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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Historical Developmental Perspective of the Chinese Language

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| ABSTRACT

The historical development study of the Chinese language is beneficial for investigating its unique features, which attracts a number of scholars to explore the nature of the Chinese language. The Chinese language is featured with its long history, among which there are different phases and stages in the historical development of the Chinese language. The paper aims to investigate the specific features of the Chinese language from the perspective of its historical development by examining phases and stages of the developmental history of the Chinese language with concrete examples. In particular, in the four historical development periods of the Chinese language proposed by Wang Li and Lü (1947, 1965), the paper finds that characteristics of the Chinese language exhibit its specific features in periods or stages of development in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of the Chinese language. The findings are suggestive of the further systematic study of Chinese linguistics.

| KEYWORDS

Historical development; Chinese language; vocabulary and grammar

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### 1. Introduction

Almost any languages undergo historical changes. There are a number of factors that may influence the historical development of languages, among which social phenomenon always develops through different historical stages (Chen, 1956; Ding, 1956). People can stage history according to the different characteristics of these phenomena in each developmental stage. If the work is done well throughout the stages, it can highlight the phased characteristics of the development of things, which is conducive to people's in-depth understanding of the historical panorama of things and the laws of their development. The development of language is inseparable from society. However, language is a special social phenomenon. Its development has its stages and can also be divided into historical stages. The history of language should be divided into stages according to the characteristics and laws of the development of language itself and should not be equated with the stages of social history. Different languages have different histories at different stages. The stages of Chinese history should be determined according to the characteristics of Chinese history (Cheng, 1992; Guo, 1952, 1957, 1983).

### 2 The development of the Chinese language

Swedish sinologist Gobenham 高本漢 (B. Karlgren) was the first scholar to divide the stages of the history of the Chinese language, and he divided the history of the Chinese language into five stages: tàigǔ hànǔ 太古漢語 (le proto-chinois) before *Shijing* 詩經, shàngǔ hànǔ 上古漢語 (le chinois archaïque) from the emergence of 詩經 to the Eastern Han Dynasty, zhōngǔ hànǔ 中古漢語 (l'ancien chinois) from the Six Dynasties Period to the Tang Dynasty, jìngǔ hànǔ 近古漢語 (le chinois moyen) in the Song Dynasty, and lǎo guānhuà 老官話 (le vieux mandarin) in the Ming and Yuan Dynasties (Hu, 1982).

Lü (1947) divided the history of Chinese language development into two major stages, namely, the old and modern stages, based on the two written languages of *classical* and *vernacular*. He said:

It is estimated that the difference between the written and spoken language before the Qin Dynasty was not too great, but after the Han and Wei Dynasties, a fairly fixed written language gradually formed, which was later called *classical Chinese* (p.12).

Although there was a small amount of spoken language in certain types of essays, *bái huà wén* 白話文 (vernacular) with spoken language as the main body, such as *Dūnhuáng wénxiàn* 敦煌文獻 and *Chánzōng yǔlù* 禪宗語錄 (Wang, 1954), which did not begin to appear until the late Tang and Five Dynasties, and it was not until not too long after that when it replaced the written Chinese of classical Chinese. Judging by this situation, it is more appropriate to divide the history of the Chinese language into two major stages, old Chinese and modern Chinese, taking the late Tang and Five Dynasties as the boundary line. As for modern Chinese, it is only a stage within modern times of the Chinese language.

Some other opinions from Lü (1947) are as follows:

In terms of grammar and vocabulary, there is a little problem that the old Chinese was before the Qin and Han Dynasties, and modern Chinese was after the Song and Yuan Dynasties. How should the 700 years be divided from the Three Kingdoms to the end of the Tang Dynasty? The spoken language in this period must be quite different from that before the Qin and Han Dynasties, but because of the conservatism of writing, the spoken language could only be revealed here and there, and it was not until the late Tang and Five Dynasties that the spoken language prevailed in addition to the traditional text (p. 27).

From the Wei and Jin Dynasties to the end of the Tang Dynasty, there were some works close to the spoken language, such as Liu Yiqing's 劉義慶 (from Song in the Southern and Northern Dynasties) *Shì shuō xīn yǔ* 世說新語, *Bǎi yù jīng* 百喻經 translated by Qiuna Pidi 求那毗地 from Qi in the Southern and Northern Dynasties, Jia Sixie's (from the Northern Wei Dynasty) *Qí mín yào shù* 齊民要術, and so on. As for the folk songs in the Six Dynasties, such as *Zì yè gē* 子夜歌 and *Dú qǔ gē* 讀曲歌, as well as the poems of Wang Fanzhi (from the Tang Dynasty), Han Shan 寒山 and Shi De 拾得, they can be said to be quite colloquial. After the Five Dynasties, the vernacular was mainly limited to be spoken in *Chánzōng* 禪宗 or *Rújiā yǔlù* 儒家語錄 [Confucian Quotations], novels, and other popular literary works. History books, letters, official documents, and other styles were still written in classical Chinese. As Lü Shuxiang (1947) pointed out, it was not realized until recently that the vernacular completely replaced classical Chinese. Therefore, it is not without difficulties to stage the history of the Chinese language according to the application of classical Chinese and vernacular.

In principle, Wang (1954) did not agree that the stylistic change should be taken as the standard for the staging of the history of the Chinese language because "the change of style is not equal to the change of the national language. It does not show the transition of language from the old to the new." Wang (1954) believed that "the historical stages of language must be determined from the internal laws of language development." (p.9). In terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, "grammar should be taken as the main basis". Hence, the grammatical structure and basic vocabulary are the foundations of language and the essence of language characteristics. The grammatical structure changed more slowly than the basic vocabulary. If the grammatical structure changes significantly, the qualitative change of the language can be proved. There is a close relationship between phonetics and grammar (traditional Western grammar including phonetics), which is the entire system, so the evolution of phonetics can also be used as a standard for stages. The development of general vocabulary can also be used as a standard for staging, but it is not the main standard (Li, 1965; Luo, 1975, 1984). Wang (1954) divided the history of the Chinese language into four periods: Old Chinese (around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., before the Uprising of the Five Barbarians; the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries are the transitional periods); Middle Chinese (from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries are the transitional periods); Early Modern Chinese (from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; the Opium Wars in 1840 to the May Fourth Movement in 1919 as a transitional stage); Later Modern Chinese (after the May Fourth Movement).

In addition, Zhang (1989) believed that the staging of modern Chinese had an upper limit no later than the end of the Sui Dynasty and the beginning of the Tang Dynasty and a lower limit no later than before the appearance of *A Dream of Red Mansions* 紅樓夢. His reason was that according to the principle of *shuō yǒu yì* 說有易 (easy saying), if there was a typical modern Chinese component confirmed by evidence in a certain period, then although the number was small, it should be admitted that modern Chinese emerged in this period. As long as there is a reliable example of the emerging oral component, it can be proved that it "has", and it should not be suspected of "nothing" because of the small number of written examples. Zhang's point of view is not without reason. Most examples of Wang's (1954) *Zhōngguó xiàndài yǔfǎ* 中國現代語法 [Modern Chinese Grammar] were taken from *A Dream of Red Mansions* 紅樓夢.

### **3. Phases and stages of the developmental history of the Chinese language**

With reference to the views of Wang (1954) and Lü (1947), the history of the Chinese language is divided into the following four periods:

The first period is the Old Chinese Period, which is from the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., namely, the Shang and Zhou, Qin, and Han Dynasties. Among them, the Shang Dynasty was in the early period of Old Chinese, the Zhou and Qin Dynasties were in the middle of Old Chinese, and the Han Dynasty was in the late period. The Chinese language in this period had the following features:

In phonetics, there were no qīng chún yīn 輕唇音 (labiodentals); no shé shàng yīn 舌上音 (retroflex stop initials); no zhuāngzǔ shēngmǔ 莊組聲母 (Zhuang group initials) in the early and middle period; three types of finals, that is, the three groups of finals yīn陰, yáng陽 and rù入, were neatly coordinated; the tones were divided into two categories: level tone and entering tone, and each of the two categories can be divided into two sub-categories. There was no departing tone.

In vocabulary, there were mainly monosyllabic words and a certain number of polysyllabic words. In grammar, judgement sentences generally did not use conjunction words; pronoun objects of negative sentences and interrogative sentences were usually placed in front of verbs; passive sentences were usually expressed by function words such as “yú於” and “jiàn見”; notional words lacked certain parts of speech marks.

Among them, the early, middle, and later periods had their own characteristics. The early period was represented by oracle bone words. The number of vocabulary and the number of polysyllabic words were small. Grammar was relatively simple. There were few function words, and the phonetic system was not very clear. In the middle period, the rhyme materials, such as *Shijing* 詩經, were rich, and the old rhyme group was established. The number of words increased greatly, with about 20% of polysyllabic words, and a complete functional word system was produced. In the late period, the jīngzǔ shēngmǔ 精組聲母 (Jing group initials) with dental sibilants were gradually differentiated into the two groups of initial of jīng精 and zhuāng莊. The number of polysyllabic words increased, and the copula “shì是” began to appear (Qi, 1981).

The second period is the Middle Chinese Period. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to around the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., namely the Six Dynasties and the Tang and Song Dynasties. Among them, the six Dynasties were in the early Middle Chinese Period, during which ethnic minorities ruled northern China, and the scholars of the Central Plains moved to the east of the Yangtze River, which led to the integration of Chinese and northern national languages as well as changes in Chinese dialects. The Tang Dynasty was in the middle of the period, and the Song Dynasty was in the late period. During these two periods, the economy and culture reached a high level of development, which promoted the widespread development of the common language of the Han nationality based on the Central Plains language. However, in the Southern Song Dynasty, the Chinese language began to brew new and great changes. The Chinese language in this period had the following features:

In phonetics, the phonetic system represented by the phonological system of “qiè yùn切韻” was formed. The four tones: level tone, rising tone, departing tone, and entering tone were formed. Labiodentals and retroflex stop initials appeared. Two initial groups, zhuāng莊 and zhāng章 merged together. Many words with long entering tones were changed to departing tones (Tang, 1981).

In vocabulary, it became more prevalent that there were four tones and characters with multiple meanings. The number of polysyllabic words increased. Loaned words and relevant new words were added to the Chinese vocabulary due to cultural exchanges and the wide spread of Buddhism in China.

In grammar, the third-person pronoun “tā他” (he) came into being. The verb tense-aspect system began to appear. The structural auxiliaries “dǐ底”, “dì地” and “gè箇” appeared. The conjunction “shì是” (be) and new judgment sentences were widely used. The pronoun objects of negative sentences and interrogative sentences were generally moved to the back of verbs. Passive sentences represented by “bèi被” appeared. The disposal forms expressed by “jiāng將” and “bǎ把” came into being. The complement structure with “dé得” developed in many forms (Wang, 1956).

Two written languages, classical Chinese and vernacular, appeared. Classical Chinese that imitated Old Chinese took a dominant position. In the meantime, the vernacular that reflected the spoken language began to take shape and was widely used in biànwén 變文 and yǔlù 語錄.

The third period is the Early Modern Chinese. The Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties were from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Yuan Dynasty was in the early period, the Ming and Qing Dynasties were in the middle of the times, and the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement was the late developmental stage. The Chinese language in this period had the following features:

In phonetics, the voiced initials became voiceless. Retroflex stop initials, retroflex sibilants, and palatal sibilants merged together and changed to retroflex initials. In the late period, jiān tuányīn 尖團音 was gradually mixed. Rhyme groups were simplified. The [-m] sound disappeared, joining the sound [-n]. The entering tone disappeared, merging into the level tone, the rising tone, and the departing tone. The level tone was then divided into two categories of yīn 陰 and yáng 陽 (Xu, 1990).

In vocabulary, due to the widespread of vernacular literature, a large number of spoken words (including dialect words) entered the literary language. A lot of borrowed Mongolian words appeared in the early written language (Xu, 1984). After the middle period, under the influence of western culture, a large number of borrowed words were absorbed, and a large number of new words were created according to foreign concepts.

In grammar, the tense auxiliary word system was further improved. The usage of “zhe 著” and “le 了” was clearly stated. Kāishǐ mào 開始貌, jìxù mào 繼續貌, and duǎnshí mào 短時貌 were produced successively (Yao, 1984). The structural auxiliary word “de 的” was commonly used, and a new modal particle system was formed.

The fourth period is Contemporary Chinese, which is from the May Fourth Movement to the present. The modern common Chinese language (Putonghua), which takes Beijing pronunciation as the standard sound, the northern dialect as the basic dialect, and the typical modern vernacular works as the grammatical norm, was finally formed and further developed (Yang, 1985).

#### 4. Conclusions

The study is focused on the historical development of the Chinese language. From the perspective of the phases or periods of Chinese development, it can be seen that in the above-mentioned periods or stages of development, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of the Chinese language all have their own characteristics. However, the change of language is not realized through sudden change but through the gradual accumulation of new elements and the gradual disappearance of old elements. In the meantime, a language phenomenon often goes through a long process of development from the beginning to universal application. Therefore, the staging of Chinese history is not exactly guaranteed, as it is difficult to determine a definite date. Before each stage is formed, there is a long transitional period, some of which can be as long as 200 to 300 years or more. The common language phenomenon at a certain stage may have appeared in the previous stage. For example, the merging of the initial groups jīng 精 and zhuāng 莊 is the major characteristic of initials in the phonetic system of qiè yùn 切韻 in Middle Chinese. However, they began to divide in the later period of Old Chinese. The change of the rising tone of voiced sounds to the falling tone was one of the characteristics of tones of Modern Chinese, while it first appeared as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, language forms that have basically disappeared at a certain stage may also occasionally appear at a later stage, especially in written language. For example, the structures “yǐ.....wéi.....” and “wéi.....ér.....” were widely used in Classical Chinese, and they seldom appeared in early vernacular. However, sentence structures like “yǐ máo zhǔ xí wéi shǒu de dǎng zhōng yāng.....”(The Central Committee of CPC headed by Chairman Mao)” and “wéi shí xiàn sī gè xiàn dài huà ér nǚ lì fèn dòu (Strive hard for the realization of the four modernizations)” were both used in written and spoken language. The history of the Chinese language should be divided into different stages according to the overall characteristics of each development stage. The findings help to investigate the different features of the characteristic contents of the Chinese language systematically. The study has its limitations in that relatively small examples are exemplified, and the related factors affect the specific features of the Chinese language. Future study needs to further investigate the systematic features of the Chinese language in the specific branch (i.e., the merging group features) with numerous examples.

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