement (AP) Chinese Language and Culture course, recognising the importance of CFL at high-school level in the United States. An increasing number of schools in all parts of the world have since included the TCFL in their curriculum.

The number of non-native learners taking CFL in higher institutions across the globe and undertaking the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* ‘Chinese Language Proficiency Test’ (administered by The Office of Chinese Language Council International in Beijing, known as the *Hanban* for short), has multiplied over the past decade, underscoring the growing international status of Mandarin. The *Language Situation in China Report: 2005* estimated that in 2005, the number of foreigners learning CFL was close to thirty million. Extrapolating from current trends, the *Hanban* projected that the number of CFL learners would exceed 100 million by 2010.

The development of Mandarin in the Outer and Expanding Circles is further enhanced by China’s adoption of a new ‘peaceful development’ strategy, which includes the setting up of Confucius Institutes (CI) and Confucius Classrooms (CC), modelled on the British Council, the German Goethe Institute and the French Alliance Française (but unlike their European counterparts, CI are usually housed in educational institutions – schools and universities). These were instituted by the *Hanban* in 2004 with the stated mission of providing ‘scope for people all over the world to learn about Chinese language and culture’ and to ‘become a platform for cultural exchanges between China and the world as well as a bridge reinforcing friendship and cooperation between China and the rest of the world’ (http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm, 7 April 2014). According to figures provided by the *Hanban* on its official website, by December 2013 a total of 440 CIs and 646 CCs had been set up in 120 countries and regions. Student enrolment has been rising steeply. Official figures indicate that ‘In 2009, Confucius Institutes /Classrooms around the world offered 9,000 Chinese courses of various types, with a total enrolment of 260,000, a 130,000 strong enrolment increase from the previous year’ (http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm, 7 April 2014).

The sudden sharp rise in the population of CFL learners worldwide in conjunction with China’s growing economic power supports Crystal’s argument that economic and political factors determine the popularity of a language and, ultimately, the number who speak it as a second language. It is thus clear that the major force underlying the spread of a language is more often external

8 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

than internal. Learners of a foreign language are usually motivated by external factors – in the case of Mandarin, economic ones – which provide access to personal betterment or lucrative markets; they are less likely to learn a language on the basis of internal language-specific factors such as aesthetic qualities, literary power or cultural heritage, which in Crystal's words, 'can motivate someone to learn a language, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language's world spread' (Crystal 1997:7).

The Expanding Circle may be a good measure of the global status of a language but it is often factors in the Inner Circle that account for the rise of that language. The degree of global status of a language is determined by the degree to which native speakers in the Inner Circle can draw people into the Outer and Extending Circles. The recent global interest in Mandarin is clearly a result of economic attraction. Now, the Outer Circle (represented by places like Singapore and Hong Kong) is recognised as an economic force in its own right. However, the Outer Circle per se does not have the global clout to raise the international status of Mandarin. It is the economic rise of the Inner Circle that has conditioned the ascent of global Mandarin.

1.3.5 *Advances in Chinese-Operated Information Technology*

A number of recent developments outside the realm of TCFL also reflect the growing global significance of Mandarin. The field of information technology (IT) – traditionally dominated by English – has seen the development of Chinese language computer tools, including the Chinese Internet, Chinese search engines (such as Google, Yahoo, Bing, Baidu, Sohu and Yam search to name only a few) and the Chinese version of major American software programs such as the Windows operating system and Microsoft word-processors.

The IT industry's exploration and development of software and IT-related technologies with Chinese capabilities has two important implications. Firstly, it indicates that the drawing power of the vast Chinese market is strong enough to convince the English-dominated IT industry that it needs to cater to the Chinese market and to Mandarin users. Mandarin is no longer just a means of communication. It has become a commodity in its own right, a commodity whose existence is increasingly valued in the world. Secondly, the close linkage that once existed between computers and English has been severed. Technological developments that make Chinese language computing possible have in effect broken geographical barriers and speeded up the dissemination of Chinese – as well as other regional languages – across the globe.

The effect is twofold. For the fast-expanding overseas Chinese diasporic communities, advancement in Chinese Internet technologies makes it possible for community members to keep in close contact with their motherland, as well as with one another, through the establishment of virtual 'language zones'

1.3 The Global Spread of Mandarin

9

(Dor 2004:111) that expand and reinforce the use of Chinese. For non-native communities, as the Internet becomes more accessible and more widely used, those looking for business opportunities in China or with Chinese companies can now gather relevant first-hand information and communicate directly in Chinese with their Chinese counterparts via the World Wide Web. As Hancock (1999) points out, proficiency in the language of the business partner will put one in an advantageous position in the increasingly globalised, competitive business world:

The World Wide Web has accelerated the trend to globalization, and globalization requires companies to form partnerships or more structured alliances with local companies. Cross-border mergers, acquisitions and collaborative projects are increasingly common and their success relies partly on good personal relations and communications between individual participants. Good relations and communications in turn rely partly on the parties being familiar with each other's languages. Internal documents or local regulation and practices will be clearer if the language is understood; ideas and inspirations will be more easily shared. Not even attempting to speak the local language could alienate other parties. (Hancock 1999:35)

There is an emergent literature documenting the spread of Mandarin use as well as other regional languages on the World Wide Web. Based on the estimated and projected figures of Internet users provided by Global Reach, an online marketing firm, Dor (2004:99) predicts that the Internet will soon be predominantly non-English language, as virtual communities, particularly those of global businesses, gradually recognise the needs of an evolving global consumer market and begin to adopt a multilingual strategy 'to penetrate local markets in their own languages' (ibid:102). The latest statistics released by the Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm, 7 April 2014) strongly support Dor's observation and clearly signal a speedy expansion in the number of non-English Internet users over the past decade. Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish are the five fastest growing Internet languages in the list of the top ten. These have registered strong growth of between 807 per cent and 2,501 per cent between 2000 and 2011. Chinese, which is ranked second on the list in terms of number of users, records a total of 510 million users, as compared to 565 million English users, and registers a remarkable percentage growth of 1,478.7 per cent over the same time period.

1.3.6 *Mass Media*

1.3.6.1 *Mandarin TV Channels*

Since the 1990s, as part of its concerted effort to exert its influence over various regions, beginning with South-east Asia and later Africa and beyond, China has been making its presence felt through the infiltration of soft power, a term

10 The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language

coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. On the basis of Nye's discussion, Joshua Kurlantzick (2006) examined the growth of China's soft power in a broader context, and defined it as 'China's ability to influence by persuasion rather than coercion' (Kurlantzick 2006:1). According to Kurlantzick, China crafted a 'more nuanced strategy reinforcing the concept of peaceful development' (Kurlantzick 2006:3) through efforts like the establishment of Confucius Institutes, expanding CCTV's international broadcasting and increasing the provision of Chinese language teachers (www.carnegieendowment.org/files/PB_47_FINAL.pdf, 10 January 2009).

The global spread of Chinese language and culture is also reflected in the development of television media. The development comprises two phases. The first phase which started in the mid-1990s saw the establishment of global Mandarin channels, such as Chinese MTV and Chinese Cable TV, that were based in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong – the so-called 'Greater China region'. Examples include China's CCTV4, Taiwan's TVBS and CTN, and Hong Kong's Phoenix TV. These Mandarin TV channels offer a broad mix of programming via satellites, ranging from information (e.g. news reports, current affairs and documentaries) to entertainment (e.g. movies, variety shows and MTV) for a world audience. Although the content and focus of the various Mandarin TV channels may differ, the underlying goal is a common one: to reach out to a pan-Chinese audience, offering them diversity and a Chinese perspective. But the political role of this programming is to permeate the media world with the soft power of the 'Greater China region'.

The second phase began roughly at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is represented by the establishment of numerous regional Mandarin TV channels, such as the USA's SinoVision Inc., China Star TV and The Chinese Channel/World Today Television, Australia's Channel 31, Thailand's TCTV and Japan's CCTV DAIFU. These are all aimed at servicing the steadily expanding Chinese diasporic communities throughout the world. The development of these global and regional Mandarin TV channels reflects and, indeed, strengthens the growing needs not only of diasporic Chinese communities worldwide, but also of overseas non-native second language communities. The growth of Chinese global television is a major factor in the retention and spread of Mandarin around the world.

1.3.6.2 *Print Media*

The history of overseas Chinese print media can be traced back to the 1900s. To date, about 500 newspapers and magazines are in active publication, out of which 100 are daily or weekly newspapers and about 230 are magazines. Over the past decade, the most significant development in Chinese print media is the emergence of online websites capable of publishing and releasing news and information to a worldwide audience as it happens, overcoming the time