



The Impacts of Dialects on Time Variations of Chinese Minor New Year

Bingbing Li^(✉) and Yuntong Liu

School of Chinese Studies, Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou 310012, Zhejiang, China

19040101019@st.zisu.edu.cn

Abstract. While “xiaonian (the Chinese minor new year)” is one of the important Chinese traditional festivals, its date is not nationally unified. This essay therefore summarized “xiaonian” time and the regions where the “xiaonian” time has evolved recorded in *Compilation of Chinese Local Chronicles and Folklore Materials* (《中国地方志民俗资料汇编》), so as to comprehensively comb the distribution and time variation context of “xiaonian”, summarize the time evolution law of “xiaonian”, and reasonably speculate the reasons. It is found that there is a direct and close relationship between dialect and the distribution and evolution of “xiaonian”.

Keywords: Time of “minor new year” · Dialect · Time variation

1 Introduction

In Song Dynasty, the time of “xiaonian” (the Chinese minor new year) was fixed in the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth lunar month. As is written in *The Interpretation of Idioms* (《俚言解》) by Chen Shiyuan in Ming Dynasty, “People in Song Dynasty celebrated Xiaojieye (the Chinese minor new year) on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month whereas Dajieye (Chinese New Year’s Eve) in the thirtieth day. The two are now called ‘Xiaoniane’ and ‘Daniane’ respectively.” Wen Tianxiang in Song Dynasty also said in his poem *The Twenty-fourth Day* (《二十四日》) that “Three days before the beginning of spring is the time for people in Jiangnan to celebrate ‘xiaonian’”. By the time of Ming Dynasty, the custom of worshipping the Kitchen God in the twenty-fourth day was inherited, as written in *Xihu Youlanzhi Yu* (《西湖游览志余》), “The 24th day of the twelfth lunar month is called ‘Xiaonian’, when the folk worship the Kitchen God.” In Qing Dynasty, according to the local chronicles of various regions, it was found that the distribution of the time of “xiaonian” had changed compared with the previous, mainly focusing on the 23rd and the 24th day. Looking through the records of “xiaonian” in

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different periods in the same place, it is found that the “xiaonian” time has evolved in dozens of areas, most of which have changed from the 24th day to the 23rd. Therefore, it is speculated that the initial time of “Xiaonian” should be unified as the 24th day. Later, due to various factors, the time of “Xiaonian” in some areas has varied into the 23rd day, and some areas have not yet completed the process of variation, hence the phenomenon of the coexistence of both the 23rd and the 24th day as the time of “Xiaonian”.

Cai Yi in Han Dynasty wrote in his first volume of *Duduan* (《独断》) that “The forbidden city got its name for its doors are blocked to those who are neither servants nor the owner of the city.” The prevailing of observing “xiaonian” took place from the upper class. Therefore, official variations of the time of “xiaonian” would certainly do some influences on the folks. “Language is the main medium to communicate cultures and customs, deciding the mores of our lives and the overall of our beliefs. (Sapir)” Dialects, moreover, hold the abundant cultural information of an ethnic group amassed during the long historical process, showing its great significance to the inheritance of the local culture [4]. The correlation can thus be inferred between dialects and the variation degree of the time of “xiaonian” in each region.

The administrative center of China in Qing Dynasty is in the north, the mandarin district, where the time of “xiaonian” is thus likely to change into the 23rd day; in non-Mandarin areas. Due to the communication barriers caused by dialects, the date of “xiaonian” may follow the old calendar, that is, the 24th day is “xiaonian”. Other areas may be in the process of evolution, so the local “xiaonian”’s time distribution is the 23rd and the 24th day coexisting.

In order to prove the inference, local chronicles were looked up; the compilation of folk customs of Chinese Local Chronicles were read; by using the literature research method, the time of “xiaonian” all over the country were comprehensively combed, and the dialect regions were classified and summarized as the standard, in order to grasp their regulations and reasons. Local chronicles are books that record the customs, products, public opinion, stories and legends of the four directions. The folk custom data collection of Chinese Local Chronicles is a specialized folk custom data book, which collects thousands of folk custom data in local chronicles, with rich content, complete categories and detailed data. However, it has the defect of small space-time range [6]. This deficiency was overcome by recording the diachronic changes of “xiaonian”, in order to grasp the development of “xiaonian” macroscopically and comprehensively. In short, the literature value and academic value of local chronicles are of great help to the research on “xiaonian”.

For a long period of time, the division of Chinese dialect regions has been rather controversial in linguistic circles. The Academia Sinica divided Chinese dialects into seven kinds in 1934. On this basis, referring to the division changes of Chinese dialect regions in the 20th century, the Chinese dialect regions were divided into Northern dialect region, Wu dialect region, Gan dialect region, Xiang dialect region, Cantonese dialect region, Hakka dialect region, Min dialect region and Hui dialect region. Along with that, for the needs of research, Jin dialect, strongly influenced by Mandarin after the Ming and Qing Dynasties, is classified into the Northern dialect region, [7], and the Southwest mandarin region (originally belonging to the Northern dialect region) is divided separately for discussion as it is a special case. Since the number of regions

Table 1. Distribution proportion of the time of “Xiaonian” in each dialect region

	The 23rd day	The 24th day	Both the 23rd and 24th day
Northern dialect region	76.2%	17.1%	6.7%
Southwest mandarin region	25.1%	58.3%	16.6%
Wu dialect region	6.7%	84.3%	9%
Gan dialect region	0	94.9%	5.1%
Xiang dialect region	11.6%	88.4%	0
Cantonese dialect region	37.5%	58.3%	4.2%
Hakka dialect region	0	100%	0
Min dialect region	13.5%	76.3%	10.2%
Hui dialect region	25%	75%	0

where “xiaonian” is celebrated on the 25th day is in a small (five in total) and is relatively special, they are not included in “Table 1”.

Based on “Table 1”, the following general rules can be found: except for the relatively special Southwest mandarin region, in the Mandarin region (Northern dialect region), the time of “xiaonian” is mainly the 23rd day; in non-Mandarin regions the time is contrariwise the 24th day, which further confirms the presumption. To be meticulous in academy, the formation of the time of “xiaonian” was classified and discussed according to its distribution in different places.

2 Dialect Regions with the Time of the 23rd Day — The Mandarin Region (Northern Dialect Region)

The Northern dialect, represented by Beijing dialect, is distributed in the north of the Yangtze River, the west of Zhenjiang, and along the south bank of the Yangtze River in the east of Jiujiang. “Official dialect” originally referred to what the officials said, that is, what is common in officialdom. As Wang Lijia pointed out: “The so-called Mandarin is basically to make the hometown dialect closer to the northern dialect centered on Beijing dialect based on written language as much as possible” [3]. That is to say, there was no clear and unified phonetic standard for each Mandarin at the time, those close to the pronunciation of Beijing, the political center, can be called Mandarin. Therefore, today’s Mandarin belongs to the Northern dialect. In ancient times, unified language was needed in areas like school education, imperial examination and issuing government orders. From *The Collection of Characters Reform in The Late Qing Dynasty* (《清末文字改革文集》) and *The School Constitution* (《学堂章程》), it can be found that during the reign of Yongzheng in the Qing Dynasty, the government heavily promoted Mandarin in order to promote the implementation of government orders [5].

The time of “xiaonian” in Northern dialect region is dominated by the 23rd day (23rd: 76.2%, 24th: 17.1%), and its formation is closely related to the local language. From the perspective of the historical development of “xiaonian”, ever since the Song Dynasty, the

traditional date of “Celebrating “xiaonian”” has always been the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month, as both *Dijing Jingwu Lue* (《帝京景物略》, 1635) and *Yueling Guangyi* (《月令广义》, 1601) in Ming Dynasty recorded. During and after Qing Dynasty, the time of “xiaonian” in Northern dialect region was mostly the 23rd day, sometimes even both the 23rd and the 24th day. Both *Yanjing Suishi Ji* (《燕京岁时记》) by Fucha Dunchong of Qing Dynasty and *Dijing Suishi Jisheng* (《帝京岁时纪胜》) recorded that the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month was “xiaonian”. It can then clearly be found that variation has taken place in the time of “xiaonian”. The reasons may be as follows: First, the official time of “xiaonian” changed from the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month to the 23rd day, which is then followed by the upper classes, and gradually spread to the whole country. Second, in terms of natural conditions and geographical location, the Northern dialect region has developed farming civilization, convenient transportation, frequent economic exchanges, close cultural exchanges and relatively unified dialect pronunciation. Third, language is the medium of cultural communication. The change of official customs is first affected by the Mandarin area and its closely related areas.

Among them, many areas that do not celebrate “xiaonian” on the 23rd day still conform to the general law except Anhui Province, mainly Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Shandong and Jiangsu provinces. According to The Local Chronicles, in many places in Shanxi and Shandong, there exist phenomena like worshiping the kitchen god on the 23rd day and the 24th day sweeping the floor, which is probably one of the results of the variation from the 24th day to the 23rd day. Within Jiangsu Province both Northern dialect and Wu dialect exist; while in Anhui Province many dialects co-exist — the existing four major dialects from north to south are as follows: the Northern dialect, the Gan dialect, the Wu dialect and the Hui dialect. Influenced by the variety of dialects, the two provinces not only preserve the old customs, but update and evolve.

3 Dialect Regions Where the Time of “Xiaonian” Is on the 24th Day

In the four dialect regions below: Hakka dialect region (24th:100%), Gan dialect region, Xiang dialect region and Wu dialect region, people celebrate “xiaonian” on the 24th day. Only a few places have relatively special cases of celebrating “xiaonian” on the 23rd day or on both the 23rd and 24th day, while the whole region is in line with the regulation of non-mandarin regions celebrating “xiaonian” on the 24th day. The special cases in each dialect region are what will be discussed next:

Gan dialect is distributed in most areas of Jiangxi Province (except the areas along the river in the northeast and the southern part of the province) and some areas in south-eastern Hubei, northwestern Fujian, southwestern Anhui and eastern Hunan Province. The special cases of Gan dialect region are mainly distributed in Nanchang and Yichun Area in northern Jiangxi Province. It is worth paying attention to that in Fuzhou areas it is more common to celebrate “xiaonian” on the 25th day. The reasons may be as follows: First, Gan dialect was shaped in the Tang and Song Dynasties, and there was no major change in the dialect in the core area, so it followed the custom of celebrating “xiaonian” on the 24th day. Second, Nanchang is the historical administration center of county governments in previous dynasties. Affected by political, economic and other

factors, Nanchang has frequent foreign exchanges and is vulnerable to the influence of Northern dialects and folk customs in other regions, which promotes the transformation of local “xiaonian”. Third, there is a popular saying that “the officials on the 23rd, the people on the 24th, and the ships on the 25th”. Fuzhou, by the east of Fujian, and located in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, is a water town close to Poyang Lake and retains the tradition of “the ships on the 25th day”.

Xiang dialects are concentrated in most areas of Hunan Province (except the northwest) and a few areas in northern Guangxi Province. The special circumstances of this dialect region are concentrated in Hunan Province, of which the Hunan dialect region of Hunan Province (24th: 88.1%, 23rd: 11.9%), and the special circumstances are mainly concentrated in Jingzhou and Huangzhou in Huaihua, Xintian County in Lingling and Cili County in Changde. The reasons for the above phenomena may be as follows: First, in Hunan Province, regions that celebrate “xiaonian” on the 23rd day in Hunan dialect region are rather scattered, mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities. It is speculated that its particularity may be related to ethnic particularity. Second, Jingzhou and Huangzhou in Huaihua area, Xintian County in Lingling area and Cili County in Changde area have experienced large-scale immigration in history. The cultural exchanges brought about by them have led to the evolution of cultural customs.

Wu dialect is distributed in Shanghai, south of the Yangtze River, east of Zhenjiang (excluding Zhenjiang), a small part of Nantong, most of Zhejiang, Northeast Jiangxi, South Anhui and the northwest corner of Fujian. The special case of the time of “xiaonian” in Wu dialect is distributed in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, Wuhu County, Anhui Province, Xiaogan and Huanggang in Hubei Province. The reasons for the above phenomena may be as follows: First, the special phenomenon in Changzhou County, Jiangsu Province is speculated to be related to immigration. In the years of Yuanjia of Emperor Wen of the Southern Dynasty and the beginning of Taishi of the Ming Dynasty, the Central Plains once regained by Emperor Wu of the Song dynasty fell again, and a large number of people migrated to the south of the Huaihe River. Changzhou of Jiangsu Province then became a gathering place for immigrants from Shandong and Northern Jiangsu who brought in the customs of celebrating “xiaonian” on the 23rd day. Second, there are both Wu dialect and Jianghuai Mandarin in Wuhu County, Anhui Province. Affected by the two dialects, it is inconsistent with the time of “xiaonian” in other Wu dialect regions of Anhui Province.

4 Dialect Regions that Mainly with the Time of the 24th Day

Although Min dialect region, Hui dialect region, Southwest Mandarin region and Guangdong dialect region are dominated by the time of the 24th day, the proportion of areas where the 23rd and both the 23rd and the 24th day coexist is still not small and can not be ignored, which are thus divided into two categories according to the proportion of the 24th day:

4.1 Regions Where the 24th Day Is Dominant

Although the time of the 24th day in Min dialect (24th: 76.3%, 23rd: 13.5%, both: 10.2%) and Hui dialect (24th: 75%, 23rd: 25%) accounts for more than 70%, the proportion of

areas where both of the date exist is still not small. Min dialect is mainly distributed in Fujian, eastern Guangdong, Hainan Island and Leizhou Peninsula, southern Zhejiang and Taiwan Province. The Min dialect regions are distributed in the north of Fujian Province, Zhanjiang City of Guangdong Province and Thanksgiving County of Hainan Province. The reasons for the above phenomena may be as follows: First, since the Song Dynasty, the Min dialect has been more stereotyped, and the Min language in the core area has changed little. There is a phenomenon of non-24th day in some areas, but most of them still follow the custom of the 24th day. Second, Fuzhou has been the capital of Fujian since the Ming Dynasty. It is located in the northeast of Fujian Province. Influenced by political and other factors, its customs change radiates the surrounding areas. Third, it is said that Suixi County is located in Leizhou Peninsula in the southwest of Guangdong Province. Since ancient times, water transportation has been developed. It is a prosperous market for economy and trade in the north of Leizhou Peninsula. Boatman culture is strong and customs are unique.

Hui dialect region is mainly distributed in some counties, cities and towns of Hangzhou and Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province, Jixi County and Huangshan City, Anhui Province. Hui dialect regions in Zhejiang are all the 24th day, which is in line with the law, and its special phenomenon is all over Anhui. Anhui Province is geographically located at the North-South dividing line, and the northern dialects in the province are widely distributed. Therefore, affected by the Mandarin area, there is a phenomenon that a certain proportion of Anhui dialects celebrate “xiaonian” on the 23rd day.

4.2 Regions Where the 24th Day Is Not Dominant

4.2.1 Southwest Mandarin Region (24th: 58.3%, 23rd: 25.1%)

The distribution scope of Southwest Mandarin includes all Chinese areas in Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, some cities, counties, districts and towns in adjacent provinces and regions such as Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, Shaanxi and Gansu, as well as Ganzhou City and Xinfeng County in Jiangxi Province. From the internal consistency of Southwest Mandarin, modern southwest mandarin was formed later, and its formation time is generally considered to be the end of Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of Ming Dynasty.

The special cases of this dialect region are mainly concentrated in Sichuan and Guizhou. The time distribution of “xiaonian” is complex, and there is no dominant advantage in a specific time. The reason is closely related to the southwest mandarin itself. Although the southwest mandarin belongs to Mandarin, its distribution area is far away from the political and administrative center in the north. Therefore, the region is not only affected by the Mandarin area, but also far away from the administrative center due to geographical distance, so it has strong cultural inertia, and the customs have not been completely changed due to external influence.

The distribution of “xiaonian” in Hubei Province shows the above characteristics obviously. In most areas of Hubei Province, the time of offering sacrifices to cookers does not coincide with the time of celebrating the Chinese new year, which accounts for 91.9%. This may be due to the integration of the customs of celebrating the Chinese new year on the 23rd and the 24th. Secondly, the area of Hubei Province where the

Chinese New Year is celebrated on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month is mainly concentrated in the north of the province, while Yunmeng county is a special area, which formed an isolated island in the Qing Dynasty [2]. The reasons for the above phenomena may be as follows: First, Yunyang County, Fang County, Xiangyang County, Zaoyang County, Yicheng County and Guanghua County in the north of Hubei Province were officially influenced to celebrate the Chinese new year on the 23rd, while the southern region of Hubei remained on the 24th of the twelfth lunar month because it was far from the political center. Second, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the military household belonged to the military government, and its folk customs followed the capital. Third, *Yunmeng Xianzhi Lue* (《云梦县志略》) in the eighth year of Guangxu's reign in the Qing Dynasty contained that: "The 23rd is the 'minor new year's eve'... It is called 'seeing the god of kitchen off'." According to the recent *Yunmeng Xianzhi* (《云梦县志》): "It's the Chinese new year on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month. Some villages in the countryside follow the military etiquette and customs of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and send stoves on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, which is called" the army on the 23rd and people on the 24th". It can be seen that Yunmeng County has been influenced by the surrounding counties and cities, and the time has evolved from the 23rd to the 24th day. The "army on the 23rd and people on the 24th" can also prove the significant impact of politics on the time variation of "xiaonian". Fourth, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, large-scale immigration promoted the inclusiveness of various customs, symbiosis and happiness, and finally formed a diversified little New Year Festival. Volume 16 of *Changle Xianzhi* (《长乐县志》) in 1870 contains: "the 24th day is called 'celebrating' "xiaonian". The aborigines "worship the kitchen god" on the night of the 23rd day, while the customers on the 24th, which is called "sending the order to God".

The reasons for the formation of "xiaonian" in other provinces and cities in the southwest mandarin area are similar to those in Hubei. However, compared with Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi and Yunnan have more complex terrain and more ethnic minorities, so their social and cultural exchanges will also involve terrain and multi-ethnic factors.

4.2.2 Cantonese Region (24th: 58.3%, 23rd: 37.5%, Both: 4.2%)

Cantonese dialects are mainly distributed in parts of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces and Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions. The population of Cantonese dialects accounts for about 5% of the total number of Han people.

The distribution area of this dialect itself is small, and there are few records of "xiaonian" in local chronicles, so the data is prone to deviation. At the same time, the areas in this area are scattered all over the country, and there is no centralized area, so the obvious commonalities of these areas cannot be found. However, by consulting the local chronicles, it can be clearly found that the time of "xiaonian" in this place has once been changed. For example, *Zengcheng Xianzhi* (《增城县志》) recorded in 1871: "Worship the god of kitchen on the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month." In 1921, it was recorded as follows: "On the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month is 'minor new year's Eve'. At the night people worship the god of kitchen." Another example is *Yangjiang Xianzhi* (《阳江县志》), which was added in 1843 and renewed in 1822. It is recorded as

follows: “On the 24th day of the twelfth lunar month, sweep the house and set up fruit wine, and do fasts to ‘worship the god of kitchen’.” In 1925, it was recorded that “on the 23rd day of the twelfth lunar month, the kitchen god is worshiped in the evening, called ‘seeing the kitchen god off’, which, from the records above, can be inferred that the time of “xiaonian” in Guangdong dialect region should have varied from the 24th day to the 23rd in history. This evolution was still in progress during the Republic of China, wherefore there formed the phenomenon of a comparative proportion of the 23rd and the 24th day.

5 Conclusion

Language is the most essential tool for human communication, and more importantly the carrier of culture. The correlation of the dialects and its local culture is thus profoundly impacting the customs of the local people. By meticulously studying the time variation of “xiaonian” in the eight dialect regions through diverse ways, the assumption was proved that the time of “xiaonian” is closely relevant to language, and the characteristic of the local dialect is the potential and key factor of its distribution and variation. Yet for the complexity of history, other comprehensive factors like politics and migration are also to influence the dissemination of cultures and customs, wherefore there formed the phenomenon of some localized areas against the general rule.

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