

Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern. By Jing Tsu. New York: Riverhead Books, 2022. xix, 314 pp. ISBN: 9780735214729.

“I’m looking at those.” We were in Leiden, it was 2019, and the compact woman to my right was gesturing to some 1930s Manchukuo books that I had begun thumbing through. Looking up from the conference bookstand in front of us, I readied a hostile gaze to aim at . . . one of my academic heroes. Elisabeth Kaske, whose *Politics of Language in Chinese Education* (2008) arguably sparked the current wave of scholarship on language in China, graciously accepted my apologies and awkward admiration. But, she said, she had moved on to other topics. Few others had seemed interested in language.

Kingdom of Characters is a sign of how far things have come. In the past decade, many scholars have added significantly to our knowledge and understanding of language, both in China in particular and in Asia in general. Contributors include Robert Culp, Zev Handel, Peter Kornicki, Uluğ Kuzuoğlu, David Moser, Thomas Mullaney, Mariana Münning, Mårten Söderblom Saarela, Gina Tam, Li Yu, and Yurou Zhong, just to name a few. Tsu’s book synthesizes much of this scholarship, which includes her own prior work. In the book, she aims to teach a general audience about language in China: how it works, what it’s been through, and how it’s changed. The story is told through seven lenses: the creation of Mandarin in the first chapter; typewriting in the second; telegraphy in the third; information management in the fourth; romanization in the fifth; and computing in the sixth and seventh. The narrative is character driven—a double entendre acknowledged in the book’s introduction. “In a dramatic series of language skirmishes and clever one-upmanships, of unexpected feats and crushing failures,” she writes, “Chinese and foreigners wrestled, struggled, and threw in their lot with the future of the Chinese script” (xviii–xix). The stakes, Tsu argues, were high. Wang Zhao (1859–1933), a prominent early reformer, “risked his life to bring back to China a new spelling for the Chinese script” (276). Lin Yutang (1895–1976), famed author, linguist, and inventor, nearly bankrupted himself trying to develop a Chinese typewriter. Computer pioneer Zhi Bingyi (1911–93), branded “a reactionary academic authority” during the Cultural Revolution (211), while in prison began devising a way for computers to handle Chinese characters.

The narrative thus centers on great men (apart from a story involving Lin Yutang’s daughter, there are no women). This approach has its advantages: It makes the story easier to follow. It raises the emotional stakes. It avoids arid disquisitions on impersonal forces. The journey of the Chinese language over the twentieth century to the present day, in Tsu’s telling, is a triumph against the odds. But “triumph” implies failure averted. What would “failure” in this case have been? The abolition of Chinese characters? Korea and Vietnam did just that and seem to be doing just fine. The failure of modernization? There were many proposals for modernizing, not just the language, but all of Chinese society. What we see today in China—simplified characters, hanyu pinyin, hegemonic Mandarin—is simply one of many possible outcomes. Taiwan, with its complex characters, all sorts of pinyin, and increasing minority-language recognition, is a case in point.

Contingency is thus the lifeblood of history, as is accuracy. Much of the profusion of scholarship of the past decade has sought to debunk recurrent misconceptions about language and China. One wishes Tsu might have engaged more closely with these insights. If she had, perhaps she would have avoided including the old canard that Cantonese could have become the national language (39). Indeed, there was no way it could have because, as Tsu herself relates, Mandarin's initial pronunciation was based on "6,500 samples collected from all over the country" (38). But samples of what? Kaske and others already explained that those 6,500 samples were in fact 6,500 characters taken from a well-known rhyming dictionary. Most of the delegates to the 1913 conference that produced standard Mandarin's earliest pronunciations were from the eastern provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang (and thus not Cantonese speaking). They voted character by character, not dialect by dialect. This is not an isolated error. Tsu might also have avoided an assertion that the Wade-Giles transcription system was "based on the [sic] southern variety of Mandarin" (179) if she had leaned further on Yurou Zhong's *Chinese Grammarology* (2019) or Gina Tam's *Dialect and Nationalism* (2020). Both echo Kaske (and ultimately W. South Coblin) in showing that the system was notable for being among the first transcription systems to represent the northern speech of Beijing, a departure from the reigning bias toward southern speech.¹ More seriously, her account of Chinese typewriting, as others have already pointed out, ignores Japan's prominent role. Such an omission might have been avoided by engaging more closely with Thomas Mullaney's *Chinese Typewriter* (2017).² In writing a synthesis for nonspecialists, Tsu—a highly accomplished scholar in her own right—could have afforded every now and then to clamber atop the shoulders of other giants.

Newly out in paperback, *Kingdom* is already everywhere. I saw it in multiple bookstores in the San Francisco Bay Area in summer 2022. It has been reviewed in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New Yorker*, *Guardian*, and even *Science*. It has been blurbed by Peter Hessler and Ha Jin. Rana Mitter and Lydia Liu have also weighed in, he in the *Times Literary Supplement* and she in the *London Review of Books*. In addressing a general audience, Tsu has chosen to put characters, human and written, front and center. This is not the only way to tell the story. The curious reader, led further into the burgeoning literature, will find a diversity of narratives: how alphabetization might have been a good thing, how machines and language have confronted each other, how national unity and diversity are in constant tension, how information technology has been politicized. Nevertheless, in a profession routinely derided with an elephantine architectural metaphor, Tsu has significantly raised the profile of a once-obscure corner, to the benefit of all.

JEFFREY WENG
National Taiwan University
jeffweng@ntu.edu.tw
DOI: 10.1215/00219118-10849622

Notes

1. W. South Coblin, "A Brief History of Mandarin," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 4 (2000): 541.

2. Ian Buruma, "How the Chinese Language Got Modernized," *New Yorker*, January 10, 2022; Lydia H. Liu, "Alphabetarchy," *London Review of Books*, April 7, 2022.