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CLARITY VS. CHARACTER: ABAHAI'S ANTIDOTE FOR THE COMPLEXITIES OF CHINESE

Stephen Durrant

Just as comic relief provides a needed counterpoint in serious drama, so should heavy and, dare I say it, ponderous conferences be supplied with some lighter moments. Lest I be accused of frivolity, let me say at the outset that this paper deals at least tangentially with that most serious reality at the modern American university—enrollment statistics. Contemplating our low enrollments in beginning Chinese, and, unwilling to admit that we teachers might be lackluster and unattractive, we have concluded that the reluctance of many students to enroll in our classes is largely based upon the widespread notion that Chinese is absurdly difficult. Although this notion marks some advance over the 19th Century idea that Chinese is not just absurdly difficult but absurd as well, it still casts a shadow over Chinese language programs and, more importantly of course, the economic security of modest Chinese language teachers. With this painful reality in mind, let us turn to an interesting and somewhat bizarre page in the history of Chinese language study.

Few Westerners have ever mastered Chinese as completely as some of the Catholic fathers who worked as missionaries in China throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries. While their descriptions of the Chinese language were usually in harmony with the generally romantic vision of China which they conveyed to the West, there were occasional complaints about the great difficulty of the language. For example, the Dominican Father Domingo Navarette proclaimed the Chinese language "doubtless the most difficult in the world." Elsewhere, he described his own study of this "most difficult" language as follows:

I came to the Church the 3d of November (1659), as I said above, and presently apply'd myself to the study of that dreadful and stupendious language; there are few but find great discouragement in it, I labour'd all I could. Mattins were always said at Midnight; and it was usual with me to sit in my Chair after them till Morning at my Study. Continual application overcame the difficulty in great measure.1


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While early statements about the difficulty of Chinese were balanced by positive appraisals such as John Webb's famous suggestion that Chinese was the original language of Adam, the descriptions that began to appear in the 19th Century were almost all negative. Let us begin our consideration of these descriptions of Chinese with two statements from the first years of the 19th Century. The first is from Lord Francis Jeffrey, a man who did not know Chinese but was one of the prominent British literary critics of his day, and the second is from Reverend William Milne, an early protestant missionary in China who thoroughly learned the language.

First Lord Jeffrey:

There is no instance, we believe, on the face of the earth, of a language so extremely imperfect and artificial; and it is difficult to conceive how any race of people could be so stupid, or so destitute of invention, as to leave it in such a state of poverty . . . The structure of their written language shews that they are fully aware of the effects of combination; and yet they have in no instance introduced a compound word into their spoken language, or ventured to combine two syllables into the symbol of a complex idea. By what particular infatuation they have been withheld from so obvious an improvement--by what bar they have been obstructed from compounding their words as well as their written characters, we are utterly unable to comprehend, and no writer, we think, has attempted to explain. The fact, however, appears to be quite undeniable, that they have gone on for many thousand years pittering to each other in a jargon which resembles the chuckling of poultry more than the language of men, and have never yet had the sense to put their monosyllables together into articulate words.2

And now Reverend Milne:

To acquire the Chinese is a work for men with bodies of brass, lungs of steel, heads of oak, hands of spring-steel, eyes of eagles, hearts of apostles, memories of angels, and lives of Methuselahs! Still I make a little progress. I hope, if not to be master, yet to gain as much as will suit the purposes of a missionary. Every sentence gained I value at the rate of a dollar; so that should I gain 10,000, I shall not consider myself poor.3

2 The Edinburgh Review, No. 10 (January, 1805), 280.
Just what were the unnatural features of Chinese which made it so ridiculous and unlearnable? There were three that 19th Century writers mentioned repeatedly. First, Chinese had no grammar and hence could not be rationally analyzed by the Western mind. Second, it was not only monosyllabic in structure but possessed such an impoverished sound system that communication even between native speakers was virtually impossible. And third, it had no alphabet but was written with a cumbrous script of enormous complexity and difficulty. Let us consider each of these flaws, giving ample credit to those who were able to expose them.

The study of Indo-European languages had ill-prepared early students of Chinese for a grammar lacking conjugations, declension and other such acouterments of "civilized speech." Thus, Reverend William Medhurst, writing in 1838, noted that:

In the science of grammar, the Chinese have made no progress; and among the host of their literati, no one seems to have turned his attention to this subject. They have not learned to distinguish the parts of speech, or to define and designate case, gender, number, person, mood or tense; they neither decline their nouns, nor conjugate their verbs, while regimen and concord are with them based on no written rules . . . As for the distinction between noun, pronoun, verb, and participle, they have never thought of it; and use words occasionally in each of these forms, without any other change than that of position or intonation. 4

It is indeed strange to accuse Chinese linguists of not discovering features in their language which it did not possess. But it was much worse than this, the perverse Chinese compounded the problem of an ambiguous grammar by writing without punctuation. Several years after Medhurst, Caleb Cushing wrote in the prominent journal Chinese Repository as follows:

Moreover, it is one consequence of the peculiar formation of the Chinese language that its words have no inflections, and that accordingly it has little or no


4 China: It's State and Prospects, With Special Reference to the Spread of the Gospel, (London: John Snow, 1838), 168-169
grammar. Inflection of number, time, and so forth, are designated by phrases. To denote the plural it is necessary to subjoin some word of plurality. And so, whether a word is to be understood as a noun-substantive, as a noun-adjective, as a verb, as an adverb, as a preposition, or as a conjunction, must in general be inferred or conjectured from the context or the order of the words; all which is the occasion of extreme obscurity and uncertainty in the spoken and written speech. The Chinese augment this obscurity by their own perverse rules of rhetoric and taste. With them, it is bad taste to divide a composition into paragraphs according to the sense and the argument; it is bad taste to employ conjunctive particles; nay, it is bad taste to employ punctuation. A page of paper is covered with words, none of which are invariable distinct parts of speech, but each of which may represent any or all the parts of speech. There is no punctuation. And the divisions of the words are not made to distinguish the sense by paragraphs, but in order to place a particular word of dignity at the top of the column, or for some other such puerile or fanciful purpose. And from this mass of words, thus intrinsically devoid of clearness and precision, and made thus studiously obscure, the meaning is to be extracted, by conjecturally supplying inflections, parts of speech, connective particles, points, paragraphs, and all the other ordinary means of precision and perspicuity.  

Truly, as Reverend John L. Nevins was to say later, "The Chinese seem to be our antipodes in almost everything."  

The second grave flaw of the Chinese language is alluded to in the statement of Lord Jeffrey quoted earlier: Chinese is composed exclusively of a limited number of monosyllables. John Barrow, a famous adventurer who accompanied the MacCartney mission to Peking in 1793, gives much space to this problem in his Travels in China, a book which enjoyed great popularity in the 19th Century:  

The construction of the colloquial, or spoken language, is extremely simple. It admits of no inflexions of

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termination, either in the verb, or in the noun, each word being the same invariable monosyllable in number, in gender, in case, in mood, and in tense; and, as most of these monosyllables begin with a consonant and end with a vowel, except a few that terminate in l, n, or ng, the number of such sounds, or simple syllables, is very limited. To an European they do not exceed three hundred and fifty. But a Chinese, by early habit, has acquired greater power over the organs of speech, and so can modulate his voice as to give to the same monosyllable five or six distinct tones of sound; so that he can utter at least twelve or thirteen hundred radical words, which, with the compounds, are found fully sufficient for expressing all his wants. 7

The miraculous ability of the Chinese to modulate his voice so as to produce tones could hardly be duplicated by a European, and hence embarrassment awaited the non-native speaker as Barrow clearly demonstrates:

This recurrence of the same words must necessarily cause great ambiguity in conversation, and it frequently indeed leads to ridiculous mistakes, especially by foreigners. Thus, a sober missionary, intending to pass the night at a peasant's house, asked, as he thought, for a mat, but was very much surprised on seeing his host presenting him with a young girl; these two objects, so very different from one another, being signified by two words whose pronunciations are not distinguishable, and consequently one or the other requires to be used with an adjunct. 8

In his learned discourse cited earlier, Lord Jeffrey speaks of the problem of monosyllables:

This language consists of no more than 341 indeclinable monosyllables, which, by aspirations, accentuations, and other precarious devices, may be increased by a native Chinese to about 1300. This pitiful number of words constitutes the whole vocabulary of this enlightened empire! And such is the wretched penury of significant sounds, that every one of these monosyllables is computed to have about fifty different significations, insomuch, that their discourses are always full of ambiguity, and they are reduced to the most awkward contrivances to avoid the equivocations. 9

8 Ibid., 179, 180.
It is not the main purpose of this paper to refute these early misconceptions of the Chinese language. But it should be noted that the monosyllabic myth is still alive and well despite the brilliant attack on this position by George A. Kennedy. There remain those who attribute the non-development of science, logic, systematic philosophy and all those other civilized things the Chinese allegedly lack, to the idea that their language is so ambiguous as to block precise thought and clear communication.

What of the third flaw—the script? If one surmounts the grammarless ambiguity of the language, he must confront the nightmare described by another early traveller, Mrs. C. F. Gordon Cumming:

... though my ear for music is keen, I cannot distinguish Chinese sounds any more than those of Gaelic; nor can I conceive how any human eye and memory can recollect the thousands of combinations of little strokes, dots, and curves which must be mastered as the equivalent of our alphabet.... There are said to be upwards of fifty thousand of these written characters, and a very learned man must know most of these—a task alike terrible to the sight and memory.

According to Lord Jeffrey, who at least noted the presence of recurring character constituents, Mrs. Cumming's reference to fifty thousand characters was far too modest. He wrote that:

The eye soon becomes accustomed to fix upon the particular key or root, of the most complicated characters, in some of which are not fewer than sixty or seventy different lines and points. The right line, the curved line, and a point, are the rudiments of all the characters. These, variously combined with one another, have been extended from time to time, as occasion might require, to nearly eighty thousand different characters.

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To set the record straight, the recently published Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Chinese Language (Chung-wen ta tz'u-tien), the most complete dictionary of Chinese yet published, contains 49,905 characters. Of these, there are none with seventy or more strokes. There are just one-hundred fifty-seven characters, less than one-quarter of one percent of the total, with more than thirty strokes, and there are more characters listed with twelve strokes than with any other number.

I would not want to underestimate the difficulty of learning written Chinese, but the early descriptions often did not make it sufficiently clear that the majority of the characters listed in a Chinese dictionary are no more frequent in that language than most words listed in Webster's Unabridged Dictionary would be in English. Reverend John Nevins was correct in noting that to read highly literary documents one needed from 5,000 to 7,000 characters.

Despite the enormous flaws of the poultrylike language of China, many writers perceived an antidote. This, of course, brings us to Abahai. It will be remembered that the last Chinese imperial dynasty, the Ch'ing dynasty (1664-1911), had been established and ruled by the Manchus, a non-Chinese people that had swept into China from the northeast during the mid-17th Century. Abahai (1592-1643) was the great military leader who brought the Manchus to the gates of Peking; he, more than any other man, was responsible for the foundation of the new dynasty. And during that new dynasty, the language of the conquerers was counted as one of the five official languages.13

The Manchu language was radically different from that of China. It was an Altaic language with an alphabetic script adapted from Mongolian. As early as 1647, just three years after the fall of Peking, Father Gabriel de Magalhaes, a missionary in Szechwan Province, wrote that Manchu "letters and much more their language are easy to learn . . ."14

Quickly Westerners in China developed an infatuation with Manchu, for they discovered that it had many of those admirable features perplexingly absent in Chinese. Father

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13 Along with Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Uighur.

Amiot noted that "the Manchu language is after the style of European languages; it has its methods and its rules; briefly speaking, one sees one's way clearly,"15 One 19th Century writer urged Western nations to adopt Manchu as the official language of communication with China, and he listed its advantages over Chinese as follows:

1. It is an alphabetic language . . .

2. The alphabet is remarkable for its beauty and simplicity; and it is more easily written, as well as read, than any of the alphabets employed in Europe.

3. Manchu has all the regular parts of speech; noun-substantive; noun-adjunctive; pronouns, personal, possessive, demonstrative; verbs, with conjugations, modes, tenses and participles; adverbs; prepositions; conjunctions, and interjections.

4. In acquiring the Manchu language, one finds, with pleasure, that the adjectives, as in English, are indeclinable, and that only gender is the natural one . . .

5. The conjugations of the verbs are for the most part regular . . .16

John Barrow cited some of the same advantages of Manchu and added one other. "In the enunciation it is full, sonorous, and far from being disagreeable; more like the Greek than any of the oriental languages; and it abounds with all those letters which the Chinese have rejected, particularly with the letters B and R."17

What greater compliment could be paid any language--almost like Greek! Plainly this was a language onto which the West could pin its hopes. Thus, Barrow predicted that if the Manchus stayed "on the throne a century longer," their language would "in all probability, supplant the Chinese."18 To be exact, the Manchus remained on the throne for 106 years after the publication of this remark, and by that

15Eloge de la Ville de Moukden, (Paris, 1770), VI.
18Ibid.
time, thoroughly sinicized, very few of them could speak their native tongue. The unhappy trend away from Manchu had been seen and sternly condemned several decades before the fall by H. E. M. James:

The successive emperors of the Manchu dynasty have taken care to have every Chinese book of value translated into Manchu, and valuable dictionaries and other elementary works have been compiled in Manchu and Chinese. Yet, so wonderful are the ways of men, the Court and the people alike are now abandoning Manchu for the cumbrous and barbarous Chinese. If they had imposed their language rather than their pigtails on their conquered foes, how much better it would have been.\(^{19}\)

Yes, how much better it would have been for all of us! Reassured by grammar, an alphabet, polysyllabic words and B and R to boot, students would have been flocking to Manchu 101. Unfortunately, Abahai's antidote did not take, and we are left, if we wish to communicate with 800,000,000 of our fellowpersons, approximately one in four of the earth's inhabitants, with the wrenching job of mastering the monosyllabic grammarless Chinese chuckle while Father Navarette's words still echo in our brains, "that dreadful stupendious language; there are few but find great discouragement in it."