The Chinese Language

FACT AND FANTASY

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中國語文

中国语文

Zhōngguó Yǔwén

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1.

On Defining "Chinese" and "Language"

The idea that Chinese characters constitute *"la langue internationale par excellence"* derives part of its support from a sort of Exotic East Syndrome characterized by the belief that in the Orient things strange and mysterious replace the mundane truths applicable to the West. It is also due in part to the equally superficial tendency to bandy terms about without a precise understanding of what they mean. In thinking about the Chinese language we must avoid this confusion by clearly specifying what we have in mind.

Take the word "language." Linguists—not polyglots but scholars concerned with linguistics, the science of language—generally use the term in the restricted meaning of speech. In their view language must be clearly distinguished from writing. Speech is primary, writing secondary. The two are related, but by no means identical, and the areas where they coincide or differ need to be carefully noted.

The attempt by linguists to reserve the term "language" as a designation solely for speech is part of their persistent but largely unsuccessful battle against the confusion resulting from the popular use of the term to encompass diverse forms of human communication without distinguishing the properties specific to each. But perhaps the confusion is better avoided not by trying to monopolize the term, which seems hopeless, but by carefully noting its range of meanings and stressing the distinctions among them. This is what has been attempted in the present work, the title of which, from the purely linguistic point of view, leaves something to be desired. Apart from its being a concession to popular usage, the title is justified because of the care taken throughout the book to distinguish between the spoken and written aspects of the Chinese language.

Failure to make this distinction is a major source of confusion—as

illustrated by the case of the textbook writer who after remarking that the largest Chinese dictionaries contain about fourteen thousand [*sic*] characters goes on to say that "two thousand are sufficient for the speech of a well-educated man" (Barrett 1934:viii). This comment evokes a picture of our "well-educated man" parading about like a comic strip figure with character-filled balloons coming out of his mouth. More typically misleading is the frequent dinner-table situation in which Chinese guests, when asked about their language, blandly assume that it is an inquiry about Chinese writing (which may indeed have been the case) or simply do not recognize the distinction and thus regale their listeners by dragging out the shopworn example of how the character for "woman" and the character for "child" are charmingly combined to form the character for "good." Incongruities and muddleheadedness of the kind just noted irritate scholars who realize that it would take much time and many pages to dispel the misinformation so glibly imparted in a sentence or two.

Confusion in the use of the term "language" to mean both speech and writing is sometimes avoided by those aware of the difference between the two by referring to the former as "spoken language" and the latter as "written language." Where the context makes the exact meaning clear, the word "language" alone can be used to refer to one or the other concept or to both.

But even if we are careful to specify that the language we are talking about is spoken language it may sometimes be necessary to explain what sort of oral communication we have in mind. The speech of educated Chinese, like that of educated Americans, differs from that of their uneducated counterparts, and all these speakers make use of different styles of speech in different situations. Slang, colloquialisms, regionalisms, polite usage, and formal style exist in Chinese, as they do in English. Some forms of language are considered incorrect. Such an attitude toward language usage is *prescriptive* —an approach adopted, with varying degrees of flexibility, by authorities such as language teachers and compilers of dictionaries. It contrasts with the nonjudgmental *descriptive* linguistic approach that merely analyzes who speaks how in what situations. Statements about spoken Chinese must either specify the kind of speech in question or generalize in a way that cuts across the various kinds of speech.

Even the term "Chinese" requires clarification. It is used to refer both to a people and to their language in both its spoken and written forms. In its application to people the term "Chinese" refers to the

segment of the population of China that is called "Han Chinese" after the name of the great Han dynasty of 206 B.C. to A.D. 220. According to the 1982 census results, the Han Chinese comprise some 93 percent of the population, which is now said to total slightly more than a billion people. The remaining 7 percent consist of fifty-five ethnic minorities such as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs (SSBC 1982:20). In its application to language the term "Chinese," or more specifically "spoken Chinese," refers to the speech of the Han Chinese. The ethnic minorities speak non-Chinese languages, except for the approximately six-and-a-half million Chinese-speaking Moslems of the Hui nationality.

But the "Chinese" spoken by close to a billion Han Chinese is an abstraction that covers a number of mutually unintelligible forms of speech. Some two-thirds to three-quarters of the Chinese-speaking population speak what is loosely called Mandarin in English or *Pǔtōnghuà* ("Common Speech") in Chinese. Within this category there are differences roughly of the magnitude of the differences among the British, American, and Australian varieties of English. The remaining quarter to a third of the Chinese-speaking population are divided into several groups, such as the Cantonese, Hakka, and Min, with forms of speech so distinctive that they are mutually unintelligible. A native of Peking and a native of Canton, for example, cannot understand a word of what the other says in his own form of speech. According to the eminent Chinese linguist Y. R. Chao (1976:24, 87, 97, 105), these forms of speech are as far apart as Dutch and English or French and Spanish or French and Italian. As a result, just as a statement true for Dutch may not be true for English, one true for Cantonese may not apply to the other forms of "Chinese." To speak of *the* Chinese language is to suggest a uniformity which is far from being the case.

There is also a temporal factor to be taken into account. Chinese in both its spoken and written forms has undergone great changes over the years, as have all other languages as well. If Confucius could undergo a resurrection he would be quite unable to carry on a conversation with one of his descendants today. Nor would the two be able to communicate in writing unless the present-day descendant of the sage had received a more than average education comparable to that of a modern European who has learned to read Latin. Classical written Chinese differs so much from the written language of today that intensive training is needed to master both. Failure to distinguish

what period we are talking about and ignoring the changes that have taken place over time are other common sources of confusion and misunderstanding.

One example of this confusion is the belief that Chinese is the oldest language in the world. This myth derives much of its currency from the confusion of speech and writing. As far as the latter is concerned, Chinese writing is not the oldest in the world in the sense of its being the first to be created. Sumerian writing is older by about a millennium and a half (Gelb 1963:63). Chinese writing is the oldest only in the sense that among the scripts in use today, Chinese characters have the longest history of continuous use. As far as Chinese speech is concerned, since it has exhibited the tendency of all speech to change with the passage of time, there is considerable question as to whether it is even proper to talk about age. The spoken Chinese of today is not the spoken Chinese of two thousand years ago, just as the spoken English of today is not the same as whatever ancestral form spoken about the time of Christ we trace English to. In a sense all languages spoken today are equally young and equally old. Again we must be careful not to confuse speech and writing.

All the forms of speech and writing that have been mentioned here are included in what is popularly called "Chinese." Such generalized usage is justified only when we are careful to define just how the term is being used and to separate its various aspects without thoughtlessly taking a fact about one aspect and applying it to another.

Authors who are clear in their own minds about the range of meanings involved in these terms are usually careful in their use of specific terminology. Careful readers of such authors are likely to obtain a clear understanding of what is being said. But confused and careless writers, and careless readers of such writers (and of careful authors as well), can create a cloud of misunderstanding. This has indeed happened to Chinese on a scale that appears to exceed that for any other form of human communication.

To separate fact from fantasy in this miasma of misunderstanding there is need for a careful consideration of "Chinese" or "Chinese language" in its various forms—what it is and what it is not. Since the greatest confusion and misunderstanding involve the Chinese characters, these need especially careful attention. A good starting point in considering all these matters is "spoken Chinese."

2.

A Sketch of Spoken Chinese

Although the term "spoken Chinese" has a more restricted range than the broad expression "Chinese," it too suffers from a lack of precision in view of the wide varieties of speech that are usually subsumed under this name. "Spoken Chinese" includes the speech that can be heard throughout the area stretching from Manchuria in the northeast to Guangdong in the southeast to Yunnan in the southwest to Gansu in the northwest. The varieties of speech in this huge area are legion—ranging from forms with minor differences to others that are mutually unintelligible. Indeed, even among people whose speech is considered to be the same there are individual differences that lead linguists to assert that in fact no two persons speak exactly alike, since each person has his own idiolect which distinguishes him in certain points of detail from everyone else.

In a situation of such diversity there is obviously great danger that a statement true about one kind of spoken Chinese may be completely false with respect to another variety. Generalizations about spoken Chinese can be exceedingly misleading when carelessly advanced without qualification. In any case generalization itself is impossible without some understanding of the diversities among which general features are to be sought. It would appear, therefore, that spoken Chinese can best be described by starting with a restricted form of speech before proceeding to the more and more diverse forms in order to build up an approximate picture of the complex whole.

In selecting what kind of speech to describe it is best to choose a form that somehow stands out as of special importance. This criterion naturally suggests the speech of educated speakers in the capital city of Peking (Běijīng). This form of spoken Chinese had about the same role in China as the speech of educated Parisians in France. It is more

or less the basis of the Common Speech that under various names has been promoted as the national standard in China.

In case of need we could narrow our model to the idiolect or individual speech of a specific person. Such a procedure would have the advantage of enabling us to derive our information by observing the speech of a specific individual and checking our conclusions by testing them against what that speaker actually says. Much of the danger of making inaccurate generalizations could thereby be avoided since we could check whether they are true of So-and-So speaking in such-and-such a situation. In any case it is well to remember that speech is not a vague disembodied entity but a series of tangible sounds emitted from the mouth of an actual person.

THE SYLLABLE

In observing the sounds of our typical speaker we note that, as in all forms of Chinese speech, the syllable plays a crucial role. It consists of phonemes or basic units of sound that determine differences in meaning—for example, the sounds represented by the letters *b* and *p* in English "bat" and "pat." There are two kinds of phonemes in Chinese: *segmental* phonemes, which may be thought of as sequential sounds, and *suprasegmental* phonemes or tones, which in a sense are added to the syllable as a whole. The Chinese syllable made up of those phonemes is moderately complex—more so than Japanese, less so than English. Japanese has only 113 different syllables (Jorden 1963:xxi). Chinese has 1,277 tonal syllables; if tones are disregarded, as is frequently done by Chinese as well as Westerners, the number of what may be called "segmental syllables" or "basic syllables" is variously estimated at 398 to 418, depending on just what form of speech is taken as the basis and whether exclamations and the like are counted.[1] English has more than 8,000 different syllables (Jespersen 1928:15). An English syllable can contain a maximum of seven phonemes, as in the word "splints." The Chinese syllable has a maximum of four segmental phonemes and one suprasegmental phoneme, as in the case of *jiàn* ("see") and *huài* ("bad").

CONSONANTS

The segmental phonemes can be divided into two types: consonants and vowels. There are twenty-one initial consonant phonemes, eigh-

teen of which are represented by single letters and three by two letters: *zh, ch, sh.* There is a final consonant represented by *n,* which is also an initial, and another by *ng,* which occurs only in final position. Pekingese also has a distinctive final *r* sound which has a somewhat uncertain status in the national standard (Barnes 1977). Despite the way in which they are spelled, all Chinese consonants are single consonants. There are no consonant clusters in Chinese, so that the single English syllable "splints" would have to be represented by four syllables: *sī-pǔ-lín-cí.* The initial consonants have the following very rough approximations in English:

Chinese	English	Chinese	English
b	*p* in "spy"	*j*	*tch* in "itching"
p	*p* in "pie"	*q*	*ch-h* in "each house"
m	*m* in "my"	*x*	between *s* in "she" and *s* in "see"
f	*f* in "fie"		
d	*t* in "sty"	*zh*	*ch* in "chew," but unaspirated
t	*t* in "tie"	*ch*	*ch* in "chew"
n	*n* in "nigh"	*sh*	*sh* in "shoe"
l	*l* in "lie"	*r*	*r* in "rue"
g	*k* in "sky"	*z*	*t's* in "it's Al"
k	*k* in "kite"	*c*	*t's* in "it's Hal"
h	*h* in "hut," but rougher	*s*	*s* in "Sal"

Although the letters in the left-hand column occur both in English and in the transcription of Chinese, in many cases they are pronounced differently in the two languages. A distinctive feature of the Chinese consonants is the opposition of aspirated (with a puff of air) versus unaspirated (without a puff of air) in the pairs *b-p, d-t, g-k, j-q, zh-ch,* and *z-c.* In English the opposition is one of voiced versus voiceless—that is, whether or not pronounced with a vibration of the vocal cords that can be felt by holding one's Adam's apple while articulating the sounds. The difference in pronunciation between, for example, the *p* in "spy" and the *p* in "pie" does not make for a difference in meaning in English. It does in Chinese, however, so the two *p* sounds are differentiated by the spellings *b* and *p.*

The group *j, q, x* consists of palatals pronounced with the tip of the tongue pressing against the lower teeth and the blade of the tongue pressing against the palate. The group *zh, ch, sh, r,* consists of retroflexes made with the tip of the tongue curled back and pressing against the roof of the mouth.

VOWELS

The vowels comprise simple vowels and complex vowels—that is, diphthongs and triphthongs. There are six simple vowels. The simple Chinese vowels have the following very rough approximations:

Chinese	English
a	*a* in "father," but closer to *e* in "yet" in words of the type *yan* and *yuan*
e	*e* in "yet" after *i* and *u* *u* in "up" when final (except after *i* and *u*) and before *n* and *ng* *e* in "they" before *i*
i	*i* in "it" after *z, c, s* and before *n* and *ng* *e* in "error" after *zh, ch, sh, r* *i* in "Mimi" elsewhere
o	*o* in "low" before *u* *o* in "worn" after *u* *wo* in "worn" after *b, p, m, f* *oo* in "wood" before *ng*
u	*u* in "lute" except before *n* *oo* in "wood" before *n*
ü	German *ü* in *über* or French *u* in *tu* (that is, English *i* in "Mimi" pronounced with the lip-rounding of *u* in "lute")

The phoneme *ü* is so written only in the syllables *nü* and *lü* to distinguish them from *nu* and *lu*. Otherwise it is written as *u* without danger of confusion because the two phonetic values of this letter are determined by the preceding consonant; the *ü* value occurs only after the semiconsonant *y* and the palatal initials *j, q, x,* and the *u* value occurs elsewhere.

The complex vowels, as we shall see, consist of a simple vowel nucleus and an on-glide vowel or an off-glide vowel or both. There are three on-glide vowels: *i, u, ü.* When these vowels occur initially they function as semiconsonants and are then written respectively as *y, w, yu,* as in *ye, wa, yue.* There are two off-glides, *i* and *o/u,* as in *hai, hao, hou.*

If we let a capital V stand for the vowel nucleus and a small v stand for an on-glide or off-glide, the vowel in a Chinese syllable can be represented by the following formula: (v)V(v). This formula indicates that the vowel in a syllable must include a simple vowel nucleus and may also contain an on-glide or an off-glide or both, giving the following four vowel types:

V: *a, e, i, o, u, ü*
vV: *ia, ie, iu, ua, ui, uo, ue* (pronounced *üe*)

Vv: *ai, ao, ei, ou*
vVv: *iao, uai*

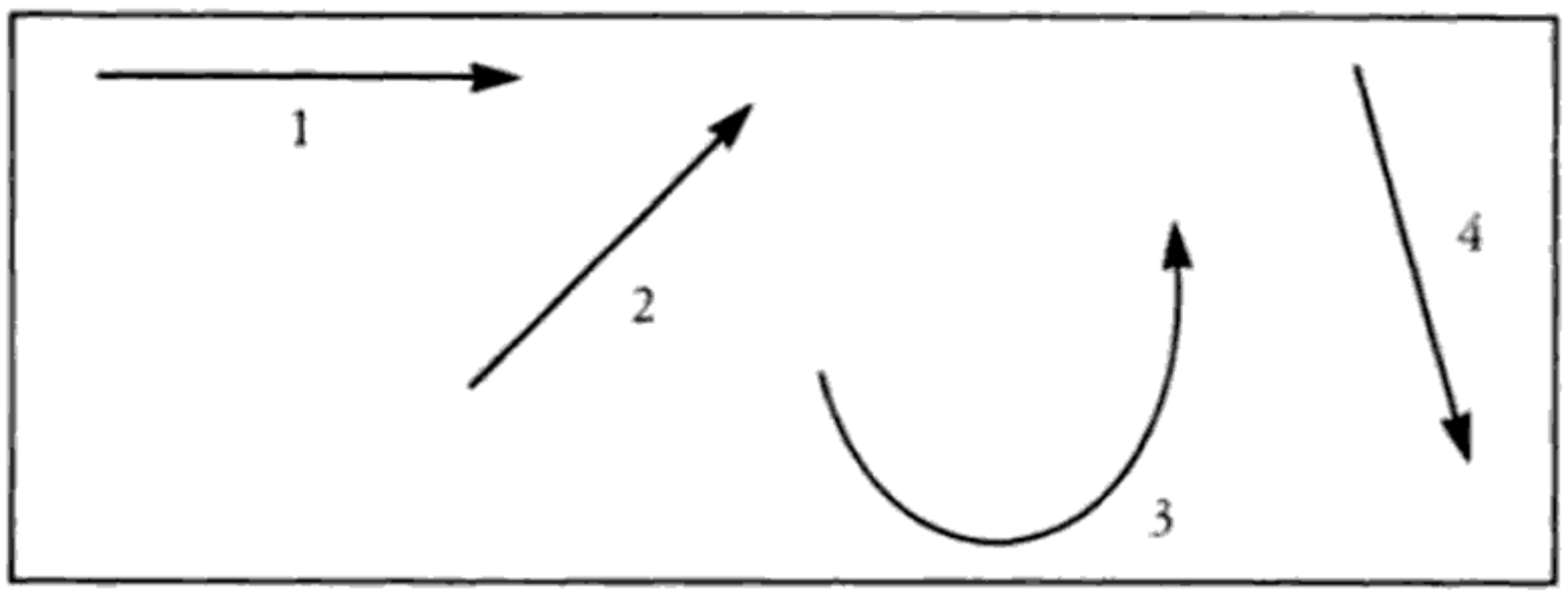
If we let C stand for consonants and boldface **V** for vowels, whether simple or complex, the Chinese syllable can be represented by the following formula: (C)**V**(C). This formula indicates that the syllable must contain a vowel and may also contain an initial consonant or a final consonant or both, giving the following four syllable types:

V : *a, ya (=ia), ai, yao (=iao)*
C**V** : *la, lia, lai, liao*
VC: *an, yan (=ian)*
C**V**C: *lan, lian*

TONES

One of the well-known features of Chinese is its suprasegmental phonemes: the tones. Chinese is not unique, however, in being a tonal language. So are some of the languages of Southeast Asia, Africa, and those of the Latin American Indians, and there are a few words in Swedish distinguished only by tonal differences.

The variety of Chinese being described here has four tones. These are not fixed notes on a scale but relative sounds or contours that vary according to the normal voice range of individual speakers. They can be represented in the following chart:



Tone 1 is high level, tone 2 high rising, tone 3 low dipping, tone 4 high falling. The tone symbols imitate these contours. They are written over the nuclear vowel in a syllable, as in *jiā, méi, hǎo, huài.* Some syllables are distinguished by absence of tone; they are said to be atonic or to have a neutral tone. The word *wénzi* ("mosquito") differs in pronunciation from *wénzì* ("writing") in having a neutral tone on the second syllable.

Suprasegmental phonemes or tones, which give Chinese speech its distinctive musical or singsong quality, must be distinguished from intonation. The latter also exists in tonal languages. It is superimposed on the basic phonological elements—that is, on the consonants, vowels, and tones. Tones perform like consonants and vowels in distinguishing meaning in Chinese, as indicated by *mā, mǎ, mǐ, bì* meaning respectively "mother," "horse," "rice," "pen." One reason why tone signs are frequently omitted in transcription of Chinese expressions, especially when these are embedded in a text in English or some other Western language, is the typographical difficulty of representing the tones in Western publications. This technical problem can be easily overcome, however; in fact, even a small portable typewriter can be inexpensively modified to allow for tone representation by arranging for two dead keys with two tone marks each. Another reason for omission of the tone signs is simple disregard of their significance—a far more important factor.

MORPHEMES AND WORDS

Apart from the phonological features described above, the Chinese syllable is distinctive in that, in most cases, it constitutes a morpheme, the smallest unit of meaning. Because most syllables have meaning they are often considered to be words. Exactly what constitutes a word is a much debated matter in every language, however, particularly so in the case of Chinese. In English we usually think of the expression "teacher" as a single word made up of two morphemes: a free form *teach* and a bound form *er* ("one who does something"). But in Chinese the equivalent term *jiàoyuán*, though similarly made up of the free form *jiào* ("teach") and a bound form *yuán* ("one who does something"), is often described as a compound made up of two words. On the basis chiefly of such an approach, in which every syllable is defined as a word, Chinese is commonly described as monosyllabic. This approach is rejected by many scholars who consider that it has been unduly influenced by the character-based writing system.

To be sure, Chinese does have many words of one syllable, such as *wǒ* ("I"), *hǎo* ("good"), *lái* ("come"). It also has many expressions, whatever they might be called, made up by combining morphemes of varying degrees of freedom either in the manner of the just-cited *jiàoyuán* ("teacher"), which combines a free morpheme with a mere suffix (one of a small but productive group of word-formative ele-

ments), or by combining two or more syllables that are clearly free words, as in the case of *tiělù* ("railroad"), which is made up by combining *tiě* ("iron") and *lù* ("road") in exactly the same manner as the English equivalent. There are also expressions of more than one syllable in which the individual syllables have no meaning of their own. An example of this is the expression *shānhú* ("coral").

The classification of words, which means identification of parts of speech, is another matter of disagreement. Nevertheless, although the terms used are subject to different interpretations, there is general agreement on referring to some things in Chinese as nouns, verbs, and other familiar names for parts of speech. There are two main word groups that can be labeled as nominal expressions and verbal expressions. As in the case of Chinese parts of speech generally, these expressions are often defined in terms of their positional relationship to each other. Roughly speaking, nouns are things that follow measure words and measure words are things that follow numbers. Verbs are things that come after negation markers.

One of the characteristics of Chinese nouns is that they are mass nouns comparable to the English mass noun "rice." The English noun needs to be quantified by measure words to produce such phrases as "a grain of rice," "three pounds of rice," "three bowls of rice," and so on. In Chinese, not only *mǐ* ("rice") but also *rén* ("person") are mass nouns. Both require measure words: *sānjīn mǐ* ("three pounds [of] rice") and *sānge rén* ("three persons"—or, to render it in the manner dear to the hearts of aficionados of Pidgin English, "three piecee person"). Just as foreign students of English have to memorize phrases like "a flock of sheep," "a herd of cattle," "a crowd of people," so students of Chinese must memorize that *zhāng* is the appropriate measure word for flat objects like paper and tables whereas *tiáo* is the measure word for long narrow things like snakes and roads.

Another feature of nouns in Chinese is that they do not undergo change to distinguish singular and plural. In this respect they are like the English word "deer." Out of context the sentence "He saw the deer" is ambiguous. Did he see one deer or several? Many students in Chinese language classes needlessly fret about the overall lack of the singular-plural distinction. But as in the case of English "deer," either the context will remove the ambiguity or if necessary number can be indicated by such devices as using a quantifying expression, as in *sānge rén,* which is unmistakably a "three-person" matter.

There is a large group of nouns called portmanteau expressions

that are formed by combining syllables of other words, somewhat in the manner of "Cal Tech" for "California Institute of Technology." *Běidà* is short for *Běijīng Dàxué* ("Peking University"), *Wĕngăihuì* for *Wĕnzì Găigé Wĕiyuánhuì* (literally "Writing Reform Committee"). Reduced forms of this sort represent a marked tendency toward abbreviation that is influenced by a writing system which even in its contemporary form in its turn has been influenced by the terse style of classical Chinese.

Verbal expressions, which can be identified by their ability to follow negative markers, comprise several subcategories. Apart from the familiar transitive and intransitive verbs, there is a group, called coverbs, which are akin to prepositions, and another group, usually referred to as stative verbs, which are less technically called adjectives. In contrast to English adjectives, but like those in Russian, they incorporate the idea which we represent by words like "am," "is," "are," as illustrated by *Wŏ hăo* ("I am-fine").

Although linguists frown on the practice of describing a language by noting features of another language that it does not have, for speakers of English it may be useful to note that Chinese can get along quite happily without our obligatory indication of tense. *Tāmen zài zhèr* could be either "They are here" or "They were here." The verbal expression *zài* ("to be at a place") does not need to indicate tense because time will be clear either from the context or from the presence of a nominal expression referring to time, such as *jīntian* ("today") and *zuótian* ("yesterday").

Chinese is characterized by having *aspect* rather than tense. This technical term refers to the way a speaker looks at an event or state. It is a prominent feature of Russian verbs and can be illustrated in English by a contrast such as "They eat Chinese food" and "They are eating Chinese food." In Chinese the one-word sentence *Hăo* ("Good") contrasts with *Hăole* ("It has become good"). The aspect marker *le* in *Hăole* is one of a category of particles that are few in number but important in function. Among other things they indicate whether or not a verbal action is continuous or has ever been experienced. Students of Chinese find this one of the most difficult features of the language.

Chinese contrasts with other languages, notably Japanese, in the way it increases its stock of words by borrowing from foreign sources. Japanese even more than English borrows foreign words by imitating the original pronunciation as closely as the borrowing language permits, as in the case of English "chauffeur" from the French with the

same spelling but slightly different pronunciation. As Mao Zedong noted in a conversation with Nikita Khrushchev,[2] the Chinese prefer to borrow by translating—that is, by the technique of translation loans rather than phonetic loans. The translation loan *diànhuà* ("electric talk"), for example, has now replaced the earlier phonetic loan *tiě-lè-fēng* for "telephone." With few exceptions, phonetic imitation of foreign words is limited to proper names, such as *Ní-kè-sēn* for "Nixon."

PHRASES AND SENTENCES

In Chinese the relationship of parts of speech to each other is characterized by the general feature that modifying elements precede the elements they modify. Adjectives come before nouns and adverbs before verbs. The equivalents of our relative clauses occur before nouns as modifying elements, as in German. Example: *Zhèiběn wǒ-zuótian-zài-zhèr-mǎi-de shū* ("this I-here-yesterday-bought book"—that is, "this book that I bought here yesterday"). Here the modifying phrase is connected with the modified noun *shū* ("book") by the subordinating particle *de*.

Chinese is frequently said to be an SVO language—that is, one in which the sentence order is subject-verb-object. Many linguists prefer to describe Chinese sentences as of the topic-comment type. The topic, the main thing that is being talked about, is mentioned at the beginning of the sentence and then a sentence, which may even be of the SVO type, says something about it, as in *Zhèiwèi xiānsheng nǐ jiànguo tā méiyǒu?* ("This gentleman have you ever seen him?"). This topic-comment construction often gives the impression of considerable looseness in the Chinese sentence. On the other hand, Chinese has the reputation of having fixed word order, in contrast to highly inflected languages like Latin and Russian, where noun endings that indicate subject and object permit the reversal SVO to OVS to have exactly the same meaning—in contrast to English, where "John loves Mary" is quite different in meaning from "Mary loves John." This fixed word order is more often found in formal speech or written Chinese than in informal speech, which permits a surprising amount of flexibility if stress, juncture, and intonation are taken into account (DeFrancis 1967b).

Features such as these are important in Chinese, as in all languages, but apart from treatment in technical studies they tend to be slighted in general works, such as in textbooks for teaching the lan-

guage.[3] The ambiguity in writing of *Tāmen bù qù, wǒ yě bù qù* disappears if we note that differences in intonation and juncture distinguish the two meanings "They're not going, (and) I'm not going either" and "(If) they don't go, I won't go either." As this sentence shows, Chinese tends to avoid the use of sentence or phrase connectors. Expressions equivalent to "and" or "if . . . then" exist in Chinese, but they are used much less frequently than in English. Chinese sentences in most styles of the language tend to be short and seemingly loosely connected.

In contrast to English, which is a sentence-oriented language, what might be considered omissions or deletions are much more common in Chinese, which is context-oriented. Thus the answer to the English question "Do students like him?" must be something like "Yes, students like him," whereas the Chinese equivalent *Xuésheng xǐhuan tā ma?* can be answered simply with *Xǐhuan* ("like"), with deletion of both the subject *xuésheng* ("students") and the object *tā* ("him"). Such terseness presents difficulties for foreign students of the language who lack the native speaker's intuitive grasp of what might be called contextual rules as well as of such neglected features as stress, juncture, and intonation.

Such things, and much more, must be taken into account for a fully detailed description of spoken Chinese. Here I have merely presented an outline. A really thorough presentation such as that contained in Y. R. Chao's monumental *Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1968a) requires more than eight hundred pages to describe a language which is every bit as sophisticated an instrument of oral communication as the better-known languages of the world.

OVERVIEW

The picture of great complexity that emerges from a full-scale analysis of spoken Chinese contrasts with the widespread myth that it is impoverished because it lacks such features common to European languages as their complex phonologies and systems of conjugation and declension. This view has been noted by Karlgren (1926:16) in his comment that the distinctive structural features of Chinese

> give modern Chinese a stamp of excessive simplicity, one is tempted to say *primitiveness*. It is therefore not surprising that in the nineteenth century, when attention was directed for the first time to linguistic

> families and their characteristics, Chinese was taken as the type of the primitive, underdeveloped languages—those which had not yet attained the same wealth of inflections, derivatives, and polysyllabic words as the European languages.

Subsequently this nineteenth-century view was replaced in some minds by the notion that Chinese actually represents a higher stage of linguistic development because it dispenses with unnecessary features such as conjugations and declensions that were retained in varying degrees by European languages. Neither view has much to commend it. Instead of adopting a sort of master-race theory of superior and inferior languages it is more accurate to say that all languages have the capacity for expressing whatever thoughts its speakers want to express and that they simply possess different strategies for doing so.

The mastery of these strategies is a necessary part of learning a language—indeed it is the very essence of language learning. The ease or difficulty in achieving this mastery is a subjective matter that basically has nothing to do with the nature of the language itself. Chinese has the reputation of being a hard and unfathomable language. The French reflect this in saying *"C'est du chinois"* where we say "It's Greek to me." This reputation is only partially deserved since it generally stems from a confused approach to the subject.

There is a difference, in the first place, in the amount of difficulty experienced by native speakers and by foreign learners of the language. Chinese have no more difficulty in learning to speak than do others born into one of the thousands of other linguistic environments around the world. For native speakers, all languages seem to be equally easy. Children throughout the world share the marvelous capacity of facile language learning.

It is the foreign learner, especially the foreign adult learner, who may have difficulties in mastering Chinese. Leaving aside the variable of individual differences in ability, there is also the problem of the specific differences between Chinese and whatever the learner's native language happens to be. A speaker of French or German, for example, will have no problem with the Chinese vowel sound represented by the letter *ü,* which does present a problem for speakers of English.

As far as English speakers are concerned, in regard to pronunciation they will have no great difficulties with the segmental phonemes of Chinese, none of which is likely to be as hard to master as the

French *r*. Tones are more of a problem, but not so great as is generally thought. Learning Chinese vocabulary requires more work than learning French vocabulary because the former is completely unrelated to English, whereas, thanks especially to the Norman conquest of England in the eleventh century, as well as an earlier ancestral affinity, there are many vocabulary items which are similar in the two languages. Chinese grammar is probably easier than French grammar with its complex verb conjugations, agreement of nouns and adjectives, and other features that are largely lacking in Chinese. Chinese is probably easier than French also with respect to the manner in which each language represents its sounds. French spelling presents puzzles as to how things are actually pronounced, as in the case of *chef* ("chef, chief"), where the *f* is pronounced, and *clef* ("key"), where it is not. Chinese spelling based on the official Pinyin system, which I shall use throughout this book, is much more regular and hence a more reliable guide to pronunciation.

This important plus for the Chinese transcription system is frequently overlooked by those who approach it with the ethnocentric idea that it should conform to their notions of the value of certain letters. This attitude, apart from being a display of arrogant or at least thoughtless provincialism, is also nonsensical because the presentation of a particular sound in a way that would please speakers of English might well cause problems for speakers of French or German or other languages. The specific solutions arrived at by the Chinese in representing the sounds of their language are all solidly based on both theoretical and practical considerations and add up to a system that does an excellent job of representing Chinese speech. The task of learning to speak Chinese is greatly facilitated by the excellence of the Pinyin system.

Overall, for a native speaker of English, learning to speak Chinese is not much more difficult than learning to speak French. It is in the traditional writing system that the greatest difficulty is encountered. The blanket designation of "Chinese" as a hard language is a myth generated by the failure to distinguish between speech and writing. Perhaps we can put things in perspective by suggesting, to make a rough guesstimate, that learning to speak Chinese is about 5 percent more difficult than learning to speak French, whereas learning to read Chinese is about five times as hard as learning to read French.

3.

Idiolects, Dialects, Regionalects, and Languages

In round figures there are about a billion people who are considered to be speakers of Chinese. Each person within this huge linguistic community has his own idiolect or particular way of speaking that distinguishes him in certain details from every other speaker. Strictly speaking, therefore, there are about a billion idiolects in China.

It is not too difficult a matter to isolate and describe a specific idiolect. In effect just this was done in the course of developing the official norm that is basically represented by the speech of educated natives of Peking. In the 1920s Y. R. Chao, a phonetician and all-around linguist of note, as a member of a group of scholars concerned with language standardization made some phonograph recordings of his own speech as a help in fixing the norm. As he himself was only semifacetiously fond of saying, he was for a while the only speaker of the Chinese national language.

Once we get beyond what might be called the Chao Idiolect, which was more or less the basis of the sketch of spoken Chinese presented in the preceding chapter, or any other specific idiolect, a problem arises: How do we categorize the huge number of Chinese idiolects? Upon examination the differences among these idiolects turn out to extend over an enormously wide range. Some differences are so minor that they are barely perceptible. Others are more readily apparent but still do not depart very far from the norm. Still others are of such a degree as to raise the question whether the different forms of speech should even be grouped together.

There is no easy way to measure the degree of difference among the Chinese idiolects. A rough and ready yardstick might be to differentiate between "minor" differences defined as those not large enough to impair intelligibility and "major" differences defined as those so great that people cannot understand each other. On this basis the bil-

lion idiolects of spoken Chinese must be divided into a number of groups. Within each group there are minor differences but between groups there are major differences of such magnitude that they produce mutual unintelligibility.

"DIALECTS" OR "LANGUAGES"?

There is considerable controversy over what to call these different varieties of spoken Chinese, a matter that forms part of the global problem of the relationship between dialect and language (Haugen 1966). In English the varieties of spoken Chinese are usually referred to as "dialects." Many linguists, however, prefer to apply the term dialect only to mutually intelligible forms of speech and to designate mutually unintelligible forms as "languages." In their view, as expressed by the American descriptive linguist Leonard Bloomfield (1933:44), Chinese is not a single language but a family of languages made up of a variety of mutually unintelligible languages.

The criterion of intelligibility as the dividing line between "dialect" and "language" is not as clear-cut as might appear at first thought. In a situation of geographic proximity it often happens that there is a continuum of speech with only minor differences between neighboring speakers but major differences between those at the extremities. If we represent the continuum by the letters of the alphabet *ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ*, there is mutual intelligibility between *A* and *B*, between *B* and *C*, . . . between *M* and *N*, . . . between *X* and *Y*, and between *Y* and *Z*, yet *A* and *Z* cannot communicate with each other. This is the situation, for example, between Paris and Rome and between Peking and Shanghai.

Yet this frequently cited analogy can be quite misleading. It suggests a steady progession of differences and some sort of numerical equivalence among the groups represented by the letters *A* to *Z*. In actual fact, at some points in the progression the differences tend to be greater than at others. And the number of speakers who can be placed at the two extremes of *A* and *Z* on the basis of their ability to converse with members of one or the other group far exceeds those in the intermediate groups. The number of people who can converse with speakers from Peking may be over 700 million. The number of speakers who can converse with speakers from Shanghai is about 85 million. Neither group can converse with the other, and the speakers who can serve as linguistic intermediaries between the two represent a relatively insignificant number.

The fact that we cannot draw a hairline separating the forms of speech spoken in Shanghai and Peking does not invalidate the need to emphasize their mutual unintelligibility and, if possible, to find a label that would draw attention to their distinctiveness. From this point of view the term "dialect" is unsatisfactory. Both in popular usage and in general linguistic application the term designates kinds of speech in which the differences are relatively minor in the specific sense that they are not great enough to impair intelligibility. The term is therefore appropriate when applied in such expressions as Peking dialect, Nanking dialect, Sichuan dialect, and others of the innumerable mutually intelligible subdivisions of Mandarin. But to add "Shanghai dialect" to the foregoing list would give the totally false impression that it differs from the Peking dialect no more than do the others in the list. To lump together all these forms of speech as more or less equivalent "dialects" is to perpetuate one of the most pervasive and pernicious myths about Chinese. It is to avoid this fantasy that scholars such as Bloomfield have insisted on referring to the kinds of speech spoken in Shanghai and Canton as languages rather than dialects.

In an attempt to find some analogy that would explain the Chinese situation to Western readers, Paul Kratochvíl (1968:15–16) has qualified his use of the term "dialects":

> We should perhaps be closer to a proportional depiction of the internal composition of Chinese and of the mutual relationship between Chinese dialects if we compared Chinese to a group of related languages. If, for example, a great number of historical events had not taken place in Europe and if speakers of Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian coexisted at the moment in a single political unit, if they had been using Latin as their common written form of communication up to the twentieth century, and if they considered, say, French as spoken in Paris as the most proper means of oral communication, they could be, although with a rather large pinch of salt, compared to the speakers of four large dialectal areas in China.

The rather large pinch of salt required to accept this well-conceived analogy between the European "languages" and Chinese "dialects" becomes a veritable shaker-full if we are required to accept the designation of "dialects" in the usually accepted meaning of the term as a label for the situation in China. Nevertheless, however justified Bloomfield's terminology might be from a strictly linguistic point of view, it involves some danger because in the popular mind (and often

in actual fact) much more than merely linguistic differences separate entities comprising different languages. All too often differences in language when reinforced by religious, economic, political, and other differences lead to deep-seated animosity and demands for political separation. The One-Language, One-Nation concept is one of the major attributes of the modern nation-state.

These facts help to explain why even those Chinese whose linguistic sophistication might lead them to follow Bloomfield's approach almost invariably choose the word "dialects" when writing in English, though Y. R. Chao goes so far as to speak of "dialects (or languages, if you like)" and to refer to them as "practically different languages" (1976:97, 105). We are thus confronted by a terminological dilemma. To call Chinese a single language composed of dialects with varying degrees of difference is to mislead by minimizing disparities that according to Chao are as great as those between English and Dutch. To call Chinese a family of languages is to suggest extralinguistic differences that in fact do not exist and to overlook the unique linguistic situation that exists in China.

Crucial to a resolution of this dilemma is a clear understanding that the Chinese linguistic situation is unique in the world. History has no precedent for a situation in which a single if occasionally disrupted political entity has so long held together huge solid blocs of people with mutually unintelligible forms of speech in which a linguistic difference has not been compounded by profound extralinguistic differences. The 50 million or so Cantonese comprise one such bloc. Yet the linguistic difference that separates a Cantonese speaker from his compatriot in Peking is not exacerbated, as it is in Canada, by religious differences that further separate French Catholics from English Protestants. It is not aggravated, as it is in Belgium, by economic differences that further separate French-speaking Walloons from Netherlandic-speaking Flemings. It is not reinforced, as in the case of Spanish and French, by a political boundary that separates the two languages. It is not marked by an accumulation of differences, by a complex of extralinguistic forces, that in the cases just cited have contributed to the desire for political as well as linguistic separation. Although centrifugal forces have existed, and still exist, among the Chinese, their linguistic differences have never possessed the disruptive power they have had in many other areas of the world. In fact, the Chinese situation provides support for the contention made by Geertz in his study of primordial sentiments and civil politics (1963)

that linguistic diversity does not inevitably lead to a primordial conflict over language of such intensity as to threaten the very foundations of the state.

OFFICIAL CHINESE CLASSIFICATION

The problem of nomenclature for this unique situation exists more in English than it does in Chinese. The official Chinese designation for the major forms of speech is *fāngyán*. Some scholars writing in Chinese make a distinction between *fāngyán* ("regional speech") as a designation for major regional forms of speech that are mutually unintelligible and *dìfang-huà* ("local speech") as a designation for lesser local varieties whose differences are not great enough to impair intelligibility. Others make the same distinction by prefixing *fāngyán* with *dìqū* ("region") and *dìdiǎn* ("locality"); that is they use *dìqū fāngyán* ("regional speech") for a major regional speech such as Putonghua and *dìdiǎn fāngyán* ("local speech") for its minor variations as spoken in Peking, Nanking, Xi'an, and other localities. This fundamental distinction is lost when all such distinctive Chinese terms are equally rendered as "dialect," as is usually done by both Chinese and Western writers on the subject. Not all writers are as careful as Bodman (1967:8) to note this term's wide range of meanings by pointing out that "Chinese usage commonly has 'dialect' in a loose as well as in a more precise sense. Loosely used, it refers to regional speech which should properly be called 'language,' such as Mandarin, Wu, Hakka, etc. Stricter usage refers to Mandarin dialects, the Peking dialect, etc."

A possible solution to our problem is to adopt English terms that would closely parallel the distinction that exists in Chinese. Since *fāngyán* is literally "regional speech," we could either adopt this designation or coin an abbreviation such as "regionalect" for the mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese. The term "dialect" can then be reserved for its usual function of designating mutually intelligible subvarieties of the regionalects. But far more important than the particular terminology adopted is a firm understanding of the factual basis for grouping the idiolects of Chinese into distinct categories distinguished by the criterion of intelligibility.

At the Technical Conference on the Standardization of Modern Chinese that was held in Peking in 1955, it was officially decided that Chinese should be considered as comprising eight *fāngyán* with a

total of 541 million people. Since the number of speakers is now estimated to have increased to about a billion people, if we use the same linguistic divisions (with other commonly used designations added in parentheses) and the same proportion of speakers for each of the regional forms of speech, the present situation can be summarized as in Table 1.

Table 1 Chinese Regionalects

Linguistic Division	Speakers
Northern (Putonghua, Mandarin)	715 million (71.5%)
Jiangsu-Zhejiang (Wu)	85 million (8.5%)
Cantonese (Yue)	50 million (5.0%)
Hunan (Xiang)	48 million (4.8%)
Hakka	37 million (3.7%)
Southern Min	28 million (2.8%)
Jiangxi (Gan)	24 million (2.4%)
Northern Min	13 million (1.3%)

There is a good deal of guesswork applied to the various regionalects. Even the number of such regional forms of speech and their specific designations are the subject of disagreement among specialists in the field. Such disagreement does not, however, seriously affect the general picture of the linguistic situation of China.

PUTONGHUA

It is clear that among the eight regionalects the one designated as "Northern" is by far the most important numerically. This term can be considered as more or less equivalent to the more commonly used expression Putonghua ("Common Speech"). The latter term, however, actually comprises a dual aspect in that it includes a narrow and wide meaning. In its narrow sense the term refers to the official norm that in its essentially Pekingese form is being promoted as Modern Standard Chinese. In its wider meaning the term stands in contrast to other regionalects as an all-inclusive designation that embraces the various local varieties of Mandarin referred to by such terms as Peking dialect, Nanking dialect, Sichuan dialect, and so on.

The 700 million or so people belonging to the Putonghua linguistic community comprise by far the largest group of people in the world who speak the same language. The English-speaking community, even if one includes people in India and other countries who have learned English as a second language, is probably less than half as large.

Native speakers of Putonghua occur as a solid bloc in the huge area that extends from Manchuria through north and central China to the southwestern provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan and the northwestern provinces of Gansu and Ningxia. They are also to be found scattered throughout other parts of China. Some 2 to 3 million more or less native speakers of what they still call *Guóyǔ* ("National Language"), a rose by another name for Putonghua ("Common Speech"), migrated to Taiwan after Japan's expulsion from the island in 1945 and the defeat of the Guomindang government in the Chinese civil war that ended in 1949. In the same period smaller numbers of speakers of Mandarin migrated to the United States and other countries in the wake of earlier migrants who came chiefly from the southeastern coastal areas. In addition to all these native Putonghua speakers there are indeterminate millions of regionalect speakers, not to mention speakers of other languages such as those of the national minorities in China, who have also acquired command of the standard language.

Within the Putonghua speech community there are some relatively minor differences—minor compared to those among the regionalects —which like those in the English-speaking community are not great enough to cause any serious problem of communication. Nevertheless they are not insignificant. In the case of Mandarin as spoken in Taiwan, perhaps the most prominent difference, apart from what may be considered as inevitable sociolinguistic changes in a divided language, is in the pronunciation of the series of retroflex initials. The native speakers of Mandarin who took over Taiwan after 1945 comprised only 2 or 3 million people as against the 5 or 6 million inhabitants already there. Most of the latter are native speakers of what is variously called Taiwanese or Fukienese or Min, spoken in the adjacent mainland province of Fujian (or Fukien), from which their ancestors migrated some three centuries ago. Guoyu was imposed on this non-Mandarin majority as the only language of education. In the process some changes took place under the influence of the local forms of speech. The merger of the initials *zh, ch, sh,* with *z, c, s* is the most prominent of these changes. The same development seems to be under way in Mainland China, but at a slower pace.

Differences of this sort are noted by linguists through the device of isoglosses: lines on maps that show boundaries in the use of specific features—words, pronunciations, and so on. Bundles of isoglosses are used to delimit boundaries between dialects or other linguistic groups. Although detailed work along these lines has not been done in China, there is general agreement on identifying Northern Man-

darin, Southern Mandarin, and Southwestern Mandarin. The latter group includes part of Hubei, Hunan, and Sichuan. Southern Mandarin includes part of Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Anhui, and Hubei. Northern Mandarin accounts for the rest. Because the boundaries of these areas are not clearly defined, dialect differences are frequently treated in unsystematic or sporadic fashion. Often a few scattered examples are used to illustrate a situation which would doubtless appear quite complex if treated in detail.

An important distinction within Mandarin is that between "sharp" and "round" sounds (Chao 1976:101)—as in the case of the word for "west," which in the Nanking dialect sounds a little like English *she*, and that for "sparse," which is a little like English *he*. In the attempts that have been made to create phonetic systems of writing, the question as to whether or not to take account of this distinction has been a frequent subject of debate. When the problem arose in the mid-fifties of adopting a standard Pinyin transcription, the decision was made to abandon the earlier attempts to show the distinction and instead to follow the undifferentiated Peking pronunciation *xī* for both "west" and "sparse" (DeFrancis 1967a:145).

Forrest (1948:205–208) mentions a number of other differences within Mandarin. A general feature of the Yangzi River region is the confusion of initial *l* and *n*. The merger of final *n* and *ng* also occurs in Southern Mandarin but is not confined to that area, being found even in Hubei. Tonal differences are widespread. In Hankou, words in the Peking high level tone have a rising inflection. Corresponding to Pekingese *shù* ("tree") one hears *fǔ* in the city of Xi'an, and in place of *shuǐ* ("water") one hears *fèi*. Here initial *f* corresponds to Pekingese *sh* and the tones are reversed. Apart from the widespread differences in pronunciation there are also differences in vocabulary. Northern Mandarin *shòu* ("to receive") is commonly used in a sort of passive construction. Southern Mandarin prefers the passive form *bèi* ("to suffer"). This usage is felt to be somewhat bookish by speakers of Northern Mandarin, but it has nevertheless been chosen to be the official Putonghua usage in this construction.

OTHER REGIONALECTS

The preceding examples of differences on the dialect level within the single regionalect of Putonghua, however extensive they may appear to be, are as nothing compared to the differences that separate other

regionalects from Putonghua and also from each other. The extent of these differences is often minimized for various reasons, including the tendency to make comparisons between regionalects on the basis chiefly of the speech of educated speakers. Paul Kratochvíl (1968:18) makes the important point that there is considerable "vertical differentiation" among speakers within the regionalects (or "dialects" in his terminology):

> There are today great differences, particularly in vocabulary, but also on other levels, between various language forms within each dialectal area in China, connected with the social position and mainly the educational background of individual speakers. These differences range from forms used only by uneducated speakers up to rather strange local variants of language forms used only in the sophisticated milieu of literary discussions among intellectuals. If differences between Chinese dialects were to be described in detail, it would have to be done for each of the socially and educationally conditioned variants separately.

Differences in Chinese speech are most pronounced at the lower social level. Paul Serruys, a Western linguist with extensive experience as a missionary among peasants, stresses this point in the following passage (1962:114–115):

> Examining the Standard Language as opposed to dialectal speech, the difference is much more than a difference in pronunciation. . . . The masses of the people do not know any characters, nor any kind of Standard Language, since such a language requires a certain amount of reading and some contact with wider circles of culture than the immediate local unit of the village or the country area where the ordinary illiterate spends his life. From this viewpoint, it is clear that in the vast regions where so-called Mandarin dialects are spoken the differences of the speech which exist among the masses are considerably more marked, not only in sound, but in vocabulary and structure, than is usually admitted. In the dialects that do not belong in the wide groups of Mandarin dialects, the case is even more severe. To learn the Standard Language is for a great number of illiterates not merely to acquire a new set of phonetic habits, but also to learn a new language, and this in the degree as the vocabulary and grammar of their dialect are different from the modern standard norms. It is true that every Chinese might be acquainted with a certain amount of bureaucratic terminology, in so far as these terms touch his practical life, for example, taxes,

> police. We may expect he will adopt docilely and quickly the slogan language of Communist organizations to the extent such as is necessary for his own good. But these elements represent only a thin layer of his linguistic equipment. When his language is seen in the deeper levels, his family, his tools, his work in the fields, daily life and in the village, differences in vocabulary become very striking, to the point of mutual unintelligibility from region to region.

These comments by Serruys reveal the need to abandon the widespread myth that regional forms of speech are largely identical except for pronunciation. Kratochvíl's stress on the need to make separate descriptions for "each of the socially and educationally conditioned variants" also reveals a new measure of complexity in a subject which, if not slighted by offhand comments that minimize the differences, would require a vast amount of detailed discussion to do it full justice. The subject is marked by a voluminous technical literature, some of which has been ably summarized by Egerod (1967). Here it must suffice to take a few miscellaneous examples as illustrations.

The Wu regionalect with its approximately 85 million speakers is a distant second to Putonghua. It is spoken in Zhejiang and Jiangsu, which includes the city of Shanghai, China's largest. One of its outstanding characteristics, said to have been derived from earlier historical forms now lost in Putonghua, is the retention of voiced initials. Whereas Peking has only an aspirated-unaspirated contrast, Shanghai adds a voiced contrast. Hence it has one set of initials that can be represented by *b, p, p'*, in which *b* is voiced, *p* unvoiced and unaspirated, and *p'* unvoiced and aspirated. In contrast to the twenty-one initial consonants of Putonghua, Wu boasts twenty-seven in the Suzhou dialect and thirty-five in that of Yongkang. Its dialects have six to eight tones compared to only four in Putonghua. In some dialects near Shanghai singular personal pronouns have two forms approaching nominative and accusative in usage, in contrast to the invariant forms in Common Speech.

The Yue regionalect, also called Cantonese from the main city in which it is spoken, is marked by a richer inventory of final consonants. In addition to the two in Putonghua, it has the finals *p, t, k, m*. The number of tones varies between six and nine depending on the dialect and analytical approach. In contrast to the modifier-modified order typical of Putonghua, there are many examples in Yue dialects of the order modified-modifier. Some words known from classi-

cal Chinese which no longer exist in Putonghua are to be found in Cantonese. There is a prefix *a* used with relationship terms and terms of address that does not exist in Standard Chinese. Expressions meaning "more" and "less" used to qualify the extent of an action are placed after the verb in Cantonese, before the verb in Pekingese. Moreover, Y. R. Chao (1976:99) notes that the best-known divergence of Yue, and Wu also, from Mandarin is their use of the word order direct object–indirect object in place of Standard Chinese indirect object–direct object—that is, "give water me" instead of "give me water."

As the foregoing notes suggest, the greatest differences among the regionalects are in the area of phonology, the least in the area of grammar. Vocabulary differences fall in between these extremes. This frequently made summary of the differences is misleading, however, since its comparative ranking obscures the fact that all the areas are marked by substantial differences—almost total at the phonological level, enormous at the lexical level, and still quite extensive at the grammatical level. In an interesting study comparing the Taiwanese form of the Min regionalect and Mandarin, Robert Cheng (1981) finds that 30 percent of the vocabulary as a whole is different (apart from the overall difference in pronunciation), a figure that rises to 50 percent in the case of function words (adverbs, prepositions, demonstratives, measures, question words, conjunctions, particles). With respect to grammar, Serruys considers claims of uniformity to be true "only if one considers the Chinese language on a very broad historical and comparative scale." Presenting some examples of grammatical differences, he concludes: "A close look at the grammars of the non-Mandarin dialects, however, will show that in reality their distance from the standard language is very wide" (1962:138–141). According to a recent estimate (Xu 1982:15), the differences among the regionalects taken as a whole amount, very roughly, to 20 percent in grammar, 40 percent in vocabulary, and 80 percent in pronunciation.[1]

A more extensive analysis than that intended here would have to pile up a great many details along the lines presented above. This could be done for the regionalects already discussed and also for the other regionalects—namely Xiang, spoken only in Hunan; Hakka, spoken side by side with other regionalects chiefly in Guangdong and Guangxi; Gan, spoken chiefly in Jiangxi; Southern Min, spoken in southern Fujian (for example in Amoy), Taiwan, Hainan Island, and other areas; and Northern Min, spoken in northeastern Fujian. A

detailed inventory of the special features of each regionalect would show them to be so much more extensive than the differences noted within Putonghua that it would make plain, if it is not already obvious, that these forms of speech must be placed in a different category from the dialects of Putonghua.

As in the case of Putonghua, each of the seven other regionalects can be further subdivided into various dialects, each with its own distinctive features. Some of these dialects show such a degree of difference that they are sometimes treated as regionalects rather than as true dialects. The analogy presented earlier of varieties of speech stretching over a continuum that defies clear-cut divisions applies with special force to the linguistic situation in the southeast coastal area.

Apart from disagreement among specialists concerning the precise number of regionalects and their classification, there has also been a lack of agreement regarding their history. Bodman (1967) pays tribute to Karlgren's seminal contribution to this linguistic research but notes the new points of view that have received more general acceptance. Karlgren in making his reconstruction of seventh-century Ancient Chinese proceeded on the misconception that his primary sources, such as the dictionary *Qie Yun*, represented a homogeneous dialect, which he identified as that of the capital city of Chang'an in Shaanxi, and was the prototype from which most forms of contemporary Chinese are descended. An opinion more generally held today is that Karlgren's reconstruction is a somewhat artificial "overall system" based on many dialects. Disparities existed then as they do today, and though the various forms currently in existence share a common ancestor, this archetype is not to be found in a single dialect as recent as the seventh century.

NON-CHINESE LANGUAGES

To round out the picture of "Chinese"—that is, of the eight regionalects each with its own multitude of dialects—it may be useful to place these diverse forms of speech in their wider linguistic context. The conglomerate known as "Chinese" is one of a more distantly related group of languages known collectively as Sino-Tibetan. Apart from Tibetan this group includes a host of closely related languages in the Himalayan region, as well possibly as some other languages in Southern China and Southeast Asia, including Burmese and the Tai

family. The precise relationship of the languages that exist in this linguistically complex area is, however, by no means settled. There is considerable disagreement among specialists regarding the problem of classification, a subject that is under constant reexamination. In China itself, besides the languages belonging to the large Sino-Tibetan family, there are others belonging to other language families. Chief among these are Mongolian and Uighur, which belong to the geographically widespread Altaic family of languages. The non-Chinese languages are spoken by fifty-four national minorities with a total population of some 50 or 60 million.

Apart from its already noted membership in the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, Chinese does not appear to have any affinity with any other language. This point needs to be stressed to counteract the myth of the supposed affinity of Chinese with the languages of the neighboring countries of Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam. The fact of the matter is that, so far as we know, it has no genetic connection whatsoever with these three languages. This statement relates to the original state of Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese when they first came in contact with Chinese some 1,500 to 2,000 years ago. Over the centuries, however, these languages did borrow huge amounts of vocabulary from Chinese.

In their origins Korean and Japanese are generally believed to be distantly related to the large group of Altaic languages that include Mongolian, Manchu, and the Turkic languages of central and western Asia. These are all agglutinative languages marked by the piling up of suffixes to root words. They are nontonal languages whose SOV (subject-object-verb) order contrasts with the SVO order of Chinese. As for Vietnamese, most specialists think it belongs to still another completely different language family that includes Khmer (Cambodian). Its tonal feature is believed to be indigenous in origin and to have been reinforced later by extensive borrowing of Chinese lexical items. In short, these three languages are basically no more related to Chinese than is English.

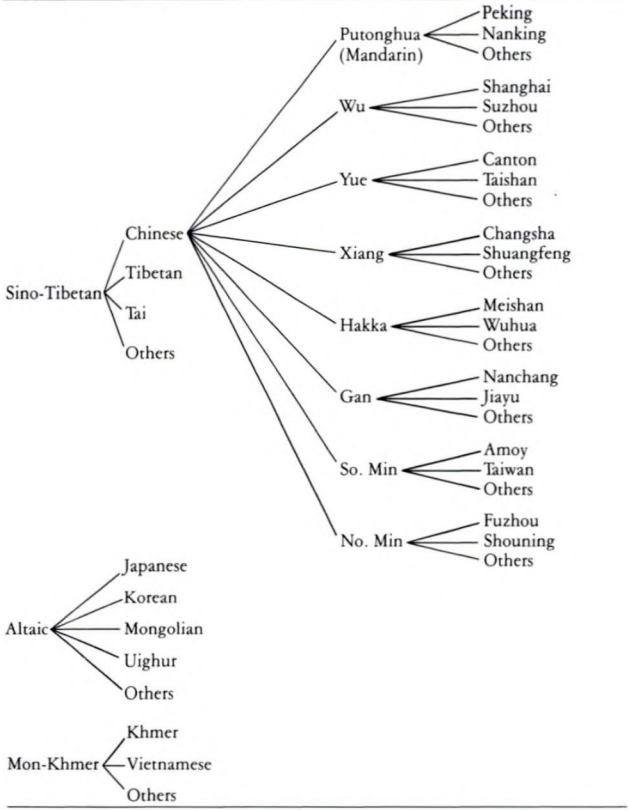
When Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam first came in contact with China, they had no writing, whereas China had a highly developed system of writing that was already some two thousand years old. China also had sophisticated schools of philosophy, a centralized state with a literate bureaucracy, an appealing religion with a vast body of dogma, a rich literature especially strong in historiography. Small wonder that China's neighbors drew heavily on the treasures of this

literate culture. They began by borrowing the writing system itself. They progressed from writing in Chinese to adapting the characters to their own languages. They engaged in large-scale borrowing of concepts and the words to express them. As already noted in "The Singlish Affair," the character 國 was borrowed to express the concept "country, nation, state," and its pronunciation was adapted to the local way of speaking. This procedure is similar to the English borrowing of French words with pronunciation modified to suit the English tongue.

Such borrowings, however important from a cultural point of view, do not basically alter the nature of the borrowing languages. English remains a Germanic language despite its extensive borrowing from French. Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese retain their original essence despite their extensive borrowing from Chinese. Speakers of these four languages can no more understand each other's speech than can an Englishman and a Frenchman carry on a conversation unless one has learned the other's language. Nor can Asians read each other's writing any more than can an Englishman and a Frenchman merely because they have some written words like "nation" in common. The popular notion that Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese are offshoots of Chinese is one of those myths that, as usual, owes much of its currency to confusing speech with writing and misunderstanding the nature of the writing systems based on Chinese characters.

The nonrelationship of Chinese to these languages, the relationship it does have with some other languages, and its division into regionalects and dialects are summarized in Table 2. Think of "Sino-Tibetan" as being on the same level as Indo-European, which includes the major languages of India and Europe, "Chinese" as being on the level of the Germanic or Romance groups within the Indo-European family, the "regionalects" as being on the level of English, Dutch, and German within the Germanic group or French, Spanish, and Italian within the Romance group, and the "dialects" as being on the level of the British, American, and Australian dialects of English or the Neapolitan, Roman, and Tuscan dialects of Italian. It must be remembered that if these parallels are to be seasoned with a large pinch of salt, we must pour a whole shaker-full over the uncritical practice of designating as "dialects" such divergent forms of speech as those of Peking, Shanghai, and Canton. At the very least it is necessary to emulate those who if they use the term at all are careful to explain its nuances of meaning.

Table 2 "Chinese" in Its Linguistic Context



For the geographic distribution of the linguistic units located in China, see map on page 34.

Part II

RETHINKING CHINESE CHARACTERS

One must deplore the general tendency . . . (alas, too prominently figuring in Sinological research on this continent) of insisting that the Chinese in the development of their writing, as in the evolution of many other of their cultural complexes, followed some mysterious esoteric principles that set them apart from the rest of the human race.

Peter H. Boodberg

4.

What's in a Name?

The marks on paper that are usually recognized as peculiar to the writing systems developed in China, Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam have been given a variety of names, some neutral and noncommittal, others explicit but more controversial. Designations such as graphs, characters, signs, or symbols apply equally well to all kinds of writings. More specialized is the term "Chinese characters." This label is not as unambiguous as might appear at first glance. In Japan, Chinese characters are called kanji (from Chinese *Hànzì*, literally "Chinese characters"), but the two terms are not completely synonymous since a few characters have been created in Japan that are different from those used in China. Moreover, and more important, the Japanese writing system is not confined to Chinese characters but includes also the indigenous phonetic symbols called kana. Korean writing has also used a mixture of Chinese characters and purely phonetic symbols. As for Vietnamese, the indigenous Nom characters look like Chinese characters but were never used outside of Viet Nam and are unintelligible to readers of Chinese without special study. Apart from the possible need at times to be more specific by taking these differences into account, the term "Chinese characters" is usually clear enough to serve as an overall designation for the basic symbols used in all four countries.

A recently coined synonym for "Chinese characters" is "sinographs" (Rogers 1979:283). Its chief virtue lies in using one word in place of two. Both terms, of course, emphasize the Chinese origins of the symbols. Other aspects of the characters are emphasized in other designations. A popular view of the nature of Chinese writing is reflected in the widespread use of the designations "pictographs"

and "pictograms." These terms are meant to indicate that the basic units of writing are pictures divorced from sound. Their meaning is supposed to be readily discernible even when the symbols are conventionalized or stylized in form. Specialists, however, apply the designation only to the earliest characters in China.

Other widely used terms are "ideographs" and "ideograms." Some people, specialists included, use these terms only out of habit, without attaching any special significance to them, more or less as popular equivalents for "Chinese characters." For some specialists, however, and for the public at large, the terms have a specific meaning in designating written signs that represent ideas, abstract as well as concrete, without regard to sound (Creel 1936:98–99; Margouliès 1957:82). The same sign is considered to evoke the same idea in the minds of different viewers, though they might well verbalize it in different ways, as in the case of English speakers responding to a particular ideograph by thinking "habitation, residence, dwelling, house, home" or some other related term while French speakers think "habitation, résidence, maison, demeure."

Some scholars are opposed to this view of Chinese characters as representing concepts and insist instead that they represent specific words. They have therefore advanced the designation "logograph"—that is, a graph that represents a word (from the Greek *logos:* "word"). Synonymous with the logographic concept (DuPonceau 1838:110; Boodberg 1937:332) is the expression "lexigraphic" referring to words in the lexicon or vocabulary (DuPonceau 1838:xiv). The key point of disagreement leading to these terms is whether a character conveys meaning directly or through the intermediary of the word.

A modification of the logographic concept has been suggested by some students of writing who argue that Chinese characters represent morphemes rather than words and hence should be called "morphemic" (Kratochvíl 1968:157) or "morphographic" (Robert Cheng 1980:personal communication). Here much of the disagreement centers on a controversial question: What constitutes a word? For some, a word in Chinese is a syllable in speech and a character in writing. For others, syllable and character represent at most not a word but rather a morpheme, the smallest unit of meaning. By this definition a word may in fact include more than one syllable and be represented by more than one character. This is a secondary point of disagreement,

however, and supporters of "logographic," "lexigraphic," "morphemic," and "morphographic" are united in opposition to the "ideographic" interpretation.

Still other designations are advanced by students of the subject who contend that most Chinese characters, actually 90 percent according to the frequently cited estimate by Karlgren (1923:4), contain phonetic elements that should also be taken into account along with the semantic elements that are universally recognized as a distinctive feature of Chinese characters. Such terms as "phonetic compounds" (Karlgren 1923:16), "phonograms" (Karlgren 1936: 161), "phonetic complexes" (Wieger 1965:10), "phonetic indicators" (Gelb 1963:118), and "phonic indicators" (Yau 1983:198) stress the phonetic aspect in this large group of characters.

The belief that both the semantic and phonetic aspects should be taken into account in the naming of Chinese characters has led to terms like "phonosemantic" (Pelliot 1936:163; Cohen 1958:52) and "ideophonographic" (Bunakov 1940; Cohen 1958:45). A similar approach has led Krykov to designate one class of characters as "phonoideograms" (1980:25–26). Chinese writing has been classified as "logo-syllabic" by Gelb (1963:10) and as "word-syllabic" by Bloomfield (1933:285–286) and Gelb (1973:818–819), though these authors appear to apply their terms to the characters as a whole and not to the component elements.

The terms suggested by Pelliot, Bunakov, Cohen, and Krykov tie in a semantic element with a phonetic element without specifying the nature of either, though Cohen adds a bit more detail to the phonetic aspect by further references to "syllabograms," "syllabo-phonograms," and "syllabic phonograms" (1958:49, 53, 55). The terms advanced by Gelb and Bloomfield are the most precise, particularly if their scope is refined, since they relate Chinese characters both to words and to syllables.

As the foregoing confusion of names amply demonstrates, there are wide differences of opinion when it comes to describing Chinese characters. A long hard look at these characters is needed if we are to make our way through this terminological maze and reach clear conclusions about the nature of Chinese writing.

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John DeFrancis is emeritus professor of Chinese at the University of Hawai'i.

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