

**AN OPEN LETTER**  
ON *JOURNAL OF CHINESE LINGUISTICS* TRANSITION

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(王士元)

Dear Friends of JCL,

I remember vividly that evening in 1973, when I drove up the narrow winding roads of the Berkeley Hills. Professor Y.R. Chao (赵元任) was waiting for me at the door of his Cragmont Avenue home. He beamed as I handed him the very first issue of *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* (JCL), which was dedicated to this eminent scholar. (JCL vol. 1, no. 1: i) He was also particularly pleased to see listed among the Associate Editors his long time friend, the eminent Professor Fang-Kuei Li (李方桂).

On p.ii of that inaugural issue, I discussed why it was necessary for the field of Chinese linguistics to have its own voice:

Chinese linguistics derives from two distinct but related fields of knowledge. In one, the objective is to deepen our understanding of Chinese culture (in the broadest sense of the term) via its primary medium of expression - its language. Whether it is a piece of inscription to be deciphered, a philosophy to be analyzed, or a poem whose rimes are to be reconstructed, a solid knowledge of the language of that time is crucial. Such studies have a long tradition in Sinology; indeed, they were virtually the only ones which scholars interested in Chinese pursued, until recent times.

The other field of knowledge is aimed at discovering the general principles underlying human language as a whole. The Chinese language is particularly important here not only because of the time depth of its literature and the wealth of its dialects, but even more because of the unique properties of its syntax and phonology. It constitutes a tremendously rich resource for Linguistics to tap - from the study of sound change to

investigations of sociolinguistic variation. These two fields, Linguistics and Sinology, flow together in their concern with the Chinese language.

The central questions on the language remain the same: its structure, its ontogeny, and its phylogeny, as well as the interactions between the Chinese language on the one hand, and Chinese thought, literature, and social systems on the other. Also of considerable interest are the questions which arise when the Chinese language comes into contact with other languages, be it in the controlled context of a language class or on the streets of an emigrant community. All in all, there is much to be done.

Before today, papers on Chinese linguistics had to seek foster homes in diverse journals of general linguistics and in publications of various hues of orientalia. This situation was at best a nuisance, and at worst a serious impediment to the communication and progress of our field. In this journal, let us hope, Chinese Linguistics will have found its own voice.

(William S-Y. Wang, "Chinese Linguistics." *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* volume1, number1 [January 1973], p. ii)

1973 was also the year I finally was able to return to China, and to lecture at Peking University, thanks to the joint effort of Professors Lü Shuxiang 吕叔湘 and Zhu Dexi 朱德熙. To renew contact and to build normal relations between linguists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and linguists elsewhere was to require much effort and many years. It was also in 1973 that the editor of the *Scientific American* invited me to write on linguistics for them, and I contributed a general article, "The Chinese Language". (vol.228, no.2, 50-63) This article has since appeared in many languages, including a Chinese version translated by Professor You Rujie 游汝杰. Gradually, in spite of the ups and downs of world politics, Chinese Linguistics and International Linguistics have begun to merge into one body of scholarship, much to everyone's benefit.

One particularly successful effort in this direction was the formation of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics (IACL) twenty years later – 1993. Much of the credit here goes to Professor Chung-Yu Chen (陈重瑜), of the hosting National University of Singapore, and the several colleagues who helped her, especially Professors C.-T. James Huang (黄正德), Benjamin K. Tsou (邹嘉彦), and James H-Y. Tai (戴浩一). I made use of the first Newsletter of

IACL to again stress the necessity to have a broad vision for our field in these words:

... We have papers on the Han dialects as well as on the languages of the ethnic minorities. Some papers are strongly theoretical, while others emphasize an experimental or computational orientation. While most of the discussion has centered around spoken language, there is also concern with our unique morphosyllabic writing system. There are papers in psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. After all, language is an activity that pervades every aspect of human life. It is natural that the study of language should be broadly based and that it should draw from many disciplines.

The term "Chinese Linguistics" in our IACL has several interpretations. Among these, one reading has to do with the traditions, theories and results of linguistics and philology as practiced by Chinese scholars past and present. Another reading has to do with the application of the methods of general linguistics to the languages found in China. This would include, of course, research on many non-Sinitic languages, such as Altaic, Austric, Tibeto-Burman, etc., especially on their interactions with the Han dialects. After all, China is a Sprachbund in the full sense of the word. Her linguistic fabric has been woven together over the millennia from many intertwining and inseparable strands. ...

(William S-Y. Wang, "An Association of Our Own." *Newsletter [of International Association of Chinese Linguistics]*, volume 1, number 1 [Jan.1993], p.1)

While I mentioned several allied disciplines in 1993, I could not have foreseen the spectacular advances in several areas made in the intervening decades that are deeply relevant to the study of language. One area studies human evolution using methods of genetics – including the exciting developments of methods to extract DNA from fossils of our close relatives who became extinct dozens of millennia ago. Perhaps the day will come when we will be able to say which of our close relatives, Neanderthals, Denisovans, etc., had the pre-requisite DNA for language, whether or not they had invented it themselves during their time.

Another area studies the brain directly using powerful methods of imaging. This area has already given us much new information about how aspects of language acquisition begin as early as fetal life. It is also making important progress toward elucidating how language is impaired,

abruptly through injury or gradually through ageing. Such knowledge about language during the sunset years will play a major role someday when we will be able to retard or prevent such impairment through appropriate intervention.

Thanks to these spectacular advances, questions in linguistics which drew mere speculations earlier can now be pursued by rigorous scientific methods. Language research in the West is taking giant strides forward in these multi-disciplinary areas. Vanguard journals like *Nature*, *Science* frequently publish papers in linguistics with authors from evolutionary anthropology and cognitive neuroscience. Chinese Linguistics surely must not miss out on these research opportunities on the fundamental questions on language. JCL will always be ready to encourage the opening of new frontiers. The natural sciences and technology in China have essentially attained international standards of excellence, worthy of the status of *daguo* 大国. In the humanities and social sciences, it seems China still lags behind by a significant margin – which requires all of us to work harder.

Even since my trip to Beijing in 1973, I sensed that my long term work should be in China. The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 seemed like an appropriate moment for me to retire from Berkeley, and return to China as well. Shortly after I joined the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Professors Kenneth Young and Billy So were kind enough to help support moving JCL from its office at the Project on Linguistic Analysis (POLA) on the Berkeley campus to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 2008.

Over the years, JCL has been very fortunate to have had the dedicated editorial assistance from young colleagues, such as Weera Ostapirat (许家平), Zhongwei Shen (沈钟伟), who are now well-established scholars in their own right. It was Yifeng Wu (吴一丰) who constructed the first very useful Cumulative Index; it was also she who accomplished the difficult task of moving JCL across the Pacific, and managed the welfare of the journal over numerous years. She frequently went way beyond the duties of an editor, and voluntarily acted as a mentor to unseasoned authors, guiding their submission to an

international journal for the first time. These are all invaluable and timely contributions she has made to our field.

It goes without saying how much a debt we all owe to the many Associate Editors whose pool of expertise has been the backbone of JCL these several decades. It is their authority, as well as that of the many international scholars of whom we have requested opinions and reviews, that has assured the highest quality that JCL is well known for. It is this combination of talents that has attracted contributions from the many hundreds of authors JCL has published over the years.

JCL has now been housed at the CUHK for a decade now, and Yifeng is due to retire this year. It is also time for the journal to evolve under new editorship, with my continued support. We are all very fortunate that Professor Shengli Feng (冯胜利) of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature and Professor Virginia Yip (叶彩燕) of the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages have consented to assume the joint editorship of the journal. They have also nominated their brilliant student, Zhou Jiangling (周蒋玲), to gradually take over Yifeng's duties at JCL.

Professors Feng and Yip are respectively Director of the Joint Research Centre for Chinese Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, and Director of the Joint Research Centre for Language and Human Complexity. JCL will continue to be housed at CUHK, with support from these two Centers and from the Faculty of Arts, as well as with continued collaboration with The Chinese University Press. The new editors will begin in January 2019 with Volume 47, as well as all subsequent JCL monographs. Their first issue, 47.1, will carry their vision statement for our journal.

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to thank Professors Feng and Yip for their generosity and leadership in taking on this commitment to serve our field. Shengli is a world authority on the history of the Chinese language, especially for his pioneering studies on prosodic aspects. Virginia has the singular distinction of having won the prestigious Leonard Bloomfield Book Award for her famous research on bilingual language acquisition, together with her husband, Professor Stephen Matthews of Hong Kong University. With such complementary breadth

represented by the joint editors, JCL will surely attain higher and higher levels of achievement as the leading voice for Chinese Linguistics in the decades to come.

We all wish Chinese linguistics research and JCL ***Pengcheng Wanli*** 鹏程万里 under the new joint editorship!

WSYW

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