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CLASSICAL CHINESE

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Classical Chinese

Classical Chinese refers to the language of canonical texts and formal writings in China prior to the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, coinciding with the end of imperial rule, language reforms were instituted so that writing was no longer carried out in the classical language, which was understood only by an educated elite, but instead done in an approximation of the modern northern vernacular.

The expression ‘Classical Chinese’ has a narrow sense and a broad sense. In its narrow sense, Classical Chinese (古文 gǔwén ‘ancient text’) is the designation for written language from the Zhōu dynasty (1111–256 BCE) through to the Hàn dynasty (206 BCE – CE 220), encompassing the language of Chinese classics such as the Analects (《论语》Lún Yǔ), the Doctrine of the Mean (《中庸》Zhōng Yōng), the Great Learning (《大学》Dà Xué) and Mencius (《孟子》Mèng Zǐ), and early historical narratives such as the Discourses of the States (《国语》Guó Yǔ), Chronicles of Zuǒ (《左传》Zuǒ Zhuàn) and Strategies of the Warring States (《战国策》Zhànguó Cè). Later imitations of the classical style, used in literature and formal writings from the third century to the early twentieth century, are said to be written in Literary Chinese (文言文 wényánwén ‘literary text’, also referred to as 文理 wénlǐ by biblical scholars). The Classical/Literary divide is in many ways similar to the relationship between Classical Latin and Medieval Latin in Europe, both learned languages, the latter of which emulates the more consistent grammar and lexis of the former. In actual usage, however, the Classical/Literary distinction is not always maintained by Chinese academics, as gǔwén 古文 and wényánwén 文言文 are used interchangeably to refer to formal writing styles prior to the advent of modern vernacular literature (白话文 báihuàwén ‘plain speech text’). It is this broader sense of Classical Chinese, including both early source texts and later imitations, that is adopted in this chapter.

In its earliest stages, Classical Chinese evolved out of the written form of Old Chinese (c. 1766 BCE – CE 220), traces of whose grammatical patterns can be found in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions of the Shāng (1766–1045 BCE) and Western Zhōu (1045–771 BCE) dynasties. The inscriptions are for the most part short sentences describing ceremonies and divinations, and are considered to be a more or less faithful record of the spoken language of the day in the Yellow River basin.
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With the breakup of the Zhōu empire in the third century BCE however, 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 and Mencius, which is more concise and structured, richer in rhetorical devices, and shows obvious imitations of earlier classics such as the Book of Songs (《诗经》Shī Jīng) and the Book of Changes (《易经》Yì Jīng).

The later Warring States period (402–221 BCE) and the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Hán dynasties saw a further move toward allegory and ornamentation, resulting in writing that is stylistically 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’ (古文 gǔwén) for the writings of the Zhōu, Qin and Hán dynasties, and refer to the language of later imitations as ‘Literary Chinese’ (文言文 wényánwén).

Following the Hán dynasty, worship of form was taken to an extreme at the expense of substance, giving rise to the belletrist ‘parallel prose’ (骈文 piánwén) of the Southern Dynasties (420–589), in which balance of rhythm, imagery and tonal patterns became of primary concern. This worship of formal elements created a backlash in the Táng dynasty (618–907), in which neoclassicists such as 韩愈 Hán Yù (768–824) and 柳宗元 Liǔ Zōngyuán (773–819) called for a return to substance and the rhetorical styles of the Zhōu, Qin and Hán dynasties. From the Táng dynasty onwards, different schools of writing have offered different takes on the classical language, and literary aesthetics have oscillated between form and substance, and between arch conservatism and the adoption of new grammar and lexicon.

In the early Republican period, especially in the context of language debates leading up to the 1917–19 Vernacular Language Movement (白话文运动 Báihuàwén Yùndòng) and the 1919 May Fourth Movement (五四运动 Wǔsì Yùndòng), Classical Chinese was often regarded as the logical complement of vernacular Chinese (白话 báihuà), for which definitions vary, ranging from the synchronic to diachronic accounts covering different historical periods. Republican language reformer 胡适 Hú Shì (1891–1962), in his seminal work A History of Vernacular Literature (《白话文学史》Báihuà Wénxué Shǐ, 1928), implied a dichotomy 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 that which is excluded from this scope by default. By this definition, what is vernacular and what is classical is not a fixed notion, but rather varies with each historical period. Hú’s dichotomy, while similar to the European notion of vernacular vs. mainstream literature, is actually foreign to the Chinese tradition. Hú is often criticized for framing a definition of vernacular language that is too broad, as his definition would necessarily include obscure works of oral literature from remote periods, which speakers of Modern Chinese would have trouble understanding.

A more widely accepted definition of vernacular and literary language is that of 吕叔湘 Lǚ Shùxiāng (1904–1998), who states that vernacular literature is written text which corresponds to spoken language from the Táng dynasty (618–907) onwards; all else is relegated to Literary Chinese (Lǚ 1944: 12). Lǚ’s treatment includes in the scope of the vernacular drama and popular writings from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties while excluding obscure pre-Táng works of oral literature. Lǚ’s definition is sometimes criticized for its arbitrary choice of the Táng dynasty as a divide, but it is worth noting that the intermingling of Sinitic and Altaic-speaking populations in cosmopolitan Táng society accounts for the considerable linguistic gap between Middle Chinese (265–1269)
and Pre-Modern Chinese (1269–1795). It is also during this period that basic Chinese word order began to shift from Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) to Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) – a development often taken to be the catalyst for grammatical changes that give the modern vernacular its defining characteristics.

It is worth noting also that 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, and was in wide circulation outside of China proper, often existing as an elite written language learned alongside the local vernacular, comparable to the use of Latin in the nation states of 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, *hanmun* in Korean and *hán văn* in Vietnamese – all local pronunciations of the Chinese 汉文 *hànwen*). Being a semantic rather than phonetic means of representation, Classical Chinese lent well to borrowing across unrelated languages, and did not have a uniform pronunciation, but instead, was incorporated into the pronunciation system of the local language or dialect (Rouzer 2007: xiii–xiv).

**Features of Classical Chinese**

A number of linguistic features serve to distinguish Classical Chinese from its present-day vernacular counterpart. Whereas Modern Chinese acquired metrical constraints that led to the development of a large polysyllabic vocabulary, lexis in the early classical period consisted, by and large, of monosyllabic forms. In the classical language, part of speech assignment is fluid, whereas in the modern language lexical items belong to fixed word classes. Noun classifiers are obligatory in Modern Chinese – not so in its classical predecessor. Classical Chinese does not require a copula, and its pronoun and determiner inventory is significantly different from that of modern-day usage. Many post-verbal prepositional phrases in Classical Chinese have moved to the pre-verbal position in Modern Chinese.

**Monosyllabicity of words**

Classical Chinese, in its early stages, commanded a vocabulary that was predominantly monosyllabic, which stands in contrast to the largely polysyllabic lexis of Modern Chinese. This discrepancy derives chiefly from the fact that Classical Chinese, having developed out of the written mode of Old Chinese (c. 1766 BCE – ce 220), represents a language whose phonological structure was vastly more complex than that of any present-day Chinese variety, and is believed to permit consonant clusters in the syllable-onset position and allow a wider range of consonantal endings in the syllable-coda position. These cluster onsets and consonantal endings were merged or dropped from the third century onward due to increased contact with the Altaic languages of northern and northwestern China (Tai and Chan 1999: 232; Jänne 1996: 165), leading to the loss of Old Chinese superheavy and bimoraic syllables and the subsequent development of disyllabic words to take their place (Feng 1998: 224–6). Hence the words for ‘ear’, ‘mouse’ and ‘son’, for example, are monosyllabic 耳 ěr, 鼠 shǔ and 子 zǐ in Classical Chinese, but are lengthened to disyllabic 耳朵 ěrduo, 老鼠 lǎoshǔ and 儿子 érzi in the modern Beijing dialect.

The shift from one to two syllables is achieved via a number of different mechanisms, the most common of which is compounding. Whereas Classical Chinese had the single syllable 父 fù for ‘father’, the same term in colloquial Mandarin becomes 父亲 fùqīn – a noun compound composed of 父 fù ‘father’ and 亲 qīn ‘kinsfolk’ – both elements of which
have since evolved into bound morphemes that cannot be used independently as words in their own right. Similarly, Classical Chinese 国 guó ‘state’ becomes 国家 guójiā ‘state+estate’ in Modern Chinese, 友 yǒu ‘friend’ becomes 朋友 péngyǒu ‘peer+friend’, and 衣 yī ‘clothing’ must now be expressed as 衣服 yīfu ‘clothing+livery’ in the contemporary idiom.

Contact between ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese speaking populations in periods of migration and upheaval served to further add polysyllabic loans to the Chinese language. The Eastern 漢 through the early 唐 dynasty (first century–eighth century) saw the spread of Buddhism to China, which brought with it many now firmly ingrained conceptual abstractions, including 世界 shìjiè ‘world’, 刹那 chànrì ‘moment’, 缘分 yuánfèn ‘destiny’ and 方便 fāngbiàn ‘convenience’. In the late 明 dynasty, China came into contact with European missionaries and traders, who brought with them (directly from the West and indirectly via Japanese) an influx of words for Western concepts such as 公司 gōngsī ‘company’, 机器 jīqì ‘machinery’, 自由 zìyóu ‘freedom’ and 新闻 xīnwén ‘news’. The process was accelerated after the Opium War of 1839–1842, when the encroachment of Western powers and the import of Western science led to an infusion of polysyllabic transliterated Western terms on a scale never seen before – a process which is continuing to this day, with the introduction of terms such as 咖啡 kāfēi ‘coffee’, 巧克力 qiǎokēlì ‘chocolate’, 麦克风 màikèfēng ‘microphone’, 引擎 yǐnqíng ‘engine’, 吉他 jítā ‘guitar’, 沙发 shāfā ‘sofa’, 马达 mǎdá ‘motor’ and the like. Virtually all foreign loans and transliterations from this period are two syllables or longer, so as to constitute the minimal metrical foot needed to form a prosodic word (Feng 1998: 224–30). We see this at play in the transliteration of country names: whereas polysyllabic country names can be rendered directly, e.g. Italy → 意大利 yìdàlì; Portugal → 葡萄牙 pútáoyá, monosyllabic names must attach the morpheme 国 guó ‘nation; state’ so that there is sufficient length to form a metrical foot, e.g. France → 法国 fǎguó, 德国 déguó.

**Word class conversion**

Classical Chinese differs from the modern idiom also in that words, in their character form, can move freely between one word class and another, exhibiting a fluidity in part-of-speech that is generally not observed in the contemporary language. In Book 12 of the Analects (c. fifth century BCE), when Confucius is asked by Duke Jing of Qi about government, the master replies with the aphorism:

君君、臣臣、父父、子子。
Jūn jūn, chén chén, fù fù, zǐ zǐ

In the master’s response, the first character of each pair represents a noun, i.e. ‘ruler’, ‘subject’, ‘father’, ‘son’, whereas the second identical character represents a verb, i.e. ‘to behave like a ruler’, ‘to behave like a subject’, ‘to behave like a father’, ‘to behave like a son’. The result is a series of clauses in which identical forms are used for subject and predicate, producing a rhetorical effect similar to that of the English: ‘Rulers rule, subjects subject, fathers father, kids kid.’

Conversions in part-of-speech in earlier stages of the Chinese language (and in their present-day remnants) are often accompanied by a change in tone, which linguists attribute to the presence of affixes in Old Chinese. The adjective 好 hǎo ‘appealing’, for example, acquires its verb form 好 hào ‘to be fond of’ by switching to the departing tone, seen as having developed out of the Old Chinese suffix */-s/ (Pulleyblank 2000: 29–30). Similarly,
in classical writings, the adjective 远 yuǎn ‘far’ alternates with the departing tone verb form yuàn ‘to keep at a distance; to keep away from’; and noun 王 wáng ‘king’ easily converts to the verb wàng ‘to be king’. Suffix /*-s/ induced conversion to the departing tone is also widely used for noun formation, as in 量 liáng ‘to measure’ → liàng ‘measurement; quantity’; 数 shù ‘to count’ → shǔ ‘numeral’; 難 nán ‘difficult’ → nàn ‘difficulty’ (Baxter and Sagart 1998: 54–5). Different Old Chinese prefixes, suffixes and infixes account for some 200 other part-of-speech conversions manifest as tone change in the present-day vernaculars (Downer 1959: 261).

Grammatical changes

Classical Chinese retains many of the grammatical features of Old Chinese (c. 1766 BCE – CE 220) prior to its transition to Middle Chinese (420–1260) brought about by successive waves of Altaic admixture in the second to sixth centuries, and again in the tenth to thirteenth centuries (Tai 1976: 293–4). The classical language thus exhibits a syntactic structure that is in many ways different from that of Modern Chinese.

While Old Chinese has a predominantly Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) word order, Modern Chinese (as characterized by Mandarin) exhibits many features found in languages with a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) word order (Tai 1973, 1976; S. Huang 1978; Chappell et al. 2007: 188–93). This is evident in the passive constructions of the two languages. Whereas in Old Chinese the passive voice is typically expressed with the passive marker (e.g. 于 yú) and agent positioned after the verb, e.g.

老公治于人。
Láolìzhě zhì yú rén (from Mencius, Book 5)
‘Laborers (are) controlled by other people.’

in Modern Standard Chinese the passive marker (e.g. 被 bèi) and agent would have to be moved before the verb in order to be grammatical, e.g.

老公被老人统治。
Láolìzhě bèi lǎoren tǒngzhì
‘Laborers (are) by other people controlled.’

Mirroring the development is the repositioning of the locative prepositional phrase: whereas Old Chinese typically places locative expressions after the verb, as is typical in SVO languages (cf. English ‘sail on the river’), Modern Standard Chinese moves the locative construction to a pre-verbal position when it is used to predicate the setting of the action. Consider the following passage from the classical work Zhuāng Zǐ (fourth century BCE):

庄子与惠子游于濠梁之上。
Zhuāngzǐ yǔ Huìzǐ yóu yú Háoliáng zhī shàng
‘Zhuāngzǐ and Huizǐ were strolling on a bridge on the River Hao.’
(from Zhuāng Zǐ, ‘Autumn Floods’)

Such placement of ‘on a bridge on the River Hao’ after the verb ‘strolling’ would be ungrammatical in the modern language, which would have to rephrase the sentence as follows, with the locative expression preposed:
Another area of divergence is the use of noun classifiers. In Modern Chinese, all nouns behave like English mass nouns, requiring the positioning of a nominal classifier between a number and the noun itself (e.g. 一张纸 yì zhāng zhǐ ‘a piece of paper’, 一根草 yī gēn cǎo ‘a blade of grass’), whereas in Old Chinese nouns were often free to behave as count nouns, which can be directly preceded by a number or a demonstrative (e.g. 一羊 yī yáng ‘one sheep’, 二马 èr mǎ ‘two horses’). Thus whereas Classical Chinese might have 一头牛 yītóu niú ‘one ox’ or 五柳 wǔ liǔ ‘five willow trees’, in Modern Standard Chinese obligatory noun classifiers would have to be assigned to each of the nouns, producing 一头牛 yītóu niú ‘one head of oxen’ and 五棵柳树 wǔ kē liǔshù ‘five sprouts of willow trees’. The shift from count to mass status for nouns is believed to have been initiated around the second century BCE (Wang 1994: 107–12), when noun classifiers began to expand in number and diversify in categorical function, but they appear not to have evolved into an obligatory fixture in ways resembling classifiers in Modern Standard Chinese until at least the first wave of Altaic contact in the second to sixth centuries – considered by many as a turning point in the development of Chinese classifiers (Liú 1965: 27; Wang 1994: 112–13), by which time classifiers began appearing in large numbers in works such as the 《世说新语》 Shìshuō Xīnyǔ (A New Account of the Tales of the World, fifth century), 《颜氏家训》 Yánshì Jiāxùn (‘Family Traditions of the Yán Clan’, sixth century), and 《洛阳伽蓝记》 Luòyáng Qiélánjì (‘Buddhist Monasteries of Luòyáng’, sixth century) in a manner for the most part identical to contemporary usage.

Classical Chinese also differs somewhat from the modern idiom in its inventory of personal pronouns, although when taking into account inflectional variation and historical sound change the differences may not be as pronounced as suggested by their divergent orthographic representations.

We encounter the first person pronouns yú (余 or 子), wú (吾) and wǒ (我) in classical writings. In the pre-classical oracle inscriptions of the late Shāng dynasty (1300–1100 BCE), yú (余 or 子) is used for the first person singular, whereas wǒ (我) is used for the first person plural (Sagart 1999: 142–43). By the Western Zhōu dynasty, in classical writings such as the Analects and Mencius, yú (余 or 子) falls out of favor, to be replaced by wú 吾 (Middle Chinese /*ŋɔ/) and wǒ 我 (Middle Chinese /*ŋɑ/), the former used more commonly in the subject position or as a possessive attribute, and the latter found predominantly in the object position (Norman 1988: 89) – a pattern of complementary distribution that, paired with their phonological affinities, has prompted scholars such as Karlgren (1920) to posit the existence of a case system in Old Chinese similar to that present in the European languages. In later writings, the case distinction between wú 吾 and wǒ 我 is blurred, although both forms continue to coexist in the literary language. In contemporary Chinese only wǒ 我 remains as the sole first person pronoun.

In Classical Chinese, the most common second person pronouns are ĕr (尔 – Middle Chinese /*ɲi/) and rǔ (汝 or 女 – Middle Chinese /*ɲio/), both of which occur in pre-classical writings of the Western Zhōu period, first exclusively as a second person plural, then as a second person singular as well (Sagart 1999: 142–3). Note the similarities between the two phonological forms, suggestive of an inflectional relationship between the pair, although, unlike with the Classical Chinese first person pronouns, no clear pattern of complementary distribution has been identified to date. The contemporary second person pronoun nǐ 你 is believed to have developed out of a northwestern reflex of the ĕr 尔 form (Sagart
1999: 143) – note the similarity with the Middle Chinese /*ni/ pronunciation, and the fact that the graphic component 尔 is an alternate form of the character 帥.

Classical Chinese, strictly speaking, does not have a third person pronoun in the nominative case, unlike Modern Standard Chinese, which has the lexeme tā (他, 她 or 它) at its disposal, most likely the remnant of a pre-classical spoken form (Sagart 1999: 146). We do see in classical writings however the use of qí 其 as a third person possessive, and zhī 之 as a third person object – both still used in stock expressions in more formal contemporary writings, but absent from spontaneous contemporary vernacular speech.

It is worth noting also that, since the advent of the classical period, Chinese pronouns no longer distinguished between singular and plural, instead relying on add-on morphemes such as děng 等 ‘ranks’, chái 侪 ‘peers’, bèi 辈 ‘generations’ to indicate collectivity when the occasion called for such. The use of men 们 as a personal collective marker in Modern Standard Chinese is the latest development in this trend, which some argue came about via influence from Mongolian or other Altaic languages in the Yuán (1271–1368) and Míng (1368–1644) dynasties (Haenisch 1931; Iljic 2001: 77–81).

Finally, Modern Standard Chinese requires the copula shì 是 for noun predication, a development in the colloquial language of the early Hán dynasty (second to first century BCE) which never quite made its way into the language of formal writings (Pulleyblank 2000: 45). The classical language continued to use the partial yě 也 in an ‘A = B yě’ pattern for identification and classification purposes, while in the spoken language the function was taken over by the new essive shì 是, evolved out of the classical demonstrative pronoun. Thus a sentence like ‘Dǒng Hú is an exemplary historian of antiquity’ would appear in Classical Chinese as

董狐, 古之良史也（《左传宣公二年》）
Dǒng Hú, gǔ zhī liáng lì yě (from the Chronicles of Zuǒ, Book VII)
‘Dǒng Hú, antiquity’s exemplary historian [particle]’

In the modern idiom, however, the particle yě 也 is discarded and the copula shì is inserted between the patient and the classificatory element, giving

董狐是古代的优良史官。
Dǒng Hú shì gǔdài de yōuliáng shǐguān
‘Dǒng Hú is antiquity’s exemplary historian.’

Coexistence with the vernacular

Up until the twentieth century, Classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese exhibited pervasive and rigid compartmentization, in which the former was used exclusively by the educated and ruling classes for formal writings, and the latter by the general populace for linguistic settings perceived to be more informal and intimate. This stable divide between an elite, semi-archaic ‘high language’ (H) and a more down-to-earth ‘low language’ (L) is termed ‘diglossia’ by linguists. The Classical–vernacular divide in Chinese, stretching over thousands of years, is seen as a textbook example of diglossia. Linguist Charles Ferguson, who coined the term ‘diglossia’ in 1959, describes Chinese as representing ‘diglossia on the largest scale of any attested instance’ (1959: 337–8).

The complementary roles served by the literary and vernacular languages in pre-modern China are in many ways typical of the roles of H and L languages in diglossia, which, in

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the classic sense of the word, implies specialization of function, namely ‘in one set of situations only H is appropriate, and in another only L, with the two sets overlapping only very slightly’ (Ferguson 1959: 328). Such is the case with literary and vernacular Chinese, the former of which was perceived as being a language suited to the expression of sophisticated and elegant thought (Snow 2010: 160), the only vehicle deemed suitable for writing, as it is the language of ‘all works making the least claim to correctness, propriety and chasteness’, owing to which ‘no person would deem his productions fit for the public gaze, and worthy of imitation, who did not write in this style’ (Letter from biblical translators Walter Medhurst, Alexander Stronach, and William Milne to the London Missionary Society (1851), in Zetzsche 1999: 93). Furthermore, in classic diglossia, the H language is typically a written variety which no segment of the population can claim as a mother tongue (Coulmas 1987: 117) – a description which applies fittingly to Classical Chinese, which is often learned through tutors in private academies by those with the means to receive a formal education. For the past two thousand years, the classical language was nobody’s native language, nor has it ever been used by any community for daily conversation (Snow 2010: 160).

The H language in classic diglossia often develops out of archaisms frozen by social conventions (Bright 1976: 66), as is the case with Classical Chinese, which traces its roots to canonical writings of the Warring States period, after which time writers continued to emulate the grammar and lexis of this early literary style, forcing the written language to acquire an archaic flavor as the spoken language of the day underwent a very different and by and large independent development (Norman 1988: 83). Perpetuation of this prestige language was helped along by its social status and literary heritage. Furthermore, as access to the more formal occasions which call for the use of the literary language is disproportionately distributed in favor of the educated, literate or otherwise privileged classes most likely to have received formal schooling, the diglossic divide is often characteristic of traditions of restricted literacy in speech communities that are overwhelmingly illiterate (Hudson 2002: 5–6; Walters 1996: 161–2) – as was the case in China, where mastery of Classical Chinese was stock and staple of imperial examinations that open the door to officialdom, often the only path to wealth, status and prestige for those without families ties or background, and was thus viewed by many as literally a road to power. Despite the appearance of class mobility however, the general populace often did not have sufficient schooling to become viable candidates in the examinations, without which the substantial differences between the classical language and the spoken vernaculars effectively served to bar the uneducated masses from civil service. Furthermore, traditional Chinese social hierarchy virtually guaranteed little motivation for the educated elite to promote knowledge of the classical language among the population at large (Snow 2010: 160–1).

Ferguson (1959: 332) writes that the type of diglossia typical of the relationship between Classical and vernacular Chinese can persist at least several centuries, and that there is evidence in some cases that it can last well over a thousand years. But it has also been observed that classic diglossia tends to thrive in pre-industrialized civil societies with restricted literacy, and most often disintegrates at the onset of modernization (Neustupny 1974: 40), as it is broken down by the processes of modernization, urbanization, mercantalism and industrialization, which create the need for a literate labor force, and by the demise of small ruling groups, the breakdown of rigid class barriers, and the democratization of education, literacy and knowledge that tend to accompany each other (Hudson 2002: 32). The result is often displacement of the classical language by a new standard more closely related to certain educated strains of the spoken vernacular (Hudson 2002: 30). The process is well-documented in China, as reflected in the writings of European missionaries, who, early in
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, initially attempted to translate the Protestant Bible into wénlǐ (文理) – their term for Literary Chinese – seen then as ‘the chaste and correct style of language’ and ‘the classical style in which the Commentaries on the Sacred Books are written’, but later resorted to various compromises between the literary and vernacular languages, and finally, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, discarded the wénlǐ translations in favor of the now widespread Union Bible version in colloquial Mandarin (Zetsche 1999).

In diglossic speech communities, decline of the classical language is often accompanied by catastrophic political events involving the collapse of classical society itself (Hudson 2002: 34), out of which a newly emerged social structure precipitates the birth of a new literary language molded out of the spoken language then current (Pulgram 1950: 461–2). As China faced encroachment from Japan and the West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was a growing sentiment that China needed to strengthen itself by promoting mass literacy and education, and that Classical Chinese was not an ideal vehicle for this means, partly because of its association with the weakening empire and traditional values, and partly because it was too unwieldy to teach (Snow 2010: 161).

The monopoly of Classical Chinese as the sole vehicle for writing began its steep decline after the Opium War of 1840–1842, as intellectuals, more and more, saw the gap between the spoken and written languages as a hindrance to greater literacy, and called for the removal of the classical language from education and media as part and parcel of the modernization of China. In the New Culture Movement (新文化运动 Xīn Wénhuà Yùndòng) of the late 1910s, promotion of vernacular Chinese gathered momentum through the efforts of noted scholars such as 胡适 Hú Shì (1891–1962), 陈独秀 Chén Dúxiù (1879–1942), 钱玄同 Qián Xuántóng (1887–1939), 刘半农 Liú Bànnóng (1891–1934), and 傅斯年 Fù Sīnián (1896–1950), culminating in the Vernacular Language Movement (白话文运动 Báihuàwén Yùndòng) 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 鲁迅 Lù Xùn (1881–1936), 老舍 Lǎo Shě (1899–1966), 徐志摩 Xú Zhìmó (1896–1931), and 沈从文 Shěn Cóngwén (1902–1988) began appearing in the vernacular.

The abrupt and wholesale replacement of Classical Chinese with vernacular writing in the 1910s coincided largely with the end of imperial rule in China – this happening within less than two decades of the adoption of Western education in China (1898), the abolition of Confucian-style civil service examinations (1905), and the overthrow of the Qing dynasty (1912). The result of this paradigm shift, officially sanctioned in 1920, was the decision to write in an approximation of contemporary northern vernacular speech, thereby discontinuing the centuries-old practice among literate individuals of writing in the classical style, which had long since ceased to function as a medium of oral communication; in other words, the elevation to prominence of vernacular writing – a writing style always available within society but previously unsanctioned for the purpose of formal and serious writing – was now in full swing (Barnes 1982: 262).

While the Vernacular Language Movement of 1917–1919 is viewed today as largely successful, the end result, as is the case in many post-diglossic communities, is not a complete replacement of the literary language with the vernacular, but rather, to a large degree, a merger of the outgoing and incoming norms. It has been noted that when a literary language is replaced or partially merged with the vernacular to produce a new standard, the lexicon of the old classical language, in particular, lives on in the newly minted vernacular-based norm in the form of higher order terminology, especially in areas relating to technology, cultural legacy and abstract reasoning (Kahane and Kahane 1979: 194). Lexicon aside,
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stylistic constraints serve to further distance the new written language from its colloquial counterpart, as languages universally require that the structure of written texts be less casual and more elevated than the natural state of spoken utterances, such that speech communities generally do not sanction ordinary, everyday speech for written use (Hudson 2002: 24; Ferguson 1968: 29–30). Such is the case with Modern Standard Chinese, in which the grammar of the standard written language includes not only the syntax of the vernacular but also remnants of Classical Chinese convention that have made their way into modern standard writing (Zhū 1988: 132). Furthermore, in the contemporary language, there is substantial incorporation of literary elements such as truncated terms, four-character idioms, stock expressions, and classical grammatical constructs (DeFrancis 1984: 244). Unique to Chinese is the fact that phonology plays a role in the choice between literary and colloquial registers, as the modern language is subject to metrical constraints requiring quasi-literary disyllabic forms in a great number of word formation templates (Duanmu 1999; Feng 2006). In other words, Modern Standard Chinese is characterized by ways of amalgamating Classical Chinese with vernacular style that are essentially motivated and licensed by prosody (Feng 2006: 17) – the result of which is a marked distinction between the written and spoken languages, which, while not as glaring as the literary–vernacular divide in pre-modern times, nevertheless, is obligatory and clearly noticeable to the untrained eye. Early Republican philologist Huáng Kǎn 黄侃 (2001: 199) ascribes the divergence to such general tendencies in language as reverence for the past, the need for formality, and the conservative nature of the written medium.

In the present age, Classical Chinese, while no longer the medium de rigueur for written communications, lives on in government missives, legal documents, business contracts, academic theses, political speeches and news commentaries – in effect all manner of writing deemed formal. Classical patterns and set expressions are ubiquitous in vernacular prose – more so in Taiwan and Hong Kong than in mainland China – so much so that, with the exception of dialog, contemporary writing that does not incorporate elements of the classical language is rarely considered fit for print.

In the Chinese-speaking societies of mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, attitudes toward vernacular writing have shifted since the 1980s, moving away from the May Fourth Movement ideal of complete emulation of oral speech to a more measured approach which sees classical elements as not only desirable but virtually necessary for stylistic effect and rhetorical functions. In all three regions the classical language is taught as part of the Chinese language curriculum from the upper levels of primary school through to university-level general education, and is a required subject in entrance examinations for high school and college. The strongest advocacy for reading proficiency in Classical Chinese is to be found in Taiwan, where promotion of traditional culture and values was officially sanctioned in the 1960s as a countermeasure to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) on the mainland, where anti-bourgeois sentiment and the purging of ‘old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas’ effectively discouraged mastery of the literary language. Taiwan followed a decidedly different route, where, after the latest round of reforms in 2010, Classical Chinese texts currently account for some 45% to 65% of the high school Chinese language curriculum, and the four Confucian classics of the Analects, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Great Learning and Mencius are part of the required core. In mainland China, amidst recent calls to revive the study of Classical Chinese, the current percentage of classical texts in the secondary curriculum stands at around 40%; in Hong Kong, close to half of all Chinese language texts studied at the secondary level are pre-modern texts written in the classical language.
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