ON THE VERY NOTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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RESUMÉ : Cet article présente un certain nombre de mots et expressions désignant « la langue chinoise » en chinois moderne ainsi que dans des formes plus anciennes de la langue. Il aborde ensuite l'histoire conceptuelle des mots chinois au sein du champ sémantique « langue ». Il se termine sur un bref examen des conceptions chinoises relatives à la nature, l'importance et les fonctions du langage humain.

MOTS-CLÉS : Glottonymie ; Idées linguistiques ; Chinois ; Langue

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the wide range of words and expressions for « the Chinese language » in modern Chinese as well as in earlier forms of the language. It then goes on to discuss the conceptual history of Chinese words within the semantic field LANGUAGE. Finally, there is a short survey of typical Chinese reflections on the nature, importance, and functions of human language.

KEYWORDS : Glottonymy ; Linguistic ideas ; Chinese ; Language

0. INTRODUCTION

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 Ма Jīnzhōng 马建忠 in 1898, which is best consulted in Lù Shūxiāng 吕叔湘 and Wáng Hǎifēn 王海芬 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 Ма Jīnzhōng 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).

2 see HEL hors-série n°3 (2000), notices 4401-4416.
Chén Jinchú 陈建初 and Wú Zéshùn 吴泽顺 1997 provide an 852-page historically oriented 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 Lucrèceus 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.

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 Liji 礼记 "The Records on Rites" of the 4th to 3rd century B.C. claims (LJ


凡人之所以为者  As a matter of principle, that by virtue of which man
是人  is real (rén 人) and rectitude (yì 義).

There was a disensus on this defining characteristic of man. The 3rd century B.C. Confucian philosopher Xúnzi 荀子 disagrees (ed. Wáng Tiānhài 王天海 2005, p. 174; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.1):

人之所以为者何  What is it, in the end, by virtue of which man is man?
是人 多 以其有辨也. I say: it is by virtue of him making distinctions (biàn 辨).

Indeed Xúnzi deepens the thought in a truly Aristotelian spirit a little further on.

(Wáng Tiānhài 2005, p. 174f; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.2):

然则人之所以为者 That by virtue of which man is man 人
非特以二足而毛也 is not only that he has two feet and no fur,
以其有辨也 it is by virtue of his making distinctions (biàn 辨)

A third second century B.C. commentary on the old Annals, (Chāngqū gǔliăng zhiān 春秋穀梁傳) focuses on language in this connection (Zhōng Wénzhēng 1996 p. 320; ed. TLS, CQGL XI 5):

人之所以为者 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),
何以为人? can he count as a person?

And none less than Confucius himself, in the very last words of his Analects finds words that warm the heart of any philologist (ed. Huáguān Huáixin 2008, p. 1751; ed. TLS, LY 20.3):

不知言 If one does not understand speech (yán 言),
無以知人耶one does not have what it takes to understand man.

The appendix to the Book of Changes, the Xici 繁辭 (third cent. B.C.) famously

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3 I have used diacritics to mark the tones of Chinese words. I recognise it is the general practice among sinologists to omit these diacritics. In times long past, Sanskriti and even Arabic were also transcribed without diacritics. I am glad Sanskritiologists and Arabists have since changed this practice. For my part, I think I should try to write French correctly, with its diacritics. Similarly, I prefer to write Chinese correctly, with its diacritics for the tones. If only because in Chinese the tone makes a crucial difference.

4 Le Thesaurus Linguae Sericae (TLS), base de données relationnelle hébergée par l'Institut d'études chinoises de l'université de Heidelberg, vise en premier lieu à permettre aux non-sinistes d'accéder à la littérature chinoise ancienne en version bilingue et annotée, accompagnée de traductions interlinéaires de chaque phrase. Le TLS facilite également l'accès aux mots et concepts du chinois classique et permet de comparer ces derniers à ceux d'autres cultures. La conception du projet revient à Christoph Harbsmeier - son éditeur en chef - mais son développement est mené en collaboration avec un grand nombre de chercheurs, dans le monde entier. (NDR)
comments on the relation between writing, speech, and thought, in words which it
even attributes to Confucius himself (Huang Shouqi 1994, p. 563):

子曰: 書不盡言  
言不盡意。
The Master said: Writing does not exhaustively present speech (yán 言)  
language/speech does not exhaustively present thought.

This reflection 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 shā  
“writing”; Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 B.C. to A.D. 18), writes in his Fāyān 法言  
“Model Words” (Hán Jìng 漢經 1992, 5.13, p. 110, translated with help from Michael  
Nylan, University of California, Berkeley):

5.13 言不盡其心  
書不盡其言
They say, “Speech cannot fully express what is in the heart  
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  
and achieve the substantial embodiment [of things] in writing.

故言, 心聲也  
Therefore, speech (yán 言) is the voice of the mind  
書, 心畫也,  
writing (shā 書), is a picture of the mind.

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  
(see Bottero & Harbsmeier 2008). The Shuowen jiezi 説文解字, 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:  
Lü shī chángqīu 呂氏春秋 dated ca. 239 B.C. writes (Wáng Liqì 2002 p. 1770; ed.  
TLS, LS 13.8.2):

古者命多不適今  
The naming (mìng 命) of things in antiquity often does  
not correspond to the language (yán 言) of today.

The sceptic philospher Wáng Chōng 王充 of the first century A.D. provides a  
striking reflection on linguistic change and its cultural importance (Huang Hui  
1990, ch. 85, p. 1196):  
Wáng Chōng 王充, 27-97?, in his Lùnhéng 論衡 writes:

經傳之文  
In the texts of the classics and their commentaries  
and in the language use (yǔ 言) of worthies and sages:

賢聖之語
古今異殊
四方異觀。
謂言必為
非為易知
使指意閉塞也。
後人不曉
世相遠遠。
此名曰語異
名曰材器。

In the texts of the classics and their commentaries  
and in the language use (yǔ 言) of worthies and sages:

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).

It is through Buddhism that multilingualism became important in Chinese culture  
and was currently admired. The language of the bramhins was mentioned along  
with the language of the Jin Dynasty (T55n2154-p0498a 25):

書梵語及書  
He was good at the bramhins/Sanskrit and Jin speech as  
well as writing.

亦兼諸文史。  
and he combined the history of the literature in these  
languages.

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 yǐn 元音 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 Zhītū 筠之涿 (AD 530 - after A.D. 590)  
was particularly interested in phonology, together with a group of contemporaries.  
The famous Qìyìan 切韻 (preface 601) with an important preface by Lù Fāyān 魯  
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 shǐ jiàxìna 顏氏家訓 “Mr Yán’s  
Family Instructions” ch. 18, Yán Zhītū writes (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 (R133_p0714a04(02); for traditions concerning the Taoist origins of Buddhism see the remarkably informative Kohn 2008) (R005_p0007b03):

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

The specialists in translation (fān yǐ 翻譯) have their own standards.

若名梵漢共有。若 a term (ming 名) exists both in Sanskrit (Fān 梵) and in Chinese (Hàn 漢).

則敵對而翻。then they just match the terms up (fān 翻) (in translation).

如其彼此無。If in that language it exists, and not in this,

或今示存梵語。then either they let the Brahmī/Sanskrit speech > language (Fān yǐ 梵語) stay.

或復借義充名。or they “borrow a meaning” to fill in the terminology (ming 名).

凡此是方無。Where all these methods fail.

翻為漢稱者。When one translates into Chinese parlance (Hàn chéng 漢稱)

皆其類爾。everything becomes generically vague.

It is important that what one customarily translates as “Sanskrit”, Fān yǐ 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 (T36n1739_p0863b08):

此由翻譯者誤也。This is because of a translator’s (fān yǐ zhé 翻譯者) mistake.

One of the many words used for “language” is simply yín 音 “sound”, and this recognition of the primacy of the spoken versus the written comes out nicely in generalisations like these (T16n0675_p0665a17):

但東西音殊。But the languages (yín 音) East and West are different and one essentially has to rely on translation (fān yǐ 翻譯).

理應翻譯。If one does not turn over (fān 翻) and does not translate (yǐ 翻)

非翻非譯。then the meaning (yì 譯) of the text (wén 文) remains blocked-up.

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. Yin 音 refers to language in the 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 Han dynasty.

5. Hua 詞 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. Fang yan 方言 (Ming dynasty occasional variant: fangy 業語) refers to a local language or regional dialect, as spoken in a given place. This term was current since Han dynasty times.

7. Yayin 矢音 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. Yan 言言 “way of speaking” came to be used for parole in modern linguistics.

9. Yuyin 言音 and yanpin 音音 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. Yinyi 音義 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. Wenzhi 文字 refers to the written language (T49n2038_p0910c26).

So he was proficient in the language (yin 音) spoken at Turfan,

and he understood the writing systems of the various states.

Details of this terminology may be consulted in Thesaurus Linguae Sericæ (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 sinic 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 to be 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. Guanhua 官話 “Mandarin” is obsolete, and its traditional antonym was xiangyu 話語 “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. Baihua 白話 “plain speech” (as opposed to wenyan 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 baihua 白話 “plain speech” must be carefully distinguished from kouyu 口語 “vernacular” and tiaohua 声話 “local patois”. The so-called “vernacular literature” of pre-modern China was in fact still quite far from the vernacular language described in Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) times in handbooks of vernacular Chinese for the Koreans.

3. Guoyu 国语 “national language” (ant. waiyu 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. Zhongguoyu 中国語 “language of China” (ant. waiyu 外語 “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 Xiogis Model SAYINGS of the first century B.C.

5. Puonghua 普通話 “common language” (Mainland China) (ant. difangyu 地方語 “local language”), fangy 言言 “dialect” (not the ancient meaning of that Chinese term).

This is a very common modern expression which corresponds to Greek koiné, and the word is always used in counterdistinction to often mutually incomprehensible dialects. The word has a rather political origin.

6. Hangyu 漢語 “language of the Han people” (should include all dialects, but is often used otherwise).

This is the most current word for the Chinese language as opposed to other ziyu 族語 “national languages”. The word is very current in the Buddhist Tripitaka, but it is also attested elsewhere in the work of Yuanch 廣信 and in Shishuoxinyu 世說新語 “New Tales of the Talk of the World” (fifth cent. AD).

7. Zhongguo hua 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.
12. wén yán 文言 “literary Chinese” (ant. báihuá 白话 “plain vernacular”) today refers to a modernised version of traditional classical Chinese, as used for example in letters. But in the Buddhist Tripitaka, for example, the phrase regularly refers to ornate Chinese, ornate formulations. Neither traditionally nor in modern times is wén yán 文言 used in counterdistinction to foreign languages: the contrast is with other varieties of Chinese.

13. wén yán wén 文言文 “literary Chinese writing” (ant. báihuá wén 白话文) 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. bái huá wén 白话文 “plain talk writing” (ant. wén yán wén 文言文) is a term with a strong stylistic nuance. This is also a twentieth century word.

15. tóng yòng yǔ 通用语 “general use language”.
This is a twentieth century neologism designed to replace pǔ tōng hùa 普通话 “common language”. The term has never achieved broad use.

16. dà zhòng yǔ 大眾语 “mass language” is obsolete today, but did in its time in the early twentieth century refer to Mandarin Chinese.

17. guó wén 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. Hán wén 漢文 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) “Hán (typically written) language” was commonly used from early medieval times onwards.

19. Zhōngguó wén zì 中國文字 “the Chinese (written) language” (T49n2036_p0477a06(03), R110_p0542b09(00))

20a. Zhōngguó yǔ wén 中國語文 “Chinese language”

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

20c. Huá wén 華文 is a variant of Huá yán 華言 with perhaps a greater emphasis on the written as opposed to the spoken language.

21. dōng tǔ 豐土 “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, and with reference to the beginning tendency to see oneself in China as East of the centre. (R059_p0119d04(00))

22. Hán shì yán 華語 “Hán language” is a term that was current in Sòng dynasty Korean textbooks of colloquial Chinese, like the famous old story: “你是高麗人，卻怎麼漢語話說的好。” ("You are a man from Goguryeo, how is it that your Han language [Hányǔ 漢語]?"")

23. Jīn wén 晉文 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) “Jīn (typically written) language” is fairly rare, but examples are easily found. (See T50n2059_p0326c12(02))

24. Jīn yán 晉言 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) “Language of the Jīn” is common indeed, but many examples can be read technically as "in Jīn this translates as". (But this is not always the case, as will be seen in 講梵言為吉言 "translate(y) the Sanskrit Pān yín into Chinese(Jīn yín 興言)"") (T4n0434_p0105a
25. *Jīn yù 菁語* (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) “Speech of the Jin”

手執梵文口宣講。 “Holding the Sanskrit in his hand he translated it orally into
Chinese (Jīnyù 菁語).” (T50n2059_p0329a 12)

26. *Jīn yín 菁音* (Jīnyín 菁音) “Jīn Dynasty speech” contrasts with 外語 “foreign language”

(T14n0434_p0105a 21; T50n2060_p0634a 26)

27. *Qín yán 秦言* “Qín language” 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, as)

答曰。摩诃絵言大。 “maha is ‘big’ in Chinese (Qín yán 秦言)” (T25n1509_p0383a 12)

28. *Qín yù 秦語* “Speech of the Qín > Chinese”

In the Buddhist Tripitaka, this is a very formal term for Chinese, not very common.

什手執經。口譯言 “Kumārajīva held the barbarian classic (hūjing 胡經)
(i.e. the sūtra) in his hands and translated it into (yì 言) the Speech of Qín (Qín yún 秦言)”.
(T51n2068_p0054a 29. See also T26n1545_p0771b 02; 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.

(R130_p0064b06; T39n1797_p0803b21; T48n2025_p1160a 24; T50n2060_p0614c17; R024_p0177a 16)

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 Hán yín 漢音 does not. (T20n1177p0724c02)

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)

皆未詳論言。 “(the Indians) all had no detailed knowledge of Táng speech (Táng yú 聞).”
(R014_p0563a 14)

32. *Táng yín 唐音* “Táng speech” is a regular expression for Táng Dynasty Chinese

in the Buddhist Tripitaka. (R036_p0584b13600; R066_p0717b08(01))

33. *Táng huà 唐話* “Táng talk” is a current Cantonese term for Chinese. My
teacher Jáng Shāoyóu 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.

若僧雖是新羅人，卻會大唐語。 “Monk Rúo was a person from Xīnlù (i.e. Silla), but he spoke the language of the Great Táng Dynasty (Dà Táng yǔ 大唐語).” (R150_p1055b17)

35. *Hán 漢* is an abbreviation for Hán yù 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 (Fān 梵) into Chinese (Hán 漢).” (T21n1293_p0378e15)

梵是天竺之言。漢是此土之語。 “Fān 梵 refers to the language of India, whereas
Hán 漢 is the language of this country.” (R068_p0353b05)

翻訳之家自有規 准。 the specialists in translation have their own standards.

若名梵漢共有。 If a term exists both in Sanskrit (Fān 梵) and in Chinese
(Hán 漢) 則恐對而譯， then they just match the terms up in translation. (R005_p0076b03)

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

37. *Jīn 菁* “the language of the Jin Dynasty.”

The term is rarely used to refer directly to the language, unlike the common Táng. But examples do exist. (T55n2157_p0795c08)

38. *Qi wén 齊文* “the language of Qi”

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 Wùdū, in
292, on the day rēnshēn, in the autumn, during the ninth month he translated this
into the language of Qi (Qi wén 齊文). And this is the Bāi yǔ jīng “The One hundred
illustrations sutra.” (T55n2157_p0834b17)

39. *nèidīnhuà 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
of the mainland’s language as different from the local.”
on the Chinese language. (This important word was brought to my attention by Jens Östergaard Petersen.)

40. shénzhōu yǔ “the language of our divine land” is quaint, nationally sentimentally, and a rare way of referring to the Chinese language.

41. zǔ yǔ “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. Hán dì zhī yán “language of the Hán 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. jīngpí “Chinese as spoken in Peking” is a borderline case because it does refer to Peking speech, but not so far 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:

| xīnjiān wén 现代文 | present-day language |
| fāngyǔ 方際語 | inter-local speech |
| qūyǔ 区際語 | inter-regional speech |
| gōngyǎngōng 通話 | commonly understood talk |
| Hán yǔ Hán yǔ 语言 | the commonly understood language of the Hán race |
| Hán yǔ bā zàzhī yǔ 汉 | Correct Chinese |
| yǔyǔ 语言 | Language of the Xī (Chinese people) |

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 Lǎozǐ 老子, starts out as follows (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 54; ed. TLS. LAO 1.1):

道可道非常道 The Way (dào 道) that can be articulated (dào 道) is not the constant Way (dào 道).

And a little further on the same text continues (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 56; ed. TLS. LAO 2.1):

是以聖人無為之事, Therefore the sage engages in a business of non-interference, practices the wordless (bù yán 不言) teaching.

行不言之教。and the uninterfering conduct.

天下希及之。few are those who reach up to these in the world.

The Taoist classic Zhōuāngzi 周子 (4th to 3rd cent. B.C.), echoes this (Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 73; ed. TLS ZHUANG 2.5.9):

誰知不言之僕, Who understands the eloquence of the unspoken (bù yán 不言).

不道之道? the Way (dào 道) that is unexpressed (bù dào 不道)?

The text quotes LAO 56.1 and goes on to argue (Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 805; ed. TLS. ZHUANG 22.1.7):

夫知者不言, He who understands does not speak (yán 言);

不知者不言, he who speaks (yán 言) does not understand.

故聖人行不言之教. Therefore the sage practices the unspoken (bù yán 不言) teaching.

In all this, Chinese thinkers like Lǎozǐ think of themselves as imitating the Way itself (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 208; ed. TLS. LAO 73.1):

天之道 As for the Way (dào 道) of Heaven,

不爭而善勝。it does not compete and excels at vanquishing.

不言而善應。it does not speak (yán 言) and excels at responding to things.

不召而自來。it does not summon but things rally to it of themselves.

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 (Huáng Huáixín 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 incursively manifest of the speaker’s spirit.

A third-century A.D. encyclopaedia Lǎshīchāngqì吕氏春秋呂氏春秋, comments (Wáng Liqí 2000, p. 3031; ed. TLS, LS 26.1.2.3):

言有之則神應乎人。 If it is truly there, then others will respond in their spirit.

言豈足以論之哉？ how should words (yán言) be enough to make things clear?

此謂不言之言也。 This is what one means by speechless (bù yán言不言) language (yán言).

The classic on socio-economics Guānzǐ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 (Táng Xiǎochūn 1995, p. 675; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.47):

不言之言，應也。 Speechless (bù yán言不言) language (yán言) is that of (spontaneous) response.

Speechless language speaks for itself, as it were (Táng Xiǎochūn 1995, p. 686; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.16):

不言之言， is heard better than thunder and drums.

The Taoist encyclopaedia of the second century B.C. Huáinànzi淮南子, speaks of a higher eloquence of silence (Zhāng Shuangdi 1997, p. 643; ed. TLS, HNZ 6.2.7):

説不之礙， The eloquence (bù yán言不言) of speechlessness (bù yán言不言),

不道之道也。 the unarticulated (bù dào言不道) Way (dào道).

The classic on Chinese poetics from the second century B.C. Húshì wàizhiwàn韓詩外傳, attributes this higher form of unarticulated communication to sage rulers of antiquity (Qín Shòuyuán 1996, p. 433; ed. TLS, HSWZ 4.3.3.3):

不言之者，

The Duke of Zhōu was good at listening to unspoken (bù yán言不言) advice.

Zhuangzǐ, in a justly famous passage, does begin to philosophise on the limitations of speech (ed. Wáng Shúmín 1988, p. 56; ed. TLS, ZHUANG 2.3.3):

夫言非也。 Speech (yán言) is not a blurring.

言者有言， In speech (yán言) there is something said.

其所言者時未定也。 But what is said (yán言) is just never quite fixed.

果有言邪？ Is there something said (yán言)?

其無言乎？ Or is there ever anything said (yán言)?

其為異於音者， Should we consider language as different from bird’s song.

亦有觶乎， Is there a distinction,

其無觶乎？ Or is there no distinction?

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 topic 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.

REFERENCES

References to non-Buddhist Chinese texts are quoted, wherever possible, by their reference in C. Harbsmeier, ed., TheSaurus Linguae Sericae (url: tlf.uni-hd.de), where they may be studied in context and with interlinear translations as well as analyses.

References to Buddhist texts are by number of entry in Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō大藏新修大藏経Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kabushiki kaisha, 1924-34, and its supplement. The letter T refers to this compilation and the letter R refers to the supplement, the Daihitsu zokuzōkyō大日本續藏経, Kyoto: Zokyo shoin, 1908-12.

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Chinese dynastic periods are dated as follows:
770-221 B.C. Eastern Zhou dynasty
770-476 B.C. — Spring and Autumn period
475-221 B.C. — Warring States period
221-206 B.C. Qin dynasty
206 B.C.-A.D. 9 Western Han dynasty
A.D. 9-24 Xin dynasty (Wang Mang interregnum)
A.D. 25-220 Eastern Han dynasty
A.D. 220-300 Three Kingdoms
220-265 — Wei
220-265 — Shu
220-280 — Wu
A.D. 265-316 Western Jin
A.D. 317-420 Eastern Jin
A.D. 420-588 Southern and Northern Dynasties
420-534 — Song
479-501 — Qi
502-556 — Liang
557-588 — Chen
386-533 — Northern Wei
534-549 — Eastern Wei
550-557 — Western Wei
550-577 — Northern Qi
557-588 — Northern Zhou
A.D. 581-617 Sui
A.D. 618-907 Tang
A.D. 907-960 Five Dynasties
907-923 — Later Liang
923-936 — Later Tang
936-946 — Later Jin
947-950 — Later Han
951-960 — Later Zhou
A.D. 907-979 Ten Kingdoms
A.D. 960-1279 Song
960-1127 — Northern Song
1127-1279 — Southern Song
A.D. 916-1125 Liao
A.D. 1038-1227 Western Xia
A.D. 1115-1234 Jin
A.D. 1279-1368 Yuan
A.D. 1368-1644 Ming
A.D. 1644-1911 Qing
A.D. 1911-1949 People’s Republic of China
A.D. 1949-