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Hongyuan Dong, author of *A History of the Chinese Language*, is November's Author of the Month! He is Assistant Professor of Chinese Language and Linguistics at George Washington University. In an interview with Routledge Language Learning, he reveals how readers can apply their knowledge of Chinese to historical linguistics, what makes his book stand out, and much more.

Complete with a [companion website](#), *A History of the Chinese Language* is a vital resource for students and professors. [View the first 30 pages](#) and request an [e-inspection copy](#).

**Tell us about your academic career and current research projects.**

I received my academic training in Chinese linguistics at Peking University, China, and in theoretical linguistics at Cornell University in the US. I feel that I am in a good position to combine my knowledge in Chinese and my knowledge in linguistic theories, and that has been my goal all along in my research. In addition to my other research interests in semantic theory, I have done research in historical linguistics, including a proposal to modify Norman's (1981) Proto-Min vowels, and a reconstruction of a subset of Proto-Tibetan consonant clusters. Now I am working on a few new projects, one of which is a historical account of the formation of a national language in China. I have already conducted some exciting archival research in the First Historical Archives of China located in the Museum Palace in Beijing. I hope to trace the origins of the current national language in China and issues in its promotion back to linguistic situations in earlier periods, such as during the mid-Qing Dynasty. Another project I am currently working on is a linguistic introduction to Modern Standard Chinese and various interdisciplinary research findings. Together with my book on the history of the Chinese language, this new project on Modern

Standard Chinese will help readers to gain comprehensive knowledge of the history and current uses of the Chinese language, and the related social, cultural, political, and philosophical issues.

**What spurred you to teach Chinese?**

One of the reasons that I took up Chinese teaching is the renewed interest in the Chinese language and culture both in China and outside. It might sound a little odd to refer to the renewed interest in the Chinese language and culture in China. But it is not. It is common for a traditional society to pay less attention to its traditions during the process of modernization. But eventually they will re-embrace their own cultural roots. Outside China, the old boundaries of China Studies have become very fluid, since scholars in many different disciplines are doing research related to China. Thus it seems to me that teaching Chinese would be a good way to build dialogs among people of different backgrounds, and I feel that my academic training in both China and the US is especially suited to teaching Chinese. In my book *A History of the Chinese Language*, I tried to bring different cultural references together, as can be seen from the names of the chapters, which I hope can

resonate with speakers of both Chinese and other languages.

### **What is it about Chinese you find so fascinating?**

Its diversity. Chapter 10 of my book is called Celebration of Diversity. I show in the chapter that there are many regional varieties of Chinese, and their corresponding regional cultures and identities. The creation of Modern Standard Chinese was exactly in direct response to such a varied linguistic situation. For people who study the Chinese language and culture, they have to deal with variations and pluralisms on multiple levels across different regions. From just a linguistic point of view, there are so many mutually unintelligible dialects in Chinese, and the daily speeches of the ordinary people in China are necessarily quite different from one region to another, even when they speak the national standard language. Personally diversity is fascinating to me. Diversity not only broadens our scope of research, but also keeps our interest going. There is a line from a famous Chinese poem that reads "where hills bend, streams wind and the pathway seems to end, past dark willows and flowers in bloom lies another village." (trans. X. Yang and N. Dai) When one does research in the Chinese language and culture, new interesting scenery always pops up.

### **What do you think is the future of languages at university level?**

This is a good question and also a difficult one. But personally I am optimistic about it, because people love their own language and culture and love to learn about others'. Interestingly, there will be a First Worldwide Congress for Language Rights to be held in May 2015 in Teramo, Italy. Notwithstanding the homogenizing effect of globalization and the rise of a few dominant languages, there is an increasing consensus worldwide to protect and promote all languages. Therefore as long as there is interest, the demand

will follow, and I do hope language departments will continue to flourish in universities around the world.

### **Why did you decide to write *A History of the Chinese Language*?**

I began teaching two linguistics courses at the George Washington University in the Fall semester of 2010. One of the courses that I teach is history of the Chinese language. Once I started preparing for the course for the first time, I found out that there were no books written for students with no background in Chinese or linguistics. Some of the books available were very advanced, which requires extensive knowledge and training in linguistics and especially historical linguistics. Some other books were too sketchy, only describing major features of Old Chinese and Middle Chinese without going into any detail. Thus I had to improvise quite a bit in my teaching, by which I mean I had to introduce the methodology of historical linguistics and some special methods used in Chinese historical linguistics step by step and guide my students from written sources to reconstructed systems. I also wrote many exercises based on real written records to help my students really grasp the methodology. After a few years of teaching this course, I am pretty confident that students with no background in Chinese or linguistics can understand Chinese historical linguistics if taught in the right way. Therefore I decided to write such a book so that anyone interested in the Chinese language and culture can gain in-depth knowledge in the historical development of the Chinese language. I certainly hope that my readers find my book easy to follow.

### **What's the one thing you hope readers take away from your book?**

The methodology is the most important thing. The facts and findings in Chinese historical linguistics are definitely fascinating. But without a good understanding of the methodology used in

the research, it is not possible to really understand how we know what we know about the history of the Chinese language. Historical linguistics is a science, and its beauty lies in the robust methods used to examine historical and contemporary linguistic data. Many of my students find it interesting to apply these methods to solve problems that I designed for the class. The joy in solving a historical linguistics problem is no less than that of putting together your first jigsaw puzzle!

**Is there anything you'd like to highlight about this topic or your book in particular?**

In my book I try to relate historical linguistics to more familiar subjects that the readers might have already known. For many readers, Chinese historical linguistics is a totally new topic, which makes them a little unsure what the topic is about. But many of the questions in this book are probably not entirely new if introduced from the right perspective. For example, it is probably true that all readers know the stories of Marco Polo's travels, and many have heard that he might have reached China. But did he speak Chinese? If he did, what was it like? It certainly could not have been the same as Modern Chinese. At this point I introduce Early Modern Chinese and the readers might already feel quite at ease by now. Many readers like to read literature, especially poetry. It is a very good starting point because Middle Chinese was just such a poetic language used by the greatest poets in Chinese history. These are some of the examples to show how I approach unfamiliar subjects from familiar angles.

**What's a common misconception about this topic that you'd like to clear up?**

Chinese historical linguistics has always been considered an arcane subject. But it does not have to be one. People with no background in Chinese or linguistics can actually understand all the major theories and findings and enjoy doing

Chinese historical linguistics when they are introduced to the art of the methodology and guided step by step to solve various puzzles with hands-on exercises. My book is an attempt at making Chinese historical linguistics accessible to any interested reader.

**How can the readers apply their knowledge in Chinese historical linguistics?**

As a linguist myself, I enjoy reading the linguistics side of Chinese historical linguistics. But I came to realize more and more how knowledge in this topic can help me better understand Chinese literature, philosophy, history and culture in general. This is probably not surprising since language is one of the fundamental aspects of human society and the most important carrier of communication and thoughts. To understand the Chinese classics, one needs extensive knowledge of Old Chinese. To understand Tang poetry, one needs to know Middle Chinese, and to understand the cultural diversity in contemporary Chinese society, one can trace the development of regional spoken forms and identity from Middle Chinese to modern Chinese. Thus linguistics is the key to a better understanding of all these related subject areas. Actually linguistics was considered the foundation to Chinese Classics, according to traditional Chinese education.

***Praise for this book***

"This is an important and valuable book for anyone interested in the Chinese language and its history. It offers a gripping account of what the language was like thousand years ago and how it reached its present state. The author's clear and reader-friendly style makes it a pleasure to read."  
***-Boping Yuan, University of Cambridge, UK.***