Barbarians Remixed: Mandarin Mayem

Jeremiah: Welcome to another episode of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne, and I'm here with my co-host David Moser.

Today we're going to talk about language, specifically about what we mean by Mandarin. One way to look at this is there are an estimated 130 non-Han languages spoken among China's 55 designated ethnic groups, and these tongues are disappearing rapidly. That's not including all the different forms of the Chinese language that have been spoken by groups that identify as Han and are often called dialects in China.

By 2050, there's a target to have Putonghua or Mandarin spoken by all Chinese. This is certainly an ambitious target and forces us to ask: what's the purpose of Mandarin? Is it a way for all the different groups that comprise the Chinese nation to communicate with each other, or is it meant to replace all of the diverse languages of China?

David, what is Mandarin supposed to accomplish? Is this a language that's supposed to unify the people so that everyone will speak Mandarin as their first language? Or is this so a guy from Guangdong, a guy from Shanghai, and a guy from Dongbei walk into a bar, and when they tell a joke, everyone will laugh at the same time?

David: The first thing we need to do is be more precise in our terminology. We very sloppily use the word "Mandarin" as if it's synonymous with Putonghua. There's nothing to be done about that—people are used to it now. They'll say Mandarin when they really mean the standard language, Putonghua. But actually, Mandarin originally had another meaning: it was the common language during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Later on, the Mandarin dialects refer to what they call the northern dialects. So that group of different languages and speech forms is called Mandarin. Putonghua is a special kind of language that is, to some extent, based upon the phonology of Beijing, and we'll get into that. It overlaps enough with Mandarin that it's okay to be sloppy about it and say we're all speaking Mandarin or Putonghua interchangeably.

But I think for this podcast, we should be careful not to just blend the two because that's part of the problem. This thing called Mandarin is spoken worldwide and even used as the technical term for the common language in places like Singapore, where it's just called Mandarin. The overlap between Taiwan's Guoyu, which we'll talk about, Singapore Mandarin, and the PRC's Putonghua is considerable. So I think it's okay to be sloppy occasionally with the terminology because we're really talking about the language that most Chinese can understand. But I just want to point that out to begin with.

Let me give you a basic overview of the situation in China. It's a huge country, basically the size of the United States, but with seven language groups that are Han dialects: Wu, Gan, Xiang,

Minnanhua (which I think of as Taiwanhua or Fujianhua), Cantonese, and Kejiahua, which is Hakka. But each of these seven language groups is divided into numerous sub-varieties with very unclear and shifting boundaries.

If you want some idea of what we're talking about, think of the color green. If you point to things in your environment that would be classified as green, you have an amazing variety of different colors, hues, and intensities. The same is true with dialects. They may fall under this category, but you travel a few hundred miles away and they can be a very different color, so to speak.

When the Republican government, after the fall of the Qing, surveyed the linguistic landscape, they realized there was quite a daunting problem because if they wanted to unify the language, which form of speech would it be? Some of these speech forms had speaking populations the size of a European country, so there was no obvious solution to the problem.

This problem of the dialects is that the distinction between a dialect and a language is most often a political one. There's an old saying that a language is just a dialect with a navy—or sometimes the original version was "a language is just a dialect with an army and a navy." The main point is, when we say what is a common language, what counts as a language, the linguistic criterion is simply mutual intelligibility. Can you basically understand what the other person is saying? If you can understand 90% of what your interlocutor is saying, you're probably speaking the same language.

The linguist and writer John DeFrancis used to say, asking the question "do you speak Chinese?" is akin to asking "do you speak Romance?" Because some of those languages are as different—the difference between Beijing Hua and Guangdong Hua is as different as between French and Italian, if not greater.

Jeremiah: I think this divide between what's a language and what's a dialect is really fascinating because if you talk to most people in China, they'll tell you China has so many dialects. The term "language" is used, even somewhat reluctantly, to describe some of the non-Han spoken languages, whereas within the Han group, there are dialects as opposed to languages. It's a political distinction.

David: Exactly. When we talk about politics, this is exactly what the headache was when language policy under the Republican era started to try and decide on what would be a common language.

Jeremiah: You brought up a really good point. In the 20th century, you had this state-building or nation-building project that comes out of the end of the Qing Empire and the rise of new forms of organization—notably the nation-state. Early state builders in the Republic of China and then their successors in the People's Republic of China are looking at the situation within the country. As you said, they're seeing all these very large groups that have their own distinctive regional cultures, regional identities, and regional languages. So what's a way to bring the country or nation together to overcome Sun Yat-sen's famous "400 million grains of sand" and organize them into one cohesive unit?

David: They can't be blamed for thinking that language unification would be one of the tasks of nation building because when they looked at the model of European nation-states, it seemed like from their vantage point, this pattern of one country, one people, one language was the natural way of organizing a modern country. They sort of lacked the specific details of those linguistic situations—it was never quite that simple.

But from their standpoint, the European countries that had been stomping all over them and stealing their lands seemed to have this in common, so this became their quest. This language unification movement didn't just start after the Qing. Some late Qing scholars had studied in Japan and were very impressed by the way the Japanese had unified their language in the face of many dialects.

They even borrowed the word that Chiang Kai-shek used, and we still use, for guoyu—a national language—from the Japanese koku-go. So this idea of unifying the languages had been a long-term agenda, a long-term goal.

That's why you have to go back to the struggles at the beginning of the Republican era. The first guoyu that they came up with was a hybrid form of language that involved pronunciations from both North and South and was a language that nobody actually spoke. It was a constructed language, and the linguist Zhao Yanrin, whose job it was to record the sounds for this language, once joked that for many years he was the sole speaker of this language that was supposed to be the common language.

So, Putonghua—what is it? I think if you just read the definition you can get a sense of what a Frankensteinian construct it is. This is the definition from 1955 when they held the Symposium on the Standardization of Modern Chinese, and this is the definition of Putonghua that still is basically the standard definition:

"Putonghua is the standard form of modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as the norm of pronunciation and Northern dialects as its base dialect and looking to exemplary modern works in Baihua, the vernacular literary language, for its grammatical norms."

You don't have to be a linguist to hear that and realize that this is a pieced-together language that is not merely the language of a certain elite group of speakers. If you say, "What kind of French are you learning in French class?" they'll say, "Well, that's easy. It's just the way they speak in Paris." But if you ask, "What kind of Chinese are we learning in our language classes?" the answer is not "Well, just the way they speak in Beijing." It is decidedly not that. And that's what confuses a lot of people, I think.

It is not a previously existing natural standard. It's a form of language that was actually debated and fixed by committees of linguists over many decades and is now the constitutionally mandated form of speech. The Ministry of Culture says that there are still as many as 400 million people who still can't adequately speak this language that is supposed to be the common language.

So you can see the problems that face the language reformers.

Jeremiah: So when my Beijing friends tell me, "Yeah, our Mandarin is perfect because we're from Beijing," maybe it's not quite as clear-cut as that.

David: No, it's not that simple at all.

Jeremiah: Why don't we test this? I'm going to go and find a somewhat random speaker of Northern Mandarin and let's see if there are some differences here between Putonghua as defined by the Ministry of Culture and the Chinese educational system and the Northern language or Northern dialect.

My somewhat random test subject is somebody who has a great deal of media training. This is Zhang Yajun, and so I'm going to ask Yajun to step up to the microphone and talk to David a little bit to test some of these differences between northern Chinese and Putonghua.

David: Hi, hello random person. You look very familiar for a random person.

Yajun: I know, he just grabbed me straight out.

David: That's okay. You're a good sport. Thank you for doing this. So you are a native speaker. This question is very important because if you pronounce a character with the wrong tone, you can be fined as much as 50 kuai at CCTV if you're an announcer. So what I want you to do is just very slowly pronounce for us the word that in Chinese would be the equivalent of "because."

Yajun: Yinwei 因为

David: Say it again. So I hear that the wei 为 is second tone. Is that right? That's Northern Mandarin. That's also beijing-hua. The actual putong hua citation version of that word in 90% of the dictionaries that you will see has the second character pronounced with fourth tone as Yinwei 因为.

Yajun: Yinwei 因为... Sure.

David: Yeah, well if you ask most Chinese, they're very unsure about it just like you.

Yajun: I was quite sure it's Yinwei 因为 or something here. Now I'm not so sure and I don't want to lose 50 kuai.

David: Don't worry, there are many examples like that and you are not actually wrong. This is an artificial standard that has been imposed and not everyone actually follows it. For example, how do you say the word for "complicated" in Chinese?

Yajun: For complicated... fuza 复杂

David: Okay, very good. Some people say 复杂, some people say 复杂. Actually both are okay, but one of them is Putonghua 普通话 and the other isn't.

Yajun: I think normally I would say Fuza 复杂

David: No, you're correct. That is the correct Putonghua pronunciation. We will not fine you 50 grand for that. Okay, thank you very much, Yajun! You're a good sport.

Yajun: Such a relief. My plan to be the random test object.

Jeremiah: Well, I do want to thank Yajun for her help. I promise this is not going to turn into a standard segment here on Barbarians at the Gate called "Professor Moser Mocks a Chinese Person's Spoken Mandarin"—although that would be fun.

So now that we've complicated just what Mandarin or Putonghua is and is not, I think we need to get into an even trickier subject. What is it supposed to do? Is Putonghua designed to make it easier for people of different language groups or dialects, whatever you want to call them, to communicate? Does it make it easier for someone from Guangzhou to come to Beijing and have a conversation? Or is it to replace all of these different spoken forms of communication? And David, has that ever really been decided? Has it ever been clear as to what the purpose of Mandarin or Putonghua is supposed to be?

David: Well, that's exactly the problem. Now, the Republican reformers, Chiang Kai-shek and his group, they were very clear. They wanted a national standard and they wanted all the other dialects to go away. The CCP were more tolerant and more open to diversity and also to respecting the local groups. So they started out, I think, fairly clear that this was meant to be a form of speech that could be used as a common language, but that the local dialects or the different forms of speech could continue alongside Putonghua. They just wanted to have a communication medium that worked.

But I want to quote something from a scholar, a person named Li Jinxi, who was a mentor of Mao Zedong and also a great language reformer. This is a quote from him when they were formulating what the national language would be. He said, "We mean by national language a sort of universal language which all the people use to express their ideas. Everyone may speak it, but everyone doesn't have to speak it. Although everyone doesn't have to speak it, we want all the people to be able to speak it. For all are Chinese and it should not be that they cannot speak Chinese when they see each other."

So that may sound a little confusing to you, but it's very clear that he's saying everyone must be able to speak it, but they don't have to speak it. He means that you can in daily life use your local dialect, but you have to learn to speak this language. But the confusion is, he says they should all speak this because otherwise when they meet, how can we say they cannot even speak Chinese? Well, that's precisely the problem. What counts as Chinese? Don't these dialects count as Chinese?

I want to read one more example from the People's Daily in 1955, once they had already instantiated the Putonghua policy. The title of the editorial was "Strive to Promote the Reform of the Chinese Script, the Spread of Putonghua." It said: "We should vigorously advocate the importance of the spread of Putonghua so that people know correctly the relationship between dialects and Putonghua. Putonghua serves the people of the whole country and dialects serve the people of an area. To spread Putonghua does not mean to wipe out the dialects artificially, but to reduce the scope of dialect use progressively. This is in line with the objective laws of social progress. Dialects are to exist side by side with Putonghua for quite a long period, but the use of Putonghua must be expanded constantly."

And there you have it, essentially the policy today, which is they don't have a clear dividing line. So they do have this goal of having everyone be able to speak Putonghua by 2050. But I think you can see that their agenda is that the dialects should gradually die out. And I think that's the thing that worries some people—that some speakers of these dialects, especially the prestige ones or the ones that have strong cultural associations, feel a little bit threatened by it.

Jeremiah: That brings us to the issues around Cantonese. There's been pushback from regions in China and particularly in Guangdong. But if you want to extend that as well, Cantonese identity being part of Hong Kong culture, Hong Kong identity. How does Cantonese as one of these prestige dialects fit into this?

David: You'll notice that the Cantonese language played a big starring role in some of the protests, especially in the linguistic aspects, the slogans, the sort of shibboleth of whether or not you were a Cantonese speaker or a speaker of Putonghua or Mandarin. So this is a very sensitive cultural issue, and especially with Cantonese. Cantonese is very special in a way that some of these other speech forms are not.

Cantonese is embedded in a southern culture that represents probably the only real challenge to the hegemony of the northern culture and language group. It has a very strong traditional culture. There's Cantonese opera—there are many regional forms, but Yueju is probably the most outstanding one. Cantonese cuisine, of course, is world cuisine.

And it's the language of Cantopop, Kung Fu movies, and so much more. It's a very strong culture. It's also linguistically interesting because Cantonese is really the only Han speech form that actually has its own written form, which is to say it has a special character set especially to represent the morphemes and speech sounds of Cantonese. So you can actually—there are books in Cantonese and you can still sometimes find film magazines or gossip magazines or comic books in Cantonese in Hong Kong. Not in mainland China, but in Hong Kong. You just look at these publications and you see these strange characters with the mouth radical, the kouzi pang there. And that's actually Cantonese.

Cantonese people feel very strongly, very culturally attached to the language. And there's so much culture, music, lore that they feel threatened by the intrusion of Mandarin and Putonghua, especially in Hong Kong. In 2010 in the PRC, they tried to take, or they did in fact take, a lot of Cantonese programming off the air, off the TV and radio. And there were actually riots in the streets.

In Guangdong province, thousands of people, tens of thousands of people took to the streets protesting the atrophy or the erosion of Cantonese language in their popular media, which then spread to Hong Kong. And as Putonghua and the influx of mainland scholars and professionals into Hong Kong continues, Cantonese is threatened. In academia and the school system, Cantonese is somewhat eroding and dying out in favor of Mandarin. So it's a very sensitive issue. And if there's any dialect that's going to fight to the last morpheme, it's Cantonese. They're not going to give up that dialect anytime soon.

Jeremiah: The controversy over Cantonese language programming, I think, is also reflective of the role that media and the administrative organs that oversee media have played in trying to promulgate a standardized Putonghua on the airwaves, movie theaters, and now internet streams. That's definitely accelerated the process of acculturation of Mandarin beginning in the 1980s in a way that you wouldn't have seen before that in the 50s, 60s and 70s. The State Administration for Radio, Film and Television, which I think now has an even longer name—what's been their policy and has it always been applied consistently?

David: I don't want to get into the weeds with this because there are lots of laws that have come up and been passed and then ignored and then revised. But basically the SARF, or now it's SAPPRFT or something—the State Administration of Press Publications, Radio, Film and Television—have passed several laws mandating Putonghua as the official language of state media, meaning that they strongly discourage any use of dialect or any other non-standard forms of the language, even accents.

CCTV and CGTN producers and announcers and anchors all have to have very standard accents, and they sometimes have to go through training to ensure that, as we just saw with Yajun, there can be discrepancies. But the problem is that dialects are hard to kill. They're hard to erase because they're such a part of Chinese culture.

They're fun, they're interesting. There's a lot of Chinese lore and culture embedded in them. And how can you do a CCTV xiaopin, a skit on the Spring Festival, without a little local regional accent or fangyan? Or how can you do a xiang sheng, a crosstalk routine, without throwing in a little regional dialect? So it's very hard to enforce these rulings. And people will sometimes put out bootleg digital material dubbed into the local dialects because they sell. People would rather hear it in their local dialect.

A thing you would find interesting is the huge number of revolutionary films portraying all of the major battles and the forming of the party, the forming of the government, all the fights between the nationalists and so forth, all depicted on film. And of course, all the actors who play Chiang Kai-shek and Chairman Mao and everything have to be played by actor lookalikes. And the policy here has varied and has been very uneven.

The standard person who portrays Chairman Mao is this guy named Tang Guoqiang, who basically is a speaker of Mandarin. So they prefer to have Chairman Mao speak in these movies with a standard Mandarin accent, a standard Northern accent, and not the very strong Hunanese accent that we know he actually spoke. So this would be like doing a biopic of somebody like

George Bush and having him sound like an NPR announcer. You'd say, "Whoa!" It would be received with shock, but not awe.

But other movies—there was a Deng Xiaoping biopic a few years ago in which the actor spoke in Sichuan dialect, pretty unabashed Sichuan dialect throughout. There's also the internet, which is very hard to police in this regard. And so there's all kinds of unauthorized dialect use all throughout it. And there are even places where there are domains like Sichuan rap culture, where they actually prefer using the Sichuan dialect because it has an authenticity and a sort of edginess that the Putonghua wouldn't have. And it's very hard to erase all of that.

So I think this is a battle, a sort of linguistic battle that will go on for some time to come.

Jeremiah: One other front in that battle is of course the educational system and the standardization of Putonghua across levels of education. It's not uncommon—and I've seen this a lot especially in some of the more frontier areas like Yunnan, Qinghai, places like that—but you see a lot of signs around the school reminding students and perhaps the teachers to speak Putonghua at school. And it reminds us just how powerful the schools are in creating a culture of Putonghua.

One other thing I've noticed when I travel a lot is you go to some of these more remote villages and if you want to speak to somebody you find somebody who's 12 or 13 years old because they've been brought up in a school system where they speak Putonghua with their teachers. So if a lot of the other people in the village are members of one of the ethnic nationalities, their language isn't even Chinese. Or if they speak a local variation of Chinese, the kids often, because of the school system, speak a version of standard Putonghua.

David: Yeah, the educational system obviously is one of the most important influences here, as is the media, the mass media. I mean, kids tend to grow up with television and radio and internet, and they begin to speak like the people that they're watching on TV rather than their parents. But it's a long slog, and in some areas where the dialect usage is quite prominent, the kids become bilingual, basically.

But it's interesting to notice that every year there's at least one Putonghua promotion week where they try to push, as you say, the Putonghua in the schools and in daily life. And there are all kinds of promotional banners you can see. And if you look at these, it is very interesting. I'll just read three of them that I encountered.

So the first one is: ai guoqi, ai guoge, shuo putonghua 爱国旗,爱国歌,说普通话—"love the national flag, sing the national anthem, speak Putonghua." The second one I noticed was: Wo shi zhongguo wa, wo ai shuo putonghua 我是中国娃,我爱说普通话—"I'm a China child, I love to speak Putonghua." And the third one is: dà lì tuì guáng Putonghua, zēngqiáng zhōnghuǎo mín zu níng jù lì 大力推广普通话，增强中华民族凝聚力—"vigorously promote Putonghua, strengthen the cohesiveness of the Chinese nation."

So if you look at these three as examples, it's really about more than just mutual communication and facilitating communication between the various peoples of China. It's about nation building. It's about patriotism. It's about unity, it's about national unity, because there's this notion that if we all speak one common language, that our thinking and our way of behaving and our mutual understanding will be increased. And I think that's the hidden—it's not even hidden, it's nakedly right there. The agenda is to build cohesiveness, build national unity and patriotism.

Jeremiah: Can a shared language imply a shared vision for society?

David: Yeah, that's a question I ask at the end of my book. And I think it's a wonderful dream they have. It's a very authoritarian dream that dates back to the beginning of this agenda after the fall of the Qing. But I think they may be fooling themselves. We come from the United States, which is a country where we have local regional accents, but we really don't have anything like a different language, a dialect that is so far apart that it's another form of speech. And yet, the one thing we really lack is political and ideological unity, even though we understand every word we say.

So I think China is going to find out that even if they realize this goal in 2050 or whenever they're going to realize it, there's still going to be divisions, schisms, and inter-country squabbling on all sorts of things. It's a pipe dream.

Jeremiah: Well, if you're interested in reading more about this, and I'm going to recommend this book because David is too modest to do so, David goes into great detail on all of these issues in his book, *A Billion Voices: China's Search for a Common Language*, which is available on Kindle. I highly recommend it. It's a really great introduction to all of these issues. David, you're also reading a book by a scholar named Gina Tam on language.

David: Yes, I can't recommend this book too strongly. Gina Ann Tam's book is called *Dialect and Nationalism in China*. It's written so well. I think it's really the definitive book on this particular subject that we've been covering—dialects. It's a real substantial piece of scholarship, very readable, very accessible, and it traces the areas that we've been discussing in this podcast: how the academics, the language planners, the intellectuals in the 20th century, as well as Chiang Kai-shek, the CCP struggled with these competing strategies for dealing with fangyan, for dialects.

She just does a great job of capturing this tension between these notions of how fangyan should be conceptualized and incorporated into the Chinese identity, since that's what it's all about. It's like there's a search for the Chinese identity. Especially important for our discussion is how the language policies are pushing for the provincial predominance of Putonghua, which is what we just mentioned, and not without considerable pushback.

So I know from writing my own book, it's really hard to explain the intricacies of Chinese dialects and their relationship to the script and the connection between language, culture and all these aspects. But she does an amazing job. She's a natural explainer. Let's put it that way. I recommend it very highly. It's a great book. I think it's the standard. For a long time, it will be the source for this topic.

Jeremiah: Thank you, David. Thanks for the recommendation. We'll put links to David's book and also Gina Tam's book in our show notes as well. Well, thank you for spending time with us. David, as always, it's good to see you. Stay safe and enjoy Oklahoma.

David: Oklahoma is okay. Did you know that?

Jeremiah: And on that note, thank you for joining us at Barbarians at the Gate, home of good Chinese history information and dad jokes.

Featured Books:

- *A Billion Voices: China's Search for a Common Language* by David Moser (Penguin, 2016)
- *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* by Gina Anne Tam (Cambridge University Press, 2020)