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Title

The Future Conditional: Building an English-Speaking Society in Northeast China

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0v79w4k9>

Journal

ASIAN ETHNOLOGY, 81(1-2)

ISSN

1882-6865

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Publication Date

2022

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Peer reviewed

Book Review of *The Future Conditional: Building an English-Speaking Society in Northeast China*. By Eric S. Henry. Cornell University Press. ISBN 978-1-5017-5516-3. Paperback \$27.95

The author provides a vivid depiction of the spatiotemporal hierarchy of language practices in Shenyang, a northeastern provincial capital in China. His extensive and expansive field research over twelve years illustrates how English, as a global language provides aspirations for a cosmopolitan identity, delivers possibilities for upward social mobility, and sustains a multi-million dollars language training industry in China's rustbelt. Furthermore, Henry contributes to the dialogue of the definition of modernity from a sociolinguistic perspective against the backdrop of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics.

The vernacular in Shenyang and the surrounding region, *Dongbeihua*, or northeaster speech is set against Mandarin Chinese, the national and official language, and English, the global language. The author highlights how not only the kind of speech is spatiotemporally organized, but people's geographical and socioeconomic mobility too. The countryside in northeastern China bordering north Korea and Russia and characterized by the memory of socialism is associated with backwardness and accent-heavy *Dongbeihua*. Shenyang, the provincial capital represents progress and Western modernity, despite its decline since the 1990s due to industrial restructuring in the economic reform era. The languages associated with urban public space are standardized Mandarin Chinese, and the occasional global English in bilingual store signs and public transportation announcements. In chapter 3, Henry provides rich stories of his participants' reflections on their lives in the West and how such experiences shaped who they are now in Shenyang. From those lived experiences, Henry skillfully weaves their narratives of personal growth and life trajectories with boundary crossing and transcendence through language acquisition. Leaving Shenyang to visit or live temporarily abroad afforded by English proficiency and the resulting personal transformations serves as yet another example of the spatiotemporal dimension of language proficiency, a.k.a. "recursive enclosure" coined by the author.

Eric Henry provides nuanced accounts of how Shenyangers define and deploy their linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) in domestic space, in residential communities, and in retail settings, corresponding to their performances of lived or aspired identities. *Dongbeihua* is a regional dialect of Mandarin characterized by certain unique phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features (p.33). Unlike regional dialects in southern China such as Cantonese or Shanghainese, *Dongbeihua* is not incomprehensible to Mandarin speakers, but its varied accents and forms of expression could confuse those who are not familiar with it. Heavily accented *Dongbeihua* indicates the speaker's rural origins, seniority, and lower levels of education. Standardized Mandarin

is expected from those with urban residence and higher educational level. Among urbanites, those who can speak global English with little Mandarin accent is recognized as modern global citizen (p.34). Furthermore, the attributes *Dongbeihua* receives in Shenyang resemble the classical connotations associated with a regional, local speech. Shenyangers find *Dongbeihua* “natural, warm, and comforting and less pretentious than Mandarin. They recognize its lack of status in the linguistic marketplace but praise its sincerity and simplicity...its innate beauty and authenticity (p.40).” One trope of theoretical concept, language ideology, is manifested throughout the book, such as the quote above, however, is not explicitly employed.

In terms of foreign languages usage in urban China, Henry considers “English a quasi-official language with an extensive public mandate (p.3).” This assessment though supported by street signs and public announcements, as well as curriculum of formal educations from elementary school through graduate school, sits awkwardly with the state’s nationalist agenda and language policy. The state promotes Mandarin Chinese intensively, at the expense of regional speech, and associates Mandarin proficiency with the realization of the “China Dream,” as the investigation of the fate of another regional language, the Shanghai dialect shows (Xu, 2021). The People’s Congress has been discussing the elimination of English as a subject from college entrance examination in the recent years. Given this trend, the enthusiasm and anxiety associated with English acquisition depicted in Henry’s book might be a short-lived phenomenon characterizing one phase of China’s rise to global prominent, instead of the beginning of a broader societal and ideological change in China’s engagement with the rest of the world, or the English language dominate West. As the author insightfully points out the presence of English in public space communicates modernity of the urban public space, and the expectation that Shenyang urbanites are supposed to understand them, instead of for the convenience of foreign visitors. Therefore, English proficiency in Shenyang, and in urban China at large is a Foucauldian self-governmentality in cultivating a neoliberal self within the rapidly transforming chronotopic landscape (p.27).

In chapter 6, Henry “examines how the body of the foreigner comes to act as an iconic representation of the related values of whiteness, modernity, fluency, and cosmopolitan subjectivity (p.145).” In his writing, “foreigner” or “foreign” reads “white” and “Western.” Such problematic tendency is evidenced when the author stresses the racial identity of a teacher from South Africa as white, but does not specify such detail about a teacher from Australia, or those from Canada and the U.S. Glossing-over like this, though might be unintentional, diminishes the author’s critical engagement with racial identity and racism in contemporary China, especially in a northeastern city such as Shenyang, which has historical connections with Russia evidenced by the fluency of Russian of old street vendors (p.169).

Eric Henry's ethnography of English language teaching and learning in the private sector permitted and flourished across urban China since the 2000s is unprecedented in its scope and depth. The investigation of the spatiotemporal dimension of language practices is truly interdisciplinary. This book is a much needed addition to the scholarship about urban soundscape in China, and will interests students of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural geography in specific, and urban China in general.