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HOKKIEN (MIN)

Hilary Chappell

Pre-publication version

The Min dialects of China are located in the southeastern coastal province of Fujian with incursions into Guangdong. They represent a diverse group of languages that tend not to be mutually comprehensible among their major subdivisions, with Min speakers comprising about 4 percent to 5 percent of China’s population. Outside of China, the languages belonging in particular to the subgroup of Southern Min are better known as *Hokkien*.

Sociocultural Origins

Min is one of the most conservative branches of the Sinitic or Chinese languages. Its ancestor probably split off from Archaic Chinese early in the first millennium, that is, during the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). This would account for many of the archaic features preserved in Min dialects that are no longer used in standard Mandarin with the same sense—including lexical items such as *tiaⁿ³* 鼎 originally pertaining to a “three-legged cooking vessel,” but now the common name for any cooking pot, *bak⁸-chiu¹* 目珠 “eye” (with respect to just the first character in this instance), and *bin⁷* 面 “face”—whereas Mandarin has replaced these terms respectively by *guo¹* 鍋 “wok,” *yan³jing¹* 眼睛 “eye,” and *lian³* 臉 “face.” A striking contrast between literary and colloquial pronunciations is an equally well-known phenomenon for Min, known as *wen bai yi du* in standard Chinese. For example, the character 共 has *kā* as its colloquial pronunciation but *kiōng* as its literary or reading pronunciation in Taiwanese Hokkien (Lian Jinfa 2001).

Regarding the history of the Min dialects, Fujian Province appears to have been settled, and sinicized, at a much later period than other parts of southern China due to its remoteness and inaccessibility. The first major migration occurred during the third century, from (modern-day) Jiangxi in the west and Zhejiang in the north, while the second major migration occurred during the seventh century, moving down the coast from the same starting points (Bielenstein 1959). The main formation period for Min thus took place during the Tang dynasty (618–907), with it emerging as an identifiable dialect group by the time of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127).

During the Song dynasty, the Min continued to spread southward along the coast to Chaozhou (Teochiu) and Shantou (Swatow) areas in northeastern Guangdong, even settling as far south as the Leizhou Peninsula in this province. Beginning in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1912), Min speakers began to migrate to Hainan Island and to Taiwan from southern Fujian, in other words, from the seventeenth century onward. More specifically, the variety of Southern Min, or Hokkien, spoken in Taiwan evolved from a fusion and neutralization of the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou dialects of Fujian Province.

The basic division for Min languages is between Inland (or Western) Min and Coastal (or Eastern) Min (see Norman 1988, 1991). This classification supersedes an earlier one with a simpler division into Northern and Southern Min.

Inland Min

Northwestern: Jian dialects

Far Western: Shaowu, Jingle

Central: Yong'an

Coastal Min

Northeastern: Fuzhou, Fu'an

Puxian: Putian

Southern: Xiamen (Amoy), Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Taiwanese, Chaozhou (Teochiu),

Shantou, Hainanese

Examples of Hokkien use Taiwanese Southern Min as the representative variety, with examples transcribed using the revised Church romanization system.

Territorial Extension to Taiwan and Southeast Asia

Apart from the use of Hokkien as a major language in Taiwan, it is spoken in many overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. For example, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines all have sizeable communities of Southern Min speakers, including principally the dialect of Chaozhou (Teochiu). The Hokkien dialects are far less common, however, in the Americas, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, where the Cantonese dialects predominate among the established Chinese communities (Wurm and Li Rong 1988, Maps B16a and 16b).

While the Min dialect group is one of the smallest for continental China, comprising only 4 to 5 percent of speakers of Sinitic languages, it is the mother tongue for 72 percent of the population in Taiwan (approximately sixteen million out of twenty-two million people). In total, there are claimed to be 52.5 million speakers for all the Min dialects in China and Taiwan (Wurm and Li Rong 1988, Map B-12), and over sixty-two million if we include

speakers in Southeast Asia. With respect to just the Southern Min dialects, Benjamin T'sou (1988) estimates there are twenty million speakers in Fujian and Guangdong provinces, compared with an estimated sixteen million in Taiwan and another nine million in the Indo-Pacific Basin, including, however, second-language speakers in the latter case.

Characteristics with Reference to Other Major Chinese Languages

Southern Min shows the basic word order of subject-verb-(object), as do most Chinese languages. Several markers for aspect (perfective and imperfective types) precede, rather than follow, the verb in Hokkien, the latter being generally the case for most other Chinese languages that use suffixes. Passive, causative, and dative functions are typically coded by either the marker *khit*⁴ 乞 or the marker *hō*⁷ 與, depending on the dialect area, and thus not by either *bèi* 被 or *gěi* 給, as in Mandarin. Gender is distinguished for a subset of animate nouns (in particular, domestic animals, including poultry) by means of the suffix *-kang*¹ 公 for the male of the species and the suffix *-bu*² 母 for a reproductive female of the species—for example, *ti*¹-*kang*¹ 猪公 “boar” and *ti*¹-*bu*² 猪母 “a sow that has produced a litter.” Note that this feature is shared with Hakka and Cantonese, while Mandarin makes use of prefixes in this function.

Number can be explicitly coded by means of plural classifiers (CLF), such as *kua*² in *chit*⁸ *kua*² *lang*⁵ 一 寡儂 (one-CLF-people) “some people” or by plural adverbs such as *long*² 攏 “all.” The plural pronouns all end in the suffix *-n*, which may represent a trace of *lang*⁵ 儂 “person, people.” Note, however, that this does not occur elsewhere in the lexicon as a plural marker, unlike Mandarin *-men* 們, which is used for certain animate nouns. There is also an inclusive-exclusive distinction for first-person plural. Compare the singular and plural forms of the Southern Min pronominal paradigm: *gua*² 我 ‘1SG’, *li*² 你 ‘2SG’, and *yi*¹ 伊 ‘3SG’

*guan*² 阮 ‘1PL_{exc}’, *lan*² 咱 ‘1PL_{inc}’, *lin*² 恁 ‘2PL’ and, *yin*¹ 伊 因 ‘3PL’

Manifestation in Literary, Musical, and Cultural Forms

Southern Min is more fortunate than other nonstandard Chinese languages, such as Cantonese and Hakka, in having preserved a much longer history of written works. Documents written in Min go back to the sixteenth century and include plays, *nanyin* 南音 (opera), and liturgical material. Most of these reflect Southern Min dialects, and include versions of the popular Ming dynasty (1368–1644) play, *Li jing ji* 荔镜记 (Romance of the Litchi Mirror, 1566), written in a mixture of the Quanzhou and Chaozhou dialects of Southern Min. Other pedagogical and religious materials from the same period have been traced to the Philippines. These include a translation into Southern Min of the *Doctrina Christiana* (Christian Doctrine) (1597–1605), two Southern Min–Spanish dictionaries, *Dictionarium Sino-Hispanicum* (Chinese-Spanish Dictionary)(c. 1604) and *Bocabulario de lengua sangleya* (Lexicon of the Sangley Language) (c. 1617), and an early grammar of a Southern Min dialect, *Arte de la lengua chiō-chiu* (Grammar of the Chiō-chiu Language) (1620), written by Spanish missionaries in collaboration with native speakers in Manila and Cebu. Chinese communities in these locations were set up in the wake of established trade routes between southern Fujian and the Philippines.

The writing system used for Southern Min is based on the same set of characters used for Mandarin, the language of education and most official domains. However, typical of this genre is the use of homophonous characters from the standard written language to represent native colloquial words that are unique to Southern Min and for which no ready-made forms are available. For example, 卜 *beh*⁴ “want” is represented by a character that means “to practice divination” in standard forms of Chinese. Southern Min was not committed to

alphabetic writing until the introduction in the nineteenth century of the Church romanization system, mainly used in Christian religious circles.

Hokkien as a Solidarity Marker in Taiwan

The demotic characters mentioned above were not widely used, except among the semiliterate authors of folk ballads, before an upsurge of interest in Hokkien arose following the change of the political situation in Taiwan in the late 1980s (Huang Shuanfan 1993). Prior to the lifting of martial law in July 1987, Hokkien had in fact been heavily restricted in official domains such as those of education and the media from the mid-1950s onwards.

Hence, a movement to standardize the writing system in Taiwan is underway, given that Southern Min has been revived as an officially sanctioned medium of communication in certain areas, including parliament, health care, and some sectors of the education system. Since 2001, for example, it has become possible in certain regions of Taiwan to take a ‘local language’ as an elective subject, particularly at the primary school level (Klöter 2005). For many Taiwanese for whom it is their mother tongue, the use of Hokkien increasingly serves as a marker of solidarity, tantamount to a badge of identity as a Taiwanese. In addition to the graphic representation in Chinese characters, there are two major competing romanization systems: (1) *peh⁸-oe⁷-ji⁷* “vernacular writing,” based on the Church romanization system; and (2) *Taiwan minnanyu yinbiao xitong* (Taiwanese Southern Min Spelling System). No consensus has been reached yet as to which system is to be adopted for the education system and in official domains. In mainland China, dialect writing has no status, given that *putonghua*, or standard Mandarin, is being promoted as the common form of both spoken and written communication.

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