

A History of the Chinese Language. By HONGYUAN DONG. New York: ROUTLEDGE, 2014. Pp. xiii + 203. \$145 (cloth); \$54.95 (paper).

This volume is intended to be an introductory textbook providing a broad survey of the history of Chinese. The field is certainly in need of an up-to-date introduction that outlines all the various stages of the language from early times to the present, covers both written and spoken forms, discusses the historical evolution of Chinese phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and the writing system, and is appropriate for non-specialists and the undergraduate classroom. Though this book aims to do all of these things, it completely fails to provide an authoritative, accurate, and competent account. It is instead a poorly written and slapdash volume that is marred by poor presentation and overflowing with careless errors and inaccurate content.

The book comprises eleven chapters, five appendices, a list of references, and an index. The author also has developed a companion website (see http://routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/_author/dong/) with supplementary exercises, some audio, and a few other resources for instructors. No exercises or study questions are included in the book itself. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of the history to be covered. Chapters 2 to 5 outline the phonological history of Chinese and are arranged chronologically: a chapter on prehistory, containing a discussion of the place of Chinese in the Sino-Tibetan language family, is followed by chapters on Old Chinese, Middle Chinese, and Early Modern Chinese. After these, chapters 6 and 7 cover Classical Chinese and vernacular writing, focusing on written Chinese and discussing lexical, grammatical, and morphological features and developments. Chapter 8 presents a broad overview of vocabulary change and evolution. Chapter 9 outlines salient features of the phonology and grammar of Modern Standard Chinese; chapter 10 covers the modern Chinese dialects. The book concludes with a brief history of the Chinese writing system in chapter 11. The appendices include a list of the chronological divisions of Chinese history, an outline of articulatory phonetics and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a pronunciation guide to *Hanyǔ pīnyīn* 漢語拼音 (the official Romanization for Chinese), a *pīnyīn*-to-IPA correspondence table, and a list of abbreviations used for grammatical terms.

The author's stated goal is to make the subject of Chinese historical linguistics "more accessible to the general readership" (p. xi). Written in a breezy, informal style, the volume endeavors to present material in an approachable and unintimidating fashion. While Dong may have succeeded in that effort, the result is that this volume reads more like loosely organized lecture notes and lacks the polish of a well-composed textbook. In terms of content, this volume might in places frame some issues in ways that are easier for an undergraduate to grasp than, say, Norman 1988 or even Ramsey 1987, but it fails to supersede either of them. Dong's volume does not bring a new or fresher perspective to the material covered by Norman and Ramsey in their books (though both are cited by the author); nor does it present an accurate and reliable picture of the current state of the field as it has evolved in the quarter century since the publication of their books. Dong merely provides an informal and uncritical overview of commonly held notions about the history of Chinese and various issues regarding modern language and dialects, some of which has been superseded by recent scholarship. Perhaps by intention, the book is decidedly not a scholarly study that sets forth new findings or original contributions to the field. It might be more accurately titled *A Student's Brief Introduction to the History of the Chinese Language*. A revision of the title, however, will not compensate for the often disorganized content and poor quality of the final product, which become increasingly apparent as one proceeds through the book. Excessive inaccuracies and a pervasive lack of clarity do serious damage to the book's efforts to serve as an introductory outline of what we know today about the history of Chinese.

Dong does strive to present the difficult concepts and arcane terminology of Chinese historical linguistics to a general audience. In some parts of the book he does a somewhat decent job of it. For instance, the sections on the reconstruction of Old Chinese and Middle Chinese are for the most part easy to follow and provide a minimally coherent outline of the essentials. However, these chapters present the reconstructions as essentially settled and widely agreed upon, and overlook most areas of continuing debate. Unfortunately, Dong's treatment also neglects major scholarship in the field. He draws mostly upon the work of Fang-Kuei Li (1983) and Zhengzhang Shangfang (2003) and fails

to mention William Baxter's (1992) work on Middle and Old Chinese. This is a major oversight, as Baxter is one of the most important sources in English for readers to turn to for further reference on these topics. The "References" do include Schuessler 2007; Baxter and Sagart's 2014 volume on *Old Chinese* was published too late for Dong to consider, although much of their material has been available on-line for many years now.

Dong's discussion of the traditional *fǎnqiè* 反切 method of representing the pronunciation of a Chinese syllable is also easy enough to follow (sections 4.2, pp. 46–47), as is the following section on the structure of the *Guǎngyùn* 廣韻 rime book (sections 4.3, pp. 47–49). But other sections are much less lucid and present a confusing and muddled picture. The sections on rime tables and "the linking method" (i.e., *xìliánfǎ* 系聯法) (sections 4.4–5, pp. 50–57), for example, start out fairly clearly, but quickly grow awkward and hard to parse, like a careless description of how to tie a shoe. The confusing presentation is exacerbated by Dong's habit of employing Chinese characters in running English text and in tables and illustrations, yet without accompanying *pinyin* transcriptions or English translations. He seems to assume that the English reader will not be stymied and frustrated by these unfamiliar symbols. But probably only readers who know at least a little Chinese will be able to navigate these passages and examples.

Yet even if we forgive the author for the sloppy presentation, once we wade through his book and figure out what he is telling us, we are dismayed to discover a considerable lack of scholarly rigor and cavalier treatment of particulars. In the introductory chapter, for example, we are told that "The Beijing dialect was chosen in 1913 as the basis of the new national language, although at the time there was still disagreement on whether elements from other dialects should be included" (p. 9). This is not exactly the case. In fact, in 1913 the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China convened a committee that decided on a standard for their newly conceived National Pronunciation (*guóyīn* 國音) that was *not* based on the Beijing dialect and *did* specifically include a number of elements from a disparate set of dialects (Chen 1999, 16–19). In a subsequent passage, Dong writes that "By mid-Qing, the Beijing dialect had been firmly established as the common spoken language or the prestigious form of Mandarin" (p. 79). This too is an inaccurate description. The common spoken standard in the Qīng 清 (1644–1911), known as *Guānhuà* 官話, was based on a number of sub-varieties of Mandarin, the most prevalent of which was a southern *Jiāngnán* 江南 variety whose most prestigious representative was *Nánjīng* and *not* *Běijīng* (Coblin 2000). Still later we are told that "Vernacular writings such as those during the Ming and Qing Dynasties were written in the de facto common spoken language based on the dialect of the capital area (e.g., the Beijing Dialect in the Qing Dynasty)" (p. 131). But in actuality the written vernacular of the Míng 明 (1368–1644) and Qīng, known as *báihuà* 白話, was emphatically *not* a single *Běijīng*-based entity. It was a highly variable language that evolved primarily from the mix of dialects underlying *Guānhuà*, in which *Běijīng* was only a minor player; and individual compositions were often markedly influenced by an author's dialect background (Chen 1999, 69–70).

Dong discusses the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* 中原音韻 (Rimes of the Central Plains), a Yuán 元 (1279–1368) period rime book compiled in 1324, as representative of Early Modern Chinese in chapter 5. After briefly entertaining the possibility that the dialect base for the phonology represented in the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* was centered in Hénán, as the title of the book would suggest, he concludes that "it is most closely related to that of the Beijing dialect" (pp. 71–72). However, this is not a universally accepted view. Dong's only support for this claim is an unpublished paper (cited as "Geng 2010") that is not publically available. He does not seem to be aware of other competing views, let alone cite any of the many works where they are presented; one well-known example is *Lǐ Xīnkūf* 1983. Describing the tonal system of Early Modern Chinese, Dong says that "only the *píng* tone split in the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn*, and consequently led to the two *píng* tones in Modern Standard Chinese, in many southern dialects each of the *píng*, *shǎng*, *qù*, and *rù* tones split into two categories" (p. 78; run-on sentences and lack of italics on Chinese terms reflect the original). This statement is problematic in many respects. First, there is not necessarily any direct relationship between the tonal system of the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* and that of Standard Chinese. The system of four tones found in the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* is widespread among northern Mandarin dialects. The matching tonal system simply reflects a large number of features that the language underlying the *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* shares with Mandarin dialects in general,

including Běijīng and the dialects of Héběi and Hénán. Regarding the tonal splits, *píng* 平, *shǎng* 上, *qù* 去, and *rù* 入 tones all split into two categories (designated *yīn* 陰 and *yáng* 陽) in the ancestor to early Mandarin. In subsequent developments in northern Mandarin dialects, the *yīn-qù*, *yáng-qù*, and *yáng-shǎng* tones merged, while the *yīn-rù* and *yáng-rù* categories separately merged into the other tones. (The traces of the original splits are thus seen in separate *rù* tone mergers and the *shǎng* tone syllables that shifted into *qù* tone.) We are left with the uneasy feeling that the reason the book does not clearly explain all this is because the author himself does not understand it.

In many places the book piles up details willy-nilly into an ineptly organized jumble. This practice is on full view in the chapter on dialects (chapter 10), where each section reads rather like a hastily written sophomore paper, often including superfluous factoids and non sequiturs. In the section on Wu dialects (section 10.5, pp. 160–61), we are told that in the early history of the Wu area there were two major states, Wu and Yue, whose rulers were descendants of the Xia in the north, “but their cultures were quite different. They cut their hair and tattooed their bodies. The State of Wu was annexed by the State of Yue, and then the State of Chu took over this area.” But Dong does not tell us whether this has anything to do with the history of the Chinese language, and if so what that might be. A bit later, Dong tells us that “Impressions of the Wu dialect described it as being light in contrast to the heavier pronunciation of the northern dialects. This might have been due to the different vowels and the manner of articulation of their initials. The Wu area was the cultural center of Chinese dynasties that were established in the south, such as the Six Dynasties, Southern Song and early Ming, and was influenced by the Mandarin dialects.” Unfortunately, this kind of disheveled composition pervades the entire chapter and is far too frequent in the rest of the book as well.

Another confusing aspect of the book’s presentation is the intermingling of traditional analysis and modern phonological and phonetic concepts with no clearly delineated distinction between them, often within a single paragraph. The section titled “Methodology of Finding Initial Classes of Old Chinese” (section 3.4 pp. 31–35), for instance, contains a paragraph that attempts to explain the use of “characters in a phonetic series” (that is, *xiéshēngzì* 諧聲字). The paragraph first notes that “In the first series, the character 丁 is the shared phonetic component,” and then immediately launches into a discussion of *pīnyīn* spelling, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and the concept of “place of articulation.” Following a discussion lengthy enough to warrant a paragraph of its own, but without beginning a new paragraph, Dong returns to phonetic series, explaining “that even though the characters in a *xiéshēngzì* [no italics, Chinese characters, or gloss in the original] series do not share exactly the same initial, their initials are nonetheless closely related by their place of articulation. Bernhard Karlgren discovered this connection. . . .” And the same paragraph continues for several sentences more in this vein. The next paragraph follows a similar pattern, starting out with the discoveries of Qián Dàxīn 錢大昕 (1728–1804), then inserting a discussion of manner of articulation (but without naming the concept) to explain the articulation of aspirated initials and fricatives. This kind of meandering explanation might work well in a spoken lecture; but on the written page it leaves a reader struggling to disentangle the threads of the discussion.

This situation is symptomatic of a larger problem affecting the volume: copy-editing standards appear to have been very low. Many infelicities of style and usage evidence the lack of a critical editorial eye. An egregious example is a couple of run-on sentences in the space of the same number of pages in chapter 10, the first of which reads “Chinese speaking people were first brought to these areas during this time and immigration has been one of the major factors in the formation of modern Chinese dialects” (p. 154). On the same page, we also find a disconcerting passage with a series of problems, one with agreement in number and then one in referent: “It is reasonable to say that most modern Chinese dialects can be regarded as a descendant of Middle Chinese, although some features of certain dialects, such as the Min dialects, are actually older than Middle Chinese.” Dialects are “a descendant”? Min dialects are “features”? Attentive copy-editing could have prevented these and other embarrassing issues.

Mechanical *faux pas* also permeate the text. Chinese words written in *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* are not italicized, although it is commendable that the author includes the appropriate tone diacritics on these words. The text also does not follow the standard convention of consistently introducing the corre-

sponding Chinese characters for Chinese terms on the first instance they are cited. The characters for the term *fāngyán* 方言 ('dialect') are not provided where it is the focus of the discussion on page 4. But then characters appear sporadically for various terms in chapter 3; for example, characters are given for terms discussed on pages 25 and 27, but not for two important terms on page 26, *shuāngshēng* 雙聲 'alliteration' and *diéyùn* 迭韻 'rhyme'. These two terms are also missing from the index (which provides neither the Chinese in *pīnyīn* nor the English), so when they are mentioned again on page 82, the reader has no way of easily referring back to the earlier explanation. The weakness of the index exposed in this instance was underscored when we discovered that it was missing other important terms as well (again listing neither Chinese nor English for them), including *yùnbù* 韻部 'rime class/group' (critical to the discussion of Old Chinese in chapter 3) and *yǐnshēn* 引申 'extend' (discussed as an important mechanism for lexical change in chapter 8).

Lastly we note that the volume references the author's spoken recordings of the "pronunciation" of Old Chinese, Middle Chinese, and other versions of premodern Chinese, on the companion website (corresponding to text provided on pages 42, 68, and 79). These recordings are highly misleading. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the reconstruction of Old Chinese is a reliable representation of the pronunciation of the early language, the vocalization of the reconstruction can be no more accurate than, say, a person who does not know Cantonese trying to read a Cantonese Romanization based solely on the spellings with no reference to actual Cantonese pronunciation as enunciated by a native speaker. But Cantonese Romanization is at least based on the actual pronunciation and phonetics of a living dialect. The Middle Chinese "reconstruction" developed from the *Qièyùn* 切韻/*Guāngyùn* phonology that the author presents in this volume represents a formal system based on the conflation of idealized reading pronunciations of two or more dialects from the Sui 隋 dynasty (581–618) and earlier, not the actual pronunciation of a former language. So to vocalize it is to present something that is not representative of a real language or any true historical pronunciation. Yet these recordings are offered to the reader as if they actually are the sounds of earlier stages of Chinese.

We could go on to list many more examples of neglectful inaccuracy, sloppy writing, and dubious content. Though some seem minor or unimportant, such problems are far too numerous for comfort. In the aggregate these defects fundamentally impair the credibility and reliability of this book. We are left with a slipshod volume that is chock-full of careless and imprecise content. In sum, this work fails to provide an authoritative, up-to-date, accurate, and competent treatment of the topic its title promises to cover, and is a poorly written and haphazard introduction to the basics of the history of the Chinese language.

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