On the Very Notion of the Chinese Language

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I. Some ancient Chinese views on the role of language
II. Chinese terms for "language"
III. Chinese terms for "the Chinese language"
IV. Some abstract discussion on the limitations of language

The concept of language is highly abstract and often problematic. Ancient China is among the ancient civilisations which have elaborated advanced discourse about language and its inherent logic, although neither grammar nor logic became part of the standard educational curriculum in traditional times. The first grammar comparable to those in Indian or in Graeco-Roman cultural spheres was a grammar published by Mǎ Jiànzhōng in 1898, which is best consulted in Lǚ Shūxiāng and Wáng Hāifēn eds. 1986. This work was overtly based on Port Royal grammar and on traditional Latin grammar. (For general surveys of grammatical studies in China see Malmqvist 1994 and Harbsmeier 1998) The only grammatical tradition preceding Mǎ Jiànzhōng was that of the dictionaries of grammatical particles which have developed since the 13th century. (For an excellent detailed study of one of these dictionaries see Winkler 1999.) Chén Jiānchū and Wú Zéshùn 1997 provide an 852-page historically orientated biographic and bibliographic survey of prominent Chinese scholars who have shown a special interest in the Chinese language. Predominantly, one will tend to conclude that the traditional Chinese interest in language tended to be concretely philological rather than abstractly theoretical, and thus no less rich, but very different from the more theoretical Greek and Indian traditions.

All the more reason, then, in the essay that follows, to begin by concentrating on some abstract philosophical reflections on language, particularly in pre-Buddhist China.

A fundamental question to ask is that about the terminological repertoire in classical Chinese for the concept of "language" as opposed to mere "speech", that is about the semantic field "language", in ancient Chinese. This is the second part of the present paper.

It turns out that the terminological repertoire of expressions referring to the Chinese language is so large, that this subject deserves a documented survey. In the third part of this paper I present a concise analysis of the contrasting nuances in the rich terminology for "the Chinese language" particularly in the large Chinese Buddhist corpus that has come down to us.

Cross-cultural contacts through Buddhism have never, in China, led to any very keen Roman sense which Lucrecius called egestas linguae "indigence of language" in comparison to other languages. Whereas disconcertingly many Roman writers have found it important to stress the inferiority of their language as compared to that of their impoverished Greek contemporaries, in ancient China
the focus was on the indigence of human language *tout court*. And the Chinese reflections on this matter which I sample in part four of this brief paper deserve to be compared in detail to those prevalent in ancient India.

In discussing these very large questions I have found it important to range widely across pre-Buddhist literature, and for the auto-referential concept of "the Chinese language" I have found it necessary to search extensively in the Buddhist corpus.¹

I. Some ancient Chinese views on the role of language

Let me begin with a fundamental question: what is the essence of man? Or, as the Chinese would put it: "What is it by virtue of which man is man?"

*The Li ji 禮記 "The Records on Rites" of the fourth to third century B.C. claims:

凡人之所以為人者， 禮義也。  As a matter of principle, that by virtue of which man is man, is ritual(*li* 禮) and rectitude(*yi* 義). (Lǐ Xuéqín 2000, vol. 14, p. 1883; ed. TLS LJ 43.1.1)²

There was a dissensus on this defining characteristic of man. The 3rd century B.C. Confucian philosopher Xünzī 荀子 disagrees:

人之所以為人者何已也? 人之所以為人者何已也? What is it, in the end, by virtue of which man is man?

曰：以其有辨也。 I say: it is by virtue of him making distinctions (*biàn* 辨). (ed. Wáng Tiānhài 2005, p. 174; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.1)

Indeed Xünzī deepens the thought in a truly Aristotelian spirit a little further on:

然則人之所以為人者， That by virtue of which man is man

非特以二足而無毛也， is not only that he has two feet and no fur,
it is by virtue of his making distinctions (*biàn* 辨). (Wáng Tiànhǎi 2005, p. 174f; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.2)

A third/second century B.C. commentary on the old *Annals*, (*Chūnqiū gūliáng zhuàn* 春秋穀粱傳) focusses on language in this connection:

人之所以為人者, That by virtue of which man is man
言也; is speech(*yán* 言).
人而不能言, When a person is incapable of using speech (*yán* 言)
何以為人? how can he count as a person? (Zhōng Wénzhēng 1996 p. 320; ed. TLS, CQGL Xi 5)

And none less than Confucius himself, in the very last words of his *Analects* finds words that warm the heart of any philologist:

不知言, If one does not understand speech(*yán* 言),
無以知人也。」 one does not have what it takes to understand man. (ed. Huáng Huáixīn 2008, p. 1751; ed. TLS, LY 20.3)

The appendix to the *Book of Changes*, the *Xìcí* 繹辭 (third cent. B.C.) famously comments on the relation between writing, speech, and thought, in words which it even attributes to Confucius himself:

子曰: 書不盡言, The Master said: Writing does not exhaustively present speech(*yán* 言);
言不盡意。 language/speech does not exhaustively present thought. (Huáng Shòuqí 1994, p. 563)

This reflexion was enthusiastically elaborated and made famous in the third century AD. It is sobering to reflect that historical as well as general linguistics is largely based on written record, when in fact speech is primary and ought to be treated as primary.

There is an interesting emphasis on the fundamental difference between speech and writing, and it often is as if the notion of *yán* 言 "language" excludes *shū* 書 "writing":

Yáng Xióng 楊雄 (53 B.C. to A.D. 18), writes in his *Fāyán* 法言 "Model Words":

5.13 言不能達其心, They say, 'Speech cannot fully express what is in the heart,
書不能達其言, nor can writings fully express speech.'
難矣哉! What a difficulty!
惟聖人得言之解, Only sages apprehend the true meaning of words
得書之體。 and achieve the substantial embodiment [of things] in writing.

...
Therefore, speech (yán 言) is the voice of the mind;
writing (shū 書) is a picture of the mind. (Hán Jing 1992, 5.13, p. 110, translated with help from Michael Nylan., University of California, Berkeley)

Explicit awareness of language difference is attested from the fourth century B.C. (Mencius), and awareness of language change is attested from Eastern Han times onwards. (See Bottéro and Harbsmeier 2008). The Shuōwénjièzǐ 說文解字, presented to the emperor of China A.D. 100, bears testimony to a passion for a systematic and historical understanding of the Chinese writing system and its graphic etymology as well as orthography which has no parallel in the West.

Early on, there was an awareness of the change of language through time:

Lūshì chūnqiū 呂氏春秋 dated ca. 239 B.C. writes:
古之命多不通乎今之言者。 "The naming (mìng 命) of things in antiquity often does not correspond to the language (yán 言) of today." (Wáng Lìqì 2002 p. 1770; ed. TLS, LS 15.8.2)

The sceptic philosopher Wáng Chōng 王充 of the first century A.D. provides a striking reflection on linguistic change and its cultural importance:

Wáng Chōng 王充, 27-97?, in his Lùnhéng 論衡 writes

In the texts of the classics and their commentaries, and in the language use (yǔ 言) of worthies and sages, ancient and modern speech/language (yán 言) differ. The ways of speaking in the four quarters deviate.

When one talked about things, it is not as if one sets out to be difficult to understand and to cause the meaning to be hidden.

If later generations did not understand them, it is due to their being removed far from them.

This one calls 'difference of language use' (yǔ yì 言異) and not vastness of talent (of the ancients). (Huáng Huī 1990, ch. 85, p. 1196)

It is through Buddhism that multilingualism became important in Chinese culture and was currently admired. The language of the brahmans was mentioned along with the language of the Jin Dynasty:

He was good at the brahman/Sanskrit and Jin speech as well as writing,
and he combined the history of the literature in these languages.

(T55n2154_p0498a 25)

In non-Buddhist and pre-Buddhist circles the multiplicity and variety of languages was never a prominent topic of reflection or discussion. There was no problematisation of the articulatory limitations outside the Buddhist context of Chinese versus other languages. Barbarian languages yī yīn 夷音 were regarded as manifestly inferior.

The focus on pronunciation as primary, rather than on the current fascination of the Chinese characters, was importantly inspired by Indian developments. The neglect of pronunciation versus semantics is already highlighted in the sixth century A.D., by which time there arose in China a specific interest in phonetics and even phonology in its own right. Yán Zhītuī 顏之推 (AD 530 - after A.D. 590) was particularly interested in phonology, together with a group of contemporaries. The famous Qièyùn 切韻 (preface 601) with an important preface by Lù Fāyán 陸法言 is a remarkable record of this reorientation and precedes similar focus on phonology in Western traditions by many centuries. (For a survey of the history of dictionaries in China, see C. Harbsmeier 1998.)

In the important 7th century A.D. work Yán shì jiāxùn 顏氏家訓 "Mr Yán's Family Instructions" ch. 18, Yán Zhītuī writes:

Now as for humans in the Nine Regions
their ways of speaking (yányǔ言語) were not the same,
and from the origin of mankind,
this certainly has invariably been so.
...
...thereafter there was Yáng Xióng who wrote the Local Language>speech(yán 言),
the speech>words(yán 言) were completely laid out;
and yet in each case Yáng Xióng investigated how names(míng名) and things converged or failed to converge,
and he did not bring out clearly the rights and wrongs in the attributed pronunciations(shēng 聲) of words. ...

The way of speaking (yán yǔ 言語) of ancient and modern times
differed because of (changing) times and customs
Those who wrote books
were all different in Chǔ (in the south) and in China. (Wáng Liqì 1993 p. 529ff)
There was an important Chinese tradition which claimed a Taoist Chinese origin for Buddhism in India. The problems of introducing Taoism in the Indian Far West, where it took the form of Buddhism, involved fundamental problems of language transmission as evidenced in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>老子漢人也。</td>
<td>Lǎozǐ was a Hàn Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>胡蕃國也。</td>
<td>and the Hú were a foreign state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>土地不同。</td>
<td>When the geography is not the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>則言音亦異。</td>
<td>then the sounds of language (yán yīn 言音) will also differ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>當其化胡成佛之際。</td>
<td>When it came to the point of converting the Hú to become Buddhists,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>為作漢音耶。</td>
<td>should he use Chinese language (Hàn yīn 漢音) for the purpose,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>作蕃音耶。</td>
<td>or should he use the foreign language (fán yīn 蕃音)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>苟以漢言。</td>
<td>If he was to use the Chinese language (Hàn yīn 漢音)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>則蕃國有所不解。</td>
<td>then the barbarian (fán 蕃) state would not understand everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>以蕃言。</td>
<td>If he was to use barbarian language (fán yīn 蕃音)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>則此經之至。</td>
<td>then the crucial points of these classics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>宜須翻譯。</td>
<td>had to be translated (fān yì 翻譯) (into a new language).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(R133_p0714a04(02); for traditions concerning the Taoist origins of Buddhism see the remarkably informative Kohn 2008)

The problems of translation and of anonymity (lexical gaps) was brought out beautifully in the Buddhist texts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>翻譯之家自有規准。</td>
<td>The specialists in translation (fān yì 翻譯) have their own standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>若名梵漢共有。</td>
<td>If a term (míng) exists both in Sanskrit (Fàn 梵) and in Chinese (Hàn 漢)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>則敵對而翻。</td>
<td>then they just match the terms up (fān 翻) (in translation).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>如其彼有此無。</td>
<td>If in that language it exists, and not in this,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>或即令留梵語。</td>
<td>then either they let the Brahman/Sanskrit speech &gt; language (Fàn yǔ 梵語) stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>或復借義充名。</td>
<td>or they &quot;borrow a meaning&quot; to fill in the terminology (míng 名).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>凡是此方所無。</td>
<td>Where all these methods fail,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>翻為漢稱者。</td>
<td>when one translates into Chinese parlance (Hàn chēng 漢稱)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>皆其類爾。</td>
<td>everything becomes generically vague. (R005_p0007b03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important that what one customarily translates as "Sanskrit", Fàn yǔ 梵語 is a generic term for Indian and possibly even some Central Asian languages. Following tradition, I shall translate the term simply as "Sanskrit" below.

Translation mistakes are recognised as a pervasive danger in remarks such as the following:
This is because of a translator's mistake.
(T36n1739_p0863b08)

One of the many words used for "language" is simply *yīn 音"sound", and this recognition of the primacy of the spoken versus the written comes out nicely in generalisations like these:

But *yīn 音 East and West are different
and one essentially has to rely on translation (*făn 翻)
If one does not turn over (*făn 翻) and does not translate (*yì 譯)
than the meaning (*yì 義) of the text (*wén 文) remains blocked-up.
(T16n0675_p0665a 17)

II. TERMINOLOGY FOR LANGUAGE

1. The most abstract philosophical and general term for language is *yán 言, which refers more specifically to speaking up on something. This term is as old as Chinese literature.
2. *Yú 語 refers to speech as part of a dialogue, but very often also generally to a language of one kind or another. This term goes back to the oldest works of Chinese literature.
3. *Yīn 音 refers in medieval Buddhist Chinese to language as primarily manifested in special forms of oral articulation, but the word also often refers to a specific language in general.
4. *Wén 文 refers to language as primarily manifested in specific ways of writing it down, but the word also often refers to a specific language in general. This use of the term goes back to pre-Buddhist times during the Hàn dynasty.
5. *Huà 話 refers to language as concrete utterance, typically as part of dialogue, and the word which is so common in modern Chinese is quite rare in classical Chinese. The term became current in medieval times.
6. *Făng yán 方言 (Ming dynasty occasional variant: *făngyǔ 方語) refers to a local language or regional dialect, as spoken in a given place. This term was current since Hàn dynasty times.
7. *Yúyán 語言 is the current general term for language in modern Chinese, but the use of this term in antiquity needs to be studied independently of this modern usage.
8. *Yányù 言語 "way of speaking" came to be used for *parole in modern linguistics.
9. *Yányín 語音 and *yányīn 言音 refer to oral articulatory aspects of language in a general and abstract way. This is a word that became current in medieval Buddhist literature.
10. *Yīnyì 言義 is a rare expression referring abstractly to a local variety of linguistic conventions linking sound and meaning. This is another term that became current in medieval literary Chinese.
11. *Wén zì 文字 refers to the written language.

So he was proficient in the language (*yīn 音) spoken at Turfan, and he understood the writing systems of the various states.
(T49n2038_p0910c26)
Details of this terminology may be consulted in Thesaurus Linguae Sericae (tls.uni-hd.de).

III. TERMINOLOGY FOR "CHINESE LANGUAGE"
There are many difficulties surrounding the concept of "the Chinese language": for one thing many linguists are convinced that the so-called dialects of Chinese are really different sinitic languages. The structural, phonological as well as lexical variety among Chinese dialects, of which Standard Mandarin is only one, is so great, and the degree of mutual incomprehensibility is so striking, that there is excellent reason to consider many Chinese dialects as so many different Chinese languages. And if the distinction between the concepts of "language" and of "dialect" could be made clear and explicit - which it never has been - then it is very likely that the dialects of Chinese would turn out to be languages. And until the terms "language" and "dialect" are clearly defined, it seems idle to dwell on the question whether Chinese "dialects" are languages or not.

1. guānhuà 官話 "Mandarin" is obsolete, and its traditional antonym was xiāngyǔ 鄉語 "local speech". From Ming Dynasty times, this was a current word for the common vernacular language used by administrative staff of any kind throughout China.

2. báihuà 白話 "plain speech" (as opposed to wén yán 文言 "literary language") This is a modern word referring to an easily accessible written version of the Chinese language, particularly the term could refer to local varieties of Chinese in the early twentieth century. The báihuà 白話 "plain speech" must be carefully distinguished from kǒuyǔ 口語 "vernacular" and tūhuà 土話 "local patois". The so-called "vernacular literature" of pre-modern China was in fact still quite far from the vernacular language described in Yuán dynasty (1271-1368) times in handbooks of vernacular Chinese for the Koreans.

3. guóyǔ 國語 "national language" (ant. wài yǔ 外語 "foreign language") was current especially in the early twentieth and Taiwan, but has a much older pre-history summarised in Victor Mair 1994. This word continues to be in increasing common use even in Mainland China today, and which is standard in places like Malaysia or Singapore, as well as in Taiwan.

4. zhōngguóyǔ 中國語 "language of China" (ant. wài guó yǔ 外國語 "foreign language") Current Japanese way of writing the Japanese word for the Chinese language, but the expression has a long history in China, the first attested use being in Yang Xiong's Model Sayings of the first century B.C..

5. pǔtōnghuà 普通話 "common language" (Mainland China) (ant. dì fāng yǔ 地方語 "local language), fāng yán 方言 "dialect (not the ancient meaning of that Chinese term")
This is a very common modern expression which corresponds to Greek koinē, and the word is always used in counterdistinction to (often mutually incomprensible) dialects. The word has a rather political flair.

6. Hányǔ 漢語 "language of the Hán people" (should include all dialects, but is often used otherwise)
This is the most current word for the Chinese language as opposed to other zúyǔ 族語 "national languages". The word is very current in the Buddhist Tripiṭaka, but it is also attested elsewhere in the work of Yúxin 庾信 and in Shishuōxìnyǔ 世說新語 "New Tales of the Talk of the World" (fifth cent. AD).

7. Zhōngguóhuà 中國話 "Chinese speech" (includes all dialects)
This word is always used in counterdistinction to foreign languages. It has become current in international contexts in nineteenth century novels.

8. Zhōngwén 中文 "Chinese (typically written) language" (ant. wàiwén 外文 "foreign (primarily written) language", often includes speech: huì shuō zhōngwén 會說中文 CAN SPEAK CHINESE (PRIMARILY-WRITTEN) LANGUAGE "He can speak Zhōngwén.")
This word is already attested in the medieval Sōushénjì 搜神記 "Record of Seeking Spirits", where it refers to the written language. In Modern Standard Chinese this is a very common way of referring to Chinese as opposed to foreign languages, and as a subject in school curricula.

9. Huáyǔ 華語 "Chinese talk" (used mainly in Singapore, Hong Kong etc.)
This word has a long history in Buddhist texts, and it is also already attested in Liú Zhījī 劉知幾 (A.D. 661 - 721) in Shītōng. Yán yüè 《史通 · 言語》 "Generalities on Historiography, On Language": "...必諱彼夷音，變成華語，"one must keep clear of the barbarian languages (yǐ yīn 夷音) and transform them into Chinese (Huáyǔ 華語)."

10. Hàn yīn 漢音 "Han-Chinese sounds" refers to the Chinese language as a spoken medium, from early medieval times onwards. Sanskrit/Prakrit is currently and contemporaneously referred to as fān yīn 梵音 or fān yīn蕃音 "barbarian speech".
R133_p0714a04(02) (Yúán Dynasty)
當其化胡成佛之際。為作漢音耶。作蕃音耶。 "When converting the barbarians to Buddhism, should one use Chinese language (Hàn yīn 漢音) or barbarian language (fān yīn蕃音)?"

11. Hán yán 漢言 "Hàn language, language of the Hán Dynasty> Chinese" (ant. húyán 胡言 or hù yǔ 胡語) is a historico-ethnographic term.
This remained a very common way of referring to the Chinese language long after the Hán
Dynasty, as is clear from the Buddhist Tripiṭaka.

胡言般若波羅蜜。  Parāmitā in barbarian speech (húyán 胡言)

漢言智慧彼岸也  is in Chinese speech (Hàn yán 漢言)

佛者。  Buddha

漢言覺也。  is "the enlightened" in Hán language (Hàn yán 漢言)

將以覺悟群生也。  He will bring enlightenment to the sentient beings.

(T25n1512_p0835b29(05) (northern Wèi A.D. 386-534))

12. wényán 文言 "literary Chinese" (ant. báihuà 白話 "plain vernacular") today refers to a modernised version of traditional classical Chinese, as used for example in letters. But in the Buddhist Tripiṭaka, for example, the phrase regularly refers to ornate Chinese, ornate formulations. Neither traditionally nor in modern times is wényán 文言 used in counterdistinction to foreign languages: the contrast is with other varieties of Chinese.

13. wényánwén 文言文 "literary Chinese writing" (ant. báihuàwén 白話文) refers since fairly modern times to classical Chinese as it continues to be used in the introductions to books and in formal letter-writing. It is a twentieth century word, as far as I can see.

14. báihuà-wén 白話文 "plain talk writing" (ant. wényánwén 文言文) is a term with a strong stylistic nuance. This is also a twentieth century word.

15. tōngyòngyu 通用語 "general use language".

This is a twentieth century neologism designed to replace pǔtōnghuà 普通話 "common language". The term has never achieved broad use.

16. dàzhòngyǔ 大眾語 "mass language" is obsolete today, but did in its time in the early twentieth century refer to Mandarin Chinese. This is a politicised ideological concept stressing the universal use and popularity of the Chinese language as advocated by language politicians. It is a twentieth century political neologism.

17. guówén 國文 "state writing" refers in a formal way to written Chinese. This is a twentieth century term mainly used in connection with educational politics.

18. Hàn wén 漢文 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Hàn (typically written) language" was commonly used from early medieval times onwards.

19. Zhōngguó wénzi 中國文字 "the Chinese (written) language"
19a Zhōngguó yǔwén 中國語文 "Chinese language"

20. Huá yán 華言 (ant. fānyǔ 梵語 "Sanskrit/Prakrit) is an obsolete traditional term for Chinese that comes over 1200 times in Buddhist texts.

20a. Huáwén 華文 is a variant of Huáyán 華言 with perhaps a greater emphasis on the written as opposed to the spoken language.

21. dōngtǔ Huáxiàyán 東土華夏言 "Chinese language in the eastern regions" is an ad hoc periphrastic expression which one might insist was never lexicalised, but it is perhaps worth recording just as well, if only in order to document the beginning tendency to see oneself in China as East of the centre. (R059_p0119b04(00))

22. Hàn'ér yányǔ 漢兒言語 "Hàn language" is a term that was current in Sòng dynasty Korean textbooks of colloquial Chinese, like the famous 老乞大: “你是高麗人，卻怎麼漢兒言語說的好。” "You are a man from Gāoli, how is it that your Hán language (Hàn'ér yán yü)"

23. Jin wén 聲文 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Jin (typically written) language" is fairly rare, but clear examples are easily found. (See T50n2059_p0326c12(02))

24. Jin yán 聲言 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Language of the Jin" is common indeed, but many examples can be read technically as "in Jin this translates as". (But this is not always the case, as will be seen in 譯梵為盡言 "translate(yì) the Sanskrit Fàn yín into Chinese(Jìn yán聲言)" (T14n0434_p0105a 16) and also 斯經似安世高譯為盡言也. "This sutra was apparently translated into Chinese(Jīn yán聲言) by Ân Shigao." (T33n1693_p0001a 17)

25. Jīn yǔ 聲語 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Speech of the Jin"
手執梵文口宣聲語。 "Holding the Sanskrit in his hand he translated it orally into Chinese(Jīn yǔ聲語)." (T50n2059_p0329a 12）
先詠本文。然後乃譯為聲語。 "First he recited the original, and then he translated it into Chinese(Jīn yǔ聲語)" (T55n2145_p0072b24)

26. Jīn yīn 聲音 "Jin Dynasty speech" contrasts with 外國語 "foreign language" (T50n2060_p0634a 26)

27. Qín yán 秦言 "Qin language> Chinese" is the standard way of providing Chinese translations for Sanskrit words in the Buddhist Tripitaka. (No less than 1132 examples in the Chinese Buddhist
Text Association electronic edition of the Chinese corpus of Buddhist texts (henceforth CBETA), but mostly formulaic, as in the following examples.)

28. **Qín yǔ** 秦語 "Speech of the Qín > Chinese"
In the Buddhist Tripiṭaka, this is a very formal term for Chinese, not very common.

> "Kumārajīva held the barbarian classic (hūjīng hūjìng) (i.e. the sutra) in his hands and translated it into (yì 譯) the Speech of Qín (Qín yǔ 秦 語)." (T51n2068_p0054a 29.

See also T26n1543_p0771b02; T55n2145_p0072b07; T55n2145_p0073c09)

29. **Táng wén** 唐文 (obsolete, occasionally found in Buddhist texts) "Táng (typically written) language"
This is the standard way of referring to the written Chinese language in Buddhist texts of the Táng dynasty.

> "Tripiṭaka respectfully held the Sanskrit text (Fàn wén) in his hands and translated it into Táng speech (Táng yǔ 唐 語)." (T30n1579_p0283c07)

30. **Táng yán** 唐言 (obsolete, found in Buddhist texts) "Language of the Táng".
1523 occurrences in CBETA. Occasionally, one wonders whether this does refer to Táng time Chinese whereas Hàn yīn 漢 音 does not. (T20n1177Ap0724c02)

31. **Táng yǔ** 唐語 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Speech of the Táng (dynasty/country)"
A fairly rare way of referring to the Chinese language in Táng Buddhist texts. (Only 18 occurrences in CBETA)

> "(the Indians) all had no detailed knowledge of Táng speech (Táng yǔ 唐語)." (R014_p0563a 14)

32. **Táng yīn** 唐音 "Táng speech" is a regular expression for Táng Dynasty Chinese in the Buddhist Tripiṭaka. (R036_p0584b13600; R066_p0717b08(01))

33. **Táng huà** 唐話 "Táng talk" is a current Cantonese term for Chinese. My teacher Jiǎng Shàoyú informs me that Táng refers here not to the dynasty but to Mount Táng 唐山.

34. **Dà Táng yǔ** 大唐語 "Speech of the Great Táng Dynasty" is rarely attested, but the word does exist:
"Monk Ruò was a person from Xīnluó (i.e. Silla), but he spoke the language of the Great Táng Dynasty (Dà Táng yǔ 大唐語)." (R150_p1055b17)

35. **Hàn** 漢 is an abbreviation for Hán yǔ 漢語 "Chinese speech" currently used in Buddhist translation theory, but the word is not in itself a term for the Chinese language outside such technical contexts.

翻梵為漢 "Translate the Sanskrit(Fàn 梵) into Chinese(Hàn 漢)." (T21n1293_p0378c15)

36. **Táng** 唐 "language of the Táng Dynasty" is most current in the combination 梵唐對譯 "Sanskrit-Chinese parallel text of..." in book titles. (T55n2176_p1118a01; T55n2176_p1119c19(18); T55n2176_p1120a05(00); T55n2176_p1131a06)

37. **Jìn** 臨 "the language of the Jìn Dynasty." The term is rarely used to refer directly to the language, unlike the common Táng 唐. But examples do exist. (T55n2157_p0795c08)

38. **Qí wén** 齊文 "the language of Qí" 以武帝永明十年壬申秋九月譯為齊文。即百喻經也。"During the reign of Wǔdì, in 292, on the day rènshēn, in the autumn, during the ninth month he translated this into the language of Qí (Qí wén 齊文). And this is the Báiyǔjīng "the One hundred illustrations sutra." (T55n2157_p0834b17)

39. **nèidìhuà** 內地話 refers to the language spoken on the Mainland, and the word is mostly used on Taiwan in modern times. This term represents an outsider's view on the Chinese language. (This important word was brought to my attention by Jens Østergaard Petersen.)

40. **shènzhōu yǔ** 神州語 "the language of our divine land" is quaint, nationally sentimental, and a rare way of referring to the Chinese language.

41. **zú yǔ** 族語 "the national language (of the Chinese) is a borderline case because the term refers to national languages in general, and only by extension to Chinese in particular.

42. **Hàn dì zhī yán** 漢地之言 "language of the Hàn territory" is a marginal periphrastic expression
which one should probably not regard as a lexicalised item. One could study such periphrastic expressions separately from the lexicalised vocabulary. (R059_p0119b06)

[43. jǐngpiànzi 京片子 "Chinese as spoken in Peking" is a borderline case because it does refer to Peking speech, but not insofar as it is the standard for the whole of China. Colloquial examples of this sort could be multiplied ad libitum...]

Among the less current modern ways of referring to Chinese one should perhaps record here at least the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{xìandàiwén} 现代文 "present-day language"
  \item \textit{fāngyìyǔ} 方言 "inter-local speech"
  \item \textit{qūyìyǔ} 区域 "inter-regional speech"
  \item \textit{gòngtōnghuà} 共通話 "commonly understood talk"
  \item \textit{Hànzú gòngtōngyǔ} 汉族共通語 "the commonly understood language of the Hán race"
  \item \textit{Hányǔ bīāozhūnyǔ} 普話標準語 "Correct Chinese"
  \item \textit{tōngyǔ} 通語 "Current speech" (old-fashioned)
  \item \textit{fàn yǔ} 凡語 "Ordinary speech"
  \item \textit{yǎyán} 雅言 "Elegant speech" (ancient)
  \item \textit{xìàyán} 夏言 "Language of the Xià (Chinese people)"
\end{itemize}

IV. THE ABSTRACT CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE AND THE PROBLEMATISATION OF THE SEMANTIC REACH OF LANGUAGE

It was commonly assumed in ancient China that whatever can be said clearly is not really worth saying.

The Taoist classic \textit{Lǎozǐ} 老子, starts out as follows:

道可道非常道 "The Way (\textit{dào 道}) that can be articulated (\textit{dào 道}) is not the constant Way (\textit{dào 道})." (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 54; ed. TLS, LAO 1.1)

And a littler further on the same text continues:

是以聖人處無為之事， 行不言之教。 Therefore the sage engages in the business of non-interference, practices the wordless (\textit{bù yán 不言}) teaching. (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 56; ed. TLS, LAO 2.1)

But in the end the famous book complains:

不言之教， 無為之益 The unarticulated (\textit{bù yán 不言}) teaching, and the uninterfering conduct, few are those who reach up to these in this world. (Shima Kunio 1973,
The Taoist classic Zhuangzi (4th to 3rd cent. B.C.), echoes this:

Who understands the eloquence of the unspoken (bù yán不言),
the Way (dào 道) that is unexpressed (bù dào 不道)? (Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 73; ed. TLS, ZHUANG 2.5.9)

The text quotes LAO 56.1 and goes on to argue:

He who understands does not speak (yán 言);
he who speaks (yán 言) does not understand.

Therefore the sage practises the unspoken (bù yán 不言) teaching.
(Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 805; ed. TLS, ZHUANG 22.1.7)

In all this, Chinese thinkers like Lǎozǐ think of themselves as imitating the Way itself:

As for the Way (dào 道) of Heaven,
it does not compete and excels at vanquishing,
it does not speak (yán 言) and excels at responding to things,
it does not summon but things rally to it of themselves. (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 208; ed. TLS, LAO 73.1)

It is the spontaneous responsiveness or sensibilité that is unmediated by linguistic articulation and indeed inaccessible to such articulation that is celebrated as the essence of Taoist philosophy.

Even Confucius, the master of conversational rhetoric, is said to have wished he didn't talk so much in the Analects:

The Master said:
"I wish I could stop coming up with this speaking (yán 言)."

Zìgòng said:
"If you do not come up with your speaking (yán 言) then what do we have to transmit?"

The Master said:
"What does Heaven say (yán 言)?
And yet the four seasons take their courses in it,
and the myriad things are born from it.
What does Heaven say (yán 言)?" (Huáng Huáixin 2008 p. 1574; ed. TLS, LY 17.19)

Even when words are used, what moves the audience are still not the words themselves, certainly not what the words articulate, but rather what they inscrutably manifest of the speaker's spirit:
A third-century A.D. encyclopaedia *Lűshichûnqiū* 呂氏春秋, comments:

If it is truly there, then others will respond in their spirit:

- If it is truly there, then others will respond in their spirit:
  - how should words (*yán* 言) be enough to make things clear.
  - This is what one means by speechless (*bù yán* 不言) language (*yán* 言).

(Wáng Liqì 2000, p. 3031; ed. TLS, LS 26.1.2.3)

The classic on socio-economics *Guānzi* 管子 of the first few centuries B.C., which also has some sections on theories of mysticism, elaborates elegantly on this crucial feature of responsiveness:

- Speechless (*bù yán* 不言) language (*yán* 言) is that of (spontaneous) response. (Tăng Xiàochūn 1995, p. 675; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.47)

Speechless language speaks for itself, as it were:

- Speechless (*bù yán* 不言) language (*yán* 言)
  - is heard better than thunder and drums. (Tăng Xiàochūn 1995, p. 686; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.16)

The Taoist encyclopaedia of the second century B.C. *Huáinánzi* 淮南子, speaks of a higher eloquence of silence:

- The eloquence (*biàn* 辯) of speechlessness (*bù yán* 不言),

The classic on Chinese poetology from the second century B.C. *Hánshī wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳, attributes this higher form of unarticulated communication to sage rulers of antiquity:

- The Duke of Zhōu was good at listening to unspoken (*bù yán* 不言) advice. (Qū Shǒuyuán 1996, p. 433; ed. TLS, HSWZ 4.33.3)

Zhuāngzǐ, in a justly famous passage, does begin to philosophise on the limitations of speech:

- Speech (*yán* 言) is not a blowing.
- In speech (*yán* 言) there is something said.
- But what is said (*yán* 言) is just never quite fixed.
- Is there something said (*yán* 言)?
- Or is there never anything said (*yán* 言)?
- Should we consider language as different from bird's song?
- Is there a distinction?
- Or is there no distinction? (ed. Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 56; ed. TLS, ZHUANG 2.3.3)
Concluding Remarks
It is clear that the abstract importance of language as such as a defining characteristic of man was recognised by the ancient Chinese as it was in ancient Greece. When it comes to the ancient Chinese words for the abstract notion of language, this was developed quite early in the form of binomes or two-character expressions which tended to be terminologised and specialised in their reference not just to any speaking or talking, but to the abstract notion of language.

The autoreferential terminology for "the Chinese language" was elaborated in the context of contacts with non-Chinese Buddhists and translation from foreign languages into Chinese. A great deal of reflection went into the problems raised by translation, and this subject clearly deserves much more detailed attention than I have been able to give it in this paper. The difficulties of translation were clearly recognised, but there was not much of a sense for any systematic shortcomings in the Chinese language. On the contrary, what always remained a topos in ancient Chinese discourse on language in general was the complaint that quite generally it was powerless as an instrument of the communication of ultimate wisdom.

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