

The 2019 Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology

“Revitalization and Representation”

Conference Proceedings Papers

January 23-26, 2019

Royal Angkor Resort
Siem Reap, Cambodia

Hosted by
The Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia

The Conference on
ASIAN LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY
2019
Siem Reap, Cambodia
<https://cala2019.cala.asia>

The CALA 2019 Proceedings Paper 6 - 1

Anthropological Linguistics, Paper 1

**Chinese Language and Literature Reform
in the Beginning of the 20th Century**

Nguyen Thi Mai Chanh

Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam

Chinese Language and Literature Reform in The Beginning of The 20th Century

Nguyen Thi Mai Chanh^a

^a*Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam*

Abstract

It is difficult not to mention language reform when referring to Chinese literature modernization between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Language played a critical role in facilitating the escape of Chinese literature from Chinese medieval literary works in order to integrate into world literature. The language reform not only laid a foundation for modern literature but also contributed considerably to the grand social transformation of China in the early days of the 20th century. Chinese new-born literature was a literature created by spoken language; in Chinese terms, it was considered as a literature focusing on “dialectal speech” instead of “classical Chinese” used in the past. In international terms, it can be named as living language literature which was used to replace classic literary language in ancient books – a kind of dead language. This article will analyze how language reform impacted Chinese modern literature at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: language, modern literature, China, literature reform, language reform

Introduction

Literary history can, from a certain point of view, be considered as the history of linguistic variables. Therefore, the relationship between linguistic reform and literary development has become an outstanding research topic. Chinese literature, out of all other nations' literature, has been phenomenal evidence for the important interaction between linguistic reform and literary advancement while shifting from pre-modernism to modernism in general and from the early to late period of the May Fourth movement in particular. According to Chinese researchers, this reform can be called the movement of “baihua” (vernacular literary language) for building the foundation for modern literature, using standard Chinese language. It is the reason why Chinese literary history researchers easily reach a common conclusion that modern Chinese literature was initiated by the movement of “Against classical Chinese, for vernacular literary language.” The implication of this slogan was conveyed from the very beginning of the movement: “Modern literature is the field of vernacular literary language” (Fu Ssu-nien, “How to write vernacular literature”, *New Wave Journal*, no.2 Volume 1, February 1919).

Research results

The nights before “Language Revolution” – The historical context of the vernacular literature movement

A shadow falling on the failure of the Xinhai Revolution was the darkness dawning on Chinese literature. The reform of classical Chinese literature gradually fell into silence while the number of writings which criticized society-related issues also declined. Fantasy novels on romance, martial arts and thrillers written by literary school Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies (鸳鸯蝴蝶) mushroomed; “modern drama” (“文明戏”) attracted its common spectators through vulgar stories; whereas poems kept their same old rules. Chinese readers at that time were only offered a colossal legacy of Tang poems along with episodic novels and were isolated from great literary advancements in the West. Intellectuals from both classical and modern schools of thought might have had different perspectives on national issues, but all agreed upon the dead-end of literature. The underlying emergence of a one-of-a-kind literary movement which could transform the whole legacy of Chinese literature was clearly in the air.

It is certain that the aforementioned conclusion should be attributed to historical research. At that time, people within a movement that strived to share and intervene quickly in the happenings mostly took advantage of media and newspaper columns. Thus, studying the past newspapers is a way to explore the nights before the “language revolution,” or to immerse in the historical climate of the vernacular literary language movement. Within only half of the decade of the 20th century, China had witnessed the birth of multiple influential newspapers, especially in coastal areas of the Eastern South – the very first point of Western interaction. Those newspapers included the HangZhou vernacular newspaper, the New vernacular newspaper (1903), the Wujun vernacular newspaper, the Anhui vernacular newspaper, the Huzhou vernacular newspaper, the Fujian vernacular newspaper, and the Zhejiang vernacular newspaper (1904). These names were all rooted in the districts’ names. Little time passed before talk emerged about that the most influential magazine was New Youth (founded in Shang Hai and then moving to Beijing), founded by Chen Duxiu. Also in Shanghai, in 1906, Hu Shi released Zhoukan Zazhi. By skimming these newspapers’ names, we see that almost all emphasized “vernacular” (in fact, even newspapers that did not add “vernacular” in their names still wrote in vernacular language). Vernacular language had become one of the pioneering elements in reforming literature in particular and in the Chinese cultural revolution in general during the beginning of the 20th century.

Pioneers of the vernacular literary language movement

From the manifesto of Huang Zunxia to the appeal of Chen Duxiu

The roots of the Chinese literary language revolution had sprouted from the May Fourth period. The interaction between the East and the West during the late Qing dynasty gave birth to the very first class of intellectuals who were “fluent in Western languages.” Representatives of the classical school of thought who were famous for their contradictions expressed great surprise over the new literature – literature which used materials from spoken language and The Bible “typical” in numerous contemporary Western languages. In a poem collection written in the classical five-character rule and having a one hundred-year-old title - A mixture of feelings by Huang Zunxia (a poet and a Qing diplomats), readers could stumble upon lines that signified the literary language revolution: “My hand records my mouth / The ancients shall not impede”

(我手写我口，古岂能拘牵)。

In 1917, “Essay on Literary Revolution” written by Chen Duxiu was released for the first time in February’s New Youth Magazine. The essay can be regarded as the appeal for movement on vernacular literary language. The basic doctrine of the appeal was summarized by the writer into three main points: “Against the exaggeration of royal literature, for the simplicity of common literature; against the obsolescence of classical literature, for the sincerity of realistic writing; against the mystery of bucolic literature, for the universality of social literature.” These three points revealed the core of the literary revolution which constitutes the linguistic revolution. Modern literature required a new kind of language which was both a tool and a type of material. Distinct features such as “simplicity; sincere; realistic; universal; impartial” were also elements of the new language which was in stark contrast to the language characterized by “exaggerate; obsolete; mysterious” in classic documents, steles, bamboo and wooden slips or silk - a thousand-year-old kind of language used to write, not to speak.

In summary, the basic condition of a literary revolution is to conduct a linguistic revolution by using a new language first. That language was spoken language with its great variables used in daily life, called “vernacular language.” The pioneer of this movement was Hu Shi – one of the leaders in the May Fourth movement, a great Chinese cultural revolution.

The revolution’s pioneer – Hu Shi

“Initial suggestions on literary revolution” (Discussion of Creating a Revolution in Literature, 1/1917) written by Hu Shi was considered as the first appeal for the literary revolution. The requirement for conducting the literary revolution was to hold a linguistic movement: Rejecting classical language, and proposing vernacular language. Classic literary language was difficult to grasp and spread as did ambiguity in expression. Hu Shi requested its replacement with vernacular language as vernacular language was “able to express clear points and facilitate understanding.” This entailed that two key slogans of linguistic revolution were “clear” and “precise.” It is known that until the nights before the May Fourth movement, classical schools of thought that used classical language were still active. Intellectuals who held a neutral position also appeared. For example, Guangdi Mei said: “There are differences in each genre of literature. Novels and songs can be written in vernacular language, but it is not the same for literature and poems” (cited from “Critics over a vernacular poem” in *Diary of Hu Shi in Studying Abroad* written by Hu Shi, published in Changsha, Te Luo Publishing House, 2000, 686).

Hu Shi pointed out eight “No” that modern literature was in contradiction with “classical literature,” among them was the second point “Not imitate classical figures.” According to him, each period produced its own kind of literature with distinct achievements. This was obviously a modern and advanced literary perspective. In Hu Shi’s opinion, the drive-away from top-notch literary works of previous generations was the reflection of the “literary evolution” which was embedded in the general evolution of the whole of mankind.

From a linguistic perspective, the stagnation of literature over centuries and dynasties, at its core, was due to the fact that contemporary generations wanted to imitate classic works as well as classical linguistic usage. Hence, modern poetry, theatre, novels, short stories and newspapers were in fact the new age’s literature. This motivated Hu Shi’s proposal that modern literature “should not avoid using common language.” His implication was that by using “dead language” (classical) only lead to “dead literature”. Writing works that used classic language (can be only be

written in paper) was no difference from copying museum heritages. The role of language to the literature was in fact uncontroversial; thus, the variable of language was the immortal reservoir for any literature.

The cultural meaning of vernacular literary language movement and its achievements in reforming the literature

Democracy and universality

Modernity was characterized by democracy and science. From a literary perspective, democracy translated into building a universal literature for the commoner. Literature and arts can not be confined to the privileges of the upper class. Therefore, the first groups of Chinese intellectuals coming back from Japan who wanted to popularize journalism and publication for Chinese people understood well that in order to popularize journalism and to increase the number of publications, it was significant to eliminate illiteracy and to learn modern language that common people, at that time, were using. On that point, it could be said that the vernacular literary movement bore an important historical meaning. That meaning was closely attached to modernizing literature by spreading literary works to the commoner and creating readers as well as the publication market. In the middle of second decade of the 20th century, when Chen Duxiu -- a culturalist and a political activist -- founded New Youth magazine in 1915 and publicly supported the direction of “democracy” and “science” while rejecting classic literature and encouraging modern literature, China’s literary modernization had become a voluntary act. Especially after the Modern Literature movement initiated by Hu Shi (1917) and the May Fourth movement (1919), Chinese literature had gained its very first rewards of the vernacular literary language movement. In these movements, modern literature with a wide range of continent- and world-scale writers started to emerge. In general, the “modernization” (现代化) of the literature was just the process shifting the regional path to the wider path of the world’s literature. In comparison with classical literature, which was exclusive for a limited number of literate people, modern literature’s distinct features could be narrowed down to one word – democracy.

Writers were growingly concerned with the role of the public, an act which certainly implied “democracy” of the modern literature. Many modern writers were also translators and worked as the bridge between readers of different cultures. This was clearly in stark contrast to a kind of “arrogant” literature where readers had to learn by heart the so-called noble “national” language. It was also certainly different from the limited legacy of translated literature from previous generations. In theatre, democracy was such that theatres and permanent stages were built to replace makeshift troupes. In major cities, professional theatre groups began to form while newspapers also delivered poems to most young people and were no longer confined to small groups of elder readers in districts.

Vernacular literary language movements built the foundation for the artistic and literary revolution as well as the cultural reform. For the first time in China, Western-modelled cities appeared with high schools, universities, publishing houses, newspaper offices, libraries, and so forth being integrated. In short, “infrastructure” for the whole of modern literature had been formed.

Changing literary notions

The literary revolution and the vernacular literary language movement were, upon regarding social impact, the beginning of literary popularization. From an inner perspective (literary perspective) the core of those revolutions was “self-movement” of the literature. The vernacular literary language movement had led to changes in writing beliefs of many writers. Writers at that time had formed a class in society and turned their works into jobs (noble but mostly to earn a living). By using classic language, intellectuals had the impression that they were using God’s words and speaking the norms of classic figures. Now, by using vernacular language, writers were of the impression that they were using the common language of the whole nation. Instead of thinking that “literature is for philosophy,” vernacular writers claimed that they were writing to serve the public. Instead of the noble “language of spirit,” new poets claimed that they were just being “sentimental.” Instead of defying “folk songs,” and regarding theatre as “mixed songs,” vernacular writers considered them as a type of art which can directly impact the majority. Instead of considering novels which tell stories by “street language” inferior, novel writers could even seek the power of elevating national spirit and changing attitudes. Never in Chinese novelistic history had previously condemned novels gained such high status in the literature. The scenario of thousands of publications reaching each and every reader gave vernacular literature unprecedented hope. Speaking and writing in vernacular language – the kind of language used by every one in daily life – naturally fostered concern in writers about modern literary philosophies. After the May Fourth movement, positive literary notions such as “humanity literature” and “the main purpose of literature is to serve humans” gradually flourished. Vernacular language helped to express thoughts “clearly” and “precisely,” to liberate the mind from “rusty chains” of classic literature which was characterized by ambiguous and rigid expression “models.”

The vernacular literary language movement and its achievements in reforming the literature

Vernacular language had moved previously marginalized novels to the center of literature. Hu Shi wrote: “Vernacular literature is a sharp weapon of novels, which has been proven by real-life evidence such as Shi Naian, Cao Xueqin - that is clearly undebatable.” The truth was close to this writer’s conclusion, after the May Fourth movement, where vernacular novels and short stories reached an unprecedented level of publications.

However, it is certain that quality should be attended to closely, and more than quantity, in considering literature-related issues. In order to understand the impact of vernacular language on reforming Chinese literature, little is more effective than observing the case of Lu Xun. When the May Fourth movement raised its flag to first signify the modern wave in Chinese literature, this writer had just released his first writing named *A Madman’s diary* (5/1918). This writing was the first vernacular short story in modern Chinese literature. The bold experiment had instantly brought Lu Xun to the rank of top-notch writers globally. *A Madman’s diary* and *The True Story of Ah Q* immediately created landslide impacts on China, and were translated into multiple languages. Lu Xun can also be regarded as the father of mixed prose, and developed this to reach its heyday at that time. In his opinion, the May Fourth’s mixed prose had achieved much more than novels, short stories and drama. This was the outcome of active literary forums

in contemporary major cities. Chinese writers who pursued mixed prose learned first from English essays and persuaded their readers through a *hu-mua* style and a huge variety of topics.

The vernacular language revolution brought a new facet to Chinese literature at the beginning of 20th century, which generated an immediate impact on modern literature. Thus, immediately following this was a theatrical reform. the linguistic revolution had formed a new kind of theatre-play. Compared with other genres, the play as well as novels were the two dialectic genres of “vernacular language,” which formed a black line between modern and classical literature. Over a thousand years, the Chinese theatre revolved around traditional Chinese opera which was basically musical theatre with a small percentage of natural dialogue using spoken language. The formation of the play under the tensioned influence of Western - Eastern interaction and the vernacular literary reform offered the perfect evidence for Chinese literary modernization in the first decades of the 20th century.

Language is material and a tool for writing and studying literature. The stark contrast between the play and other types of traditional works was in fact the contrast between using spoken language and using music and dance to express. Language in plays was language and action in daily life, not exaggerated actions or dances. This justified that spectating a play is not similar to reading a story made up solely of dialogue or monologue (novels that imitate trains of thought or letters).

The appearance of Modern Chinese poetry (新詩) in China was the consequence of the vernacular linguistic movement. Many scholars particularly emphasized the influence of direct exposure to Western poetry by intellectuals abroad. This hypothesis is true to some extent; it was only a superficial view. The root of Modern Chinese poetry can be traced back to linguistic issues. The exposure to European languages as well modern Chinese poets’ ability to understand bilingual languages gave them opportunities to gain insights into the power of a direct and spontaneous voice in literature. Modern poetry and narratives required usage of contemporary languages to express the raw feelings of contemporary souls. That assisted to explain why other names of modern poetry were usually attached to “vernacular language” such as “New vernacular new poems” and “Vernacular new poems.” Of course, exposure to the Western poetry of Chinese modern poets should also be noticed. Never in Chinese history did such a large number of poets appear. This period gave birth to a colossal amount of well-known Chinese modern poets such as Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Dai Wangshu, Wen Yiduo, Liu Bannong, Xu Chimo, and so forth. They were all translators under the heavy influence of Western poetry. Hu Shi was the first to use vernacular language to translate and write poems. He deserved to be considered as the pioneer of Chinese modern poetry. This “revolutionary poet” had publicly admitted that he was influenced substantially by foreign poetry. Therefore, Chinese historical literature in the 20th century recorded that Modern Chinese poetry was initiated by translating foreign poetry in vernacular language and then continued by writing vernacular modern poems. This revolution had paved the way for poems by erasing “rules” and the rigidity of poetry in terms of character numbers, lines, and verses. The modernization of Chinese literature till the May Fourth movement had turned into an active phenomenon, even becoming voluntary. The most outstanding sign was the establishment of a literary system (poetry essay/study) which held certain values with a number of breakthrough writings. The efforts in reforming literature had been started by poets in the post-Qing dynasty. However, the literary reform in the late Qing dynasty was half-hearted reformed songs. Classical poets in this period did not understand nor could not accept changes in “poetry rules.” Frankly, they could not imagine a type of poem

using “spoken language” as main material while the core of the literary revolution was to write by vernacular language. In the late Qing dynasty, from Liang Qichao to Huang Zuxian all proposed to only reform topics and keep classic poetic forms. It was not until the May Fourth movement with Hu Shi’s slogan “Grand revolution on poetic forms” that the issue of literary forms had been dealt with.

Hu Shi was also well-known with the direction to “make poems like writing literature.” In 1916, he initiated writing narrative poems. One year later, he published a poem sequence named Eight vernacular poems in *New Youth* magazine, Volume 2, 1917. This sequence, though retaining traces of Tang poetry, had bared itself from historical references, dual lines, and balanced tones. The title emphasized vernacular language in writing. The history of modern Chinese poetry noted Eight vernacular poems as one of the first writings in the Modern Chinese Poetry period. In March 1920, the Experimental poem collection written by Hu Shi was published by the Shanghai Eastern Library Publishing house. Until now, the Experimental poem collection is noted as being the first set of poems of Modern Chinese poetry. Nearly five years after the publication of Eight vernacular poems by Hu Shi, modern Chinese poetry had substantially transformed. The first days of modern poetry certainly had failed experiments; In general, modern poetry had occupied the whole genre. Chinese poetry finally merged with the modernist period of the world’s literature.

After 1920, vernacular poems nearly replaced Chinese “classic poetry”. Basic features of vernacular poems had been formed. Weaknesses during the first periods had been alleviated rationally, helping vernacular poems to keep their own aesthetic characteristics. One particular case was Free verse which was characterized by its alluring styles, such as Guo Moruo’s romantic style, Bing Xin’s super short poems; Feng Zhi’s and Song Baihua’s style, and so forth. Among them, the most renowned poem was the poem collection called *Goddess* by Guo Moruo published in August 1921 (Yuan Dong Publishing House, Shanghai). This collection was once a reform’s phenomenon, that is, in the early days of modern Chinese poetry, as it was imbued with anti-feudalism and romantic style. With its reformative efforts, *Goddess* was the hallmark of Chinese modern poetry reform. *Goddess*, with 56 poems in total, was first written in 1918. Most of these were from the time when poets were studying in Japan. Some writings were made in 1921 when the poet first returned to China. The whole collection was heavily influenced by world famous poets such as R. Tagore, J. Goethe, H. Heine, P. Shelley, and C. Baudelaire. Guo Moruo was among rare Chinese poets who expressed special admiration for W. Whitman’s poetry (America). Almost all of his well-known poems carried the signature of Whitman’s romantic style.

Upon the decline of the May Fourth movement was a longing in each poet. If Lu Xun named this feeling “stunned” in narratives, poets begun to write vignettes (micro poems, flourished during 1921-1923). Bing Xin and Song Baihua were regarded as the most outstanding representatives. The vignette was the form suitable for expressing longing and sadness. The theme as well as the key feeling in these poems was displayed in various layers, but it was the human experience, it was philosophical thought and nostalgia. In terms of form, the vignette mostly used a minimalist style by eliminating verses and rules. This type of poem was influenced by the classical novelette. As for writers impacted by Japanese and English literature, their vignettes resembled Japanese haiku and R. Tagore’s vignettes.

Another hallmark of Chinese modern literature during the May Fourth movement that

presented the significant influence of vernacular language was children's literature. Before May Fourth, children's literature had not been a part of literature. This was directly associated with linguistic education for children. As seen, traditional education (Confucian) had taught children Four Books and Five Classics, leading them to a thousand-year-old museum which was isolated from daily life. Because classical education had not been concerned with children's literature, it had almost "stolen" the childhood of many generations while linguistic education for children in any country should begin with spoken and vernacular language. Writing literature for children, more than for anyone else, strictly required the use of their own language – spoken language from daily life. The kind of language had evolved with children, had echoed in their songs, fairy tales and folk stories, and was very different from classical works that required that we look up almost every word in dictionary.

Finally, one thing that should not be missed in discussing the impact of the vernacular language revolution is the achievement of translated and bilingual literature. China once employed classical language to translate foreign works, most of which were not particular representatives of large-scale cultural exchange. Not until May Fourth with vernacular language as its tool did translation develop to an unprecedented scale. A myriad of the world's classic works were able to "find themselves" in their interaction with China. In addition to translated literature (with numerous modulations and adaptations) that employed 100% vernacular language, was the phenomenon that Chinese writers wrote in foreign languages. This became an approach to learning foreign languages by using vernacular languages, as more suitable than approaching these through classical language in old language books.

Conclusion

"Classical" and "vernacular" language should not be seen as completely contradictory. The vernacular language revolution flourishing in the May Fourth movement did fulfill its mission in transforming tools and materials for one of the most ancient literature genres in the world, integrating this literary form into the path of the worldwide literature – a historical act that was called "modernization" and "globalization" in retrospect. However, believing that the May Fourth movement's leaders had "destroyed all classical legacy to build the new foundation" was too radical. May Fourth reformers in language and literature did not "destroy classical legacy" but focused on transforming and merging tradition into modernism. These writers would have found it difficult to completely eradicate "classical language" or "classic poetry rules" without eradicating their own styles. Moreover, in each nation's language, there had never been an absolute difference between speaking and writing, between pure "classical language" and spoken language. This truth is universal. For example, the "Latino extinct language" is a necessary label when comparing the genre to living common languages. Ancient Latino is still "alive" in European contexts, as is the case for Chinese classical language in China. Although it is no longer used as the official tool for writing, the Chinese classical form was not killed by May Fourth. Classical language is alive in modern Chinese, but does not now occupy a "top place" in realms such as in feudal periods. Only with such an open-minded approach can researchers evaluate the scale of vernacular language revolution in the May Fourth movement exactly and learn lessons that are valuable for cultural and literary reform, at both the present and future.

References

¹ 傅斯年：《怎样做白话文》，《新潮》第1卷第2号，（1919）年2月。

² Chen D. (1917) *Essay on Literary Revolution*, New Youth, 2, February 1. Reprinted in Extant writings of Chen Duxiu, published by Anhui People's Publishing House in (1987) pp. 95-98.