CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN TAIWAN

Tradition or New Directions?

1. INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to discuss Taiwan without reference to China. China constitutes a vast land mass in east Asia, consisting of 3,745,296 square miles [9,671,725 km²], with a population in excess of 1 billion people, bounded on the north by Russia, on the west and south by India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and on the east by the South China sea, the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea and the Korean Peninsula. Taiwan is an island less than a hundred miles off the coast of China, [150 km] roughly between Hong Kong to the South and Shanghai to the north. It consists of 13,892 square miles [35,980 km²] (about the size of Ireland, Latvia, Sri Lanka, Tasmania, Togo, or West Virginia in the United States) with a population of roughly 22,113,250. On its south lies the Philippines, on its north lies Japan, and to the east is the Pacific Ocean. (See Appendix A, Figure 7.)

2. THE HISTORY—IN CHINA

By way of introduction, this historical summary covers some 3500 years and, therefore, can only cover the highlights pertaining to language planning over that long time. In the modern era (crudely defined as the 20th century), there are two massive discontinuities, the first marking the end of the nearly three-thousand years of dynastic rule in China (1911), the second stemming from the removal of the Republic of China from mainland China (1949). In terms of the long history of the Chinese language, and language planning, these are very brief periods—each only about 50 years long—but the social, political, and economic discontinuities of these brief periods were monumental, and while there is a continuity in language planning, as this section attempts to suggest, the driving forces underlying language planning are strikingly different.

Thus, language planning has a long history in China. The major language in China has long been Chinese, but Chinese consists of hundreds of spoken dialects, some mutually unintelligible. The dialects are classified into seven groups, largely on the basis of phonological evidence: Mandarin (730 million speakers—72%), language:Wù (77 million speakers—8.5%), Mǐn (Northern and Southern Mǐn—Mǐn Běi, 10 million speakers; Mǐn Nán, 45 million speakers—5%), Yuè (Cantonese, 54
million speakers—5%), Xiāng (36 million speakers—4%), Kèjiā (or Hakka, 27 million speakers—3%), Gān (20 million speakers—2.5%). In addition, there are some fifty-five minority languages in China, deriving from Altaic, Tibeto-Burman, Tai, and Hmong-Mien origins—roughly 10 per cent of the total population (Li 1992).

Historically, the language planning that has occurred in China has largely concerned the writing system, which consists of individual ideographic characters (hanzi), each always pronounced as a single syllable, each syllable largely equivalent to a single morpheme. (This is not to deny the existence of words consisting of two or more syllables or characters.) A fully developed writing system first appeared in the late Shang Dynasty (14th to 11th century BCE), and it has been an object of language planning efforts since the first serious effort by the Emperor Cheng in the Chin Dynasty (221-207 BCE). Emperor Cheng’s efforts were preceded by those of Confucius (551-479 BCE) who tried through his work as a teacher to promote the standardisation of the pronunciation of Chinese (ya-yen); however, his efforts were neither organised nor official. In 471-499 CE, Emperor Hsiao-Wen of the Wei Dynasty undertook an intensive official program of assimilation, declaring that the Northern dialect (Mandarin) was the language of the country and the court and ordering that it should be taught in schools. Unfortunately, this plan discriminated against the minorities (including the Emperor’s own ethnic group). The publication of the Chung-Yuen Yin-Yun (‘Phonology of the Central Land’—a standard rhyming dictionary) in 1324 CE by Chou De-Ching was the next important effort to standardise Mandarin. This dictionary was compiled on the basis of spoken pronunciation rather than reading pronunciation. The 19 vowel classes recorded were very close to modern Mandarin. A major issue in Chinese has always been the tone system; tones were split into upper (Yin) and lower (Yang) series. The number of tones in various dialects of Chinese differ appreciably: Mandarin—4 tones; Kèjia (Hakka)—6 tones; Wú—7 tones; Min (Amoy)—7 tones; Cantonese—9 tones. The Chung-Yuen Yin-Yun recorded four tones, corresponding exactly to contemporary Mandarin. This volume promoted a standard pronunciation, at least in the literary circle of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1367 CE).

The third emperor of the Ch’ing Dynasty, Yung-Cheng, in 1728, decreed the establishment of a governmental institution, Cheng-Yin Shu-Yuen (College for Standard Pronunciation), intended to train officials in the language of the court (i.e., Mandarin [guanhuá—‘official speech’]), but the school was not successful and was gradually abandoned in the middle decades of the Ch’ing Dynasty. However, the pronunciation still common in parts of Fukien province appears to be a lasting after-effect of the Cheng-Yin Shu-Yuen.

During the later years of the Ch’ing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE), China was rocked by internal insurrections and foreign invasions. It became apparent that education and universal literacy constituted a major means for saving the nation, and that a unified common language was essential to the task. In 1892, the Chung-Kuo Di-Yi-Kuai Chie-Yin Hsin-Zi (‘The First Pronouncing Characters’) was published by the scholar Lu Chuang-chang, who tried to secure governmental support for his efforts but was not successful. The Kuan-Hua Ho-Sheng Zi-mu (‘Pronouncing Alphabet of Mandarin’)—the alphabet imitating Japanese katakana—written by the scholar