

FASHIONABLE MANDARIN

Southern China appeals to chic sensibility of the masses

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Riders on the Guangzhou metro are used to being bombarded with propaganda messages to change their behavior: Create a civilized metropolis! Construct a national sanitary city! But riders may be surprised to see recent efforts aimed at convincing them that using Mandarin (Putonghua 普通话, “common speech”) Chinese instead of their local Cantonese will make them more “fashionable.”

Unattributed posters, likely from the Ministry of Education, which is in charge of Mandarin promotion, hang in subway cars in Guangzhou promoting: “Mandarin: Modern needs, fashionable pursuits.” One look at the ads and it’s clear this isn’t your grandparents’ propaganda.

Since the Communist government started promoting Mandarin as the national language in the ‘50s, straightforward efforts to convince people to use Mandarin as a communication tool have been commonplace. (Past favorites include “Speak Mandarin, warmly love our China; spread Mandarin, the world is watching China.” 说好普通话, 热爱我中华, 普及普通话, 世界看中华.) But as China charges into the 21st century, propaganda campaigns are changing their tone. One poster, with a purple background and a sketch of a bridge, promotes Mandarin as an “emotional link.” Another ad features colorful characters against a background of music notes, a break dancer, and a dancing figure reminiscent of iPod ads.

It’s clear these ads have broken with efforts to guilt people into using Mandarin, instead attempting to give Mandarin a hip edge.

In many parts of China, such a claim would not be controversial. Most of the mainland’s countless dialects have little prestige. In most regions, speaking Mandarin over the local language is a sign of sophistication and education.

Yet in metropolises like Shanghai and Guangzhou, local dialects have been perennially preferred over Mandarin. Madison, 17, a high school student in Guangzhou, begs to differ with the ad campaign: “Comparing the two, in Guangdong, Cantonese is a bit more fashionable. People think it’s more in.”

For locals, Cantonese has long been associated with the fast-paced world of nearby Hong Kong, hip Hong Kong cinema, and Hong Kong’s wealthy businessmen. Similarly, because of Hong Kong’s relative openness, Cantonese has long been quicker at integrating new foreign words and phrases.

Some Cantonese speakers claim that using the language can get them better customer service. Vivian Li, a financial consultant working in Guangzhou, relates: “A hotel I was staying at in Shanghai was doing loud remodeling while I was trying to sleep. When I called the front desk using Mandarin to complain, they refused to do anything. But when my coworker talked to them in Cantonese, they agreed to delay the remodeling work.”

But as the mainland’s economy takes off, attitudes seem to be changing in line with the ads. Professor C.M. Si has been teaching Mandarin at the University of Hong Kong for 22 years and says he’s noticed changes in local attitudes. It used to be that, “If you speak Cantonese compared to Putonghua, people will pay attention to you and think that you are a big spender.” Now it’s the other way around, he says.

With the number of native Hong Kongers in Si’s classes rising and about a third of his graduates finding work on the mainland, Mandarin’s prestige is on the rise in Hong Kong. It is this language popularity that analysts and professors like Professor Sheng Ding of Bloomberg University say are marking China’s increasing global “soft power” and influence. ①

