

# Collected Essays of Shen Xiaolong on Chinese Cultural Linguistics

Edited by Gao Yihong

Northeast Normal University Press

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Edited by Gao Yihong

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# PREFACE

## 1. Basic Features of “Chinese Cultural Linguistics”

The rise of “Chinese Cultural Linguistics” (CCL) has been a significant event in contemporary Chinese linguistics since the mid 1980s. Welcomed by some as “a new branch of linguistics,” “a new trend of thought,” and criticized by others as a “pseudoscience,”<sup>1</sup> CCL has aroused heated debate within Chinese linguistic and humanities circles. In one decade, over 70 books and 1,000 articles on CCL have been published, a CCL Association has been established, 4 national symposia have been held, and related debates have been carried out in various forums. Among the three major schools of CCL, namely “cultural reference,” “cultural reflection,” and “cultural identification,”<sup>2</sup> the last one represented by Dr. Shen Xiaolong (申小龙, 1952—) is by far the most influential and controversial. Now in his early forties, Shen is a professor of Chinese from Fudan University in Shanghai. In about eight years he has published some 30 books and 300 articles on CCL, and has lectured on CCL in various mainland cities as well as in Taiwan and Japan. Regarded as an “extremist” by many Chinese linguists, Shen advocates the following major points: 1) a monistic view of language and culture; 2) a strong version of linguistic and cultural relativism; 3) a thorough negation of and reaction against existing modern Chinese linguistics; 4) the necessity of a “paradigm switch” in Chinese linguistics from formal analysis to cultural interpretation.

In general, CCL attempts to reveal characteristics of the Chinese language by relating it to Chinese culture. Compared with the other CCL schools, Shen’s school draws an even closer link between

language and culture to the extent that the two entirely identify with each other. The study of the Chinese (Han) language,<sup>3</sup> therefore, is essentially an interpretation of the cultural “spirit” (精神) or the “world view” (世界观, 视界) of the Chinese (Han) people. It is claimed that such cultural “spirit” or “world view” is common to various aspects within the same culture; it is not shared with other cultures. In his study of Chinese sentence types, for instance, Shen uses “distributed view vs. focused view” to characterize respectively features of Chinese and what he refers to as “Western inflectional languages.”<sup>4</sup> Drawing a direct parallel between painting and language, Shen says that while Western painting employs “the focused view” which requires the painter to portray the world from a single, fixed perspective, Chinese painting employs “the distributed view” which allows the painter to portray the world seen from moving or various “distributed” viewpoints. This difference is basic to the Chinese and Western modes of thinking, and is likewise demonstrated in the languages.<sup>5</sup> The sentence patterns of Western inflectional languages are focused on the verb, sentence constituents are largely governed by the inflectional changes of the verb, which denote tense, aspect, person, number, case, gender, etc., and formal agreement is essential. In Chinese, such a structural focus is absent. Instead, sentences are formed of “flowing phrase-chunks”; words are freely chained together according to the inherent logic of the content. The principle of organization is “meaning agreement,” not “form agreement.” Comprehension of sentences depends less on formal, objective features, and more on context and the reader’s subjective perception.<sup>6</sup> Shen has supported his claim by exhaustive categorization of sentences in *Zuo Zhuan*, a classical work of history written at the time of Confucius,<sup>7</sup> *The Water Margin*, a novel written in the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644),<sup>8</sup> and *The Well*, a contemporary Chinese novellette.<sup>9</sup> He further claims that since Chinese and “Western inflectional languages” are different in nature, the Western linguistic framework of formal analysis is inappropriate and irrelevant for the analysis of Chinese.

Modern Chinese linguistics, marked by the publication of Ma Jianzhong's grammar of classical Chinese, *Ma Shi Wen Tong*, at the turn of the century and developed by contemporary linguists over the last nine decades, has taken the wrong path by following the formalistic approach of the West. Therefore, it needs a drastic "paradigm switch" from formal analysis to cultural interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Background to Chinese Cultural Linguistics

### 2.1 The General Linguistic and Cultural Background to Chinese Cultural Linguistics

Language studies in China have a long history. Traditional philology (小学) was directed towards the exegesis of the classical literary canon and consisted of three parts: graphology, phonology, and exegetics (critical interpretation of ancient text). Traditional Chinese philology had several major features. First, it was centered on the written rather than the spoken language. While Chinese characters and their meanings were well researched, grammar was not a major concern. Second, it was closely attached to the interpretation of ancient texts. In fact, language was never regarded by itself as the object of study. For the same reason, traditional philology was "humanistic" in nature, in the sense that it was context oriented and always served the purpose of interpreting the "spirit" of ancient texts and their writers.

The beginning of modern Chinese linguistic was marked by the completion of Ma Jianzhong's *Ma Shi Wen Tong* (1898), the first systematic grammar of Chinese written by a Chinese scholar. Drawing on grammars of Latin and other Western languages, Ma established a grammatical system for Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Since then, this approach of former analysis has been largely affirmed by modern Chinese grammarians such as Zhao Yuanren (Chao Yuan Ren, 1892 - 1982),<sup>12</sup> Wang Li (1900 - 1986)<sup>13</sup> and Lü Shuxiang (1904 - )<sup>14</sup>, yet solid achievements have been gained more in the description of language variation and micro-level constituents than in theoretical generalization

at a macro-level. The prevailing theory in contemporary Chinese linguistics is structuralism mainly as developed by American linguists in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>15</sup> In college, language majors are required to carry out binary analyses of Chinese sentences within the framework of Immediate Constituent (IC) analysis. Chomsky's Transformational Generative (TG) Grammar is introduced, yet its application to Chinese has so far been limited. Discussion of functional approaches, such as the systemic functional grammar of M.A.K. Halliday and discourse grammar by W. Chafe and C. Li and S. Thompson, is mostly limited to overseas Chinese linguists and mainland teachers of English.<sup>16</sup> Applications of these theories to the analysis of Chinese can be found, but are often superficial and fragmental. For a large number of Chinese linguists, "Western Linguistics" means the structuralist binary analysis that they have followed for almost a century, plus a TG grammar "tree" that has not generated much fruit. In this situation, some Chinese linguists have begun to seriously question the applicability of "Western linguistics," and to vigorously discover the "characteristics of the Chinese language." From a linguistic perspective, therefore, the espousal of CCL could be seen as the result of such self-identification with the mother tongue.

If the general development in modern Chinese linguistic circles has gone from "turning outwards" in the past to "turning inwards" in the 1980s, i.e., from applying Western perspectives to developing native perspectives, that in the cultural arena seems to be the opposite. After a segregation from the external world for several decades, there arose in the 1980s a "culture craze," in which intellectuals tried to compare the pros and cons of Chinese and Western cultures. This occurred in an era in which the "open-door policy" and economic reform brought China and the world closer, and "civilization of the blue sea lashed the civilization of the yellow land."<sup>17</sup> The loudest cry heard was a severe and bitter attack on Chinese cultural traditions, which in a sense resembled the iconoclasm or anti-traditionalism of the "May Fourth" modernization movement around 1920. The Great



Wall, previously an emblem of long history and national solidarity for the Chinese, was said to represent self isolation; the dragon, long regarded as a positive symbol of Chinese ancestry, was said to stand for unaccountable autocracy.<sup>18</sup> A representative product of the craze was a TV series entitled "the River Elegy," whose title and content reverse those of the traditional eulogy to the Yellow River as the maternal symbol of Chinese culture. The heat of this culture craze fitted the reforming mood of society in general, which saw its culmination in the political movement of 1989.

Born in the middle of the culture craze of the 1980s, CCL could also be seen as a cultural phenomenon, although not all of its proponents acknowledge this. Many fervent supporters of CCL are scholars and students of classical Chinese. From a linguistic perspective, they argue against those relentless attackers of Chinese traditions. While those radical social reformers attempted to "carry forward the spirit of the May Fourth," Shen and his CCL colleagues viewed the cultural reform during the May Fourth Movement as a "cultural fault/fracture."<sup>19</sup> Their voices were not loud in the cultural arena in the 1980s, but have perceptibly increased during the 1990s. During the last five or six years, many books on Chinese culture have been published, many classical works have been reprinted and edited, and discussions about "Chinese characteristics" have been heard in various fields.

In Chinese cultural discourse, therefore, CCL can be seen as a reaction against the cultural self-negation of the 1980s, and an expression of the cultural self-assertion of the 1990s. It is probably not a mere coincidence that, while radical reformers of the 1980s launched an iconoclastic attack on the "dragon" symbol and "the dragon mental-ity,"<sup>20</sup> Shen's enthusiastic supporters have repeatedly noted that Shen was born in the year of the dragon and his name "Xiaolong" means "little dragon," he acts like a "dragon twister" (longjuanfeng, tornado), he is a "rising dragon," and he represents a "dragon phenomenon."<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 Shen Xiaolong as Seen among Three Groups of People

In the following discussion I will venture to place Shen Xiaolong among three groups of people, each defining certain continua concerning particular issues. However arbitrary it may be, I believe such a placement may aid international readers in understanding Shen's own stance and the influences he has received.

The first group consists of philosophers. Here the first issue of debate is on the nature of language. Some people such as R. Carnap<sup>22</sup> see language as pure signs of logic, whereas others like W. Humboldt<sup>23</sup> will see it as the "world view" of a nation. In this dichotomy between the logical/empirical approach and the humanistic/hermeneutic approach, Shen obviously stands for the latter. In his study of what he refers to as the "Western humanistic tradition,"<sup>24</sup> he repeatedly cites a package of Western philosophers. Among these are G.B. Vico with his "new science," W.Humboldt with his "sprachliche Weltansicht" (language world view), L.Weisgerber with his "geistige Zwischen welt" (language as an "intermediate world of the mind"), L.Wittgenstein with his view on the relation between language and existence, H.G.Gadamer with his hermeneutics, and E.Cassirer with his concept of "prelogical" thinking. For Shen, language is definitely a subjective rather than objective matter.<sup>25</sup>

The second issue of philosophical debate is on the nature of scientific development. On the one hand there are "revolutionaries" represented by T.Kuhn,<sup>26</sup> who argues that science develops by a process of drastic, discontinuous "paradigm switch," and different paradigms are "incommensurable"; on the other hand there are "evolutionists" such as K.Popper,<sup>27</sup> who believes that the development of science is continuous, and that different theories CAN be compared. In these terms, Shen is a revolutionary. He cites Kuhn frequently; he claims directly that his CCL is meant as a Kuhnian "paradigm switch" or "revolution." For Shen, again in Kuhn's terms,

the establishment of an “extraordinary science” requires a total negation of the previous “ordinary science.”<sup>28</sup>

The second group consists of linguists and anthropologists. The relevant dichotomies here are those of 1) “formalism” vs. “functionalism;” 2) “universality” vs. “uniqueness;” 3) “induction” vs. “deduction.” At the formalist pole of the formalism-functionalism continuum, we see generative grammarians headed by N. Chomsky,<sup>29</sup> and structuralist anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss.<sup>30</sup> At the functionalist pole there are Prague School linguists such as V. Mathesius,<sup>31</sup> London School linguists such as J.R. Firth<sup>32</sup> and M.A.K. Halliday,<sup>33</sup> and functionalist anthropologists such as B. Malinowsky.<sup>34</sup> Traditional Chinese philologists can also be considered functionalists. Primarily concerned with the practical use of language, Chinese philology was naturally oriented to meaning and function rather than form. In this divide, Shen stands firmly on the functionalist side. Although deeply attracted by Chomsky’s TG as an undergraduate, Shen decided later that TG was a framework which would distort the Chinese language.<sup>35</sup> In his view,<sup>36</sup> Chomsky offers great insights into the “humanness” of language and the “linguisticness” of humans, yet he has taken the wrong path by isolating and formalizing this “humanness” in language. The study of Chinese especially shows up the barriers to taking this formalistic path as, according to Shen, Chinese is a language especially “humanistic” and flexible in grammatical forms. Shen’s CCL is a reaction to formalism and a return to the functionalist approach of traditional Chinese philology. Though not versed in modern Western functionalist linguistics, Shen has occasionally cited Malinowski, and has recently shown an interest in Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar. Compared to Hallidayan functionalism, however, Shen’s CCL seems less “social” and more “psychological” in emphasis. For Halliday, language is a “social semiotic”;<sup>37</sup> for Shen, language is “a nation’s thinking mode.”<sup>38</sup>

On the universality-uniqueness continuum, we hear Chomsky

claiming language “universals,”<sup>39</sup> Lévi-Strauss arguing for “common psychological structures” manifested in different cultures,<sup>40</sup> whereas E. Sapir<sup>41</sup> and B. Whorf<sup>42</sup> talking about linguistic and cultural “uniqueness” or “relativity.” Shen does not believe in universals. He blames Lévi-Strauss for distorting cultural facts to fit into his framework, and for seeing only the neatness of the structure but not the real human beings.<sup>43</sup> In line with Sapir and Whorf, Shen argues for the strong version of linguistic and cultural relativism, and holds that there is no “common denominator” among different cultures.<sup>44</sup> However, there are two apparent differences between them. First, Sapir and Whorf based their theory on anthropological field work, whereas Shen has focused on written text analysis. Second, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is ultimately based on an “etic” perspective, as “primitive languages” were examined by outsiders who are native speakers of English. Shen’s CCL is based on an “emic” perspective, as the Chinese language is examined by Chinese linguists. In his own words, it is “to examine our own language with our own eyes.”

On the methodological continuum of induction-deduction, there stand at one end anthropological linguists, sociolinguists, American descriptive linguists, and orthodox Chinese grammarians who put a special emphasis on “data work.” These linguists favour an inductive approach and mock at theoreticians as “armchair linguists.” At the other end there are deductionists such as Chomsky, who sneered at inductive sociolinguistic practice as “collecting butterfly specimens.”<sup>45</sup> On this matter Shen is allied with Chomsky. His attack on the inductive approach of sociolinguistics in the concluding chapter of *Community Cultures and Language Variations* (1991) very much echoed Chomsky’s words in *Language and Responsibility* (1979). For Shen, data are the result of theoretical perceptions, and the data “bricks” of a linguistic mansion have to be laid down according to a theoretical “blueprint.”<sup>46</sup>

The third group consists of Chinese intellectuals devoted to the cultural development of the nation. In terms of the variation in

attitudes towards Chinese cultural traditions, they can be roughly classified as “revolutionaries,” “traditionalists,” and “reformists.” The revolutionaries include Chen Duxiu (Ch’ en Tu - hsiu, 1879 - 1942), Hu Shi (Hu Shih, 1891 - 1962),<sup>47</sup> and other activists of the May Fourth Movement and the accompanying “New Culture Movement” in the first two decades of the 20th century. These people attacked political, cultural and linguistic traditions of the Chinese past. They called for the abandonment of the “Confucian Workshop,” and replacement of classical Chinese with writings in the vernacular. The opponents of these revolutionaries were traditionalists such as Gu Hongming (Ku Hung-ming, 1857 - 1928), who called for protection and restoration of the “spirit of the Chinese,”<sup>48</sup> and defended even cultural relics like women’s foot-binding, men’s pigtales, and concubines. Between the revolutionaries and the conservatives stand the “reformists,” including Ma Jianzhong (1845 - 1900), the linguist and social reformist whose work Shen Xiaolong attacks, the three generations of “neo-Confucians,”<sup>49</sup> and many other contemporary Chinese who are concerned with cultural issues. These people may differ in their shades of attitudinal orientation, but all aim at a “creative transformation” of Chinese cultural traditions. In this group, Shen might be called a “conservative reformist.” He is a “reformist” because in the reinterpretation and revitalization of the Chinese philological tradition, he emphasizes the active participation of the interpretative subject ( “The Six Classics are interpreted by Me” 我注六经),<sup>50</sup> he enthusiastically draws on Western philosophies mentioned above, and tries to combine them with Chinese philosophical and philological traditions. He is “conservative” because he blames the “New Culture Movement” for creating a “cultural fault-line;” the “uniqueness” of Chinese in his description is said to imply, consciously or unconsciously, “superiority” or an “Oriental chauvinism.”<sup>51</sup> Shen’s eulogy to the Chinese writing brush as a symbol of the Chinese cultural spirit<sup>52</sup> appears to be a poetic elaboration of Gu Hongming’s statement on the same issue in “The Spirit of the Chinese

People.”<sup>53</sup>

Ma Jianzhong may be Shen's most direct comparison within this group. One hundred years after Ma and also at the turn of a century, Shen stands at a similar historical point, i.e. the nation faces a crucial period of survival/development, and the study of the nation's language, viewed as important for the survival/development, is in bad need of a breakthrough.<sup>54</sup> While as a “radical reformist,” Ma turned to Western theories and proposed to reform the Chinese traditions of language education and economy, Shen the “conservative reformist” has primarily and essentially turned to Chinese philological and cultural traditions.

Compared with many contemporary linguists in the People's Republic of China, especially linguists of his own generation, Shen is probably more open to influences from both the Chinese and Western traditions. Yet compared with some figures of the May Fourth era mentioned above and the present generation of neo-Confucians such as Tu Weiming (1940 – ), Cheng Zhongying (1935 – ) and Yu Yingshi (1930 – ) who stay overseas and publish in English,<sup>55</sup> Shen is limited in his access to Western academic discourse and exposure to Western cultures. His writings have never been addressed to a non-Chinese-speaking audience directly. His reflections on the uniqueness of Chinese have yet to benefit from a closer integration between “emic” and “etic” views.

As we have seen, Shen's positions on most of the continua above are at the poles, not the mid-points. As an “extremist,” he has caused so much a stir that there has been some discussion of a “Shen Xiaolong Phenomenon,” referring to the impact of his CCL.<sup>56</sup> Such a phenomenon is attributable not only to Shen's unusual qualities as an individual, but also to the historical development of Chinese linguistics and Chinese culture. It has added a new scene to the landscape of cultural pluralism in the post-colonial world.

### **3. Controversy over Chinese Cultural Linguistics**

Being an “extremist” and using a discourse that appeals more to philosophers than linguists, Shen receives different feedback from different circles in China. Among philosophers, historians, aestheticians and literary critics, he finds considerable empathy. Among linguists he is a figure of great controversy, and is publically attacked in various linguistics forums and journals. Shen and his CCL colleagues—mostly young people—are not “in power” in current Chinese linguistic circles, and therefore have been subject to some institutional pressure.<sup>57</sup> Criticism and debates have been centered around the following major issues.<sup>58</sup>

#### 1) Relation between language and culture

While Shen claims that language identifies with culture, others believe that language merely reflects culture. It is also argued that such reflection varies in degree at different linguistic levels: it is maximal at the lexical level, and minimal at the syntactic level where Shen focuses his attention.

#### 2) Features of Chinese

Shen says that if Western inflectional languages are “law/rule-governed” (法治), Chinese is to a large extent “person-governed” (人治); its construction and comprehension depend much on individual perception. The “laws” or “rules” of Chinese have to be governed by meaning rather than govern meaning. His opponents, for either theoretical or practical purposes, believe that Chinese is in essence “law/rule-governed,” just as other languages.

#### 3) Relation among different languages/cultures

Shen holds that languages/cultures are essentially different from one another, especially those from different language or culture families. There is no commensurability among them. His critics believe that different languages/cultures share “universals” whose existence it is incorrect and undesirable to deny.

#### 4) View of modern Chinese linguistics

Shen says that by modelling itself on the grammars of Western languages, Chinese modern linguistics from its birth has taken the

wrong path. In the words of a supporter, Shen “is not trying to speed up the train of modern Chinese linguistics. Rather, he is telling people that it has taken the wrong track and should turn back. ... He has not only called out but also tried to switch the track.”<sup>59</sup> Shen’s opponents, on the other hand, consider it arrogant to negate a history of nine decades. They blame Shen for “standing on the faces rather than on the shoulders of giants.”<sup>60</sup>

#### 5) Nature and method of linguistic research

For Shen, linguistics by its very nature is a study of the humanities, and should adopt an interpretive method. The major problem of modern Chinese linguistics is “the conflict between the humanistic nature of Chinese and the scientific attitude of Chinese linguistics.” For his critics, linguistics is at least in part similar to natural and social sciences, and should adopt a scientific approach that values objectivity and precision. For them, the problem of modern Chinese linguistics is precisely its unscientific nature.

#### 6) Nature of Chinese Cultural Linguistics

Shen claims that CCL is a new branch of linguistics, or that it IS linguistics.<sup>61</sup> This reminds one of the claim made by R. Hudson not long ago that the prefix “socio-” in “sociolinguistics” is redundant, because language studies cannot be isolated from social factors.<sup>62</sup> Other CCL schools consider CCL an “interdisciplinary linguistics,” like the present status of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. Still others believe that CCL is not mature enough to be called a new field of academic study, yet its influence has gone beyond the boundaries of linguistics. Therefore, it is better to be called “a new trend of thought.”<sup>63</sup> There are also a number of linguists who simply ignore CCL, because they regard it as a pseudo-science which out of either naivety or self-glorification claims the status of a science.

Comments from international scholars have been few so far, but thought-provoking. McDonald, for example, criticizes the “patriotic” motive of CCL.<sup>64</sup> He and Zeng also reinterpret Shen’s syntactic theory in the framework of systemic-functional grammar.<sup>65</sup>



In a rather informal setting, Eugene A. Nida gives trenchant feedback on a few issues after reading the English version of Essay 4 in this collection. This has provoked a heated debate among students and professors at Peking University.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Purposes and Contents of this Collection

The editor of the present collection believes that it is worthwhile and necessary to bring the controversy over CCL — especially over Shen's "cultural identification" — into an international context to facilitate a dialogue among people of different cultural perspectives. Such a dialogue will, first of all, make participants become aware of different "subjective" perspectives, and thus enhance cross-cultural understanding; and secondly, help people "seek truth from facts", i. e. reach a more "objective" understanding of the issues concerned.

For these reasons, this collection presents 20 papers by Shen Xiaolong. These papers can be categorized into several groups, as seen in the table of contents.

Essays 1 to 5 present the ideas of CCL in general. With high school teachers of Chinese as target readers, they are relatively easy to read. Essays 6 to 8 present "critical reflections" on modern Chinese linguistics. These three articles carry much "explosive" criticism, very typical of Shen's style. Essays 9 to 12 are syntactic studies, which demonstrate Shen's constructive efforts as a grammarian. From these articles readers will taste the "paradigm" of cultural identification at the syntactic level. Essays 13 to 17 are studies in other sub-domains of linguistics. These papers show how language might be "identified" with culture in the areas of graphology, rhetoric, and the critical interpretation of ancient texts. Essays 18 to 19 set out the traditions of Chinese philology from a historical perspective. With heavy citations from Chinese classics, these two articles attempt at "creative transformation" of Chinese philological traditions. Essay 20, published in *Book Forest* as a prose piece rather than an academic paper, carries Shen's emotional defence of his CCL approach. So far,