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LA NOMINATION DES LANGUES

# ON THE VERY NOTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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RÉSUMÉ : 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 Mǎ Jìnzhōng<sup>1</sup> 馬建忠 in 1898, which is best consulted in Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 and Wáng Hǎifèn 王海森 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 Jìnzhōng was that of the dictionaries of grammatical particles<sup>2</sup> which have developed since the 13<sup>th</sup> century (For an excellent detailed study of one of these dictionaries see Winkler 1999).

1 see A. Peyraube (1999). « Sur les sources du Ma shi wen tong », HEL 21/2, p. 65-78.

2 see HEL hors-série n°3 (2000), notices 4401-4416.

Chén Jinchū 陳建初 and Wú Zeshùn 吳澤順 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 Lucretius 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.<sup>3</sup>

### 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 *Lǐjī* 禮記 “The Records on Rites” of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. claims (Lǐ

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, Sanskrit and even Arabic were also transcribed without diacritics. I am glad Sanskritologists 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.

Xuéqín 2000, vol. 14, p. 1883; ed. TLS<sup>4</sup> LJ 43.1.1):

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 (*lǐ* 禮) and rectitude (*yì* 義).

There was a dissensus on this defining characteristic of man. The 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Confucian philosopher Xúnzǐ 荀子 disagrees (ed. Wáng Tiānhǎi 2005, p. 174; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.1):

人之所以為人者何  
曰：以其有辨也。  
What is it, in the end, by virtue of which man is man?  
I say: it is by virtue of him making distinctions (*biàn*  
辨).

Indeed Xúnzǐ deepens the thought in a truly Aristotelian spirit a little further on. (Wáng Tiānhǎi 2005, p. 174f; ed. TLS, XUN 5.4.2):

然則人之所以為人者  
非特以二足而無毛也  
以其有辨也。  
That by virtue of which man is man  
is not only that he has two feet and no fur,  
it is by virtue of his making distinctions (*biàn* 辨)

A third/second century B.C. commentary on the old *Annals*, (*Chūnqiū gǔliáng zhuàn* 春秋穀梁傳) focuses on language in this connection (Zhōng Wénzhēng 1996 p. 320; ed. TLS, CQGL Xi 5):

人之所以為人者，  
言也；  
人而不能言，  
何以為人？  
That by virtue of which man is man,  
is speech (*yán* 言)；  
When a person is incapable of using speech (*yán* 言)，  
how 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. Huang Huáixin 2008, p. 1751; ed. TLS, LY 20.3):

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

The appendix to the *Book of Changes*, the *Xìcǐ* 繫辭 (third cent. B.C.) famously

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-sinisants 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. (NDLR)

comments on the relation between writing, speech, and thought, in words which it even attributes to Confucius himself (Huáng Shòuji 1994, p. 563):

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.

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* “writing”: Yáng Xióng 楊雄 (53 B.C. to A.D. 18), writes in his *Fǎyán* 法言 “Model Words” (Hán Jing 1992, 5.13, p. 110, translated with help from Michael Nylan, University of California, Berkeley):

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.

故言，心聲也

...Therefore, speech (*yán* 言) is the voice of the mind

書，心畫也。

writing (*shū* 書), is a picture of the mind.

Explicit awareness of language difference is attested from the fourth century B.C. onwards (see Bottéro & Harbsmeier 2008). The *Shuōwénjiězì* 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: *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 dated ca. 239 B.C. writes (Wáng Liqi 2002 p. 1770; ed. TLS, LS 15.8.2):

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.

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

賢聖之語

and in the language use (*yǔ* 語) of worthies and sages

古今言殊

ancient and modern speech/language (*yǔ* 語) differ

四方談異。

The ways of speaking in the four quarters deviate.

當言事時

When one talked about things,

非務難知

it is not as if one sets out to be difficult to understand

使指意閉隱也。

and to cause the meaning to be hidden.

後人不曉

If later generations did not understand them

世相離遠。

it is due to their being removed far from them.

此名曰語異

This one calls “difference of language use” (*yǔ* 語異)

不名曰材鴻。

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 brahmins was mentioned along with the language of the Jin Dynasty (T55n2154\_p0498a 25):

善梵晉語及書

He was good at the brahmin/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 *yí 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 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. work *Yán shì jiāxùn* 顏氏家訓 “Mr Yán’s Family Instructions” ch. 18, Yán Zhītuī writes (Wáng Liqi 1993 p. 529ff):

夫九州之人，  
 言語不同，  
 生民已來，  
 固常然矣。  
 後有揚雄著方言，  
 其言大備，  
 然皆考名物之同  
 異，  
 不顯聲讀之是非  
 也。  
 古今言語，  
 時俗不同；  
 著書之人，  
 楚夏各異。

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 yǔ*),  
 the speech > words (*yán yǔ*) 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.

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):

老子漢人也。  
 胡蕃國也。  
 土地不同。  
 則言音亦異。

Lǎozǐ was a Hān Chinese  
 and the Hú were a foreign state.  
 When the geography is not the same  
 then the sounds of language (*yán yīn* 言音) will also  
 differ.

當其化胡成佛之際。  
 為作漢音耶。  
 作蕃音耶。  
 苟以漢音。  
 則蕃國有所不解。

When it came to the point of converting the Hú to become  
 Buddhists,  
 should he use Chinese language (*Hàn yīn* 漢音) for the  
 purpose,  
 or should he use the foreign language (*fān yīn* 蕃音)?  
 If he was to use the Chinese language (*Hàn yīn* 漢音)  
 then the barbarian (*fān* 蕃) state would not understand  
 everything.

If he was to use barbarian language (*fān yīn* 蕃音)  
 then the crucial points of these classics  
 had to be translated (*fān yīn* 翻譯) (into a new  
 language).

The problems of translation and ofonymy (lexical gaps) was brought out

beautifully in the Buddhist texts:

翻譯之家自有規  
 准。  
 若名梵漢共有。  
 則敵對而翻。  
 如其彼有此無。  
 或即令留梵語。  
 或復借義充名。  
 凡是此方所無。  
 翻為漢稱者。  
 皆其類爾。

The specialists in translation (*fān yì* 翻譯) have their own  
 standards.  
 If a term (*míng* 名) exists both in Sanskrit (*Fàn* 梵) and in  
 Chinese (*Hàn* 漢)  
 then they just match the terms up (*fān* 翻) (in  
 translation).  
 If in that language it exists, and not in this,  
 then either they let the Brahmin/Sanskrit speech > language  
 (*Fàn yǔ* 梵語) stay  
 or they "borrow a meaning" to fill in the terminology  
 (*míng* 名)  
 Where all these methods fail,  
 when one translates into Chinese parlance (*Hàn chēng*  
 漢稱)  
 everything becomes generically vague.

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 (T36n1739\_p0863b08):

此由翻譯者誤也。  
 This is because of a translator's (*fān yì zhě* 翻譯者)  
 mistake.

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 (T16n0675\_p0665a 17):

但東西音殊。  
 理憑翻譯。  
 非翻非譯。  
 文義斯壅。

But the languages (*yīn* 音) East and West are different  
 and one essentially has to rely on translation (*fān yì* 翻  
 譯).  
 If one does not turn over (*fān* 翻) and does not translate (*yì*  
 譯)  
 then the meaning (*yì* 義) 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. *Yǔ* 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. *Fāng yán* 方言 (Ming dynasty occasional variant: *fāngyǔ* 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. *Yǔyán* 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. *Yányǔ* 言語 “way of speaking” came to be used for *parole* in modern linguistics.

9. *Yǔyīn* 語音 and *yányīn* 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. *Yīnyì* 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. *Wén zì* 文字 refers to the written language (T49n2038\_p0910c26).

所以善吐番音。

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

兼解諸國文字。

and he understood the writing systems of the various states.

Details of this terminology may be consulted in *Thesaurus Linguae Serricae* (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 *wényán* 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 *tǔhuà* 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. *wàiyǔ* 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. *wàiguóyǔ* 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 Yáng Xióng’s *Model Sayings* of the first century B.C.

5. *pǔtōnghuà* 普通話 “common language” (Mainland China) (ant. *dìfāngyǔ* 地方語 “local language”), *fāngyán* 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 incomprehensible) dialects. The word has a rather political flair.

6. *Hànyǔ* 漢語 “language of the Hàn 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 Yúxīn 庾信 and in *Shìshuōxīnyǔ* 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: *hu* “*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 Zhǐjī 劉知幾 (A.D. 661–721) in *Shǐtōng*, *Yányǔ* 《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 (*yí 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) (Yuán 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. *Hàn yán* 漢言 “Hàn language, language of the Hàn Dynasty > Chinese” (ant. *húyān* 胡言 or *hú yǔ* 胡語) is a historico-ethnographic term.

This remained a very common way of referring to the Chinese language long after the Hàn Dynasty, as is clear from the Buddhist Tripiṭaka. (T48n2023\_p1095c25(00))

胡言般若波羅蜜。  
漢言智慧彼岸也

Parāmitā in barbarian speech (*húyān* 胡言)  
is in Chinese speech (*Hànyán* 漢言)

佛者。

漢言覺也。

將以覺悟群生也。

Buddha

is “the enlightened” in Hàn language (*Hàn yán* 漢言)  
He will bring enlightenment to the sentient beings.  
(T25n1512\_p0835b29(05) (northern W i 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. *tōngyòngyǔ* 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 wénzì* 中國文字 “the Chinese (written) language”

(T49n2036\_p0477a06(03), R110\_p0542b09(00))

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 Huáxiáyán* 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 Hàn language [Hàn'ér yányǔ]”).

23. *Jīn wén* 晉文 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) “Jīn (typically written) language” is fairly rare, but clear 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 譯梵音為晉言 “translate(y) the Sanskrit *Fān yīn*) into Chinese(*Jīn yán* 晉言)”. (T14n0434\_p0105a

16) and also 斯經似安世高譯為晉言也。"This sutra was apparently translated into Chinese (Jīnyán 晉言) by Ān Shīgāo." (T33n1693\_p0001a 17)

25. *Jīn yǔ* 晉語 (obsolete, current in Buddhist texts) "Speech of the Jīn" 手執梵文口宣晉語。"Holding the Sanskrit in his hand he translated it orally into Chinese (Jīnyǔ 晉語)." (T50n2059\_p0329a 12)  
先誦本文。然後乃譯為晉語。"First he recited the original, and then he translated it into Chinese (Jīnyǔ 晉語)." (T55n2145\_p0072b24)

26. *Jīn yīn* 晉音 "Jīn Dynasty speech" contrasts with 外國語 "foreign language" (T14n0434\_p0105a 21; T50n2060\_p0634a 26)

27. *Qín yán* 秦言 "Qín language > Chinese" is the standard way of providing Chinese translations for Sanskrit words in the Buddhist Tripiṭaka. (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.)

答曰。摩訶秦言大。"maha is 'big' in Chinese (*Qín yán* 秦言)" (T25n1509\_p0383a 12)

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.

什自手執胡經。口譯秦語 "Kumārajīva held the barbarian classic (*hūjīng* 胡經) (i.e. the sutra) in his hands and translated it into (yǐ 譯) the Speech of Qín (*Qínyǔ* 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.

(R130\_p0664b06; 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 *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)

皆未詳唐語。"(the Indians) all had no detailed knowledge of Táng speech (Táng yǔ 唐語)." (R014\_p0563a 14)

三藏法師玄奘執梵文譯為唐語。"Tripiṭaka respectfully held the Sanskrit text (*Fàn wén*) in his hands and translated it into Táng speech (*Táng yǔ* 唐語)." (T30n1579\_p0283c07)

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 Jiāng 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:

若僧雖是新羅人。却會大唐語。"Monk Ruò was a person from Xīnlúo (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 *Hàn 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)

梵是天竺之言。漢是此土之語。"*Fàn* 梵 refers to the language of India, whereas *Hàn* 漢 is the language of this country." (R068\_p0353b05).

翻譯之家自有規 The specialists in translation have their own standards.

若名梵漢共有。 If a term exists both in Sanskrit (*Fàn* 梵) and in Chinese (*Hàn* 漢)

則敵對而翻。 then they just match the terms up in translation. (R005\_p0007b03)

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. *Jīn* 晉 "the language of the Jīn 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 *wénshēn*, in the autumn, during the ninth month he translated this into the language of Qí (*Qí wén* 齊文). And this is the *Báiyǔ jīng* "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. shénzhōu yǔ** 神州語 “the language of our divine land” is quaint, nationalistically 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. jīngpīnzi** 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:

<i>xīndàiwén</i> 現代文	present-day language
<i>fāngyǔ</i> 方際語	inter-local speech
<i>qūyǔ</i> 區際語	inter-regional speech
<i>gòngtōngyǔ</i> 共通語	commonly understood talk
<i>Hànzú gòngtōngyǔ</i> 漢族共通語	the commonly understood language of the Hàn race
<i>Hànyǔ biāozhǔnyǔ</i> 漢語標準語	Correct Chinese
<i>tōngyǔ</i> 通語	Current speech (old-fashioned)
<i>fānyǔ</i> 凡語	Ordinary speech
<i>yǎyán</i> 雅言	Elegant speech (ancient)
<i>xīyán</i> 夏言	Language of the Xì (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):

是以聖人處無為之事，  
行不言之教。

Therefore the sage engages in the business of non-interference,  
practices the wordless (*bù yán* 不言) teaching.

But in the end the famous book complains (Shima Kunio 1973, p. 146; ed. TLS, LAO 43):

不言之教，  
無為之益，  
天下希及之。

The unarticulated (*bù yán* 不言) teaching,  
and the uninterfering conduct,  
few are those who reach up to these in this world.

The Taoist classic *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. B.C.), echoes this (Wáng Shūmín 1988, p. 73; ed. TLS ZHUANG 2.5.9):

孰知不言之辯，  
不道之道？

Who understands the eloquence of the unspoken (*bù yán* 不言),  
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，  
言者不知，  
故聖人行不言之教。

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.

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  
不爭而善勝。  
不言而善應。  
不召而自來。

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.

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 *Analecets* (Huáng Huáixín 2008 p. 1574; ed. TLS, LY 17.19):

- 子曰：  
「子欲無言！」
- 子貢曰：  
「子如不言，  
則小子何述焉？」
- 子曰：  
「天何言哉！  
四時行焉，  
百物生焉；  
天何言哉？」

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 *Lǚshìchūnqiū* 呂氏春秋, comments (Wáng Lìqì 2000, p. 3031; ed. TLS, LS 26.1.2.3):

- 誠有之則神應乎人 若其不誠則神不應乎人  
矣，  
言豈足以論之哉？
- 此語不言之言也。

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 (Tāng Xiǎochūn 1995, p. 675; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.47):

- 不言之言，應也。  
Speechless (*bù yán* 不言) language (*yán* 言) is that of (spontaneous) response.
- Speechless language speaks for itself, as it where (Tāng Xiǎochūn 1995, p. 686; ed. TLS, GUAN 37.1.16):
- 不言之言，  
聞於雷鼓。  
Speechless (*bù yán* 不言) language (*yán* 言)  
is heard better than thunder and drums.

The Taoist encyclopaedia of the second century B.C. *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子, speaks of a higher eloquence of silence (Zhāng Shuāngdì 1997, p. 643; ed. TLS, HN2 6.2.7):

- 不言之辯，  
不道之道也。
- The eloquence (*bīn* 辯) of speechlessness (*bù yán* 不言),  
the unarticulated (*bù dào* 不道) Way (*dào* 道).

The classic on Chinese poeology from the second century B.C. *Hànshī wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳, attributes this higher form of unarticulated communication to sage rulers of antiquity (Qū Shǒuyuán 1996, p. 433; ed. TLS, HSWZ 4.33.3):

周公善聽不言之說。

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

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

- 夫言非吹也。  
言者有言，  
其未言者特未定也。
- 果有言邪？  
其未嘗有言邪？  
其以為異於鬻音，  
亦有辯乎，  
其无辯乎？
- 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?

#### 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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References to Buddhist texts are by number of entry in *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大藏新修大藏經 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 *Dainihon zokuōkyō* 大日本續藏經, Kyoto: Zokyo shoin, 1905-12.

Convenient information on the Buddhist texts involved will be found in Paul

Demiéville, Hubert Durt, and Anna Seidel, eds., *Répertoire du Canon bouddhique sino-japonais*, Edition de Taishō, Paris and Tokyo: Maisonneuve, 1978 and, for many Buddhist texts already included in the old Korean Tripitaka, very conveniently also in Lewis Lancaster, *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalog*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979 (extremely useful website: [http://www.acmuller.net/descriptive\\_catalogue/](http://www.acmuller.net/descriptive_catalogue/)). By far the most detailed source of information for those who can read and type Chinese is that created by Christian Wittern at Kyoto University (<http://www.kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~wittern/can/can4/find/canwww.htm>). Here all the items in the main Tripitaka may be looked up by T-number, and the volumes of the *Supplement* may be browsed by R-number. Much of the information of the various handbooks is systematised in this strategically central site.

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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
221-207 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. 220-280	Three Kingdoms
220-265 -- Wei	
221-263 -- Shu	
229-280 -- Wu	
A.D. 265-316	Western Jin
A.D. 317-420	Eastern Jin
A.D. 420-588	Southern and Northern Dynasties
420-588	Southern Dynasties
420-478 -- Song	
479-501 -- Qi	
502-556 -- Liang	
557-588 -- Chen	
386-588	Northern Dynasties
386-533 -- Northern Wei	
534-549 -- Eastern Wei	
535-557 -- 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	Republic of China
A.D. 1949-	People's Republic of China