

NEW CHINA AND THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

In 851, four and a half centuries before Marco Polo, the anonymous author of a famous report on China and India¹ (*Akhbar as-Sin wal-Hind*), availing himself of the information brought back by Arab merchants and sailors, gave so careful and meticulous a description of China that specialists even today find few inaccuracies. Yet the same subject is treated by most contemporary scholars with a light-hearted casualness that is confusing and disturbing.

One such scholar, who passes for an expert because of half a dozen bad books he has written on the Orient, does not even take the trouble, when he writes about the 'Chinese élite' to consult studies which deal with the same topic rather well. Another merely refuses to admit the existence of individuals who do not appeal to him. But all this does not mean that in the last five or six years no serious books have been written that help us to penetrate the Middle Kingdom.

Instead of dwelling on a China that is extinct, let us start our examination with a picture of the China of the future (*La Chine Future*)² given us

¹Jean Sauvaget. *Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde* (critical edition and French translation): Les Belles Lettres, 1948.

²Les Editions de Minuit, 1952.

in a short attractive monograph by Pierre Naville, a man who has followed the Chinese Revolution at close hand for more than twenty years. Here we have personal, sweeping points of view, frequently enriched by quotations in which Maspero balances Hegel. Although there is a generous dash of audacity the study as a whole is judicious. For M. Naville sees the essential truth, that is, that China can now 'turn a new face to the heavens without denying her ancestors'. One China is dead, the China that foreign dynasties (first Mongol, then Manchu) surrendered to white men's greed; the China of unjust treaties and *extra-territoriality* (a horrible, unpronounceable word which symbolises, by an amusing whim of justice, something that should never have existed). But if the new-born China is even slightly disposed to, she will know how to renew her ties with the true Chinas—the China of the Song, the T'ang, the Han, the Chou, and even the Yin (not to speak of the Hsia, the myth of whose dynasty presupposes the existence of a culture which could be called 'Chinese', according to Herrlee Glessner Creel's *Studies in Early Chinese Culture*³).

In this destruction of so many economic and social values, will the leaders of the revolution have the wisdom to preserve one of the ideas and one of the richest arts that man has created? I am not the only one to raise this question. All those who have any feeling at all for China are equally concerned. For example, Arthur F. Wright declares at the end of a volume of essays, *Studies in Chinese Thought*⁴, that if the Communists have their way, the influence of ancient Chinese literature and other cultural traditions will be reduced to practically nothing. I should like, then, to examine as well as I can the question as to whether or not China will accept her heritage after inventory has been taken. This, according to Arthur Wright, 'is one of the most important questions of our days' (p. 301).

In 1932, long before Mao Tse-tung came to power, the League of Nations sent a mission to China with the purpose of studying the public education system and, if necessary, reorganising it. They found the country divided into factions, some for, some against the characters. In fact, there were a number of liberals who believed that the large masses of people, including illiterates, could not be educated so long as they had to master the script. Some suggested that only a limited number of characters be taught, which would serve as a kind of intellectual vital minimum. Many of the scholars who were familiar with the Japanese systems of notation

³First Series, Baltimore, 1937.

⁴The University of Chicago Press, 1953.

proposed a syllabic, or in any case phonetic, scheme which would adapt the *kana* to China. M. Naville, using Japanese as his model,⁵ suggests a mongrel system with a mixture of traditional characters and phonetic transcriptions. And he should like this new writing to denote a new language as well, a kind of 'basic Chinese' built on the tongue spoken in the North. Since he believes that China is 'the only country in the world where the popular revolution calls for changes in the language' he feels that a new 'instrument' must be forged with the 'aid' of the people. And what difference does it make if this new language, this 'basic Chinese', breaks with 'a literary past that the masses never enjoyed'!⁶

Others made the even more radical proposal of romanising the Chinese language at once. This meant neglecting the problem created by the great variety of dialects involved. When one knows that characters which in Peking are pronounced somewhat as follows: *tsao k'i yue lao je tch'u*, are read by a Cantonese more or less as *tso hi yut lok yat tch'eut*; and in Shanghai become '*tsao 'ki gneuh loh gneh ts'eh'*' one can see that an indiscriminate romanising of spoken Chinese would create languages as different from each other in their sounds as Italian from Spanish, Catalan from Rumanian, or French from Portuguese. As for the interdialectal romanisation that so many scholars dream of, I should like to know how they propose to romanise *uniformly* dialects that are so dissimilar! By destroying the lingual unity which depends entirely on ideograms, romanisation would jeopardise political unity at a moment when the revolution, an essentially centralising force, needs all of its strength and rigour to keep China in a single bloc.

So long as the Chinese do not speak a common language the romanisation of the popular vernacular, as well as its phonetic transcription (even if it is modelled on the Japanese *kana*), will be impossible. If Communist China did want to adopt one of our alphabets she would have to take the drastic step of deciding which of the many languages was to be the legal currency. It could not be anything but *kuo yu*, a kind of *koimè* that has been forming little by little. Limiting ourselves to purely common-sense arguments, we must agree that, in any case, it would not be possible to romanise safely before every Chinese without exception had assimilated the common language. Even if we suppose that the Ministry of Public Education could guarantee schooling for all the children, with enough

⁵ 'As the Japanese already do in part.'

⁶ *La Chine future*, pp. 34-5.

⁷ I have borrowed this illustration from Father Lamasse's *Sin Kouo Wen*.

instructors capable of teaching them *kuo yu*, there are still the adults to contend with. So that the advocates of a romanised Chinese (assuming that they still exist and can prevail) would not be able to carry through their plan in less than fifty years or so.

What does the Communist Party think of all this? At the beginning of the civil war, about 1935, they supported romanisation; obviously, the *agit-prop* specialists had noticed that the enforced transcription of Annamite into *quoc ngu* was a help in proselytising peasants. And was it not more convenient to teach the few workers only the signs of an alphabet? A number of manuals of romanised Chinese were sent to me about that time. And a Russian Sinologist, V. N. Alexeief, devoted an entire book to the gospel of the period, *Kitaiskaya ieroglificheskaya pis'mennost' i ee latinisatsia* (The Ideogrammatic Writing of the Chinese and Its Romanisation). He demonstrated that one could perfectly well romanise the spoken language, the *pei hua* (that goes without saying), arguing that the original monosyllabism of Chinese was not the obstacle many people thought it to be. In fact, Vendryès had written that 'monosyllabism was sometimes considered a characteristic of English', which, as we know, does not have to be written in Chinese characters. In short, the Marxists were in favour of romanisation before they came to power. But it was interesting to note that the very same Alexeief was assigned the preparation of a huge Chinese-Russian dictionary of the characters. In any case, having been converted to Alexeief's and the League of Nations experts' ideas, I published an essay in 1934 showing that it was *technically* impossible to romanise literary Chinese, the *wen yen*, adding that I hoped to see a spoken *koinè*, the *kuo yu*, romanised. In 1947 I revised my essay, having come to the conclusion that the Chinese characters should be retained. Mao Tse-tung, on his coming to power, condemned romanisation.

Now let us listen to Claude Roy, one of the French Marxists who in 1953 disparaged the same alphabets that they had considered the only salvation of China in 1934. While the Chinese 'draw their script', we Occidentals can only 'jot the scrawls of a gaunt stenography'. When the Chinese 'offer us a *character*', we ingrates can only 'give a *word* in return', a wretched word, made up of 'little utilitarian signs' (one might almost call them *capitalist* or *feudal*) or 'cheap and limp' scribbles, like the cyrillic alphabet, I suppose. Whereas the brush of Mao Tse-tung gives us the whole world, the real world (one might almost say *socialist-realist* world)—idea and picture in one stroke—our fountain pen and typewriter present just an algebra of the world (one might say an *abstractivist* picture).

'Watching you write, Hau Lien Tuan, I saw you *draw the writing*. How poor I felt next to you! As pure and elegant as my letters may be, I know that they will always seem as odd to you as algebraic notations, and you will be right.' Well, then, the Chinese asks, shall we get on with 'the revolution of the writing'? 'Revolution?' How marvellous is the power of forgetfulness, permitting you to write today the contrary of what you professed yesterday or the day before⁸ and with exactly the same assurance!

With the same assurance and the same excess! Is there any point in calumniating the phonetic alphabet? If I am glad to learn that Mao Tse-tung has adopted the characters without reproaching them for being a vestige of the feudalism that ends for him in 1940, it is not because I belittle our alphabets, which have, indeed, many virtues that the Chinese does not have. It is because I love the Chinese language as I love the culture that it made possible. Moreover, anyone who forced China to disown her ancient script would be robbing her of her entire heritage.

As long as the Chinese people know a *pei hua*, the vernacular, that is written in ideograms, why should it be more difficult for them to go on to classical Chinese than for the Bedouin to study literal Arabic, or the young French or Italian student, Latin? What is more, whoever has studied Chinese at the *École des Langues Orientales*, devoting the first year to the characters of the *pei hua*, knows that the transition to the administrative language and the *wen yen* the following year is painless. Now, without going as far as M. Margouliès who believes (if I understand *La Langue et l'Écriture chinoises*⁹ properly) that customs and ethics, politics and manners, even the philosophy of power depend on the characters, I must admit that the peculiar nature of this script and syntax has strongly influenced the thinking that it shaped.

The Indo-European languages are composed of words which one arrives at only by a progressive synthesis of letters and syllables which are directed to the ear. These words have no autonomous existence whatsoever, subjected, as they always are, to the play of inflections, to vocalic changes, and to conjugations (*orao, opsomai, eidon, éôraka*, I go, we are going, I went). The basic element of the Chinese language on the other hand is the ideogram, that is, the word given definitively, for all cases, genders, numbers, tenses, persons, voices, moods; the word in its visual, not in its auditory, form, the mere tracing of which often evokes the whole

⁸ In this connexion see *La Chair des Mots* in *Clés pour la Chine*, Gallimard, 1953, pp. 250-8.

⁹ Payot, 1943.

group of ideas or notions that it connotes.¹⁰ Margouliès contrasts the concreteness and subjectivity of the Occidental languages with the abstractness and objectivity of Chinese, a perfect instrument for the expression of ideas; the prolixity of our spoken tongues with the conciseness of a common language created for the eye; the loose individualism of the Western Press with the careful control which Chinese scholars exercised over the use of key-words (if it is true that they alone, and only the best of them at that, had the authority to impose a neologism or a derived meaning). Many consequences follow from this. Just as in the West the carpenter devotes himself for a considerable period to learning how to handle the plane, the rabbit-plane or the jointing plane, depending on the case, so, before being able to write, every Chinese scholar must study vocabulary and syntax at length. Since one cannot write Chinese without having read a great number of good authors, the Chinese reads, or did read, much more than the Occidental. And, unlike us, he reads for the purpose of mastering and appreciating rhetoric. So that in China genius without form simply does not exist; it is both expressed and apprehended by form.

Nor is that all. Since the standard of the literary language has nothing in common with that of the vernacular, the art of writing cannot be judged by the same criterion as the art of speaking. Every Chinese knows almost instinctively, having learned it little by little, that a good lecture is a bad article, and a fine discourse a poor piece of writing. Today when Western letters tend to be reduced to journalism, reporting and the stenographed dialogue, the Chinese language might well recall us to some elementary and important truths. At the rate that we are going our children will not be able to understand us. Every thirty years our language must die, and before being able to even touch our cultural heritage, we shall see it completely squandered. Now, in China, because of the power of the characters, nothing is in danger of becoming obsolete. After two thousand years the form of the *Li Sao* and the *Li Ki* will be clearer to an educated person than the language of Villon to a French student of today or the language of Chaucer to an Englishman. Thus, the Chinese literary tradition, inextricably bound to the script as it is, provides a guarantee against fickleness of taste, according to M. Margouliès.

One cannot deny that there is much to be said in favour of the characters

¹⁰ If it is true that early Chinese had inflections (and Karlgren showed that it did) the Chinese we are discussing, the Chinese of the classics, had lost them; at most it preserved some vestiges.

and the quality that they give to the *wen yen* which seems to have some of the characteristics of the universal language Leibnitz desired and Margouliès too. And although I cannot say that I know the *wen yen* well, it has given me great joy, and still does. There are few languages more satisfying than Chinese for word-lovers, in spite of the fact that the poverty of the phonic system neutralises the richness of the script. But can one seriously think that the ideograms and syntax of Lao Tsu constitute the ideal language for the diplomat, the philosopher or the story teller? Only those who have never taken the trouble to count the number of Russian words, or calculate the scope of the English vocabulary (or the calumniated French) can be lost in admiration at the approximately forty thousand characters in a Chinese dictionary. As for the syntax, what expert would deny its ambiguity and rigidity?

The *wen yen* thus is far from having all the virtues that Margouliès attributes to it. Let us then turn to Achilles Fang's delightful essay on the difficulties of this written language, 'Some Reflections on the Difficulty of Translation'.¹¹ Take the simple and overworked word *min*, the *min* in *Kuomintang*. Who would dare to translate it after having read Mr. Fang? *Min* to a Chinese means something that is neither the French *peuple* nor the English 'people'. Mr. Fang's argument reminded me of T. E. Lawrence's scruples for once having translated the Arabic expression, *ya ahl es-Shams* as 'people of Damas'. And suddenly it occurred to me that the best translation of *min* would undoubtedly be the Arabic *ahl*. No, I will not cite the well known debate about a certain *Ko wu* which succeeded in dividing Chinese thinking completely, with one group deducing a metaphysics of intuition and a kind of spiritualism from *Ko wu*, and the other finding in it the essence of a positivist doctrine and something that could have become the experimental method. But I should like to say a few words about *Chong Yong*. Europeans hardly know this more or less Confucian treatise that historical hazard placed in the *Li Ki*. Without the *Chong Yong* it is impossible to study the Confucian doctrine seriously. But as for knowing what those two words mean! In more than two thousand years of studying them the confusion has only grown! Giving the meaning of 'centre' to *chong* and the same meaning to *yong* as *ch'ang*, that is, 'constant', 'lasting' (perhaps 'eternal' as well), Chu Hsi interpreted it as signifying the 'changeless mean' which has to satisfy us most of the time. But Cheng Kiuian glosses this *yong* with another character

¹¹ *Studies in Chinese Thought*, pp. 263–85.

that is also pronounced *yong* and which means 'to employ'! As for Marcel Granet, whose course on this treatise I attended,¹² he read this composite expression as a musical metaphor, the important word remaining *chong*, glossed by *chong-ho*, *ho* being 'harmony' and *chong ho* the 'just harmony'. According to this version, the Son of Heaven, who radiates harmony, is placed in the centre of the world at the particularly dense spot which is organised and illuminated by the *ho*. So that Granet suggests it be translated as 'Power of harmonious union', or even 'Radiating power of central harmony' in the ethical and social sense.

But the difficulty I have translating *chong yong* becomes almost agreeable whenever I am faced with the task of translating the rather commonplace *pu k'o* which appears so frequently in *wen yen* and the writings of the philosophers. It irremediably combines the idea of 'necessary' (in physics) and 'obligatory' (in ethics). Imagine what absurdities we are driven to by the 'necessary' (or perhaps 'obligatory') choice of one or the other translation. How can we know if the Confucian philosopher who writes *tao pu k'o* thinks of the *tao* as a moral force which 'is not permitted to' or as a blind natural force (in which case we should have to translate it as: 'It is not possible that the tao', etc. . . .). When Granet prefers to give *pu k'o* only the moral meaning, who can guarantee that he is not limiting or even falsifying the significance, because of the undeniable ambiguity of the Chinese language as well as his sociological prejudice?

Let us not claim, then, that the Chinese language, in addition to its many virtues, has also the clarity of the French. Take the other key word of Confucian thinking, the *t'ai ki*, a formula which has become famous because one of the 'fathers' of Neo-Confucianism, Chou Tuen-yi, curiously coupled it with one of the key words of Taoist metaphysics, *wu-ki*, as a kind of challenge. So that *wu-ki el t'ai-ki* (with the particle *el* having the same sense as our copulative 'is') constitutes one of the most daring formulas of philosophical syncretism, if Mr. Chow Yi-ching¹³ is justified in translating it as 'Without-Peak and Peak Supreme' or even 'Without-Peak is peak-supreme'. More explicitly, the Without-peak is the formula of Lao-tsu and Chung-tsu, a Taoist formula, *par excellence*. But it is also purely and simply what we Confucians call the Peak-supreme, the *t'ai-ki*, which is the metaphysical formula where the Taoists

¹²In 1930-1 at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises.

¹³*La Philosophie morale dans le Néo-Confucianisme (Tcheou Tounen-yi)*, preface de Paul Demiéville, P.U.F., 1954.

tried to define being negatively. It is also the good old cosmological formula of *yi-king*, the Book of Changes. How we all do agree!

One might just as well say that everything is in everything; that white is black; or that white is not white. Which is exactly the opinion expressed by the Chinese sophists and by the famous paradox of Kong-suen on the white horse which, in so far as it is white cannot be horse. After Forke and twenty other equally erudite commentators (among them Hou Che) Mr. Ignace Kou Pao-Koh¹⁴ has just stumbled against the famous phrase which sums up the debate, *pu k'o yi wei ma ma ye*. Here we come on the disturbing *pu k'o* again, less disturbing here than elsewhere. But what are we to make out of *ma ma ye*? *Ma* means 'horse', 'a horse', 'the horse', or 'some horses'. First difficulty. Here is the second difficulty—*ma ma*; the character that I have just said means 'horse', 'a horse', etc. is repeated. We suspect that this is not the first time that Chinese has played tricks like this on us. One of the best known precepts juxtaposes several pairs of repeated words, for example, *fu fu* and *tsu tsu* ('the father should act as father, or realise his quality of father; the son that of the son'). But try to use this key on the *ma ma* of Kong-Suen Long. It does not help. So it comes to mind that *jen jen* can have another meaning, the distributive, 'each man'. Hence the scholarly commentator Ts'ien Mu translated *ma ma* as 'each horse', which is perfectly plausible syntactically but which makes no sense whatever. The equally learned Sie Hi-chen reads it as 'two horses in one substance', which in the context means absolutely nothing. The distinguished scholar Yu Yue gets by with 'one horse like two' which has no meaning at all, as far as I can see. Then we have Mr. Kou Pao-Koh, Doctor of Letters and very lettered indeed, who says, 'the text is very obscure; it is hard to know what "a horse horse" can mean'. Now, if I, myself, do not find the text obscure, it is simply because I ignore the weakness of the syntax, letting myself be guided by a reasoning which *forces* me to understand: 'We can state, then, that there exists a horse [or some horses] (*ku ki wei yeu ma ye*), but we cannot state that there exists a horse [or some horses] *qua* horse[s] (*pu k'o yi wai ma ma ye*).' Chang Tong-suen glosses it in the same way, 'the horse in abstracto'; as does the scholarly historian of Chinese thought, Mr. Fong Yeu-lan, 'the horse as such'.¹⁵ Which does not prevent Mr. Ignace Kou Pao-Koh from modestly

¹⁴ *Deux Sophistes chinois: Houei Che e Kong-Souen Long*, Imprimerie et P.U.F. Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1953.

¹⁵ As a substitute for his history of philosophy (in Chinese) (7th edition, Tchong King, 1946) see *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, New York, 1948.

giving up the sponge, 'We do not see what the two words "the horse horse" mean. Is there another corruption of the text here?' By no means! What strikes us here is precisely the fact that in a text where the meaning is absolutely unambiguous, given the premises of the reasoning and everything we know about Kong-Suen Long's thinking, it has been possible, because of the nature of the language, for ten different scholars to become embroiled, to contradict each other and even occasionally delicately give up the attempt to understand.

And even worse. In the more than two thousand years that we have revered the *Tao Tö King* it has not been possible to agree on the meaning of these three characters that make up the title of one of the most widely translated works of China and the world. Stanislas Julien translated it as *Le Livre de la voie et de la vertu* (*The Book of the Way and Virtue*). Closer to us, Messrs. Huang Kia-Cheng and Pierre Leyris as *La voie et sa vertu* (*The Way and Its Virtue*)¹⁶, an interpretation where the word 'its' indicates a relation of determination between *tao* and *tö*. Stanislas Julien, on the contrary, makes *tao* and *tö* two words in apposition. First difficulty. Father Wieger, himself, treats *tao* and *tö* as Huang Kia-Cheng does, but he denies that those three words can mean anything but *Treatise of the Principle and Its Action*.

And here is the long-awaited translation of Mr. Duyvendak, *Le livre de la voie et de la vertu* (*The Book of the Way and Virtue*).¹⁷ After having enjoyed the charming introduction of the Dutch scholar, one pulls up with a start at the very first phrase of the text itself, the *tao k'o tao fai chang tao!* One recalls the translation of Huang Kia-Cheng and Leyris: 'The way which can be uttered is not the way forever'; and Stanislas Julien's as well: 'The way which can be expressed by the word is not the eternal way'. Then the reader goes back to the traditional glosses and is sure that the second *tao* of the phrase is correctly translated as a synonym of *yen* which means 'word' or even 'utter'. There is no mistake about it, the *Tao Tö King* opens with a play on words, a literary trick. But here is Duyvendak translating: 'The really true way is other than a constant way'. No more playing on the two meanings of the character *tao*; and *k'o* is no longer 'to be able', but 'to be worthy of'. Instead of the notion of eternity he gives us that of 'constancy'! Had Stanislas Julien perhaps suspected this interpretation? In a note on p. 2 of his *Tao Tö King*, after *Su-tsu-yeu* he glosses: 'There are two ways (two *Tao*), the ordinary one, which is the

¹⁶ *La Voie et sa vertu*—Editions du Seuil, 1949.

¹⁷ *Adrien-Maisonneuve*, 1953.

way of justice, rites, and prudence; it can be expressed by the word and its name can be named. The other is the sublime Way (the *Tao*) which Lao-Tsu speaks of.' On the basis of a Taoist edition published under the Ming he adds, 'This way, which hovers over time, has neither form, nor colour, nor name. If one looks for it with one's eyes one will not see it; if one listens with one's ears, one will not hear it. That is why it cannot be expressed by the word, nor indicated by means of a name.' In short, on the basis of the first phrase the *Tao* has always been regarded as a kind of Platonic Idea, almost a Kantian *noumenon*, or even as a purely transcendental value. But Mr. Duyvendak very simply declares, 'this conception seems wrong to me!' What is more, he then goes on to explain, 'the words here translated as the "really true way" (or, more literally, "the way which can be considered the way") [. . .] are *k'o tao*'. *Tao* would then be 'used as a factitive verb. *K'o* (whose perfidy I have already mentioned) has the meaning of "to be worthy of, to deserve".' As for this *tao* which a number of translators take to mean 'to express in words', 'it is true that the word means "to say", but it is not used in that sense anywhere else in the *Tao To King* [. . .]'. Nor is the negative *fai* a 'simple negative' here. It must be understood in the sense it has 'in the famous dictum of the sophist Kong-Suen Long: "White horse is not horse", that is, the notion of a white horse is not identical with the general notion of horse'. According to Mr. Duyvendak's translation, which I find convincing, *not a single one of the six words of this crucial phrase has the meaning or the grammatical function that has been attributed to it for more than two thousand years by thousands of glossarists. Tao suddenly shines with a new and startling meaning: 'The word tao means way. Now, the characteristic of an ordinary way is that it is unchangeable, constant, permanent. However, the way we are dealing with here is characterised by the exact opposite; this way is perpetual mutability itself. Being and Non-being, life and death constantly alternating. There is nothing that is fixed or unchanging.'* Nothing, not even the way!

It seems to me that we can now understand a little better what so bafflingly appears as a kind of intellectual lethargy or scholastic sterility in Chinese thinking and which has made possible so many translations of well-known texts differing according to the ambitions of each dynasty and each prince.

If the *wen yen* had the virtues Margouliès attributes to it, and if the characters deserved the indiscreet praise heaped on them by Claude Roy we should know what meaning to give the titles of the most famous works

of the two greatest traditions, the *Chong Yong* and the *Tao Tö King*. The Greeks can well be proud of their syntax and the French of their grammar. It is true that glossarists dwelled for two thousand years on a text of Aristophanes where a woman 'refuses to be the lioness on the cheese grater', but it is simply because they were not familiar with the shape and decoration of Greek cheese graters. After excavations had produced a grater embellished with a lioness offering herself to a lion they saw perfectly clearly that their word-for-word translation had been correct, if temporarily meaningless; syntax had guided them irresistibly. Whereas Chinese syntax only too often does the opposite.

It is obvious that a government concerned with efficiency cannot entrust propaganda slogans to so ambiguous a language. Besides, since the *wen yen* removes Chinese literature from the flux of history, that is, from 'the exigencies of daily living',¹⁸ it is the same as saying that this literary language (even though it lends itself to ceremonial poetry of, let us say, the Saint John Perse kind) cannot serve to express either the *ideas* which present-day China needs, or the *tone* of the newspapers or wall posters that are written for proletarians and schoolboys. Moreover, the richness of *wen yen*, like literal Arabic, is largely due to an abundance of unusual words. Now, the best Arab writers, the very ones who hope to play a role in the sciences, arts and philosophy equal to their forbears a thousand years ago, willingly admit that the beauty of their poetry does not help them find a language for medicine, physics, political economy, or simply art criticism. Just as the Chinese prose writers know perfectly well that they will not find a vocabulary for dialectical materialism in Chuang Tsu nor a language for heavy industry in Kiu Yan, nor the words for art criticism in the *Yo Ki*. They know this so well that, since the publication of the *Néologie*¹⁹ of Father Wieger who had collected several thousand new words, other neologies have appeared, becoming outmoded the day after publication, so swift is the influx of new notions. Wieger's 1936 *Néologie* began with the word, if I may call it that, *ai keue-seu koang-sien* which was followed by *ai-pi-si-ti*. (In *ai-pi-si-ti* you have undoubtedly recognised the *abcd* but I doubt if *x-rays* can clarify the meaning of *ai-kenessen*!) The same *Néologie* ends with *yunn-yunn, et cetera*. From the *abcd* to *x-rays*, etc., these are the words that contemporary China needs—words for banking, commerce, industry, economy, biology, meteorology and many more. Words also had to be created for sociology,

¹⁸ Preface to *Kou Wen* by Margouliès, pp. xxxviii–xxxix.

¹⁹ Imprimerie de Sien-hsien, 3rd Edition, 1936.

socialism, socialisation and the socialist state. These words (one might better say, periphrases) present innumerable difficulties, manufactured under the pressure of mechanical civilisations, as they have been. Today telephone in Chinese is written in two simple characters, *tien houa*, 'electric words', while as late as 1929 my professor of Chinese still taught me the phonetic transcription *tō-lu-fong* for which three characters had been practically sterilised, and then mobilised, without ever evoking 'telephone'. For the one word, centimetre, four characters were required, *chen-ti-mai-tang*, or something like that. How can any Chinese who respects or loves his past regard these foreign growths with anything but hostility? This *Ye-su*, the Jesus of the Christians! This *Ya Po La Han* with its four characters for the simple name of Abraham! This *Yeh Ho Hua*, three characters for the *One* (one for each person of the Trinity)! Thus the Christianised *T'ai p'ing* could never bring themselves to name their God *Ye Ho Hua*; they call Him *Chang Ti*, Lord on High, according to an old Chinese expression, thereby paganising and Sinising the concept. The Protestants themselves Sinised the Holy Bible when they invented—for their catechumens—the notion of *Ye-su hua-ti*, 'transformed into Jesus' (as if the 'Imitation of Jesus' raised man to the divine!). For similar reasons the vocabulary of socialism and communism will not get by without some difficulty. Accustomed as they are to get a notion from every character, the Chinese will have to think of socialism in four characters, *she-huei chu-yi*. Arthur Wright gives some amusing examples of this kind of puzzle in the essay he has just published, 'The Chinese Language and Foreign Ideas'.²⁰ We have guessed it! In Peking and elsewhere the newspapers have not stopped attacking 'American imperialism'. Now, in Chinese the United States is called *Mei li hien kuo* (in which *Mei-li*, the phonetic transcription of [A]meri[ca], was certainly chosen in order to evoke 'grace' and 'elegance' which they also mean). Four characters is a lot for just one country. So, it is simplified and becomes *Mei Kuo* (just as France, *Fa-lan-si Kuo*, in phonetic transcription, becomes *Fa Kuo*, 'the Country of Law'). But how to translate 'imperialism'? The word is analysed as 'empire plus doctrine'. So that 'empire' becomes *Ti-kuo* in two characters, with the same *Kuo*, 'country', that we have in the Chinese name for the United States. To render the '-ism' of 'imperialism' the Chinese have recourse to the *chu-yi* that we are already familiar with in 'socialism', *she-huei chu-yi*. If then, I put the words

²⁰ *Studies in Chinese Thought*, pp. 286–303.

'American imperialism' together I get eight characters, *mei-li-hien-kuo ti-kuo-chu-yi*, or 'the imperialism of the country of niceness'. Cutting it down to *mei-kuo ti-kuo chu-yi* we have six characters but that is still too much! Using the technique of the various digests, one abridges the abridged, arriving at *mei-ti*, two words which can also mean (if one sees them in all their richness) 'emperor of America' (the character *mei*, 'beautiful', 'pretty', standing for America!) The strange results of these neologisms are enough to discourage the Chinese from accepting anything that comes from America or Europe!

And then we have the new vocabulary of dialectical materialism savagely erupting with a German-Russian scholasticism that no Chinese brain could ever think up. I have not yet been able to study the Chinese equivalents of the Marxist vocabulary, but I promise myself to do so with profit. However I can already sense something of its originality or weakness by going back to the translation of the *cogito* supplied by the best Chinese philosophical dictionary. *Ergo sum* is reduced to *ku wo tsai*, that is, 'therefore I am here' in the locative sense! Whereas Spanish distinguishes between *estar* and *ser*, and French has just one verb *être* ('to be'), this verb is completely lacking in Chinese; instead it gives us the *tsai* which always requires locative complements, 'at', 'in', 'to be there'. Reduced to this comical and puerile 'therefore I am here', there is no danger of the *cogito's* influencing Chinese thinking.

Just as the Chinese characters by their very nature and without the slightest ill will have resisted the *cogito*, they will defy German Marxism and Russian Stalinism. Moreover, they will be able to react all the more effectively since the thinking of the Sons of Han abounds in works, doctrines, and schools where the spirit of tradition will eventually lead them to find a foreshadowing of dialectic (in Taoism) or the Stalinist *praxis* (in the School of Legists, the Book of Lord Shang)²¹. Since Mao Tse-tung and his team have to create technicians and train Communist cadres, how can they avoid teaching them *at the very beginning* one of the languages of Marxism or one of the scientific tongues? In 1936 Victor Purcell raised the question as to whether or not the limitations (as well as the virtues) of the *wen yen* and the *kuo yu* were not going to make it mandatory for every Chinese who wanted to serve his country to learn at least one of our languages).²² The Arab élite have adopted this solution, and their native

²¹Excellent translated and presented by Duyvendak in *Probsthain Oriental Series*, XVII, 1928.

²²*Problems of Chinese Education*, Kegan, London, 1936.

tongue has clearly benefited, as the writings of Taha Hussein and Bishr Fares show. With a bit of daring and imagination England or France, in 1949, could have offered China two spare languages to be used for its reconstruction, as gifts for the happy event. In spite of the fact that our languages are unpleasantly associated in the Communists' minds with the missionary tradition, merchants' trickery, unfair treaties, 'the white man's burden', in short, they have also benefited by a long past of friendship and symbiosis. Yet, the Chinese, if they want to survive, find themselves delivered, by our blundering, to Russian, the only European language whose exclusive influence they have to fear, they who have always been so wary of excessive and tyrannical Occidentalism!

But teaching the Chinese cadres the language of practical knowledge and true philosophy is not sufficient. The entire population must get an edifying literature within the comprehension of all, without delay. Luckily for Mao Tse-tung a group of liberal scholars had already decided to do away with the *wen yen* in 1917. Although many enemies of the Manchu dynasty had very ably defended the old style and the genres it produced (Chang Pin-lin, for example), the majority of those who appealed to this tradition did so only because it was a symbol of a past they wished to keep alive forever. Then Houn Che appeared with his manifesto in favour of the mixed language, the *pei hua*, which won over all of Peking from one day to the next. The Dean of the Faculty of Letters, Ch'en Tu-siêu, was converted by the document as soon as it appeared in *New Youth*. And in 1920 the Office of Public Education ordered that *pei hua* be taught in the elementary schools.

Suddenly it was not only the vocabulary that had to change. Under the impact of the *pei hua* and foreign models the structure of words and phrases began to alter. When one says that in Chinese a sign is a concept, and every sign a syllable, it applies only to *wen yen* and *ku-wen*. As far as the spoken language is concerned the poverty of sounds has necessitated various subterfuges and compromises. For example, take the sound *mao* which in *wen yen*, when it evokes a certain character, means 'the cat', or 'a cat' (unless it means 'some cats' or 'the cats'). Now in order to say 'a cat' in *pei hua* you have to add three characters, that is, three sounds, to the sound *mao*; *yi*, meaning 'a'; plus the numeral (which varies according to the nature of the being or thing) *ko*, in this case; and finally *eul*, a noun suffix. So that instead of the simple *mao* of the *wen yen* you have *yi-ko mao-eul* in *pei hua*. The so-called 'monosyllabism' of the Chinese develops into a *de facto* polysyllabism in *pei hua*. Little by little indivisible groups

are formed. An example of this can be seen in the idea of 'reciprocity'. It is impossible to make oneself understood with just a single one of the various characters of classical Chinese connoting this idea; *pei hua* had to put two of them together, *hu* and *siang*, forming the word *hu-siang*. Similarly, instead of using the single character *sing* of the *ku wen* for 'star', the *pei hua* doubles the ideogram and says *sing-sing*. Furthermore, in classical Chinese most words can have any 'grammatical function' whatever; depending on the context, they can be noun, verb, adjective, or adverb. Now the written phrase gives time to reflect, to re-read as often as necessary, whereas the spoken language, the *pei hua* has to be grasped on the spot. So, many words which are used as adjectives are given the suffix *ti*. The adverb often ends in *jan*. Other suffixes (*tsu*, *kia*, *fu*, *tsiang*) mark a great number of nouns, corresponding roughly to the French nouns ending in *-eur* or *-ier*. To indicate the future the auxiliary *yao*, the verb 'to wish', is used; another verb, *leao*, indicates the past. The romanised *pei hua* thus strongly resembles our language in its concealed forms.

The influence of foreign books has also served to destroy the structures of the *ku wen* whose synthetic, coalescent syntax has been replaced by an analytic discourse that is much less disturbing to us Westerners.

By the time Mao took power, *pei hua* had established itself everywhere. Having been converted to this new language thirty years before, almost all the 'bourgeois' writers zealously set about producing the vernacular literature that Hu Che had asked for. According to Mr. Wang Che Lieu (preface to Mao Tse-tung's directives *Artists and Writers in the New China*²³), these innovators could already translate foreign masterpieces into *pei hua*, and collect the scattered examples of *pei hua* to be found in the literature of *wen yen*. Thus Ken Ki-tche spent almost his whole life transcribing the great Russian writers into *pei hua*, and Cheng Cheng-to studied earlier novels and plays where the language showed that Chinese writers of the past had sought inspiration in the vernacular. By 1949 the *pei hua* had produced a literature which the specialist, Father Monsterleet, S.J., considers the equal of Soviet works of the same period—stories by Lu Siun, novel trilogies by Pa Kin and Mao Tuen, the early plays of Ts'ao Yu and the poems by Siu Che.²⁴

I wonder, nevertheless, if Mao Tse-tung really intends to extend the

²³ Pierre Seghers, 1949.

²⁴ *Sommets de la Littérature chinoise contemporaine*, Domat, 1953, pp. 19–20. This is the opening volume, containing summaries, biographical sketches, and unusual bibliographical information.

use of *pei hua* to the point of forbidding the exercise of *ku wen*. The cultivation of *pei hua* advocated by 'bourgeois' writers certainly serves the purposes of the revolutionary leader. But after having recently reproached those 'comrades who consider the *level* of culture more important than its diffusion', Mao Tse-tung goes on to say that since the 'leaders' of contemporary China 'have an intellectual capacity superior to that of the masses' it is absolutely essential that they have 'a superior literature and art'.

Did he merely have in mind better written and better reasoned texts in *pei hua*? Since he feels responsible for the future of China is he not tempted to rescue from the past all that has made her great? Does he not think of rehabilitating the *wen yen*, even partly? If Communist schools and universities limit themselves to teaching only the *pei hua*, the Chinese will end by having no access to the very foundation of their culture except by translation, once the last scholars of *wen yen* will have died. It is enough to read the demotic translation of a famous verse of Sophocles to be dismayed by the vulgarity which makes Antigone and Ismene talk in diminutives, and kills Sophocles; how can one think of translating the *Chuang-Tsu* in *pei hua*? Five lines of Claude Roy²⁵ confirm my conviction: 'Confronted by the gap between the literary and the spoken language . . . and between Chinese and the European tongues, the Chinese of the Revolution, as I see them, are hesitating and groping their way, advancing (and destroying), innovating (and constructing) only with great prudence, patience and wisdom.'

Am I wrong in concluding that neither Mao Tse-tung nor Kuo Mo Jo have decided to sacrifice the *wen yen*? How can a culture which really has the aim of leading every man as far as he can go on the road to beauty renounce the treasures revealed to us through the ancient language in spite of its many imperfections? The man who prides himself on giving 'Marxism a national form' can succeed in only one way—by providing the whole nation with a common tongue, the *pei hua*; by granting those who are worthy, the use of one or two foreign languages; and by according to the most gifted of all the privilege of studying the *wen yen*, which would play the role in China that Latin and Greek do in the West. Nor can we claim that this means the rebirth of the mandarin caste, unless we are prepared to say that the University of France produces French mandarins.

²⁵ *Clés pour la Chine*, p. 255.

New China and the Chinese Language

In the villages of ancient China there was a building that I often muse about, lingeringly. It was the pavilion of traced characters, the *hi-tsu t'a*. There the people carried every scrap of paper on which even the faintest trace of an old character could be discerned; and then religiously purified it by flame. I cannot see a people who revered their language that deeply toss away more than thirty centuries of *wen yen*. I shall say with the Taoists so cherished by Mao Tse-tung, 'a time for *pei hua*, a time for *wen yen*'. That is indeed the *tao*.