



## Vernacular Language Movement

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### Introduction

The English term ‘vernacular language’ is more capacious than any of its Chinese equivalents. When discussing writing, the term is usually equated with *baihua* (白话), a word that now refers to the standard written language, but only gained that sense starting in the 1890s with the rise of vernacular newspapers. When discussing speech, the term now refers primarily to northern varieties of speech on which *baihua* was based, particularly the standard language, which in English is usually referred to by the terms ‘Mandarin’ or ‘Mandarin Chinese,’ which equates to *putonghua* (普通话 common speech) in the mainland, *guoyu* (国语 national language) in Taiwan, and *huayu* (华语 Chinese language) in Singapore. In these senses, ‘vernacular’ is defined in opposition to ‘classical’ or ‘literary,’ as in Classical or Literary Chinese (now usually called *wenyan* 文言), a primarily written medium whose norms were established in the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE) and the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). As the medium of the Confucian canon, the civil examination system, and the imperial bureaucracy, *wenyan* remained the prestige form of writing for roughly two thousand years until the end of the 19th century. On the other hand, when referring to speech, the vernacular language movement (*baihua yundong* 白话运动) went hand in hand with the national language movement (*guoyu yundong* 国语运动). This movement sought to create a standard spoken language to unify a polyglot Chinese nation that spoke hundreds of mutually unintelligible ‘speeches of a locality’ (*fangyan* 方言). Though they are tantamount to distinct languages, these local speech varieties are usually called “dialects” in English in an acknowledgement of China’s cultural unity, though some advocate the term “topolect” as a more neutral equivalent of *fangyan*. Thus, the ‘vernacular’ represents an intellectual and political agenda for Chinese intellectuals who saw the ‘classical’ and ‘local’ as impediments to literacy, education, and thus modernization. Starting in the early 20th century, and spurred from 1919 onwards by the May Fourth Movement, progressive intellectuals advocated the vernacular in writing and in speech, arguing that it was closer to the living language of the people and thus appropriate for a modern nation in which being able to read was a necessity not just for a privileged few, but rather for the great bulk of the population. *Baihua*, which had simply meant ‘local speech’ until the 1890s, was redefined as the writing style found in ‘vernacular’ novels (*xiaoshuo* 小说) of the past few centuries, which themselves were elevated in status from works of popular entertainment to literary classics. *Guoyu*, which during the Qing dynasty had referred to the Manchu language, was also redefined—under the influence of the Japanese neologism *kokugo* (国語)—as the nation’s language. The multiplicity of the Chinese terms for different aspects of the language in China thus emerged from the polemics of reform: *baihua* was not *wenyan*, *guoyu* was not *fangyan*. But the distinction between the components of each dichotomy was somewhat forced, given that *baihua* retained many *wenyan* expressions and *guoyu* incorporated elements of *fangyan*. While these ways of thinking about language have drawn legitimate scholarly criticism, they have become the conventional wisdom in contemporary China. Indeed, the revolution in the culture and practice of language in China may represent one of the largest such social transformations in history: Mandarin is now the language with the greatest number of speakers on the planet.

### General Overviews

Periodicals in the vernacular began appearing in the late 19th century in an attempt to reach a wider audience. The “vernacular language movement,” however, usually connotes the early 20th-century intellectual advocacy of a vernacular literature coupled with a

unified national language, especially in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, which erupted in 1919. As a set of written and spoken conventions, Modern Chinese (in the form of Mandarin speech and *baihua* writing) became widespread only in the 1930s after several decades of debates that played out among intellectuals in informal conversations, in various media outlets, and on government commissions, leaving a rich paper trail for future scholars. The first synthetic work, Li 1934, followed closely on the heels of these developments. Another key figure in the development of a standardized language in China was Yuen Ren Chao, who provides a useful introduction to the process in Chao 1976, a collection of essays on the nature of language in China. In English, the pioneering work on the subject is DeFrancis 1950, whose author's advocacy of the adoption of a phonetic script for the Chinese language continued for the rest of his life (see DeFrancis 1984). Chow 1960, addressing the May Fourth Movement in general, provides a good entry into the literary currents of the time. More recent scholarship on the language question in China was sparked by Kaske 2008, which has remained a must-cite source for all subsequent research concerning language issues in *fin-de-siècle* China. Moser 2016 provides a good introduction to the subject for a general audience, while Weng 2018 addresses the details of how Mandarin was invented. Tam 2020 deals with the fraught relationship between standard and dialect in the 19th and 20th centuries, and Cui 2018 provides a clear and detailed Chinese-language account.

**Chao, Yuen Ren. *Aspects of Chinese Sociolinguistics: Essays*. Edited by Anwar S. Dil. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976.**

Linguist and polymath Chao is a foundational figure, not only in Chinese linguistics, but also in the creation of the Chinese language itself. This collection of essays, especially the ones in Part 1, is an indispensable firsthand explanation of the complex language situation in China in general and the vernacular language movement in particular.

**Chow, Tse-tsung. *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.**

Chow's work, like the May Fourth Movement itself, ventured far beyond issues of language and literature. Nevertheless, the "literary revolution" proclaimed by the leading intellectuals of the movement was a core component to the broader cultural renovation they advocated, and so chapter 9 of this work deals specifically with literature, providing a lively exposition of the key ideas of the time.

**Cui Minghai 崔明海. *Jindai guoyu yundong yanjiu* (近代国语运动研究). Wuhu, China: Anhui shifan daxue chubanshe, 2018.**

A masterful study of the national language movement, primarily in the republican era. The author makes such skillful use of primary sources that this book, apart from its clear and persuasive narrative, can serve also as a guide to archives and published compilations of historical materials useful for future scholarship.

**DeFrancis, John. *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950.**

This touchstone account of language reform in China starts in the 19th century, with a discussion of western influences that shows how much this work was a product of its time: the chapter titled "The West Shows the Way" is emblematic of DeFrancis's implacable opposition to character script, aligning himself with radical Chinese intellectuals who saw characters as an impediment to literacy and thus modernization.

**DeFrancis, John. *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984.**

A lucid introduction to the inner workings and history of the Chinese language for nonspeakers. The memorable opening chapter, while possibly disorienting in its indulgence in a counterfactual history of the world, is an effective debunking of the myth that Chinese characters stand for ideas rather than sounds, and can thus function as a universal system of writing.

**Kaske, Elisabeth. *The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895–1919*. Boston: Brill, 2008.**

Kaske's periodization takes us from the shock of the Chinese defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the First Sino-Japanese War to the declaration of a "literary revolution" by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi at the cusp of the May Fourth Movement. This masterful and detailed work, based on the author's PhD thesis, shows just how multifaceted debates over language reform were at the turn of the 20th century.

**Li Jinxi 黎錦熙. *Guoyu yundong shigang* (國語運動史綱). Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934.**

English title: *A Historical Outline of the National Language Movement*. This firsthand account of language presents an understandably teleological account of how a standardized national language was created, covering debates over both the reform of the writing system as well as the national unification of the spoken language.

**Moser, David. *A Billion Voices: China's Search for a Common Language*. Scoresby, VC: Penguin Books, 2016.**

This short introduction dramatically tells the story of language standardization in China starting in the early 20th century and contains helpful "digressions" clarifying what "dialects" are in relation to the standard and the relationship between Chinese script and the language itself, along with discussions of issues that extend into contemporary life, such as Mandarin in the media.

**Tam, Gina Anne. *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.**

Tam, in what is sure to be a landmark work in the field, centers her account on the evolving role of *fangyan*, local languages commonly known in English as "dialects," amid the formation of a Chinese nation. Tam argues that nationalism in China was a contested field containing multiple contradictory interpretations of what the nation really was supposed to be.

**Weng, Jeffrey. "What Is Mandarin? The Social Project of Language Standardization in Early Republican China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77.3 (2018): 611–633.**

This account of the invention of Mandarin argues that the design of the language reflected its designers' vision of a modern society—one in which an official language was made to be accessible to everyone, thus making possible mass education and national regeneration.

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## Essential Primary Sources

While *baihua* in the sense of "vernacular" is more specific in its meaning in Chinese than in English, the word for 'movement' in Chinese (*yundong* 运动) is much less specific. While the word often conjures up mass marches and popular activism in English, the reference in Chinese in this case is to the people who were educated sufficiently to have an opinion about language. Thus the "vernacular language movement" (*baihua yundong*) was primarily one among intellectuals, and much of the debates within this movement over its goals and its methods were conducted in print. Perhaps two of the most famous texts from the period, essential starting points to any inquiry into modern vernacularization in China, were Chen 1996 and Hu 1996, both published in 1917 in back-to-back issues of the journal *Xin qingnian* (新青年 New Youth), which was quickly followed by a rejoinder from Liu 1917 in the same journal. The flip side of the movement for vernacular literature was one for a unified national language (*guoyu yundong*), in which intellectuals debated what the new language should sound like. In retrospect, there were two main stages in the development of a national language: the first, a standard based on Beijing dialect that also extensively incorporated elements of other dialects. This so-called "old national pronunciation" (*lao guoyin* 老国音) was developed in 1913 by a committee of delegates from across the country (Wenzi gaige

chubanshe 1958), whose work from February to May of that year led to the publication in 1919 of a dictionary with the newly standardized pronunciations of Chinese characters (Jiaoyubu duyin tongyi hui 1920). Far from settling matters, this dictionary ended up being only a footnote in the acrimonious debates over pronunciation between supporters of this mixed standard (*guoyin* 國音) and supporters of one based more exclusively on Beijing dialect (*jingyin* 京音). The *jingyin* supporters won out in the mid-1920s, and their standard—known as *xin guoyin* (新國音) and, in most essentials, today's standard—appeared in a pronouncing glossary in 1932 (Jiaoyubu guoyu tongyi choubai weiyuanhui 1932). Chao, et al. 1977 describes the twists and turns, and Chao's own role in this process, in an oral history interview.

**Chao, Yuen Ren, Rosemary Levenson, Laurence A. Schneider, and Mary R. Haas. *Chinese linguist, phonologist, composer and author Yuen Ren Chao*. BANC MSS 78/43, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1977. BANC MSS 78/43. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.**

This transcript, freely available online, of an oral history interview done (in English) toward the end of Chao's life is a treasure-chest of anecdotes and insights from one of the intellectual giants of language reform in 20th-century China. The interviewers address the evolution of language practices in China, and Chao's role in the process, from several different angles—among them, pronunciation, script, and implementation and teaching.

**Chen, Duxiu. "On Literary Revolution." In *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*. Edited by Kirk A. Denton and translated by Timothy Wong, 140–145. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.**

Chinese title: *Wenxue geming lun* (文學革命論). Appearing in the February 1917 issue of *Xin Qingnian*, this famous essay calls for a literary "revolution." Chen takes us on a brashly Europhile romp through two thousand years of Chinese literary history, in which he excoriates the Classical ("stale" and "pompous") and extols the plebeian ("fresh" and "sincere"). Along with Hu Shi's (1996) famous essay from the preceding month's issue, this work constitutes the opening salvo of modern literature.

**Hu, Shi. "Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature." In *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*. Edited and translated by Kirk A. Denton, 123–139. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.**

Chinese title: *Wenxue gailiang chuyi* (文學改良芻議). Originally published in the January 1917 issue of *Xin Qingnian*, this famous essay (ironically written in Literary Chinese) lays out prescriptions for a new vernacular literature—among them injunctions against "imitat[ing] the ancients" and "hackneyed and formal language." This translation, otherwise lucid and complete, happens to omit a laudatory concluding comment by Chen Duxiu, one of the journal's editors, that appeared in the original issue.

**Jiaoyubu duyin tongyi hui 教育部讀音統一會, ed. *Guoyin zidian* (國音字典). Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1920.**

English title: *Dictionary of Nation Pronunciation*. This 'dictionary' gives no definitions, only 'readings' (pronunciations) rendered in a newly invented alphabet known at the time as 'national pronunciation letters' (*guoyin zimu* 國音字母, today's *zhuyin fuhao* 注音符號, 'phonetic annotations' now used mainly in Taiwan). Tones, of which there were five in this standard (as opposed to today's four), are indicated separately in each entry. Although most of the pronunciations indicated here will be familiar, some will seem strange, reflecting southern dialects.

**Jiaoyubu guoyu tongyi choubai weiyuanhui 教育部國語統一籌備委員會. *Guoyin changyong zihui* (國音常用字彙). Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1932.**

English title: *Glossary of Commonly Used Characters in the National Pronunciation*. Entries are ordered alphabetically by *zhuyin fuhao*, accompanied by a Latin-alphabet transcription system invented by Yuen Ren Chao called Gwoyeu Romatzyh (*guoyu luomazi* 國語羅馬字), in which tones are "spelled out," as opposed to the diacritics used to indicate tone in *pinyin*. Curiously, syllables pronounced with

certain tones for which no characters exist are included as blank entries, perhaps reflecting the linguistic training of the glossary's compilers.

**Liu Bannong 劉半農. “Wo zhi wenxue gailiang guan” (我之文學改良觀). *Xin qingnian* 3.3 (1917): 18–30.**

English title: “My Views on Literary Reform.” Also known as Liu Fu (劉復), Liu Bannong was a prolific writer, translator, linguist, and poet who followed up on the opening salvo of essays by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi with this essay that defined literature in Western terms (indeed, in English). He further advocates the recognition of local opera, and then goes on at length about the renovation of poetry with the creation of new rhyme tables using living speech. He expresses hope that language standardization will contribute to this goal.

**Wenzi gaige chubanshe 文字改革出版社. 1913 nian duyin tongyihui ziliao huibian (1913年讀音統一會資料匯編). Beijing: Wenzhi gaige chubanshe, 1958.**

English title: *Documentary Compilation of the 1913 Committee for the Unification of Reading Pronunciations*. In early 1913, delegates from across China gathered in Beijing under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Standardizing the formal “reading” pronunciation of Chinese characters (as opposed to casual speech) was their remit—an exceedingly narrow one, given the freewheeling nature of debates over language reform that had raged for the better part of two decades by that point. This book is a helpful compilation of key documents produced by this committee, whose work culminated in the creation of what is now known as *zhuyin fuhao* and the initial *lao guoyin* standard pronunciation.

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## Sound and Syntax: Perspectives from Linguistics and Sociolinguistics

The creation of modern standard Mandarin was an unprecedented intervention by the state into the language practices of the Chinese masses. It represented a major historical break with prior imperial regimes, whose civil examinations maintained standards in the Classical language and kept scholarship on the classical canon alive. The rest of the population spoke scores of local languages. A broad outline of these linguistic practices appears in three landmark surveys—Norman 1988, Ramsey 1987, and Chen 1999—that cover not only the linguistic but also the social traits of China’s evolving language situation. Imperial-era scholar-bureaucrats, drawn from all over the empire, communicated in a loosely defined *koiné*, or interregional lingua franca, known as *guanhua* (官话 officials’ speech), whose norms in the Ming and Qing dynasties were strongly influenced by southern speech, particularly that of the early Ming capital Nanjing, as Coblin 2000 shows. It was only in the later 19th century that the center of *guanhua* gravity shifted north to Beijing, and so it was the use of *guanhua*, along with the local speech of Beijing itself, that fed into the set of standardized pronunciations of the new national language. The initial set of pronunciations, which drew as well from dialect sources outside of Beijing, proved to be unworkable because of a lack of native speakers able to teach it. Simmons 2017 systematically outlines the characteristics of this eclectic ‘old national pronunciation’ (*lao guoyin*), and then illustrates the changes that brought the standard closer to Beijing dialect. This ‘new national pronunciation’ (*xin guoyin*) is in most essentials the sound of the language spoken today, the intricacies of which are detailed in Duanmu 2007. Sanders 1987 represents a more general view of the language situation in China with respect to ‘Mandarin,’ an English term that he argues actually refers to more than one set of practices. Indeed, language remains a complex issue, not least for linguistic taxonomists represented by such works as Mair 1991, which argues for a new terminology in English—most notably, advocating discontinuing “dialect” in favor of his coinage “topolect”—to more accurately describe what the Chinese actually do. The tension between the national standard ‘language’ and the numerous local ‘dialects’ is well documented from a historical perspective in both Tam 2016 and Liu 2016. Even standard Mandarin’s own basis, Beijing dialect, is sufficiently different enough to merit dedicated study, although works in English on this are few and far between, a notable one being Chirkova 2003.

**Chen, Ping. *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.**

This sociolinguistic survey divides its examination of the modern language situation in China into two parts: first, a discussion of the

spoken language starts the work, covering the history of standardization and its relation to dialects, and second, a discussion of the written language, covering both changes in the written language (from Classical to vernacular) and in the writing system (including character simplification).

**Chirkova, Ekaterina Yurievna. *In Search of Time in Peking Mandarin*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, 2003.**

A linguistic study of the speech of Beijing, the basis for the modern standard spoken language in China, that focuses on how time is expressed in the dialect. The first chapter contains a useful description of the dialect and how it differs from the standard.

**Coblin, W. South. "A Brief History of Mandarin." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120.4 (2000): 537–552.**

This useful discussion of the origins of today's standard language seeks to dispel the myth that Mandarin has always been associated with Beijing, something that only became true in the 1860s. Coblin demonstrates that southern norms, bearing the influence of the early Ming capital Nanjing, prevailed in the interregional language (*koiné*) known as *guanhua* (officials' speech), which preceded standard Mandarin.

**Duanmu, San. *The Phonology of Standard Chinese*. 2d ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.**

Duanmu's approach to the standard language is firmly rooted in structural and generative linguistics, and his work accordingly focuses on the sounds of the spoken language, treating them as part of a self-contained symbolic system whose rules he seeks to discover and elucidate, sometimes offering novel solutions of his own.

**Liu, Jin. "A Historical Review of the Discourse of *Fangyan* in Modern China." In *Special Issue: National Language, Dialect, and the Construction of Identity*. Edited by Kristin Stapleton. *Twentieth-Century China* 41.3 (2016): 217–233.**

This article, part of a special issue on language, illustrates how fraught the relationship was between the unified national language that some intellectuals were attempting to construct in early 20th-century China and the dialects that it was both related to and made to be distinct from. Covering such diverse topics and script reform and dialect literature, Liu concludes that dialects ultimately were marginalized in the quest for linguistic unification.

**Mair, Victor H. "What Is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms." *Sino-Platonic Papers* 29 (1991).**

Mair, seeking to impose a semblance of order on English-language terminology regarding China's highly complex language situation, advocates the term "topolect" as an equivalent of the Chinese term for local speech, *fangyan*.

**Norman, Jerry. *Chinese*. New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.**

This work has become a classic of Chinese linguistics, covering everything from the historical evolution of language in China to the sound system of the modern standard and the course of language reform in the early 20th century, along with a dialect survey toward the end.

**Ramsey, S. Robert. *The Languages of China*. 2d ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.**

Another classic on the subject, Ramsey's work not only covers the various dialects of the ethnic Han, but also (in the second half) has an extensive section on minority languages, such as Turkic and Mongolian.

**Sanders, Robert M. "The Four Languages of 'Mandarin'." Edited by Victor H. Mair. *Sino-Platonic Papers* 4 (1987).**

This paper explicates the polysemy of the English word 'Mandarin,' which Sanders argues points to four interrelated things: (1) "idealized Mandarin"—the standard spoken language; (2) "imperial Mandarin" (i.e., *guanhua*); (3) "geographical Mandarin"—a conceptual construct of linguists, essentially a family of dialects closely related to the standard; and (4) "local Mandarin"—the language as actually spoken in the various localities of the country.

**Simmons, Richard VanNess. "Whence Came Mandarin? Qīng Guānhuà, the Běijīng Dialect, and the National Language Standard in Early Republican China." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137.1 (2017): 63–88.**

This article builds on the insights of Coblin 2000 and others to create a detailed lineage of Mandarin in its initial "interdialectal" form (*lao guoyin*) and then the later form that more exclusively relied on Beijing pronunciations (*xin guoyin*). It also discusses a potential competitor to the new standard from the 1930s, *Latinxua sinwenz* (*ladinghua xin wenzi* 拉丁化新文字), an interdialectal orthographic system designed under Soviet influence.

**Tam, Gina Anne. "'Orbiting the Core': Politics and the Meaning of Dialect in Chinese Linguistics, 1927–1957." In *Special Issue: National Language, Dialect, and the Construction of Identity*. Edited by Kristin Stapleton. *Twentieth-Century China* 41.3 (2016): 280–303.**

Another illuminating contribution along with Liu 2016 to the same special issue, Tam's article dissects the notion that *fangyan* ("dialects") are dependent on (i.e., "orbit") the national standard language. Charting the course of understandings of language among intellectuals and the state between the 1930s and the 1950s, Tam shows how Soviet linguistics and republican-era dialect survey methods contributed to the conceptual subordination of dialects to the standard language.

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## Currents in Literature and Education

The foreign impact on language reform in China cannot be underestimated. Indigenous forces slowly drove both vernacular and Classical linguistic conventions into the 19th century, but as the century (and the Qing dynasty) came to an end, a flood of foreign influences burst onto the scene. There was a surge in changes to Chinese writing, not only lexical—with the influx of new vocabulary from the West, often via Japan—but also grammatical, with the Europeanization of many aspects of Chinese written expression. Gunn 1991 and Liu 1995 give magisterial accounts of the process and consequences of this unprecedented East-West clash of languages. An integral part of the movement toward vernacularization in China was a radical change in the kind of writing that was taught in schools and printed in literature. The account in Schwarcz 1986 of the May Fourth Movement serves less as a general introduction than as a detailed portrait of a set of key intellectuals and their ideas about cultural renewal in China. Culp 2019 shows how the new industrial publishing industry fostered the rise of a new intellectual culture that strongly influenced new language practices, while Hayford 1987 presents the central role the vernacular played in the expansion of literacy. Tsu 2010 sets forth the full complexity of debates about vernacularization—particularly with regard to script reform—while Shang 2014 questions the whole notion of vernacularization altogether, arguing that the May Fourth intellectuals who advocated the vernacular were not actually doing what they said they were doing. Finally, Snow 2004 presents an alternative modernity, showing the development of language in Hong Kong, a modern Chinese-speaking society in which spoken Mandarin plays only a marginal role.

**Culp, Robert Joseph. *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire to***

**Maoist State Socialism. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.**

This book discusses how the rise of industrial publishing enabled the development of a modern intellectual culture from the late Qing to the 1960s. Culp describes how a culture of intellectual leisure and “commensality” (e.g., banquets, poetry readings) was able to arise even within the context of capitalist, industrialized publishing. The profitability of textbooks pushed companies to behave in some ways as research institutions, with libraries and in-house writing and editorial staff. Under state directives, editors and writers also helped standardize pedagogy in the written vernacular, as detailed in chapter 3. Finally, Culp details the continuities in organization and demand for pedagogical books in the first two decades of the People’s Republic.

**Gunn, Edward M. *Rewriting Chinese: Style and Innovation in Twentieth-Century Chinese Prose*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.**

Gunn attempts, from the viewpoint of history and literary studies (and, to a lesser degree, linguistics), to account for the “upheavals” in Chinese writing that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, examining linguistic and stylistic innovations whose inspirations were both indigenous and foreign (particularly European and Japanese). This work is also notable for its 109-page appendix detailing numerous specific instances of “innovative constructions” in the Chinese language.

**Hayford, Charles W. “Literacy Movements in Modern China.” In *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. Edited by Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, 147–172. New York: Plenum Press, 1987.**

This chapter chronicles the development of ideologies of mass literacy and state- and nonstate-led efforts in literacy campaigns from the late Qing to the 1980s. Of particular interest is the changing meaning of literacy as political upheavals and major changes in the language took place.

**Liu, Lydia. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.**

This magisterial work, which examines the evolution of Chinese language and literature during its encounter with European languages and literatures (often by way of Japan), has become a modern classic. The seven appendixes of meticulously compiled equivalents among Chinese, Japanese, and various European languages could easily stand alone as an indispensable reference work.

**Schwarcz, Vera. *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.**

Based on documentary research, as well as interviews with surviving May Fourth participants conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Schwarcz’s account argues that the May Fourth Movement sought enlightenment in the vein of its European counterpart 150 years prior. Of particular interest in chapter 2 (pp. 55–94) is the discussion of the movement’s intellectual leaders’ arguments advocating that a vernacular literature be made accessible to the people.

**Shang, Wei. “Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issues of Vernaculars in Early Modern China.” In *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919*. Edited by Benjamin A. Elman, 254–301. Boston: Brill, 2014.**

Shang’s chapter deconstructs the claim of May Fourth intellectuals that they advocated the vernacular in order to bring language closer to the people. Rather, he argues that they in fact replaced “one cosmopolitan writing style . . . with another existing cosmopolitan style” (i.e., *wenyan* with *baihua*).



**Snow, Donald B. *Cantonese as Written Language: The Growth of a Written Chinese Vernacular*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004.**

This fascinating exploration focuses on contemporary Hong Kong's unusual language culture. Cantonese dominates as the spoken language in almost all areas of life. The formal written language, however, remains standard written Chinese, which is based on spoken Mandarin, a language that differs substantially from Cantonese not only in pronunciation, but also in vocabulary and even grammar. What makes Hong Kong unusual is that it has fostered a written form of its local language in certain areas—such as advertising, popular publications, and newspapers—almost wholly without state support.

**Tsu, Jing. *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.**

The second chapter of this engaging account of the various “contentions” surrounding the Chinese language in diasporic communities presents a lucid and dramatic narrative of the early 20th-century debates over language with particular regard to the writing system, for which there were dozens of proposals for reform.

**Zhong, Yurou. *Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Chinese Literary Modernity, 1916–1958*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.**

Building on Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) Zhong discusses script reform in 20th-century China, particularly the influence of phonocentrism—the privileging of speech (considered “real” language) at the expense of script (merely a simulacrum of speech). Taking seriously Derrida's contention that phonocentrism is a form of Western ethnocentrism, Zhong argues that such an ideology was ultimately defeated in China when the Chinese began to see their own written language's loose relationship with sound to be a feature rather than a defect.

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## **The Broader Regional Context: Vernacularization in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam**

The Chinese national vernacular arose amid similar trends in neighboring countries. Not only was the movement for language reform in China heavily influenced by developments in Japan, which had initiated its language reforms starting in the 1870s, the Japanese influence also made itself felt in Korea, which became a colony of the Japanese Empire in 1910, as well as in Vietnam, which fell under increasing French influence starting in the 1860s. These parallel and yet interdependent developments shared many similarities. First and foremost was the rejection of the Confucian canon and the Classical Chinese in which it was written, a language that, as Kornicki 2018 details, had served as an East Asian lingua franca for the better part of two thousand years. This development in each country represented a turning inwards toward indigenous language practices. The Japanese, while not entirely eliminating their use of Chinese characters, went through many debates over script reform before settling on a writing system that increased their use of their natively derived syllabic *kana* scripts, syllabaries now mainly used to indicate grammatical inflections, *kanji* (漢字 Chinese character) readings, and transliterations of foreign loanwords. This linguistic transition was a not altogether straightforward process, as shown in Clark 2009, Twine 1991, and Lee 1996. The Koreans, on the other hand, transitioned to a similarly mixed script that retained *hanja* (漢字 Chinese characters) while adding Korean grammatical inflections by interspersing indigenous *han'gŭl*, an alphabet created in the mid-15th century by committee in the royal court originally to indicate *hanja* readings. By the end of the 20th century, however, written Korean had eliminated characters altogether. Until the last few years, writing on Korean language practices was the preserve of an intrepid few works, such as Schmid 2002 and King 2004, but recent works by an emerging generation of scholars on the evolution of Korean language practices have significantly contributed to the field, especially Pieper 2017. The Vietnamese, too, eventually transitioned to their entirely Latin-alphabet-based *quốc ngữ* (國語) script, a confusing term that, unlike its Chinese, Japanese, and Korean equivalents, refers to the written language, not the spoken one. The evolution of language practices in Vietnam was intimately bound up with the experience of French missionizing and colonizing. The scholarship on language in Vietnam thus bears the influence of this colonial legacy, having arisen during the denouement of the Vietnam War and borne fruit starting in the late 1970s with landmark works

DeFrancis 1977 and Marr 1981.

**Clark, Paul H. *The Kokugo Revolution: Education, Identity, and Language Policy in Imperial Japan*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2009.**

A good introduction to the multifarious language practices that preceded the creation of a unified national language in Japan in the late 19th century, as well as the trends and the intellectual personalities infusing debates over language reform among different factions of intellectuals in the Meiji era (1868–1912).

**DeFrancis, John. *Colonialism and Language Policy in Viet Nam*. The Hague: Mouton, 1977.**

Despite a lack of formal training in Vietnamese, DeFrancis managed (with the help of language consultants) to produce an essential work on the evolution of Vietnamese language practices over the past thousand years. As with his sinological work, he brings his customary verve and clarity to this astonishing account of a country that fully transitioned from a Chinese-character-based script to the Latin alphabet—something DeFrancis wished had happened in China.

**King, Ross. “Western Protestant Missionaries and the Origins of Korean Language Modernization.” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 11.3 (2004): 7–38.**

King argues in this article that, contrary to historical understandings hitherto, Western missionaries engaged in linguistic research did indeed have an impact on later language reforms in Korea. This account complements the discussion of the influence of Western missionaries at work in China in Kaske 2008 and Tam 2020 (both cited in General Overviews).

**Kornicki, Peter F. *Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

Expanding on a series of lectures at Cambridge, this book starts by explaining the dominance of Classical Chinese, a language that had become commonly used among literati throughout East Asia by the 8th century. Kornicki shows how readers in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, as well as the Inner Asian Tangut and Khitan empires, dealt with a language that was so unlike their own, setting the stage for later developments in vernacularization.

**Lee, Yeounsuk. *The Ideology of Kokugo: Nationalizing Language in Modern Japan*. Translated by Maki Hirano Hubbard. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996.**

In this English translation of a work originally published in Japanese, Lee brings a perspicaciously skeptical eye to conventional understandings of Japan's national language, arguing that *kokugo* (the national language) arose in the late 19th century as ideologically concomitant with nation building by the new Meiji regime.

**Marr, David G. *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.**

A US intelligence officer stationed in Vietnam in the early 1960s, Marr was spurred by his encounter with North Vietnamese ideological cohesiveness to understand the social changes that had occurred earlier in the century. Chapter 4 focuses on language, chronicling French attempts to break the hegemony of Classical Chinese by promoting *quốc ngữ*, the rise of a popular press, and the effect of increasingly widespread literacy on mass political mobilization.

**Pieper, Daniel Oliver. "Korean as a Transitional Literacy: Language Education, Curricularization, and the Vernacular-Cosmopolitan Interface in Early Modern Korea, 1895–1925." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2017.**

This is one of the few comprehensive accounts of language reform in Korea that is on par with that of Kaske 2008 for China, showing how changes in Korean language practices occurred in literature, translation, and lexicography, amid ideological debates heavily influenced by Japan.

**Schmid, Andre. *Korea between Empires, 1895–1919*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.**

The second chapter of this book centers on the rise of a vernacular press in Korea, a key component of the development of nationalist thought. The precipitating event for Schmid is China's defeat in 1895 in the First Sino-Japanese War, which heralded the decline of Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula and growing Japanese encroachments into Korea's political life.

**Twine, Nanette. *Language and the Modern State: The Reform of Written Japanese*. New York: Routledge, 1991.**

Focusing on the years between 1895 and 1946, Twine argues that the momentum to create a uniform national language, meant to be learned by the masses, was fueled by the imperatives of nationalization and industrialization—in a word, modernization. Mobilization of the masses was only possible, she writes, in a society in which the bulk of the people were able to communicate with one another, especially through text.

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