

Goals and Duties of Linguistics in China at the Turn of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

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The twenty-first century is close at hand. This great historical turning-point demands that we contemplate the future as best we can. Confronting the third millennium, many disciplines, linguistics included, have reached a time to take stock. At this stage it is helpful to cast a retrospective glance on linguistics in China during the past half-century to evaluate the gains here at the transition between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

Linguistics in China since the Second World War

The end of the Second World War led to the birth of a series of new countries in Asia. The People's Republic of China was among them. The development of linguistics in China from the foundation of the republic until the present day can be divided into three stages:

- from the foundation until the mid-1960s;
- from the mid-1960s until the end of the 1970s;
- from the end of the 1970s until the present day.

The first stage

During the first stage the emphasis of linguistic research was upon the generalization of linguistic knowledge and its planning. All sectors of society accorded great importance to the standardization of the modern Chinese language. The most representative example is the serial publication in the *People's Daily*, the most influential newspaper in China, of a number of articles under the generic title, 'Discourse on the Grammar and Rhetoric of Modern Chinese.' The publication of these articles written by Professors Lü Shuxiang and Zhu Dexi, two linguists very well-known in China, continued for more than seven months. At the same time as these articles in the *People's Daily* an editorial entitled 'Let Us Use Our Mother Tongue Correctly and Unite Our Efforts to Achieve Linguistic Purity' appeared. This was an occurrence unprecedented in Chinese history. A collected volume of these articles was published, with some modifications, shortly after the end of serial publication. This book put grammar at its centre and elementary grammatical knowledge as its foundation, by placing its emphasis on the analysis of concrete examples, underscoring the guiding role of linguistic knowledge in the use of language, and aiming to 'correct errors and rectify the incorrect use of terms.' For several dozen years after its

publication, this book exercised great influence upon the teaching of Chinese and upon linguistic study and played a very active role in the promotion of the standardization of Chinese.

We can say that on the whole the 1950s and the early 1960s were dominated by a marked tendency to favour the standardization of modern Chinese in order to 'correct errors and rectify the incorrect use of terms' in linguistic research, although there were great successes in many other linguistic fields during this period.

In sum, the standardization of modern Chinese, conceived as a work of the whole of Chinese society, experienced a considerable increase throughout the entire country. But beyond what I have just said, it should be observed that the primary task of the standardization of modern Chinese most often aimed above all to correct errors noted in popular written and oral usage. But the criteria for judgement were often too prescriptive to be perfectly applied in practice. Moreover, they might flagrantly contradict the principles of sociolinguistics.

The second stage

This stage as a whole corresponds to the ten or so years of the famous 'Great Cultural Revolution' which were in reality 'ten years of unprecedented calamity.' These past times are too painful to be awakened. I wish only to say that instead of making progress, all branches of knowledge in the social and humanistic sciences, including linguistics, regressed. Nor was this all: not only social and humanistic sciences but also their methods of research were the object of pitiless censure.

There are many who have still not recovered entirely from their terror at that time. The negative impact of the 'Cultural Revolution' on the intellectual milieu in China is immeasurable.

The third stage

This stage began with the end of the 'Cultural Revolution' and still continues. It is markedly characterized by rapid development in linguistic research. There are several reasons for this:

- first, it has become possible to find out in 'real time' about research abroad and most recent trends;
- secondly, the number of professionals engaged in research has increased thanks to the development of higher education and the training of a large number of researchers;
- thirdly and finally, research materials have been gathered and have made it possible to establish linguistic data bases.

The general situation at the present time is as follows: research methods of contemporary western linguistics are continually introduced into different areas of linguistic study in China. Researchers in all branches of linguistics speculate on possible combinations of

western linguistic theory and linguistic practice in China. These enquiries have stimulated new ideas in many areas of linguistic study. Moreover, attention has been drawn to the relation between theory and its application. This has primarily had repercussions on the treatment of information and upon the teaching of Chinese and the languages of national minorities.

Successes have been most evident in the areas of Chinese palaeography, the modern Chinese language, dialectology, languages of national minorities, and the treatment of data relating to Chinese.

The state of research in the different branches of linguistics in China

China is one of the oldest civilized countries of the world. And Chinese is one of the languages of the world with the longest history. This dazzling cultural heritage is rich in historical records and imperishable classical writings which have plunged scholars into ecstasy right up to the present day. As a vehicle for this culture, Chinese carries more or fewer traces of this inheritance. This is why numerous linguists have quite naturally given pride of place to research on Chinese in all its aspects.

The state of things, in the different branches, can be described as follows:

The study of the history of Chinese

For many years scholars have devoted themselves to dynastic research on ancient Chinese and researches for the classic monographs deemed the foundation for dynastic research. A series of influential works have thus appeared, for example, *The Study of Chinese in the Pre-Qin Period* (that is, the period of the Spring and the Autumn and that of the Warring States); *The Study of Chinese of the Qin and Han Dynasties*, and *The Study of the Chinese of the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties* – all three by Cheng Xiangqing and others.

Other researches have examined the history of Chinese in relation to linguistics, for instance, *The History of Chinese Linguistics* by Wang Li; *The History of Ancient Chinese* by He Jiuying; *The History of Modern Chinese Linguistics* also by He Jiuying, and *The History of the Study of Chinese* by Li Kai. These works are characterized by a plentiful store of data, but suffer from some weakness in theoretical explanation.

To summarize, there is still no work available exhaustively treating the history and evolution of Chinese. Essentially no doubt because of the countless difficulties presented by the detailed study of the phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar of ancient Chinese in its varying periods.

Phonology

Among researches on Chinese, the study of phonology has become one of the most active and productive fields: researchers have collated, classified, and systematized the works of ancient philology. Some have edited different tables of rhymes or manuals of pronunciation

for the ancient characters in order to make a comparison with the modern Chinese characters. There has been extensive research on ancient rhyming dictionaries. The study of sounds at different historical periods has become highly specialized. The evidence studied goes henceforth well beyond the framework of traditional rhyming dictionaries. Scholarly enquiry has extended to inscriptions on carapaces and on bones (from the Shang dynasty, sixteenth to eleventh centuries BC), on bamboo tablets and ancient texts on silk recently discovered.

Grammar

The grammar of ancient Chinese and its history have received much attention. The *Grammar of Ancient Chinese and its Development* by Yang Bojun and He Leshi is one of the most remarkable works of recent times. The authors have succeeded in establishing a practical grammatical system not without theoretical stature, and they have developed a great number of original ideas. It represents the highest plane of research on the grammar of ancient Chinese.

Among works classifying and systematizing the results of earlier researches, that concerning the *Grammar of Ma Jianzhong*, a masterpiece of the last century, is the most striking. Ma Jianzhong, who was a student in France in his youth, had a perfect mastery of Greek, Latin, French, and English. His work took him more than ten years of research. It contained almost 8000 examples drawn from classical Chinese writings. To construct his system, the author sought to apply traditional western grammar to the practice of Chinese. Since the book has become the standard reference work for grammatical studies of Chinese, it has marked a new stage in the development of autonomous modern Chinese linguistics. For many years the *Grammar of Ma Jianzhong* has never ceased to attract many researchers, and it has given rise to important commentaries.

Commentary on ancient texts

Here the most striking successes have occurred in the field of textual criticism and the clarification of words and expressions.

Philological study of the accounts in prose and verse of Dunhuang have stimulated a large number of high-quality works, such as: *General Explanation of the Significations of BIAN WEN of Dunhuang* by Jiang Lihong (*BIAN WEN* is the popular form of literary narrative in story and song during the period of the Tang dynasty, 618–907, with alternating prose and poetic rhythms, often on Buddhist themes), *Selected Commentaries on BIAN WEN of Dunhuang* by Xiang Chu, and *Collection of Textual Criticism of the Literature of Dunhuang*, also by Xiang Chu. Moreover, there are many novels and tales in the spoken language, and researches on the vocabulary of traditional opera have produced interesting results.

Since ancient times, commentary on early texts has enjoyed the prestige of long practice and has imposed the superiority of the classics over popular writings. This practice has made it possible to develop a theory of commentary in order to apply it to modern writings.

The study of Chinese writing

During the preceding decades the study of writing has gone beyond its traditional bounds. Inscriptions on carapaces and bones, and others still older, contemporary and classical writing, documents discovered recently in the course of excavation have thus been able to be studied. The most remarkable discoveries impinged on the following areas:

- the science of Chinese writing in general (including the nature and origin of the Chinese characters, *Explanation of Primitive Figures and Dissection of Characters* and *Six Procedures of Chinese Writings*, which have become the core of discussion in recent years); palaeography (the philology of ancient Chinese, including research on inscriptions on carapaces and bones and those on bronzes, research on the writing of the Warring States, 475–221 BC, etc.).
- Computer handling of Chinese characters and their simplification. In consequence of the return of Hong Kong into the bosom of the mother country and of the development of relations across the Taiwan Straits, comparative studies on the use of Chinese characters in many cultural fields have progressed greatly. The governments of Japan and of the Republic of Korea have made a proposal to China for a programme of joint research on the unification of the Chinese characters used in these countries.

The study of modern Chinese

Research is very active in all branches of modern Chinese, and the results are cogent.

On the phonological level, they impinge on the synthesis and analysis of the oral language in current use, an indispensable approach for a deeper consideration of the 'man-machine' dialogue.

At the lexicological level, interdisciplinary approaches have forwarded encounters between, for example, socio-linguistics, cultural linguistics, and applied linguistics. A sufficient number of encounters give grounds for hope of considerable growth in the theory of modern Chinese in times to come.

As for grammatical study, it attaches great importance to current problems, to overcome which several theories and methods of research are being compared. The observations being made are more scrupulous, the descriptions more detailed, and interpretations more searching – as much on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels of the common Chinese language as those of dialects and ancient Chinese.

This replacement of grammatical micro-studies with global studies encourages theoretical reflection in academic circles and makes it possible to direct research more specifically.

The study of Chinese dialects

This is not without influence on the situation of the country, since it aims, by the validation and integration of dialects, to generalize the common Chinese language, and to promote standardization and thus facilitate computer management of data.

A series of very important projects related to the study of dialects is in hand or already completed: for example, *The Linguistic Atlas of China*, a project which is the fruit of collaboration between the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Australian Academy of the Humanities, directed by Professor Stephen Wurm. Published in Chinese and English, the atlas contains thirty-five captioned graphics, whence 'The Map of Chinese Dialects.' This is a highly important source for the knowledge of China's languages, dialects, and patois. It has attracted the attention of academic circles inside China and abroad. It is viewed as a major cultural achievement in China and as a model of successful international collaboration in the field of humanistic sciences.

The Linguistic Atlas of China has given rise to profound studies on the ground. This work was a preparatory stage for dialectal comparison on a great scale. The nine most representative dialectal regions of China have served as a base for these enquiries. The reports have already been published.

The languages of ethnic minorities

In China the study of the languages of ethnic minorities is partially integrated with linguistics. China is a multinational country numbering fifty-six nationalities. An even-handed policy of validation of the languages of ethnic minorities can only enhance the country's unification. The Han, the largest nationality, constitute around 92 per cent of the population of the country, while the other nationalities represent scarcely 8 per cent. Respect for the languages and for the ethnic minorities has been observed and one of its most dazzling results was the publication of the *Annals of the Languages of the Ethnic Minorities in China*, a series of works based on large-scale investigations on the ground. This was a national project comprising fifty-nine books in all (one book per language, in the main) in which emphasis was placed on the detailed description of the distinctive structural characteristics of each language, and above all on their grammatical systems. These books have become indispensable reference works for all scholars in these fields.

Inquiries and Research into the Languages and Writings of the National Minorities is another of these grand projects. In co-operation with linguists (in this case Canadian), *The Written Languages of the World: A Survey of the Degree and Modes of Use (Volume 4: China)* has also been published. These two works systematically describe and analyse the ethnic communities, and the use of ethnic languages and ethnic writing in different social conditions.

More specialized studies have given rise to a great number of monographs, for instance, *Mongol Grammar* by Qing Ge'ertai; *Basic Grammar of Korean* by Xuan Dewu; *Grammar of Jingpo* by Dai Qingxia and Xu Xijian, and so on.

Great strides have also been made in the study of the writings and ancient documents of the ethnic languages, in the publication of reference works, and in the standardization of new terms in the ethnic languages.

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Besides the aspects mentioned above, there has been encouraging progress in areas such as theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics (especially the teaching of Chinese and of foreign languages) and the publication of dictionaries, etc.

Important fields for linguistic study in China at the turn of the century

The condition of Chinese linguistic studies at the present time can be summarized as follows: theories have been reinforced, methods improved, and application enhanced. The most important current problems can be resumed briefly: too limited financial resources allocated to linguistic studies, difficulties of publication, and research too widely dispersed.

Linguistics is no longer only a specialized theoretical discipline. It is closely associated with the socio-economic life of the people. Many fields, such as the teaching of languages, computer handling, automatic translation, linguistic standardization, Sino-foreign cultural exchanges, the classification of traditional cultures, and the publication of reference works depend on the future development of linguistics; improvements in the standard of living for the whole people, the speed of the spread of information technology, the diffusion of the culture of the Chinese nation, and the union of all the nationalities of the country depend upon it.

Granted, the public at large as well as the government know little of linguistics and the importance of the role it plays. However, the new challenge of global information technology, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, demands a fair appreciation of the situation.

Linguistic milieux themselves are not above criticism. We must put an end to the overspecialized division of labour, develop co-operation between the various branches of linguistics, and promote interdisciplinary and interlinguistic research. It is also necessary to relate theoretical linguistic research to practical studies. In the years to come, great efforts will be required to reinforce certain definitive directions:

Linguistic theory

Having introduced western linguistic theory, it is now a matter of urgency to use it as a source of inspiration to construct a theoretical system adapted to linguistic practice in China, making use of foreign works in translation on linguistic theory to harmonize it with research in China. Experts should collaborate to edit *Linguistic Theory* to give full justice to the theoretical level achieved by linguistic research in China.

The history of Chinese

As a fundamental discipline, the history of Chinese is closely tied to the teaching of Chinese, the publication of dictionaries, the collation and classification of ancient texts, and so on. The four following fields will be the most decisive in determining the direction of research:

- the history of phonetics in Chinese;
- the grammar of modern Chinese;
- the writing of modern Chinese and the computer (the cardinal point here being the study of the topological structure of the Chinese characters and their system of composition);
- the comparative study of ancient writing and the 'Clarification of Primitive Figures and the Dissection of Characters.'

Modern Chinese

Despite the thorough researches which we have described, the detailed systematic study of key problems such as the definition and segmentation of the 'word,' the classification of words, the types and forms of phrases, has been inconclusive. In China it is easy to find good dictionaries, but nothing on the component elements of discourse. It is difficult to conceive that the clear distinction between verb and noun is often fluid. For a country priding itself on a civilization five thousand years old, this is somewhat inglorious at the advent of the third millennium. All these inadequacies have clearly rebounded on the global study of modern Chinese. For this reason, lexicology (at the same time as computer analysis of Chinese characters) and grammar (the study relating to words, and the classes of words, to the types and forms of phrases, to the methodology of grammatical study in China in particular) should be particularly favoured in the future.

The study of modern Chinese, as we have already observed, is directly related to the development of the country and of society. But linguistics has for too long been the poor relation of the teaching of Chinese and purely theoretical analysis. With the growth of information technology, attention must necessarily be brought to bear on the problems posed by computer application. In this respect, the support of the country is indispensable, for example, for the establishing of phonetic data banks concerning the common Chinese language. But all evidence indicates that success is impossible without state investment.

Dialectology

At the very end of the twentieth century, we should also take stock of ten years of dialectology to synthesize the data already gathered. Emphasis should consequently be placed on the completion of the *Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects*, the *Phonetic Data Bank of Modern Chinese Dialects*, on dialectal studies of regions still little known, finally on the completion of the compilation of the *Annals of Local Dialects* and the grammars of Chinese dialects.

It should be observed that there are many dialects in China, very different from each other, particularly in their pronunciation. China's vast territory and huge population have created these differences. The inhabitants of the south or the north, sometimes even those of adjacent regions, speak very different dialects. They do not understand each other when they speak their own dialect. Some foreigners mistakenly take these dialects for different languages. To acquire a more detailed knowledge of Chinese dialects and to promote the 'common Chinese language' called the *putonghua*, and habitually referred to as 'mandarin' by foreigners, a *Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects* has been set in hand. It is one of the most important and most ambitious Chinese linguistic projects of the twentieth century and its investigations cover forty representative regions, sufficient to cover the principal dialectal regions of the country.

The publication of forty regional dictionaries (one per region) will be the conclusion: more than ten have already been published.

The study of the languages of national minorities

In many regions of the world with plural ethnicity, ethnic questions (including those of languages) give rise to social unrest. They must be treated most circumspectly. In the years to come, they must be studied in greater depth and more specifically: then we should take stock; and, finally, there should be research on phonology and computer-handling techniques just as on the philological modernization of the ethnic minorities.

Applications of linguistics

By this term we mean the whole body of research making use of linguistic approaches proper to resolve problems in everyday and professional life, and questions posed by other disciplines.

The generalization of information technology makes the selection and codification of Chinese characters used by the computer a matter of urgency. We need to attract and mobilize many linguists and scientists to conduct joint research. The following aspects will be critical:

- establish a great national bank of linguistic data;
- specify linguistic standards for computer handling of Chinese, such as the characteristics of words, methods of describing words, and standards for word-division;
- revise in its entirety the codification of Chinese characters to harmonize with the standards of the ISO (International Standards Organization);
- improve the technique for keyboard treatment of Chinese characters;
- conduct fundamental research on the discrimination of sounds in order to establish a bank of phonetic data of the *putonghua* and the distinctive phonetic characteristics of Chinese.

As far as the teaching and the writing of Chinese is concerned, the following aspects will be the most important: learning the features of Chinese characters (by using various methods of alphabetization, and by the psychological and physiological study of learning to read); the development of the so-called 'structure-function-culture' theory in the teaching of Chinese abroad.

Reflections at the end of the twentieth century on the future of the humanities

Great changes have taken place in Asia, Europe, and the rest of the world in the 1990s.

As a result of the rapid development of information technology, telecommunications technology, and the arrival of the Internet, the world – as is commonly said – has become a global village. The advantages and drawbacks are entirely self-evident.

Now, the Internet mainly uses English, which is in the process of becoming more or less the international language. There are various reasons for this, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. But in parallel with the development of English, national cultural

inheritances and mother tongues should be safeguarded at all costs. In our own time numerous languages used by a small number of speakers are in danger of dying out. A language is the vehicle of a national culture. An ancient Chinese proverb says: 'When the skin disappears, what can the fur be attached to?' In other words, if a mother tongue dies, what will become of the national culture? This is a serious problem. The hegemony of the great languages and great cultures is a phenomenon which does not operate only to the detriment of the indigenous populations of America and Australia, but also of Asia, Europe, and other regions of the world. It is a problem that merits reflection. Even within the European Union, the use of one sole language for economic purposes can be envisaged, whether English, French, or Spanish . . . But is it not high time for us to take an interest in languages and cultures which find themselves in a difficult situation?

As far as relations between the humanities and other disciplines are concerned, it is crucial to remember that all sciences, including humanistic and social sciences, are essential factors in the progress of humanity and in socio-economic development.

Admittedly, the competition between the humanities and the 'hard' sciences, and even some social science disciplines, is very unequal. No one would dare dispute that a country's economy and technology have immediate and conclusive effects in terms of efficiency. But it should not be forgotten that the development of a country cannot be lasting, or its place on the international stage assured, without a concomitant cultural development or decent living conditions.

Immediate results cannot be expected from linguistics or history. It is only in the long term that they bear fruit.

Of course, the world has many urgent problems to resolve, such as the increasingly apparent contradiction between economic development and environmental pollution, or between demographic growth and the lack of natural resources . . . The Asian financial crisis has resulted in a general disruption throughout the world. And the attention required must be devoted to these problems. That is quite clear. But for all that it would be damaging to neglect the humanities. For it is perhaps precisely the spirit of humanism which will facilitate a better approach to these problems. Research in the humanities cannot be other than profitable to general socio-economic development. Relations between humanistic sciences and the other disciplines are complementary. Many regions of the world have a shortage of resources, but it seems to me that the absence of a humanistic spirit can sometimes prove still more serious. We should therefore beware of a *fin de siècle* melancholy. The path is curving, but the future is radiant. The humanistic sciences, linguistics, literature, and the arts have more than once played a decisive role in the history of the world. I need look no further for an example than the Renaissance in Europe and especially in Italy. I do not doubt that the humanities have a promising future in the next century. And I do not doubt that their relations with other sciences will be more harmonious.

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