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Preface

Victor H. Mair

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The papers in this volume were submitted as part of the requirements for my course on “Language, Script, and Society in China” in the fall semester of 2018. There was no set agenda or theme for the course, so students were free to choose a topic of their own desire, so long as it fit within the general rubric of language and writing in China, no matter what the period. Consequently, the five papers selected for inclusion in this volume cover a broad range of topics: contemporary installation art that distorts and deconstructs the characters, the impact of digitalization on language usage, the impact of characters vs. alphabetical scripts on business and the economy, the language of Maoist revolution, and the neurolinguistic analysis of character amnesia.

All five of the papers deal with current issues, even though the Chinese script has a history of over 3,200 years. This shows the degree to which language matters are a hot and vital topic today, not just a matter of historical interest, which the archaic nature of the script might lead one to believe. In fact, Chinese language and writing are undergoing revolutionary change at a dizzying pace, to the degree that one hardly knows what to predict they will look like ten years from now. (See “Pinyin for ABCs,” *Language Log* [6/14/20].)

The wide range of disciplinary interests represented among these papers is also noteworthy. One of the papers has to do with economics, one with political science, two with the sciences, and one with art. Surprisingly, although all of these papers might have been submitted as graduate student papers, they were all written by undergraduates. Their majors ranged across a number of departments throughout the university, which shows that students who choose courses in East Asian Studies / Languages and Civilizations are by no means restricted to majors in that field.

All of this offers plenty of food for thought, and much hope for the future.

A Neurolinguistic Analysis of Character Amnesia

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ABSTRACT

Character amnesia is an increasingly common phenomenon within Chinese speaking communities, defined as Chinese speakers' forgetting how to write previously learned characters. With the introduction of pinyin input method editors (IMEs), in which typing an individual character's pronunciation can produce the appropriate Chinese character, Chinese characters are beginning to be interacted with phonologically. Although this phenomenon is becoming widespread within the Sinosphere, little empirical research has been conducted to quantify it. This discussion explores character amnesia through an analysis of various neurobiological correlates, including neural processing and memory. Through a survey of the literature, I will try to show that character amnesia may be attributed to differences in the neural processing of Chinese characters and the ways in which these logographs are encoded into memory.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of new technologies, handwriting is becoming increasingly obsolete. Within the context of the Chinese language, new input method editors (IMEs) have revolutionized the way people communicate, as well as the way individuals interact with language. An IME allows keystrokes to be converted into graphs of a language foreign to the keyboard itself. Although there is a variety of

different IMEs that can be used while typing, the phonetic IME is perhaps the most widespread.¹ Phonetic IMEs allow for users to utilize the Roman alphabet in order to input Mandarin or other Chinese topolects.² Alongside these technological advancements, a phenomenon known as character amnesia began to appear. First defined by Professor Victor H. Mair in 2010, character amnesia is the phenomenon in which Chinese speakers forget how to write previously learned characters, especially in the period following the widespread adoption of pinyin IMEs.³ Character amnesia can be roughly translated into Chinese as *tíbǐwàngzì* 提笔忘字.⁴ Although this phenomenon is becoming ever more prevalent, only a limited number of resources characterize or attempt to quantify it. However, there are studies describing character amnesia both within China and abroad.⁵

Although various empirical surveys have been conducted to quantify character amnesia, methodologically, they have a variety of flaws. Characters that are considered “common” or “simple” as compared to those that are “rare” or “complicated” can change dramatically depending on the source consulted. In addition, characterizing fluency can be challenging when attempting to survey foreign learners of Chinese.⁶ Even utilizing such sources as the Table of General Standard Chinese Characters produced by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China yields unhelpful results; this source does not take into consideration the widespread use of pinyin IMEs and the variety of new ways Chinese speakers are interacting with characters.⁷

¹ I choose to use the word “phonetic” over pinyin as this phenomenon applies to other Chinese topolects as well.

² Guy Almog, “Getting Out of Hand? Examining the Discourse of ‘Character Amnesia,’” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2019): 691.

³ Victor H. Mair, “Character Amnesia,” *Language Log*, 22 July 2010, <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2473> [accessed 24 Nov 2019].

⁴ Almog, “Getting Out of Hand?,” 693.

⁵ As an example, see Jingjun Chen et al., “Chinese Character Practice: Comparison between Children Using Handwriting and Pinyin Keyboarding [儿童汉字练习：纸笔手写与键盘拼音输入的效果比较],” *心理学报* 48, no. 10 (2016): 1267.

⁶ Guy Almog, “Reassessing the Evidence of Chinese ‘Character Amnesia,’” *The China Quarterly* 238 (2019): 524–525.

⁷ “Table of General Standard Chinese Characters [通用规范汉字表],” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2013, accessed 24 Nov 2019, <http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/att/att/site1/20130819/tyghzb.pdf>

Neurolinguistics is concerned with the neurology of language: how and where languages are produced and stored, as well as other mechanistic details.⁸ A neurolinguistic analysis of Chinese language processing is necessary to further elucidate the impact of phonetic IMEs on Chinese.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

An understanding of the structure of Chinese is integral to understanding how an alphabet-based IME can bring about a phenomenon such as character amnesia. Chinese can be described as a phonemic language in which morphemes are generally monosyllabic, although polysyllabic morphemes do exist.⁹ However, the Chinese language is not idiographic, but represents words phonetically.¹⁰ It is important to mention, however, the difference between *zì* 字 and *cí* 词 in Chinese, i.e., a character and a word respectively. The coexistence of these two concepts is fundamental to the way the Chinese languages operate. Not all characters are themselves words, and the reverse is also true. Most characters within the Chinese script are *zì* 字, belonging to the categories of *huìyì* 会意 and *xíngshēng* 形声, referring to “fused meaning” and “pictophonetic characters” respectively.¹¹ Notably, the phonetic components of *xíngshēng* characters are derived from Old Chinese. Therefore, pictophonetic characters have become seemingly arbitrary; contemporary pronunciation schemes used by modern learners of Chinese cannot take full advantage of the phonetic component of most pictophonetic characters.¹² This leads to the difficulty of associating sound not only with meaning but also with form.

Another important aspect of the Chinese languages is the various romanization schemes that accompany them. In the context of Mandarin, this is pinyin. Pinyin is uniquely meant for *Pǔtōnghuà*

8 Lise Menn, “Neurolinguistics,” Linguistic Society of America, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/neurolinguistics>

9 Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 154.

10 John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 145.

11 Norman, *Chinese*, 68.

12 Norman, *Chinese*, 44.

普通话 (the common language), which is a *de facto* synonym for Mandarin. As Zhou Youguang explains, pinyin is not intended to spell the forms of characters (only their sounds), to be used as a romanization scheme for other Chinese topolects, or to be a representation of the sounds of Classical Chinese.¹³ Rather, pinyin was adopted due to its ability to capture various nuances in phonology and syntax, yet appeal to a large international audience through the use of the Roman alphabet.¹⁴

PINYIN INPUT METHOD EDITOR

What will be discussed henceforth relates to Hanyu pinyin and Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM). It is to be noted however that the general principles of how a phonetic Input Method Editor functions can be applied to other Chinese topolects. For the sake of clarity, only Mandarin will be considered.

Modern pinyin IMEs provide the user with a standard Roman alphabet keyboard. Most keys retain their original identity; that is, when the user types “h” (U+0068)¹⁵ and “u” (U+0075) the computer recognizes that as “hu.” However, some keys have changed identities to reflect the nuances of the Chinese language. For example, pinyin does not have a “v” (U+0056) symbol, and the “v” key is replaced with the “ü” (U+00FC) symbol. In addition, the backslash “\” (U+005C) is replaced with the ideographic comma “、” (U+3001) due to its prevalence in Chinese grammar. There are numerous other changes to the Roman alphabet keyboard, but the two aforementioned examples serve to show how the pinyin IME optimizes the pre-existing keyboard for Chinese language writing.

When the pinyin corresponding to a particular character is typed, a character selection pop-up appears. Characters are sorted by their frequency in use through a variety of algorithms, and with each successive keystroke, results become more defined. Typing one *zì* will provide all characters that the IME has within its database that match that spelling. As many pinyin IMEs cannot incorporate tone into the input sequence, characters displayed include those of all four tones. Results are sorted not only in overall frequency of the word within the language, but also are refined to select options

¹³ Zhou Youguang, *The Historical Evolution of Chinese Languages and Scripts* (Columbus, OH: National East Asian Languages Resource Center, The Ohio State University, 2013), 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁵ Unicode character codes for the letters mentioned are denoted U+(unique character letter-number combination).

that the user utilizes frequently. For example, to type the character *wú* 吾 (I, we), the two letters “w” (U+0077) and “u” (U+0075) are typed, and a variety of characters with “wu” pinyin spelling appear. According to Jun Da’s corpus of Chinese character frequencies, *wǔ* 五 (five) is ranked in the 63rd percentile, whereas *wú* 吾 (I, we) is ranked in the 95th percentile.¹⁶ *Wǔ* 五 is arranged before *wú* 吾, and although the exact ranking may change between databases, this example demonstrates how characters are arranged within the pinyin IME.¹⁷ If *cí* are typed rather than *zì*, the algorithms of the IME are put to work, analyzing the frequency of the two (or more)¹⁸ character pair. Using the example of a two-character *cí*, the pinyin IME will not juxtapose the two most common characters with the sounds inputted. Instead, it will analyze known *cí* that contain those two sounds in the order in which it was typed and display the relevant results.

It is important to consider the interaction that is occurring between the user and the pinyin IME when typing. The user seeks to type a character. In order to do so, he must recall the pronunciation of that character in MSM, and input that into the IME. Once it is inputted, he must recognize the graph that corresponds to the character of interest. This involves distinguishing between a variety of different characters with the same core pronunciation,¹⁹ some with very similar graphs. A variety of cognitive processes are at play while using a pinyin IME, and these can be explored via neurolinguistics.

NEURAL PROCESSING OF CHINESE

Orthographically, a clear difference can be drawn between an alphabet-based language such as English and a character-based language such as Mandarin Chinese. Importantly, each of the letters used in the English alphabet are representative of how the letter is pronounced; there are clues to

¹⁶ Jun Da, “Chinese Text Computing,” 2004, <http://lingua.mtsu.edu/chinese-computing>.

¹⁷ In the aforementioned ranking, the 100th percentile is used to represent the most infrequent character in the corpus.

¹⁸ Not all *cí* must be two or more *zì*, as some single *zì* are themselves *cí*. However, for clarity when describing the function of most pinyin IMEs, I will use two-character *cí* examples.

¹⁹ I define core pronunciation as the sound without the tonal component. For example, the core pronunciation of *xī* 西 would be “xi.”

pronunciation embedded within most English words. Extending this to pinyin, the pronunciation of Chinese characters is embedded directly within the romanized text. Rather than interacting with Chinese via logographs, a Chinese speaker can now facilitate communication in Chinese through an alphabet-based system. The logograph-to-alphabet shift is important for phonological processing.

Tan et al. explored the differences in phonological processing between Chinese characters and alphabet-based words via a meta-analysis of functional magnetic resonance imaging studies.²⁰ They isolated different neural systems for phonological processing of Chinese and alphabetic words, discovering that while there was some overlap in these pathways, others differed depending on the demands of the language. For example, the posterior neural system is important for Chinese phonological processing as compared to alphabet systems.²¹ The posterior neural system could be useful for the storage of phonology due with the "mapping procedure" required when reading Chinese.²² This mapping procedure is related to the lack of phonological keys present within the logograms themselves: the processing of Chinese phonology is memory-based rather than provided to the reader within the structure of the word/character itself. These differences in neural processing pathways dictate differences in phonological processing between Chinese logographs and alphabetic words.

Chen et al. researched the differences in processing when reading Chinese characters compared with pinyin.²³ Although there were similarities in the way that pinyin and Chinese characters were processed, there were also striking differences. For example, lateralization of hemispheres seemed to be relatively similar when comparing pinyin and Chinese character reading.²⁴

²⁰ Li Hai Tan, Angela R. Laird, Karl Li, and Peter T. Fox, "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Phonological Processing of Chinese Characters and Alphabetic Words: A Meta-Analysis," *Human Brain Mapping* 25, no. 1 (2005): 83.

²¹ Tan et al., "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Phonological Processing," 87.

²² Ibid.

²³ Yiping Chen, Shimin Fu, Susan D. Iversen, Steve M. Smith, and Paul M. Matthews, "Testing for Dual Brain Processing Routes in Reading: A Direct Contrast of Chinese Character and Pinyin Reading Using fMRI," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 14, no. 7 (2002): 1088.

²⁴ Chen et al., "Testing for Dual Brain Processing Routes," 1093.

However, the engagement of other areas of the brain when reading logographs, such as the bilateral activation of the left fusiform gyrus and cuneus, suggested these areas are important for pattern recognition of logographs alone.²⁵ These findings suggest important differences between the processing of pinyin and Chinese characters, and that pinyin processing can be comparable to an alphabet system of another language, such as English.

The neural processing of Chinese can be shown to be distinct from that of alphabet-based languages. In Chinese, it has been shown that phonological processing is memory-based, alluding to the impossibility of gathering pronunciation directly from Chinese characters. In addition, the processing route of pinyin and Chinese characters is somewhat distinct, and pinyin processing is similar in various neurological aspects to other alphabet-based processing, such as that in English.

CHINESE CHARACTERS AND MEMORY

Schmitt et al. elucidated the differences in how Chinese and English are memorized in the context of brand recognition.²⁶ Although specific to consumerism, brand memory, and recognition, several important findings were elucidated with regard to language and memory. First, it was found that Chinese speakers “were more likely to recall information when the visual memory rather than phonological memory trace is accessed,” whereas English speakers were the opposite.²⁷ Importantly, this gives clues as to how information may be coded in the brain, with Chinese speakers coding spoken Chinese information “primarily in a visual manner,” and English speakers coding spoken English information “primarily in a phonological manner.”²⁸ This discrepancy in the coding of spoken information allows for multiple conclusions to be drawn. First, the coding of information into memory differs based on the graphic appearance and structure of a language. Second, this elucidates

²⁵ Ibid., 1904.

²⁶ Bernd H. Schmitt, Yigang Pan, Nader T. Tavassoli, “Language and Consumer Memory: The Impact of Linguistic Differences between Chinese and English,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 21, no. 3 (1994): 419.

²⁷ Schmitt, “Language and Consumer Memory,” 428.

²⁸ Ibid.

the way in which Chinese speakers interact with their language visually and English speakers interact with their language phonologically.

Tan et al. surveyed a variety of criteria such as listening and writing skills to determine a measure for Chinese reading skills in children.²⁹ It was found that Chinese writing level was a predictive marker of Chinese reading level in children.³⁰ This finding was supported by further experimentation, where two different mechanisms were proposed: "orthographic awareness" and "motor programming."³¹ Importantly, the second mechanism was proposed to be the source of motor memory of characters in the long-term.³² Writing and memory are being directly connected via motor programming. Data from functional magnetic resonance imaging and other studies have shown that areas important in recognizing Chinese characters are functionally important for writing as well as short-term memory of linguistic processing.³³ Although this study specifically surveyed reading ability in children, the mechanism can be generalized to any individual of typing age.

Both of the previous studies have confirmed that, neurologically speaking, the way in which Chinese is processed within the brain is distinct from alphabet-based languages. There is some overlap, however, which is not to be forgotten; the overlap allows for a common basis when doing a comparison. Chinese characters are interacted with visually rather than phonetically, and in terms of memory, writing characters improves their memorization, which can lead to a higher reading level.

In addition to emphasizing that writing improves memorization due to visual interaction, it is crucial to emphasize that Chinese characters are encoded visually. A study by Chen and Juola examined the phonological and orthographic coding of Chinese and English.³⁴ Due to the large

²⁹ Li Hai Tan, John A. Spinks, Guinevere F. Eden, Charles A. Perfetti, Wai Tin Siok, "Reading Depends on Writing, in Chinese," *Proc Natl Acad Sci U.S.A.* 102, no 24 (2005): 8781.

³⁰ Tan et al., "Reading Depends on Writing," 8784.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hsuan-Chih Chen and James F. Juola, "Dimensions of Lexical Coding in Chinese and English," *Memory & Cognition* 10, no. 3 (1982): 216.

amount of homophony, Chen and Juola postulate that individual logograms are less well defined when displayed phonemically rather than visually.³⁵ Thus, pinyin would represent a less distinct variant of a Chinese character. Intuitively, this conclusion is logical due to the large amount of repetition possible when romanizing various characters with pinyin. In addition, the results of the aforementioned study indicate that the encoding of Chinese relies heavily on visual imagery and thus results in “‘visual’ encoding strategies, whereas phonological recognition and memory processes based on phonological codes are deemphasized.”³⁶ These differences in encoding strategies are essential for recognizing the neurolinguistic differences between pinyin and Chinese logograph processing.

DISCUSSION

The concepts described herein contribute to the phenomenon of character amnesia. As previously mentioned, with the rise of pinyin IMEs, character amnesia is becoming more common, and there is concern that the issue will be exacerbated as modern language tools evolve.³⁷ It is important, however, to diagnose the problem before solutions can be presented.

The crux of character amnesia hinges on pinyin IMEs forcing an alphabet medium for writing characters. This marks where Chinese language speakers begin to interact with the language differently. From this, an analysis can be broken down into two parts: neural processing and memory. An understanding of each leads to a diagnosis of why the phenomenon of character amnesia may have arisen.

Chinese language processing is worthy of investigation, given the logographic nature of the language. In Tan et al. (2005), the authors conclude that Chinese phonology is memory-based. This means that phonology is not gathered from logographs; thus, a language-learner must memorize both the physical structure of logographs as well as phonology. In addition, Chen et al. (2002) found that pinyin and Chinese are processed differently. Extending from the Tan et al. results, it can be

³⁵ Chen and Juola, “Dimensions of Lexical Coding in Chinese and English,” 222–223.

³⁶ Ibid., 223.

³⁷ Victor H. Mair, “Character Amnesia Revisited,” *Language Log*, 13 December 2012, <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4367> [accessed December 18, 2019].

concluded that the use of a pinyin IME creates two different processing routes: phonological and logographical. In context with character amnesia, when interacting with a pinyin IME, a user must use both of these processing routes, as the input and output are fundamentally different, being a romanized script and logographs respectively. Although there is overlap in the areas of the brain used, there are also distinct areas. This represents a physiological correlate to the differences in pinyin and Chinese character processing. Another aspect of processing is the way in which Chinese speakers interact with the language. In the Schnitt et al. study (1994), the authors found that Chinese speakers interact with Chinese visually, whereas English speakers interact with English phonologically. Therefore, by using a pinyin IME, a Chinese language speaker is no longer interacting with the language visually, but rather is interacting with an alphabet phonologically. This represents a fundamental shift in both language interaction and, as can be seen with the Tan et al. (2005) and Chen et al. (2002) studies, language processing.

Chinese characters and memory are another topic that is fundamental to understanding character amnesia. In a study by Tan et al. (2005), the authors found that areas important for the recognition of characters are important in writing, leading to a "motor memory" of characters. Simplistically, the pinyin IME is changing the physical way in which the user is interacting with the language: typing versus writing. This concept relates back to a multitude of studies that surveyed the impact of typing versus handwriting with regard to memory. One such study was Mangen et al. (2015), which found that handwriting was positively correlated with recall of material.³⁸ A similar principle can be applied here with regard to character amnesia. The benefits of handwriting characters that confer motor memory are being rendered moot when using a pinyin IME. In addition, as was found by the Tan et al. (2005) study, motor memory is important for the recognition of characters, as the memory of each individual logograph is not being reinforced when typing. Chen et al. (1982) found that Chinese characters are encoded visually; characters can be treated as visual imagery, and the process relies upon visual encoding strategies, not phonological ones. By extension, Chinese characters are not being encoded when using a pinyin IME. Rather, the brain is utilizing phonological

³⁸ Mangen et al., "Handwriting Versus Keyboard Writing: Effect on Word Recall," *Journal of Writing Research* 7, no. 2 (2015): 238.

methods for encoding words instead of visual encoding strategies. Although a user may be *seeing* the characters, the way they are being interacted with is *phonological*. This is due to the fundamental fact that a pinyin IME is pronunciation-based.

Neural processing and encoding memories of Chinese characters can serve as two neurolinguistic correlates for character amnesia. Each returns to the principle that a logographic language is being interacted with in a phonological manner, rather than relying upon visual processing and encoding pathways. A parallel can be drawn between Chinese character amnesia and aphantasia. Aphantasia is the phenomenon in which individuals lack a “mind’s eye,” and are unable to visualize images. It was first described in a study by Zeman et al. in 2015, in an attempt to describe a condition in which people had an inability to visualize images.³⁹ They defined this phenomenon as “congenital aphantasia,” and study participants had varying degrees of image reduction that persisted throughout their lifetime.⁴⁰ A more recent study by Keogh and Pearson (2018) found that individuals with aphantasia scored lower on various measures of visual object imagery.⁴¹ Although congenital aphantasia cannot be directly applied to character amnesia as the latter is not congenital, the same principle holds. Thus, a new term is warranted to mechanistically describe character amnesia: acquired logographic aphantasia. The output of character amnesia closely resembles the condition of aphantasia, and due to its linguistic nature, it can be termed “logographic.”

Character amnesia has additional implications in Chinese language pedagogy. The advent of pinyin IMEs has dramatically changed the way that students interact with the language. Given that character amnesia is a phenomenon being observed in native speakers, it remains to be studied whether Chinese language students find the learning of characters to be more difficult if they use a pinyin IME as a learning tool.

39 Adam Zeman, Michaela Dewar, and Sergio Della Sala, “Lives without Imagery: Congenital Aphantasia,” *Cortex* 73 (2015): 378.

40 Ibid., 379.

41 Rebecca Keogh and Joel Pearson, “The Blind Mind: No Sensory Visual Imagery in Aphantasia,” *Cortex* 105 (2018): 58.

CONCLUSION

Character amnesia is a noteworthy linguistic phenomenon unique to logographic languages. Although a solution has remained both divisive and elusive, there has not been a wealth of scholarship attempted at defining the problem in its entirety. However, it is also important to explore different neurolinguistic correlates as an attempt to characterize the phenomenon. As has been shown, two different neurolinguistic correlates for character amnesia include neural processing and memory. Fundamentally, how a native speaker interacts with Chinese in the modern era has changed with the advent of pinyin IMEs. Due to the forced phonological interface, pinyin IMEs continue to propagate this phenomenon. Several questions arise from this, the most pressing of which: what is the fate of Chinese characters? Is it an integral part of Chinese culture that will persist despite modern phonological typing mechanisms? Or, will phonology succeed it?⁴² Ultimately, the existence of character amnesia is predicated on the dual existence of a logographic language and a phonetic input method editor. In the coming decades, as technological advances in language processing continue, language reform is inevitable. It is the will of the culture behind the language that will determine the nature of these reforms.

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⁴² These questions are beyond the scope of this manuscript, but they are important to consider when attempting to quantify and classify the phenomenon of character amnesia.

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The Impact of Digitalization on Chinese Language

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INTRODUCTION

Nowhere has the new power of the digital world shown itself more impressive than in China during the past few decades. We have only to recall that the basic telephone in the 1950s presented a “symbol of privilege, power, and status” (Li 2009, 53), which only a few members of the Chinese elite could afford. By contrast, in 2008, over 420 million people, 30% of the total Chinese population, used cell phones (Li 2009, 53). In a short period, the cell phone had become a “fifth mass media” (Li 2009, 54) and a “widely used communication device for all age groups” in Chinese society (Li 2009, 53). The spread of mobile phone usage enhanced the popularity of the internet in China not just as an “information superhighway” (Yang 2012, 53), but also as a convenient and accessible “space for personal expression, social networking, and political participation.” The continuing rapid growth of WeChat together with the increase of censorship of the Chinese internet signify clearly the extent of digitalization in China today.

With the pervasiveness of digital media in Chinese society, the interaction between digitalization and the uniquely dynamic linguistic and cultural atmosphere of China has become a topic of keen interest. In particular, the extensive heritage that thousands of years of ancient Chinese history has bestowed upon handwritten Chinese characters continues to clash with the efficiency of the convenient *pīnyīn* input system on smartphones and computers. Some use the apparent decline in child reading development of Chinese characters as evidence that digitalization has caused a linguistic deficit within Chinese society. On the other hand, the computer has largely facilitated the

study of Mandarin as a second language by assuaging the frustrations of non-native speakers learning *hanzi*. Moreover, the vibrancy of the extensive online community in China has led to the formation of a new internet dialect that diverges in lexicon, grammar, and sentence structure from everyday face-to-face Chinese communication. This new online language pairs with the promotion of other Chinese dialects as well as the resurrection of the old traditional "Chinese fictional genre *zhiguai* 志怪" (i.e., records of the strange) (Fu 2019, 36). On balance, despite emerging deficits in reading development among Chinese children, the digitalization of Chinese society over the past few decades has stimulated educational and cultural growth through linguistic transformation.

READING DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY

The simplicity and convenience of typing pinyin have caused "phonetics-based software" (Zhao 2008, 352) to grow in popularity, especially among Chinese school-aged children. The two forms of digital Chinese character input are: ideographic methods, consisting of the *wǔbǐ zìxíng* (five-stroke input) keyboard or, more recently, handwritten input on many smart phones, as well as the phonetic, pinyin input method. As in many other countries, the age at which children in China begin regularly using mobile phones and the Internet has been decreasing. One study by Li Hai Tan et al. (2013) looks at a sample of school-age children in several Chinese cities who, as early as third grade, started spending forty minutes of class time each week learning to use the computer and typing using the pinyin input method (Tan et al. 2013, 1121). These children generally spent additional time each day using the computer at home as well as sending text messages on mobile phones.

Increasing computer and cell phone usage among young Chinese children has renewed widespread study of the intricacy of early Chinese reading development. Because of the logographic nature of Chinese language, linguists describe the "visuospatial analysis" (Tan et al. 2013, 1119) integral to the early reading development of Chinese children. Whereas learning to read English is a largely phonetic process, as a result of the language's alphabetic and syllabary nature, early Chinese reading development requires complex study of the "orthographic, phonological, and semantic facets of printed words" (Tan et al. 2013, 1119). Children begin at an early age to learn Chinese characters by decoding them into their "sublexical units" (Lam and McBride 2018, 918). By the age of five, most

Chinese children have begun to gain an understanding of the structural distinctions of Chinese characters based on their semantic and phonetic radicals. For instance, the character 泳, which means “to swim,” contains the semantic radical 氵 for water, and the phonetic radical 永 (*yǒng*) (Lam and McBride 2018, 918). This decoding typically follows the path of “lexical mappings of orthography to phonology, orthography to meaning, and phonology to meaning” (Tan et al. 2013, 1119).

While typing using the pinyin input method may have the potential to solidify the pronunciation and pinyin skills of Chinese children (He and Jiao 2010, 227), consistent use of this method interferes with the pivotal visuospatial analysis in Chinese reading development. In particular, pinyin input methods seem partially to overshadow handwritten language learning. Handwriting fundamentally enhances the early graphical mapping of Chinese characters, preceding an understanding of the “semantic functions” (Lam and McBride 2018, 926) of characters and thus the ability to recognize and recall them. Some believe that this early mapping “requires children to repeatedly copy single characters to help them to elaborate the visuo-orthographic analysis of characters and to establish their representation in long-term memory” (Tan et al. 2013, 1119). Typing in pinyin diverts attention from the orthographic aspects of characters, so that children fail to build the necessary “reading circuit” (Tan et al. 2013, 1119) connecting orthography, phonology, and meaning. Tan et al. thus find in their study of Chinese children’s reading scores that more frequent computer usage correlates with an observable decline in childhood reading scores (Tan et al. 2013, 1119). Their results indicate a negative correlation between time spent each day using the pinyin input method on various devices and children’s reading scores, finding the strongest correlation in the case of fourth graders who spent more than average time typing pinyin.

THE COMPLEXITY OF *HANZI* AND THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL DEVICES IN FACILITATING CHINESE LANGUAGE LEARNING

While the rise of digital input methods has contributed to the degradation of childhood character-reading development, it also reveals further the complexity that many have long attributed to *hanzi*. Because a small wealthy elite used the privilege of writing to rule over the illiterate masses, early twentieth-century China saw an initial rise in feelings of aversion toward the complexity of *hanzi*

(Zhao 2008, 323). Unlike alphabetic languages, *hanzi* contains a "welter of units" (Zhao 2008, 354) that lack transferability. These characteristics have made the computerization of *hanzi* over the past few decades a difficult process. Widespread, painstaking efforts beginning in the 1970s to find the optimal method of computerizing character input fueled long-standing sentiments in a number of Chinese, who became convinced of the inefficiency of *hanzi* in the modern age. After much simplification and digitalization had taken place, traditionalists came to believe that further simplification or even romanization of Chinese written language would have a "harmful effect on China's cultural heritage" (Zhao 2008, 346). Moreover, even after simplification, typing *hanzi* continues to be relatively time-consuming. In fact, input-scheme designers have long felt that simplified characters do not completely overcome the challenge posed by the "large number of radicals and components" (Zhao 2008, 342) and instead create "more variation and therefore more rather than fewer problems." The long-running clash that we see between Chinese characters and digitalization therefore reflects the perception within China of the tediousness of *hanzi*.

The difficulty of learning *hanzi* further affects those studying Chinese as a second language. Chinese language differs greatly from alphabetic languages, as instructors of the language must teach students *hanzi* as well as the corresponding pinyin and translation. Wayne W. He and Dela Jiao describe in their article "Curriculum Design and Special Features of 'Computer Chinese' and Chinese for Tomorrow" the most common methods of introducing students to these three distinct elements of Chinese:

Currently there are three major types of existing curricula for teaching Chinese as a foreign language: (1) unity type, emphasizing the unity of all aspects of Chinese language learning; (2) delay type, avoiding teaching the students any Chinese characters for a prolonged period of time, or even at all during the entire first year, with all instructional needs relying on phonetic symbols such as Pinyin; (3) lag type, emphasizing the oral-aural skills with a temporary lag in character-learning and a stronger emphasis on speaking more and writing less. (He and Jiao 2010, 219)

In delving further into each of these curricula, He and Jiao assert that all three fail to address

the fundamental challenge that writing Chinese characters poses to Chinese language students. Some believe that “the time necessary to learn to write characters is inversely proportional to the usefulness of that skill” (He and Jiao 2010, 218). They attribute this belief to the notion that, compared to other language skills, hundreds of hours spent studying *hanzi* provide a “smaller payoff” in terms of the ability to function as a “participant in a Chinese society” (He and Jiao 2010, 219).

Despite the remaining difficulties in typing Chinese characters, implementation of the computer within the framework of Chinese language instruction may improve study of Chinese as a second language. He and Jiao describe a new curriculum they call “Computer Chinese” or CC, which involves the use of the computer in the early stages of learning to write characters. The design of this curriculum may allow students to use Chinese language “in a practical and engaging way...and also solidify their *pīnyīn* and pronunciation skills from the start” (He and Jiao 2010, 227). He and Jiao base their confidence in this approach on the results of current research, which shows that “using a computer for input and the selection of characters can greatly increase students’ learning efficiency and knowledge retention at the beginning stages” (He and Jiao 2010, 227) of Chinese language learning. Within the first year of study, the CC approach would involve both “teaching computer input” and also explaining “the components of Chinese characters” (He and Jiao 2010, 227). Further, He and Jiao clarify that the CC approach does not imply exclusive use of the computer but rather “offers exercises for handwriting a limited number of characters specially selected for their frequency” (He and Jiao 2010, 227). Following the CC curriculum, beginner Chinese language students could more efficiently gain initial exposure to *hanzi* so as to prepare for a more intense focus on handwriting during their third and fourth years of study.

The potential benefit of the Computer Chinese approach relative to the other three curricula is of course debatable. The approach still proves somewhat controversial, especially considering that a number of Chinese teachers continue to stand behind the benefits of extensive handwritten *hanzi* practice in aiding the acquisition of all the Chinese language skills. Regardless of one’s attitude toward *hanzi*, most would agree that Computer Chinese appropriately “integrates computer input and handwriting instruction as being complementary, each supporting the other to help students read and write Chinese” (He and Jiao 2010, 227).

Aside from the computer’s contributions to the process of learning *hanzi*, using the internet in

their studies may allow students to gain a more authentic exposure to Chinese language and culture. Just as with other languages, many Chinese language textbooks teach the very formal language of "standard educated speakers" (Godwin-Jones 2013, 2). Additionally, many textbook audio dialogues do not accurately reflect real Chinese conversation since they often contain native speakers "intent on communicating information in a coherent and logical way, with rare interruptions or repetitions, while exhibiting polite turn-taking and grammatical correctness" (2). Written dialogues in textbooks also reflect a similar style of unrealistic formality, often failing to include the use of slang and idiomatic phrases that are frequent in everyday Chinese conversation. Many of the most popular Chinese textbooks circulating in universities contain phrases that are quite obsolete and no longer useful in modern Chinese conversation. Use of the internet to communicate and connect with groups of "willing native speakers offers the best opportunity to move beyond the textbook" (Godwin-Jones 2013, 3–4). Moreover, students can read online blogs or social media posts from native Chinese speakers so as to get a much better impression of Chinese modern colloquial language. Taking a step back, integration of the internet into the curriculum enhances Chinese students' acquisition of pragmatic Chinese language skills by giving them more of an understanding of the real phrases and idioms prevalent in Chinese contemporary culture. The internet, in other words, allows for students outside of China to engage with real Chinese conversation and language, making their ultimate language skills much more useful in modern Chinese society.

CHINESE INTERNET YOUTH LINGUISTIC CULTURE

The internet has popularized an array of linguistic changes, forming an almost distinct online Chinese dialect. As in other countries, the high cost of the internet when it first became popular in China generally caused much electronic communication to be "overly concise and straightforward" (Gao 2011, 3). Online messages in Chinese frequently contained "abbreviated words, subjectless sentences, and single-word sentences" (Gao 2011, 17). For instance, one might simply type "在 *zài?*," the Chinese preposition for time and place, to ask if the other person is still active in the chat. Aside from its terse nature, we see in the Chinese online dialect three new categories of lexicon: "1) words solely composed of Chinese characters, 2) words that consist only of pinyin alphabets, English letters, Arabic

numbers, or paralinguistic symbols, and 3) words of mixed sources” (Gao 2011, 12). We can discern each of these lexical categories coming into play in the following dialogue that Liwei Gao has collected from an Internet relay chat room:

- A: 哪? (“Where are you from?”)
 B: 深圳, u? (“Shenzhen. And you?”)
 A: 扬州。认识你很高兴! (“Yangzhou. Good to know you!”)
 B: me2! ^o^ (“Me too!”)
 A: 家? (“Are you home now?”)
 B: 单位。 (“No. At my working unit.”)
 A: M or F? (“Are you a male or a female?”)
 B: M! 我有事, 走先! 886! (“Male. I need to take care of something. I’m leaving now. Bye-bye!”)

(Gao 2011, 19).

As we see above, some Chinese netizens occasionally use online abbreviations of English words and phrases such as “me2,” “M or F?,” and “u.” Other English words and phrases such as “hi,” “oh,” or “I think so” (Gao 2011, 15) have also circulated in Chinese online chat rooms. We also see an interesting case of the Arabic number lexical category, namely 668, meaning “Let’s chat,” and 886 for “Bye-bye” (14). These common online numeric phrases come from the resemblance of the sounds of each of the digits to the Chinese translation of their meanings: 668, or *liù liù bā*, resembles the sounds of the Chinese translation of chat, *liáotiān* 聊天, whereas 886, *bā bā liù*, sounds similar to the word for bye, *bài bai* 拜拜. With the development of smartphones and WeChat, this Chinese internet lexicon has continued to grow, extending to all forms of digital instant messaging.

Since the rise of internet chat rooms in China in the early 2000s, another strong trend that has marked the online transformation of Chinese language has been the use of *hanzi* as a “phonetic symbol” (Liu 2011, 66) rather than a unit of semantic meaning. In other words, the informal setting of

the internet has allowed for "Internet-savvy youth" to practice "phonetic transcription in Chinese characters, coupled with alphabetical spellings...in their e-chat conversations, BBS postings, blog writing, and other typographical online activities" (Liu 2011, 66). This stems mainly from a desire among Chinese youth to undermine the centrality of standard Mandarin characters and pronunciation by basing online transcription on different dialectal pronunciations. For example:

椅弯撵 have nothing to do with "chair, bent, or to drive away," but just function as a similar pronunciation notation *yǐwānnián* for the Shaanxi Mandarin pronunciation of "10,000 years." The intentional avoidance of the use of the original characters — 万年 *yíwànnián* subverts the conventional association of the Chinese characters and their standard Mandarin pronunciation. (Liu 2011, 66–67)

This phrase, along with many others, characterizes the "phonetic transcription in Chinese characters" (Liu 2011, 66) that has populated Chinese chat rooms and blogs, replicating dialectic sounds.

This phonetic transcription reflects the overarching role of the internet as a powerful medium of dialect promotion within Chinese youth culture. The first widely-acclaimed Chinese online song, Xie Cun's "The Northeasterners Are All Living Lei Fengs" (东北人都是活雷锋 *Dōngběirén dōu shì huó Léi Fēng*), "eulogizes the good deeds of the Northeasterners through a synecdochic substitution of an ordinary working-class or peasant Northeasterner for their entire population" (Liu 2011, 62). The popularity of this early 2000s song derived primarily from its clever usage of various puns as well as Northeast Mandarin pronunciation and words. Similarly, starting in 2003, a popular website called SHN (www.shanghaining.com/) informs its users on all elements of the Shanghai dialect, called Shanghai Wu, as well as Shanghai rap (Liu 2011, 72). Not only does the site allow visitors to engage in Shanghai Wu chat rooms and forums, but, even in its early years, it gave native Shanghainese the chance to teach other users new Shanghai Wu words and phrases. At one point, the site was so popular that it would receive more than two hundred words and expressions from members each day (Liu 2011, 73).

These two examples of the growing online appreciation for Chinese dialects indicate the way in which Chinese youth culture "draws on the dialects as unexpected, unpredictable, refreshing

sources of popular youth culture” (Liu 2011, 64). This online engagement with language diversity has allowed local dialects to continue adding color and variation to Chinese language in spite of external standardization and centralization efforts.

With the decrease in online freedom that has accompanied rising Internet censorship, the Internet nevertheless has become a rich source of Chinese creative expression. As a result of current Chinese online regulations, the popular online microblog called Weibo closes its search function during times of “social crises or critical events” (Yang 2012, 50) so as to prevent users from using the site to mobilize. In addition, most Chinese websites, chat rooms, and apps are subject to extensive monitoring, which effectively bans users who use certain political keywords or phrases. Despite such strict regulations, many have found “creative ways of negotiating and bypassing keyword filtering by inventing an Aesopian language combining linguistic with non-linguistic symbols” (Yang 2012, 50).

One of the most popular methods of bypassing online censorship has been the use of “contemporary online allegorical ghost stories [that] re-appropriate an old Chinese fictional genre *zhiguai* 志怪 (i.e. “records of the strange”) (Fu 2019, 36). Two well-known web writers, Ma Boyong and Jinyi, get considerable publicity for their blog-like *zhiguai* collections of stories. The genius of their work stems from its “semi-personal,” bizarre format, making it quite unlikely to draw the attention of internet police (Fu 2019, 41). Overall, online *zhiguai* literature mingles the weird, supernatural conventions of the genre with subtle commentary on contemporary social issues.

These stories maintain their social influence by “directing the reader’s attention to the fantastical, humorous, and sometimes bizarre plot while simultaneously veiling and disclosing the factual, satirical and subversive core” (Fu 2019, 41). One could argue that since censorship has been a byproduct of efforts to limit the extent of free, informal online expression, the internet has allowed for the resurgence of a traditional Chinese linguistic tradition that otherwise might have remained unknown to younger generations in China.

CONCLUSION

In sum, pinyin input methods on various digital devices may have caused recent the declines in Chinese childhood reading development, but this finding does not necessarily signal a detachment

from Chinese language. In reality, computers and the Internet have an incredible amount of potential in facilitating foreign acquisition of Chinese communication and interpretation skills, thus broadening the scope of the language's global influence. Moreover, the Chinese language continues to experience the diversifying influences of online engagement both with local Chinese dialects as well as a distinct internet language. Liwei Gao argues that "when the society changes, language as a sign that mirrors the reality of society will also undergo transformation" (Gao 2011, 21). Certainly this assertion gains traction from the clear linguistic evolution following the path of the many complex socio-political and cultural changes throughout Chinese history. Digitalization arguably stands as one of the most powerful sources of fundamental change in the function of Chinese language in society. Given the importance of Chinese language within the framework of Chinese culture, one might say that the linguistic growth that has followed digitalization is a sign of significant cultural enrichment.

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The Language of Maoist Insurrection

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which the Maoist ideology of continuous struggle was manifested in the linguistic changes that arose in Chinese society following the Communist victory in proclaiming the People's Republic of China in 1949. The paper begins with a brief introduction to the worldview associated with the Chinese brand of Marxism–Leninism that formed the core of Mao Zedong Thought and the propaganda system engineered to promote it, as it is in this context that the political was able to triumph in all spheres including linguistic. The formalization of language into set phrases will then be considered, along with its precedent and efficacy. Once this is established, specific linguistic changes will be analyzed in the pattern of two general themes: identity, especially political identity, and military-style rhetoric.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MAOIST WORLDVIEW

Language is a reflection of thought and attitude. Therefore, in order to understand the linguistic particularities of Maoist rhetoric, it is important to first understand the worldview that necessarily was espoused by a doctrinaire Communist in Mao's China.

As the adaptation of the principles of Marxism–Leninism to the unique conditions of Chinese society, Maoist thought, often grouped with its intellectual predecessor and inspiration to form “Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought,” places the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the essential vanguard in the effort to bring about communism in China by means of class struggle.

In Communist parlance, contradictions (*máodùn* 矛盾)¹ inherent in society make inevitable a fundamental struggle between the visionary forces of socialism (good) and the reactionary forces of capitalism (evil). From the basic proposition that “society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other,”² there forms a dualism that leaves little room for nuance and no tolerance for traitors to the movement. Mao underlined this point when he said that “nowhere in the world does there exist hate or love without reason,” emphasizing the impossibility of love and the inevitability of hate between those who belong to opposing classes.³

In tandem with this great struggle, Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought holds itself to be a “scientific” ideology, its precepts aligned with a universal law of history that sees the world as marching steadily on the path to global communism.⁴ That it is a law of history implies that there are those in society who will be revealed to be on the “wrong side of history” in conflict with those on the “right side of history,” i.e., those who are working to build communism. Therefore, those who oppose

¹ See Mao, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” and his earlier, more philosophical work, “On Contradiction.” In the latter, for example, he stated, “Changes in society are due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the new; it is the development of these contradictions that pushes society forward and gives the impetus for the supersession of the old society by the new.”
https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm

² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 15.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>

³ For an in-depth analysis of this phrase, see Haiyan Lee’s essay in *Words and Their Stories: Essays On the Language of the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Ban Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁴ Haiyan Lee in Wang, ed., *Words and Their Stories*, 164: “Politics in Mao’s China was still about identity, but the Maoist identity politics aligned itself with the Law of History. Class enemies had become what Hannah Arendt calls ‘objective enemies,’ because they were, from the ‘objective’ perspective of scientific Marxism, on the wrong side of History. Their extirpation was thus the objective precondition for the forward motion of historical progress. Whether a particular person was guilty of a specific crime or not was no longer meaningful. The need to identify objective enemies regardless of innocence or guilt rendered everyone a potential enemy within. In the end, the Maoist political showed the greatest contempt for experience.”

the supposedly historically correct movement do not merely have differing political opinions, but *incorrect* opinions.⁵ Naturally, these people are enemies, hostile entities that must be vanquished.

Moreover, violence is not a mere side effect, but rather a necessary component of the revolution. Mao's famous dictum makes this clear:

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.⁶

Furthermore, to a doctrinaire Communist, an individual derives significance chiefly from his or her class identity.⁷ New recruits to the movement must rid themselves of bonds to old class structures as they unify themselves with the collective and submit to the guidance of the Party. Only in unification with the masses can one gain influence in the unjust world, and only with the Party can this be achieved.

Haiyan Lee defines class feeling, *jiējí gǎnqíng* 阶级感情, as "comradely love for brothers and sisters from one's own class... a horizontal, fraternal feeling that extends equally to all members of the proletariat, but finds its most intense and sublime expression in the love for the supreme leader, Mao

⁵ In his speech, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People," Mao said: "Marxism can develop only through struggle, and this is not only true of the past and the present, it is necessarily true of the future as well. What is correct invariably develops in the course of struggle with what is wrong.... Such struggles will never end. This is the law of development of truth and, naturally, of Marxism.... Fighting against wrong ideas is like being vaccinated — a man develops greater immunity from disease as a result of vaccination."

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm

⁶ "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" (March 1927), *Selected Works*, 1: 28.
https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm

⁷ John Wesley Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell's Newspeak and Its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 148.

Zedong" coupled with "hatred and resentment for the class enemy."⁸ Its invocation has the goal of redirecting the people's sentiments from personal concerns (e.g. family, romantic partner, individual position) to class concerns, namely taking part in class struggle, however the Party may determine. The distinction between friends and foes is fundamental, as Mao outlined in 1926:

Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution....To distinguish real friends from real enemies, we must make a general analysis of the economic status of the various classes in Chinese society and of their respective attitudes towards the revolution.⁹

Crucial for cementing the Party's influence is the idea that the political trumps the personal, or, as Lin Biao's famous phrase has it: *tūchū zhèngzhì* 突出政治 (politics takes command). If communism is to be built, it requires never-ceasing participation from every member of society. Personal concerns must be subordinated to those of the greater political cause. The *People's Daily*¹⁰ explained:

If politics does not take command — i.e., if the proletarian ideology does not take command — there can be no direction. In every work we undertake, we must always insist that politics take command and let political and ideological work come before anything else. Only when we are both thorough and penetrating with our political and ideological work can we guarantee the accomplishment of our task.¹¹

8 Haiyan Lee, "Class Feeling," in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Australia: ANU Press, 2019), 23.

9 Mao Zedong, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society" (March 1926), *Selected Works*, 1: 13.

10 *Rénmín Rìbào* 人民日报, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

11 Frederick T. C. Yu, *Mass Persuasion in Communist China* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 4.

THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA

The insistence that people submit not only in their actions but also in their hearts is a classic law of power that has precedent in Chinese intellectual thought. In the *Mengzi*, for example:

If one makes others submit with power, their hearts do not submit. Power is inadequate to make their hearts submit. If one makes others submit with Virtue, they are pleased in their hearts and genuinely submit, like the seventy disciplines who served Kongzi.¹²

This idea is reflected, as well, in the very foundation of Marxism-Leninism itself. The Party professes to be in service of the "People." Everything from the bank to the army supposedly belongs to the People. If there is to be a dictatorship, it must be a "dictatorship of the proletariat." Therefore, in theory, the Communist Party can never be satisfied with the mere submission of the people to its power but needs to indoctrinate its subjects to be willing comrades who submit in their hearts as well as in their actions.

The embodiment of this principle is the policy of the mass line, which the *People's Daily* declared to be the "fundamental policy of the party."¹³ Its consequence is that every action that the Party takes must give the appearance that it is supported by the majority of the people. Every citizen, then, is required to internalize the message of the Party so that the collective "class consciousness" can be raised. Apathy is a cardinal sin; every member of society must participate in the struggle.

The myriad ways in which citizens could demonstrate their requisite participation in the struggle included the infamous struggle sessions in which those accused of being class enemies or enemies of the revolution were subjected to humiliation, forced confessions, torture, and sometimes execution. By experiencing forced public identification with the revolutionary cause against these supposed enemies, people were slowly made to internalize the feelings they externalized by

¹² Book 2A of Mencius, *Mengzi: Selected Passages with Traditional Commentary*, tr. and ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2009), 19.

¹³ *Renmin Ribao*, December 11, 1958, quoted in Yu, *Mass Persuasion in Communist China*, 15.

communal struggle. In a similar vein, *dàzìbào* 大字报, literally “big character posters,” became the canvas on which was painted the language of class struggle. Deemed the “best fighting form for the revolutionary masses,”¹⁴ citizens around the country were encouraged to create *dàzìbào* to show their revolutionary spirit and foster this spirit in others.

Paramount in the overarching process of mass persuasion is the role of the press. From the Soviet example and Lenin’s dictum that the press should be “a collective propagandist, a collective agitator, and a collective organizer,”¹⁵ the Chinese Communists channeled their complex system of propaganda dispersion to an effect that exceeded anything Moscow could have dreamed.¹⁶

In order to keep the citizenry in constant struggle, the Party devised a series of overlapping propaganda campaigns that always involved an enemy to be vanquished or a role model to be emulated. As stated clearly in the journal *Xuexi* (Hseuh Hsi):

Always give full support to complete one central task, mobilize the broad masses and attract them to the general slogan at the time. We must know that revolution is a mass movement, and that actions of the masses must concentrate only on one or at most a few definite and clearly-expressed objectives... After one central task is completed,

¹⁴ Lu Xing, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact On Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 75.

¹⁵ V. I. Lenin, “The ‘Plan’ for an All-Russia Political Newspaper,” in his *What is to Be Done*, 105. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf>

¹⁶ For more on the propaganda system in Maoist China, see Yu’s *Mass Persuasion in Communist China*. “The technical difference between the Moscow and Peking propaganda systems is much smaller than is generally assumed; the Chinese originality lies in the intensity, scope, and skill of their propaganda-agitation, not in its philosophy or nature. That is to say, what is remarkable is that the Chinese Communists have managed to manipulate and control almost all forms of human communication. Specifically, they have succeeded, to the surprise of many observers, in integrating all oral, informal, casual, and traditional means of communication with the more conventional channels and methods of mass propaganda and indoctrination.” (Yu, 155)

For the a study of the press in the Soviet bloc and the guiding role of its Marxist-Leninist ideological foundation, see Antony Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works* New York: Praeger, 1964.

replace it with another central task, substitute one general slogan for another new slogan. This is the forward-going law of revolution. It is also the law of gradually elevating mass consciousness and organizational ability.¹⁷

In this way, it was imperative to perpetually hold certain groups as an enemy against which the class struggle could be waged. Harmony was inconceivable, as a lack of societal tensions would eliminate the need for socialist revolution. Therefore, it was critical for the Party to continuously magnify any pre-existing tensions and manufacture new tensions where previously there were none.

Many of these propaganda campaigns, such as "Learn from Lei Feng" and "Learn from Dazhai" had an explicitly military theme, even after the Great Leap Forward saw the colossal failure of the Party's experiment, under the slogan "Everyone a Soldier," to militarize the entire adult population.¹⁸ The martial theme was accentuated even more when the Party launched the "Learn from the PLA" campaign in early 1964, calling on all elements of society to emulate the "advanced political and ideological work" of the armed forces.¹⁹

Emulation of the military was not limited by gender, as women under Communist rule were encouraged to rid themselves of the chains of the old system and take up the cause alongside their male comrades. To this end, Mao famously declared that the daughters of China love battle array, not silks and satins (*bù ài hóngzhuāng, ài wǔzhuāng* 不爱红装爱武装). This phrase has been thoroughly analyzed by Tina Mai Chen in *Words and Their Stories*, where she links its use to the Communist defeminization of women in the context of mass mobilization and changes in class identity. She cites an article of the same name by Guo Moruo beginning with the line, "Military units have a glorious tradition in the history of China's revolution," but containing sparse references to specific female soldiers and comments. Chen writes that, "Placing female militia within the larger history of Chinese

¹⁷ Hseuh Hsi 43, quoted in Yu, *Mass Persuasion in Communist China*, 27.

¹⁸ Ralph L. Powell, "Commissars in the Economy: 'Learn from the PLA' Movement in China," *Asian Survey* 5, no. 3 (1965): 125–38. doi:10.2307/2642402, 136.

¹⁹ Powell, "Commissars in the Economy," 125.

Socialist struggle ensures that women are mobilized alongside men as part of ‘the people’ who will continue revolutionary struggle in the 1960s.”²⁰

These propaganda campaigns all had the aim to incite an atmosphere of militant struggle in line with Maoist thought. Seen in this context, the linguistic changes that came forth under Maoist rule should come as no surprise.

TIFA

Language has long been recognized as a potent political instrument,²¹ and Communist regimes that claim to have a monopoly on truth have been especially active on this crucial front in the struggle for political power.

An important part of Communist rhetoric is formalization of language. In Communist China, this formalization is exemplified in the phrases officially sanctioned by the state as *tífǎ* 提法. Each *tífǎ* is determined by those in the higher echelons of the Party, with lists of approved formulations passed down to lower ranking members and citizens in the form of state-controlled media and “red headers” from Party Central in Beijing. Under Mao and his immediate successors, any patriotic citizen was pressured to flower his speech with the “correct” *tífǎ* in order to show loyalty to the revolutionary cause and solidarity with the Party.

Formalized language, in essence, takes the multitude of possible ways one may express a thought and narrows them down to a handful of approved variations, many with political connotations. Michael Schoenhals summarizes the advantages of language formalization as follows:

First, the proscription of selected formulations makes the introduction of new concepts — reformulated ideas of what a thing could be — cumbersome. It is possible in part to circumvent this problem by engaging in paraphrase and by juggling with ironic devices like quotation marks, but such tactics require a far greater mental effort

²⁰ Tina Mai Chen, “Use the Past to Serve the Present; the Foreign to Serve China,” in *Words and Their Stories: Essays On the Language of the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Ban Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 273.

²¹ A classic essay on this topic is George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language.”

than does using ready-made word concepts. Effective and successful communication between an advocate of representative democracy and a PRC constituency, for example, is rendered exceedingly difficult if the former is constantly forced to refer to his or her political program as "the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" or "the preposterous fallacy of a so-called bourgeoisie democracy." The prescribed repetition of a limited number of "scientific formulations," furthermore, promotes acceptance of already existing conceptions. Formalization thus not only inhibits change in the direction of something new or "other"; it also simplifies the defense and perpetuation of that which is already established, conventional or traditional.²²

The Chinese Communist Party's use of language formalization for political indoctrination, though unparalleled in scope and penetration, was certainly not without precedent. The Confucian concept of *zhèngmíng* 正名, or rectification of names, dates the importance of correct language to the very foundations of traditional Chinese society.

Confucius famously declared in *Analects* 13:3 that, "When names are not correct, what is said will sound unreasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable affairs will not culminate in success... the thing about the gentleman [*jūnzǐ* 君子] is he is anything but casual where speech is concerned."²³

The third-century BCE philosopher Xunzi dedicated an entire chapter to the concept of rectifying names, arguing from a philosophical basis the importance of correct names with the conclusion that the top-down imposition of language is a correct and entirely necessary aspect of a ruler's authority. In fact, he said it is the basis of his rule:

Names are used when the reality itself is not clearly understood. Combinations of names are used when single names alone are not understood. Explanations are used

²² Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992), 21.

²³ Confucius; tr. and ed. D. C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects*, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000), 121.

when combinations of names alone are not understood. Discourses are used when simple explanations alone are not understood. Hence, names, combinations of names, explanations, and discourses are the major forms to be used in conducting practical affairs and are the basis of the king's business.²⁴

Xunzi made this statement, it must be noted, in the context of the grand Confucian project for moral transformation. As Paul R. Goldin writes, for Xunzi “the only legitimate purpose of language, like that of government itself, is to serve as the king's tool in propagating moral excellence.”²⁵ In this way, Xunzi affirmed the power of language — specifically, formulated language — to induce changes in both the behavior and mentality of the population.

This precedence is not limited to intellectual thought. In Chinese history, successive imperial dynasties compiled lists of taboo characters as part of complex language formulation schemes. Across the strait, Taipei government officials have made every effort to avoid words appropriated by the Communists on the mainland, declaring them to have “bandit” overtones. An example of this is the word for “formulations” itself: instead of *tífǎ*, Guomintang propaganda cadres use *jiǎngfǎ* 讲法/講法.²⁶

In the Soviet Union, Lenin declared that the most critical task of the new Soviet revolutionaries was the “selection of language,”²⁷ a sentiment Stalin echoed when he described language as an “instrument of struggle and development of society.”²⁸ Later, Soviet theoretician L. O. Resnikov wrote that Marxism teaches that “language [is] a powerful tool which can be used to affect thought, feelings, and especially behavior.”²⁹ From its role as a political tool, it follows, then, that

²⁴ Xunzi 22, “Rectifying Names,” *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu*, 146–147.

²⁵ Paul R. Goldin, *Confucianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 93.

²⁶ Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 2.

²⁷ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 126.

²⁸ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1950/jun/20.htm>

²⁹ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 211.

language would be perceived as malleable in the pursuit of political ends, and that words would be defined to suit political necessity.

In China, the creation of set formulations overlapped heavily with the cult of Mao, though this was but one aspect of a propaganda apparatus that prescribed correct phraseology across society.

The Great Helmsman's words were immortalized and sanctified by their publication in *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, known in the West as "Mao's Little Red Book," of which every Chinese was required to own a copy to be kept on hand for reference at study sessions. These quotes constituted the core of Mao Zedong Thought (*Máo Zédōng Sixiǎng* 毛泽东思想).

From the introduction by Lin Biao:

... the most fundamental task in our Party's political and ideological work is at all times to hold high the great red banner of Mao Tse-tung's thought, to arm the minds of the people throughout the country with it and to persist in using it to command every field of activity....

In studying the works of Chairman Mao, one should have specific problems in mind, study and apply his works in a creative way, combine study with application, first study what must be urgently applied so as to get quick results, and strive hard to apply what one is studying. In order really to master Mao Tse-tung's thought, it is essential to study many of Chairman Mao's basic concepts over and over again, and it is best to memorize important statements and study and apply them repeatedly. The newspapers should regularly carry quotations from Chairman Mao relevant to current issues for readers to study and apply....³⁰

The mania of Mao worship led to the "correct" belief that the Chairman's words were imbued with intrinsic qualities that made them an infallible tool for any problem. It completely took over China's education and work systems, as Mao Zedong Thought study sessions were mandated across

³⁰ In Biao, "Foreword to the Second Edition of Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung."

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1966/12/16.htm>.

society. Respect for teachers as in the concept of *shīdào zūnyán* 师道尊严 (dignity and awe of the teacher) was deemed bourgeois and replaced from above by a concept adopted from the army slogan, *guān jiào bīng, bīng jiào guān, bīng jiào bīng* 官教兵、兵教官、兵教兵 (officer teaches soldier, soldier teaches officer, soldier teaches soldier).³¹ The student was suddenly the equal of the teacher, and all were under Mao.

With the the mass hysteria of the superiority of Mao's every word, citizens across China were known to imbed Mao quotes casually in everyday speech. There were even entire conversations carried out solely with words recorded to have been once uttered by Mao.

To say that writing styles changed throughout the nation would be a colossal understatement. As described above, Maoist thought, from its Marxist-Leninist foundation, has as one of its core principles that politics is ever-present and must take precedence over the personal. Class membership and vigorous struggle should define a citizen's life, certainly not petty personal concerns. To write a non-political letter and thereby submit the political to the personal would be to commit one of the cardinal sins against the core of what formed the basis for Maoist thought.

In this way, every thought, even, for example, personal correspondence between father and son, was to be embellished with *tífǎ* to demonstrate unity with the Party line. Naturally, then, this extended to make public discourse a stage for the performance of one's "correct" politics. Dittmer describes what is known as *dǎ yǔlù zhàn* 打语录战 (to fight a quotation war):

For years, the opening of any speech, political report or article always began with something like *xingshi da hao, er bu shi xiao hao* 形势大好而不是小好 ("the revolutionary situation now is very good, not just good"). Every paragraph or statement had to culminate with a quotation from Mao. The more quotations were used, the more learned the writer or speaker seemed to be.³²

³¹ Lowell Dittmer and Ruoxi Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1981), 63.

³² Dittner and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 45.

Tífā was certainly not limited to Mao's words, but rather could be defined as the standardization of set phrases that were pre-approved and promoted by the authorities on high. The Party, of course, also took precedence. For example, people were taught to equate "love of country" (*àiguó* 爱国) with "love of Party" (*àidǎng* 爱党) in a phrase that is still employed today: *àidǎng àiguó àirénmín* 爱党爱国爱人民.³³ Meaning "love the Party, love the Nation, love the People," it is only natural that love for the Party would be first in the listing.

Another example that Perry Link cites in his groundbreaking book, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*, is the following description of the Party: *wěidà de guāngróng de zhèngquè de gōngchǎndǎng* 伟大的光荣的正确的共产党, meaning "the great, glorious, correct Communist Party." A curious thing about phrases such as this, notes Link, is the insistence on the prescribed word order. It works precisely because of the standardization, from which deviation could imply mockery or worse.

It is instructive to emphasize that formulated political worship for an almighty leader across media was not unique to Maoist China. The Marxist-Leninist theoretical foundations for the domination of the political should make it no surprise that we find in Stalin's USSR a comparable precedent to the formulated political worship prevalent in Mao's China, and in the cases of both rulers this brand of rhetoric extended as well to mandated recitations of praise for the respective almighty leader (characteristic of totalitarian regimes in general). For example, discussing scientific journals in the post-World War II period, Adler writes:

Every article has to begin with a quotation of Stalin's "works," which are mostly collections of his speeches, for he was never a scientist in the true sense. He also had to be praised as the "great leader of the people," "the genius and leader of the Soviet Union," and whatever new epithets could be invented by an author.³⁴

³³ Perry E. Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 257.

³⁴ Max K. Adler, *Marxist Linguistic Theory and Communist Practice: A Sociolinguistic Study* (Hamburg: Buske, 1980), 60.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, the Party immediately began the process of reducing and revising the old *tǐfǎ* associated with the chaos of the latter years of his rule. Formulations from the Cultural Revolution were designated as inappropriate, the total number of formulations classified as scientific was reduced, and a general trend toward shorter formulations emerged.³⁵ Within the Party, the rise of younger members around this time challenged the authority of Party elders with regard to the validity of old formulations. The crux of the matter for these elders, according to two of Hu Yaobang's ghost writers, was that the personal privileges and careers of many of them were irrevocably linked to these formulations.³⁶

Mao's influence as a whole declined gradually, however, with many of the *tǐfǎ* associated with him so ingrained in society that they continued to be used past his death. For example, John Pomfret recalls that while he was a student at Nanjing University in 1981, the dean, to "maintain a façade of loyalty to Maoist liturgy," continued to permit the broadcast of the old national wake-up call containing the martial message, adopted from a Mao quote, to "increase vigilance, protect the motherland, and prepare for war!" The messaging faded in different cities at different times, and by 1982 he no longer heard it.³⁷

With the shifting of heroes and villains in Mao's wake, the old deadly mistake of quoting an out-of-favor leader remained. For instance, Michael Schoenhals describes the story of what happened after a 1972 *People's Daily* article published an article on political and ideological work in which it said, "there has to be praise as well as criticism, although there should mainly be praise." In the midst of a national anti-Lin Biao campaign, if it turned out that this quote was from Lin (as on first glance it was), then it could carry grave consequences. Thankfully, an editor was able to find an instance in which Mao said the same thing and cite Mao, not Lin, as the originator.³⁸

This environment of fear incentivized writers to use the safest phrases possible, inserting

³⁵ Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 20.

³⁶ Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 27.

³⁷ John Pomfret, personal correspondence and *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), 1.

³⁸ Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 24–25.

anachronistic political *tífǎ* in places where they carried little practical use but tremendous ideological significance. After all, the presence of *tífǎ* has the effect of making a phrase "correct-sounding" as long as its use of that *tífǎ* fits the norms.

Consider the following dialogue given in an English-language textbook produced during the Hua Guofeng era:

A: The Gang of Four Anti-Party Clique wanted to usurp Party and state power and restore capitalism. We Red Guards, never allow them!

B: That's right. The struggle against the Gang of Four is a life-and-death struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between socialism and capitalism, and between Marxism and revisionism.³⁹

The above dialogue would certainly never occur in real life with a native English speaker, and its criticisms do not quite fit the description of the Gang of Four. But the real goal here was not language education, and it is possible that the authors of the textbook would have found it difficult and dangerous to consider a pattern not molded on the pre-approved list of acceptable *tífǎ*. To assert the pervasive dominance of the Maoist political over all facets of life was indeed the safest move one could make.

Patterns of thought and expression die slowly. Link recalls that even dissidents in exile continued to phrase their thoughts according to the *tífǎ* they had internalized:

Now driven into exile, where they were free to state things as they wished, some of their phrases continued to resemble officialese: *wei Zhongguo minzhu er nuli shiming*

39 Fengyuan Ji, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 307.

“Strive hard for Chinese democracy,” *xianshen yu weida shiming* “devote oneself to the great mission,” etc.⁴⁰

In the summer of 1989, when a group of Chinese dissidents, refugees from the June Fourth massacre in Beijing, met in Paris to draft a Declaration of the Chinese Democratic Front, they got into a heated debate about language. Democratic front? Isn’t “front” a military term? Mao used it, but should we? Everyone wanted to end the dictatorship of the Communist Party, but not everyone wanted to use terms like *tuifan* [推翻], “overthrow” or “knock down.” Two factions formed on the question, and each took itself to be the more radical. One side said, in effect, we do not compromise; we are willing to come out and say “Down with the Communist Party.” The other side said: you compromise by accepting the Communist Party’s language; it is we who do not compromise; we say only “End one-party rule.”⁴¹

Language formalization in the form of *tífǎ* was a powerful, omnipresent tool in Maoist linguistic engineering and, with its political overtones, brought both a new pattern of thinking and an accompanying new vocabulary to the Chinese population.

It is this new vocabulary that will be explored in the remaining two sections.

IDENTITY

In 1951, Professor Ye Chang-qing of the Chinese Catholic University was ordered to the countryside along with scores of other intellectuals as part of the land reform program and was astonished to find that the peasants from whom he was ordered to learn employed the following words easily and naturally as part of their everyday conversation:⁴²

⁴⁰ Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 294.

⁴¹ Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese*, 19.

⁴² Yu, *Mass Persuasion In Communist China*, 91–92.

汉字	拼音	英文	汉字	拼音	英文
包庇	<i>bāobì</i>	accomplice	彻底	<i>chèdǐ</i>	thoroughly
领导	<i>lǐngdǎo</i>	to guide; authorities	任务	<i>rènwu</i>	task, assignment
斗争	<i>dòuzhēng</i>	to struggle	剥削制度	<i>bōxuē zhìdù</i>	system of exploitation
压迫	<i>yāpò</i>	oppression	不法	<i>bùfǎ</i>	illegal, unlawful
目标	<i>mùbiāo</i>	objective, goal	问题	<i>wèntí</i>	problem, issue, question
思想	<i>sīxiǎng</i>	ideology, view, thought	检查	<i>jiǎnchá</i>	investigation
讨论	<i>tǎolùn</i>	discussion	交流	<i>jiāoliú</i>	exchange of ideas or experience
弱点	<i>ruòdiǎn</i>	weakness	补充	<i>bǔchōng</i>	to supplement
积极	<i>jījí</i>	active	开展	<i>kāizhǎn</i>	to start, develop
政策	<i>zhèngcè</i>	policy	团结	<i>tuánjié</i>	unity; to unify
封建势力	<i>fēngjiàn shìlì</i>	feudalistic forces	政治微风	<i>zhèngzhì wēifēng</i>	political prestige
统治	<i>tǒngzhì</i>	control, rule	主要	<i>zhǔyào</i>	most important
标准	<i>biāozhǔn</i>	standard	根据	<i>gēnjù</i>	according to
觉悟	<i>juéwù</i>	consciousness	优点	<i>yōudiǎn</i>	advantage
研究	<i>yánjiū</i>	research	合法	<i>héfǎ</i>	legal
总结	<i>zǒngjié</i>	conclusion	合理	<i>hérlǐ</i>	logical

These words are all typical in Communist jargon, with many of them taking on new connotations that would have been foreign to peasants far removed from politics. Yu explains:

Almost all of them were not expressions commonly used before by Chinese peasants. The list was submitted to a group of twelve professors who had been born in China but who are now living in the United States. It was their opinion that only five of the expressions would conceivably have been used by peasants prior to 1949, and then only by men. They were: [*yāpò*] (oppression), [*sīxiǎng*] ideology, *wèntí* (problem, issue), [*héllǐ*] (logical) and [*héfǎ*] (legal). None of them thought that Chinese peasants in pre-Communist days would have understood such expressions as [*língdǎo*] (authorities), [*juéwù*] (consciousness), [*zǒngjié*] (conclusion), [*jiāoliú*] (exchange of ideas) or [*dòuzhēng*] (struggle).⁴³

The internalization of these terms less than two years after the founding of the People's Republic attests to the quick success the Communist regime had in propagating a new vocabulary to accompany their program of the politicization of everyday life. Moreover, the connotations present in this politicized everyday vocabulary had the effect of normalizing the Party's authority and the heightened sense of societal conflict, intrinsic in the Maoist worldview, that had then descended upon China. On *língdǎo* "leader(ship)," for example, Link writes:

In their original meanings, the two components of this phrase, *ling* and *dao*, are both verbs that describe the leading of a person who follows willingly, even gratefully. A paradigmatic example of *ling* is what an usher does in a church or a theater; *dao*, originally, is something like what a tour guide does. Do these activities resemble what a *ling* does within China's political system? Hardly. Overwhelmingly, people in China follow their *ling* because they have to, not because they choose to. Words like "authority," "ruler," or "boss" would be more literally descriptive of what a *lingdao* does,

⁴³ Yu, *Mass Persuasion in Communist China*, 92.

but if one puts such words directly into Chinese — using terms like *quanwei* [权威], *dangju* [当局], or *laoban* [老板] — the rhetorical flavor changes immediately. The *lingdao* themselves view such terms as “hostile to the socialist system.” They prefer the euphemism, which saves their face, because face is one root of power. A term like *lingdao* has the added advantage that it makes any objector seem, at least at the rhetorical level, to be wayward or ungrateful.⁴⁴

Class in Communist China diverged from the traditional Marxist definition to a modified definition that accounted for the likelihood that a particular member of a group would support the revolution. One’s class status was called *jiējí chéngfèn* 阶级成分, of which there were three general categories: good, middle, bad. Those least likely to support the revolutionary agenda were further grouped by terms such as “five categories of counter-revolutionaries” (*wǔlèi fǎngémìng* 五类反革命) and “five black categories” (*hēi wǔlèi* 黑五类) that aimed to build a linguistic barrier separating those whom the party deemed as such from the rest of society.

Michael Schoenhals has investigated the question, “Who makes up the ‘People’ (*Rénmín*) in the People’s Republic?”⁴⁵ and tracked the ways in which the Communist Party was able to create a concept of *rénmín* 人民 separate from other nationals (*guómín* 国民) and citizens (*gōngmín* 公民) by dividing the population in a 95% to 5% split into the *renmín* “on [their] side” who supported the Communist regime against the *fēi rénmin* 非人民, or non-People, in opposition. As CCP Central Committee member Bo Yibo explained to a group of journalists:

“People” is not the same as “nationals” (*guomin*). In the past, we generally used to say that “nationals” include the landlords and the other antagonistic classes. In any case, persons (*ren*) living on the national soil are all [sic] “nationals,” and are all called “nationals.” Then there is another term called “citizen” (*gongmin*). “Citizens” are

⁴⁴ Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese*, 299.

⁴⁵ Schoenhals, Michael. “‘Non-people’ in the People’s Republic of China: A Chronicle of Terminological Ambiguity,” *Indiana Working Papers on Language and Politics in Modern China*, no. 4 (1994).

different from “nationals” and from “People.” Politically and legally there are such things as “citizen’s rights,” the most important of which are the right to vote and the right to be elected. So much for “citizens.” With “People” it’s different. For example, the People’s Democratic Dictatorship with the worker–peasant alliance as its main body: here “People” includes workers, peasants, the urban poor, intellectuals, etc., but certainly not landlords and comprador bourgeois elements.⁴⁶

These groupings of the “People” and its enemies were not locked, but fluid to meet the changing needs of the revolutionary movement for which the labeling of new enemies was a necessity. To this end, Mao clarified in 1957 that,

During the War of Resistance Against Japan, all those classes, strata and social groups opposing Japanese aggression came within the category of the people, while the Japanese imperialists, their Chinese collaborators and the pro-Japanese elements were all enemies of the people. During the War of Liberation, the U.S. imperialists and their running dogs — the bureaucrat-capitalists, the landlords and the Kuomintang reactionaries who represented these two classes — were the enemies of the people, while the other classes, strata and social groups, which opposed them, all came within the category of the people. At the present stage, the period of building socialism, the classes, strata and social groups which favour, support and work for the cause of socialist construction all come within the category of the people, while the social

46 Bo Yibo, “Renmin ribao de mingcheng he Baotou de youlai” (The origins of the name and title of the *People’s Daily*), *Xinwen zhanxian*, no. 7 (1981), 3, quoted in Michael Schoenhals, “‘Non-people’ in the People’s Republic of China: A Chronicle of Terminological Ambiguity,” *Indiana Working Papers on Language and Politics in Modern China*, no. 4 (1994),

forces and groups which resist the socialist revolution and are hostile to or sabotage socialist construction are all enemies of the people.⁴⁷

Key to this distinction is that it allowed the Party to take vicious action against "non-People" in the name of the masses. Thus, when "rebel elements" were shot or taken prisoner, it was for the good of the "People." Furthermore, the "People" has been constructed as a semantic entity that by definition is incapable of rebellion;⁴⁸ the "People" cannot rebel against itself.

Schoenhals provides, as well, a list of some of the hundreds of new labels that were created to deal with these non-People. Variants on the simple "rightist" label included: "rightest hard-core element," "old-line rightist," "rightist pathbreaker," "vicious rightist counsellor," "rightist careerist," "utterly evil rightist element," "rightist wolf in sheep's clothing," and "sinister and ruthless rightist element."

Variants on the "anti-" theme included: "utterly arrogant and utterly reactionary and utterly despicable anti-Party element," "anti-Communist and anti-People conspiratorial activist," "anti-Party buffoon-gang accomplice," "anti-Party careerist traitor and spy turned anti-Communist vanguard," "anti-Communist specialist," "anti-Party 'eulogist,'" "anti-Communist 'valiant general,'" "anti-Communist black gang strategist and Hu Feng counter-revolutionary clique rank-and file," "old-line anti-Communist," "anti-Party clique 'military counsellor,'" "anti-Communist 'rocket gun,'" and "rightist element oozing anti-Communist toxin from the depths of the soul."

General political slander included: "political slave of a foreign master," "utterly reactionary political conspirator," "bourgeois political careerist and 'valiant general' assaulting the Party," "loyal and obedient servant of imperialism," "political conspirator donning the robes of the progressive scholar," "double-faced conspirator," and "overwhelmingly ambitious conspirator." Females accused of being rightists were called "rightist woman general," "ferocious woman general," "anti-Party clique woman general," and "fierce and tough rightist woman general."⁴⁹

47 Mao Tse-tung, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People," in *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*.

48 Schoenhals, "Non-people' in the People's Republic of China," 16.

49 Schoenhals, "Non-people' in the People's Republic of China, 13–15. See *Guangming ribao*, August 19, 1957; *Renmin ribao*,

Notice the prevalence of military rhetoric in these insults. The mindset of continual dualistic struggle had become normalized to the extent that hated enemies could not be pictured as simply opponents, but necessarily as members of a vast apparatus of forces conspiring against the revolutionary cause. Traitors and black hands were everywhere. With politics in command, everyone had a movement behind him or her.

In line with the sentiment that class enemies were lesser beings against whom there needed to be constant struggle, the names given to them portrayed them as beastly and devilish. Among these were: *yāomó guǐguài* 妖魔鬼怪 (evil spirits and monstrous freaks) and *niúguǐshéshén* 牛鬼蛇神 (ox-monsters and snake-demons), a term that became synonymous with China's non-People and was defined with the four-character phrase *dì fù fǎn huài* 地富反坏, translated as "landlord [elements], rich[-peasant] [elements], reactionary [elements], and hooligans."⁵⁰ Strangely for an atheistic ideology but pragmatically tapping into Chinese tradition, these non-people were also devils, *móguǐ* 魔鬼, or demons, *guǐguài* 鬼怪, whose devilish words, or *guǐhuà* 鬼话, spiritually infected the population. It is noteworthy that the very concept of these unearthly terms is at odds with dialectical materialism and does not have a Soviet equivalent.⁵¹

While the above terms refer to the inhumanity of sworn class enemies, Communist cadres under criticism were referred to by epithets, *dàihào* 代号, assigned by the Party.⁵² For example, Liu Shaoqi was to be referred to as "the biggest capitalist-roader in the Party," *dǎngnèi zuìdà de zǒuzīpài* 党内最大的走资派, and Deng Xiaoping as "the number-two capitalist roader in the Party" *dǎngnèi dì èr hào zǒuzīpài* 党内第二号走资派. This was done for a variety of reasons; one of these is that it saved face and covered oneself in the case of turning political tides, as final verdicts were to come from Party Central. Schoenhals documents the process of using Party circulars to proscribe and prescribe terminology in the second chapter of *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*. In addition to official *dàihào* prescribed by the Party, common Chinese also invented their own *dàihào*

August 9, 1957; *Gansu ribao*, August 9, 1957; *Yunnan ribao*, August 11, 1957.

⁵⁰ Schoenhals, "Non-people' in the People's Republic of China," 12.

⁵¹ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 130.

⁵² Dittmer and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 43.

to use against reviled figures, such as Jiang Qing, one of whose milder nicknames was simply *nàge póniáng* 那个婆娘, "that woman."

As regards more civil political name-calling, Link chronicles the propensity for terms to acquire new definitions that could contradict previous definitions. For example, *fǎndòng* 反动, "reactionary," literally means to "oppose movement," in reference to the Guomindang and others who resisted China's supposedly inevitable transition to communism. Once the Communists were in power and had cemented in place a rigid bureaucracy, however, *fǎndòng* still had the meaning of anyone accused of opposing the Communists, but, ironically, this meant that those who wanted society to "move" were being accused of "opposing movement." Link explains a similar linguistic predicament that emerged around the terms *zuǒ* 左 "left" and *yòu* 右 "right":

The critics of the Party who were labeled "rightist" in 1957 stood for things like free speech, a free press, fairness, the interests of the downtrodden, and other notions that fifteen years earlier had been called "left." Meanwhile, the label "left," in the 1950s and 1960s, continued to refer to orthodox followers of the Party line. By the late 1970s, after Mao died, this doctrinaire group had become known as *baoshou* [保守] "conservative." Their critics also called them *jizuopai* [极左派] "ultraleftists" — and so it happened that "ultraleft" and "conservative" became synonyms.⁵³

It is important to note not only the additions to language that came with Communist rule, but also the subtractions. For example, words such as *yōuyù* 忧郁 (melancholy), *xiánsǎn* 闲散 (easy and graceful), and *wánshǎng* 玩赏 (to enjoy) dropped out of usage during Mao's years in power, as they were charged with reflecting frivolous "bourgeois" emotions and nonpolitical attitudes, the antithesis of the call of class struggle.⁵⁴

⁵³ Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese*, 250.

⁵⁴ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 203.

As with *tífǎ*, many of the connotations behind the new Maoist way of viewing language have been ingrained in the collective consciousness of the population. Link quotes the philosopher Liu Xiaogan:

The hot iron of “struggle worship” has left its mark upon the language habits, patterns of thinking, and ways of behavior of the Chinese people. In the lexicon of mainland Chinese, “struggle,” “revolution,” “rebellion,” “resolute” and “thoroughgoing” are unequivocally positive in their connotations; they symbolize nobility and glory. On the other hand words like “retreat,” “negotiate,” “compromise,” “tolerance,” “gradualism,” and “improve,” have at times all been broadly rejected as terms with negative connotations, terms that symbolize shame and dishonor.⁵⁵

In the unity of the masses in class struggle, Marxism-Leninism seeks to supersede any lingering loyalties and sentiments of family and romance, replacing love for close individuals with class love and love for the Party and its supreme leader. The Chinese Communists, in particular, were obsessed with destroying old ideologies and especially the filial loyalty central to Confucian ethics and therefore traditional Chinese culture.

This cultural upheaval was epitomized by violent riots during the “Four Olds” (*sìjiù* 四旧) campaign that had as its aim to “break the old ideas, culture, customs and habits of the exploiting classes and foster the new ideas, culture, customs and habits of the proletariat, with a view to further consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat and developing the socialist system.”⁵⁶

Language played a key role in this battle against the past, and the dictionary was a potent weapon. For example, during the campaign to criticize Confucius, the definition of Confucianism was changed from “an ancient Chinese philosophical school founded by Confucius which advocated

55 Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢, “Mao Zedong yu douzheng chongbai lungang” 毛泽东也斗争崇拜论纲 (Mao Zedong and the worship of struggle: An outline), unpublished paper, 1996, 20, quoted by Perry Link in *An Anatomy of Chinese*, 291.

56 Lin Biao, “Comrade Lin Biao’s Speech at the Celebration Rally.”

benevolence and righteousness" to "a school of thought in Ancient China, founded by Confucius, which represented the interests of the exploiting class."⁵⁷

The destruction of the old order put in danger words or concepts with hints of hierarchy or deference to anything outside of Mao and the Party. Many traditional deferential expressions such as *bìchù* 敝处 (my humble place) and *lìngzūn* 令尊 (your honorable father) dropped out of use, discarded with the concept of *xiàojìng fùmǔ* 孝敬父母 (to show respect and filial piety to one's parents) that had served as the bedrock of traditional Chinese values.⁵⁸

To return to the idea of the supremacy of the political, if a family member erred politically, making the slightest off-hand remark that did not fit with the Party line, it was expected of the other members of the family that they would have no reservations about turning the person in for ideological nonconformity.⁵⁹ Jung Chang recalls in *Wild Swans*, "We were drilled to think that anyone, including our parents, who was not totally for Mao was our enemy." She recounts how when she announced that her 1965 New Year's resolution was the traditional "I will obey my grandmother," her father warned, "You should not say that. You should only say 'I obey Chairman Mao.'"⁶⁰ This comment was made only one year before the start of Mao's Cultural Revolution, in which the country descended into civil war, pitting communities and family members against each other for survival. Loyalty to Mao and to one's (good) class was to be professed at all costs.

With regard to romantic love, the Party sought to create an ideal of fighters brought together by political passion rather than erotic attraction. The heroine of Yang Mo's novel *Song of Youth*

⁵⁷ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 192, from Winfred P. Lehmann, *Language and Linguistics in the People's Republic of China*.

⁵⁸ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 202.

⁵⁹ See John Pomfret, *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China*, 22–23. " ...for centuries morality in China was rooted in a veneration for the elderly and the family tree. People didn't disgrace themselves in the eyes of God; they did so in the eyes of their forebears.... But Mao was determined to create a new morality by cutting ties between this world and the past.... People were expected to report on those dearest to them because it was they alone who knew the most private thoughts of their loved ones. China was turned into a society of snitches. The stool pigeon became the hero of the revolution."

⁶⁰ Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 263.

embodies this when she leaves a bourgeois intellectual for a communist revolutionary, symbolizing the idea that her rejection of bourgeois love goes hand-in-hand with her rejection of capitalism. Linguistically, while public displays of love towards another person were taboo, citizens were expected to have an ardent love (*rè'ài* 热爱) for the Party and Chairman Mao. As in Orwell's *1984*, love for the Party and its great leader must take precedence above all.

MILITARIZATION OF LANGUAGE

It has been widely noted that the Chinese language under Communist rule has over time incorporated a tremendous amount of military-style terms into everyday language and reflected a much stronger degree of militance than language in the post-Stalin Soviet Union.⁶¹

One of the many examples of the extent to which military metaphors have seeped into everyday life that Link cites in *An Anatomy of Chinese* is that a common expression on the mainland for "finish the leftovers" is "*xiāomiè shèngcài* 消灭剩菜," using "*xiāomiè* 消灭," "annihilate," as the verb. He notes that this usage would be shocking to a Chinese speaker raised outside of the post-1949 mainland, a testament to the extent to which the isolationism of the first half of Communist rule succeeded in keeping its citizens cut off from external reality and focused on internal militant struggle.

To understand the origins of this linguistic change, it is necessary to go back to the origins of the Communist Party in China, a militant organization that rose to power through more than twenty years of near-constant warfare.⁶² Beginning in the toils of the Long March that led to the Communists' eventual settlement in their base at Yan'an, shared military struggle brought a sense of unity and purpose to the movement. During the Yan'an days, military life was a constant; militarization held the camp together. After the Party leaders waited out the bulk of the war in the Northwest, military attitudes became even more entrenched, as full-scale civil war recommenced, culminating in the 1949 proclamation of the People's Republic.

From the beginning of the People's Republic, society was still very much militarized, ready to

⁶¹ Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 130.

⁶² Powell, "Commissars in the Economy," 125.

rise up against enemies both foreign and domestic. With slogans such as *bèizhàn, bèihuāng, wèirénmín* 备战、备荒、为人民 (Prepare for war and natural disasters for the sake of the people)⁶³ and constant warnings in nationwide propaganda, the country was kept on constant alert and securely under the rule of the Party.⁶⁴

The *dānwèi* 单位, or work unit, system was the foundation of Party control in the everyday life of the people. Each worker was assigned to function as a member of a single *dānwèi*, which provided not only employment but also basic services such as housing. Workers' lives revolved around their *dānwèi*, and it was through the *dānwèi* that Party instructions were carried out and suspicions of unpatriotic comrades reported. Every Chinese was assigned to some organization, even those who could not work (e.g., housewives, the retired, pre-school children): they were assigned to a neighborhood committee (*jiēdào wěiyuánhui* 街道委员会). Dittmer and Chen write:

Military designations were applied to all work units.... All units including the neighborhood committees, were under direct or indirect control by the army: either with a military man in immediate charge, or with military staff in a responsible supervisory role. Aside from the countryside, it is not an exaggeration to say that China was a military regime.⁶⁵

As noted by Perry and Li, civilian adoption of martial terminology can be traced to the early years of the People's Republic when demobilized soldiers took military phrases with them to their new positions as local cadres. It became natural for these veteran revolutionaries (and by extension their young admirers) to designate burdensome posts as "frontlines" (*qiánxiàn* 前线) and to declare the need to "stage an offensive" (*fāqǐ jìngōng* 发起进攻) to tackle a problem.⁶⁶

63 <https://baike.baidu.com/item/备战、备荒、为人民>.

64 Dittmer and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 32.

65 Dittmer and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 31.

66 Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun. "Revolutionary Rudeness: The Language of Red Guards and Rebel Workers in China's Cultural Revolution," *Indiana Working Papers on Language and Politics in Modern China*, no. 2 (1993): 8.

Compiled by T. A. Hsia⁶⁷

汉字	Pinyin	Literal definition	New definition
战士	<i>zhànshì</i>	fighter	worker
战斗	<i>zhàndòu</i>	to fight a battle	to work hard in production
战线	<i>zhànxiàn</i>	battle line	workplace
岗位	<i>gǎngwèi</i>	sentry post	a revolutionary's appointed position in society
大军	<i>dàjūn</i>	a great army	a large group of people organized for some project of Socialist construction
千军万马	<i>qiān jūn wàn mǎ</i>	a great host of foot or mounted soldiers	a huge number of people engaged in production
对天宣战	<i>duìtiān xuānzhàn</i>	to declare war against heaven	to overcome the obstacles nature poses to production
掌握敌情	<i>zhǎngwò díqíng</i>	to get hold of information about the enemy	to secure information relevant to production, as when subjecting iron ore to chemical analysis before smelting
小型运动战	<i>xǎoxíng yùndòngzhàn</i>	small-scale, mobile warfare	work that can be done bit-by-bit, as time allows
突击	<i>tūjī</i>	to attack by storm	to make a concerted effort in production
大战役	<i>dà zhànyì</i>	a major battle	a major productive undertaking

With each Party propaganda campaign to eliminate one threat or another, military metaphors naturally came to the forefront and were used ever more often outside of solely administrative circles.

⁶⁷ Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 87.

An oft-cited example is the great "battle of annihilation" to eliminate China's sparrows, one of the initial groupings of four pests, *sihài* 四害, declared to be plaguing the country. In Beijing, the *People's Daily* lauded the "three million brave warriors with a single heart" who formed shock brigades (*tūjīduì* 突击队), mobile units (*jīdòngduì* 机动队), scattering and chasing units (*hōnggǎnduì* 轰赶队), slingshot units (*dàngōngduì* 弹弓队), noise-making units (*yīnxǎngduì* 音响队), and searching and capturing units (*sōubǔduì* 搜捕队).⁶⁸ With such formidable organization, it is no wonder the sparrows lost!

The war to "annihilate" these pests did not end with the extermination of China's sparrow population, as — to return briefly to the idea of the need for ever-present enemies and the malleability of language to facilitate this — the definition of *sihài* could simply be modified to direct combat against a new threat. Indeed, in 1959, the *sihài* were mosquitoes, flies, rats, and sparrows. With the resulting disappearance of sparrows from the country, bedbugs replaced sparrows. Later, when the popular sentiment turned against the Gang of Four (*sìrénbāng* 四人帮), those four became the pests in need of extermination.⁶⁹

All rectification campaigns were waged as individual battles in the context of the larger war for the soul of the country, and featured antagonistic names such as "Cleanse the Class Ranks" (*qīnglǐ jiējí duìwǔ* 清理阶级队伍) and "One Strike and Three Antis Campaign" (*yīdǎ sānfǎn yùndòng* 一打三反运动). In most *dānwèi*, headquarters (*zhǐhuībù* 指挥部) would issue orders to detachments (*xiǎofēnduì* 小分队) assigned to specific tasks such as keeping an around-the-clock watch on the investigation target. Persecution could not rest, as Lin Biao's military strategy of night-fighting, *yèzhàn* 夜战, was put into practice by citizens across the country. Showcasing how the military outlook swept across society, *yèzhàn* was also widely employed to motivate people to work overtime with unflinching determination to meet production targets.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 88.

⁶⁹ Dittmer and Chen. *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 47.

⁷⁰ Dittmer and Chen, *Ethics and Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 32–33.

The Cultural Revolution was the apex of Communist-era militaristic language usage. As Red Guards across the country exhibited their adulation for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), martial language moved to pervade ordinary speech. Through the chaos of the Cultural Revolution,

increasingly the country resembled a military barracks, with “Red Guard warriors” dressed in military uniforms, organized in military hierarchies, speaking like soldiers, and even opening fire with real guns and ammunition. By the summer of 1967 the fondness for the military had been superseded by a love of violence itself, resulting in pitched battles against the regular military forces in some parts of the country (e.g. Qinghai, Wuhan, Sichuan).⁷¹

The Maoist press fanned the flames of ideological war as it framed the Cultural Revolution as the next great part of the glorious violent struggle in which every citizen was a front-line soldier. A typical example of this rhetoric from the *People's Daily* in 1967:

The struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the area of the superstructure is like a battle between two armies — always one wins and one loses. Either we wipe them out or they eliminate us. We can't cease fire in ideological and cultural battle... otherwise we surrender to bourgeois thought and culture.⁷²

The second half of the 1978 restricted-circulation publication *On Newspaper Work* (*Tántán Bào zhǐ Gōngzuò* 谈谈报纸工作) is dedicated to specific comments made by Hu Qiaomu, who was the link between the *People's Daily* editorial board and the upper echelon of CCP leadership.⁷³ This publication is instructive in understanding the day-to-day attitude of those behind the state propaganda. Hu ran the publication with eyes sensitive to the importance of getting the subtleties of

⁷¹ Perry and Li, “Revolutionary Rudeness,” 9.

⁷² *People's Daily*, May 29, 1967; reprinted in Red Guard Publications 16:5007; quoted in Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 200.

⁷³ Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 80.

language correct and many of his comments come across as akin to a serious professor or old-school editor, criticizing technical details such as change of tone and repeated words across different articles. He seems to have approached his work as if supervising a studio of artists charged with painting pictures of a society consistent with the Party worldview.

The Party worldview was one of constant struggle, in line with traditional Marxist-Leninist thought that places class struggle as key to societal advancement. In follows, then, that complacency and apathy to this requisite struggle would be perceived as an existential threat to its power and a message of “agitation” would need to be broadcast throughout the all-pervasive propaganda system.

Ji Fengyuan notes the extent to which Red Guard newspapers, for example, were filled with antagonistic verbs such as *zhànshèng* 战胜 (to vanquish), *xíjī* 袭击 (to strike), *máizàng* 埋葬 (to bury), *fěnsuì* 粉碎 (to shatter), *pī* 劈 (to hack), *kǎn* 砍 (to hack), *pàojī* 炮击 (to bombard), *dǎjī* 打击 (to hit), *bó dòu* 搏斗 (to fight), *jiānmiè* 歼灭 (to annihilate, wipe out), *xiāomiè* 消灭 (to exterminate, liquidate), *qīngchú* 清除 (to liquidate), *jīkuì* 击溃 (to rout), *dǎbài* 打败 (to defeat), *sǎochú* 扫除 (to sweep away), *zhuījī* 追击 (to pursue), *duóqǔ* 夺取 (to seize) *wǔzhuāng* 武装 (to arm), *cuīhuǐ* 摧毁 (to destroy), *hànwèi* 捍卫 (to defend), *bǎowèi* 保卫 (to defend, guard), *bǎohù* 保护 (to protect). These words were generally used to celebrate and motivate revolutionary action. If used in reference to opponents of the revolution, they were almost invariably qualified with phrases such as “attempt to” or “seek vainly to” that would make light of the ostensibly futile attempts at resistance.⁷⁴

To keep with the militaristic Party Line, it is natural that Hu would have been keen to make his newspaper correct not only on the issues, but in tone as well. In this context, to use language that was “not lively, not exciting, not serious, and plain”⁷⁵ was an especially grave sin.

Below is a representative criticism from Hu to a writer, showing his attention to minute details down to the typeface as well as the ever-present emphasis on ideology:

⁷⁴ Ji, *Linguistic Engineering*, 202.

⁷⁵ *Tantan Baozhi Gongzuo*, 193, quoted in Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 18.

No agitation here, no ideology, just two simple nouns and not even a verb. You have chosen the clerical style (*lishu*) typeface, and that's no good either. It looks quaint, but clashes with the pictures showing the dynamic and vigorous life of the Communes.⁷⁶

Hu points out that the writer in question failed to use a verb, critical for one concerned with inciting a sense of urgent struggle. Complacency is a great sin; “normal” life needs agitation, and in this, proper concern for language is key.

CONCLUSIONS

Maoist rule saw a stark trend toward language that was formulaic, militaristic, and overtly political in form as well as content. In these characteristics, the language of the period was a reflection of the dualistic ideology of violent class struggle that was mandated from above and came to permeate every facet of society. It was not refined, leisurely, or temperate, and it certainly was neither restrained nor magnanimous. Its agitation sent shockwaves through the People and its rancor fermented the insurrection for which it was so effectively engineered.

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⁷⁶ Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Zong Zhengzhibu, ed., *Lin Fuzhuxi Yulu*, 17, quoted in Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics*, 18.

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Written Chinese: Creative Impediment or Harmless Placebo?

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Few statesmen can claim to be so astute an observer, or so keen a student, of all things China as the late Singaporean premier Lee Kuan Yew. Recognizing the geopolitical and strategic importance of China earlier than most foreigners, he mandated the teaching of Mandarin as a second language in schools in the 1960s (as opposed to popular indigenous dialects such as Hokkien or Teochew), thus aligning Singapore with Beijing's own linguistic policy direction. He was also the only foreign leader to visit all five CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leaders, making over thirty-three visits in the course of thirty-seven years.

By the turn of the century, the student had become the teacher, and Western politicians flocked *en masse* to Lee for counsel on China's culture and inscrutable state apparatus. It is thus scarcely possible to get a more surprising and authoritative indictment than Lee's, when he claimed that the Chinese language, and its written script in particular, was one of the biggest obstacles to China's economic ascent, and that the solution would be to "make English the first language of China."¹

There were two primary reasons for his claim: first, that written Chinese was so difficult to learn (and to a certain extent speak, being "monosyllabic and tonal"²) that it stifled the free exchange of information both within China and with foreigners, and second, that the rote nature of learning

¹ G. Allison, R. Blackwill, and A. Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

and memorizing Chinese characters would inherently dampen one's creative abilities ("a language that shapes thinking through ... 4,000 years of epigrams in their heads"³). This lay in sharp contrast to how "the main forces of discovery and invention and creativity... occur not only in the language but also in the mentality of English."⁴ While many have asserted that Chinese cultural habits and norms (e.g. deference to authority, collectivism, and so on) are barriers to innovation and creativity, few have looked at the strictly linguistic dimension of that argument.

In this paper, I will look at neurobiological, linguistic, anthropological, and technological research in an attempt to demonstrate why the first claim (that Mandarin stifles information exchange) is largely true, while the second (that Mandarin stifles creativity because it is innately onerous to learn) is not. Ultimately, while this means that various proposed solutions for increased accessibility (such as Romanization or the use of English) still hold validity and are worth discussing, the impetus that drove thinkers such as Lu Xun and Chen Duxiu does not (i.e., that Chinese characters are inherently incompatible with modernity, and that abolishing them would "get rid of the average person's childish... ways of thinking"⁵).

NEUROLOGICAL IMPACT OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

First, existing neurobiological literature suggests that there is no link between the use of picto-phonetic characters, and any reduction in creativity due to the alleged additional rote memorization required. The level of right-brain activity is commonly taken as a proxy for creative capacity, as it is the right hemisphere that is primarily activated in curiosity, risk-taking, experimentation, and metaphoric thinking, among other creative processes.⁶

The 2015 paper "Holistic Neural Coding of Chinese Character Forms in Bilateral Ventral Visual

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ T. S. Mullaney, "To Abolish the Chinese Language: On a Century of Reformist Rhetoric." (2017, September 15). <https://lithub.com/to-abolish-the-chinese-language-on-a-century-of-reformist-rhetoric/>

⁶ N. Herrmann, "Is it True That Creativity Resides in the Right Hemisphere of the Brain?" (1998, January 26). <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-it-true-that-creativit/>

System” attempted to measure the level of BOLD (blood-oxygen-level-dependent) signals when test subjects viewed four categories of paired characters: (1) “periphery,” in which the paired characters shared the same peripheral contour but not a central component, (2) “center,” with a common central component but not periphery, (3) “identical,” in which the same character was presented twice, and (4) “different,” in which there was no visual similarity between the two characters.⁷ An example of (1) would be 囍 and 囍, while an example of (2) would be 习 and 习. The hypothesis was that more similar characters should lead to a reduction in the level of BOLD signal recorded, as different neural areas are supposedly selectively tuned to different sub-components in a single character, and the brain would only need to expend additional energy in interpreting the unique regions in each character pair.

However, it ultimately turned out that there was reduced activity only in the pairs of identical characters, and not at all in the partially overlapping ones.⁸ This suggests that, to the brain of a literate Chinese, Chinese characters are represented as mutually distinctive wholes rather than as combinations of sub-character components, despite their physical overlap. Such a representation engages more of the right brain, which deals with holistic, visuospatial thinking skills, and lies in stark contrast to the left-lateralized, simple-to-complex neural representations of English alphabetic words⁹ (which are first recognized as individual letters before being assembled to form words). Hence, it can thus be directly argued that the ability to read and write Mandarin actually endows its speakers with a creative edge if anything, owing to their inherent right-brain inclinations.

Ce’s paper is qualified by other existing studies, such as “Brain Activation in the Processing of Chinese Characters and Words: A Functional MRI Study.” This experiment sought to evaluate a claim that can be understood as an extension of Ce’s paper: while neural activations in reading single characters are right lateralized, two-character words are left lateralized.¹⁰ This is known as character–

7 M. Ce, Y. Mengxia, C. Seger, and L. Mo, “Holistic Neural Coding of Chinese Character Forms in Bilateral Ventral Visual System,” *Brain and Language*, 141 (2015): 28–34. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S00939334X14001710#!>

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 H. T. Li, J. Spinks, J.-H. Gao, H.-L. Liu, C. Perfetti, J. H. Xiong, K. Stofer, P. Yonglin, L. Yijun, and P. Fox, “Brain Activation in the Processing of Chinese Characters and Words: A Functional MRI Study,” *Human Brain Mapping* 10: (2000) 17.

word dissociation, and if it were true, it would mean that Mandarin is neurologically different from English at the character (字) level, but not all that dissimilar at the word (词) level onwards. In the study, three classes of character-words were used as stimuli: (1) single characters with vague and imprecise meanings (e.g. 济, which can mean “many,” “to aid,” “to relieve,” etc.), (2) single characters with precise meanings (e.g. 雨, which can only mean “rain”), and (3) two-character Chinese words.

Ultimately, there was no substantial support for character–word dissociation, with largely overlapping activations for both single and two-character words. Instead, there seemed to be no noticeable hemisphere bias—with activity in the frontal and temporal cortices being left lateralized and that in the visual systems, parietal cortex, and cerebellum being right lateralized.¹¹ The only meaningful differentiating dimension ended up being the semantic precision of the word, with activations in the left frontal cortex being significantly larger for vague-meaning characters and two-character words than for precise-meaning characters.¹² This was due to the additional retrieval difficulty required with the former two categories.

Taking both studies into account, we can see that although a more nuanced understanding of the neurological impact of Chinese characters is still required (as opposed to character–word dissociation or sole right-brain dominance), the prevailing consensus is that there is nothing inherent in the makeup of Chinese characters that should impede creative thinking, relative to English letters.

DIFFICULTY OF L₁ VERSUS L₂ ACQUISITION

While neurology might not provide a satisfactory answer, the field of linguistics provides an alternative lens through which to view the utility of Chinese characters. The general argument is simple: Mandarin is difficult to learn, and if one adopts a less taxing script, literacy increases. As literacy increases, so does general education and the propensity for innovative thought and progress. While the difficulty of learning Mandarin as an L₂ (second language) for native Germanic and

<http://www.pitt.edu/~perfetti/PDF/Brain%20activ%20process%20Chinese%20char%20and%20words-%20Tan%20et%20al..pdf>

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid., 23.

Romance languages speakers is well-established (owing to fundamental differences in script, and the tonality of its spoken language), the objective difficulty of learning it as an L1 (first language) for young children remains a topic of interest for linguists today.

According to conventional linguistic wisdom, there is a “sensitive period” of language acquisition in which children have an accelerated ability to learn almost any language, ending (liberally) around twelve years of age and beyond which most native speakers should be fully conversant (with the exception of vocabulary, which typically increases over a lifetime). Any language learned during the sensitive period is considered an L1, and it is processed in a different region of the brain altogether.¹³ While linguists often proclaim in public that all L1s are identical and equally easy for children to learn, they admit in private that this is something of a white lie, intended to avoid the attendant socio-ethnic implications that might follow, and that the truth is a little more complicated than that.

There are certain yardsticks that one might turn to for an educated guess on the matter. First, literacy rates (defined as the percentage of the population above fifteen years of age who can read and write) do seem to marginally favor the ease of learning English as an L1. While literacy rates in the US stand around ~99% for both males and females, the corresponding numbers in China are 96% and 88% respectively.¹⁴ Yet the numerous drawbacks of having such a yardstick are immediately apparent. A direct brute comparison of literacy rates ignores varying urbanization levels in both countries (and hence access to basic education), differing census collection abilities (especially in rural regions, though this would further skew the statistics against China if anything), or even gender norms, in that in China less of a premium is placed on ensuring that girls are able to read and write. Lastly, comparing the *extent* of literacy between two individuals is also a tricky question—while basic

¹³ A. S. Finn, “The Sensitive Period for Language Acquisition: The Role of Age-Related Differences in Cognitive and Neural Function.” PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010.

https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Finn_berkeley_0028E_10481.pdf

¹⁴ “China Vs United States Education: Literacy Stats Compared”

<https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/compare/China/United-States/Education/Literacy>

reading literacy is estimated at 2,000 characters for Mandarin¹⁵ and around 8,000 words for English,¹⁶ these are highly subjective estimates and difficult to measure for any given person.

A somewhat more meaningful yardstick might be the average age of L1 fluency, i.e., when native speakers of a language attain full fluency. Again, this raises problems of measurement and how to define comparable rates of fluency—only a large enough gulf between achievement levels would sufficiently substantiate objective disparities in difficulty levels. According to James C., a PhD student in linguistics at the University of British Columbia, one of the few recorded cases of genuine L1 difficulty amongst children lies in the case of the Athabaskan language family in Native America, where there are numerous cases of incomplete or partial acquisition among children beyond the sensitive period, regardless of initial levels of exposure (since children in various Athabaskan cultures usually receive more than enough exposure to complicated linguistic forms such as oratory and narrative).¹⁷ Anecdotally, native speakers agree that some parts of the language are unreasonable to learn in the span of the twelve or so years that it typically takes L1 speakers to become fluent.

Specifically, it is the Athabaskan morphology (i.e., how individual words are formed through different inflections, tenses, etc.) that is fiendishly complicated. One example of a difficult phenomenon is what has come to be known as “superaspect” or “subaspect,” where a fully conjugated verb that has person, voice, plurality, lexical class, distributivity, spatial disposition, and so on embedded within it can then be re-conjugated to form a verb that has been conjugated for temporal properties twice.¹⁸ The result is that a verb can simultaneously be a “semelfactive occasional perfective” as well as a “progressive habitual” (e.g., “he would always occasionally be tapping his finger once,” but in a single verb), and demonstrate characteristics of both.¹⁹ Evidently, Athabaskan children

¹⁵ D. Moser, “Why Chinese Is So Damn Hard.” <http://www.pinyin.info/readings/texts/moser.html>.

¹⁶ B. Sagar-Fenton and L. McNeil, “How Many Words Do You Need to Speak a Language?” BBC News (2018, June 24). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44569277>.

¹⁷ J. C. “Are Some Languages Inherently Harder for Children to Acquire?” Linguistics Stack Exchange (n.d.) <https://linguistics.stackexchange.com/questions/778/are-some-languages-inherently-harder-for-children-to-acquire>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

struggle heavily with producing and understanding such verbs, usually only grasping a portion of the temporal information. However, it is interesting to note that no other Athabaskan linguistic aspects pose similar temporal limits on acquisition, so syntax (i.e., how words and phrases are structured in a sentence) and phonology (i.e., the system of sounds that constitute a language, and one of the things for which Mandarin is known to be difficult) reach complete acquisition on schedule.

While the discussion on Athabaskan languages appears tangential, it stands as one of the very few genuine and extreme cases of L1 acquisition difficulty, and thus a counterexample to demonstrate that Mandarin, as peculiar to foreigners as it might seem, poses nowhere near the same difficulty to native speakers. Even its tricky aspects, such as phonology and the lack of an alphabet, do not lead to incomplete acquisition in the same way. However, although this yardstick of L1 acquisition age is more sensible than looking at literacy rates, it would benefit from more rigorous academic studies. The sensitive nature of suggesting that not all languages are created equal, and a relative lack of native Athabaskan speakers, has meant that there is no systematic empirical evidence other than anecdotal opinions from informed experts.

Ultimately, until proven otherwise, it is safe to posit that while Mandarin might be objectively more difficult as an L2 to the Western learner (which will be covered in more depth later), this is not the case as an L1. Thus, Mandarin does not get in the way of local information exchange through impeding literacy.

UNRECOGNIZED INNOVATION

Now that the more egregious arguments on Mandarin hindering creativity and innovation have been addressed, it is time to examine ideas with a little more merit. One field in which the Chinese have commonly been accused of not innovating enough is scientific research, but the truth is that while their written language might be at fault, it is not by damping the Chinese people's curiosity or originality, but by causing the ideas they do generate to be overlooked by an Anglocentric scientific community.

According to a 2016 study published in the journal *PLoS Biology*, Cambridge zoologist Tatsuya Amano found that of the 75,000 original scientific papers on biodiversity and conservation available

on Google Scholar since 2014, over 35% were in non-English languages, with Mandarin near the top of the frequency list.²⁰ However, these findings rarely enter into English consciousness and thus are not disseminated to the rest of the world. For example, when a paper was published that found the bird species fairy pitta to be endangered, based on contemporary population data, it was not included in the latest assessment by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, simply because the paper was published in Mandarin.²¹ Even when observations occasionally find their way past the language barrier, there is often a substantial lag in the interim, sometimes with deadly consequences. For instance, the Chinese *Journal of Preventive Veterinary Medicine* first reported in January 2004 that the deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu had first begun to infect pigs, an alarming development as pigs are vulnerable to human viruses and could serve as a vessel for the flu, which could then go on to infect humans.²² However, the obscure nature of this Chinese-language publication meant that this groundbreaking finding went unnoticed until August of that year, when the sudden outbreak of the virus in humans prompted the WHO (World Health Organization) to scramble to translate the results, costing an untold number of lives in the process. Even for those who try not to ignore Chinese research, difficulties exist. More than half of the non-English papers observed in Amano's study had no English title, abstract or keywords, making them invisible to most scientists doing database searches in English.²³ Thus we see that there actually is a constant abundance of original thought taking place in the medium of Mandarin, but also that a large portion is lost in translation to the international community.

An attendant consequence of this phenomenon is that scientific research is being increasingly conducted and published in English in societies like China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, given the clear

20 T. Amano, J. P. González-Varo, and W. J. Sutherland, “Languages Are Still a Major Barrier to Global Science,” *PLOS Biology* 14(12) (2016): e2000933. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2000933>

21 Ibid.

22 H. Li, K. Yu, H. Yang, X. Xin, J. Chen, P. Zhao and H. Chen, “Isolation and Characterization of H5N1 and H9N2 Influenza Viruses from Pigs in China,” *Chinese Journal of Preventive Veterinary Medicine* 1 (2004): 1–6. http://caod.oriprobe.com/articles/6901891/Isolation_and_characterization_of_H5N1_and_H9N2_influenza_viruses_from.htm

23 Amano, “Languages Are Still a Major Barrier to Global Science,” *PLOS Biology* 14(12) (2016).

benefits to scientists' careers. Journals previously published in local languages are also switching to English to maximize the impact that they make on the global scientific community.²⁴ China's share of articles in the Scopus database of international scientific publications, which is heavily English-biased, jumped from 4 percent of articles in 2000 to 18.6 percent in 2016.²⁵ While this reduces the friction of global information exchange and resolves the central tension alluded to at the start of this paper (use Mandarin and be "left behind," or abandon one's roots and gain access to the latest innovation and creative thought), it does result in an unfair imbalance in knowledge transfer within these countries themselves. Scientific knowledge and research that has originated there is only available in English and not local languages, to the detriment of the local population.

LANGUAGE NETWORKS

Thus far, we have seen that there is nothing inherent in Mandarin, in terms of its neural processing or linguistic makeup, that restricts the generation of original ideas among standalone Chinese-speaking societies. Where the Chinese script does seem to have a detrimental impact is by impeding the way in which the outside world interacts and exchanges information with it, both by insulating foreigners from the community of Chinese thought (L2 acquisition) as well as by slowing the export of organic ideas for the world to recognize and synergize with (scientific research).

This dynamic was formalized in a 2014 study led by Cesar Hidalgo of MIT, which sought to rank the influence of global languages on three dimensions: number of speakers, GDP per capita of its speakers, as well as Eigenvector centrality (a measure of the influence a node, or language, has on the entire network; if a node is pointed to by many nodes which also have high Eigenvector centrality, then that node will have high Eigenvector centrality).²⁶ Centrality was measured by looking at various

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Q. Xie and R. B. Freeman, "Bigger than You Thought: China's Contribution to Scientific Publications and Its Impact on the Global Economy," *China and World Economy* 27(1) (2019): 1–27.

https://economics.harvard.edu/files/economics/files/bigger_than_you_thought_chinas_contribution_journal_china_and_world_economy_xie-freeman_jan2019.pdf

²⁶ C. Hidalgo, S. Ronen, B. Gonçalves, K. Hu, A. Vespignani, and S. Pinker (2014). "Links That Speak: The Global Language

forms of media that had been translated into multiple languages, such as books or tweets.²⁷ If a book was translated from one language to another, or a single Twitter user sent out tweets in two languages, that represented one connection between both languages.

Ultimately, the study found that the greatest correlation lay between a language's centrality and the global influence of its speakers (as measured by the number of famous people it produced who had a major impact in the arts or sciences), as compared to the number of speakers it had (in which Mandarin ranked first) or their wealth.²⁸ This demonstrates the enduring edge that English has over Mandarin—not that its speakers are numerous, but that more speakers of English are also conversant in other languages and hence are more plugged into the fluid global exchange of information.

EXPERIENTIAL GESTALTS

Despite the direction this paper has taken so far, one way in which the Chinese script might inherently shape its speakers' thoughts and attitudes lies in how it serves as a *tabula rasa* for cultural norms to leave an indelible mark on. In this phenomenon, formally dubbed experiential gestalts,²⁹ the bottom line is simple: culture shapes language, which then reinforces culture in a virtuous or vicious cycle. If people signal awareness of a new cultural phenomenon by naming it, then ancient terms that have persisted for centuries demonstrate an enduring awareness of a given trend, and these continue to shape the outlook and worldview of new speakers.

In the book *Creativity: When East Meets West*, the authors attempt to apply this logic to quantify the Chinese attitude toward creativity and learning. They specify the three necessary and sufficient conditions for creativity—"breaking a context-induced mindset," "restructuring," and

Network and Its Association with Global Fame," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* (2014).
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1410931111>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, "The Metaphorical Structure of the Human Conceptual System," *Cognitive Science* 4 (1980): 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4

challenging “unconscious mental attitudes.”³⁰ Subsequently, a list of learning-related terms was generated by two groups of Mandarin speakers, and then rated for similarity by a third group. Finally, the list of terms was categorized into two main groups summarizing the Chinese attitude towards learning.

The first was labelled “heart and mind for wanting to learn,” which described one’s desire to learn and contained terms such as 学无止境 (“there is no boundary to learning”).³¹ Meanwhile, the second group was more accurately dubbed a quartet, as it included four subgroups about how the Chinese thought the learning process ought to take place. These were: (1) “diligence,” meaning that learning is an activity requiring much time and practice (e.g. 熟读唐诗三百首，不会吟诗也会吟 or “if well-versed in 300 Tang poems, one can chant if not appreciate them”), (2) “endurance of hardship,” framing learning as an overcoming of literal physical obstacles such as drudgery and poverty (e.g. 悬梁刺股 analogizing how scholars such as Su Qin and Sun Jing would tie their head to the ceiling beam or pierce themselves, to prevent themselves from dozing off while studying), (3) “steadfastness,” or the way knowledge accumulates bit by bit over a long period without any shortcuts (e.g. 磨杵成针 or grinding an iron pestle into a needle), and (4) “concentration,” the need for resolve in dedicating oneself to learning without swerving from it.³²

Taking these into account, one can observe how the Chinese concept of learning is radically different from the Western one. The former sees it as contingent on the amount of effort, something that should be endured rather than enjoyed, and a process in which there are no shortcuts or sudden flashes of inspiration; this has correspondingly been codified in the language through anecdotal and proverbial wisdom. The West, however, sees learning and progress as contingent on extraordinary ability and a process based on instantaneous bursts of inspiration, as can be seen from sayings such as “hitting the nail on the head” or to “have a light bulb moment”. Ultimately, this might explain why the Chinese are viewed as inferior at the kind of discontinuous innovation the West is so used to; their default preference is to incrementally refine and build on existing knowledge.

³⁰ S. Lau, A. Hui, A. and G. Ng, *Creativity: When East Meets West* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2005), 181.

³¹ Ibid., 92.

³² Ibid., 93.

COMPUTING EFFICIENCY

Finally, it would be amiss to conduct any discussion on innovation in the modern age without looking at the effects of the digital revolution. In the digital age, the overwhelming abundance of data available means that efficient processing of information has become a key differentiator for a knowledge economy; the society best able to store, sort through, and retrieve knowledge, is the one most likely to synthesize new insights. In his seminal book *The Fifth Generation Fallacy*, James Marshall Unger explores precisely this issue. While he was primarily concerned with Japan, as the book was written and published in the 1980s, his ideas on Japanese *kanji* can be for the most part readily applied to Chinese characters. Essentially, he argues that contemporary computer technology is inherently incompatible with Japanese/Chinese characters because of storage, transcription, and organization issues.

Regarding storage, one issue certainly is that the large character set takes up exponentially more memory, but more than that, it is the intricacy of individual characters that poses a challenge for storage and processing. For instance, an English letter can easily be represented in an individual matrix of 8×16 pixels, while a Chinese character would require 24×24 (or 16×16 with some distortion).³³ Scaled up, this means that the typical personal computer can output 1,920 English characters on the screen, compared to 530 Chinese ones; it requires multiple times the memory to store the same number of the latter on disk.³⁴

Regarding transcription, the three methods in vogue—duplication, dictation, and indication— all have their own drawbacks.³⁵ Duplication refers to handwriting-based input, where the coordinates of a pen's movements are tracked to decipher what strokes have been written and in what order. This is by far the most expensive and least efficient method (in terms of being able to promptly and accurately identify what the user is trying to write), and its use has been relegated to educational programs trying to train individuals to handwrite Mandarin. The ambiguous reading of

33 J. Unger, *The Fifth Generation Fallacy: Why Japan Is Betting Its Future on Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge: Oxford University, 1987), 66.

34 Ibid., 67.

35 Ibid., 132.

Chinese characters also did not lend itself well to the closely related method of speech input. Indication refers to associating each Chinese character with a numeric tag or code, which the human user must then type out to input the related character (e.g. representing 好 by 2035). While this is more computationally efficient, it is the human user experience that turns out to be obviously unrealistic—expecting all users to memorize thousands of related tags to be able to type efficiently. The last method is dictation, where users type out the Romanized pinyin, and any potentially associated characters appear in a drop-down list from which the user would then choose at his discretion. While this method is the most sensible and widely used today, its speed is still ultimately constrained by the additional layer of input a user has to go through before the computer can generate accurate characters. The average productivity of a professional Mandarin typist was 20 characters per minute (10 pages a day), compared to at least 96 words per minute for a practiced typist in English.³⁶ This placed very real restrictions on the speed with which Chinese societies could process Chinese language data.

Regarding the organization of the written Chinese word, there are also significant difficulties in standardization and alphabetization. While there are numerous examples, the most pertinent one relates to how Chinese can be written both in horizontal script (横排 i.e., like English, from left to right, top to bottom) or vertical script (纵排 i.e., from top to bottom, right to left).³⁷ Though the Chinese insist on maintaining the latter for cultural convention, the increasing number of documents referring to international and scientific matters has meant a prevalence of the Western format. Switching from one format to another is not just a matter of laying out the characters in a different direction: it also involves a host of language-specific complications. For instance, some punctuation marks are positioned in the center of a character cell in 纵排 but in the bottom half in 横排; other characters are different altogether in each format. This has posed problems when computers have to simultaneously work with both formats or convert from one to another³⁸.

For alphabetization, sorting Chinese data and folders is challenging because of the multiple

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

³⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁸ Ibid., 33.

competing methods. While English has two main rules in a single system (namely earlier letters before later, and shorter words before longer as a tiebreaker between, say, “air” and “airport”), the Chinese have to decide between sorting by phonology (pinyin alphabetical order, which would have to deal with characters with multiple readings), by number of strokes in a character, or by radical (which would also have to deal with characters with no obvious radical such as 人).³⁹ Thus, while searching for a single English document in an indexed list is an exercise in intuition lasting seconds, doing so in Mandarin becomes much more of a chore, as clerks have to deal with divergent standards on different computing platforms and develop their own idiosyncratic methods for sorting through large amounts of information without resorting to computerized automation.

Ultimately, we see that while Chinese characters might have been a sufficient implement for the Chinese to use in a pre-industrial era, their inherent incompatibility with computing standards has become a handicap preventing Mandarin speakers from processing information as efficiently as their Western peers.

EVALUATION

When we consider the claim that Lee made at the start of this paper, we now have a far more nuanced understanding of the role that Chinese characters have played in its society and development. There is nothing intrinsic about them that stifles creativity—not the larger character set speakers have to memorize, its tricky phonology, or even its right-brain engagement from a neurological standpoint. Where Mandarin has been done a disservice is almost entirely circumstantial—the fact that the bulk of the world’s knowledge is recorded and discussed in a language family that is radically different from its own, that it puts foreign learners off, and that this makes it easy to overlook the original thought that the Chinese have come up with. Cultural and technological trends have also combined to serve as additional headwinds for the Chinese script, ingraining in Mandarin speakers the idea that genius doesn’t happen overnight (for better or worse), and making it unwieldy to digitally store, transcribe, or organize Chinese data.

In terms of what this means for language reform in Chinese societies, we can see that efforts at

³⁹ Moser, *Why Chinese Is So Damn Hard*.

simplifying the script, which were merely cosmetic, actually did little to address the ways in which Mandarin has been a handicap. Such efforts have not addressed cultural legacy, digital incompatibility, nor deep-seated linguistic differences. The introduction of pinyin, on the other hand, undoubtedly made Mandarin a more accessible language to foreigners, giving it some sort of commonality with their own alphabetic scripts. More extreme solutions include the complete Romanization of Chinese characters or even the adoption of English as a first language altogether, but the cultural pride Chinese people feel about their thousands of years of civilization would surely prevent the consideration of any such action. It seems as though the only thing the Chinese can do now is resort to piecemeal solutions to some of the problems mentioned above—switching to dual language scientific or research publications to get plugged into the global community without excluding locals, or settling on a single unified standard for alphabetizing Chinese characters.

Chinese Characters in Xu Bing's Installation Art

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INTRODUCTION

Xu Bing, a contemporary artist and intellectual, is well known for having "tampered" with one of the traditional essential elements of Chinese culture — Chinese characters — by turning it into "illegible writing." When we look at his most famous works, we inevitably wonder: Why do almost all of them contain elements of or are inspired by Chinese script? Giving attention to this question, this paper explores Xu Bing's unique experience with Chinese characters. It examines the expressive effect of Chinese characters in his installation artworks and how these works reflect the essential genes of Chinese script.

This paper argues that, when Xu Bing's generation was growing up, the Chinese language, especially the writing system, was turned upside down; this special period caused the entire generation's memory of culture to be formed in fracture or even deformity. Xu Bing's obsession with script was formed gradually during this period, leading him to create a series of installation artworks related to Chinese characters. The paper will offer a close reading of two of the most representative works. On this basis, I hope to examine the characteristics of the Chinese language, writing system, and culture, as well as its current relationship to the contemporary world.

A FREAKISH PERSONAL AND GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH LANGUAGE

Xu Bing was born into a bourgeois capitalist family in Chongqing, Sichuan province, in 1955. During the following decades, in the turbulent social and political context of that time, the realms of culture and language were also in turmoil. Over millennia, on account of the idiosyncrasy of the characters, the process of learning to speak and write the Chinese language became quite different from that of languages in which people can take advantage of an alphabet or syllabary. When a member of the Chinese cultural community starts his or her language learning, not only must he or she learn to speak, but also spend years memorizing thousands of characters, which are not directly related to pronunciation. The resulting painstaking process is supposed to instill an extreme sense of respect for the Chinese script.

However, for Xu Bing's generation, these traditional circumstances were turned upside down. The newly established Chinese government sought reformation of language and script. The simplification policy suddenly came out just about when Xu Bing was old enough to learn characters. Xu Bing himself mentioned that the abandonment of the old characters and the promulgation of new ones had a profound impact on his earliest memories of language, ultimately leaving him confused about the fundamental concept of culture.¹ In addition, his childhood memory of indecipherable traditional characters' intricate shapes left him with both bafflements regarding their internal meaning and an obsession with their external shape, which may be what drove him to create his major production, the most highly acclaimed of which is *Book from the Sky*. Moreover, the simplification movement led him to view characters themselves as unstable and unreliable, and he started to interest himself in the external forms of language, rather than in its content. It is exactly the gap between extrinsic shape and intrinsic meaning that defines Xu Bing's unreadable *Book from the Sky*.

In addition, during his late childhood and youth, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing. His father, Xu Huamin, had been labeled a counter-revolutionary and member of the "black gang," but, in

¹ Ann L. Huss and Victor H. Mair, "Xu Bing: 'The Living Word,'" *Hawaii Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Victor H. Mair et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 643.

fact, almost everyone in Chinese society at that time, especially the literati, became the victims of this anti-culture torrent. The problem of one's culture's being turned upside down and rendered unstable became a prominent theme in Xu Bing's work, and it brought to the fore other issues that would later become a major dynamic for the creation of his character-related installation art.

Born into a family of intellectuals, Xu Bing was able from an early age to have contact with all sorts of books. However, because of the era in which he grew up, he experienced a disturbing interruption during a formative period: though he longed to read the books that mesmerized him, at first, he was too young; then, when he was old enough to read a sufficient number of characters, he was no longer allowed to read those books — during that period, people could no longer read whatever they liked, and Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* became the epitome of wisdom transcribed into words.² In fact, Xu Bing represents a whole generation of people who were strictly limited by the Chinese political agenda of the period as it was imposed on both speech and script, as well as on other dimensions of culture. Xu Bing once spoke out bluntly that he always feels "incapable of entering culture."³ Thus his art reflects the confused memories and wishful yearnings of his generation to understand the relationship between culture, politics, and language. It is exactly his confused early feelings that triggered and inspired the creation of his later works.

Another issue that promoted his unique interpretation of language is the importation of Western texts during the decade of the Post-Cultural Revolution, emphasizing the stark contrast in reading material availability before and after the Mao era with what was available under Mao.⁴ This sudden and excessive influx of information led Chinese readers' minds, after their long deprivation, into a constant state of chaos. According to his own recollections, the more he read and the more engrossed he became in historical and other texts, the more muddled and confused his mind became. This chaotic state made him feel "the discomfort of a person suffering from starvation who had just

² Petya Andreeva, "From Xu Bing to Shu Yong: Linguistic Phenomena in Chinese Installation Art," in *Language and Ideology in Nationalist and Communist China*, ed. Victor H. Mair, Sino-Platonic Papers no. 256 (April 2015), 55.

³ Huss and Mair, "Xu Bing: 'The Living Word,'" 643.

⁴ Guey-meei Yang and Tom Suchan, "The Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art Education* 62, no. 6 (2009): 30.

gorged himself. It was at that point that [he] considered creating a book of [his] own that might mirror [his] feelings."⁵

In addition to the multifactoral personal and generational freakish experience with language, the open-door policy under Deng Xiaoping allowed artists to gain access to previously banned Western modern artistic practices. Some artists began to adopt more conceptual approaches to art-making, including the use of abstraction, mixed-media installations, and performance. In such an ideological context, China had welcomed the "1985 Fine Arts New Wave" (*85 meishu xinchao*)—a movement that shifted the aim of artistic creation and transcended the limitation political propaganda had posed during the Cultural Revolution. This is considered to be the emergence and forming stage of Chinese contemporary art,⁶ the artists were bold in challenging the paradigm and ideas of traditional Chinese art. They also tried to combine different approaches with traditional Chinese art forms, such as ink painting and calligraphy, to construct an artistic expression that was contemporary yet distinctly Chinese.⁷ Xu Bing's influential installation *Book from the Sky* is representative of this trend.

REAL OR FAKE: THE "CHARACTERS" IN *BOOK FROM THE SKY*

Indeed, *Book from the Sky* is created as a mirror to reflect those entangled feelings towards characters and language, as well as the concept of culture—the original title for the work was *Xishi jian* (*A Mirror That Analyzes the World*). As a "mirror," it also reflects Xu Bing's extensive insights into the idiosyncrasy of Chinese language and script. While reversing the Chinese character as a piece of "pseudo writing," it deconstructs and reconstructs what makes this language legible, conceivable, and therefore meaningful.⁸

⁵ Huss and Mair, "Xu Bing: 'The Living Word,'" 642–645.

⁶ Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 171.

⁷ Yang and Suchan, "The Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Art," 30.

⁸ Wu Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion': Notes on Xu Bing's 'Nonsense Writing' and Other Works," *Public Culture* (1994), 412–413.

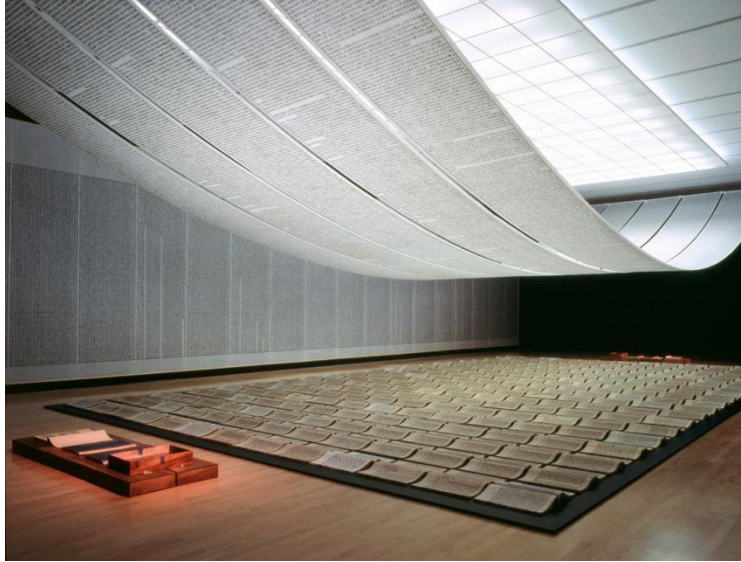


Figure 1. Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991. Mixed media installation/hand-printed books and scrolls printed from blocks inscribed with "false" characters. The installation is exhibited around the world. Installation view at Crossings/Traversées, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1998 ⁹

The puzzling *Book from the Sky* consists of a series of 400 woodblock-printed books, ceiling scrolls, and wall hangings (Fig. 1). Xu Bing, a professionally trained printmaker, scrupulously carved thousands of characters in an antique serif-style font used in the printing of books in ancient China.¹⁰ Its production process and format, arrayed like ancient Chinese classics, were so meticulous and exhaustive that audiences could not believe that these exquisite texts were utterly unreadable. By rearranging and combining a few components or strokes of existing characters, he managed to create these 4,000 "stripped" characters that are deprived of their intrinsic meaning and retain only their unique external features — the composite structure and square shape of Chinese characters. Anyone who cannot read Chinese characters would conclude that these symbols are real characters because they look like they are. Even Chinese people themselves suspect that these are rarely used Chinese characters that genuinely exist, because nobody can memorize every single character in the endless

⁹ Xu Bing Studio, *Book from the Sky*. <http://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/198?type=project#198>.

¹⁰ Hajime Nakatani, "Imperious Griffonage: Xu Bing and the Graphic Regime," *Art Journal* 68, no. 3 (Sept. 2009), 13. College Art Association of America.

Chinese writing system. Xu Bing's reversal does not totally destroy the characters: it destroys only the signified (i.e., content), not the signifier (i.e., form).¹¹

This reminds us of the ambiguity of the Chinese writing system: there is no infallible rule that can assist us in determining whether a symbol that conforms to the physical characteristics of the Chinese writing system is an existing character with real meaning or not. The work presented is grand and rigorous; it first invites the viewer's desire to read those characters, then immediately denies such desire without mercy. As Xu Bing has noted, the false characters "seem to upset intellectuals,"¹² inspiring doubt in received systems of knowledge of Chinese character and language. Many early viewers pored over the artwork, obsessively looking for real characters. In fact, it is especially exciting that Charles Stone has identified, quite admirably, two characters from a page of this work as "real characters" listed in a Chinese dictionary. Moreover, as Wu Hung notes, Stone found that one of them (Morohashi no. 7061) was a "historical forgery": Wuzong of the Tang dynasty created this graph without providing meaning or pronunciation.¹³ In a sense, therefore, what Xu Bing has done is not unprecedented: there has been a long history of reflecting on the chasm between the form and the content of Chinese characters.

¹¹ Wu Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion,'" 411.

¹² Xu Bing, "Looking for Something Different in a Quiet Place (在僻静处另寻一个别的)," *Beijing Youth Newspaper*, 1991, no. 10.

¹³ Wu Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion,'" 417.



Figure 2. Visitors viewing *A Book from the Sky*, 1998, China Art Gallery, Beijing¹⁴

Despite his painstaking efforts to make the fake characters look as real as possible, Xu Bing still inevitably encounters characters that actually exist, or had existed at an earlier time. This once again demonstrates the irregularity of the Chinese character system, from a new angle. The Chinese writing system is a continuous invention, and the formation of characters exhibits a mighty arbitrariness. All the rules about the construction of Chinese characters (e.g., Xu Shen's Six Categories of Chinese Characters) are summed up based on existing Chinese characters, instead of establishing rules before creating characters on the basis of them.

Moreover, the Chinese writing system has derived complex inter-character relations that are a mixture of splitting, merger, or variant through the thousands of years of historical evolution. As a result, even the most extensive dictionaries could not ensure that all Chinese characters are included. Thus, we can reasonably say that among the thousands in this work, there must be more than two that are actually existing characters, and we could certainly find more if we try our utmost to search for them. This is to say that, although the inherent pictographic elements of Chinese characters have passed out of existence, they still subsist in large quantities in the form of ideographic components. Even though Chinese characters, like the writing systems of other languages, have an absolute dependence on speech, and that while identifying Chinese characters as picto-ideographic is indeed a

¹⁴ Nakatani, "Imperious Griffonage," 7–29.

misunderstanding, there is no doubt that Chinese script has never been developed or, more neutrally speaking, has never eventuated in full phonograms. As DeFrancis pointed out, this ambiguity of Chinese character between true and false reminds us they are not reliable vehicles of constant meaning.¹⁵

ELIMINATING THE BARRIERS BETWEEN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

After the great success of *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing decided to move to New York to get inspiration by crossing cultural boundaries. There were also political reasons behind it; this work was interpreted as “a primary symbol of the broad liberalization movement that characterized the years before the Tiananmen massacre.”¹⁶ This paper will not discuss whether the political message is implicit in what Xu Bing wants to express by this work, but it is inevitable that, given his status, he was understood to be making a direct attack on China’s political authority, and that is also a reason he had to cross the ocean. In this situation, Xu Bing feels a strong desire to express his thoughts in a way that can transcend cultural barriers and escape from old notions of ethnocentrism and closed minded, nationalistic thinking.¹⁷

¹⁵ John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 162–176.

¹⁶ Wu Hung, “A ‘Ghost Rebellion,’” 414–415.

¹⁷ S. J. Vainker and Bing Xu, *Landscape/landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2013), 121.



Figure 3. Xu Bing, *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 1994–1996. Hand scroll, ink on paper.¹⁸

A breakthrough in thinking about this came when he observed the attitude of awe and respect with which non-Asians regard Chinese writing during the exhibition of *Book from the Sky*. He sought to create a work that would demystify calligraphy and reward the Westerner's engagement. The result was *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy in English* (hereafter referred to as a *Square Word*), a writing system attempting to fuse written English and Chinese (see Fig. 3). This innovative calligraphy at first glance appears to be written in Chinese, but closer inspection exposes the fact that the writing employs the English alphabet of letters and words that have been “disguised” as Chinese characters.¹⁹ To obtain such an effect, Xu Bing produced a system whereby English words are written according to Chinese-looking brush marks, and the letters are assembled together within square spaces so as to match the format of all Chinese characters.²⁰ To achieve this, he utilized the fact that some of the 214 different radicals used to write Chinese characters also resemble the letters in the Roman alphabet.

¹⁸ “Xu Bing: An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy.” Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/73325>

¹⁹ Amanda C. R. Clark, “Contemporary Chinese Artists’ Books: New Artistic Voices in a Time of Transition,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34, no. 1 (2015): 23.

²⁰ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning and Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 68–69.

Based on the similarities of certain Chinese radicals and the twenty-six English letters in the Roman alphabet, Xu Bing created his own “password table,” a “Sino-Roman alphabet.” Using these symbols, he began to write English words by combining the letters of individual English words into squares, with all the letters of any English word present but formatted into a square shape, in the same way that the modern Korean writing system deals with the twenty-four letters of the Hangeul alphabet. The result is a Chinese-like grouping of symbols into single “characters” (or English “words”) of the same size.

We can see that, first of all, this work once again confirmed the uniqueness of Chinese character configuration, because anyone who sees square characters will think of Chinese characters right away. Xu Bing chooses the most representative feature of Chinese characters — shape — as the carrier to link the two writing systems, which shows that the square shape is deeply imprinted in the blood of the Chinese writing system. Even if a square “character” is completely deprived of meaning (as in *Book from the Sky*), even if it is actually composed of other languages, such a square symbol will still be regarded as carrying the gene of Chinese script. What inspired Wu to combine several symbols into one character might be his early working experience in the countryside. Based on certain local Daoist folk customs, he combines the four characters in the phrase to form a single character (see Fig. 4). He realized that the uniqueness of Chinese characters has encouraged a tradition of “playing upon words” since time immemorial.²¹

²¹ Huss and Mair, “Xu Bing: ‘The Living Word,’” 644.

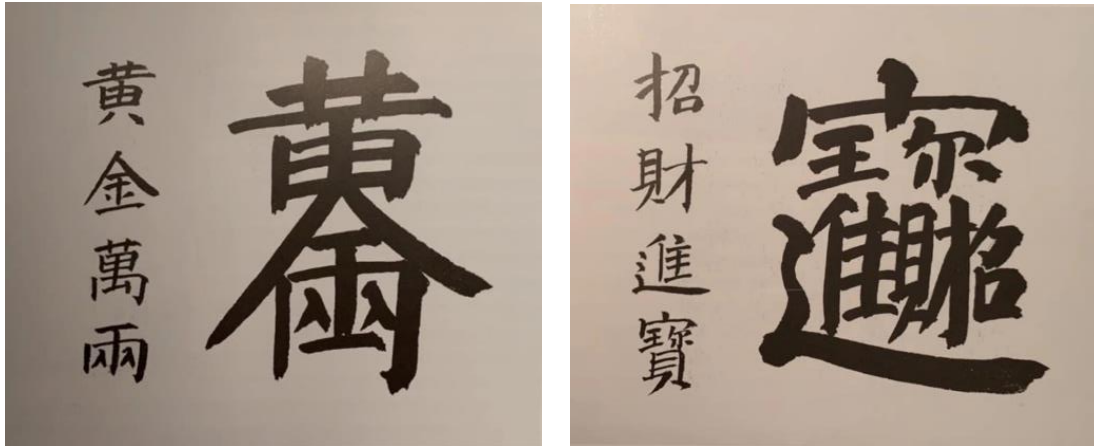


Figure 4. *Huang jin wan liang* (Ten thousand catties of gold) and *Zhao cai jin bao* (Bringing in wealth and riches) rendered as in folk art²²

Besides, similar to *Book from the Sky* in presenting extraordinary fidelity to the structure and formation of traditional Chinese book art, Xu Bing made great efforts in the external appearance of these elements, which seemed to have no great importance for the content of the artworks. This once again reflects his obsession with their formation, including careful preparation for writing traditional calligraphy or in making the exterior of the thread-bound book. For example, *Square Word* strictly conforms to methods of traditional calligraphic style, with the tracing book printed in the manner of a typical practice guide that might be commonly found in calligraphy bookstores in China. It also consists of instructions written entirely in the *Square Word* style, top to bottom, left to right. The text includes his own diagrams and sketches, while the instructions for forming the pupil's technique take special care to follow with exacting rigor the traditional Chinese method of calligraphic practice. Later, Xu Bing also designed new serial installation works modeled on calligraphy classes within the exhibition space, adding a textbook, an instructional video, and a practice sheet in front of each "pupil." He changes the gallery into a classroom and invites a usually uninformed audience to enter into the seemingly secretive and elite Chinese written tradition.²³

²² Erickson, *Words without Meaning*, 18–19.

²³ Clark, *Contemporary Chinese Artists' Books*, 23.

Square Word Calligraphy Classroom's exhibitions (see Fig. 5) in various Western countries have all enjoyed great success and are said to be the most popular interactive installations ever. As mentioned above, Xu Bing wanted to reward the Westerner's engagement and respect for calligraphy by demystifying the myth; in this way, each audience can participate in the composition of Chinese calligraphy, and they are able to endow these with their own meaning, for they can write any English word according to the password table. Xu Bing's goal in thus bridging the gap between the two languages is to popularize square word calligraphy to such an extent that everyone, even outside China, can have the opportunity to enjoy practicing calligraphy in the Chinese mode.²⁴ By blending two languages, Xu Bing questions the assumption that we can identify language with culture, causing the indications of the written form to transcend the language of calligraphy itself.



Figure 5. Xu Bing, *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, 1994–1996. instructional video, model books, copybooks, ink, brushes, brush stands, blackboard²⁵

In *Square Word*, the translation of English letters to Chinese characters is the result of Xu Bing's "seeing" the shape of English letters with the ideograph property of Chinese characters. This

²⁴ Erickson, *Words without Meaning*, 70.

²⁵ *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*. Xu Bing Studio. <http://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/198?type=project#198>

shows that he explores the characteristics of different language and writing systems and grafts them onto one another from the perspective of his own cultural background. As Xu Bing noted, "To lay one's hand on writing is to lay one's hands on the roots of culture; to alter a written form is to alter the most basic part of how people think."²⁶ His cross-cultural practice has created "translated" visual expressions in various forms.²⁷ He consistently reflects upon and examines the relationship between himself and the mainstream cultural context of the Western contemporary art system and the cultural traditions of his own origin, in a kind of interspace. At the beginning of his trip to the United States, he at first tried to get rid of the shackles of China and criticize the imprisonment of culture. However, in the later period, he gradually moved towards the recognition of Chinese culture, as well as bringing about dialogue and interaction between the Western contemporary art system and own cultural background. After rethinking his position and relationship with the Western mainstream of culture and art, Xu Bing reconstructed his cultural identity. At this time, Xu Bing was no longer as keen to seek to enter the mainstream as previously, but rather he began to employ his own cultural background as a fulcrum to carry out his art practice in a local context in a cross-cultural manner.²⁸

CONCLUSION

In Xu Bing's works, we can see the shadow of the artist's personal experience everywhere: the tampering with culture and character of that scarred age that led to his confusion on the concept of language, script, and culture, as well as his obsession with the external forms of characters and books after stripping them of information and meaning. In *A Book from the Sky*, the false characters illustrate the instability and unreliability of Chinese script and reveal the rupture between the form and the content of the Chinese writing system. However, when he created the *Square Word*, Xu Bing,

26 Wu Hung, "Xu Bing: Experiments in Media and Visual Technology (2001)," in *Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists*, trans. Jim Weldon (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009), 21.

27 Doris Bachmann-Medick, "Translation: A Concept and Model for the Study of Culture," in *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture*, ed. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 2012), 23–44.

28 Lili Xiao (肖丽丽), "A Study on the Cultural Significance of Xu Bing's Chinese Character Installation Art (徐冰汉字装置艺术的文化意义研究)," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2017.

who had lived in the United States for years, had a new perspective on language. With his own experience of language barriers, Xu Bing came to use Chinese characters as a vehicle to allow Westerners to experience Chinese culture and to channel communication between different languages.

Although the standpoint, purpose and message of the two works are different, the permanent element that runs through them is the Chinese character — not the real ones, but the “pseudo characters” with their authentic square shape. He demonstrates that the exceptionally idiosyncratic structure of Chinese characters is the most unusual and charming gene in the DNA of Chinese culture.

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