

Eric S. Henry, *The Future Conditional: Building an English-Speaking Society in Northeast China*

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This book 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 and upward social mobility while sustaining a multi-million-dollar language-training industry in China's rust belt. Furthermore, Henry contributes to the dialogue concerning 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 northeastern speech, is set against both Mandarin Chinese, China's official language, and English, the global language. Henry highlights how not only kinds of speech are spatiotemporally organized but also people's geographical and socioeconomic mobility too. The countryside in northeastern China—bordering both North Korea and Russia and characterized by the memory of socialism—is associated with backwardness and heavily accented *Dongbeihua*. The provincial capital Shenyang 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 spaces are standardized Mandarin Chinese, and occasionally 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 those 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 because of English proficiency and personal transformations that result from that experience serves as yet another example of the spatiotemporal dimension of language proficiency—namely “recursive enclosure,” to use the term coined by the author.

Henry provides nuanced accounts of how Shenyangers define and deploy their linguistic capital in domestic spaces, residential communities, and retail settings, corresponding to their performances of lived or aspirational identities. *Dongbeihua* is a regional dialect of Mandarin characterized by certain unique phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features (33). Unlike regional dialects in southern China, such as Cantonese, *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, age seniority, and lower level of education. Standardized Mandarin is expected from urban residents and those of higher educational level. Among urbanites, those who can speak English with little-to-no Mandarin accent are recognized as a modern global citizen (34). Furthermore, the qualities attributed to *Dongbeihua* 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” (40). One theoretical concept, language ideology, is manifested throughout the book, such as the given quote; however, this framework is not explicitly employed.

In terms of foreign language use in urban China, Henry considers “English a quasi-official language with an extensive public mandate” (3). This assessment, though supported by street signs and public announcements, as well as the curriculum of elementary school through graduate school, sits awkwardly with the state’s nationalist agenda and language policy. The state promotes Mandarin Chinese intensely, at the expense of regional dialects, and associates Mandarin proficiency with the realization of the “China Dream,” as my 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 from college entrance examinations in 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 prominence, 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-dominated West. As the author insightfully points out, the presence of English in public spaces communicates the modernity of these spaces as well as the expectation that Shenyang urbanites should understand it, instead of being intended only for the convenience of foreign visitors. Therefore, English proficiency in Shenyang and urban China at large is a form of Foucauldian self-governmentality in cultivating a neoliberal self within the rapidly transforming chronotopic landscape (27). 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” (145). In his writing, “foreigner” or “foreign” reads “white” and “Western.” This 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 United States. Glossing over like this, though it 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 Russian fluency of older street vendors (169).

Henry’s ethnography of English language teaching and learning in the private sector, which has 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 concerning urban soundscape in China and will interest students of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural geography specifically, and urban China in general.

REFERENCES

Xu, Fang. 2021. *Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

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