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Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960

Taking aim at the conventional narrative that standard, national languages transform “peasants” into citizens, Gina Anne Tam’s pathbreaking work centers the history of the Chinese nation and national identity on *fangyan* – languages such as Shanghainese, Cantonese, and dozens of others that are categorically different from the Chinese national language, Mandarin. She traces how, on the one hand, linguists, policy makers, bureaucrats, and workaday educators framed *fangyan* as non-standard “variants” of the Chinese language, subsidiary in symbolic importance to standard Mandarin. She simultaneously highlights, on the other hand, the folksong collectors, playwrights, hip-hop artists, and popular protestors who argued that *fangyan* were more authentic and representative of China’s national culture and its history. From the late Qing through the height of the Maoist period, these intertwined visions of the Chinese nation – one spoken in one voice, one spoken in many – interacted and shaped one another, and in the process, shaped the basis for national identity itself.

Gina Anne Tam is Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese History at Trinity University, San Antonio.

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To my parents, Sam and Toni Russo, and my
husband Tam Wing Sun

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Acknowledgments

One of the joys of researching this book was reading letters between the men featured in its narrative. They wrote to one another about phonological patterns they discovered; they asked one another to read drafts of manuscripts. They offered praise, support, and affection; they inquired about health and sent love to each other's families. It is and always has been entirely obvious to me that this book was the product not of my own mind, but of the assistance, encouragement, and support so kindly provided by dozens of people whom I've had the pleasure of spending time with over the past decade. But as I read the letters that floated between and among these Chinese linguists, from Upsalla to Kunming, the process of writing this book began to feel as though I was participating in a grand scholarly tradition of garnering inspiration from the people whom I am lucky to know. I wish I could thank every single person who made this book possible. I will start with this list.

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A Note on Romanization and Characters

This work uses *Hanyu pinyin* for romanization of Chinese sources except in the case of individuals or political parties who commonly use names with alternate romanizations. To the best of my abilities, characters accord to the style found in my sources – simplified when the source uses simplified, and traditional when the source uses traditional characters.