

Xiang

Xiāng 湘

Xiang is the name of the people and local sublanguage of the central southeastern province of Hunan. The Xiang people are one of three subgroups of Han Chinese that settled south of Mandarin-speaking Chinese; their language is complex with many dialects.

The name *Xiang* is derived from the older literary name of Hunan. It is estimated that more than 34 million Chinese (most of them living in Hunan Province) speak Xiang today. Several early leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (most notably Mao Zedong) came from Hunan, and the linguistic influence of people thinking in Xiang or in Xiang-accented Mandarin appears to have influenced the forms chosen to simplify the characters used in the Chinese language.

Along with the Gan and Wannan, the Xiang are one of the three subgroups of Han Chinese who settled inland and to the south of the Mandarin-speaking people in China. The sublanguage (a division of the main language) spoken by the Xiang has not been regarded as significant as the Mandarin forms spoken in the north, and the Xiang have not contributed in a major way to Chinese migration overseas. The Xiang, like the Gan and Wannan, generally have been considered to be Chinese who speak Mandarin, but with very poor pronunciation.

Xiang is a complex language with many dialects. While it shares similarities with Mandarin, it differs from other sublanguages of Han Chinese mainly because of the way

the dialects and subdialects relate to each other. The dialects that have similarities with Mandarin are grouped together as the New Xiang or the Xinxianghua. Local histories suggest that the complexity in the Xiang sublanguage may be due in part to the fact that most of the population now living in Hunan Province originated in other provinces. Migration has thus contributed greatly to the complex pattern of Xiang subgroups in Hunan Province.

Linguists find it easier to divide the sublanguage chronologically into New Xiang and Old Xiang, rather than describing the geographical distinctions of the various forms. Old Xiang, or Laoxianghua, has been described as a conservative form of the Xiang sublanguage and therefore much closer to the Middle Chinese of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) than New Xiang. Some linguists have suggested that there are ties between Old Xiang and the Wu dialects of the region around Shanghai. It is not surprising that Old Xiang is spoken only in the more isolated rural districts and some of the smaller cities of central Hunan Province. New Xiang, on the other hand, is spoken mainly in most of the larger cities and towns, where people from other regions and provinces have settled.

New Xiang

Linguists point out that New Xiang has evolved much further from the Middle Chinese norm than has Old Xiang. The development of New Xiang generally has paralleled that of southwestern Mandarin. Indeed, this form

of Mandarin is supposed to have been the strongest influence on New Xiang, partly because southwestern Mandarin is spoken in Hubei Province, which is located directly to the north of Hunan Province. New Xiang is therefore much closer phonetically to Standard Mandarin than is Old Xiang. Yet both Old and New Xiang have been in use together and coexist in many towns. Complicating the geographical distribution of the speakers of Old and New Xiang are generational divisions: Elderly speakers usually speak Old Xiang, while their younger family members speak New Xiang.

Speakers of New Xiang in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, typically do not pronounce the initial sounds *b-*, *d-*, *dz-*, *dzh-*, and *gh-*, as they do the other surrounding forms, sounds that are added or part of Han Chinese. Because these initials have been retained in the Old Xiang spoken in the smaller Hunanese city of Shuangfeng, linguists consider Old Xiang an island of linguistic conservatism. New Xiang is expected to change Old Xiang in time, bringing it more into conformity with Standard Mandarin and Mandarin-like speech forms.

The nature of spoken New Xiang can be examined in a list of words used in the provincial capital of Changsha. In New Xiang subdialects, the personal pronouns are similar to those used in Mandarin. Hence, “him” or “he” (*t’a*), is pronounced similarly in both New Xiang and Mandarin. Likewise, “you” (*ni*) is pronounced the same in New Xiang and Mandarin. According to scholar Leo Moser, the Changsha vernacular as described in the reference text *Hanyu Fangyan Cihui* can be compared with Standard Mandarin in several ways. First, it has no retroflex series of consonants. Second, there are no words ending in *-ng*, although some people in Changsha do use retroflex consonants as well as some syllables ending in *-ng*. Third, there are words beginning with *-ng* and *z-*. Fourth, there are six tones rather than four. Fifth, there are nasalized vowels and, sixth, a pattern of consonant liaison that may modify medial sounds in two-syllable phrases. Finally, there are different grammatical particles somewhat differently employed. Words in the Changsha subdialect can also start with an *h-* and an *f-*. These characteristics make the Changsha subdialect different from other forms of Xiang. (See table 1.)

In northern Hunan Province, the Yiyang subdialect is another form of New Xiang. It shares many characteristics

TABLE 1 Corresponding Terms in English, Standard Chinese, and New Xiang (Changsha)

ENGLISH	STANDARD CHINESE	NEW XIANG (CHANGSHA)
tomorrow	mingtian	min-zi
this year	jinnian	chin-nie
we	women	ngo-men
this	zhege	ko-ko
what	shenme	mo-tsi
cold	leng	len
person	ren	zen

Source: Moser (1985).

with the Changsha subdialect but has five tones and words ending in *ng-*. The subdialect has also developed a pattern of inserting *l*-like sounds in many words.

Linguists have concluded that the Xiang sublanguage differs from most other Sinitic sublanguages. Hunanese do not appear to take pride in their local dialect, since there does not seem to be uniform pronunciation of the name *Changsha*, for example, even within the city itself.

Old Xiang

Linguists consider the Shuangfeng dialect a good example of Laoxianghua, or Old Xiang. The vernacular of Shuangfeng lacks the *f-* and the initial *j-*, although there are the initial consonants *n-*, *ng-*, and the voiced *h* or *gh-*. According to Wade-Giles Standard Chinese, the word *liang* (two, a couple), is *niang* in Shuangfeng, while *jou* (meat) becomes *niu*. The tendency to use old forms with voiced consonants and other ancient language habits has led to the comparison of Old Xiang and the Wu dialects.

Pronouns in Shuangfeng differ widely from Standard Chinese in both sound and formation. Several pronouns do not share the pluralizing element *men* in Standard Chinese. (See table 2.)

In the far south of Hunan Province, a zone of eleven counties, the Southern Xiang, or Xiangnan, dialect is spoken. Some have assumed that this dialect was influenced by Cantonese, the sublanguage spoken to the south, but in

TABLE 2 Corresponding Pronouns in English, Standard Chinese, Old Xiang, and New Xiang

ENGLISH (AND STANDARD CHINESE)	OLD XIANG (SHUANGFENG)	NEW XIANG (CHANGSHA)
I, me (wo)	ang	ngo
we, us (wo-men)	ang-nga	ngo-men
he, him (ta)	to	ta

Source: Moser (1985)

fact the pronunciation shows a heavy influence of south-western Mandarin.

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Further Reading

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