Celebrating 25 Years of Publication
Shanghainese: Dictionary and Phrasebook

BY RICHARD VANNESS SIMMONS
REVIEWED BY JENNIFER HALL

I am obsessed with the letter Q. I can’t get it out of my mind! It has so many mysterious sides. First, I met the rare and elusive English Q [kw] and then the French Q [k] which is kept busy with [ke], [kee] and [kA] sounds. Our relationship developed further when I was introduced to Mandarin Q [ch], a more subtle parting of the lips. But now... I have met Shanghainese Q! It is almost like a grunt which abruptly stops deep in one’s throat. To know it fully, one must not release, aspirate or swallow. Gulp! Are English sounds ever described this way?

Mmm... Where was I?

Right. The book. My expanding interest in the letter Q is in part due to Richard VanNess Simmons’ “Shanghainese: Dictionary and Phrasebook”. It is one of the latest additions to the 82 books published in Hippocrene Books’ Dictionary and Phrasebook series. Hippocrene publications are the crème de la crème of language books. Their attention to detail far surpasses that of my Eyewitness phrasebooks whose pinyin does not include tones, which while troublesome are necessary.

Simmons’ dictionary has plenty of tones. It is a serious and scholarly, yet intuitive and accessible, written representation of Shanghainese, a member of the Wu family of Chinese languages. Originating in the Yangtze River delta region, Wu dialects are spoken by as many people (well over 70 million) who speak a Cantonese dialect. Meanwhile, the family of Mandarin dialects alone are spoken by over 800 million people worldwide.

In response to the omni-present Mandarin putonghua, some of the other approximately ten (excluding ethnic minority languages) Chinese dialect families have been experiencing a revival in an attempt to preserve their distinctiveness. The linguistic uniqueness of the Wusong River area (Suzhou, Hangzhou, Zhejiang and Shanghai) has spawned a particular interest in Shanghainese, the most cosmopolitan dialect of the lot.

The dictionary’s introduction is reason enough to own this compact 329 page handbook. The introduction reviews the region’s origin as a cluster of fishing villages and explains Shanghai’s nickname Hu, the ubiquitous character visible
on Shanghai license plates. It briefly covers Shanghainese’s fascinating linguistic history which parallels the raucous politics, immigration and commercial ventures that have taken place within its city walls for several centuries.

The first section of the dictionary also reviews Shanghainese pronunciations and grammar. The Wu dialect family has some similarities to Mandarin and the comparisons are listed in tables along with pinyin pronunciations. Comparisons of grammatical structures – questions, negatives, adjectives - are included, too. But in many cases, there are no comparisons. This distinctiveness is a reminder of the isolated evolution of the Chinese dialect families.

Although it has been spoken for many centuries, a written Shanghainese script was never developed. Shanghainese speakers write in Standard Mandarin Chinese, in characters and pinyin. Pinyin was developed by Chinese linguists in the mid 1900s. A century earlier in the mid 1800s, Western linguists began devising written forms of (what they considered) exotic and foreign languages based on the Latin (Roman) alphabet, calling the process Romanization.

Unsatisfied with existing Romanized versions of Shanghainese, the editors at Hippocrene asked Dr. Simmons, a professor at Rutger’s University, to develop his own Romanization for this dictionary. Simmons is well qualified for this task. Twenty years ago, he drafted a Romanized dictionary of the Hangzhou dialect for his PhD dissertation and has been actively researching and writing about the region’s dialects ever since. (See photos.)

Which, uh, brings me back to Q. In Simmons’ Romanized form of Shanghainese, Q represents a glottal stop which can be found at the end of a sound bringing it to an abrupt stop. Listen to a Shanghainese speaker say words such as: us/we, they/them, my/mine, ours/yours or the participles, leq and h’eq. Then look up the Romanized spelling.

The two dictionary sections (English to Shanghainese and vice versa, both with Mandarin translations) together equal the generous size of the phrasebook section that includes an array of topics such as introductions, food, weather and accommodation.

This Shanghainese Dictionary and Phrasebook was written for business people, students and travellers, those who are serious about the task of learning and using the language and have reason to be immersed in its use. But it is also for those with a curious mind; Shanghai residents who want to learn more about the history and inhabitants of this extraordinary part of the Middle Kingdom.

It offers written precision and clarity but nothing compares to listening to the language. Hippocrene does not, as yet, have an audio component available. So, it is best if the book is used to support conversations with native Shanghainese speakers. I tried this with a friend who speaks Shanghainese, Mandarin, English and a little French. And thanks to this dictionary I was unexpectedly bewitched and beguiled by Q, Shanghainese Q.

Check with Shanghai’s foreign bookstores to obtain a copy.

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