

Mariana Münning, *Sound, Meaning, Shape: The Phonologist
Wei Jiangong (1901–1980) between Language Study
and Language Planning*

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It is always pleasant to see a solid contribution to knowledge appear, and that is exactly what Mariana Münning, assistant professor at Heidelberg University, offers to the scholarly community in this well-researched book on the scholarly, social, and policy contributions of twentieth-century Chinese language scholar Wei Jiangong 魏建功 (1901–1980). Her work adds to a growing historical literature on the politics of language in twentieth-century China, which includes Gina Anne Tam's *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Jing Tsu's *Kingdom of Characters: A Tale of Language, Obsession, and Genius in Modern China* (Riverhead Books, 2022), and Janet Chen's *The Sounds of Mandarin: Learning to Speak a National Language in China and Taiwan, 1913–1960* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

Published by Heidelberg, the book—it is important to note—is a dissertation, and it even calls itself a dissertation within the text. That I draw the reader's attention to this fact in no way detracts from its quality. Rather, this notice is meant to delineate the expectations on which this review will proceed. German academia is notable for the high barriers it places between doctoral graduates and full-time positions, and the publication of dissertations as such, without the wholesale rewriting that goes into American academic dissertation-books, is but the first of two book-length studies German academics typically complete before

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professorial appointments. Additionally, Munning is working within Sinology, whose philological predilections are on clear display in the monograph, which is already about language. Thus, the conventions and goals of the discipline, along with the academic culture in which this book was produced, should set the standards by which it should be assessed. That is how this review will proceed. Nevertheless, after summarizing and evaluating the contents of the book on its own terms, I will offer some comments aimed at a readership beyond German Sinology, particularly for those more familiar with American conventions rooted in area studies and the social scientific and humanistic disciplines.

One of the great strengths to be found among the best works of Sinology is how carefully evidence is sourced and analyzed. Munning's work exemplifies this care. Her sources are "Wei Jiangong's texts" (p. 24), which she says include his massive oeuvre collected in the *Wei Jiangong wenji* 魏建功文集 (*Collected Works of Wei Jiangong*, Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001); "many of his manuscripts, documents and books" (p. 24) preserved by his family in Beijing, which includes tens of thousands of books, some donated to the Huazhong University of Science and Technology; and about "15,000 pages of manuscripts and documents" (p. 24). Using these sources, she discusses the interplay between the theory and practice of linguistic reforms in twentieth-century China.

Why study Wei Jiangong? Munning's justification for the subject of her study is twofold. First, Wei, who worked in both Taiwan and mainland China, was deeply involved in multiple aspects and phases of language reform and policymaking in both the Republican and PRC eras. Additionally, he was acutely embedded in the social networks of intellectuals that shaped linguistic research and policymaking. All of these make him a significant and influential figure in the intellectual, social, and political history of language in China (p. 21). In spite of this importance, Munning remarks that he has "hardly been mentioned in Western language" scholarship at all, which is further cause for scholarly attention (p. 23).

Chapter 1, the Introduction to the book, sets the scene by periodizing the work and situating it in relation to the existing scholarship. Munning considers her work a successor to Elisabeth Kaske's landmark *Politics of Language in Chinese*

Education, 1895–1919 (Brill, 2008). Kaske ends her account in 1919 with the inception of the May Fourth Movement, which is where Munning picks up by focusing on the period from 1920 to 1965 (p. 22). This makes sense, given her focus is on Wei Jiangong, who was born in 1901 and thus part of the generation that followed the earliest language reformers in China, most of whom had been born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Munning divides the subsequent chapters of her book into three parts, each named for a field of Chinese philology, as laid out in the book's title (p. 21). The first, titled "Sound," examines the research, debates, and policies that undergirded the creation and promulgation of the standardized spoken language today known in English as Mandarin. The second part, "Meaning," focuses on Wei's involvement in the creation of *Xinhua zidian* 新華字典 (*Xinhua Dictionary*) in the 1950s. The third and final part, "Shape," investigates Wei's participation in the script reform debates before and after 1949 that culminated in the simplifications current in today's PRC. Each of these investigations is intended to bolster Munning's three principal claims: (1) Language planning was a legitimization of the status quo by appeals to tradition; (2) language planning made use of traditional Chinese scholarship; and (3) though expressed in different terms before and after 1949, Wei's "language concept" remained constant through the regime change (p. 30).

Part I ("Sound") encompasses Chapters 2 to 5. Chapter 2 consists mainly of a background and overview of the National Language Movement 國語運動, defining key terms that include *guoyu* 國語, *guanhua* 官話, and *baihua* 白話. Munning's contextualization of Wei Jiangong's work and impact draws on the major historiography of the past few decades, including the works of Joseph R. Levenson, Robert Sandars, W. South Coblin, Jr., Elisabeth Kaske, Richard VanNess Simmons, and Victor H. Mair. In her review of the literature, Munning illustrates the scholarly consensus that has grown up around our understanding of the epochal changes in language practices in China that took place over the first few decades of the twentieth century. This understanding has necessarily moved beyond the pioneering and influential, but arguably overly teleological, *Guoyu yundong shi gang* 國語運動史綱 (*Historical Outline of the National Language*

Movement) by leading language reformer Li Jinxi 黎錦熙 (1890–1978). Munning notes the growing discontent with China’s diglossic language situation and points us to scholar Shang Wei’s explanations of how this division between the classical and vernacular varieties of the written language was often overstated in May Fourth-era rhetoric. Following received historiographical conceptualizations, she sees the National Language Movement, which emphasized the reform of China’s spoken language, as separate from and subsequent to the May Fourth debates over the language that ought to be used in Chinese literature, as embodied in the Vernacular Literature Movement 白話運動.

Wei Jiangong’s involvement in reforming the spoken language, which began in his student days at Peking University in the 1920s, forms the bulk of the subsequent narrative in Chapters 3 to 5. At university, Wei was taught by such luminaries as Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 (1887–1939), Hu Shih 胡適 (1891–1962), and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), among many others. He also taught at a night school affiliated with the university and participated in research on folklore and dialectology as well as a student theater group. Needless to say, the spirit of May Fourth permeated his time at Peking University, and his earliest publications include polemics in *Guoyu zhoukan* 國語週刊 (*National Language Weekly*) that defended the concept of *guoyu* against traditionalists such as Zhang Shizhao 章士釗 (1881–1973), who had been appointed Minister of Education in 1925. Munning explains Wei’s concept of language, one that “remained unchanged throughout his life” (p. 67): it was a “tool” for communication (p. 67), subject “to a progress-oriented evolution” (p. 66). These views were further solidified while he taught Chinese in colonial Korea from 1927 to 1928—when he took up a post at Keijō Imperial University in what is now Seoul—where he witnessed firsthand a society that had long been buffeted by the imperial ambitions of its neighbors.

After his return to China in 1928, Wei was encouraged by Qian Xuantong to participate in the Preparatory Committee for the Unification of the National Language 國語統一籌備委員會, as Munning details in Chapter 4. In that capacity, he entered into the vociferous debates that raged in the 1920s over the hybrid “Old National Pronunciation” 老國音 that a predecessor of the Committee,

the Commission for the Unification of Character Readings 讀音統一會, had created in 1913. Partisans of this old standard included Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865–1953) and Liu Fu 劉復 (1891–1934), along with Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940), who opposed unification of the spoken language altogether, especially one based on the Beijing dialect, because of its associations with the recently defunct dynasty. Extending Kaske’s account of speech unification in the 1910s, MÜnning shows how Wei, who along with Li Jinxi, Qian Xuantong, and others, advocated bringing the spoken standard closer in line with the ordinary speech of Beijing. Wei’s arguments in particular were made along historical linguistic lines, which were publicized in his research on the “entering tone” 入聲 published in 1929 in *Guoyu xunkan* 國語旬刊 (*National Language Thrice-Monthly*) and *Guoyu jikan* 國語季刊 (*National Language Quarterly*). In MÜnning’s view, Wei’s argued Beijing dialect was a suitable national standard because, rather than being a debased and insufficient language, it was one that had evolved naturally to its current state. The Old National Pronunciation had five tones, including *rusheng*, but according to Wei and other scholars, the Beijing dialect had naturally evolved into four tones, losing the entering tone. Moreover, as a city that was at the margins of empire early on in Chinese history, the speech of Beijing in Wei’s view represented an evolutionary hybrid of multiple cultural influences.

Chapter 5, the last of Part 1, introduces another interesting interlude in Wei Jiangong’s life. From 1946 to 1948, he was in Taiwan as head member of the Taiwan Committee for the Promotion of the National Language 臺灣省國語推行委員會. This chapter hews very closely to Wei’s numerous publications promoting Mandarin in Taiwan, which had been a Japanese colony for the preceding half century. Wei extended his arguments on the evolutionary naturalness of Beijing-based Mandarin, writing that the local speech of Taiwan, a variety of the Min 閩 dialect family, has a familial relationship with Mandarin and thus could serve as a stepping stone in teaching the people of Taiwan the nation’s new national language. This thinking contrasted with the KMT’s dialect-suppression policies in Taiwan that began in 1956. Though this sort of linguistic repression occurred nearly a decade after Wei’s departure, a strong premonition of the

discontent and repressive response under KMT rule occurred during his tenure in Taiwan: the February 28 Incident, when the provincial government violently cracked down on antigovernment protests. Munning sees Wei as implicitly acknowledging the advanced state of social development in Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule—the literacy rate (in Japanese) was higher than many parts of the mainland, for instance—but he also saw the Japanese legacy as an impediment to linguistic reintegration with the rest of China.

Chapter 6 stands alone in Part 2 (“Meaning”) and focuses on Wei Jiangong’s involvement with *Xinhua zidian*, which Munning notes is perhaps one of the world’s “most popular reference work[s]” (p. 157) and whose various editions have sold more than 400 million print copies from 1953 to 2015. Beyond its popularity, the dictionary was the distillation of several linguistic and lexicographical innovations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While older lexicographical works in China had adopted the single character as the unit for entries, the modern spoken languages of China—and thus Mandarin—are polysyllabic, with “words” that are compounds of mostly two (though sometimes more) characters. Early twentieth-century Chinese dictionaries began introducing compound-character entries under Japanese influence, but as head of the compilation team of *Xinhua zidian*, Wei pushed for arrangement not by the traditional radical-and-stroke-number order, but in alphabetical order (initially using *zhuyin fuhao* 注音符號) and grouping entries by meaning. The intention was to make an accessible reference work for language learners that laid out the contours of the most commonly used words and phrases of the national standard language. By avoiding obscure and archaic entries, the dictionary sought to be both practical and concise.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss script reform, the former before and the latter after 1949. These chapters together form the third and final Part (“Shape”) of the book. One theme of both chapters is the continuity of script reform efforts between the Republican and PRC regimes. In the 1920s, Wei—along with many others—entertained the idea of abolishing Chinese characters in favor of a phonetic or alphabetic script. But by the 1930s, he recognized the impracticality of

character abolition and began researching ways to simplify characters. In his advocacy, he maintained his thinking on language as a progressive and evolutionary tool of communication, one that needed to be simple to be accessible, but still based on common practices and traditions. In 1949, Wei joined the Chinese Script Reform Association 中國文字改革協會 as one of its twenty-six members. Much of the simplifications carried out in the 1950s and 1960s, now still current, took over ideas that had already been in circulation in the Republican era: the use of simplifications already in everyday popular use, the codification of print forms of cursive writing, and the replacement of traditional phonetic components of phono-semantic compound characters with more obvious phonetic components.

Overall, Munning has offered us a treasury of new and fascinating information on a relatively neglected but important figure in language science and policy formulation in twentieth-century China. Her compilation and analysis of texts are by all appearances carefully and accurately done, and her book will serve as a valuable reference to other scholars working on allied areas in years to come. By the standards of her own discipline, Munning has fulfilled all reasonable expectations, and then some. From the perspective of an American academic trained in a social science that is more accustomed to making broad arguments that intervene in larger-scale theoretical debates, Munning's work is not one that seeks to accomplish these larger tasks. She is careful to use the word "claims" and not "arguments" in both her Introduction and Conclusion, which makes sense because the points she makes are carefully and narrowly crafted to be supportable by the large body of textual evidence she analyzes. Clearly at the start of a long and promising career, I hope to see more built on this excellent research. In the future, one imagines she might elucidate why Wei Jiangong has been relatively neglected in the Western literature? Perhaps because his career, unlike say Yuen Ren Chao's 趙元任 (1892–1982), was spent entirely in Asia, and he produced little if any Western-language scholarship. What about the larger implications for Chinese nationalism or society? What does Wei's career tell us about the particular predicaments that China faces today? All these are the avenues of future scholarship that Munning's excellent book points to.