Ping Chen’s *Modern Chinese* is an eloquently written book on the development of the Chinese language from the late nineteenth century up to the 1990s, focusing on three areas: modern spoken Chinese, modern written Chinese and the modern Chinese writing system. The first two parts, on the spoken and written aspects of the language in question, begin with a diachronic account and move to a presentation of the present situation. Many topics, especially in the contemporary description, are described in the sociolinguistic context with situations from dialects or varieties used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore being contrasted.

The book’s subtitle, “History and sociolinguistics”, aptly describes the approach used by the author in outlining the development of the Chinese language over the past one hundred years. Every movement in language reform has reflected the political consideration behind it, especially in the modern period. The main aim of the Chinese government has remained the same over the past century: to modernize the country. The beginning of the last century saw China as a weak, corrupted country ruled by a declining old regime and suffocatingly bound by traditional, if not oppressive, values, teachings and beliefs. The dismantling of the old dynasty, invasions and conquests by foreign countries, civil wars, successive changes of government, political unrest and natural as well as human disasters had all made the Chinese people aware that the only way to ensure well-being for the vast population was to transform the country into a modern nation. In addition to the initiatives in politics and ideology, another important measure was to reform the language and its writing system.

Here Chen gives a detailed historical description of the dominant or official variety of the language, from the Jiaguwen (bone script) in the Shang Dynasty in the early times, through the Yayyan (“elegant speech”) dominant in the times up to the Song Dynasty, Guanyin (“official pronunciation”) in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and eventually to the scenario of the 20th century, when the Chinese government staged a vigorous campaign to reform the
Chinese language, making it into a national language which could be easy to learn by its huge population. That was when the Guanhua (“the mandarin”, or official speech) or Xin Guoyin (“new national pronunciation”) or Putonghua (“common speech”) were promoted by the authorities and the many commissions that were created at different stages.

In describing the efforts made towards language reform, Chen has presented an unbiased account of the reason behind them:

In face of a large number of mutually unintelligible dialects spoken in different geographic areas of the country, the establishment and promotion of a modern standard Chinese, together with the reform of the writing system, were put forward as two of the top priorities in the modernization of the Chinese language. In fact, the uniformity of the spoken language was seen as a necessary precondition for the unity of the country. (p.14).

This gives indirect evidence that throws light on the conception of the Chinese language as one single entity. Is Chinese a single language or a group of languages different from each other according to their geographical location and historical development? Chen does not enter the great debate by stating his stance clearly. Readers can easily find detailed descriptions of the various dialects in China in previous works, notably Yuan (1989), and more well-known works like Norman (1988) and Ramsey (1989).

Indeed this difference as well as the degree of unintelligibility between the dialects, has been acknowledged in the author’s statement that “one of the views of the language reform is that the national language should be a generalized form of Guanhua (the Official Speech), incorporating important features of other major dialects” (p. 17), which suggests that there are more than minor structural differences between the dialects, equivalent, say, to the Romance family. However, Chen has predominantly looked at the situation from a sociolinguistic perspective instead, concentrating on the successive dedicated efforts of the authorities to promote Putonghua as the official tongue, on the general attitude of scholars and the prestige associated with the standard speech. In this respect, the author has therefore subtly supported the “dialect” status of the various other speech varieties.

In fact, Chen abides by the traditional sociolinguistic approach by maintaining a clear contrast between the standard variety and all the other varieties used in Chinese society referred to as dialects, in particular in the first
two parts of the book. This is reflected in the spoken aspect with the national
tongue Putonghua compared with other dialects, on their patterns of use in the
society, and on the policy and language planning work conducted by the
Central Government. Description covering the last one hundred years is set
mainly on the Mainland, while in non-metropolitan regions like Taiwan, Hong
Kong and Singapore the description focuses on more modern times. In the
written language, the change from using Wenyan (“classical literary
language”, the old written form) to Baihua (“vernacular literary language”, the
modern written form) during the beginning of the last century is the most
significant comparison here. Chen gives details of how each variety has
developed, and the influence of local dialects. But as the author points out,
dialect writing has not been encouraged from the beginning, due in part to the
inadequacy of characters in representing the sounds of dialects, especially for
those in the south. This has resulted in the under-development and low
prestige of dialect writing, and so people, past or present, have not aspired to
write literature in dialect. Chen also describes the different norms and
variations together with the general attitude and opinion associated with these
varieties.

The third part focussing on the modern Chinese writing system continues
with more information and summaries of the development of the system, of
which script reform, i.e. the simplification of characters, is the focus here, as it
is indispensable as one of the initiatives to modernize China. The pros and
cons of script reform, as well as the impact of using the simplified script are
presented objectively. The other significant topic of Part III is the
phonetization of Chinese. Chen gives a comprehensive account of its
development, pointing out that in the beginning, the work of phonetization
was largely carried out by missionaries and often based on the Southern
dialects, while native Chinese scholars were generally more dedicated to
developing the Pinyin system which is based on the Northern speech or
Putonghua. The latter has become the main object of phonetization in
Mainland China since. The section on phonetization also includes a detailed
discussion of the means of representing the Chinese script, and discussion of
the writing system also sheds light on sociolinguistic issues of the Chinese
language. By pointing out the characteristics of Chinese script, notably its
ability to span times and dialects, Part III echoes the issue discussed in Part II
that dialect writing has not been encouraged throughout the historical
development of Chinese, partly because of the discrepancy between writing
and speech. Such a discrepancy contributes to the script’s everlasting and
universal nature which has made it an effective written lingua franca for the
Chinese people of all times. This might also have given less incentive for speakers of other dialects to develop a new script which would exactly match the sounds of their speech. The contrast between the standard language and dialects is reflected in the issue of phonetization as well. When it comes to the major systems of Chinese phonetic writing, they are, not surprisingly, based on Northern Mandarin, while others developed for any other dialects were not likely to gain national support and momentum.

A minor criticism of the book is that Chinese terms would be better understood by Chinese readers if the original Chinese characters were provided alongside both the Pinyin romanization and the English translation. All in all, Chen has provided a rich reference for the study of Chinese in its historical and sociolinguistic context. If classic works like Ramsey (1989) or Norman (1988) are the stepping stones for those interested in Chinese, Chen’s book can be counted as a reliable sequel to them.

References

