

Classical Chinese

Classical Chinese refers to the language of canonical literature and formal documents 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 only by an educated elite, but instead done in an approximation of the modern northern vernacular.

When trying to give 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 in the vernacular -- definition by default; the second is to try to pinpoint the historical period out of which Classical Chinese developed, and state that Classical Chinese consists of literary traditions that grew out of the speech habits of a particular time and place. The first half of this entry will be devoted to the first approach -- we will discuss ways to determine what is Vernacular Chinese and what is not -- the latter being the default definition of Classical Chinese. The second half of the article will provide a survey of formal writing styles throughout Chinese history, and explore the issue of whether they can be traced to a common source.

The Classical / Vernacular Divide

When stating that Classical Chinese (*wenyanwen*) is the logical complement of Vernacular Chinese (*baihuawen*), it is natural to ask where we draw the line, and what criteria we are using. Criteria that have traditionally been used to distinguish Classical and Vernacular Chinese include:

- (1) *Intelligibility*: Is it readily understood by the average native speaker? Or is it language that only the educated elite can understand?
- (2) *Spoken vs written mode*: Is it more like natural speech or more like stylized writing?
- (3) *Time depth*: When we talk about "natural speech" and "average native speaker", are we using contemporary people as a point of reference (modern audience), or are we referring to people at the time the work was written (historical audience)?

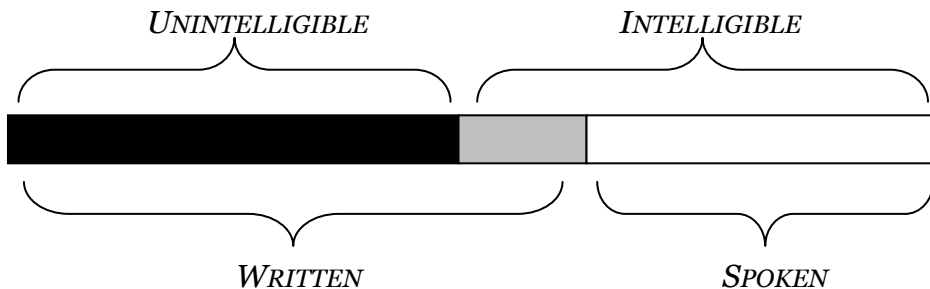
Let us first look at the intelligibility criterion. By "intelligible", what is meant is that the language is comprehensible to a general audience; if it cannot be understood by the average native speaker without further training, it is considered "unintelligible". The intelligibility criterion cleverly captures the lay view of the vernacular/classical divide: Vernacular Chinese is Chinese written in language the layperson can understand; everything else is relegated to classical Chinese regardless of the source of the difficulty. This view is often reflected in popular comments about writing styles: certain styles are difficult to understand because they are too *wenyan* (classical/literary), as if Classical Chinese stands for all that is obscure or arcane.

There are problems with this approach, however. The first is that intelligibility judgements are necessarily limited to the here and now, for we have no way of determining whether people in ancient times can understand a particular style of writing or not. That is to say, we are tied to the judgements 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 historical popular novels such as *All Men are Brothers* (*Shuihu Zhuan*) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou Meng*), which are traditionally considered vernacular literature (*baihua xiaoshuo*), but in modern times are not readily comprehensible to the uneducated reader.

An alternative to the intelligibility criterion is that of spoken language vs written language. Most of the world's languages maintain a difference between spoken and written varieties: the spoken variety 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 variety 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 bear closer resemblance to spoken language are then labelled 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. The reason for this is that most uneducated speakers can understand *some* formal language. It is not the case that uneducated speakers can only understand language in the spoken mode, and find formal writing totally unintelligible. There is an in-between stage where language can have characteristics of the written register, and is yet comprehensible to the non-educated reader. The relationship between the two criteria is outlined in Figure 1.

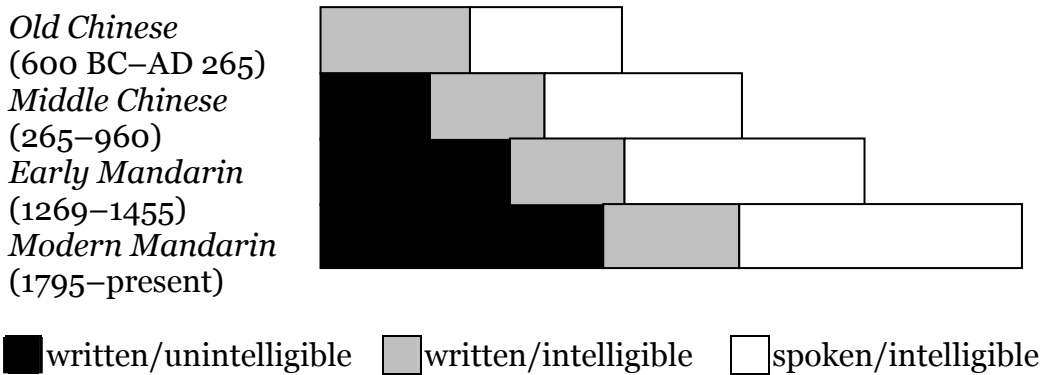
Figure 1: Intelligibility and mode



Whether we use intelligibility or spoken/written language as criterion, however, an additional variable is 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. The relationship between intelligibility, speech/writing and historical change is outlined in Fig. 2.

Figure 2: Intelligibility and mode through time



(after Lü 1944: 11)

A spoken language, historical audience-based definition of Classical Chinese 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 seminal work *A History of Vernacular Literature* (*Baihua Wenxue Shi*, 1928) Hu implied a dichotomy in which vernacular literature is literature written in the spoken language of the day (which may be far removed 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. This dichotomy, however, while similar to the European notion of vernacular and mainstream literature, is foreign to the Chinese tradition. Hu’s definition 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): the vernacular language is written text which corresponds to spoken language from the Tang dynasty (618–907) onwards; all else is relegated to classical Chinese. Lü’s treatment avoids the shortcomings of both Hu’s working definition and the lay notion of the vernacular: it includes drama and popular writing from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) 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 intermingling of Sinitic and Altaic-speaking populations in cosmopolitan Tang society accounts for the considerable linguistic gap between Middle Chinese (265–1269) and Pre-Modern Chinese (1269–1795)

(See Mandarin). 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 change often taken to be an important distinction between classical Chinese and modern Chinese.

Classical Chinese throughout the ages

Having defined the classical language as writing several degrees removed from the spoken language, it is natural to ask whether this 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 and Western Zhou dynasties (1751–771 BCE). 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 Yellow River basin.

With the breakup of the Zhou empire (1111–256 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 Confucius's *Analects* (*Lunyu*) and *Mencius* (*Mengzi*), which is more concise and structured, richer in rhetorical devices, and shows obvious imitations of earlier classics.

The later Warring States period (402–221 BCE) and the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE – CE 220) dynasties saw a further move towards 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” for the writings of the Qin and Han dynasties, and refer to the language of later imitations as “Literary Chinese”.

Following the Han dynasty, worship of form was taken to an extreme at the expense of substance, giving rise to the belletrist “parallel prose” (*pianwen*) of the Southern dynasties (420–589), in which balance of rhythm, imagery and tonal patterns reigned supreme. This worship of formal elements created a backlash in the Tang dynasty (618–907), in which neoclassicists such as Han Yü (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan (773–819) called for a return to substance and the rhetorical styles of the Qin and the Han. From the Tang 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.

The dominance of classical Chinese came to an end 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 and parcel 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 (1891–1962), Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), Qian Xuantong (1887–1939) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950), culminating in the Vernacular Language Movement (Baihuawen Yundong) of 1917–1919. As a result of this movement, Vernacular Chinese was adopted as the standard 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 missives 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 than in mainland China. Despite the efforts of early 20th century language reformers to make a clean break with wenyan, it does look as if 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.

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