

FEDERICO MASINI

**Trends in lexical changes in Chinese  
from the end of the nineteenth century,  
with special reference to foreign borrowings.  
A research project.\***

When and how did the modern Chinese lexicon emerge?

It is difficult to single out any one date or event as marking the birth of a new type of language, or as initiating a process that led to the rise of a new form of an existing idiom. Languages are constantly changing, but in varying degrees in respect of distinct parts. One part may start to develop a new form, while other parts are resistant to change.

Thus, while, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the language used for the communication of official matters still seems deeply rooted in the tradition of previous centuries, after 1850, certain outstanding intellectuals, and even the Chinese imperial authorities, started to attach importance to the comparisons between the Chinese language and the idioms spoken by foreign powers.

For many centuries and even from the very beginning of the empire, Chinese officials had very seldom travelled abroad. The first to make such tours – after 1860 – composed diaries of their experiences<sup>1</sup>. Such accounts provide some of the first descriptions in Chinese of western

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<sup>1</sup> The first official tour in Europe was the mission in 1866 of Binchun, Zhang Deyi, Feng Yi and Yan Hui. Binchun, head of the mission, and the young Zhang Deyi wrote diaries of their experience: respectively *Chencha biji* (Notes about a raft journey) and *Hanghai shuqi* (The marvels seen crossing the sea).

objects and ideas. The first school for interpreters and translators, the *Tongwen Guan*, was established in Beijing in 1862, and this was followed immediately by similar institutions which were set up in other parts of the country.

The importance of translations of western books into Chinese and, as a consequence, the rendering of Western words in Chinese, was appreciated by the leading thinkers of that period. Reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, or scholars like Ma Jianzhong, stressed the need for the diffusion of foreign languages, realizing as they did that an extensive volume of translation would lead to a better knowledge of Western culture.

The statistics<sup>2</sup> of translations during the second half of the nineteenth century show that over 50% of all the translations are from the English, the majority of them being on practical subjects. If we look more closely at these translations, we notice that during this period, most of the newly created words had to do with Western science, and were formed by phonemic loans from English, rather than constituting loan-translations.

Things changed after the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, when Chinese intellectuals switched from English language cultures to the Japanese, and from practical subjects to political and social topics.

During the first years of the present century, over 10,000 Chinese went to Japan to study, and absorbed Western ideas, especially on politics and law through Japanese translations of Western writings. Thanks to the similarities of the Chinese and Japanese scripts, they quickly found ways of expressing Western words in Chinese, not by simple and rather awkward phonemic loans, but by loan-translations.

In the three years from 1902 to 1904 alone, as many works were translated as during the whole of the second half of the nineteenth century, over 60% of them translations of Western writings, through Japanese versions, on social sciences and history.

The turn of the century witnessed extraordinary changes in the political and cultural life of China. As pointed out by Lin Yütang, it was from 1895 that the «Golden Period» of the Chinese press can be dated<sup>3</sup>. Daily and weekly papers started to serve as the media for spreading new

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<sup>2</sup> Tsuen-hsuei Tsien, «Western Impact on China through Translation», in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. XIII, no. 3, (May 1954), pp. 305-327.

<sup>3</sup> Lin Yütang, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China*, New York, 1914, p. 94.

ideas to a broader range of readers. The first papers to be published focused on politics, and after them came literary magazines.

Western and Chinese scholars have so far studied the impact of these two kinds of periodical only from the point of view of the history of ideas and of literature. It has hardly ever been noted that while these periodicals were promoting new ideas, they were also spreading new words and even new forms of phrasing.

This was a period of lively political and cultural debate. Authors such as Liang Qichao and Zhang Shizhao were clearly seeking to appeal to as wide an audience of *literati* as possible, and with the specific aim of converting readers to their views. Under the influence of the new ideas arriving in China directly from the West or via Japan new dimensions of politics and culture were being discussed.

The essays and the novels published in periodicals at this point had a much stronger impact on the language than the translations of Western books on science and technology issued in China between 1860 and 1894 and than the reports of the first Chinese officials travelling abroad on their experience.

The first translations of Western books were prepared in order to obtain a grasp of certain aspects of western science and technology. The reports on their travels were written by high officials sent to the West to obtain information for the Chinese authorities about the unknown outside world. In their turn, the political essays aimed at influencing public opinion; while the novels published around the turn of the century provided new tools for the denunciation of social evils.

As regards the lexicon, one main difference between the two types of writing is that in the first translations prepared after 1860 and in the travel reports, foreign words are mostly expressed in Chinese by phonemic loans; in political essays and in the novel at the beginning of the present century, foreign words are mostly expressed in Chinese by loan-translations. Moreover in the translations and in the travel reports, in seeking to express a new idea or describe new objects, the authors prefer to define its meaning instead of creating a new Chinese word. As against this, in political essays and in novels, the new ideas seem to conceal their foreign origin, and are expressed in Chinese by single words, usually loan-translations.

This shift from phonemic loans to loan-translations and from the description of things to their expression in Chinese with a single word was probably connected with the discovery that, at that time, the Japanese had already solved the problem of transcribing in Japanese many foreign words, mostly by loan-translations.

Thus, in the search of for a starting point of the development of

modern Chinese and particularly its lexicon, given the importance of those periodicals in the development of new political ideas and of a new form of literature, the years around the turn of the century appear to offer the best point to start an enquiry into the development of the modern Chinese lexicon, as found in political essays and in novels.

Up to this point, I have tried to answer the question as to when the modern Chinese lexicon arose; I shall now look at how its development started. Any attempt to indicate how the modern lexicon began to be fashioned has to tackle the intricate question of the coexistence and interaction of *wenyan* and *baihua* (classical and colloquial language respectively).

We need not go into details as regards the historical roots of these two languages or styles, I would merely point out that political essays appearing in those years were written in *wenyan*, while novels used different forms of what has been termed *baihua*. In my opinion, it is less important to provide an adequate definition of the two different languages, than to clarify how these languages started to diverge from those used in the past, and also how these two different forms of language interacted and finally blended in the written prose.

In the analysis of the lexicon used to express political ideas and novels it is essential to show how and to what extent *wenyan* and *baihua* traditions contributed to the development of the language used for political and literary matters. In this perspective the best methodological approach seems to be to adopt a quantitative analysis of the *wenyan* and *baihua* elements present in a sizeable sample of texts. However this kind of analysis, right from the very beginning, presents difficulties, and does not seem to provide a sufficient degree of reliability. The difficulty in determining with certainty which stylistic strata underlay certain lexical items, such as *wenyan*, *baihua*, old colloquial and dialectal languages, etc., prompts me to prefer a phonological approach combine with a morphological one, rather than a purely stylistic one. Moreover, the late approach would merely yield a description of how the different styles have contributed to the development of the Chinese lexicon, and would give some pointers for the understanding of the new lexical system generated by the contributions of those styles, but would not give a complete picture of it.

Thus, in order to work toward a general description of the lexical system of the language, we have chosen, as a first step, a number of texts as samples for a statistical analysis. Bearing in mind the impact of certain authors on the Chinese culture of that specific period, we chose a text for each of the two styles, i.e., political essays and novels for period of one or two years from 1896 to 1918.

The samples of each text (roughly 450 characters) are analyzed by four main categories:

1) Phonological length. The ratio between the number of characters and the number of free words, expressing the degree of phonological length of the text used as a sample: the closer this ratio is to 2, the more polysyllabic is the language.

2) The analysis of the morphological structure of the polysyllabic items showing the different incidence of the eight possible structures first presented by Lü Zhiwei in his *Hanyu de Goucifa*, Beijing 1957: Modifying, Associative, Subject–Predicate, Predicate–Complement, Predicate–Object, Reduplication, Prefixation and Suffixation.

3) Lexical origin. Words were divided in this category into two main groups: purely Chinese words and those borrowed from foreign languages. Bearing in mind the difficulty, already noted, of clearly defining the stylistic source of each purely Chinese word, I decided to separate purely Chinese words from those which can be considered as due to the influence of foreign languages.

4) Grammatical function: noun, verb, etc. Only in this category and for the *xuci*, or empty words, I tried to determine the different stylistic origins of the items dividing the *xuci* into two main groups: those belonging purely to *wenyan* and those in the *baihua* tradition.

As a result of this statistical analysis, I was able to start describing the different impact of the novels written in *baihua* and the political essays written in *wenyan* on the formation of the lexicon of modern Chinese as used during the present century for novels and political essays.

I will first indicate the result of the statistical analysis as regards political prose.

As already pointed out by several scholars, during its history, classical Chinese had already show its tendency to change from a mainly monosyllabic language to a tendentially disyllabic one. However, over the centuries, specially in the written language and more so in the language used for official texts than that used for novels, this tendency was slow to make itself felt. As against this, since thàe first publication of political periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century, this tendency started to exercise a rapid influence even on the *wenyan* texts. Hence, the phonological length of the words ranges from 1.16 in Liang Qichao's *Bianfa Tongyi*, published in 1896, to 1.37 in Sun Zhongshan's *Jianguo Fanglüe* published in 1918. And, if we observe the percentage of monosyllabic words in these two texts, we will note that, in 1896, monosyllabic words account for 84.52%, while, in 1918, they had decreased to 66.98%. In the meantime, disyllabic words registered a sharp

increase, rising from 14.97% to 29.32%. In the case of words with more than two syllables, the increase in trisyllabic words is small, while, in 1918, there is already a percentage of 2.16 of quadrisyllabic words, as against a percentage close to zero in 1896. At present the tendency to move toward polysyllables is clearly visible.

The situation regarding morphological structures is more complex. As yet, I have not been able to detect a precise trend in the occurrence of the eight different structures. We can only note that, throughout this period, the modifying structures accounts for over 50%, and associative structures for roughly 20%. As against this, I have noticed a small increase in the percentage of other patterns – the predicate-complement and the predicate-object. For the time being, however, these data are insufficient to indicate any marked tendency.

However, interesting data in the field of lexical origin emerged. While, in Liang Qichao's 1896 text, all words were of purely Chinese origin, as we move toward 1918, this percentage decreased to about 90%. In the remaining 10%, the incidence of phonemic loans is very low (1–2%), while loan-translations account for 8–9%. The important aspect of the presence of loan-translations from foreign languages is that almost all of them were borrowed from the Japanese. I then further divided these borrowings into two categories: original borrowings from Japanese and words first used in old Chinese texts but revived by the Japanese with new meanings. This division reveals that the incidence of the second category (classical Chinese words first revived by the Japanese) covers more than half of the percentage of the loan-translations. As regards the increase in foreign borrowings, after Chinese culture came into contact with Japan, many phonemic loans adopted by Chinese during the second half of the century were replaced by loan-translations first prepared by the Japanese. The impact of Japanese words in this period is so great that it is even possible to assume that Japanese was not only responsible for the assimilation of single words, but was also responsible for the preference shown by numerous authors for the creation of loan-translations instead of phonemic loans. In other words, we can argue that the shift in the Chinese language in this period from phonemic loans to loan-translations was not an entirely spontaneous process, but was influenced by the Chinese writers' knowledge of Japanese. In particular, I propose to investigate whether Japanese could be held responsible, in some way for the massive development in Chinese of suffixation structures, specially suffixes such as *-hua* and *-xing* whose function is often to modify the grammatical role of the suffixed word.

I have not yet finished the sampling of the novels, and I can not therefore offer complete information as regards this class of text.

However, the data acquired so far give a general indication of the main differences between the lexical transformations of the language used in these two kinds of text.

As mentioned above, the first elementary observation to be made is that the political essays were written in *wenyan*, while the novels were written in *baihua*. The main difference that induce us to distinguish between the two styles is the use of two different sets of *xuci*. From 1899 on, these two different styles tend to converge, except for the use of different *xuci*. The lexicon used for political essays starts to absorb Japanese borrowings and to use words first found only in *baihua* literature. As opposed to this, fiction seems less influenced by the Japanese vocabulary, but at the same time makes a considerable use of expressions with dialectal origins. At the end of the period, just before the literary revolution brought about by the May Fourth Movement, the two styles had already started to interact, and this made for the creation of a single language, of which the political and the literary languages are only varieties. Before 1918, the interaction is present only in the *shici*, or full words; political essays had already absorbed many words used in the past only in *baihua* texts, while on the contrary, the novel had assimilated some words derived from politics. The May Fourth Movement helped to extend the use of *baihua xuci* to both kinds of text, while, as for the *shici*, this blending, I feel, had already started during the period from the end of the nineteenth century to 1918. If this thesis were to be demonstrated, it would, for one thing, establish the role played by *wenyan* in the development of the modern Chinese lexicon.

In this perspective, the comparison of the different evolution of lexicon used in the two kinds of text would suggest that the modern Chinese lexicon was the result of a whole series of factors, namely *wenyan*, *baihua*, phonemic loans and loan-translations from the Japanese and other foreign languages, dialect words, etc., which were fused in an intricate process.

After having described the beginning of this process for the years from 1896 to 1918, I will try to apply the same methodology to the later stages of the development of the modern Chinese lexicon.