Abstract: The recent publication of the novel *Magnificent Flowers* (*Fan Hua* 繁花) has attracted attention not only because of critical acclaim and market success, but also because of its use of Shanghainese. While *Magnificent Flowers* is the most notable recent book to make substantial use of Shanghainese, it is not alone, and the recent increase in the number of books that are written partially or even entirely in Shanghainese raises the question of whether written Shanghainese may develop a role in Chinese print culture, especially that of Shanghai and the surrounding region, similar to that attained by written Cantonese in and around Hong Kong.

This study examines the history of written Shanghainese in print culture. Growing out of the older written Suzhounese tradition, during the early decades of the twentieth century a distinctly Shanghainese form of written Wu emerged in the print culture of Shanghai, and Shanghainese continued to play a role in Shanghai’s print culture through the twentieth century, albeit quite a modest one. In the first decade of the twenty-first century Shanghainese began to receive increased public attention and to play a greater role in Shanghai media, and since 2009 there has been an increase in the number of books and other kinds of texts that use Shanghainese and also the degree to which they use it.

This study argues that in important ways this phenomenon does parallel the growing role played by written Cantonese in Hong Kong, but that it also differs in several critical regards. The most important difference is that, to date, written Shanghainese appears almost exclusively in texts that look back to “old Shanghai” and/or to traditional alley life in Shanghai, and that a role of the type written Cantonese has in Hong Kong is not likely to be attained unless or until Shanghainese texts that are associated with modern urban Shanghai life, especially youth culture, begin to appear.
Keywords: Shanghainese, Wu, literature, dialect, topolect

Abstract: Recently, the novel Magnificent Flowers (Fan Hua) has captured significant attention in China, largely because of its use of Shanghainese. The novel portrays the daily lives of typical Shanghai residents in the 1960s and the 1980s. In addition to being critically acclaimed, the novel has also been commercially successful, and is now even being made into a movie by the famous Hong Kong film director Wong Kar Wai. One feature of the novel that has attracted considerable attention is its rather liberal use of Shanghainese. Granted, most of the text is written in Mandarin and is readily intelligible to readers throughout China. However, on virtually every page there are words that are distinctively Shanghainese, many of which are not familiar to Chinese readers who do not speak Shanghainese. This liberal use of Shanghainese in a novel is surprising because, since the founding of the People's Republic, it has been virtually unheard of for a novel published in China to make heavy use of Shanghainese or, for that matter, any southern variety of Chinese that differs substantially...
from Mandarin (Putonghua). Granted, some well-known novels like Zhou Libo’s (周立波) The Hurricane (Bao Feng Zhou Yu 暴风骤雨) and Great Changes in the Mountains (Shan Xiang Ju Bian 山乡巨变) make considerable use of regional vocabulary, but generally such novels draw on varieties of Chinese that are not too distant from Mandarin, at least not nearly as distant as the Wu varieties. One can also find a few examples of novels published in the mainland that use vocabulary from southern varieties of Chinese that are quite different from Mandarin; for example, Lin Yongrui’s (林永锐) Notes of a Farmer (Zuotianren suoshi 作田人琐事) makes considerable use of Chaoshanese (Teochew), but it has also attracted little attention and few readers.\footnote{While there are far fewer texts written in Chaoshan than in Cantonese or varieties of Wu, there is a pre-modern tradition of writing “songbooks” (ge ce 歌册) partially in Chaoshan; many missionary texts in Chaoshan were also produced. On the latter, see Snow and Chen (2015).} What has not happened since 1949 in mainland China is the appearance of a novel that makes generous use of a regional variety of Chinese that differs significantly from Mandarin and also enjoys a high level of public attention and market success.

Of course, beyond the Chinese mainland there are precedents for regional varieties of Chinese playing a significant role in print culture, the most obvious example being found in Hong Kong, where the use of Cantonese in many kinds of written texts, including novels, has become quite common. For example, while popular works set in modern Hong Kong such as Joseph Yao’s (邱世文) Weekend on the Bed (Zhouri Chuang Shang 周日床上) or Chen Qingjia’s (陈庆嘉) Diary of the Little Man (Xiao Nanren Zhouji 小男人周记) have never received the kind of critical acclaim the Magnificent Flowers has, they sold a great many copies despite the fact that much or all of the text was written in Cantonese. Even though the world of written Chinese in Hong Kong is dominated by Mandarin, written Cantonese has emerged as a second written language that appears in a wide variety of text genres, including different kinds of works of fiction (Snow 2004). To some extent a similar phenomenon is found in Taiwan. Though written Taiwanese does not play as significant a role in the island’s print culture as written Cantonese does in Hong Kong, contemporary Taiwan fiction does sometimes include Taiwanese vocabulary, and some authors have produced texts written entirely in Taiwanese, such as Song Zelai’s (宋泽莱) short story “The Violent Protest of Damao City” (抗暴个打猫市) (Snow 2004; Gunn 2006). So, precedents do exist outside mainland China.

The use of regional vocabulary in Magnificent Flowers is also somewhat less surprising because the novel was published in Shanghai and the regional
language in question is Shanghainese. For more than a century now Shanghainese has been one of the most prestigious and widely spoken varieties of Chinese, and also one of the most publically visible. Shanghainese is frequently encountered in the media in a variety of ways, such as television programs that are partially or fully in Shanghainese; it is also encountered in Shanghai bookstores where one can find many textbooks and reference works for learners of Shanghainese, or books that introduce Shanghainese sayings. Also, over the last decade in Shanghai the role of Shanghainese been the focus of substantial public discussion, and many have advocated that Shanghainese play a greater role in public life, or at least that more attention be given to ensuring that it does not gradually wither away. All of this suggests that Shanghai provides, by mainland Chinese standards, relatively fertile soil in which a written regional language might grow. One is led to ask: Is it possible that Shanghainese will come to be a secondary written language in and around Shanghai, developing a role similar to the role written Cantonese plays in and around Hong Kong?

In this paper we will explore this question by examining the history of written Shanghainese. The specific questions we will address are:

- When and where did a distinct Shanghainese version of written Wu emerge out of the older (primarily Suzhounese) written Wu tradition?

- How significant is the current role of written Shanghainese in regional and even national print culture?

- Is there reason to believe written Shanghainese could come to play as large a social role as written Cantonese?

In this paper we will first briefly discuss the early story of written Suzhounese in Shanghai, and then examine the gradual emergence of a form of written Wu that is more distinctly Shanghainese. Then we will trace the development of written Shanghainese from the 1940s into the early 2000s, and also present an overview of the growing interest in and support for Shanghainese that occurred in Shanghai in the 1990s and 2000s. Next we will discuss an upswing in the use of written Shanghainese that began around 2010 as manifested in published materials, especially books. Finally we will conclude by discussing the question of whether the conditions are ripe for Shanghainese to move into the domain of writing to a degree similar to the social role of written Cantonese in Hong Kong.
2 From written Suzhounese to written Shanghainese

Linguist Qian Nairong (钱乃荣) points out that Shanghainese has been used in written texts for well over a century, early appearances taking place in late Qing dynasty in texts as diverse as the novel Which Classic? (He Dian 何典) and Bible translations such as James Summers’ 1853 Shanghainese version of the Gospel of John (1989). However, well into the 1900s, even though Shanghai increasingly came to be the geographical center of written Wu, Suzhounese remained the most commonly used variety of Wu in written texts. This is seen most clearly in Suzhounese courtesan novels such as Shanghai Flowers (Hai Shang Hua liezhuan 海上花列传 1892), A Shanghai Swan’s Traces in the Snow (Hai Tian Hong Xue Ji 海天鸿雪记 1899), and Nine Tailed Turtles (Jiu Wei gui 九尾龟 1906). These novels were all published in Shanghai, usually first in serial form in Shanghai tabloid newspapers and then later as books, and they were also explicitly set in urban Shanghai, even mentioning specific locations in the city (Des Forges 2007). However, the variety of Wu used in dialogue is almost always Suzhounese rather than Shanghainese (Des Forges 2007; Snow et al. 2018).

Granted, Suzhounese and Shanghainese are very closely related, the main difference between them lying in pronunciation differences that disappear when they are written in Chinese characters. Even most of the distinctly Wu vocabulary – in other words, the vocabulary that is distinct to Wu and not generally used in Mandarin - in these two varieties overlaps. However, there are also words that the two varieties do not share in common; for example, in Shanghainese the use of 侬 for the word “you” and of 阿拉 for “we/I” is not found in Suzhounese. In this paper we will define written Shanghainese as a written variety of Wu which shows a consistent preference for Shanghainese words in cases where the vocabulary of Shanghainese differs from that of written Suzhounese.

One reason the courtesan novels used Suzhounese in dialogues was realism, reflecting the fact that the most popular courtesans were from in and around Suzhou, so any courtesan who aspired to elite status in the profession used Suzhounese. Another reason Suzhounese was used in courtesan novels was that in the early 1900s the variety that we now know as Shanghainese really hadn’t formed yet. Of course long before the 1900s there was a local variety of Wu spoken in the area in and around Shanghai, a variety which Qian refers to as Old Shanghainese (老上海话). However, during the later 1800s and early 1900s there
was massive immigration into Shanghai from the surrounding regions, and the varieties of Wu spoken in places such as Suzhou and Ningbo had a significant impact on the local language. By the 1920s a variety which Qian calls New Shanghainese (新上海话), a new amalgam bringing in elements from many varieties of Wu, was taking shape in Shanghai (Qian 2007). When we consider this point, it is less surprising that early Wu texts in Shanghai such as *Shanghai Flowers* had a much stronger Suzhounese than Shanghainese flavor; the persistence of Suzhounese into later novels such as *Romance on Hu River* (*Hujiang Fengyue* Zhuan 沪江风月传 1921) is testimony both to the lingering prestige of Suzhounese and the strength of the convention of using Suzhounese in courtesan novels. Even in the 1939 novel *The Auntie in the Back Room* (*Tingzi Jian Saosao* 亭子间嫂嫂), we see the influence of this convention. This novel tells the story of a down-on-her-luck courtesan in Shanghai, and differs from the earlier courtesan novels in that it focuses more on social issues than daily life in the world of the pleasure quarters. While the dialogue in *Auntie in the Back Room* is generally in Mandarin rather than Wu, the main character of the novel is explicitly identified as a speaker of Suzhounese, and the Mandarin dialogue is peppered with Suzhounese words.

Another place where written Suzhounese appeared in pre-modern Shanghai was the pages of tabloid newspapers (小报). First appearing in Shanghai in the late 1890s, these tabloids were designed to entertain rather than inform, and contained mainly “humorous stories and news from the Shanghai entertainment world” (Des Forges 2007: 108; see also Li 2006; Wang 2012). Many tabloid newspapers carried serial fiction, including not only many of the courtesan novels mentioned above but also other serial fiction columns that were never published as books. For example, in the October 1, 1901 issue of the tabloid *Splendid World* (*Shijie Fanhua Bao* 世界繁华报) one finds a novel called *Diary of Viewing Shanghai Flowers* (*Hai Shang Kan Hua Riji* 海上看花日记) in which, as with the many other courtesan novels, the dialogue is in Suzhounese. Written Suzhounese was also occasionally found in advertising; for example, a cigarette ad in the tabloid *Sound of Wu* (*Wu Sheng* 吴声) (March 3, 1923) notes that their product is “來得格鮮明”² (very smartly packaged). While the number of advertisements that use Wu is not especially large, nor is the total amount of Wu vocabulary in advertisements very great, this phenomenon is still interesting because of its similarity to what happened in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, where advertising was one of the earliest types of text in which written Cantonese appeared (Snow 2004).

2 Underlined characters are Suzhounese or – for later texts – Shanghainese.
More written Wu was found in columns that contained light entertaining essays. For example, the April 13, 1927 issue of a tabloid called Speaking Nonsense (Xia San Hua Si 瞎三話四) contains multiple columns with lines that contain Wu words, such as 請借鑑做一歇 (Would you please do it for awhile), 吃飽仔飯 (eat until full) and 以後就沒有人相信你閒話了 (in the future nobody will believe your words). Wu vocabulary plays a major role not only in these examples but also in the name of the tabloid itself, a phrase that is common in Wu but not in Mandarin. However, the sentences that contain Wu vocabulary are often actually a mix of Mandarin and Wu, and contain some words (such as 你 in the last example above) that are distinctly Mandarin rather than Wu. By the late 1940s this kind of essay had even turned into a distinct genre called “Literature At Your Side” (身边文学) (Meng 2005), and often the language used in these columns contained not only Mandarin and Wu but also elements of Classical Chinese (see Qian 2007: 222–3, for an example). A very similar writing style called saam kap dai (三级第) also became popular in Hong Kong tabloids starting in the late 1940s, albeit making use of Cantonese rather than Wu (Snow 2004).

Even though the texts mentioned above were published in Shanghai, the variety of Wu used was generally Suzhounese. However, during these years we also see evidence of an increasing awareness of Shanghainese as a distinct variety in its own right. One place we see this is the popularity of a type of column that began appearing in Shanghai newspapers in the 1920s that introduced new local phrases to readers (Meng 2005). Generally titled something like “Local Phrases in Pictures” (suyu tushuo 俗语图说) these articles consisted of three elements: (1) a new phrase serving as the title of the article; (2) a short text explaining the phrase and its use; and (3) a picture illustrating the use of the phrase. Normally the text of the article was written in Mandarin, and contained little or no Shanghainese; however, the phrase used as the title for each article generally was Shanghainese. Also often the names of the columns explicitly stated an interest in new phrases identified with the life and culture of Shanghai; for example, the column Pictorial Dictionary of New Shanghainese Words (Huyu Xincidian Tushuo 沪语新词典图说) which appeared regularly in The Society Daily (Shehui Ribao 社会日报) in 1933. Such columns can be taken as evidence of growing interest in Shanghainese as a distinct language.

It seems reasonable to claim that by the late 1940s a distinctly Shanghainese version of written Wu had emerged, and one place where we can see this clearly is Ni Haishu’s (倪海曙) 1950 book The Zage Longdong Collection (Zage Longdong Ji 杂格咙咚集), a collection of songs, poetry, stories and scripts, many of which are written in Wu. What makes this collection significant is that in the preface Ni explicitly states that some of the texts in the book are written in Suzhounese but others in Shanghainese. Furthermore, the texts which are labeled as
Shanghainese generally contain vocabulary that is definitely Shanghainese rather than Suzhounese. For example, a Shanghai opera script entitled “Visit from the Police” (Jingcha Fangwen 警察访问) contains lines like the following (page 29):³

(Woman) Who are you?
(Man) I’m with the police station.
(Woman) The police station isn’t here, you’ve found the wrong place.
(Man) I’m with the police station coming to talk to you.

In these lines, the Shanghainese words 侬 (you) and 阿 (I) are used in preference to the Suzhounese equivalents 們 and 我. Ni’s book is significant because it explicitly distinguishes between written Suzhounese and written Shanghainese, and even has somewhat more texts in Shanghainese than in Suzhounese.

During the 1950s and 1960s we also see Shanghainese being used in other kinds of opera scripts, especially scripts for Shanghai Opera (Huju 沪剧) and Farce Opera (Huaxixi 滑稽戏). Shanghai Opera grew out of rural folksong traditions in the region around Shanghai, and in the early 1900s developed into a form of urban opera focusing on modern life in Shanghai (Qian 1989; Stock 2003). Farce Opera developed somewhat later and consisted mainly of comic dialogues (Qian 1989). In their early years, both forms of opera relied heavily on improvisation rather than carefully planned scripts, but eventually scripts were also published, and these made generous use of Shanghainese. For example, the 1957 Farce Opera booklet San Mao Goes into Business (San Mao Xue Shengyi 三毛学生意) contains the following lines (page 3):

老船夫：三毛，我在船上搭儂講仔交关閒话，还嘸嘸没同儂过，儂到上海來做啥?
三毛：我來找伲隔壁头格阿姐。
老船夫：哪能弄出隔壁头阿姐?
三毛：是我郷下的隔壁头阿姐。

³ In the sample text below and anywhere else where we directly quote Chinese texts that were originally in traditional Chinese characters we have chosen to retain the original characters. Otherwise we use simplified Chinese characters.
(Old boatman) San Mao, I was talking with you on the boat about a lot of things, but I didn’t ask – what did you came to Shanghai for?
(San Mao) I came to look for the woman who lives next door.
(Old boatman) What woman who lives next door?
(San Mao) The woman who lives next door in my hometown.

While most of the Wu terms in this opera script are found in both Suzhounese and Shanghainese, some are distinctly Shanghainese, for example, 侬 and 侬(which appears later in the passage). Similar use of Shanghainese can be found in the 1958 *Burning the Tofu Store* (*Huoshao Doufu Dian* 火烧豆腐店), a collection of Farce Opera scripts performed by the famous actor Jiang Xiaoxiao (江笑笑).

Written Shanghainese could also be found in Shanghai Opera scripts, even into the 1960s. For example, in the 1964 collection *New Shanghai Operas* (*Huju Xinxi Kao* 沪剧新戏考) the introductions to each script are written in Mandarin, as are some of the scripts themselves. However, some scripts are clearly written in Shanghainese, containing lines like the following (page 5):

甲：(唱)老太婆，侬看呀，迭顶大桥造得多神气。
乙：老头子，这顶桥我熟来，在啥地方看见过格。
(A): (Singing) Old woman, look, this bridge is built so impressively.
(B): Old man, I know that bridge, I’ve seen it somewhere before.

Here we again see the not only a number of Wu words but also the distinctive Shanghainese 侬.

It seems safe to say that, at least in a few types of texts, by the early years of the People’s Republic a distinctly Shanghainese form of written Wu – what we might call Wu with a pronounced Shanghainese accent – had become established.

## 3 The quiet years

In 1956 the Chinese government formally began the policy of promoting Putonghua (Mandarin) throughout China, and in the following decades it was relatively rare to see local varieties of Chinese in print. However, as Qian (1989) reminds us, Shanghainese didn’t disappear entirely from the world of printed texts, and during these decades one can catch glimpses of it in dialogues in works of fiction. One work mentioned by Qian as containing Shanghainese is the 1957
novel *Shanghai Morning (Shanghaide Zaochen 上海的早晨)* by Zhou Erfu (周而复), where one does indeed occasionally find typically Shanghainese words such as 事体 (matter). Another work Qian mentions, Ye Xin’s (叶辛) (1980) *Our Young Generation (Women Zheyidai Nianqingren 我们这一代年轻人)*, makes somewhat more generous use of Shanghainese, on occasion even using several Shanghainese words in a single dialogue passage. For example on page 79 a short dialogue between several young men about someone who has been arrested contains several Shanghainese terms such as 不懂经 (not streetwise) and 发叶子 (to play cards for money). However, this particular passage is very unusual; more typically one encounters one Shanghainese word every few pages. Also, when Shanghainese terms are used, they are sometimes placed in quotation marks, and footnotes with Mandarin explanations are also provided the first time most of these terms are used.

In contrast, Hu Kao’s (胡考) (1982) novel *The Bund (Shanghai Tan 上海滩)* does not explain Shanghainese words, nor does it mark them in any special way. However, as in *Our Young Generation*, use of Shanghainese terms in the book is relatively rare, generally well under 1% of the words on a given page, and even the sentences in which Shanghainese appears are primarily written in Mandarin. Take, for example, the following dialogue sentence (page 6): 你发你的财，我过我的日脚. (You go make your money, I’ll pass my days.) While the sentence uses the typically Shanghainese term 日脚 (days) in preference to the Mandarin 日子, in the rest of the sentence distinctly Mandarin words such as 你 (you) and 的 (possessive marker) are used rather than the Shanghainese equivalents.

Cheng Naishan’s (程乃珊) (1988) novella *Daughters (Nüer Jing 女儿经)* uses somewhat more Shanghainese; on virtually every page at least one or two Shanghainese words are found and it is not unusual to find several. Furthermore, unlike most of the cases mentioned above, many of these words are distinctly Shanghainese and not found in Suzhounese. While the text does use words like 今朝 (today), 铜钿 (money), and 勿 (no, not) that are also found in Suzhounese, it also uses words such as 伊拉 (they) and 阿拉 (us) that are distinctly Shanghainese. Also, while Mandarin explanations are provided in footnotes for some of these words, most are not glossed and readers are clearly expected to know them or at least be able to figure them out. This is not the only work in which Cheng Naishan uses Shanghainese; other novellas in the same collection as *Daughters* also have some Shanghainese terms, though generally not as many as in the title story; also later books such as the 2003 *Shanghai Lady (Shanghai Lady 上海 Lady)* also use Shanghainese terms in similar ways.

As should be obvious from the discussion above, the works mentioned by Qian do not actually have very much Shanghainese in them, certainly nothing
remotely approaching the level of Wu vocabulary use found in the earlier courtesan novels, in which sometimes 20% or more of the text consisted of distinctly Wu words. Also, even when occasional Shanghainese words are used, some of the authors felt it necessary or desirable to mark these in special ways. However, Qian reminds us that even though Shanghainese was rare in written texts between the 1950s and the 2000s, the tradition never vanished entirely, and for authors writing about Shanghai there always remained a pull toward creating a sense of linguistic realism by bringing Shanghainese onto the written page.

4 A growing role for Shanghainese

Into the 1980s, regional varieties of Chinese such as Shanghainese barely had any role in what we might call public or official life. Of course many people spoke Shanghainese in their daily lives, but it was relatively rare to encounter Shanghainese in print culture or the media, and it certainly played no officially acknowledged role in the education system.

However, in the 1990s and especially after 2000 this began to change in Shanghai, first slowly and then at an accelerated pace. One of the first spheres where we can see this is the publication of language textbooks. Until recent years, in most parts of China there have been relatively few textbooks and other kinds of learning materials that are intended to help people learn local varieties of Chinese; in fact, in most parts of China – including areas where the local language differs considerably from Mandarin – this is still the case. However, by the 1990s Shanghainese textbooks such as Three Hundred Putonghua and Shanghainese Sentences (Putonghua Shanghainhua Huihua 300 Ju 普通话上海话会话 300 句 1990) and Learn to Speak Shanghainese (Xueshuo Shanghainhua 学说上海话 1994) had begun appearing, and after 2000 the trickle turned into a flood; our undoubtedly incomplete collection of Shanghainese textbooks published between 2000 and 2015 includes 17 textbooks, many of them accompanied by tapes, CDs or other audio-visual learning materials. In this same period an increased number of dictionaries and other Shanghainese reference materials were also published. In mainland China the only other regional Chinese language for which so many textbooks and dictionaries are available is Cantonese.

In recent years many books have also been published that carry on the pre-1949 tradition of newspaper columns that introduce interesting Shanghainese phrases; books like Local Shanghainese Phrases Explained in Pictures (Shanghai Suyu Tushuo 上海俗语图说 2004), Old Shanghainese Phrases Explained in
Pictures (Lao Shangahi Suyu Tushuo 老上海俗语图说 2004), and Shanghainese That Can’t Be Written (Xie Bu Chu De Shanghaithua 写不出的上海话 2011) introduce interesting Shanghainese phrases in more or less the same way that similar newspaper columns did in the 1940s.

Another sphere in which Shanghainese has become a more visible feature of public life is the broadcast media. While most television programs in Shanghai continue to be in Mandarin, interested viewers have also been able to find a selection of Shanghainese programs such as Happy Apartment (Kaixin Gongyu 开心公寓), Three-Person Spicy Soup (San Ren Malatang 三人麻辣烫), Let’s Sound Off (Ala Pangpang Xiang 阿拉乒乓响), and Everyone Will Help You (Dajia Bang Nong Mang 大家帮侬忙). Popular TV celebrity Zhou Libo (周立波) also rose to fame in large part because of his success with a distinctly Shanghainese form of comedy (haipai qingkou 海派清口). Similarly radio listeners can find programs ranging from talk shows to performances of Shanghainese Farce Opera. Granted, the presence of so many regional language programs in the airwaves of local broadcasters is not unprecedented in China – there are even more in Guangzhou. This phenomenon is also relatively easy to explain as many of these programs are quite popular and generate substantial advertising revenue (Gao 2015). However, we should note that such programs are more common in Shanghai than in most parts of mainland China, and have become much more common in recent years than they were in the 1980s and 1990s.

Predictably there has been a parallel increase in the role of Shanghainese on the Internet; for example, there are various online Shanghainese dictionaries and discussion forums; also there is new software that makes it easier for users to type Shanghainese into mobile phones (Li 2015). While this increase also suggests greater public interest in Shanghainese, it is somewhat less surprising and significant than increased use of Shanghainese in the broadcast media because it is not quite so publicly visible and does not need the degree of official approval that Shanghainese television or radio programs do.

By the second decade of the 2000s, there were increasing signs of a modest degree of government support for the public role of Shanghainese. For example, in 2010 various kinds of Shanghainese culture classes began appearing in Shanghainese middle schools, and in 2011 Shanghai buses began announcing stops not only in Mandarin and English but also Shanghainese. In 2012 public attention was more sharply focused on Shanghainese when a group of 82 linguists and language professionals, including the aforementioned linguist Qian Nairong, signed a document urging the government to do more to protect Shanghainese (Shen 2016; see also Gong and Lin 2012), and this encouraged additional government support for Shanghainese, for example, support for a Shanghai Dialect Club that organized activities to help people learn Shanghainese (Li 2015).
However, by far the most dramatic initiative began in 2013 when the Shanghai government selected twenty public kindergartens for an experimental program in which children were to be encouraged to learn Shanghainese through activities such as playing games in Shanghainese or learning traditional children’s rhymes in Shanghainese. As noted above, this was not Shanghai schools’ first foray into teaching Shanghainese culture. However, this new initiative was significant not only because it had a stronger focus on language, but also because the stated intent was that, if the program proved successful, it was to be extended to other schools in Shanghai and perhaps even other parts of China (Li 2015). When examined carefully, it becomes clear that the teaching goals of this initiative are modest. Even in those kindergartens selected as sites for the experimental program, most instruction is in Mandarin, and Shanghainese is only used for a limited number of activities. Also, this initiative only covers kindergartens, rather than primary schools or higher levels of education. What is striking about the initiative is not the amount of Shanghainese instruction provided or the impact on students’ Shanghainese language skills; rather it is that a local government in mainland China would promote a local variety of Chinese in the public school system – in short, that it happened at all.

Our point is that in recent years, especially the last decade, in Shanghai there has been an increasing level of interest in and attention to Shanghainese, which goes along with Shanghai’s efforts to encourage a distinct Shanghainese identity and promotion of what we might call a Shanghainese (海派) brand. At times this interest has manifested itself in activities that would not only protect and preserve Shanghainese but even encourage more people to learn it. The climate has definitely become somewhat warmer and more encouraging for the growth of written Shanghainese.

5 Written Shanghainese in novels

As we saw above, in the final decades of the last century and the first decade of the new, written Shanghainese did not play a very significant role in mainland Chinese literature. However, around 2009 we can discern an increase as Shanghainese begins to appear more frequently in novels. To some extent this
increase consists of an increasing number of novels that use Shanghainese in essentially the same way as 1980s novels, occasionally using Shanghainese words to give texts what we might call a Shanghai flavor. One example of such a work is Wang Xiaoying’s (王小鹰) (2009) novel *The Long Road* (*Chang Jie Xing* 长街行), which describes the lives of people from various social classes living on the same street in Shanghai from the 1940s into the 1980s. The back cover of the book explicitly notes that the novel makes use of Shanghainese to give it a “Shanghai flavor” (上海方言平添浓郁的海派韵味), and one does encounter Shanghainese words such as 事体 (matter), 今朝 (today), 勿 (no, not), and 拽 (throw) in both dialogue and narrative passages. However, Shanghainese words appear infrequently, accounting for only about 0.5 % of the text’s vocabulary. Similarly, Xia Shang’s (夏商) (2013) novel *Notes from the East Bank* (*Dong An Ji Shi* 东岸记事), a love story set in “Old Pudong” in the 1970s and 1980s, occasionally uses Shanghainese words such as 清爽 (clear), 阿拉 (we/I), 赤佬 (punk), and 欢喜 (to like), usually in dialogue lines but occasionally in narration; however Shanghainese words appear no more frequently than in *The Long Road*. A final example is Wang Chengzhi’s (王承志) (2016) *Tonghe Alley* (*Tonghe Lii* 同和里), which describes the narrator’s experiences growing up in the traditional Shanghai alley (*longtang* 弄堂). This novel definitely does make some use of Shanghainese; however it generally only uses words and phrases such as 囡囡 (daughter or little girl), 小赤佬 (little punk), 瞎三话四 (nonsense!) that would be familiar to many Putonghua speakers, and Shanghainese vocabulary makes up less than 0.1 % of the text.

Other novels in this same period use somewhat more Shanghainese. Shen Feilong’s (沈飞龙) (2009) novel *Six Years at Shuyuan Hall* (*Shuyuantang Liu Nian Ji* 书远堂六年记) describes life on Chongming Island during the 1960s, and not only uses widely known Shanghainese words but also terms distinctive of Chongming Island such as 伊特 (they/they) and 为啥 (why/why), often providing Putonghua glosses in parentheses. The percentage of Shanghainese words in this novel is definitely higher than in the novels mentioned above, generally making up more than 2 % of the text, and Shanghainese is found in both dialogue and narration, though more often in the former. The back cover of the book also explicitly claims that the book’s “heavy use of local dialect terms” (大量的方言俚语) makes it “especially exciting” (格外精彩). However, use of Wu vocabulary in this novel is still best described as occasional use in a text that is predominantly in Putonghua, and sentences like the following (page 4) mix the two: 德纲向弟弟认认真地辩解: “咯是老师告诉的.” (De Gang intently explained, “This is what the teacher said.”) While the word 咯 (this/this) is clearly Wu, the rest of the sentence is in Mandarin. Also, the first time a given Wu term appears in the text, the author accommodates non-Shanghainese readers by providing a gloss in Mandarin.
Lanzi Qinghui’s (蓝紫青灰) novel Twelfth Floor (Shier Lou 十二楼), first published on the internet and then as a book in 2009, uses even a higher percentage of Shanghainese words. In this novel, which tells the tale of a beautiful but unfortunate flower seller in the Shanghai countryside during the Republican era, approximately 3–4% of the text is made up of Shanghainese words, which are found in both dialogue and narration, and sometimes one encounters lines like the following that are entirely Shanghainese (page 16):

阿囡，我伲屋里钞票多，你要啥我拨侬买啥，好勿啦。

*Ah Nu, I have a lot of money at home, whatever you want I will give, alright?*

However, such sentences are the exception rather than the rule, and most of the text is in Mandarin; also, glosses in Mandarin are sometimes provided in footnotes for Shanghainese words. The figure given above for the percentage of Shanghainese words is also somewhat misleading because frequent mention main character’s name – 阿囡 – inflates the percentage.

A final novel, Sun Zhizheng’s (孙智正) The South (Nan Fang 南方), also has a somewhat higher percentage of Shanghainese words. In this memoir of the narrator’s childhood, approximately 3.5% of the vocabulary is Shanghainese, and Shanghainese is found in both dialogue and narration. However, again the work is written mainly in Putonghua.

We introduce these books here in part to call attention to a post-2009 increase in the number of works that make use of Shanghainese vocabulary. Whereas previously one such book might appear every few years, since 2009 the tempo has increased with one or more appearing every year. It is also interesting that several of these works quite explicitly advertise their use of Shanghainese, apparently assuming this will attract readers. Finally, it appears that interest in “Shanghainese flavored” books is not confined only to publishers in Shanghai; while the first four novels mentioned above were all published in Shanghai by the same press, Shanghai Arts Press (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文艺出版社), Twelfth Floor was published in Beijing and The South in Guangzhou.

However, the books mentioned above really don’t break much new ground in their use of Shanghainese; the amount of Shanghainese vocabulary used is not dramatically different from that of novels in the 1980s. In all of these books Shanghainese vocabulary is essentially used as a spice – occasional dashes of Shanghainese flavor in a Putonghua dish. The relatively light use of Shanghainese – and the fact that glosses are sometimes provided for Shanghainese words – makes the book accessible to readers who are more comfortable reading in Putonghua and perhaps don’t know Shanghainese at all.
6 Breaking new ground for written Shanghainese

The years since 2009 have also seen the appearance of several published works that most definitely do break new ground in the development of written Shanghainese and its social role. Below we will focus on four books that are especially worthy of attention in this regard.

6.1 Rich Shanghainese feeling

The 2012 book Rich Shanghainese Feeling (Nongnong Huyu Hai Shang Qing 浓浓沪语海上情 2012) is actually a collection of articles first published in a Xinmin Evening News (Xinmin Wanbao 新民晚报) column called “Shanghainese” (Shanghai Xianhua 上海闲话). The column was started in 2010 by editor and writer Lü Zheng (吕争), and she co-edited the book with Qian Nairong. The articles themselves are written by many different contributors, and are generally reminisces about life in old Shanghai.

The first thing that makes these articles special is that they use a relatively large amount of Shanghainese. While the percentage of Shanghainese vocabulary varies somewhat from one article to the next, generally the total amount is fairly high, usually in the 15–25% range. More importantly, the articles are written entirely in Shanghainese, rather than a mix of Putonghua and Shanghainese; in other words, where the normal vocabulary and word order of Shanghainese varies from that of Putonghua, the articles are consistent with the former rather than the latter. Consider the following brief excerpt from an article in the book entitled “Tiger Stoves” (Laohu Zao 老虎灶, page 2):

老虎灶集中在老弄堂地区，交关【许多】居民泡茶、吃茶、用熟水全靠老虎灶。勿少老虎灶还摆好几张台子，供大家边吃茶边茄茄山河，有个还摆了浴盆汤供人汏浴【洗澡】唻。

Tiger stoves are most frequently found in old alley areas, and many residents rely on these for the hot water they need for making and drinking tea. Tables are found around many tiger stoves so that people can chat while they drink tea, and some of the stoves even have basins people can use for bathing.

Approximately 24% of the vocabulary in this short excerpt is markedly Shanghainese; also, there is no vocabulary that is typical of Mandarin but not Shanghainese, although Mandarin glosses for some Shanghainese words are given in brackets.
A particularly interesting feature of this book is that it is accompanied by a workbook enclosed in the same wrapping as the book itself. The workbook contains 57 short lessons on Shanghainese and also contains many multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank or short answer items through which readers can test their ability to use Shanghainese words and phrases. An answer key is even provided at the back of the workbook. The inclusion of this workbook is interesting in part because it suggests the book is intended as a tool for helping people learn Shanghainese. However, even more interesting is the fact that the workbook focuses entirely on written Shanghainese. The texts used as examples are all expository passages rather than dialogues, and most of the Shanghainese words that the workbook attempts to teach are not provided with any phonetic notations that would help a reader learn how to pronounce them.

This book is significant for several reasons. First, it is clearly motivated by a desire to protect and preserve Shanghainese, a mission that is explicitly discussed in two prefaces. The first of these, by the chief editor of Xinmin Evening News, Chen Baoping (陈保平), emphasizes that it is necessary not only to make people aware of the importance of protecting Shanghainese, but also of finding effective ways to do so. He is also at pains to emphasize that there is no inherent contradiction between promotion of Putonghua and ensuring that Shanghainese is transmitted to the next generation, and points out that Shanghainese has always been a “tolerant” (包容性) language that absorbs elements from other languages. These arguments are presumably included to pre-empt accusations that protecting Shanghainese runs counter to the national policy of promoting Putonghua. In the second preface, Fudan University professor Qian Wenzhong (钱文忠) stresses that the task of building a distinctive “Shanghainese culture” (海派文化) begins from and is founded on protection of the Shanghainese language.

A second feature that makes this book – and the newspaper column from which it came – groundbreaking is its use of Shanghainese in expository text. While there are certainly previous instances in which some Shanghainese vocabulary is used in narrative sentences, in general Shanghainese vocabulary is only found in dialogue; in fact, often there is a very clear division of labor with narrative in Mandarin and dialogue partially or fully in Wu. In stark contrast, in Rich Shanghainese Feeling virtually all text of every kind is in Shanghainese. This includes not only the articles themselves but also the section headings in the book and even the introductions to editors and contributors that appear on the inside flaps of the book’s cover. The only exception is a brief paragraph in Mandarin on the back cover of the book introducing the book’s contents. Once readers actually open the book, they move from a world in which Mandarin is the normal written language into a one where Shanghainese is the norm, appropriate for any topic and any part of a text.
The final way in which this book is ground-breaking is that it not only encourages protection and preservation of Shanghainese; it also promotes Shanghainese as a written language. This is seen mostly clearly in the inclusion of the above-mentioned workbook, which is really designed more to help people learn to read and even write Shanghainese rather than to speak it. When combined with the workbook, *Rich Shanghainese Feeling* is essentially a primer for promoting literacy in Shanghainese.

### 6.2 Notes from alley life


It is somewhat difficult to generalize about the use of Shanghainese in this book because the articles are by different reporters who differ in the degree to which they use Shanghainese. For example, articles by Dai Zhendong (戴震东) generally use no Shanghainese at all; in contrast articles by Han Xiaoni (韩小妮) tend to use quite a bit of Shanghainese in the dialogues. Also, even when reporters do use Shanghainese in dialogues, they generally mix it with Mandarin. That being said, however, most articles do have some Shanghainese, especially in dialogue lines, and in such articles the percentage of Shanghainese vocabulary is fairly high – up to 7–8%. Consider the following lines of dialogue from an article by Han Xiaoni (page 2):

> 在阿拉济康里，小辰光做爵要外人，就到伊拉屋里厢去。外国人会到伊拉屋里厢买邮票。但是看不到伊拉老有邮票，蛮低调的。

*In our Jikang alley, when I was small, if you wanted to see a foreigner, you just went to their [the neighbors’] home. Foreigners would go to their place to buy stamps. But you really couldn’t tell that they always had stamps – they were very low profile.*

Obviously the amount of Shanghainese in this excerpt is fairly high; however, we should also note that sometimes Mandarin words such as 不 (no, not) and 的 (possessive marker) are used in places where Shanghainese would be more likely to use 勿/弗 and 个; also, Shanghainese words are usually glossed in footnotes at the bottom of the page the first time they appear.
Notes from Alley Life is obviously somewhat similar to Rich Shanghainese Feeling in that both are collections of articles from the columns of a major Shanghainese newspaper, and both focus on the daily lives of average Shanghai people. However, unlike Rich Shanghainese Feeling, Notes from Alley Life does not explicitly advocate preservation of Shanghainese language or culture; it is also much more restrained in its use of Shanghainese. What is most interesting about this book may be fact that it was published in Beijing rather than in Shanghai, suggesting a growing interest in and tolerance for the use of written Shanghainese even outside China’s Wu-speaking regions.

6.3 The alley: Shanghainese

Hu Baotan’s (胡宝谈) 2011 book The Alley: Shanghainese (Longtang: Shanghaihua 弄堂: 上海话) broke new ground in yet another way. The book, published by Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House (上海书店出版社), describes itself as “the first Shanghainese novel” (第一本上海话小说) and consists of many short stories – one- or two-page vignettes – that allow the reader to experience the daily lives of Shanghai people. While many of the stories are set in recent years, they focus on traditional life in the alleys rather than life in more modern settings.

This book, however, is not only a novel. The back cover also claims that it is a textbook designed to allow the reader to “study Shanghainese through real life situations” (通过真实情景学习上海话), and calls attention to the fact that the book’s chapters are arranged alphabetically around Shanghainese expressions and are equipped with notes on the meaning and pronunciation of Shanghainese words. The book also claims to use “proper characters for writing Shanghainese words” (上海话正字).

The most striking feature of the book is the sheer amount of Shanghainese in it. Like Rich Shanghai Feeling all of the text is in Shanghainese, including both narration and dialogue, but the percentage of Shanghainese words in each passage is even greater, usually 25% or more. Consider the following excerpt (page 3):

大块头开始谈朋友哉。伊拉爷蛮撑伊个，铜钿银子像人参浆介补仔伊交关。大块头塞爪钞票虚胖，常庄请认得个小姑娘看电影、吃夜饭……下只礼拜一，小姑娘托人带闲话过来，大块头忒浪漫忒脱底，忒勿会得过日脚，拗断。大块头拉爷爷头穷摇：叫侬是侬嫡嫡亲个儿子，勿然介我也要帮侬拗脱。
Big Guy started dating. His father was pretty supportive, stuffing his pockets with lots of money, just like you would supplement somebody’s diet with lots of ginseng royal honey. Flush with all this money, Big Guy often invited this girl he knew out to watch a movie and eat dinner…. The following Monday, the girl had her friend pass back the word that Big Guy was too wasteful, too extreme, too unable to manage daily life, and that she was breaking up with him. Big Guy’s father kept shaking his head: If you weren’t my son, I would break with you too.

In this selection, we have counted approximately 31% of the words as Shanghainese, and there are other words such as忒 we have not counted as Shanghainese but still have a Shanghainese aroma.

In The Alley each section of each chapter is followed by a vocabulary list that provides Putonghua glosses for Shanghainese words that the author presumes readers might not know; by way of example, the first section of Chapter 1 has 27 such notes despite the fact that the section is only about one page long. While later chapters in the book generally don’t have quite as many notes as this, virtually all chapters have some, and even late chapters may have a dozen or more. Also, in most chapters Shanghainese pinyin is provided brackets after a few relatively obscure words which readers might not know how to pronounce.

Like Rich Shanghai Feeling this book explicitly advocates preservation of Shanghainese, a mission announced at the beginning of the book with a long quote from linguist David Harrison about why it is important to preserve endangered languages. As we saw above, this book does more than call attention to the importance of preserving Shanghainese; it also attempts to preserve and promote Shanghainese by helping more people learn to read and even speak the language.

However the most distinctive feature of the book is the unprecedented degree to which it uses Shanghainese – no other text we have seen so far has such a high percentage of Shanghainese vocabulary. Also, no other book contains such a wide range of Shanghainese words, including a great many low frequency words. In many other texts that use Shanghainese, most of the Shanghainese vocabulary consists of a limited number of high frequency words, so learning to read them is not particularly difficult. In contrast, The Alley introduces many words that may be unfamiliar even to readers who have basic Shanghainese skills. Rather than trying to make the text reader-friendly, the author has designed it as a rather challenging textbook that will stretch the Shanghainese skills of anyone who attempts to read it.
6.4 Magnificent flowers

The work which has drawn most attention to written Shanghainese is Jin Yucheng’s afore-mentioned novel Magnificent Flowers (Fan Hua 繁花). First published as a serial online novel in 2011, it then appeared in an abridged version in the literary magazine Harvest (Shouhuo 收获) in 2012, and finally was published in book form in 2013 by Shanghai Arts Press, which also published several of the other books discussed above. The novel depicts the daily lives of working class people in Shanghai in the 1960s and 1980s.

Despite attention that Magnificent Flowers’ use of Shanghainese has attracted, it is basically written in Putonghua – only approximately 2–3% of the vocabulary is Shanghainese. In fact, the use of Shanghainese is so limited that it is initially a little hard for readers to detect, in large part because author avoids using high frequency Shanghainese words like侬 and阿拉 that would immediately call attention to use of Wu. Consider the following excerpt (page 115):

同学说，不肯是吧，沪生，去开大橱。香港小姐一呆，忽然眼睛睁圆，上来一把掐紧同学的头颈，摇了两摇头，小赤佬，瘪三，弄堂里的穷鬼，欺负到老娘头上来，我怕啥人呀，我吓啥人呀，黄幸荣我碰到过，白相人，洋装瘪三，吃豆腐吊膀子，我看得多了，今朝我掐煞这只小赤佬，小瘪三……

Classmate said, you won’t do it, will you. Hu Sheng, you go open the wardrobe. Hong Kong Girl was stunned, then suddenly her eyes opened wide and she jumped up, clutched Classmate’s neck, and shook him twice. Little punk, worthless good-for-nothing, alley bum, you think you can take advantage of me? Who am I afraid of? Who am I scared of? People with money, screw-arounds, good-for-nothings in nice Western suits, flirts – I’ve seen them all. Today I’m going to choke you to death you little punk, you little good-for-nothing....

The text is predominantly in Putonghua, and use of Shanghainese consists largely of repeated use of a few words, such as瘪三 (a good-for-nothing) in the excerpt above. This of course would make the text reasonably accessible even to readers who do not know Shanghainese. However, it is also true that both the excerpt above and the novel’s text as a whole has multiple Shanghainese words on every page, and uses Shanghainese more consistently than any of the Shanghai novels between 1949 and 2009.

Jin Yucheng’s approach to use of Shanghainese was the result of search for a literary language that had a distinct Shanghainese flavor but could still reach a
broader audience. As he described the process in a public lecture, before he wrote *Magnificent Flowers* he had not attempted to write anything in Shanghainese, and when he first started writing chapters to post online he found using Shanghainese to be somewhat difficult; however, he soon became more comfortable using Shanghainese, describing the feeling as “joyful and free” (非常开心，非常自由), and used quite a bit of Shanghainese in the first, online version of the novel. However, when editing the novel for publication as a book, he significantly reduced the amount of Shanghainese; in particular he eliminated iconic Shanghainese words like 侬 and 阿拉 out of a concern that if such words appeared frequently readers would “find it strange” (会觉得很怪). Jin Yucheng does not feel his mission is to promote Shanghainese; rather his goal is to create a written language which he describes as “improved Shanghainese” (改良的上海话) (Huang 2014: 72–3) that limits use of Shanghainese words so that the text is not too difficult for non-Shanghainese readers, but uses it enough that the text has a pronounced Shanghainese feeling to it.

The most obvious way in which *Magnificent Flowers* breaks new ground for written Shanghainese is the increased public attention it has drawn. As we noted in the Introduction, the book has been widely discussed in the Chinese media and received substantial critical acclaim, even winning the prestigious Mao Dun Literary Prize in 2015. It has also been quite successful in the marketplace; as of 2015 it had already gone through 20 printings, with more than 300,000 copies printed. While Jin Yucheng himself is at pains to emphasize that *Magnificent Flowers* should not be viewed as a dialect/Shanghainese novel, and that his goal is not promoting Shanghainese per se, his use of Shanghainese in the novel has drawn considerable attention (e.g. Xiang 2014; Chen 2015).

While breaking some new ground, as a number of observers have noted (e.g. Li 2016; He 2013) *Magnificent Flowers* is some ways the modern heir to the Suzhounese courtesan novel genre of the early 1900s. The book’s very title, *Magnificent Flowers*, echoes *Shanghai Flowers* (*Hai Shang Hua Liezhuan* 海上花列传), the title of the book that began the Suzhounese courtesan novel tradition. Jin Yucheng himself has also pointed out stylistic similarities between the two books, for example, in both books the storyline is held together by a few main characters who appear throughout the book, but many other characters appear briefly only to soon vanish and never return. In fact, while Jin Yucheng is at pains to distance himself from the notion that *Magnificent Flowers* is a Shanghainese novel, he is definitely willing to associate his work with the written Wu tradition; for example, in the public talk mentioned above he

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prefaced discussion of his own literary work by first reminding the audience of the Wu literary tradition, not only the Suzhounese courtesan novels but also earlier Wu works such as Kun opera texts. While *Magnificent Flowers* may not have been intended to promote Shanghainese literature per se, its author clearly perceives it as part of a long tradition in which Wu is used in literary works.

### 7 Discussion

As the preceding account should make clear, a distinct Shanghainese written language has existed for several decades, at least since the 1950s. While written Shanghainese obviously builds on the older Suzhounese-based written Wu tradition, and overlaps with it to a very considerable degree, it has now become a written variety in its own right that is distinguished by use of distinctively Shanghainese vocabulary. Furthermore, evidence suggest that its role in print culture is on the rise; while this paper focuses mainly on use of written Shanghainese in books, Shanghainese is also now appearing more often in other print media such as newspapers. Finally, there seems to be little doubt that this increase is due, at least in part, to not only the growing prosperity and influence of the city of Shanghai but also a related desire to assert a Shanghainese (海派) brand. But, should we expect this increase to continue? Is written Shanghainese likely to develop a social role comparable to that of written Cantonese in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta? In order to better address this question, here we will briefly compare the cases of written Cantonese and written Shanghainese.

A number of similarities between these two cases lend plausibility to the notion that the role of written Shanghainese would continue to increase. One fairly obvious similarity is that both cases are situated in economically prosperous and culturally powerful cities that have a strong local identity – and have an interest in promoting their city brands for purposes ranging from building soft power to attracting tourism. Of course the role of written Cantonese has grown primarily in Hong Kong, but this growth is also facilitated by the existence of a large and affluent Cantonese-speaking population outside Hong Kong in Guangzhou, Macau, and throughout the Pearl River Delta. The soil that nourishes written Shanghainese is a little more problematic in that a larger percentage of Shanghai’s population is not Shanghainese-speaking, but written Shanghainese still benefits from association with the wealth and power of not only Shanghai but the larger Wu-speaking region in southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang. A related similarity is that both written Cantonese and
written Shanghainese have grown in cities with large and powerful media industries, and in both cases the road toward increased use of the written language has been paved by earlier use in broadcast media. A rather different kind of similarity is that both written Cantonese and written Shanghainese have long histories. Cantonese has been appearing in written texts since the late Ming dynasty, sometimes in works which had a degree of prestige and acclaim; one thinks here of examples ranging from Zhao Ziyong’s (招子庸) 1828 Cantonese Love Songs (Yue Ou 粵讴) to the highly regarded essay columns of Gao Dexiong (高德雄) (pen-name Saam So 三苏) in Hong Kong newspapers in the late 1900s. The story of written Shanghainese has more twists and turns; it began in the late Ming dynasty as written Suzhounese, transformed into written Shanghainese in the mid-1900s, and then virtually vanished for several decades after the 1950s, only to reemerge around 2009. However, both those who wish to write in Cantonese or Shanghainese can justify their actions by pointing to a long historical tradition that includes at least some texts that are generally respected.

Finally, in both cases the paths taken as the written language develops have been similar. Both written Cantonese and written Shanghainese/Wu at first appeared mostly in texts explicitly intended to replicate speech, and in the early centuries of their development were generally confined either to dialogue or to texts that were intended for oral performance, such as song texts. It is only relatively recently that either Cantonese or Shanghainese has appeared in narration or in expository texts, and even today such use is relatively unusual.

There are, of course, also significant differences between the two cases, but some of these would seem to lend further credence to the idea that the role of written Shanghainese would continue to grow. Take, for example, the question of government language policies. Written Cantonese has grown primarily in a city where the government does not place any restrictions on what languages can be used in printed media, and the choice is entirely up to writers and publishers. In contrast, in mainland China for many decades government policy has restricted the use in printed media of varieties of Chinese other than Putonghua, especially southern Chinese languages that differ significantly from Putonghua. However, the speed with which Shanghainese has emerged in print culture after government policies became more tolerant suggests that the underlying conditions for the growth of written Shanghainese are favorable.

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Another difference can be found in the kinds of publications in which the written language has grown. Over the last century use of written Cantonese has increased mainly in newspapers and magazines, in other words, in relatively ephemeral types of publications that are normally disposed of soon after they are published. It should also be noted that most of these publications have not targeted the high end of the market, and publications that wish to be taken seriously generally use little or no Cantonese. To the extent that written Cantonese appears in books, these are generally what would be considered popular literature rather than books with greater aspirations to literary merit. In contrast, over the last decade written Shanghainese has taken more of a high road, often making its mark in the world of books, including relatively serious works of literature. The fact that written Shanghainese is appearing in books may suggest greater public willingness to accept the use of Shanghainese even in serious types of publications.

Some of the differences between written Cantonese and written Shanghainese, however, bode less well for the future of the latter. The first of these was briefly mentioned above. Hong Kong has a population that is largely Cantonese-speaking, and there is little question there that the culture of the city is closely related to the Cantonese language; it is also notable that when written Cantonese is used in Hong Kong newspapers, magazines, books, and even public billboards, Mandarin glosses for Cantonese words are virtually never provided. In contrast, Shanghai’s population includes a much higher percentage of people who don’t speak Shanghainese as their primary language, and in many domains of daily life Mandarin is as likely to be used as Shanghainese (Van Den Berg 2016). So it cannot so easily be assumed that Shanghainese identity is inextricably intertwined with the Shanghainese language. This is no doubt one main reason why many of the authors who use Shanghainese in their works do so sparingly, and why they often include notes to explain Shanghainese words. This presumably reflects a concern about whether the target readership can read Shanghainese – and perhaps also concern about not to going too far and alienating or leaving behind a large market of readers who are not committed to the Shanghainese language.

Another difference relates to the forces which drive increased use of local languages in the print media. For written Cantonese, by and large growth has been driven by what we might describe as market forces – people write in Cantonese because they assume this will receive a more positive reception from the intended audience, not because they necessarily feel a strong desire to protect or promote Cantonese. This may change as more people in Guangdong and Hong Kong become concerned about the future of Cantonese in the face of competition from Putonghua. However, to date the choice to use
Cantonese in published texts has generally been driven mainly by a sense that this will make the text more effective in reaching the audience. In contrast, many of the texts that employ written Shanghainese, especially those that make heavy use of it, are produced by people who have a sense of mission related to preserving and/or promoting traditional Shanghainese culture. While written Shanghainese no doubt benefits from having advocates who publically promote it and write texts in it, the substantial role advocates have played in recent years also suggests that popular support for writing and reading in Shanghainese is somewhat weaker than is the case for Cantonese; after all, if it was extremely popular it would not need to be protected and promoted. Also, to date there isn’t much evidence that texts which make heavy use of written Shanghainese can fend for themselves in the marketplace; where Shanghainese texts have been commercially successful, as in the case of Magnificent Flowers, their use of Shanghainese has also been carefully limited. In this regard, the case of written Shanghainese, at least so far, appears somewhat similar to that of written Taiwanese in Taiwan, where the movement has been driven to a large degree by activists but has had trouble finding a mass reading audience.

Perhaps the most significant difference lies in cultural and social associations. In Hong Kong and the surrounding region, written Cantonese is sometimes used in texts related to the past, or to working class life, but it is not restricted to these; in fact, written Cantonese is now most often found in texts that are associated with contemporary urban culture, and it has strong associations with the middle class and with youth culture. In stark contrast, written Shanghainese is almost always found in texts which look back to traditional life, either texts dealing with subject matter from the past – old Shanghai – or texts set in the recent past that are associated with older ways of life Shanghai, especially working class life in Shanghai’s alleys. In fact, so far it seems that use of Shanghainese in a written text generally needs to be justified by “old Shanghai” subject matter. One generally does not encounter much Shanghainese in texts about contemporary urban life, especially the lives of middle class people who work in offices and live in modern apartment communities; to the extent that written Shanghainese is associated with a generational cohort, it is associated more with reminiscences of the elderly rather than modern youth culture. There is little evidence that written Shanghainese has become associated in the public mind with the vitality of modern Shanghai life; it is more closely associated with nostalgia for the past and concerns about losing old traditions.
8 Conclusion

How likely is it that written Shanghainese might develop a role like written Cantonese in Hong Kong – or even more? Of course it is always hard to predict such things, and it is entirely possible that written Shanghainese’s current trajectory could be dramatically altered by changes in government policy. However, by way of conclusion, let us briefly consider what might happen if government policy does not change.

There are a number of reasons why we might expect the role of written Shanghainese to continue to increase. It already has a substantial historical pedigree, so there is already a considerable population that knows how to read and even write it, and the fact that written Shanghainese has a historical tradition gives it a degree of historicity and legitimacy that it would not have otherwise. Also, as written Shanghainese has developed in recent years, it has accumulated some of the accessories that lend a written language respectability, such as reference works like dictionaries and respected literary works. Last but not least, written Shanghainese seems to have shown a greater degree of vitality over the last decade, gaining an increased role even in a national setting that is not known for supporting the use of local languages in print culture. All this tends to suggest that the idea that written Shanghainese could develop into a secondary written language playing a role similar to that of written Cantonese in Hong is not preposterous.

There are, however, some factors that would steer us toward a less optimistic assessment, one being concern that Shanghainese is on the decline as a spoken language. In fact, as we have seen, one of the main forces currently driving increased publication of texts in Shanghainese is precisely this concern that the language is on a downward path – and it could be that one reason government currently tolerates Shanghainese in the city’s print culture is precisely because Shanghainese poses no credible threat to the dominance of Putonghua.

The greater challenge, however, may be the strong tendency to justify use of written Shanghainese by associating it with “old Shanghai.” Again, this tendency may be one of the reasons why written Shanghainese is relatively tolerated – its association with old Shanghai makes it useful as a tool as the city attempts to promote its image and Shanghainese hai pai culture. However, if written Shanghainese remains firmly connected in the public mind with old Shanghai’s colorful past and its traditional alley life, its future role as a language for contemporary people in Shanghai – especially young people – is likely to be quite limited.
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Bionotes

Don Snow

Don Snow (PhD in East Asian Languages and Cultures, Indiana University) has taught language, culture, and linguistics for over two decades in various parts of China, as well as in the United States, and he is currently Director of Language and Culture Center at Duke Kunshan University. His research interests and academic articles focus on sociolinguistic topics such as diglossia and the historical development of written forms of Chinese vernaculars, and Cantonese as Written Language: The Growth of a Written Chinese Vernacular was published by Hong Kong University Press in 2004.

Shen Senyao

Shen Senyao received her M.A. degree in Linguistics from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree there. She previously worked as Research Assistant for Duke Kunshan University's Language and Culture Center. Her research interests include child bilingualism, second language acquisition, and Chinese dialects.

Zhou Xiayun

Zhou Xiayun earned her M.A from Fudan University in Teaching Chinese as Second Language. She is now a Chinese Language Lecturer at Duke Kunshan University, and her research interests focus on dialects and language teaching.