NOTES ON A TRIP TO CHINA

by William S-Y. Wang

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During the period of August 29 to October 6, 1973, I was in the People’s Republic of China. Since mine was an unusual opportunity, the Director of the Center for Applied Linguistics invited me to make some informal notes on the trip for The Linguistic Reporter.

In addition to the linguistic interests, I visited communes, schools, private homes, and historical sites. My understanding of these first-hand observations was significantly deepened through lengthy discussions with my father, who has participated in this society over these two decades. Another helpful ingredient for my perspective is the fact that I had some basis for a “before-and-after” comparison, since I have some memories of what life was like in China before the Liberation of 1949. It is an altogether stirring experience to be a part of this vibrant society, even as briefly as I was. People who have also visited Israel at the most ardent moments of that new nation like to compare the two societies. But social reconstruction in China, of course, proceeds on a much grander scale. Everywhere, men and women of all ages move with a confident optimism and a unity of purpose that is at once simple and ennobling.

Since I went as an individual, rather than as a member of a group, there was virtually no constraint either on my itinerary or on my movement within cities. For twenty days I was in Peking, where I met for the first time many scholars whose writings in Chinese linguistics I have admired for years. A colloquium was arranged for me at Peking University on September 11, jointly chaired by Lu Shu-Xiang, Director of the Institute of Linguistics, and by Zhu De-Xi, Professor of Chinese at Peking University. It lasted three hours and was attended by some sixty people. These included Cen Qi-Xiang, Li Rong, Liu Yong-Quan, Wang Li, Wu Zong-Ji, Yuan Ji-Hua, and Zhou Dian-Fu.

Because a good amount of our recent work in Chinese linguistics as well as on the general theory of phonological change rests on the data base provided by Peking linguists (see Matthew Chen’s synthesis of this work in Foundations of Language 8,457-98, 1972), it was for me a particularly gratifying moment to speak with them in person. I presented a report on recent research in linguistics done in my laboratory in Berkeley. (Since many people have expressed an interest in this report, it will be published in a future issue of the Journal of Chinese Linguistics, in Chinese.) After the report, there was a general discussion on topics ranging from machine translation to semantics to language teaching. At the conclusion of the colloquium, Professor Lu suggested that a “partnership” be formed between the linguists of the two countries. There is no doubt that we will continue to have much to learn from Professor Lu and his colleagues, so his generous suggestion is most enthusiastically taken.

On September 15 I had the opportunity of visiting The Fourth School for Deaf-Mutes in Peking, where I watched the children, from 9 to 17 years old, receive both speech training and medical treatment. The heart of the treatment is acupuncture, which each child receives several times a week. This method of treating deaf-mutes, which is highly regarded in China, has been publicized by the Foreign Language Press in a little booklet, Exploring the Secrets of Treating Deaf-Mutes (Peking, 1972), available in many languages. There have been many reports of success based on this method; the officials at the school I visited are also confident in its effectiveness. It is clear to me from the class visits that the children are extremely well-motivated and that some are making impressive progress in gaining speech. As we may expect, it is more problematic for a deaf student to master the Chinese tones than the consonants and vowels, since it is much more difficult to monitor the activities of the larynx.

Although I did not have a detailed schedule for doing field work, I did make use of the opportunity to take notes and make tape-recordings. People invariably tried to be helpful to my endeavors, and some of them visibly enjoyed having their voice played back on the SONY TC55. All my recordings and photographs were taken with the explicit prior consent of the subject.

Since the Liberation, the government has been very concerned over the Chinese language; Premier Chou En-Lai and Dr. Kuo Mo-Juo, President of the Academy of Sciences, are among the leaders who have commented on language reforms. (The reader unfamiliar with the linguistic situation may find it useful to see my article on the Chinese language in the February 1973 issue of Scientific American.) Putonghua, based on Peking pronunciation, is now virtually universal — most people under 30 are fluent in it — the result of widespread and intensive popularization. In stores in Canton, I was told, one does not get served except in Putonghua. In the Southern provinces, especially away from the urban centers, families tend to be bidialectal. Local language arts continue to flourish: I attended operas given in the Guilin and Meixian dialects and story-telling sessions in the Guangzhou and Suzhou dialects. The simplified characters have become generally accepted, though older people still use a few complex characters now and then when they write. Pinyin, the spelling system based on the Latin alphabet, does not appear to have a very central place in schools, though it is used consistently in official textbooks of Chinese.

The greatest change in Putonghua over the past quarter century is in the lexicon. Beverly Fincher has recorded some observations on this in the Journal of Chinese Linguistics 1.1. Because of the tremendous degree of political and social uniformity across the nation, it was quite easy for a group of words to take on sharply defined new meanings. My unfamiliarity with this new lexicon was a significant hindrance during my first few days in Peking, especially in the context of more serious discussions.

Phonetically, I did not encounter many
new developments in Peking. However, some on-going sound changes seem to have diffused all across the lexicon and to have reached more speakers. The /w/ glide, when syllable-initial, has hardened to /v/ before non-labial, non-high vowels for many speakers, in words such as wàng (forget), wéi (for) wén (ask), and wá (socks). After alveolars and sibilants, it is often deleted, in words such as tái (correct), suí (although); in shuí (who), the deletion is almost universal as evidenced by the alternating spelling sēi given in dictionaries. The /ʃ/ glide sometimes loses its labialization and becomes /ʃ/ in words such as xuè (blood), quàn (complete). There are also a few words in which /ʊ/ varies with /u/.

The remainder of the trip was spent in Yenan, Xian, Shanghai, Suzhou, Guanzhous, and Guilin. In Yenan, the /n/ has become lost after the vowel that corresponds to Peking /ɑ/, and has vowelized to /ŋ/ elsewhere. So the name “Yenan” itself is pronounced /jɑ:/ by the local inhabitants. Xian is particularly interesting because of the unusual development before labials of /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /j/ into /pʃ/, /pʒ/, and /ʃ/ respectively. To my ear, /pʃ/ sounds like /ʃ/, and /pʒ/ and /ʃ/ both sound very much like /ʃ/. I plan to do some instrumental analysis of my Xian tapes on these phonetic questions. Not far to the southeast of Xian is Lantian, where the plain alveolars have merged into the palatals before palatals; so dí (low) is pronounced like jì (chicken), and tī (ladder) is pronounced like qí (wife).

While at Guilin, I had the opportunity of working sessions with Mr. Wei Zhi-Min, a native speaker of the Zhuang language as spoken in Tiandong, Zhuang is one of the largest minority languages in China, with over eight million speakers. Based on my sketchy exposure, the tone system appears exceedingly complex — five long ones and four short ones. Although it preserves the basic syntax of the Tai languages, the lexicon is heavily saturated with Chinese borrowings. I hope to work on these field notes before long and make them generally available.

The English language is becoming increasingly popular, not only in schools, where it is the major foreign language, but also for the general population, especially at urban centers. Radios broadcast English instruction several hours every week. The pronunciation that I heard lies somewhere between Daniel Jones and, say, Kenyon and Knott. Impressionistically, it seems that while the stressed vowels are mildly RP, the rhythm and intonation are much more smoothed out, tending toward American English. I was lucky to have been able to buy some of the texts which go with the radio lessons. Most of the time, stores are sold out.

It was a very intensive 40 days for me, crammed full of movement, facts, and activities, and of course, all too short. One tangible product of the trip is that the colloquio, so kindly arranged by Professors Lu and Zhu, has opened up more channels of communication for all of us. Given the importance of the language and its unsurpassed philological heritage, the real impact of Chinese linguistics upon general linguistics is yet to come. We can look forward to our colleagues and “partners” in China working with us in these endeavors. Less tangible are the impressions gleaned, the friendships formed, and the optimism I was infected with as I moved within this new society, so sure of its direction and so proud of its destiny.

### Boston Offers Program In Psycholinguistics

The School of Education at Boston University has established a doctoral program in applied psycholinguistics designed to prepare a student to be a language behavior specialist in the areas of language learning, language learning disabilities, and the teaching of language. Students who successfully complete the program will be prepared for effective participation in programs at universities, schools, or clinics where knowledge of the analysis and description of language behavior, both normal and deviant, and the ability to apply this knowledge to the study of particular educational and clinical language problems is a major requirement.

The principal academic areas related to the program are psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, psychobiology, experimental design, and educational application. The design of the program also provides the students with an opportunity to engage in independent study in related applied areas including language acquisition, bilingualism, developmental language disorders, language learning patterns of the neurologically and emotionally impaired, and assessment of language development.

The first students were admitted to the program last fall. Further information about the program as well as application forms for admission and financial support may be obtained by writing: Admissions Office, School of Education, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts 02215.

### FORD ANNOUNCE MINORITY GRANT

The Ford Foundation awarded 570 Peace fellowships for the 1973-74 academic year as part of its Scholarship and Fellowship Programs for Native Americans, Chicano Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Americans. Of these, 52 were for social sciences, linguistics, or minority education. The recipients for each such grant are listed below along with the institutions they are attending and their field of study.

- Jorge Benitez, City University of New York, Spanish
- Gloria I. Bernabe, Middlebury College, Spanish
- Daniel W. Brown, Brown University, Middlebury College, Spanish
- Maria Soledad Cabigas, Princeton University, Romance Languages
- Harry R. Chaban, Stanford University, Romance Languages
- Sonja Cintron, University of Connecticut, Romance Languages
- Ruth Crespo, New York University, Spanish
- G. Reginaldo Daniel, University of California at Los Angeles, Spanish
- Frederick Diaz, Michigan State University, Romance Languages
- Jorge Escalera, New York University, Spanish and Portuguese
- Juan Ortiz Escalera, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Spanish
- Roberta Fernandez, University of California at Berkeley, Spanish and Portuguese
- Rose Marie A. Foote, New York University, Spanish
- Vivian H. Ford, University of California at Berkeley, Early Childhood Education
- Jose L. Galvan, University of Texas at Austin, Romance Languages
- Gracie D. Glymph, Columbia University, Russian
- Janice E. Hale, Georgia State University, Early Childhood Education
- Francisco G. Hinojos, Stanford University, Spanish and Portuguese
- Carolyn R. Hodges, University of California at Berkeley, Romance Languages
- LaVerne M. Jeanne, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Linguistics
- Dewara M. Johnson, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Linguistics

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