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Chen Yuan and Chinese Sociolinguistics

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a young and vigorous branch of linguistics. Brought to life in the late 1960s through the pioneering work on urban dialects by William Labov and his students, it developed rapidly. From the end of the 1970s, it expanded to include a vast range of studies focusing on various relations between language and society. From sociolinguistics in the narrow sense—the study of correlations between linguistic and nonlinguistic variables—it came to be used as an umbrella term of loosely connected research into the interdependence and mutual influence of language and social life. Nowadays, sociolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field, focusing on such issues as social dialects, multilingualism, language planning, and language reform and change.

Due to political upheavals in China in the 1960s and 1970s, sociolinguistics did not enter the country until the end of the 1970s. As in the West, this new branch of linguistics rapidly gained popularity. As early as 1987, the first symposium on sociolinguistics was held. Remarkably, the lion's share of introducing, popularizing, and developing sociolinguistics in China was performed by just one man, Chen Yuan. Even today, the development of sociolinguistics in China still largely follows Chen's footsteps.

Born in 1918, Chen Yuan is not a linguist by training. His interest in language, language reforms, and the mutual influence of language and society grew out of the major intellectual trends in Chinese society in the twentieth century. This century was marked by Chinese intellectuals' severe dissatisfaction with the linguistic situation. They blamed the problems facing the country at the dawn of the twentieth century on the people's lack of knowledge, and they attributed this lack of knowledge to the cumbersome and difficult language and script. Among the most

crucial problems of that time were the struggle between literary and vernacular Chinese, the need to establish and promote a national language, and the urgent need to modify the logographic form of script by another, preferably alphabetic, system of writing, or even by another language. Chen Yuan witnessed and became an active participant in many of the linguistic reforms of this turbulent era.

Chen Yuan can be justly called a Renaissance man, for he is gifted with many talents, driven by numerous interests, and works successfully in diverse fields of investigation. Chen received a traditional Chinese education. He attended a private elementary school with the standard curriculum of the four Confucian classics and classical Chinese. Upon graduation, his parents sent him to a Christian middle school, where he took interest in foreign languages, writing, poetry, translation, music, and painting. As a student, he painted, sang in a choir, studied musical composition, and wrote music. His love for music never abandoned him; later on in his life, he translated the correspondence between Petr Ilich Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda von Meck (1876–1878), which appeared under the title *Wo de yinyue shenghuo* (My life in music).

Even though problems of language always intrigued him, Chen chose natural sciences as his major and entered the College of Engineering at Sun Yatsen University. He specialized in geography, and upon graduation, authored and translated over ten books on geography, including Chinese and world geography, as well as natural, economical, and political geography. In college, he also took interest in terminology, born out of the practical need to understand textbooks and manuals. At that time, many English technical terms did not have standard counterparts in Chinese, and there were no special dictionaries of correspondences.

In the 1930s, Chen joined the *Latinxua sin wenz* movement. *Latinxua sin wenz*, initiated by Russian and Chinese linguists who aimed to promote literacy among Chinese workers in the Soviet Far East, was one of the alphabetization schemes of the time. Given that the northern-based form of *latinxua* was ill-suited for speakers of southern dialects, the creation of dialectal versions of *latinxua* and the promotion of literacy in the people's native dialects in the southern dialectal areas was proposed. As a response to this urge, Chen published a manual and a reading book in the *latinxua* scheme for his native dialect, Cantonese.

Also in the 1930s, Chen studied Esperanto, which was perceived at the time as a possible replacement for Chinese. He took active part in the Esperanto movement, striving to popularize this language. Through-

out his life, Chen remained an ardent popularizer of Esperanto, having written numerous articles on this subject. Currently, he is also vice-chairman of the board of directors of China's Esperanto association.

Chen's professional life started with a job as an editor. He worked in the largest and most influential publishing houses of China: Sanlian shudian, Renmin chubanshe, Shijie zhishi chubanshe, Zhonghua shuju, Shangwu yinshuguan, and Wenzi gaige chubanshe. He was one of the editors of the new editions of the renowned and influential dictionaries *Cihai* (Sea of words), *Ciyuan* (Origin of words), and *Xiandai Hanyu cidian* (Dictionary of modern Chinese).

Very early in his life, Chen took an interest in writing. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, he wrote numerous articles on international politics, and took part in editorial work on the journal *Shijie zhishi* (Knowledge About the World). In 1947, he wrote a column for the Shanghai newspaper *Shidai ribao*, which contained weekly international reviews. He also wrote essays, book reviews, poetry, and being fluent in English, French, and Russian, translated numerous literary works by English, American, French, and Russian writers.

The culmination of Chen's lifelong career as an editor and sociolinguist was his appointment as the chair of the State Language Commission of the PRC. Hence, by witnessing and participating in language reforms of the twentieth century, he now has a chance to plan and implement China's various language policies.

Chen's interest in sociolinguistics—more precisely in the relationship between lexicon and social life—came as a response to the critique of Chen's work by Yao Wenyan, a member of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution. In the introduction to his first oeuvre on sociolinguistics, *Yuyan yu shehui shenghuo* (Language and social life), Chen reports that after this episode, he immersed himself in studies of language phenomena and wrote numerous notes on linguistics. These notes were the origin of his *Yuyan yu shehui shenghuo*—in his formulation, a “record of the struggle between an elementary student of linguistics and scoundrels of cultural despotism” and a “reflection of a small facet of this turbulent era” (Chen 1979, introduction).

Chen's second opus, *Shehui yuyanxue* (Sociolinguistics) (1983), was conceived as a popular account of sociolinguistic phenomena for the nonlinguistically oriented public. Perfectly acquainted with the best foreign works on sociolinguistics, Chen endeavors to apply the most up-to-

date Western theories to Chinese. These two works are truly the foundation of sociolinguistic studies in China.

Among other representative works of Chen are five papers “Explaining . . .,” each of which comments on one word (namely, *yi* [one], *da* [big] [included in this issue], *gui* [ghost], *dian* [dictionary], and *jiu* [nine]), and further reflects on lexicographic, lexicological, and sociolinguistic issues. The first paper in this series, “Shi *yi*: Guanyu cidian shouci, shiyi de ruogan shexiang” (Explaining the word *one*: Some considerations on word collection and explanation in dictionaries), was published in 1980. These papers are written vividly and are highly entertaining, covering various aspects of the words under consideration (etymology, morphology, and usage) in a popular form.

The papers in this issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* are presented chronologically by their time of appearance. The first paper, “Lexicon and Metaphysics,” is an excerpt from Chen’s first work, *Yuyan yu shehui shenghuo* (1979). It focuses on the influence of social upheavals—for the most part, the Cultural Revolution—on the modern Chinese lexicon. Chen discusses a small group of so-called everyday words (e.g., *eat*, *sofa*, *onion*, *miniskirt*) that were labeled “reactionary” in the 1960s and 1970s. This excerpt, like the whole of *Yuyan yu shehui shenghuo*, is written emotionally, showing close personal involvement in the discussion around the “reactionary” words of the time. It condemns the damaging effect that a handful of “evil-minded people” had on the Chinese language during the Cultural Revolution. From a modern standpoint, it is more like a picture of the epoch rather than a scientific investigation. The importance of this book in Chinese science is nevertheless difficult to overestimate, as it laid the foundation for Chinese sociolinguistics. Indeed, it was the first publication to attract attention to the influence of society on language.

“Explaining the Word *Da* (Big): On Dictionary Compilation, Lexicography, and Certain Problems in Sociolinguistics” (1981) represents Chen’s work as an editor. The paper opens with a query into the notion of *word* as applied to Chinese and Indo-European languages, and discusses the difficulty of distinguishing words in Chinese.

The question of what constitutes a word in Chinese is fundamental for modern Chinese linguistics. The problem of word demarcation appeared in the twentieth century, when various systems of phonetic writing were developed. The issue of identifying word boundaries arose as a practical problem to segment phonetic writing into orthographical units.

By comparison, Chinese traditional script segments written texts into characters, *zi*, which are morphemic in nature.

The distinction between *zi* (character) and *ci* (word), as well as the problem of “wordhood” in Chinese in general, have been extensively researched. A range of methods to distinguish words from word groups or phrases has also been proposed (cf. Chao 1968, 136–38, 153–54; Isaenko 1957; Lu Zhiwei 1956, 1964; Wang Li 1953). Lu Zhiwei’s method of expansion (*kuozhanfa*) is currently used as the standard way to distinguish words from phrases in dictionary compilation. In this context, it is not entirely clear why Chen takes distance from this rich tradition, and even notes, “so far, there has been no large-scale scientific study of what can be called a word and how to distinguish between a word and a word group.” Chen’s reluctance to refer to the ongoing academic discussion can tentatively be explained by the popular nature of his paper, although even a popular account of the problem could greatly benefit from the insightful research on words and word boundaries in Chinese linguistics.

The third paper, “The Rise, Development, and Future Prospects of Sociolinguistics” (1982), outlines the essence, boundaries, and methods of sociolinguistics. Well-documented and based on the best sociolinguistic literature in the West, this paper endeavors to apply these methods to the Chinese situation. The paper ends with an outline of prospects for future research in this field. Worthy of note, Chen single-handedly explored most of the proposed directions.

In the context of sociolinguistic research in the West, this paper may not offer any insights or major theoretical findings. On the other hand, in the Chinese context, its significance at the time of its publication for introducing sociolinguistic theories and demonstrating their relevance to the study of Chinese can hardly be overemphasized.

Chen works not only on very broad outlines of sociolinguistics as a frontier science, but also devotes much attention to thorough research of concrete problems within the domain of sociolinguistics. The fourth paper chosen for this issue, “An Analysis of the Greatest Amount of Information and the Most Effective Language Communication Based on Several Examples from Modern Chinese—Notes of a Sociolinguist” (1983) illustrates this approach. In this paper, Chen shows how the achievements of the *Mathematical Theory of Communication* by Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949)—the notions of amount of information, redundancy, and noise—can be applied to linguistics and

to the Chinese situation in particular. By analyzing examples from Chinese newspaper articles and books, Chen reflects on the most effective information that these media should ideally attain.

Chen's fascination with cybernetics is evident in all of the papers selected for this issue. It is remarkable that in some cases he prefers to search for solutions in cybernetics instead of resorting to the relevant research in linguistics, as is the case with the discussion on wordhood in Chinese. Yet Chen does acknowledge that natural language should not and cannot limit itself to a formal language of mathematics and cybernetics.

The paper concluding this issue is "The Chinese Language (Mandarin) in the Twenty-first Century" (1997), a speech given by Chen at a linguistic conference in Hong Kong. Chen offers a historical overview of the sociolinguistic situation in China from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. As the chair of the State Language Commission of the PRC, he discusses the past, the present, and most important, the future of language reform, along with issues of language standardization, and the destiny of Chinese in the coming century. Typical in this respect is the presentation of Chinese as one language as opposed to minority languages of China, whereas in reality, Chinese consists of a variety of mutually unintelligible languages, conventionally referred to as dialects.

Whether or not one agrees with the directions and solutions proposed by Chen, he puts forward ten questions concerning the destiny of Chinese in the twenty-first century that will no doubt influence language planning in China in the coming decades.

In sum, Chen Yuan's life and work is inseparable from major trends in Chinese linguistics. The influence he exercised in sociolinguistics and language planning in China is enormous, and will continue to inspire Chinese linguistic research in many different domains.

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