I am currently learning Mandarin Chinese. I am just a beginner, only in the middle of level two. It is the fourth language that I have learned — English, Spanish, Amharic, which is the language of Ethiopia, and now Mandarin.

What excites me about learning a new language is trying to understand the underlying values of how the world works embedded in it. At more than 5,000 years old, Mandarin Chinese is said to be one of the oldest languages in continuous use today.
Through learning the most basic aspects of the language, I have come to understand that when the Chinese language was developed, the social values were male-centred and agrarian.

How were the values male-centred? One of the first words that one learns in Chinese class is hǎo (好), which means good. The character 女 means woman or nǚ in pinyin. The character 子 means child/son or zǐ in pinyin.

Thus the very definition of “good” in Chinese society was to have a woman and child. If this were from a woman’s perspective (hetero-centrically speaking), “good” would be made up of the characters for man/male (男, nán) and child.

How were the values agrarian? The character for man/male (男) is made up of two parts. The top part is the character 田 (tián), which means field. The bottom part is the character 力 (lì), which means strength. Thus, a male is defined as one who has the strength to carry out the major activity in society, farming.

Chinese feminists might say Chinese society is only slowly changing from a male-centred one. Yet, the rate in which China has shifted from an agrarian-based society to an urban one has been rapid.

According to data listed on the World Population Review, 52.6% of China’s total population of 1.3 billion live in urban centres. This number is expected to increase to 70% by 2035. As people living in China become predominantly urban dwellers, I wonder how they will continue to relate to the values expressed in their agrarian-based language.

For example, the character for risk, 风险 (fēng xiǎn), refers to being on a dangerous cliff with strong winds. The typical urban dweller may have never experienced being on a cliff with strong winds.

For them, the notion of 风险 (fēng xiǎn) is only an abstraction. They may experience the risk of being on a skyscraper tower on a windy day, but that is something different. Thus, the question I ask is: what happens when a language, like Mandarin, and its values no longer align with the everyday experiences of its speakers?

Of course, Mandarin Chinese has undergone many evolutions and some revolutions. During the Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.), Li Si standardised the language.
World wars stopped the efforts to simplify the language in the turn of the 20th Century. The Communist Party revolutionised the language when it introduced Modern Standard Chinese in 1956, with the pinyin Romanisation system following in 1958.

The Communist Party sought to simplify many of the traditional Chinese characters to order to increase both bureaucratic efficiency and literacy rates. The desire to further reform the language continues. Debate ensued, even in the New York Times, when the People’s Republic of China began proposing more simplifications in 2009.

What keeps me fascinated with the learning of Mandarin is not the traditional versus simplified Chinese characters debate. Rather, I am interested in the differences between rural and urban values and how urban lifestyle experiences might be reflected in the redesign of the Chinese language of the near future.

As a beginning language student, I have no answer to my question regarding what happens when a language, like Mandarin, and its values no longer align with the everyday experiences of its speakers?

And recent discussions with my Chinese language instructor and my Mandarin-speaking friends indicate that they do not have an answer to it either. Perhaps the answer will come the same way as all great innovations — a science-fiction author will write a speculative novel about a “city Mandarin language,” 城市的普通话.
While some day sitting in a café in Shanghai, I will enjoy reading that book in neo-Mandarin, when I am finally able to do so.