

# A Review of “Sichuan Mandarin” in the Studies of Eastern Sichuan Dialects

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**Abstract:** The promotion of Mandarin has a great impact on the use and protection of dialects, but in return, the local dialects are also influencing or even transforming Mandarin, and thus Mandarin with strong regional characteristics has been formed in many dialect areas. “Sichuan Mandarin” mainly refers to the non-standard Mandarin spoken by Sichuan people due to the influence of some language elements, their coordination and the law of change. Taking Eastern Sichuan dialects as an example, this paper reviews the relevant studies and probes into the phonetic features of “Sichuan Mandarin” from the perspective of phonetics. At the same time, the article also discusses the following: (1) the popularization of Mandarin should be implemented appropriately; (2) dialects are supposed to be protected well; and (3) an inclusive and positive attitude should be taken towards “Sichuan Mandarin.”

**Keywords:** Review; Sichuan Mandarin; Eastern Sichuan dialects

**Online publication:** November 22, 2024

## 1. Introduction

In a broad sense, Eastern Sichuan refers to Chongqing, Guang’an, Dazhou and Bazhong. In a narrow sense, the Eastern Sichuan refers to the three prefecture-level cities of Dazhou, Guang’an and Bazhong and 16 counties under their jurisdiction. The Eastern Sichuan dialects here refer to the dialects in the narrow sense. The specific areas are Guang’an City, and 5 counties in the Guang’an area, Dazhou City, and 7 counties in Dazhou area, and Bazhong City and 4 counties in Bazhong area.

Some regional dialects have a long history and are highly distinctive. However, with the national promotion of Mandarin and the implementation of standardized Chinese characters, it is difficult for people in these regions to get rid of the influence of dialects when learning Mandarin, which results in the “local Mandarin” with a mixture of Mandarin and dialects<sup>[1]</sup>. Thus, this paper takes the dialects of Eastern Sichuan as an example and mainly explores the new phenomenon of “Sichuan Mandarin” from the perspective of phonetics. The purpose of analyzing “Sichuan Mandarin” is to recognize the phonetic differences between it and Mandarin, in the hope of promoting the promotion of Mandarin in the region.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Studies about Eastern Sichuan dialects

In the existing studies, there is not much research regarding the Eastern Sichuan dialects as a whole, and the research mainly focuses on the phonetics and vocabulary of the Eastern Sichuan dialects. There are four tones in the Eastern Sichuan dialects, namely “yinping,” “yangping,” “shangsheng” and “qusheng”<sup>[2]</sup>. There are 19 initial consonants and 37 vowels. The “Sichuan Mandarin” phenomenon is viewed from the phonetics of the Eastern Sichuan dialects<sup>[3]</sup>. Vocabulary research is also done by taking traceability analysis on some special dialect words that are still widely used in Eastern Sichuan up to now<sup>[4]</sup>. Some scholars explain the character, phonetics and meaning of part of the words in Sichuan dialects and its application in teaching<sup>[5]</sup>. Some studies explore the subjective well-being of residents by using Mandarin<sup>[6]</sup>. However, it’s difficult to understand and grasp the internal situation of the Eastern Sichuan dialects through these macro and sporadic studies. Therefore, it is necessary to review and sort out the research on the municipal and County dialects of Dazhou, Guang’an and Bazhong regions involved in the Eastern Sichuan dialects in the future.

### 2.2. Studies about “Sichuan Mandarin”

The study of the “Sichuan Mandarin” phenomenon is a relatively recent phenomenon. The main opinions are as follows: Han Y (2021) thinks that “Sichuan Mandarin” mainly refers to that Sichuan people cannot speak standard Mandarin and cannot get rid of Sichuan dialects in phonetics and words, either<sup>[7]</sup>. Feng C *et al.* (2019) point out that the promotion of Mandarin impacts dialects<sup>[8]</sup>. Meanwhile, dialects will also have local advantages to influence or even “transform” Mandarin. Zeng C (2019) believes that “Sichuan Mandarin” is mainly characterized by “Sichuan dialects vocabulary and Mandarin intonation”<sup>[9]</sup>. Based on the existing opinions and the analysis of the phonetics records of some people with strong accents of “Sichuan Mandarin”, Ma J (2024) believes that “Sichuan Mandarin” mainly refers to the non-standard Mandarin spoken by Sichuan people under the influence of some language elements, their coordination and the law of change<sup>[10]</sup>. The language elements here include phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and so on.

### 2.3. Summary

#### 2.3.1. The characteristics of research of Sichuan dialects and “Sichuan Mandarin”

On the whole, the study of Eastern Sichuan dialects and “Sichuan Mandarin” mainly presents the following characteristics: (1) The research content is most mature in the study of dialects phonetics, and the study of phonetics covers almost all counties and cities; (2) The research team is growing, and many universities’ doctors and masters are also involved in the research; (3) Comprehensive studies of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar have been gradually emerging; (4) There are some new methods in the study of phonetics. A few studies have adopted experimental phonetics to study tones.

#### 2.3.2. Problems in the existing studies

There are some problems in the existing studies of Eastern Sichuan dialects considering various research in this direction.

- (1) Standing on the whole view of the Eastern Sichuan region, most of the regions are involved in phonetic studies, but only a few cities and counties have systematic studies on vocabulary and grammar<sup>[11]</sup>.
- (2) The research content is extremely unbalanced. Most of the research on the Eastern Sichuan dialects focuses on phonetic research, which shows that while the number of studies is large and the system is

strong, that of vocabulary and grammar, however, is relatively weak and fails to be systematic.

- (3) The research method is traditional. To study phonetics, scholars mainly use synchronic description and diachronic comparison. This method of field investigation can no longer meet the needs of dialect research. The systematic study of dialects also requires mutual reference and supplement in research methods to be innovative in the study of Sichuan dialects.

### **2.3.3. Research direction suggestion**

Given the uneven regional distribution of the study of the Eastern Sichuan dialects, future research is supposed to find the differences in the same geographical distribution and fill the gaps. Then, as for the research content, enough attention should be paid to the lexical grammar of the dialects of counties and cities in the east of Sichuan. Scholars can combine the historical level theory of dialects, synchronic study with diachronic depth, make full use of the existing synchronic research results of the Eastern Sichuan dialects, explore the history of its formation, and confirm the synchronic phenomenon with historical documents.

## **3. Phonological system of “Sichuan Mandarin”**

The “Sichuan Mandarin” phonetic system is the sum of all kinds of “Sichuan Mandarin” phonetic elements, their coordination, and changing rules. The combination of “Sichuan Mandarin” factors, the matching relationship of sound, rhyme and tone and the change rule, the stress tone, the characteristic of accent, etc., all belong to the category of its phonetic system<sup>[12]</sup>. “Sichuan Mandarin” is formed based on the integration of Mandarin and Sichuan dialects, with Mandarin phonetics as the standard sound. Based on previous research, this paper deals with the consonants and vowels of the Eastern Sichuan dialects and their combination, tone and phonetic changes, but the lexical and grammatical aspects are not discussed here.

### **3.1. Consonants of “Sichuan Mandarin” and their characteristics**

The consonants of the Eastern Sichuan dialects are different from Mandarin in many ways and have their own characteristics, but some of them do not affect the people in this area to speak Mandarin, so only a few obvious characteristics are discussed here.

The velar “h” is indistinguishable from the labiodental “f.” In the Eastern Sichuan dialects area, “h” and “f” are mostly mixed. Some native speakers pronounce “h” as “f,” for example: “huang” (yellow) as “fang,” “hong” (red) as “fong.” Mostly, “f” is read as “hu,” for example, “chi huan” (eat a meal), “huang bian” (convenient), “huo ze” (otherwise), and “san hu tian” (dog days). As we know from the above, “h” and “f” are used interchangeably, and in most situations “f” is read as “hu.”

Most people pronounce the voiced nasal “n” on the tip of the tongue as the lateral approximant “l.” For people in Eastern Sichuan, it is difficult to pronounce “n.” For example, “shui niu” (buffalo) is often read as “shui liu,” and “nao nu” (angry) is often read as “lao lu.” It is also found that the two cannot be distinguished, for example, “nong” (dragon) and “nong” (agriculture) can be read as both “long” and “nong,” but it is more widely accepted that “n” is often misread as “l” in Eastern Sichuan dialects, while “l” is rarely read as “n,” and the cause of this phonetic phenomenon remains to be further explored.

The supradialectals “z, c, s” are mixed with the retroflex “zh, ch, sh.” In “Sichuan Mandarin” in the dialects area of Eastern Sichuan, people cannot distinguish the supradialectals very well, and most of them pronounce the retroflex as the supradialectals. For example, “zhong” (middle), “chi” (eat), “shan” (hill)

are pronounced as “zong,” “ci,” “san” respectively. At the same time, due to overcorrection in the process of learning Mandarin, some people will read the retroflex as the supradialectals, such as “fang si” (impudent) into “fang shi,” “zi si” (selfish) into “zi shi,” “za zhi” (magazine) into “zha zhi.”

Compared with Mandarin, the above three characteristics are more outstanding. So, the local Mandarin of the region (“Sichuan Mandarin”) has a slightly difference. Here are 22 initial consonants for “Sichuan Mandarin” (plus zero initials):

- (1) Plosives: (a) unaspirated: b (bilabial), d (alveolar), g (velar); (b) aspirated: p, t, k.
- (2) Affricates: (a) unaspirated: zh/z (retroflex), j (palatal fricative); (b) aspirated: ch/c (retroflex), q (palatal fricative).
- (3) Fricatives: (a) voiceless: f (labiodental), sh/s (retroflex), x (palatal fricative), h (velar); (b) voiced: r/Z (retroflex).
- (4) Nasal: m (bilabial).
- (5) Lateral: l (alveolar).

The initial consonant system of “Sichuan Mandarin” is roughly the same as that of Mandarin, and its characteristics are mainly reflected in the mixed use of some initials, and it is this mixed use that forms the non-descript “Sichuan Mandarin.”

### **3.2. Vowels of “Sichuan Mandarin” and their characteristics**

Compared with the initial consonant system, the vowels of the Eastern Sichuan dialects are quite different from those of Mandarin. There are 13 nasal vowels in Sichuan dialects, 3 less than that in Mandarin (16 vowels), which are “ing,” “eng,” and “ueng.” In conclusion, the main characteristics of “Sichuan Mandarin” vowels can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The back nasal vowels “ing,” “eng” are respectively included in “in” and “en” rhyme, such as the pronunciation “yin xiong” (hero), “xin qu” (interest), “den” (wait), “hen shan” (Mountain Heng). (2) The use of front and back vowels is mixed.
- (3) Sometimes “ueng” is misspelled as “ong,” such as “lao wong” read as “lao wong.”

### **3.3. Tone change and its characteristics**

The change of tone mainly depends on pitch, and also on length. Tone is the actual phonetics of syllables and the specific form of tone change. Through the comparison of tonality between the Eastern Sichuan dialects and Mandarin, one can know the tone characteristics of the Eastern Sichuan dialects. At the same time, the tonality of “Sichuan Mandarin” forms based on the convergence of Mandarin can also be assumed boldly.

The “yiping” dialects in Eastern Sichuan are the same as the Mandarin dialects, both of which have a high flat tone, but the tone value 44 is slightly lower than that of the Mandarin dialects 55. Then, “yangping” in Mandarin is a rising tone 35, while the Eastern Sichuan dialect is a semi-falling tone 21. In “shangsheng” and “qusheng,” the opposite is true, and the high falling tone in Eastern Sichuan dialects tones is 52, just a bit higher than the Mandarin falling tone 51. It is found that the disadvantage of the tone of “Sichuan Mandarin” is that “yangping” and “shangsheng” cannot be told apart very completely, and the majority of “shangsheng” is incomplete. The tone of “shangsheng” in Mandarin should be reduced before they are raised, and sometimes the sound at the end of the “Sichuan Mandarin” fails to rise enough; sometimes it rushes to rise before completely landing, thus is easily confused with the tone of “yangping.”

## 4. Critical thinking of “Sichuan Mandarin”

This paper provides a literature review on “Sichuan Eastern dialects” and Sichuan Mandarin” and then introduces the systems of consonants, vowels, and tones of “Sichuan Mandarin” and its outstanding characteristics. It can be found that great achievements have been made in the popularization of Mandarin and the merger of local dialects and Mandarin, but there are also many problems.

### 4.1. The promotion of Mandarin and the protection of dialects

For a long time, China has been vigorously promoting Mandarin, especially in the education system. One problem concerning people is that Mandarin education in primary and secondary schools is not in place, especially in schools in rural areas where Mandarin popularization is difficult to carry out<sup>[13]</sup>. The main reason may lie in long-term dialect communication, that is the lack of language environment to speak Mandarin. Additionally, in some primary and secondary schools in Sichuan, teachers and students only use non-standard Mandarin in Chinese classes, but out of class they usually do not speak Mandarin, which makes it difficult for students to speak standard Mandarin after entering the university. Thus, to create a language environment in which Mandarin is spoken, Mandarin teaching should be incorporated into the evaluation system of teachers<sup>[14]</sup>. At the same time, teachers and students are supposed to do some regular training in Mandarin to promote the popularization of Mandarin and promote communication with people.

Remarkable results have been achieved in the promotion of Mandarin, which deserves recognition. Some dialects are slowly being forgotten, which makes people introspect. Although dialects have a long history and solid foundation, they are likely to disappear in the future under the background of accelerating urbanization and promoting Mandarin nationwide. In this regard, while promoting Mandarin, special attention should also be paid to the protection of dialects.

### 4.2. Attitude towards “Sichuan Mandarin”

“Sichuan Mandarin,” as the result of the integration of Mandarin and Sichuan dialects, owes the language properties of both Sichuan dialects and non-standard Mandarin. To “Sichuan Mandarin,” an inclusive attitude is suggested. The reasons are as follows:

- (1) “Sichuan Mandarin” is not artificially created, but it has the soil for its existence<sup>[15]</sup>. In other words, there are a large number of users, and it should not and cannot be eliminated.
- (2) “Sichuan Mandarin” has its cultural connotation and value. For example, TV programs and songs about “Sichuan Mandarin” are very popular among people, which can be verified in the “conscious Sichuan Mandarin.”

To sum up, the attitude towards “Sichuan Mandarin” should be positive and inclusive, and the popularization of Mandarin can be done and the dialect can be protected well by studying it.

## 5. Conclusion

“Sichuan Mandarin” mainly refers to the non-standard Mandarin spoken by Sichuan people under the influence of some language elements, their coordination, and the law of change. This paper first reviews the previous studies on the Eastern Sichuan dialects and Mandarin, and then takes the Eastern Sichuan dialects as an example to discuss the phonetic features of “Sichuan Mandarin” from the aspects of sound, rhyme and tonality, which roughly explains the phonetic characteristics of “Sichuan Mandarin” and the differences between “Sichuan Mandarin” and Mandarin. In terms of the research content, enough attention should be paid

to the lexical grammar of the dialects of counties and cities in Eastern Sichuan. Finally, based on the opinions of various scholars, the paper also gives some thoughts. The promotion of Mandarin should be insisted on for a long time, especially in the Western and Southern dialects areas. Besides, long-term measures should be taken to protect dialects. Lastly, it is a must to take an inclusive attitude towards “Sichuan Mandarin.”

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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