

NATIONALISM AND THE VERNACULAR IN CHINA

BY LOW KWANG-LAI

PEOPLE in this country are more or less familiar with the political and industrial changes that have taken place in China through the writings of prolific journalists and the perennial stream of books on China, issuing from the protean press. But however important these changes and however valuable these publications, there is one great change, one great movement, about which there is a conspiracy of silence on the part of the writers on China in this country, and yet it is a movement fraught with the most serious consequences and exercising an unparalleled influence on the intellectual and spiritual life of the Chinese people. If the transformation of the Chinese Monarchy into the Chinese Republic is an event politically significant, the change from the classical Chinese language into the vernacular, the language as it is spoken today by the people, is nothing short of an intellectual and spiritual revolution, which arouses the creative energy of the Chinese people and awakens the dormant national consciousness of the four hundred millions. It is through this medium of the spoken language, newly discovered and exalted to the plane of time honored language, that the Chinese people are giving expression to their emotions and feelings, hitherto suppressed because trammled by the restraining influences of the classical language. Hostile criticism may say that the Chinese students who are the cause of the Shanghai trouble and are behind most of the anti-foreign agitations need sound chastisement by the Chinese Government. But in looking upon Chinese students as mere school children who have escaped the salutary influence of the rod, the critics have failed to understand the psychology of the new Chinese language and the significance of the whole movement. For the fundamental difference between the classical Chinese and the vernacular is that the for-

mer, like the French of the seventeenth century and the English of Addison's time, is a language marked by the virtues of restraint, order and unity, whereas the vernacular Chinese, like the language used in the Romantic period of European literature, is a language distinguished by such qualities as diversity and exuberance. If with the Classicists all is reason and sweet calm, with the Romanticists—and the Chinese writing in the vernacular are all Romanticists—all is wild imagining and unbridled emotions. "*Gefühl ist alles.*" That is the keynote to the Chinese Vernacular Movement, the Romantic Movement in Chinese Literature.

The leader of the Romantic Movement in Chinese Literature, Dr. Hu Shih, attributed the sudden rise of this movement partly to the fact that the classical language had ceased to be a living tongue as early as the second century, B.C., and that its continued use as a medium of expression was due to the ingenuity of the Chinese mind, namely, the invention of the examination system, which required of every candidate a thorough knowledge of classics, and thus perpetuated the language used by Confucius and his contemporaries. While this statement contains germs of truth, it is to be remembered that a language which Dr. Hu considers as having been dead in 120, B.C., had produced marvelous things in prose and poetry down to the very time when this new movement was launched by Dr. Hu Shih and others, and had been adequate as a medium of expression and as a literary instrument, comparable to any language in Europe. It would certainly be flying in the face of facts to say what Dr. Hu implied in his pronouncement, that the prose and poetry of the Tang Dynasty, the Augustan period of Chinese literature, were utterly valueless and that the language of the Tang poets was inadequate to express the feelings and ideas of the Chinese of that period. Besides, the process of evolution has been going on in the Chinese language just as it has been going on in the languages of other countries, and the prose of one Chinese Dynasty is as different from the prose of another, as the prose of the eighteenth century is different from the prose of the nineteenth century. Eccentrics there are of course in each period whose aim it is to stop the march of history and perform the heroic but impossible task of turning the clock back. But the prose or poetry as it was written

by the Chinese people at large at any one period always reflected the mind and the changes of psychology of the people at that time, and the classical language therefore was not without vitality and the power of growth.

But after China came under the rule of the Mongol tribes, the Chinese language became somewhat rigid and inelastic through the imposition of strict literary canons and standards which are entirely pseudo-classical and Procrustean. One can get an idea of the classicality of the Chinese language if one recalls the French prose or poetry of the neo-classical period: the introduction into writings of colloquial expressions and newly coined words is considered a literary crime and the temptation to do so is to be resisted with all the scrupulosity of one's conscience. In other words, the Chinese language has followed the dangerous tendency to pay its highest homage to form, to the neglect of content, with the result that what happened in the neo-classical period in Europe has happened in China.

With the introduction of Western knowledge and Western sciences, the difficulty of expression was felt by every translator and writer. To pour new wine into old bottles was a task impossible of fulfilment. But the adherents of the classical school have indomitable courage, and stoical contempt of admitting defeat at the first encounter. Thus Dr. Yen Fu used classical Chinese to translate Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill, Huxley, Herbert Spencer and Darwin; and the dignity and beauty of his style has compelled the admiration even of his opponents. Indeed it was through what the French call *hauteur* in his style that some of the common biological terms have become household words in China. Mr. Lin Shu is another example of translators in the classical Chinese. He has translated, in the course of twenty-five years, over one hundred and fifty novels by English, French and American authors. Mr. Liang Chi-chao, a great Chinese scholar and writer, one of the leaders of the reform movement of 1898, and Mr. Chang Shih-chao, a well known writer on political subjects, have both tried to infuse new blood into the exhausted stock of the Chinese classical language, the former by a generous admission of all the terminology and phraseology which had never been allowed to enter the sacred

precincts of the classical language, and, the latter, by the introduction from European languages of the elements of logical precision and syntactical complexity in order to equip the emaciated classical language with resources to express the abstract and complex ideas of the modern world. The results that have been achieved by these writers are highly satisfactory, as the expository and argumentative prose of these two writers is of rare beauty and clarity.

But, as I have pointed out, what is wrong with the Chinese classical language is the over-emphasis on form to the neglect of substance, and, although scholars like Yen Fu and Liang Chi-chao, publicists like Chang Shih-chao and Huang Yuan-yong, have succeeded in endowing the classical language with the intellectual riches of the West, yet the classical Chinese has not been able to give free expression to the emotions and feelings of the modern Chinese who have been not only insulted but also injured by the Western nations and whose need of finding an outlet for them is most urgent. Now the vernacular Chinese, though far from possessing such qualities as dignity and elegance, is yet a better medium to pour one's vials of wrath and to give vent to one's indignation and griefs and joys. It is true that the vernacular at the hands of most practitioners is most crude and lends itself to unabashed vulgarity and grossness, but it is full of possibilities and can remedy the fundamental defects of the classical language if the sense of historical continuity is not lost sight of. Whatever the vernacular may develop into and whether the consequences it will produce are for good or ill, there is not the slightest doubt that as a medium for the expression of elementary emotions and feelings it far surpasses the classical language. I do not mean to say that the way the advocates of the vernacular language express themselves will meet with the approval of the Classicists; a poet like Landor will prefer to sigh rather than to wail; but when a nation is torn by unending civil war and when it is at the same time continually bullied by its aggressive neighbors, the atmosphere thus engendered is necessarily one of intense gloom and bitterness, and a means has to be found to relieve the tension of the atmosphere. This the vernacular aims to accomplish.

The close relation between the Vernacular Movement and the advent of the nationalistic spirit is thus clear. It will now be useful to give a brief survey of the movement itself. It is always a sign of genius to discover the tendency of popular feeling and thought and to steal a march upon one's contemporaries by boldly proclaiming it. This kind of genius is a more common phenomenon in the West, for the West, more radical and always looking forward, takes more delight in adventure than the East, while the East, generally conservative and harking back to the past with wistful feelings, is more conventional and is more or less suspicious of innovations and change. Thus Dr. Hu Shih, a graduate of Columbia University, is greatly to be admired for his boldness in raising the standard of revolt in the literary world of China.

The movement had its humble beginnings in a controversy started by Dr. Hu and a few of his friends while he was a student in Cornell University as to the suitability of the vernacular as a medium for prose as well as poetry. The controversy went on for some time until on the first day of the year 1917 Dr. Hu published his article on *Some Suggestions for the Reform of Chinese Literature*, in which he said that literature changes with time, that every age has its own distinctive literature, that from the standpoint of historical evolution the great novels written in the *Pei Hua* (vernacular) must be regarded as the only great masterpieces during the last centuries, and that the *Pei Hua* will undoubtedly be employed as the effective tool for all literary composition in the future. In February of the same year his friend Chen Tu-shiu published his article on *A Revolution in Literature*, which, as Dr. Hu said, was a sympathetic response to his article. In Dr. Hu's second article entitled *The Historical View of Literature* he again pointed out that as the ancients had produced their literature it was our turn to create the new literature of our age; and that the *Pei Hua* literature, which had grown both in bulk and in intrinsic quality, was sufficient to indicate to us the tendency of historical evolution in Chinese literature. In April, 1918, he published his article on *A Constructive Revolution in Literature* which, as he says, was summed up in the sentence: "Produce literature in the national language and you will have a

national language of literary worth." He quoted in this article the examples of *Pléiade* in French literature, of Dante in Italian literature, and of Wickliffe and Chaucer in England. In the same article he said that the literature produced in the last two thousand years by the literary men in China was dead, because they used a dead language and dead language could not produce living literature. He thought it high time for the present generation to hold funeral services for the classical language.

This, however, does not seem to me to harmonize with his vaunted historical bias, for any student of history and of literature is familiar with the idea of historical continuity, and knows that a sudden break with the past is not only undesirable but impossible in any sphere of human endeavor and human thought. It is obvious that every age should have its literature, just as every season should have its fashion, but it does not follow from this that the fashions do not often echo the so-called buried styles of the past and that literature should not take its point of departure from the preceding age. So there is great confusion of thought in Dr. Hu's claim to historical bias and at the same time calling the classical literature dead and gone, to be consigned to oblivion. His theory, again, contradicts flatly his practice and his own experience, for his clear and charming vernacular style is largely due to his thorough knowledge of the classical works and his early apprenticeship in the difficult art of writing excellent prose. It is my suspicion that it is his rich intellectual equipment that has made him eclipse the glimmering lights on the literary horizon in China at the present time. For it is to be borne in mind that the difference between the vernacular and the classical Chinese is not really very great, though it is noticeable enough, and the line of demarcation had never been sharply drawn in the past between the two; the glorious days of the Chinese literature, when there were giants like Li Tai-pu and Tu Fu, were not unlike those of the reign of Elizabeth; there were then no artificial rules or conventions for the writer to obey; all that he needed to follow were the dictates of his artistic conscience and the instinct for perfection. That was the real classical period of Chinese literature. But the classical tradition could not last long without giving rise to abuse; that has hap-

pened in French and English literature and in the literature of other European countries, and now it has happened in China. In the West no one would, however, have the courage to say that immortals like Milton and Shakespeare are no longer to be studied. For what is literature but the accumulated storehouse of thoughts and feelings of the past generations?

The publications in which the experiments in vernacular were given to the reading public were numerous. *The New Youth*, in the first month of 1918, printed nothing but what was written in the vernacular, and the editorial board was composed of Dr. Hu and some other members of the faculty of Peking National University, which has become the intellectual center of China and is identified with Radical thought. They also introduced the contemporary literature of Europe: Ibsen, Strindberg and Anderson were translated into vernacular; Dostoievski and Tolstoi were rendered into the familiar *Pei Hua*; Sienkiewicz, the Polish writer, and Ephtaliotis, the Greek, were also dressed in the language of the denizen of Cathay. Some of these translations are literal, the original thought being rendered into Chinese without changing the word order of the original sentence. Some are very good, but some require a previous knowledge of the language of the author to get the general drift in the translation. This raises a very important point, namely, the Europeanization of Chinese grammar, taking the word in its broad sense. Many daring spirits do not hesitate to translate with the grammatical peculiarities belonging to French or German or English, with the result that the reader has first to equip himself with a working knowledge of the language used by the author translated, and has also to think back in the original language in order to follow intelligently what the translation is all about. Whether these experiments will succeed in changing the Chinese mental habits is highly doubtful. I am extremely skeptical as to the possibility of making the Chinese people change their ways of thinking and their mental habits, which have been deeply ingrained in the brains of the four hundred millions. Slight modification of certain ways of expression is of course desirable and possible, and such modifications have constantly occurred in the European languages. But every language has its genius, the mysterious

force of communal thinking, which often refuses to accept any radical change of its habits.

It has also become a general practice with the Chinese writers and journalists to make very generous use of the punctuation marks of the West. While full stop and comma have been constantly employed in Chinese writings before the introduction of Western learning, colon, semi-colon and exclamation marks are the recently adopted children of the vernacular leaders. Whether the excessive use of exclamation marks by the contemporary Chinese writers enhances the beauty of their style or increases the expressiveness of their meaning is highly dubious, but it is significant of the whole movement that the exclamation mark should become their darling child, petted and spoiled. Its loving parents, the emotional youths of China, seem to be unable to find words sufficiently strong to express the whole gamut of their deeply felt emotions, whereas the classical writers, with their self-mastery and sweet calm, would consider it a compromise of dignity to show their bleeding heart without a veil.

On that epoch-making day, May 4, 1919, the students in Peking University made a public demonstration against the decision of the Paris Conference in awarding Shantung to Japan, which resulted in their soundly thrashing one Minister and in compelling the Government to dismiss three Cabinet Ministers for their sympathy with the policy of Japan. This incident aroused the students of the whole country and marked the beginning of the Student Movement, which has struck terror into the heart of the Chinese Government and has lately assumed alarming proportions, to the great embarrassment and irritation of certain Powers interested in China. But what is germane to our present subject is that the Student Movement has given a great impetus to the spread of the Vernacular Movement and has made it a common medium of expression among the journalists and writers. Dr. Hu says: "The student movements have greatly facilitated the spread of the literary revolution in the same mysterious way as they have incidentally brought about the recognition of the Yuan Shih-kai dollar by foreign banks in China on the same footing with the Mexican dollar." But really there is nothing mysterious about the phenomenon, for the Stu-

dent Movement is essentially patriotic and is inspired with the most fervent wishes for the restoration of the sovereign rights of China which have been wrenched from her hands by the pugnacious Powers of the West. The students naturally used the vernacular as the most convenient medium through which to give vent to their feelings and emotions, for the vernacular, as I have pointed out, is far more effective for the expression of feelings than the classical. To be sure, the classical language is refined and polished and dignified, but it is rendered unfit by its very refinement, polish and dignity to suit the madding crowd. At any rate, the vernacular has come to stay and seems to fill a longfelt want. The political parties, always watching carefully in what direction the wind is blowing, lost no time in converting their party organs into propaganda for the use of the vernacular and the big publishing companies competed with each other in publication of books written in *Pei Hua*. There were also a great number of magazines and papers published in *Pei Hua*; it was estimated that in the year 1919 there were at least four or five hundred papers written in *Pei Hua*. There were also dailies written in the vernacular; *The Morning Post* of Peking and *The Shanghai Republican* have supplementary papers printed in *Pei Hua*, and such magazines as *The Eastern Miscellany* and *The Short Story Magazine* have followed the prevailing fashion without any further grumbling. At present *The Weekly Review*, published by the Peking National University, is entirely written in the vernacular. The subjects dealt with in these magazines range from researches in Chinese philology and Einstein's theory to Psychoanalysis and crossword puzzles.

The Vernacular Movement received an added impetus in 1920, when the Ministry of Education issued a proclamation to the effect that from the autumn of that year the text books used in the primary schools should be written in the vernacular. As a result the vernacular has replaced the literary language in the reading material of the primary schools, but many of the high schools have also voluntarily chosen or had text books written in the new medium, and in a great many cases the students in the middle schools are directed by the teachers to express themselves in the vernacular. The impression that I have of these juvenile

essays is that while they lose in dignity and polish, they gain in directness and freshness and expressiveness. And this is true of the products of the aspiring poets and authors. If there is no beauty in most of the literary hodgepodge, there is at least a good deal of strangeness, which is by no means a loss. For did not the same thing happen in the Elizabethan period? Do we not remember the inkhorn words, the Italianated phrases and other antics familiar to students of English literary history? It will take some time before the infant vernacular grows into a lusty youth, but I have faith in the essential sanity of the Chinese race and the immortality of the Chinese language.

Another thing which should also be mentioned in connection with this movement is the phonetic alphabet. In the first year of the Chinese Republic the Minister of Education appointed a committee for the standardization of the pronunciation of the Chinese language and the committee adopted thirty-nine symbols, some of them initial sounds and others finals, by which the phonetic value of any word or character can be expressed and be identical for every district. Long since, the Japanese in their two sets of Kana made use of such symbols, and the result was to make reading easy and widespread. There the proportion of characters to Kana was at first very great, but today newspapers and books are so printed as to bring relatively few characters into the line, and all of them with their phonetics at the side. In November, 1918, the Minister of Education promulgated this phonetic alphabet, and in September, 1919, the dictionary of pronunciation was published so that the alphabet became that of the national language.

As for the opposition that was encountered by this movement, a word need be said. It was opposed from the very beginning by Ku Hung-ming and Lin Shu, and also by Messrs K. T. Mei and M. Wu, both graduates of Harvard University, and Chinese scholars with splendid training in this country. They started a review called *The Critical Review*, which has as its aim the promotion of Chinese culture and the preservation of the great intellectual heritage of China, and is opposed to the new movement which I have described. It is an excellent magazine in its own way, but as it runs counter to the popular tendency and, besides,

as it has no catch word or battle cry to appeal to the popular imagination, the influence it is exercising over the generality of the students and the masses is naturally not very great. But still its criticisms of the excesses of the Vernacular Movement and the rampant vices and abuses of those who are fishing for fame supply a wholesome tonic and corrective. But "occupying," as it is doing, "all the spaces between," it is bound to miss popularity, for literary opinions are like political opinions; extreme views, whether ultra-conservative or ultra-radical, will attract attention, whereas moderate opinions and liberal views will never find enthusiastic support and following.

Another attempt was made last year by the late Minister of Education, Chang Shi-chao, to effect a revival of the Chinese classics. This movement found expression in the publication of a weekly of which Mr. Chang is the editor, and in the ready response in several provinces in the establishment of schools of college grade with the main purpose of emphasizing the ancient classical learning and the classical language. The Governor of Hunan Province has added the weight of his influence to the movement by holding a qualifying examination for the candidates for the civil offices in the Province, based on the old ideals, but including modern topics. This examination was placed under the supervision of some of these conservative leaders. Chinese classics received special attention by the invitation of one of the most distinguished classical scholars in China, Chang T'ai-yen of Hangchow.

It is as yet too early to pass a final judgment on the achievements of the writers in the vernacular, although nine years have elapsed since the movement was started. But it is possible to discern some of the general tendencies and the direction in which the Vernacular Movement is traveling. I think it likely that the *Pei Hua* with its informality and elasticity will be a fit medium for the development of a particular kind of literature which is known in English as the informal essay, and there are a few persons in China already exploring its possibilities with some degrees of success. I also think the great prestige *Pei Hua* is enjoying will tempt many of dramatic talents to try their hand in this important form of literature, but the present period is a period of

adaptation rather than creation. I think the growing nationalistic spirit and the fight for the recovery of China's birthrights will usher in a period like the age of Pericles and the Elizabethan age after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Great drama requires full national consciousness and awareness of its goal. But already something is accomplished in the field of poetry, especially lyric poetry, with a poignancy and freshness which can be easily elicited from the lyre that is the natural possession of the common people, although the imitation of free verse at the hands of certain versifiers has achieved results that prove the unwisdom of taking every freak and fancy as divine inspiration. As for expository and descriptive writing, the achievement is as yet not very great, because although one of the weaknesses of the classical language is its inability to express the new ideas to which modern science and philosophy give birth, the vernacular is confronted with the same difficulty, and it is only by a very slow and gradual process that the new ideas will be acclimated and find embodiment. The same thing happened in the Elizabethan period; it was not until the time of Dryden that the English language began to talk philosophically and scientifically, although the case of Chinese vernacular is not exactly the same inasmuch as Chinese writers can draw upon the rich storehouse of Chinese philosophy and literature.

This brief survey of the Vernacular Movement and nationalism goes to show that it is of the greatest importance for the better understanding and the establishment of better relations between the Western countries and China to realize what great and important changes have taken place in intellectual and spiritual life of the Chinese people, how relatively insignificant are the political changes on which the people in the West have concentrated all their attention, and that it is necessary for the West to take note that the neo-classical China with all its timidity and cautiousness, all its sweet reasonableness and calm, is being superseded by a romantic China with a boldness, a fierceness, an exuberance, that are characteristic of youth and growing strength.

LOW KWANG-LAI.

JOHN BUNYAN'S HYPOCRISY

BY HAROLD GOLDER

THE Puritan is not usually considered an entertaining person. We hear him frequently praised for his stalwart virtues and frequently condemned for his narrowness. But we find few qualities in the sincere, thorough-going Puritan that are engaging. It is only when he falls from grace, when he displays traits at variance with his ideals, that we find him a fit subject for comedy and adopt him into the society of interesting people. Sir Toby Belch derived little amusement from the contemplation of his niece's model steward, Malvolio, until that unrelenting censor of the household morals fell a victim to his own conceits and blossomed out resplendent in cross-garters and yellow stockings. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Tartuffe, Mr. Pecksniff, Milton, William Wordsworth, all were respectable but uninteresting until the world discovered the touch of nature that established their kinship with humanity.

For this reason, when we contract interesting friendships with men in the latter half of the seventeenth century, we choose Samuel Pepys but seldom John Bunyan. The immortal *Diary* has illuminated secret corners of Pepys's heart unsuspected by his contemporaries. We chuckle at Pepys and find him exceptionally good company, not because he was a high official in the Admiralty and President of the Royal Society, a respected citizen and a trusted servant of his king, but because we have inside knowledge of his foibles, his impulses, his humanity. The fact that Pepys attended divine services with some regularity and usually remembered the sermons captivates us less than the other fact that he was not at such times wholly unconscious of pretty girls that shared his pew and not wholly disdainful of a feminine hand that came within reach during the course of a prayer. In large measure such revelations of John Bunyan's private life and inner man are denied us. Consequently we see him as his flock of