

20th-Century Writing Reforms in China

79-271 Paper 2

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April 28, 2004

This paper gives a brief overview of the history of efforts to reform the Chinese writing system in the first half of the 20th century. We explore particularly the goals, rationales, and personalities behind the 1913 Commission on the Unification of Pronunciation, and the first linguistic reforms of the Chinese Communist Party.

1 Early Reform Efforts

The former Hundred-Days reformer 王照 Wang Zhao, in 1900, returned from a hiatus in Japan to publish the monograph “Letters for Combining the Sounds of Mandarin” (官話合聲字母 *Guānhuà héshēng zìmǔ*). In this book, he expostulated a new phonetic system he had devised for the Chinese language. Wang wrote:

When China’s ancients created writing for the convenient use of the people, they necessarily assigned reading pronunciations that were identical with the language of the time. This is a fixed principle. Language changes with each generation and writing follows it.¹

¹Mair, Victor H. *Sound and Meaning in the History of Characters: Views of China’s Earliest Script Reformers*. In *Difficult Characters: Interdisciplinary Studies of Chinese and Japanese Writing*, edited by Mary S. Erbaugh. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University National East Asian Language Resource Center, 2002.

Wang, in other words, believed that the written language was an ever-changing phenomenon; he blamed classical scholars for attempting to lithify Chinese writing in the ancient scholarly style of 文言 *wén yán*, or “literary language.” In Wang’s interpretation, the written language up until relatively recent historical times had been a faithful recording of the spoken language. But recently the spoken vernacular — what later would be referred to as the 白話 *bái huà* — had diverged, both in vocabulary and in sentence structure, from the corresponding written language.

Wang’s solution to what he saw as this problem of growing illiteracy was drastic, although certainly not unprecedented:² he devised a phonetic alphabet which, he proposed, ought to be used instead of Chinese ideographs in all cases. A phonetic system, he claimed, would improve the Chinese literacy rate and in the end add to the welfare of the Chinese state. After all, one of the best ways to run a state is to make sure the populace is well-informed, and one of the best ways to inform the populace is to make sure they can all read the newspaper!

But Wang’s system not only never caught on; according to Mair, it was actually banned by the Nationalist government, probably because it seemed to derive too heavily from the Japanese *katakana* script at a time when Sino-Japanese relations were touchy at best.

In the 1920s, a Committee for National Language Romanization was convened by the Nationalist government to discuss the proper romanization of the Chinese language. Out of this conference, thanks to the participation of its main developer, the talented, Cornell-educated linguist 趙元任 Y. R. Chao, in 1926 came the 國語羅馬字 *gwoyue romatzyh* system. This system, unlike the popular Wade-Giles or Yale systems, and unlike the now-standard Hanyu Pinyin system, encoded tonal information not with diacritical marks or numbers, but by actually changing the spelling of each syllable depending on its tone. For this reason, *gwoyue romatzyh* has been both hailed as “without doubt the only [Chinese

²Prior phonetic alphabets, successful and otherwise, had included those of Matteo Ricci, 1605; Nicolas Trigault, 1625; Thomas F. Wade, 1867; 盧戇章 Lu Zhuangzhang, 1892; and 蔡锡勇 Cai Xiyong, Shen Xue, and Wang Bingyao, all in 1896. (Zhou, Wu, Li, et al. *Reform of the Chinese Written Language*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1958; pp. 24–26, 63–64.)

romanization] that is linguistically sound”³ and vilified as “based on a series of very fatal phonetic lies.”⁴ It was adopted by the Chinese government as an official romanization, but its complexity and irregularity led to its disuse in common writing. Today, the *gwoyue romatzyh* is used on the mainland by only a handful of advocates.

2 The Language Standardization

These romanization efforts are all well and good; but before any system of romanization could be adopted, the Chinese first had to agree on which of China’s many dialects would be considered the standard. (An analogy in Western terms: the choice of how sounds were to be represented would depend heavily on whether one were trying to represent the sounds of English or of French.) To this end, the Nationalist government in February 1913 convened the Conference on Unification of Pronunciation. Among the forty-four noted Chinese intellectuals invited to participate in this conference were the noted linguist 吳敬恆 Wu Jingheng (Woo Tsin-hang) and Wang Zhao, the would-be script reformer we met in the first paragraphs of this essay.

Why did China require a standardized national language? From the Nationalists’ perspective, the reason was simple: Common language enabled common nationalist thought. The European powers who entered China in the nineteenth century brought with them their own nationalist spirits: the French, the Germans, the English and the Russians all possessed their own distinctive national tongues. As S. R. Ramsey remarks, “Language standardization obviously brought with it national strength.”⁵

The Conference on Unification of Pronunciation, though, despite the presence of Wu

³“Chinese Romanization.” At “Lingua Sinica: A Chinese Language Resource Company.” Online as of 25 April 2004 at <http://www.linguasinica.com/romanization/body.html#gwoluo>.

⁴Karlgren (1928), quoted in DeFrancis, John. *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950, ch. 4.

⁵Ramsey, S. Robert. *The Languages of China*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987; page 4.

and Wang, was not primarily composed of competent linguists nor phoneticists. Many of the members were invited for political reasons, with the result that the conference was split roughly equally into those who favored the adoption of Northern Mandarin as the national tongue and those who favored non-Mandarin southern dialects. Wang Zhao was a strong partisan of the former camp. But the conference turned into a political stalemate as neither side was willing to yield to the other.

After three months of this stalemate, a bizarre (and quite possibly embellished after the fact) incident occurred:

Wang Zhao attempted to exert pressure to split the southern group by threatening to walk out on what he referred to as the “Jiangsu-Zhejiang Conference on Unification of Pronunciation.” Finally he almost came to blows with 汪榮寶 Wang Rongbao [an advocate of the Southern tongues]. One day, when the latter happened to use the colloquial Shanghai expression 黃包車 *wangbao che* “rickshaw,” Wang Zhao mis-heard it as the Mandarin oath 王八蛋 *wángba dàn* “turtle’s egg,”⁶ whereupon he bared his arms and chased the speaker out of the hall. That was the last of Wang Rongbao at the conference.⁷

With Wang Rongbao out of the conference, it did not take very much longer for the committee to decide upon Mandarin as the national language. But the dialect they chose initially was not that spoken in Beijing; rather, it was a hybrid tongue that combined the basic features of *Beijingshua* with details such as the fifth (“entering”) tone which had been common in the speech of earlier dynasties but which Northern Mandarin had not bothered to preserve.

As part of one of the 國音推行方法七條 Seven Mandarin Sound Promotion Programs, Y. R. Chao was called upon in 1920 to produce authoritative sound recordings of the new

⁶Son of a b—.

⁷DeFrancis, *op. cit.* The same story appears in paraphrase on page 8 of Ramsey’s book.

national language. The resulting gramophone recordings sounded, according to Ramsey, “like Chinese no one had ever heard before.”⁸ Very soon after that, the committee decided to let go of the Southern features of the proposed language; the 國音常用字彙 National Phonetic Dictionary of Common Characters published in 1932 contained normalized Beijing Mandarin pronunciations, not the pronunciations dictated by the 1913 國話 *guóhuà*.

3 The First Communist Reforms

When the Communists “officially” took power in 1949, they had been following the language reforms closely for quite some time. Their stated goals, though, were not at all the same as those of the Nationalists. The Communist Left followed the Leninist idea of “federalist socialism” in linguistic policy: what this meant was the linguistic equality of Mandarin with the native tongues of all minority peoples in China. The Soviet bureaucracy had by 1920 already begun the process of categorizing and recording the minority languages of Russia, and the Chinese Communists stated their desire to follow suit.⁹

The Chinese Left also had another problem with the 國語 *guóyǔ*; namely, it was Mandarin! Northern Mandarin was also the language which the Qing dynasty had used for official politics, under the name 官話 *guānhuà*, and influential Chinese Communists felt that any show of support for the old imperial language would be impolitic, if not downright anti-revolutionary.

After the success of the Communist revolution, though, pragmatism prevailed. Mandarin had by 1949 been established as the national language for almost twenty years (depending on when one started counting), and they couldn’t very well change it all again. As for the “federalist” ideas of the Soviet linguists, they were virtually discarded as it was realized that a centralized government required a standardized language in which to do

⁸Ramsey, *op. cit.*; page 9.

⁹Stalin’s infatuation with minority languages did not last long; by the 1930s the USSR was beginning to turn to covert Russification. See for instance Ornstein (1959).

business. So the Communists turned to the next issue on their linguistic agenda: ensuring that the populace would be able to read the newspapers (and the attendant Communist sloganeering).

In 1952, the Communist government convened the Committee for Reforming the Chinese Written Language. It was headed by 吳郁章 Wu Yuchang, the former head of the Yen-an Association for the Promotion of Constitutional Government and a member of the Central People's Government Committee.

The goals of this committee were to design a method by which the complicated Chinese ideographs could be simplified to the point where anyone, even working men and peasants with little scholarly ability, would be able to remember them without much difficulty; and also to make sure that their simplifications met with popular approval. Zhou Enlai pointed out several years later that “long before the establishment of the Committee. . . the people had been doing the reforming. The committee's role [was] only to collect. . . what [had] been created by the people[.]”¹⁰

Simultaneously, the same committee was deciding on the form of the National Phonetic Alphabet. It was decided to use the Latin alphabet, rather than any Chinese phonetic system, simply for pragmatic reasons, including catering to Western students of the language. To nationalist critics of the Latin alphabet, Zhou writes: “At present, more than sixty countries use the Latin alphabet. . . So, the Latin alphabet had become the alphabet of each nation's own alphabet. . . . Likewise, when we adopt the Latin alphabet, in which we make necessary adjustments to suit the. . . Chinese language, it becomes the phonetic alphabet of our language and is no longer. . . the alphabet of any foreign country. . . . We make it serve us just as we make trains, steamships, automobiles and aeroplanes serve us.”¹¹

While the committee successfully produced a Plan for Character Simplification in 1954 (officially promulgated in 1956), the government viewed language reform as an ongoing

¹⁰Zhou, op. cit.; page 13.

¹¹Zhou, op. cit.; pp. 26–27.

process, as indeed it still is viewed. This policy of continuous reform resulted in the convening of numerous later committees, conferences and conventions, such as the committee which in 1977 proposed the Second Plan for Character Simplification. This reform was officially rescinded in 1986, though, partly due to lack of popular support and partly due to the backlash against anything seen to be connected with the Cultural Revolution (similarly to the way Wang Zhao's *guanhua zimu* system was quashed for different ideological reasons, half a century earlier).

4 Conclusions

In this paper, we have looked at the evolution of the writing reform movement in early twentieth-century China, from the alphabetic approach taken by Wang Zhao to the combined *pinyin*–simplified character approach taken by the Communist Party post-revolution. Nor has the Chinese language lost its fascination for scholars and politicians; the Committee for Reform of the Written Language is still operating in the PRC today, its tasks made all the more influential by the rise of digital standards such as 國家標準碼 Guobiao and Unicode.¹²

It is apparent that the goals and backgrounds of the many individuals involved in the early years of the national language reform movement affected its outcome in many ways: from the almost accidental way in which Mandarin was chosen to be the national language, to the way the Communist ideology shaped the movement for character simplification. My research has shown me several directions in which I wish to continue to learn more about China, its language, and the men and women who shaped them both.

¹²For an interesting example of the tension between the Chinese written language and the digital age, see: “Unique or trite, Chinese parents try to personalize kids’ names.” Xinhuanet, 18 June 2003. Online as of 25 April 2004 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2003-06/18/content_924136.htm.

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