

The Chinese Language: Its Nature and History

David Prager Branner
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“Teach China”
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- Outline:
1. Preliminaries
 2. The shape of Chinese words
 3. “Dialect”
 4. Writing
 5. Grammar
 6. How Chinese language is written down
 7. Consequences for civilization

1. Preliminaries

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qīfu 欺負 ‘to mistreat’
qífú 祈福 ‘to pray for good fortune’
qǐfú 起伏 ‘ups and downs in life’
qìfù 棄婦 ‘abandoned wife’

2b. Tone: 15 relatively common 2-syllable words (not all recognizable in speech), with 9 pronunciations differing only by tone:

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<i>yīshī</i>	医师 ‘doctor’	<i>yǐshì</i>	以是 ‘therefore’
<i>yīshí</i>	依实 ‘in accordance with the facts’	<i>yìshì</i>	意识 ‘mentality’
	衣食 ‘clothing and food’	<i>yìshí</i>	一时 ‘a period of time’
			异时 ‘diachronic’
		<i>yìshǐ</i>	驿使 ‘courier’
<i>yíshī</i>	遗失 ‘to lose’	<i>yìshì</i>	异事 ‘a strange matter’
	遗诗 ‘posthumous poetry’		译释 ‘translate and explain’
<i>yìshì</i>	仪式 ‘ceremony, ritual’		逸士 ‘scholar who withdraws from civilization’
	一世 ‘one generation’		

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jiāncháyuán 监察员 ‘supervisor’

jiǎncháyuán 检查员 ‘inspector’

jiǎncháyuàn 检察院 ‘procuratorate’

qiānzǎi yìshí 千载一时 ‘once in a thousand years’ (said of
an opportunity or achievement)

qiánzài yìshí 潜在意识 ‘subconscious’

xiānxī wúyí 纤悉无遗 ‘to be detailed and without
omissions’ (of reports)

xiánxí wǔyì 娴习武艺 ‘to be skilled at martial arts’

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Example: *xiǎn wéi rén zhī* 鲜为人知 ‘little known’. Usage:

- verb 百年古宅**鲜为人知**。
The hundred year-old house *is little known*.
- noun 它的魅力来自图案的**鲜为人知**。
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Yoga-like circumlocution is often needed in English translation.

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steer	<i>yānniú</i> 阉牛	‘castrated’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
calf	<i>xiǎoniú</i> 小牛	‘young’ + <i>niú</i> ‘ox’
heifer	<i>xiǎomǔniú</i> 小母牛	‘young’ + ‘cow’
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- technical terminology often easier to figure out in Chinese than in English

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- (morpheme: meaningful unit of language, not nec. oral language)

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dī in *dǎdī* 打的 ‘to take a taxi’ (from English *taxi*, loaned into

Cantonese as [tɪk˧˥si˧˥], written 的士, read in northern

Mandarin as *dīshì* (among other things), abbreviated as *dī*)

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i. Competition between phonetic loanwords and calques (“loan translations”):

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hormone	<i>hé’ěrméng</i>	<i>jīsù</i>	‘essential substance for stimulation’
engine	<i>yǐnqíng</i>	<i>fādòngjī</i>	‘machine for starting activity’
motor	<i>mǎdá</i>		
microphone	<i>màikèfēng</i>	<i>huàtǒng</i>	‘tube for words’
tank	<i>tǎnkèchē</i>	<i>zhuāngjiǎchē</i>	‘vehicle bearing armor’

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 - access to political power restricted by access to education

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 - possibility of reading texts from many periods without learning a new language for each
 - possibility of drawing political authority from very old texts
- b. full literacy expensive to acquire
 - 6000 discrete characters necessary in traditional era
 - currency of texts from many periods leads to heavy use of traditional idiom, requires long time to master
 - access to political power restricted by access to education
 - elaborate civil service examination system, requiring command of texts and handwriting (!)

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 - heavy Chinese borrowing of Japanese coinages after 1890
 - coinages were chiefly translations of Western terms
 - impossible to recognize in Chinese by form or sound

One page re-cap...

Consequences for civilization

(i) continuity of non-phonetic script

- burden of history?

(i) expensive to learn

(ii) unified script => display of political authority

(iii) vehicle of cultural exchange

End

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