Classical Chinese refers to the formal written language of China prior to the twentieth century, a terse, learned language of the educated distinct from the spoken vernacular of the masses. Following the Vernacular Language Movement of the 1910s, writing in China shifted to vernacular Chinese, but remnants of the classical language survive in modern writings in the form of allusions, idioms, and set expression.

Classical Chinese refers to the language of established literature and formal writings in China before the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, language reforms were instituted so that writing was no longer carried out in the classical language, which was understood by only an educated elite, but instead done in an approximation of the modern vernacular (everyday language) of the north.

The expression Classical Chinese has a narrow and a broad sense. In its narrow sense, Classical Chinese (guwen, ancient text) is the designation for written language from the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) through the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), encompassing the language of the Chinese classics and early historical narratives. Later imitations of the classical style, used in literature and formal writings from the third century to the early twentieth century, are referred to as Literary Chinese (wenyanwen, literary text). The classical/literary divide is in many ways similar to the relationship between Classical Latin and Medieval Latin, both learned languages. In actual usage, however, the classical/literary distinction is not always maintained by Chinese academics, as guwen and wenyanwen are used interchangeably to refer to formal writing styles before the advent of modern literature (baihuawen, plain speech text).

When attempting to frame a formal definition of Classical Chinese, linguists tend to resort to one of two strategies. The first is to treat Classical Chinese as all that is not vernacular writing—definition by default. The second is to pinpoint the historical period out of which Classical Chinese writing developed and state that Classical Chinese consists of literary traditions that grew out of the speech habits of a particular time and place.

The Classical/Vernacular Divide

Criteria that have been traditionally used to distinguish Classical and Vernacular Chinese include the following:

1. **Intelligibility**: Is the text readily understood by the average native speaker, or is the language comprehensible only to an educated elite?
2. **Spoken versus written mode**: Does the text resemble natural speech, or is it more characteristic of stylized writing?
3. **Time depth**: When speaking of natural speech and average native speaker, are we using present-day speakers as a reference point (modern
Intelligibility means that the language is comprehensible to a general audience. If it cannot be understood by the average native speaker without further training, it is considered unintelligible. Vernacular Chinese (baihua, plain speech) is Chinese written in language the average speaker can understand. Everything else is classified as Classical Chinese regardless of the source. This view is often reflected in popular comments about writing styles. Certain styles are difficult to understand because they are too wenyan (classical/literary). In this view Classical Chinese stands for all writing styles understood by only a few.

There are problems with this approach, however. The first is that intelligibility judgments are limited to the here and now, for there is no way of determining whether people in ancient times could understand a particular style of writing. We are tied to the judgments of a modern audience. If we were to do this, we run into a second problem, which is that we would have to exclude from our definition of Vernacular Chinese the language of popular historical novels such as Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu Zhuan) and Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou Meng), which are traditionally considered vernacular literature (baihua xi-aoshuo) but are in modern times not fully comprehensible to the uneducated reader.

An alternative to the intelligibility criterion is that of language mode: spoken language versus written language. Most of the world’s languages maintain a distinction between spoken and written modes. The spoken mode is usually more informal and involved, employing more first- and second-person pronouns (I, you), conjunctions (and, but), and situation-dependent references (last night, over here), whereas the written mode tends to be more informational, abstract, and explicit, often containing learned or technical vocabulary. Relying on such universal tendencies, we can determine whether the text at hand is closer to typical spoken language or written language. Texts that resemble spoken language are then labeled Vernacular Chinese. Those with attributes of written language are relegated to Classical Chinese.

Note that the intelligible/unintelligible divide is not the same as the spoken/written divide. This is because most uneducated speakers can understand some formal written language. It is not the case that uneducated speakers can only understand language in the spoken mode, and find formal writing entirely unintelligible. There is an area of overlap where language can have characteristics of the written register, and is yet comprehensible to the uneducated reader.

Whether we use intelligibility or spoken/written mode as criterion, however, an additional variable is time depth, the historical period of the intended audience. Writing that is intelligible to or characteristic of the population of one historical period may be unintelligible to or uncharacteristic of the speech of another stage in history. For this reason it is important to specify the period on which we are to base our definition.

Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of Communism in China, was both a scholar and a rebel. He and his fellow intellectual Hu Shi succeeded in bringing about the Vernacular Movement, or the change from writing in a Classical Chinese to a colloquial syntax.
A definition of Classical Chinese based on spoken/written mode from the perspective of a historical audience was given by scholar Hu Shi (1891–1962), who was one of the chief proponents of language reform and vernacular writing in early Republican China. In his influential work Baihua Wenxue Shi (A History of Vernacular Literature, 1928), Hu described a division in which vernacular literature is literature written in the spoken language of the day (which may be far removed from the spoken language of today), and classical literature is all other literature. By this definition what is vernacular and what is classical is not a fixed notion, but rather varies with each historical period. Hu’s definition, while similar to the European notion of vernacular and mainstream literature, is actually foreign to the Chinese tradition. Hu is often criticized for framing a definition of vernacular language that is too broad. His definition would necessarily include obscure works of oral literature from remote periods, which speakers of Modern Chinese have great trouble understanding.

A more widely accepted definition of Vernacular and Classical Chinese is that of Lü Shuxiang (1944, 12), which states that vernacular literature is written text that corresponds to spoken language from the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) onwards. All else is relegated to Classical Chinese. Lü’s treatment avoids the shortcomings of both Hu’s working definition and the layman’s notion of the vernacular. It includes drama and popular writing from
the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties while excluding obscure pre-Tang works of oral literature. Lü’s definition is sometimes criticized for its arbitrary choice of the Tang dynasty as a divide, but it is worth noting that the intermingling of Sinitic and Altaic-speaking populations in cosmopolitan Tang society accounts for the considerable linguistic gap between Middle Chinese (265–1269) and Premodern Chinese (1269–1795). It is also during this period that basic Chinese word order began to shift from subject–verb–object to subject–object–verb—a change often taken to be an important distinction between Classical Chinese and Modern Chinese.

A number of linguistic features distinguish Modern Chinese from its classical predecessor. Whereas Modern Chinese acquired a system of stress and rhythm that led to the development of longer words, vocabulary in the classical period consisted by and large of single-syllable word forms. In the classical language, words can easily change from noun to verb or adjective and vice versa, whereas in the modern language such flexibility is rare. When counting objects, nouns in Modern Chinese are always preceded by a measure word—not so in Classical Chinese. Classical Chinese does not require a “to be” verb, and its pronouns and articles are significantly different from those of modern day usage.

Classical Chinese, as an abstract form of writing far removed from the Chinese spoken language, was an East Asian lingua franca readily borrowed by neighboring states. It was in wide circulation outside of China proper, often existing as an elite written language alongside the local vernacular, similar to the use of Latin in Western Europe. Up until the twentieth century, the educated classes in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam possessed a reading knowledge of Classical Chinese (known as kanbun in Japanese and hanmun in Korean). Being a semantic (related to meaning) rather than phonetic (related to sound) means of representation, Classical Chinese did not have a uniform pronunciation but instead was incorporated into the pronunciation system of the local language or dialect.

Classical Chinese through the Ages

Some scholars believe that the classical writing style may have been derived from the spoken language of an earlier period. Linguists have found considerable overlap between Classical Chinese grammar and the syntax of Old Chinese oracle bone and bronze inscriptions of the Shang (1766–1045 BCE) and Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE) dynasties. The inscriptions are for the most part short sentences describing ceremonies and divinations, and are considered a more or less faithful record of the spoken language of the day in the Huang (Yellow) River basin.

With the breakup of the Zhou empire (1111–256 BCE), a new culture of pluralism demanded a more stylized form of writing suited to political oratory. This is reflected in the language of works such as the Confucian Analects (Lunyu) and Mencius (Mengzi), which shows obvious imitations of earlier classics and is more concise and structured, and richer in rhetorical devices.

Writing during the later Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han dynasties saw a further move toward allegory and ornamentation, resulting in a style distinct from the vernacular language of the day. It was during this period that Classical Chinese forged an identity as a literary language separate from vernacular speech, and it is the conventions of this period that later authors sought to emulate when writing in the “classical style.” For this reason some sinologists reserve the term Classical Chinese (guwen) for the writings of the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties and refer to the language of later imitations as Literary Chinese (wenyanwen).

Following the Han dynasty, worship of form was taken to an extreme at the expense of substance, giving rise to the parallel prose (pianwen) of the Southern dynasties (420–589 CE), in which balance of rhythm, imagery, and tonal patterns became the focus. This worship of formal elements created a backlash in the Tang dynasty, in which neoclassicists such as Han Yu (768–824 CE) and Liu Zongyuan (773–819 CE) called for a return to substance and the rhetorical styles of the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties. From the Tang dynasty onward, different schools of writing have offered different takes on the classical language, and literary aesthetics have swung back and forth between form and substance, and between arch conservatism and the adoption of new grammars and lexicons.

The dominance of Classical Chinese started to wane after the Opium War (1840–1842), as intellectuals began to see the classical/vernacular gap as a hindrance to greater literacy and called for the replacement of Classical Chinese with the modern spoken language in education.
and media as part of the modernization of China. In the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s, promotion of Vernacular Chinese gathered momentum through the efforts of noted scholars such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), Qian Xuantong (1887–1939), and Fu Sinian (1896–1950), culminating in the Vernacular Language Movement (Baihuawen Yundong) of 1917–1919. The success of the movement led to the adoption of Vernacular Chinese as the language of textbooks, and influential new works of literature by authors such as Lu Xun (1881–1936) began appearing in the vernacular.

To this day, however, the classical language lives on in government notices and legal documents and in all manner of writing deemed formal. Classical patterns and set expressions appear frequently in vernacular prose—more so in Taiwan and Hong Kong than in mainland China. Despite the efforts of early twentieth-century language reformers to make a clean break with wenyan, it looks as though it will be some time before the new writing born of the Vernacular Language Movement can forge an identity fully distinct from that of the classical language that has been standard for much of Chinese history.

**Further Reading**


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