
Reviewed by Rui Peng (National University of Singapore)

The nine-chapter book, *The Europeanization of modern written Chinese: a case study of the changing third person pronouns in the twentieth century and beyond*, authored by Clara Ho-yan Chan, discusses the evolution of the Chinese third-person pronouns *ta* and its plural form *tamen* over the past 100 years (1904–2003), a typical case of “Europeanization,” i.e., the changes of the Chinese language under the influence of Western languages. In contrast to most of the past research concerning the Europeanization of the Chinese language, which usually lack sufficient data observation and systematic comparison of the Chinese language before and after contacting Western languages (Peyraube 2000), this book impresses the readers with its empirical methodology.

The opening chapter is brief but informative. It states the dual objectives of the book, i.e., (1) to establish the development of *ta* and *tamen* in terms of gender and number markings and syntactic functions, and (2) to explain the pronominal innovations that occurred in the 1920s. The second chapter provides a comprehensive survey of the literature on the changes of the Chinese language during the twentieth century. It sets the background and foundation for the discussion in the remaining chapters. In addition, issues regarding the creation of the standard spoken language, the proliferation of new vocabulary, and the changes of grammar are reviewed.

Chapter 3 has two foci, i.e., the methodological framework and principle of data collection. All the data come from two sources, i.e., the Indigenous Chinese Text (ICT) and the Translated Chinese Text (TCT). The former refers to newspaper articles, whereas the latter refers to three Chinese versions of the *Book of Matthew* in the *New Testament*. Three time periods, 1904–1919; 1952–1953, and 2002–2003, are taken from each source. Chan claims that her approaches are two-dimensional, including the examination of diachronic evolution of *ta* and *tamen* over the three periods and the comparison of the usages of the pronouns in both types of sources. The comparison among data from two types of Chinese texts and three time periods is a novel feature of this book. In Chapter 4, after a brief
description of the transformation of *ta* from a demonstrative pronoun into a generic third-person pronoun before the twentieth century, Chan outlines how this pronoun developed into a gender-specific third-person pronoun in the 1920s.

Another major strength of the book is the statistical approach. Four chapters, 5 to 8, are devoted to the statistical examination of the innovations of the Chinese third-person pronominal system in the three selected periods. In these chapters, Chan makes an excursus into both the quantitative changes, i.e., the overall increasing occurrences of the third-person pronouns, and the qualitative changes, including the innovation of syntactic functions of these pronouns.

Chapters 5 and 6 conduct a detailed analysis of the gender marking and number marking of *ta* and *tamen* in the ICT and TCT, respectively. In Chapter 5, changes in terms of the overall gender form distribution of *ta* and *tamen* and the human and non-human gender distribution of generic *ta* and *tamen* antecedents are examined statistically. The results confirm the effectiveness of the reform of Chinese third-person pronouns in the 1920s, as *ta* and *tamen* have clearly shown the division of masculine, feminine, and neuter categories in the second and third periods. Statistics also show the evolution of the number marking of the Chinese third-person pronouns from underdevelopment (the first period) to flexibility in usage (the second period) and eventually to full development (the third period). Chapter 6 deals with the gender and number markings of *ta* and *tamen* based on the TCT. The statistics of the gender distribution of *ta* and *tamen* in the TCT in the three periods are presented. In the first period, only the generic form of *ta* (他) and *tamen* (他們) is used, whereas in the second and third periods, different forms of the third-person pronouns (他, 他們; 她, 她們; 它, 它們; 牠, 牠們; 它), are used. With regard to the number markings, the pronoun-antecedent number agreement of the third-person pronouns has made notable progress through the three periods.

Chapters 7 and 8 present the statistical examination of the changes of the syntactic functions of *ta* and *tamen* in ICT and TCT, respectively. According to Chapter 7, the role of *ta* and *tamen* as subject in ICT has increased overall. Particularly, the second period is characterized by the freer positions of the neuter *ta* and *tamen* in a sentence and the greatest number of complex structures formed with *ta* and *tamen*. As noted in Chapter 8, the second period is unique also because in this period the occurrences of *ta* and *tamen* in various syntactic positions in TCT remarkably outnumber those in both the first and the second periods.

In Chapters 5–8, Chan has successfully achieved the goal of establishing the diachronic development of *ta* and *tamen* in terms of gender and number markings and syntactic functions. Interestingly, statistics show that from the second period to the third period, the number of instances of *ta* and *tamen*, the frequencies of using *ta* and *tamen* in organizing phrases and sentences, and the frequencies of the
inanimate neuter *ta* and *tamen* in the subject and object positions, have decreased. It may not be a coincidence that the pullback takes place in both ICT and TCT. Chan sees this phenomenon as the reversed tide of Europeanization in terms of the use of *ta* and *tamen*.

The conclusion chapter presents a sociolinguistic explanation of the development of the Chinese third-person pronominal system. Chan finds that among the three sociolinguistic causes of language change, i.e., “fashion,” “foreign influence,” and “social need,” the latter two are more important, and therefore claims that the evolution of *ta* and *tamen* sheds light on the controversy of grammatical borrowing among some sociolinguists. In explaining what she calls the reversed tide of Europeanization, Chan attributes this phenomenon to two trends of thought. The first trend is that since the 1960s, some writers, translation theorists, and linguists have defended “the purity of the Chinese language.” The second trend is that after the 1980s, Chinese translation studies have been influenced by a strand of new “poststructuralist” theories from the West, which encourages translators to “re-write and recreate the source texts” (p. 289).

This explanation raises a theoretical question, namely, to what extent and under what condition(s) can a language be changed in the way designed and expected by the intelligentsia? The reform of the Chinese third-person pronominal system, initiated by Liu Bannon and advocated by other intellectuals, seems to tell us a story of how the intelligentsia successfully exerted influence over the Chinese language. Note that this reform took place immediately after the May Fourth Movement, a period when China had a social environment favorable for the innovation of Chinese written language. The new Chinese third-person pronominal system emerged as the reflection of the times and the social need. Moreover, the reform had a concrete goal, i.e., to change *ta*, a generic pronoun, into a gender-specific one with different forms, and had been designed and conducted on the basis of a specific scheme. Therefore, unless concrete evidence is provided to show that both the slogan to defend the purity of the Chinese language and the theoretical proposition to rewrite and recreate the source texts in translation cater to the social and cultural needs and have been put into practice, it would not be that convincing to make a direct connection between them and the decreasing occurrence of Chinese third-person pronouns in the third period.

This questionable point does not obscure the value of the book, which provides an excellent empirical basis for further exploration of some other theoretically significant issues, e.g., the interaction between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of language change. The development of Chinese language has been jointly influenced by multiple extrinsic factors, i.e., Classic Chinese, dialects of Chinese language, and foreign languages. According to Chan, the intrinsic law of the Chinese language is also involved in the innovation of the Chinese third-person

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pronominal system. For example, as shown in Chapter 4, among the innovated forms of ta/tamen (他/他们) are not only the feminine ta/tamen (她/她们) and the neuter ta/tamen (它/它们), but also the divine Ta (祂), which was invented by missionaries to translate the capitalized divine He from the Bible into Chinese, and the honorific tan/tanmen (怹/怹们). Chan quite rightly points out that the reforms “have exceeded Westernism and become nativized products.” Then the readers may be curious about what kind of role each (intrinsic and extrinsic) factor plays in the establishment of Modern Standard Chinese and how these factors interact with one another. It is hoped that these questions will be taken up by Chan and others in future research.

Without question, the book makes a thoughtful contribution to the study of the evolution of Chinese third-person pronouns. It will prove valuable to students and scholars who are interested in the diachronic development and standardization of the Chinese language.

References


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