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The problem of *kuan–hua* in eighteenth century China: the Yung–chêng decree for Fukien and Kwantung

In 1728 a decree was issued by Yung–chêng by which the Emperor, irritated by the strong local accents of officials born in Fukien and Kwantung, ordered the Governors of both Provinces to adopt expedients for teaching "correct pronunciation" (*chêng–yin* 正音) understandable by everybody, i.e. the *kuan–hua*[1].

In spite of the great number of studies on the unification and diffusion of the national language in China, only very few scholars[2] mention

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[1] *Ta Ch'ing Shih–tsung hsien Huang–ti Shih–lu* 大清世宗憲皇帝實錄, ch. 72. 4–5.

[2] De Francis J., *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*, Princeton 1950, p. 7; Li Chin–hsi 黎錦熙, *Kuo–yü yün–tung shih–kang* 國語運動史綱, Shanghai, 1934 cit. in de Francis, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Fang Shih–to 方師鐸, *Wu–shih Nian lai Chung–kuo kuo–yü yün–tung shih* 五十年中國國語運動史, Taipei, 1965, p. 7. Krjukov, M.V., Maljavin V.V., Sofronov M.V, *Etničeskaja Istorija Kitajcev*, Iz. Nauka, Moskva 1987, p. 238. De Francis erroneously ascribes the decree to K'ang–hsi. He quotes the only extant translation of the decree in a western translation, published in1840 by R. Thom in Shanghai. In his preface, Thom explained to western readers the characteristics of the Chinese language, the differences between the written and spoken languages, as well as that among the different dialects. He quoted the decree in its entirety, ascribing it to K'ang–hsi in order to explain how difficult verbal communication was in China between people from different areas. He compared the use of Mandarin to that of French as *lingua franca* spoken by the European educated élite, merchants and travellers of his time. Thom also noted that, in spite of the decree, nothing had changed at least in those two provinces. In any case it is well worth noting that a century after its issuing the echo of the decree had still not died down as even a western author was aware of it and deemed it of such interest as to quote it in its entirety. Thom R., *Esop's Fables written in Chinese by the learned Mun Mooy Shen–shang and compiled in their present form (with a free and literal translation) by his pupil*, Canton, 1840, p. VIII.

this historical precedent in Imperial times which, with all due caution, could justifiably be considered the starting point of the language reform movement which started at the end of the Ch'ing era and is, even today, an important issue of the Chinese government's cultural policy.

Yung–chêng's decree does not appear even in studies dealing with the Emperor's life and work[3]. Nevertheless, it would seem to add something to the knowledge of Yung–chêng's personality, and to his reform and rationalization of bureaucratical institutions. The need for efficiency is, in fact, the principal value singled out in the structural expansion of the Palace Memorial System carried out by Yung–chêng during his reign. This value embodies the need for clarity in communication among different levels of the bureaucratic system and, generally, between officials and subjects. Of course, when one refers to the question of language precision and of exact bureaucratical terminology, one mostly refers to the written language. But spoken communication cannot be neglect either, both at lowest level where rulers and subjects come into direct contact and at the highest strata of the bureaucratic system. In this sense Yung–chêng's decree may be included among those projects carried out by this practical–minded Emperor aimed at easing "some tensions that always existed between ruler and bureaucrat and indeed... (meeting)... the Chinese people's own value demand that government fulfill its responsabilities"[4].

In the sixth year of his reign (September 8th 1728)[5], Yung–chêng issued an edict in which he declared the necessity for Fukienese and Cantonese officials to learn to speak a "clear and understandable language". The reason for this decision seemed to derive from his own personal experience. "I have always observed – he wrote – that among all the officials, both of high and low degree, memorializing on their activities, those from Fukien and Kwantung who still have a local accent (*hsiang–yin* 鄉音) are the only ones I can't understand at all". Yung–chêng, furthermore,

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[3] Huang Pei, *Autocracy at work: A study of the Yung–chêng period: 1723–1735*, Bloomington/London, 1974; Wu Silas, *Communication and Imperial Control in China*, Cambridge Mass., 1970; Feng Erh–k'ang 馮尔康, *Yung–chêng Chuan* 雍正傳. Peking, 1985.

[4] Wu Silas, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

[5] In these years the problem of the reopening up of the maritime trade with southest was discussed at court. In 1727 the prohibition set up by K'ang–hsi in 1717 was abolished and in Fukien and Kwantung two ports were open to trade. Léonard Blussé has suggested to me that it could be possible that for this reason many Fukieneses and Cantoneses came to the Emperor pleading for the reopening of trade. Confronted with a diversity of language and dialect, and a consequent basic problem of communication, the Emperor might well have been motivated at precisely this time to issue the decree.

wondered how it was possible for these people, speaking such an unintelligible language, to fulfill their duties when they were sent to other provinces. Yung-chêng considered the custom of making use of clerks (*li-hsü* 吏胥) as go-betweens between officials and common people to be one of the reasons for the many abuses and mistakes arising in daily bureaucratic work. And further: "They themselves (i.e. Fukienese and Cantonese officials when they are in their own districts) as common people (*pien-mêng* 編氓) are unable to understand the instructions of officials". Even though he took into consideration the difficulties of learning a language other than the mother tongue, Yung-chêng ordered the Governors of both provinces to adopt any and every expedient they could to try to learn a language which would be comprehensible to most of the population throughout China[6].

Yung-chêng's mention of the difficulties of learning a second language, that is, one different from that spoken during childhood, is interesting if we consider that he himself had had to face the difficulties of a bilingual experience. However, like all Manchu Princes and Emperors, he had been subjected, as a child, to a strict education, and his essays show an extensive knowledge of Chinese history, Classics and Chinese language[7]. Once Emperor K'ang-hsi said: "I've learnt to recognize the accent from thirteen provinces, and if you watch the person and study his voice you can tell where he is really from"[8]. To Yung-chêng the problem was not simply that of being able to recognize the different dialects, but rather that of understanding what was being said, and that his officials and people should understand each other, so that the former would better interpret the situations in which they had to work, whithout having to resort to middle-men. Furthermore, he had often urged his officials not to trust servants and assistants too much, just as he himself never had[9]. On a different level, the need for clarity had driven him, in 1724, to issuing the *Shêng-yü Kuang-hsün* 聖諭廣訓 (Amplified Instructions of the Sacred Edict), considering his father's text too concise to be comprehensible to the great majority of the people. In his introduction he openly stressed his aim: "Our text attempts to be clear and precise; our words, for the most part, are direct and simple"[10].

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[6] *Ta Ch'ing Shih-lu*, ch. 72. 4-5.

[7] Huang Pei, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[8] Spence J., *Emperor of China: Self portrait of K'ang-hsi*, London, 1974, p. 51.

[9] Huang Pei, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[10] Mair V. H., "Language and Ideology in the written popularizations of the Sacred Edict" in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. by D. Johnson, A. J. Nathan, E. S. Rawski, Berkeley, 1985, p. 336.

In the decree Yung-chêng wondered how Fukienese and Cantonese officials, on duty in other provinces, could read the Sacred Edict to people. But we know that the Sacred Edict, the medium of transmission of the elite's ideology, was read and interpreted in the different dialects in order to render its educational aims explicit and effective[11]. On the other hand, during the Yung-chêng period, the *kuang-hua* was a *lingua franca* used by officials and merchants, that is, all the people who were obliged to use a language understandable in all parts of the Empire. There was, however, never any attempt made to spread its use among the common people[12]. But how widespread was the use of *kuan-hua* within the literati and learned classes? The decree certainly reveals a resistence to the use of it, at least in these two provinces, and one might wonder whether the situation was modified, even partially, after its issue.

A few references to the establishment of schools for teaching *chêng-yin* in Fukien Province can be found in two texts: *Min Tsa-chi* 閩雜記 by Shih Hung-pao and *Kuei I Ts'un-kao* 癸己存稿 by Yu Cheng-hsieh[13]. The first text refers to the fact that, after the decree, *chêng-yin shu-yuan* (Academies for correct pronunciation) were established in every *hsien* of Fukien, but because officials did not take their duties very seriously, they declined rapidly. The only *chêng-yin shu-yuan* which survived until the author's time was that of Shao-wu 邵武, but Shih Hung-pao tells us that this Academy preserved only the name and was, in reality, a common Academy where other things were taught. Shih wrote his book more than one century after the issuing of Yung-chêng's decree and it is unlikely that schools for teaching *chêng-yin* were established in every *hsien*. Nevertheless, there is evidence that, at least at the very beginning, the Emperor's orders were put into effect. The *Kuei I Ts'un-kao* also mentions that, after the issuing of the decree, degree holders at the different levels were forbidden to pass the examination to the next level if they were not fully acquainted with *kuan-hua*. In the thirteenth year of Yung-chêng's reign (1735), the prohibition was extended for a further four years, but two years later, in the second year of Ch'ien-lung's reign (1737), it was abolished.

With regard to Kwantung Province, we know that in 1840 there were

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[11] *Ibidem*.

[12] Seibolt P., Chiang G. K. (ed. by), *Language Reform in China*, New York, 1979, p. 25.

[13] Yü Chêng-hsieh 俞正燮, *Kuei I Ts'un-kao* preface, 1849, ed. 1968, ch. 9, p. 270; Shih Hung-pao 施鴻保, *Min Tsa-chi*, preface 1858, ed. 1986, ch. 3, pp. 41-42. I'm indebted to Prof. P. Van der Loon for having pointed the *Kuei I Ts'un-kao* out to me.

"schools set up in Canton city for teaching Youth the Mandarin tongue – just as schools exist with us for teaching our Youth French – and in both cases who can afford it, commonly send their sons to learn"[14]. We also know from the comment of a nineteenth century writer that in Yung–chêng's time 120 Mandarin speaking community schools in Nan–hai district and more than 70 in P'an–yü 番禺 district were set up, but by the time of Ch'ien–lung's reign none of them had survived[15].

The Academy for "correct pronunciation" (*chêng–yin shu–yuan*) in Fukien Shao–wu district was established in the same year of Yung–chêng's decree[16]. But the new school met with many difficulties and its history was similar to that of many schools of that period, which had either been established and funded by magistrates or, more often, by contributions from the local gentry, and had later declined due to lack of further funds[17].

The Shao–wu Prefect, in 1782, writing the Academy's history up to his time, ascribed the reason for its decay to a lack of funds for the support of the students. The *Chêng–yin Shu–yuan* was founded on the remains of a former one, named Ch'iao–ch'uan 樵川. "Its aim was to employ teachers for the teaching of the basic rules of *kuan–hua*. Usually the most talented youths of the towns started to learn it as children. In this way, as adults, they were able to both speak and write without using dialect. The mininum achievement was the ability to classify *hsieh–shêng* 諧聲 characters; the maximum outcome was the ability to memorialize to the Emperor in an elegant style. Its aim was admirable and its method excellent". "But – the Prefect wrote – from the time of the decree which established it, until today, it has undergone many vicissitudes with moments of revival and others of decay".

In fact, in 1752, nearly twenty years after its establishment, the Academy was abolished and turned into a temple by the Prefect Liu Ssŭ–k'ung 劉嗣孔. About twenty years later, in 1777, when nearly everybody had forgotten the ancient institution, the Prefect Shên Ta–nien 沈大年 took it upon himself to try to re–establish it and it was decided to utilize the proceeds deriving from the land which belonged to the Ch'iao–ch'uan Academy, for both Academies. But this attempt, too, was doomed to failure. A few years later however, in 1781, thanks to a

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[14] Thom R., *op. cit.*, p. VIII.

[15] Woodside A., "Some Mid–Qing Theorists of Popular Schools: Their Innovations, Inhibitions and Attitudes Toward the Poor" *Modern China*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1983), p. 19.

[16] *Shao–wu fu chih* 邵武府志, ed. 1897, ch. 12. 25b, 26ab, 27a.

[17] Chü T'ung–tzu, *Local Government in China under the Ch'ing*, Cambridge Mass., 1962, p. 329.

shêng–yuan 生員 named Wei Pang–t'ai 魏邦泰 who offered funds and two buildings, and also thanks to the support given by the Prefect, the Academy resumed its activities which mainly consisted in teaching "correct pronunciation" to the children. In fact «if one exercises the "correct pronunciation" as a child, one's culture will be great and the literati's style even more refined. To bring these sounds into harmony is necessary in order to make the country's flourishing resound»[18]. The Academy certainly existed until 1858 when it was destroyed; in the following years, it was rebuilt but had to face financial problems[19].

An indirect piece of evidence on the diffusion of the teaching of Mandarin following the issue of the decree, is given by some textbooks for the study of the Mandarin language, which were written and published between the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century[20]. The textbooks were the outcome of studies and research carried out over many years; they were utilized as teaching materials or for personal use. But, evidently, a pressing demand pushed the authors into gathering and publishing their studies also in order to "spare friends the trouble of recopying them"[21].

In the prefaces to these textbooks, reference is always made to Yung–chêng's decree. Some authors quote it in its integral version, some others only in its main outlines, but nobody omits commenting on its importance for the solution of the communication problem. All of them stress the difficulty of learning to speak Mandarin correctly, if one does not start to do so as a child, and, often, authors make reference to their personal experience in the process of learning *kuan–hua*.

In his introduction to Sha I–tsun's *Chêng–yin Chü–hua*, Liang Tso–chi maintains that after the Emperor's decree, more and more literatis, especially in provincial capitals, wished to learn the *kuan–hua*, because they thuoght they could make use of it when they became officials. Unfortunately, since teachers did not use good methods, even after months of studying, it was difficult to obtain good results. For this reason, he advises using the textbook for which he wrote the introduction, which, despite a few gaps, was surely better than many others[22].

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[18] *Shao–wu fu chih*, ch. 12. 26b.

[19] *Shao–wu fu chih*, ch. 12. 26a.

[20] Chang Yü–ch'êng 張玉成, *Nan–pei kuan–hua hui–pien ta ch'üan* 南北官話彙編大全, preface 1785, ed. 1820; Ching T'ing–kao 靜亭高, *Chêng–yin Ts'o–yao* 正音撮要, ed. 1863; Sha I–tsun 莎彝尊, *Chêng–yin Chü–hua* 正音咀華, ed. 1853.

[21] *Chêng–yin Chü–hua*, author's preface.

[22] *Ibidem.*, Liang Tso–chi, preface.

More often the textbooks refer to children. As we have seen in the case of the Shao–wu Chêng–yin Academy, children had to learn Mandarin as soon as possible because only in this way, as it is written in the preface to *Nan–pei Kuan–hua* of 1785, "they will not be bound to their habits and it will be possible to communicate easily between near and faraway places. The Emperor's wise order has brought a sure advantage"[23].

In his *Chêng–yin Tso–yao*, the author gives an explanation of the reason why the decree was issued particularly to the two provinces, Fukien and Kwantung. In the chapter dedicated to "The diffusion of *kuan–hua*" he writes: "I have travelled across Chiang–nan, Che–chiang, Honan, Liang–hu and, everywhere, dialects were very different and people of neighbouring *jun* and *hsien* did not understand each other. Only merchants and those families that travel around by sea, by land and from harbour to harbour, speak *kuan–hua*; but if they meet a countryman they speak in such a way that you can't understand a single sentence. Since I came to stay in Peking, I have found an even stranger situation. Walking along the streets you often meet groups of people speaking their own dialect with a great gabble of tongues. You can't understand what they are talking about, but later you see them going into shops to buy things and you hear them speaking Mandarin. They speak perfectly both Northern and Southern Mandarin. If you ask them where they come from, you find out that they come from towns and villages throughout the land. Among those who leave their villages with the intention of seeking fame and fortune you will not find one who does not learn *kuan–hua*. If they were not able to learn it, they could not travel around. But all these people coming from so many different provinces have a correct pronunciation and it is not difficult for them to learn Mandarin, and they easily manage to correct themselves. Only people coming from Fukien and Kwantung provinces pronounce words wrongly and give a completly different name to things. When they are children they refuse to study and when they grow up they are unable to speak (Mandarin). Many of them become officials and can barely speak Mandarin. This is the reason why the decree was issued to these two provinces only. I heard that in the past in these two places there were neither people teaching Mandarin nor people learning it. Since the decree, everybody is busy studying and along the streets, on the red signboards outside children's schools, you can see written: "Mandarin is taught here". You can easily understand from this fact that the decree has given quite a number of results'[24].

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[23] *Nan–pei Kuan–hua Hui–pien ta ch'üan*, preface.

[24] *Chêng–yin Ts'o–yao*, ch. 1. 5ab, 6a.

These comments are extremely interesting because testify to the flourishing of schools of Mandarin in the two provinces in question and to the practical application of Yung-chêng's decree. However, the phenomenon they report seems largely due to the initiative of teachers in private schools rather than to any official institutional response[25]. This may explain why, with one exception, none of the local gazetteers mention these schools of Mandarin.

Yung-chêng's decree was to have a strange fortune: practically ignored as far as the correction of the pronunciation of adults, which was, after all, its main concern, it had, on the contrary, some echoes in the sphere of private teaching to children; the only official institution of which we have any trace in the sources is a school for children and not for in-service training of officials.

It is also true that, although Yung-chêng had ordered his officials to try to improve their pronunciation, he had put this in general terms. In fact, he stressed the point that they should be able to understand and to be understood, not only when were occupied with official business, in their capacity, that is, as officials, but also, when they were simple *pien-mêng*. The decree, therefore, affected the gentry (*shên-shi* 紳士) in general, not only as degree holders (*shên*), but also in as much as they performed functions at the informal level of government and social service in their district (*shih*)[26].

Furthermore, if it is true that for the educated classes, speaking *kuan-hua* had a merely utilitarian purpose and a "southern accent was more of an inconvenience than anything to be ashamed of"[27], it is also true that speaking *kuan-hua* was also a mark of distinction and signalled class membership. No educated Chinese would dare to speak in dialect with officials or literati – so Thom tells us – [28] and in a contemporary description of the city of Canton we find: "No Chinese can make any pretension to learning unless he is master of court dialect, that form of the language which is common and universally used among all officers and literati in all parts of the Empire"[29].

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[25] During the seventheenth century a theatre in Mandarin Language was widespread in Fukien. This kind of theatre which still exists in today Taiwan, known as Pei-kuan or Luan-t'an, may have made a contribution to the knowledge of Mandarin Language. It seems that even actors of this theatre acted as tutor in language classes. I am indebted to Prof. K. Schipper for this observation.

[26] Wakeman F., *The Fall Off Imperial China*, London 1975, pp. 19–37.

[27] Chao Yuan Ren, *Aspects of Chinese Socio-linguistic*, Stanford 1976, p. 75.

[28] Thom R., *op. cit.*, p. VIII.

[29] "Description of the City of Canton" in *Chinese Repository*, February 1846, no. 2 (vol. XV), p. 67.

It would seem that in the long process since Mandarin began to be used by bureaucrats up until the national language movement at the close of the Ch'ing era – when the changes in historical conditions forced a new awareness with respect to the national language problem – Yung-chêng's decree occupies a prominent place as, indeed, the first official act which attempts to unify the spoken language. It did not modify the situation a great deal in the two provinces in question, but there can be no doubt that it coincided with at least some modification of the attention paid to this theme by the literati, or a part of them. The possibility to create a linguistic uniformity was condemned to failure also because the project was probably too ambitious for the time, and, as Woodside suggests[30], only tangible results could enable the schools to survive.

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[30] Woodside A., *op. cit.*, p. 19.