Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages

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The vast majority of premodern Chinese literature, certainly all of the most famous works of the classical tradition, were composed in one form or another of Literary Sinitic (hereafter LS, wen-yen[-wen]), also often somewhat ambiguously called “Classical Chinese” or “Literary Chinese”). Beginning in the medieval period, however, an undercurrent of written Vernacular Sinitic (hereafter VS, pai-hua[-wen]) started to develop. The written vernacular came to full maturity in China only with the May Fourth Movement of 1919, after the final collapse during the 1911 revolution of the dynastic, bureaucratic institutions that had governed China for more than two millennia. It must be pointed out that the difference between wen-yen and pai-hua is at least as great as that between Latin and Italian or between Sanskrit and Hindi. In my estimation, a thorough linguistic analysis would show that unadulterated wen-yen and pure pai-hua are actually far more dissimilar than are Latin and Italian or Sanskrit and Hindi. In fact, I believe that wen-yen and pai-hua belong to wholly different categories of language, the former being a sort of

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demicryptography largely divorced from speech and the latter sharing a close correspondence with spoken forms of living Sinitic. This difference is reflected in the names for these two types of written Sinitic, wen-yen literally meaning “literary language” and pai-hua meaning “unadorned speech.” The problem is that stylistics in both the wen-yen and pai-hua traditions seldom, if ever, employed an unalloyed form of these two types of written Sinitic. Thus, there are varying degrees of mixtures that are loosely characterized as pan-wen-pan-pai (semiliterary-semivernacular).

Linguistic data indicate that LS and VS have been distinct systems as far back as they can be traced. This is certainly true from the Warring States period (475–249 B.C.E.) on, but I suspect that eventually we will be able to demonstrate conclusively that LS, starting with its earliest stage in the oracle shell and bone inscriptions (around 1200 B.C.E.), was always so drastically abbreviated and so replete with obligatory nonvernacular conventions used only in writing that it never came close to reflecting any contemporary living variety of Sinitic speech. Naturally, LS must have been founded upon and continuously infused by some variety or varieties of VS, just as written Sumerian (which was likewise “unsayable”) must have been based upon a form of the living language of the people of ancient Sumer (cf. DeFrancis 1989:78–79). Yet the disparity between LS and VS is of a wholly different order of magnitude than that between, say, written and spoken English or written and spoken Russian.

An analogy that may be used to illustrate the relationship between LS and VS is that of the relationship between a code or cipher and the natural language upon which it is based, although the difference is not so drastic as it normally is in the latter case where intentional (though strictly principled and hence reversible for a privileged receiver) scrambling may be involved. Or we may describe the radical reduction of VS to LS as being somewhat similar to the making of shopping or chore lists and the jotting down of lecture notes that include all sorts of abbreviations and omit auxiliaries, prepositions, endings, and other morphemes that are not absolutely essential. Apart from its being unnecessary for the writer to spell out everything explicitly in detail, early scribes doubtless had added incentives to economize on the time-consuming task of preparing the awkward materials they worked with—clay on the one hand and bones and shells on the other—and to be as terse as possible with the complicated, inefficient morphosyllabic symbols of their scripts. After this sort of shorthand got started, it may have seemed the norm for writing. Such drastically pared-down, unnatural (in terms of real [spoken] language) styles would have been fostered and perpetuated by those elite ritual specialists who wished to monopolize their exotic skill. In the case of Sinitic, once such an elliptical system was established, it diverged more and more from the spoken language as the writing remained largely fixed while speech changed over time (DeFrancis 1991). The difference between LS and VS is thus not just a matter of diachronic change, as between Old English and Modern English or between Old Russian and Modern Russian. It is, rather, a distinction between two separately structured linguistic media. As we shall see below, LS and VS coexisted in China for thousands of years. Their maintenance as competing systems was due to support from different social and political constituencies.

Going from LS to VS or in the other direction definitely requires a process of decoding/encoding or translation; witness the burgeoning number of VS translations of LS texts from all ages that are being produced in Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China. If LS and VS were merely two variants of the same language, there would be no compelling need to translate the one into the other. The confused notion that
LS and VS are simply constituents of a single language is due to their frequent borrowing from and mixing with each other. More of this is done by VS from LS (e.g., ch'eng-yüi ["set phrases," commonly referred to loosely as "idioms"] whose LS grammar, syntax, and lexicon are noticeably distinct from the VS matrix in which they are implanted) than by LS from VS, since writers of LS tend to be more conscious of maintaining the integrity and purity of their highly mannered style, while writers of VS often aspire to affect an LS aura without really mastering the entire artificial language.

In a stimulating article, "On Representing Abstractions in Archaic Chinese," Henry Rosemont, Jr. (1974) basically concurs with these views on LS when he states that it was not a spoken language but an exclusively written language and hence that it cannot be classified as a natural language. Tsu-Lin Mei (1992a) takes the contrary position that the Analects, to a certain extent, reflects spoken language. He sees the best evidence for this in fusion words (or what W.A.C.H. Dobson [1974:101–2] has called "allegro forms"). Since they can occur only in rapid speech, he regards them as "prima facie evidence that the Master did speak in a form pretty close to what was recorded." Indeed, the Analects is more vernacular than the Tso chuan [Tso's Chronicle] in the sense that it uses more grammatical particles, requires more words to say the same thing, etc., and that both are more vernacular than contemporary bronze inscriptions. Nonetheless, I still maintain that all LS texts (including the Analects and Tso's Chronicle) are dramatically divorced from vernacular speech and represent a separate system of linguistic and orthographic conventions employed solely in writing. The clearest evidence for the separateness of the two systems can be seen in the much higher degree of polysyllabic of the vernacular, starkly different grammatical structures and usages (see the discussion of shih below for one telling example; many others, such as distinctive demonstrative words, the method for handling possessives and relative clauses, different approaches to measure words [also called counters and classifiers], and verbal complements, might be adduced), and the fact that the borrowing back and forth between the two systems is so conspicuous. We shall return to the alleged vernacularity of the Analects again under the rubric of kuan-hua.

Early Written Vernacular in China

A curious phenomenon about the way the vernacular first comes to be written down in China is that the earliest instances of written VS occur almost exclusively, certainly with absolute and unmistakable predominance, in Buddhist contexts. The most conspicuous examples of this phenomenon are the Tun-huang pien-wen (transformation texts: eighth to tenth centuries) that I have worked on for the past two decades (Mair 1983, 1988, 1989; Iriya 1961, 1985) and the recorded sayings of Zen masters referred to as yü-lu that date from the period immediately following (Maspero 1914; Kao 1948; Berling 1987). Equally striking is the high proportion of vernacular elements that are present in the earliest translations of Buddhist texts into Sinitic, starting from the second century of the Common Era (C.E.). This has been demonstrated conclusively through the careful research of the eminent Dutch Buddhologist, Erik Zürcher (1977; 1980; 1991), and, following in his footsteps, the young Chinese linguist, Chu Ch'ing-chih (1990).

Chu's study is based on a close reading of all the Chinese Buddhist texts of the early medieval period, by which he intends the Eastern Han, Wei, Chin, and Northern
and Southern Dynasties, from about 25–589 C.E. There is an enormous amount of material to be covered—Buddhist scriptures of the early medieval period alone amount to 960 titles in 2,990 scrolls or fascicles composed of roughly 25,000,000 graphs, surprisingly more than the secular native literature from the same period.

Chu richly and conclusively documents a highly significant phenomenon, that medieval Buddhist texts are decidedly more vernacular and colloquial than their non-Buddhist counterparts from the same period. One of the most obvious aspects of Chinese Buddhist texts in comparison with native works is that they contain far more polysyllabic words (particularly disyllabic words), but there are also noticeable syntactic and grammatical differences (cf. Watters's excellent but little known work of 1889, esp. chapters 8 and 9 ["The Influence of Buddhism on the Chinese Language"]). Some of this influence was in direct response to the linguistic features of the Indic (and perhaps Iranian and Tocharian) prototypes for the Chinese translations of Buddhist texts. It is clear, however, that the implantation of Buddhism into the Chinese sociolinguistic body also served to elicit in an active way vernacular, colloquial, and dialectical elements that belonged properly to spoken Sinitic languages but that had been rejected by the indigenous textual tradition as vulgarisms.

I shall give here only two examples in support of Chu's thesis, the first grammatical and the second lexical. Sbih as the copulative verb shows up in the earliest Buddhist translations (i.e., starting from the second century C.E.) and is quite common in medieval popular Buddhist literature. This is in complete contrast to its use as a demonstrative in LS. Very early use of sbih as the vernacular copulative has recently been archaeologically confirmed by the discovery of an astronomical text in which it repeatedly and unmistakably occurs in that capacity (cf. Tuan Li-fen 1989). Since this newly found text dates to well before the beginning of the Common Era (from near the beginning of the Western Han [i.e., the early part of the second century B.C.E.]), copulative sbih can hardly be attributed to the coming of Buddhism. It must, rather, be a feature of the vernacular language that was present very early, perhaps from the start, but that was ignored by LS writers (cf. Cantonese bai, which seems to represent another modern survival of the same vernacular element). This distinctive characteristic of VS (A sbih B ["A is B"] which is so apparent even up to the present day, is utterly different from LS, which lacks a copulative verb altogether. Instead, LS employs the nominative sentence structure A B yeb ["A [is] B"). It is noteworthy that Ssu-ma Ch'ien's Records of the Grand Historian (Shih-chi) (c. 90 B.C.E.), which of all LS texts dating to the period before the Common Era has a tendency to admit a few discernable elements from VS, includes a number of instances in which A sbih B and A B yeb are combined, hence A sbih B yeb. Ohta (1958:189) offers an astute analysis of this phenomenon.

The emergence of the largely polysyllabic VS lexicon is often erroneously explained as the result of the combination of monosyllabic words from LS, as though VS were somehow derived from LS or an attempt to make LS more explicit and understandable when spoken. Conceptually this makes no sense whatsoever, since spoken languages always precede the invention of their written forms. Historically, the alleged derivation of VS from LS is also demonstrably false. In a fuller treatment, I could cite hundreds of instances that show that polysyllabic vocabulary has been a feature of VS from the earliest times that can be attested, but here I shall refer only to one, namely tao-lu ("way, road"). Tao-lu is a venerable VS word still in use today that is found in a wide variety of pre-Ch'ın texts, including the Tso chuan (Tso's Chronicle) (463 B.C.E.) by Tso Ch'iu-ming (cf. Mair 1990:22–23 for the phonology and philology of this word). The fact that the word tao-lu is usually reduced to just tao in LS texts.
shows that the relationship between LS and VS is exactly the opposite of that which is commonly assumed. To wit, where we can test specific instances in the early stages of the formation of LS, it seems to be the result of drastic truncation of VS, including anaphora so extreme that it could not possibly be tolerated in intelligible
speech. Of course, once LS was securely established, it became possible to create new polysyllabic (chiefly bisyllabic) words in VS by joining together monosyllabic LS words. But this was a relatively late phenomenon and would have been possible only for those few who were literate in LS. The mass of the population would have continued to use and create polysyllabic words as they always had from the beginnings of the Sinitic language group, i.e., irrespective of the tetragraphic script.

What Zürcher and Chu have both shown clearly is that, from the very beginnings of Buddhism in China, the translated texts of this new religion display a higher degree of vernacular content than do non-Buddhist texts. No other texts from the same period can begin to compare with the early Buddhist translations for the large amount of vernacularisms they contain. Indeed, it is extremely rare in non-Buddhist texts of the same age ever to find even a single unambiguously vernacular usage. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that, as the eminent Russian specialist on Medieval Vernacular Sinitic, I. S. Gurevich (1985) has shown, even the Tun-huang pien-wen can by no means be said to represent a pure form of VS, inasmuch as they still contain a significant proportion of LS elements. This is probably due to the nature of the sinographic script which is so perfectly well suited to LS but rather inimical to a full representation of any VS language. It should also be mentioned that, once Buddhists had paved the way for the use of a vernacularized written medium, it was tentatively adopted—through emulation—for secular purposes by others who were living in close association with them. Witness the occasional transformation texts, stories, rhapsodies, cantos, and other genres on non-Buddhist subjects that came to be written down at Tun-huang. By the Sung period, it had become acceptable—among certain still mostly nonelite social classes—to employ the written vernacular for historical medleys, love stories, and lyrics.

The evidence for the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the written vernacular in China is so irrefutable, yet so unexpected, that it demands an explanation. Given that the connection is both obvious and uncontested, one might imagine that there would be an easily identifiable set of reasons for this phenomenon. Such, unfortunately, is not the case. The situation is actually quite complex and it is difficult to declare with assurance precisely what it was about Buddhism that proved to be conducive to the adoption of the vernacular as an acceptable written medium. This is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that Chinese literati had always looked down upon any trace of the vernacular in writing as crude and vulgar (su). Naturally, like all other vocal human beings, Chinese scholars themselves were forced to use the vernacular in daily conversation, but committing it to writing was an entirely separate matter. On the face of it, the adoption by Chinese Buddhists of written vernacular and Buddhist Hybrid Sinitic (hereafter BHSi) as vehicles for the expression of their faith seems improbable. One would have thought that they would have chosen, instead, LS, since it was uniformly considered by the Chinese elite to be more elegant. Surely straight wen-yen would have been more appropriate if one were deliberately searching for a suitable sacred language in which to couch one’s scriptures in a new arena of evangelism. Hence, the blatant Buddhist preference for pai-hua or wen-yen mixed with large chunks of pai-hua vocabulary and syntax is puzzling from a conventional point of view.

With time, styles of Buddhist writing in China more nearly approximating LS did develop, especially for those texts that were composed by native authors and were not translated from non-Sinitic languages. To one degree or another, most Buddhist texts that were translated from non-Sinitic languages, particularly those done by non-Chinese individuals, display various types of grammatical and syntactical
discrepancies with LS. This is not, of course, to mention the large amounts of translated and transcribed terminology that also stamp BHSi as different from LS.

In the next section, I would like to identify a number of factors peculiar to Buddhism that possibly might have contributed to the acceptance of the vernacular as a workable tool for written expression. Because of the tremendous complexity of this issue, I will refrain from any simple, unidimensional explanation. Starting from the most abstract and general aspects, I shall move to more concrete and specific features that may have fostered the growth of the written vernacular in China.

Buddhism and Language

Buddhism, above all, is a sophisticated religion with an extensive body of doctrine. Perhaps Buddhist teaching contains a core precept that is conducive to the vernacular, a teaching for which there was no parallel in native Chinese traditions, such as Confucianism and Taoism. One that leaps to mind is the notion of upāya (fang-pien, skillful means). According to this doctrine, believers should use whatever means are appropriate to ensure the salvation of all sorts of living creatures. Upāya was not just a rarefied theory, but was actively applied in Buddhist preaching and teaching. In China, for example, lectures for laymen (su-chiang) were delivered by eminent monks (kao-seng) and, upon occasion, by a few who were not so eminent. The notes for some of their lectures have been preserved among the Tun-huang manuscripts as sūtra-lecture texts (chiang-ching-wen) and they are quite vernacular in their orientation (Mair 1986). Other literary ramifications of the doctrine of upāya are Buddhist parables, apologues, and birth-tales known as avadāna, nidāna, and jātaka. These, too, were much-favored in China and popular with the masses. Vivid descriptions of Buddhist storytelling and lecturing may be found in the Biographies of Eminent Monks (Kao-seng chuan), travel records of foreigners in China (e.g., Emnin’s Diary), classical fiction (ch’uan-ch’i), Tun-huang texts (e.g., the tale of Hui-yüan [S2144 in the British Library]), anecdotal literature, and other sources.

Buddhism is not only a religion, however, for it also functions as an elaborate philosophical system. Is there anything inherent in Buddhist thought that might sanction the use of the vernacular? Here I am rather skeptical that we can find much that will help us elucidate the mystery of the Chinese Buddhist predilection for the vernacular. My suspicion about the applicability of philosophical premises to our present quandary is based on the fundamental ineffability of Buddhahood and other associated concepts, such as nirvāṇa. Already in the Nikāyas (the early Pāli texts) and the Āgamas (a group of texts in the Sanskrit canon that correspond to the Pāli Nikāyas), it is clear that ultimate religious goals are held to lie outside the realm of discourse and, hence, discursive thought. The Suttanīpāta informs us that the Buddha is beyond the “paths of speech” and in the Teraṅgāthā he is described as being inconceivable in visual or auditory images (Gomez 1987:446a). It is a commonplace in Mahāyāna texts that enlightenment is incompatible with words and intellection. The usual formulation is “the way of language is cut off, the workings of the mind are obliterated” (yuen-yü tao t’uan, hsin-hsing ch’u miĕh). See, for example, Mahāprajñāpāramitopadesa/Ta chih-tu lún (T25[1509].71c), Avatamsakaśītra/Hua-yen ching (T9[278].424c), and *Mahāsāmatihavipaśyanā [?]/Mo-be chih-kuan (T46[1911].59b). Even the Zen masters, whose words are ironically preserved in written vernacular (perhaps one should say, especially the Zen masters),
insist on such notions as “transmission from mind to mind” (i hsìn ch’uàn hsìn) and “nonestablishment of written words” (pu li wen-tzu), which disparage the efficacy of language, especially in its written form, to convey essential truths.

Despite Buddhism’s presumed philosophical derogation of language, no religion can survive without sacred texts, and Buddhism definitely produced an abundance of scripture (three huge baskets full!). What is unusual about the Buddhist canon, however, is the pervasive pretense that it has an immediate oral basis. It is remarkable how many works in the Buddhist Tripitaka begin with the formula evaṃ mayā śrutam, Pāli evaṃ me sutam (“Thus have I heard,” in Sinitic jū shib wo wen), or words to that effect. The simulacrum is that of the eminent disciple Ānanda reciting the Buddha’s words to the assembled faithful at Rājagṛha after his death. This formula not only stresses the presumed reliability of direct transmission, but also reveals that the Buddhist sūtras were orally conveyed to Ānanda, and thence to the rest of the community. This self-evident mark of oral transmission is like a stamp that authenticates the text that follows. It distinguishes the doctrines of the Buddha from those of teachers who were presumably heretical. Ultimately, then, the entire Buddhist canon—while it clearly represents a large and long scriptural tradition with rules, commentaries, discourses, and exegeses added later—is ostensibly (one might almost say “aggressively”) founded upon the spoken word (v. Hinüber 1990:ch. 5). This is also reflected in the large number of East Asian sūtras whose full titles start with the expression Fo shuo (“spoken by the Buddha,” from Sanskrit buddhavacana or buddhabhāṣita), even though it would have been impossible for the Buddha to utter all of the words in them, especially those that were originally composed in China, Japan, and Korea! There is even an entire sūtra (Pāli sutta) entitled the Itivuttaka, which means roughly “the speeches beginning with the words ‘This was spoken (by the Lord).’” The equivalent Sinitic title is Jū shib yū ching [Sūtra Spoken Thus]. This is the fourth scripture in the Khuddaka-nikāya of the Pāli canon. Each section of the sūtra begins Vuttaṃ hetam bhagavatā vuttaṃ arahatā ti me sutam (Wo wen shib-tsün ying-kung ts’eng ju shib shuo (“Thus did I hear the worshipful World-Honored speak’)). Interspersed in the text we find such expressions as iti vuccati (jū shib yen (“said thus”)). At the end of each section occurs the following formula: Ayam pi attho vutto bhagavatā iti me sutam ti (Wo wen shib-tsün shuo ts’u i (“I heard the World-Honored explain this meaning”), translating the Sinitic text; the Sanskrit has “I also heard . . .”). The oral affinities of early Buddhist religious texts are underscored by the profession of bhāṇaka or dharma-bhāṇaka, whose duty it was to declaim them aloud, apparently in a rather entertaining fashion (Hoffman 1990).

With such tremendous emphasis on the presumed orality of the canon, there might have been resistance to rendering it in stilted, “unsayable” LS. I am somewhat dubious, however, that this is a sufficient explanation for the decision to employ large amounts of vernacular in Chinese Buddhist texts. After all, the Analects [Lun-yü] are famous for the ts’u yüeh (“the Master said”), which prefaces Confucius’s every utterance, but that did not deter their compilers from utilizing LS as the vehicle for conveying his sagely wisdom.

Translation, Linguistics, and Psalmody

It would seem, instead, that the actual process of translation itself had a greater impact on the quality of Chinese Buddhist written language than any ideas about
the nature of the canon. The entire enterprise of rendering the Buddhist scriptures and literary texts into Sinitic was begun by foreigners, about a dozen of whom are known for the period from the middle of the second century to the collapse of the Eastern Han dynasty in 220 C.E. Among these individuals were the Parthian prince An (for Arsacid) Shih-kao, who arrived in the capital at Loyang in 148 and was active until around 170; another Parthian, An Hsüan, who was active in Loyang c. 180; the Yüeh-chih (also transcribed as Ju-chih), presumably Kushân, Lokakṣema who worked in Loyang from c. 170–90; another Kushân, Chih Yao, who was active late in the second century; and the Sogdian, K'ang Meng-hsiang,
who collaborated with the Indians Chu Ta-li (Mahābala ?) and Chu T'an-kuo (Dharmaphala ?) around the turn of the century. These men produced a large amount of material in Sinitic. Applying the most stringent criteria, there are 29 different works in 70 fascicles that still survive, and hundreds of additional titles are attributed to them.

LS is an extremely difficult language to master, not just because of the sinographs but also because it is so terribly allusive, requiring at least ten to fifteen years to gain a modicum of proficiency. In contrast, the spoken Sinitic languages, in part due to their lack of inflection, are relatively easy to acquire through immersion in a Chinese environment, especially if one does not have any severe hangups about the tones. Since these foreign translators usually came to China as adults and often, according to their biographies, quickly plunged into the business of translation, it would have been well-nigh impossible for them to command LS sufficiently well to create passable translations in it. Therefore, it was inevitable that whatever proficiency they acquired in writing Sinitic was bound to be highly contaminated by vernacular elements. Even when the foreign translators relied on Chinese assistants or collaborators to write out their drafts in sinographs, the necessary oral metaphrases that they provided would have had a pronounced tendency to infiltrate the intended LS product. The result, then, was the peculiar type of BHSi that is so conspicuous in the earliest translations and, indeed, which exists to one degree or another as an acceptable subcategory of LS throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism. This would also have been the case with the presumably better acculturated translators such as the Tocharian Dharmarakṣa (active c. 265–313), the so-called Bodhisattva of Tun-huang, and Kumārajīva (b. 344 or 350, d. 409 or 413), who was of Indian (Kashmiri) and Tocharian (Kuchan) parentage. These famous pillars of Chinese Buddhism produced an enormous number of Sinitic texts but, whenever precise information concerning their modus operandi is available, we find that—more often than not—they worked in teams with Chinese collaborators, sometimes as many as ten people for a single text, or that they simply dictated their translations to Chinese scribes (Fuchs 1930).

The famous late Ch'ing-early Republican “translator” of European and American novels into Sinitic, Lin Shu (1852–1924), was also dependent on oral VS interpretation by others because he knew no Western languages. However, where he was content to paraphrase loosely the secular novels that he rendered into LS, the early Buddhist translators strove to make accurate renditions of the sacred texts with which they were dealing, in spite of the vast dissimilarities between the Sinitic and Sanskrit languages in which they were written.

The special quality of BHSi persists even when learned native Chinese such as Hsüan-tsang (596–664) and I-ching (635–713) later become proficient in Sanskrit by traveling to India and studying there for an extended period of time. The translations they produced upon their return to China were still so heavily influenced by Sanskrit grammar, syntax, and lexicon that they are noticeably distinct from typical LS. I should note, furthermore, that individuals such as Hsüan-tsang and I-ching who acquired the ability to read Sanskrit were extremely rare in China. The majority of Chinese who claimed a knowledge of sacred Buddhist language(s) usually were familiar only with the Siddham script at best (van Gulik 1956). Often their acquaintance with Indic languages was limited to syllabic transcriptions of very

1Siddham was derived from the Gupta form of the Sanskrit alphabet and was used in East Asian countries for the writing of dhāraṇī, mantras, and other (usually very brief) Buddhist texts.
short texts in sinographs. Systematic expositions of grammar do not seem to have become available before about the eighteenth century, and even these were disappointingly obscure.

Regardless of how we classify BHSi, however, one thing is clear: the early impetus for the translation of Buddhist texts into Sinitic came primarily from foreign monks resident in China. Indeed, the church at Loyang initially seems to have consisted solely of foreigners and it only gradually came to include a few Chinese (Zürcher 1990; Maspero 1934). Another complicated facet of the early translations is the fact that most of them were done not by Indians, but by Iranian- and Tocharian-speaking individuals. This must have had a great impact on the development of the Chinese Buddhist canon, yet, aside from a few articles by the distinguished Sanskritist and Tocharian specialist Chi Hsien-lin (1947; 1956; 1959; 1990) on very specific terms, this vital issue has scarcely been touched.

John Brough (1961) has highlighted the importance of the northwestern Prākritis (vernaculars) for the early Chinese Buddhist translations. In particular, he makes the case that many of the early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts were done from Prākritis such as Gandhārī rather than from Sanskrit. There is also good evidence from Chinese sources that the Sinitic translation of the Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish (HSien-yü ching) was taken down orally in Khotan by eight monks from western China and compiled by them after they had returned to Qočo (Turfan) (Takakusu 1901; Pelliot 1929).

There must have been a flourishing vernacular Buddhist “literature” (if that is what we may call it; I prefer to refer to nonwritten narrative and dramatic traditions as “dichte”) in the oral realm in Central Asia before Buddhism was transmitted to China. The paucity of written Buddhist texts in the indigenous languages of Central Asia before the seventh century may be due to the perception of adherents of the religion there that scripture should be reserved for the sacred language of Sanskrit. Some evidence for the existence of Buddhist texts in the local languages of Central Asia may be found in the rich tradition of Buddhist narrative art at sites such as Kucha and Bezeklik, several examples of which have extensive narrative inscriptions in Tocharian or other non-Sinitic, non-Indic Central Asian languages, e.g., the exquisite Mahāprabhāsa avadāna from the Knights’ Cave at Kirish (Along the Ancient Silk Routes: 105–6).

We must also remember that, under Indian tutelage, the Tibetans started translating Buddhist texts into their own language by the seventh century. Buddhist Tibetan, while sticking closely to the Sanskrit, is as much Tibetan as the usually quite loose BHSi translations are Sinitic. Furthermore, the Tibetans played a truly major political role in Central Asia just at the time translations of Buddhist texts into Khotanese, Sogdian, and other languages were becoming popular (cf. Beckwith 1987). I suspect that the second vernacular revolution (from around the seventh century), when Buddhist texts were appearing in the indigenous languages of Central Asia, may be related to the wide-ranging activities of the Tibetans there beginning about that time, just as the first “vernacular” revolution (from the second half of the second century), when texts began to appear in BHSi, was most likely due to the sponsorship of Kushan, Parthian, and other Central Asian peoples. The large interval between the two revolutions (nearly half a millennium) would seem to indicate that, while the idea of the translation of Indian Buddhist texts had already been floated by the second half of the second century, sociopolitical circumstances apparently did not permit its realization outside of China until the seventh or eighth century. Hence, in striving to understand the timing of the first and second vernacular
revolutions, perhaps we should focus more on geopolitical conditions and less on religious and linguistic criteria.

As a matter of fact, the first “vernacular” revolution was not really vernacular in nature because BHSi is basically LS with some admixtures from VS. This may explain why it was possible for Central Asian monks and missionaries to translate Indian Buddhist texts into BHSi but not into their own vernaculars. In essence, by rendering Sanskrit and Pali texts into BHSi, they were simply transferring scriptures from one sacred language into another. Like LS, BHSi was not sayable (i.e., it was nonvernacular) and hence had presented little danger of truly secularizing the sacred Indian texts. The first vernacular Buddhist texts in Sinitic did not appear until the middle of the eighth century (the pien-wen [transformation texts]), after the vernacular revolution had already taken place in Central Asian Buddhism. As we have seen above, the pien-wen themselves were far from being fully vernacular, though they were decidedly more vernacular than the typical BHSi text, and incomparably more so than all writing in LS.

Above all, it cannot be stressed often enough or strongly enough that our biggest problem in reconstructing the history of Central Asian Buddhism (and virtually everything else about Central Asia) is due to the lack of systematic, scientific archaeological excavation in Sinkiang. Until the Chinese government authorizes and supports more thorough investigations in this region, all that we say about its history must be considered extremely tentative. The notion that Central Asian Buddhists did not create texts in their own languages before the sixth or seventh century, whereas they did so for the Chinese from the second century, may be simply an artifact of preservation or lack thereof (cf. Nattier 1990).

While the repercussions of the Buddhist translation enterprise for language usage in China were undoubtedly enormous, more specific kinds of linguistic expertise were also being transferred. It would not be an exaggeration to state that every major advance in linguistics from the Han period until the advent of Jesuit-inspired evidential learning (k’ao-ch'eng-hsiêh) in the Ch’ing period over 1,500 years later, particularly in phonology, was dependent upon or conditioned by Buddhist in one way or another. Here we need mention only such momentous developments as the creation of counterronomy or cut-and-splice pseudospelling (fan-ch‘ieh), generally attributed for the last thousand and more years to the Buddhists, which for the first time enabled Chinese to indicate the pronunciation of unknown graphs fairly unambiguously and analytically (Mair 1992a); the whole system of rhyme classification (teng-yîn) which laid the foundations of linguistic science in China that are still operative today; and the thirty-six quasiletters (san-shib-liu tzü-mu) of the late T’ang monk Shou-wen, inspired by Sanskrit nyajnam ("consonants"), which constituted a sort of abortive alphabet (more accurately termed a "consonantary") for Sinitic (Ni 1948:17). All of this unaccustomed attention to the sounds of spoken language, in contrast to the traditional emphasis of Chinese scholars on the shapes of the written graphs, must have contributed to the legitimation of the vernacular vis-à-vis LS. While the nonphonological aspects of Indian linguistics were not so readily transferable to China, Buddhists were vaguely aware of their importance as subsumed under the general category of labda-vidyā, accurately rendered in Sinitic as "voice-insight" (sheng-ming), although the Sanskrit expression refers to grammar and philology as well as phonology. The significance of labda-vidyā for the Indian tradition can be seen by its inclusion among the pānca vidyā-sthānāni (five types of knowledge, Sinitic wu-ming), the other four being betu-vidyā (logic, yin-ming), adhyatma-vidyā (psychology, nei-ming), vyādhi-cikitsā-vidyā (medicine, i-fang-ming), and śilpa-karmasthāna-vidyā (arts...
and crafts, *kung-ch’iao-ming*). Yet we should remember that this kind of linguistic knowledge was restricted to a relatively small group of specialists, so I suspect that it was not the chief reason for the establishment of the written vernacular.

Probably more important in raising the consciousness of some Chinese that the simple sounds of language were just as essential as their elaborate and exalted script, if not more so, was the Buddhist penchant for psalmody. There was no precedent in the indigenous literary and religious traditions for the flood of sacred singing and chanting that engulfed China with Buddhism. The Chinese were completely unprepared for and utterly bedazzled by the meticulousness and seriousness with which their Indo-Iranian teachers delivered their *brahma-pātha* (hymns, *fan-pai*), *gāthā* (verses, *chi*), *śloka* (stanzas, *shou-lu*), songs of praise (*sung*), *stotra* (eulogies, *tsan*), *dhāraṇī* (mystical charms and prayers, *t’o-lo-ni*), *mantra* (magical formulas and incantations, *man-t’e-lo*), and so forth. *Dhāraṇī*, for example, were thought to be potent only if properly pronounced, hence they were transcribed in their entirety, not translated. Even the mantic recitation of the Buddha’s name (*nien Fo*) must have impressed upon the masses the power of the spoken word, although most of the other types of religious utterances listed above were principally the preserve of religious experts. The very real consequences of Indian prosody, as introduced through Buddhism, for even the most celebrated secular verse in China have now been demonstrated by Mair and Mei (1991).

Social Values, Intellectual History, and Religious Mission

So far we have been examining doctrinal, philosophical, intellectual, and technical aspects of Buddhism that may have played a role in the growth of the written vernacular. Perhaps we have overlooked certain social values of Buddhism that might have had an equal or even greater bearing on this question. We must remember that traditional Chinese society, according to Confucian orthodoxy and to a great extent in actuality, was rigidly hierarchical from the family right up to the emperor. The same, of course, was largely true of Hindu society. It is noteworthy that, both in India and in China, at least in the early phases, Buddhism functioned (and perhaps originated) as a means for the individual to escape from the normal societal bonds. Leaving the home (Sanskrit *pravrāja*yā; Sinitic *ch’u-chia*) and becoming a monk represented a profound break with the ordinary rules governing social and political intercourse. Even the elder (*śreṣṭha; chang-che*), the householder (*ṛg Hastha; su-jen*), the layman (*upāsaka; chi’-shib*), and the lay woman (*upāsikā; chin-shib-ni’i*), who never really quit the family, was enjoined to subscribe in his/her daily life to an entirely different set of precepts from those who were completely outside of the Buddhist community. This constituted a dangerously subversive challenge to existing structures and institutions, one that is measurable in economic (Gernet 1956) and demographic (Hartwell and Hartwell 1991a; 1991b) terms, not to mention other indicators.2

Certainly the Chinese authorities were threatened by encroachments of Buddhist

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2According to the Hartwells, the Buddhist *samgha* was perhaps the most egalitarian institution in Sung society. See especially their interesting note and comments on the monk Tsung-ku (database #16348) who was the illeterate son of a Shao-wu (in northwest Fukien) farmer and became the founder of an important Zen temple. Among his friends and disciples were members of some of the most distinguished families of the Sung period.
ideology, organizations, and wealth, so much so that they periodically launched massive persecutions against the alien faith—even after it had, as it were, been domesticated. For their part, the more narrowly doctrinaire Confucian literati kept up a vigorous polemical attack almost from the moment Buddhism set foot on Chinese soil, so that there was frequent tension between church and court even when the latter was not burning the temples, melting the statues, confiscating the lands, and defrocking the monks and nuns of the former.

We are slowly gaining a better picture of the true composition of the Buddhist community in China and are finding that it included a high proportion of widows, orphans, and other types of individuals who did not fit within the usual pattern of societal relationships. The composition of the Chinese sangha may be interpreted as having a bearing on language usage. LS was clearly identified with the literati establishment. The vernacular, on the other hand, served as a more easily acquired tool for written expression of the dispossessed and those who lacked the opportunity or means for the long and tedious education necessary to master the literary language. With these qualities of socially embedded Buddhism in mind, I view the written vernacular as a kind of demotic empowerment. Living in an age of massive manipulation of language for sociopolitical ends, which I have often referred to as "linguistic engineering," I think we can readily appreciate the dramatic consequences of an assertive written vernacular opposing itself to a privileged, hieratic, classical script.3

Daniel Gardner (1991) has recently called attention to the importance of the written vernacular in Neo-Confucianism, both for the freer, more inquisitive approach it permitted toward the classics and for allowing the extension of philosophical discourse to a broader segment of the population. Considering the powerful influence of Buddhism on the formation of Neo-Confucian thought and practice, the adoption of the written vernacular as a legitimate form of serious intellectual discussion would seem to be one more example of the radical restructuring of Confucianism brought about by this foreign religion (Angurahohita 1989).

Tsu-Lin Mei has written a lengthy response (1992b) to Gardner that he does not plan to publish. Some of the major points he raises, and which he has authorized me to present here, are:

1. Whereas Gardner stresses the epistemological assumptions of Neo-Confucians concerning the power of mind in every man to comprehend the truth expressed in plain colloquial style, Mei emphasizes the sociolinguistic and historical linguistic background of the development of the written vernacular.

2. In spite of its technical sounding name, yü-lu is simply the "transcript" of conversations involving two or more persons in colloquial Sinitic. Its use during

3Although those who wrote down early vernacular texts in China were necessarily dependent upon the very script which limited their freedom of expression, they treated it rather casually by using the graphs more for phonetic purposes and less for logographic purposes than was customary in LS. This is evident, for example, in T'ang period transformation texts where homophonic borrowings and "mistakes" routinely occur.

The fundamental nature of the sinographs is still very much in dispute. A few philosophically/theoretically minded scholars continue to insist that the Chinese writing system is pictographic and ideographic, whereas most historically/empirically oriented linguists consider it to function fundamentally as a huge and phonetically imprecise morphosyllabary with conspicuous logographic features (Hansen 1993a, 1993b; Unger 1993). One thing is sure, however, and that is the fact that Chinese characters—unlike the elements of a true syllabary, consonantary, or alphabet which convey only phonetic information—carry both semantic and phonetic weight (albeit limited in both cases).
the Sung was not just limited to Zen (Ch’an) Buddhists and Neo-Confucians; emissaries on foreign missions also used this form to transcribe what was said during their diplomatic negotiations (e.g., Shih pei yü-lu [Transcripts from a Northern Mission]), particularly with the Khitans and Jurchens. The rationale for using the vernacular rather than the literary language was that the former medium was capable of recording more accurately what was actually said during the negotiations which, after all, touched upon sensitive matters of national security (Mei 1980).

3. Vernacular short stories and southern dramas (hsi-ven) containing colloquial dialogue also make their appearance around the same time (twelfth-thirteenth centuries).

4. The question of timing cannot be limited to the yü-lu, but must also be asked about the colloquial diplomatic transcripts and the vernacular literary texts.

5. The most natural context for understanding the origin of Sung colloquial and its use among different social classes is the rise and development of the written vernacular during the late T’ang period. During the T’ang, the ability to compose in the written vernacular was limited to persons (especially individuals with a Buddhist disposition) not belonging to, or marginally belonging to, the elite. The turning point seems to have come in the second half of the eleventh century, and especially during the twelfth, when a substantial number of the bureaucratic elite acquired the ability to write colloquial Chinese. The reason why Confucians did not turn to the colloquial yü-lu form prior to the second half of the eleventh century may merely be that they and other members of the elite had not yet mastered the written vernacular, which theretofore had developed in an essentially Buddhist environment.

6. Another factor that has to be taken into account is the spread of literacy. Obviously, the Neo-Confucians’ efforts to disseminate their doctrines via the colloquial yü-lu would have been in vain if a readership with an adequate degree of literacy had not existed at that time. Victor Mair (1989:135–39) has shown that low-level literacy was already widespread in the late T’ang period. From previous studies, we know that the invention of printing, the establishment of government schools and private academies (attached to monasteries), and the civil service examination system (particularly at its lowest levels) all promoted literacy. By the Sung, the spread of literacy had become an East Asian phenomenon; the Tangut script and the chü’ nòn script were both invented during this period in order to write the vernacular languages of the Tanguts and the Vietnamese.

Combining the findings of Gardner and Mei with the comprehensive intellectual history of the period, we may deduce that the gradual adoption of the vernacular for limited purposes during the T’ang and Sung was the result of a complicated adjustment to the norms and values of Buddhist ideology. These norms and values manifested themselves in diverse fields of human endeavor (literature, philosophy, government documents, commentaries for non-Sinitic rulers, etc.), but all of them may be analyzed sociolinguistically as emanating from the fundamentally demotic impulses of the religion.

Another reason for Buddhism to choose the vernacular over the classical may have been its strong missionary zeal. For a religion that wishes to move rapidly into a new area, complex and hard-to-learn written languages like LS are a frustrating obstacle to rapid dissemination of its doctrines. They are, furthermore, usually the jealous possession of an entrenched bureaucratic or priestly elite who would actively oppose the spread of potentially subversive ideologies that are directed toward the populace. One of the major themes in David Diringer’s well-known book Writing is that “alphabet follows religion.” In particular, he shows the close connection
between the spread of Buddhism and the creation of written vernaculars from India to Central, Inner, East, South, and Southeast Asia (1962:148). It would be revealing to make a study of just how many languages in these areas received their first written expression through the activities of Buddhist monks and other types of proselytizers. I suspect that, before the coming of Christianity to this part of the world, aside from a handful of sinographically inspired scripts (most of which are now dead [Tangut, Khitan, Jurchen, Vietnamese, etc.] or dying [Yao, Women’s Script/Nü-shu, etc.]) (Zhou 1991; Sino-Platonic Papers 31 [October 1991]:29–33), nearly all of the written vernaculars east of the Pamirs to the Pacific Ocean were a direct result of the Buddhist missionary enterprise. Thus, the two great missionary religions, Christianity and Buddhism, together account for the overwhelming majority of Central, Inner, East, South, and Southeast Asian languages that have been committed to writing. The other great religion of conversion, Islam, and the older Semitic faiths account for most of the remainder. The role of Christian missionaries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in creating hundreds of written vernaculars throughout the entire world is well known.

The Indian Background

The final characteristic of Buddhism that seems to have lent support for the written vernacular which I wish to examine is a matter of religious policy or practice. As Buddhism swiftly expanded from its original base in Magadha (Rājagṛha, Pātaliputra) and gained converts even from among the Brahmans, the founder of the religion was faced with the pressing issue of linguistic usage. Should a single prestige dialect be designated to ensure respect for the Buddha’s word? Or should a plurality of language be permitted to enable the unimpeded spread of the dharma among those who were not privy to the priestly tongue? Judging from all accounts, the Buddha made the wise decision to allow Buddhist practitioners to transmit his teachings in their own respective languages.4 This scenario, at any rate, is repeatedly maintained by most extant versions of the vinaya (monastic rules) and must represent one of the earliest layers of Buddhist literature.

Since the story is well known, I will simply summarize it here. Two brahman brothers convert to Buddhism and join the saṅgha. Having a background in Vedic recitation, they are concerned that other monks of diverse backgrounds will corrupt the Buddha’s teachings by reciting them in substandard ways. They go to the Buddha

4Due to the misleading, if not wholly erroneous, commentary of Buddhaghosa (Cullavagga 5.33; Vinaya ii, 139, 1–16), there has been a small amount of scholarly controversy over whether the Buddha enjoined his followers to use his own native tongue or their own native tongues in spreading the dharma (Brough 1980). It would seem that the operative Pāli word sakāya (or sakkāya = Sanskrit satkāya), under the given circumstances, is more apt to function as a third-person reflexive pronoun than as a first-person reflexive. Furthermore, it has not previously been pointed out that the passage in question would seriously contradict itself if we accepted Buddhaghosa’s explanation ("Lord, here monks of miscellaneous origin are corrupting the Buddha’s [i.e., your] words [by repeating them] in your own dialect")[!]. This simply does not make sense. Only when we understand sakāya as "their" is the entire passage comprehensible. Cf. Edgerton (1953:1–2) and Lin Li-kouang (1949:216–27). Finally, no one seriously disputes the claim that the Buddha was in favor of the vernaculars at the expense of the classical, priestly language. Of one thing we can be certain, linguistic diversity was present in ancient Buddhism almost from the very beginning of the religion (Bechert 1980:15).
and propose that they standardize his word in *chandas*. Although there are numerous interpretations of the word *chandas*, this presumably signifies mannered, metrical verse and in this context probably just means “Veda,” which is how the famous grammarian, Pāṇinī (fifth or sixth century B.C.E.) uses it. In any event, the brahman brothers are surely proposing an elite style of delivery for which their training suits them. The Buddha will have none of it. Roundly rejecting them, he emphatically advocates the propagation of his teachings in the vernacular.

The actual history of linguistic usage in Indian Buddhism aside, the Buddha’s pronouncement in this celebrated passage stuck. Let us follow it through the *vinaya* of five different schools preserved in the Chinese Buddhist canon. In the Dharmaguptaka recension translated by Buddhayasas during the years 410–12, the Buddha calls upon his followers to use “the vernacular languages understood in diverse locales (*pradeśānām prākritabbāṣāḥ*) (Lamotte 1958:612) to recite the Buddhist *sūtras*” (T22[1428].955a). Although the equivalent sentence is missing in the *vinaya* of the Sarvāstivādins, translated by Punyatarā, Dharmaruci, and Kumārajivā from 404–9, the same sense is retained in the passage taken as a whole. (T23[1435].274a). The Vinayamārktā version, translated into Chinese in about 418, expands the passage thus: “You should speak in whatever language all the living beings can obtain enlightenment. For this reason it is called ‘doing in accordance with the country’” (T24[1463].822a). The *vinaya* of the Mahāśākā school, translated into Chinese by Buddhajivā in 422–23, only indicates that the Buddha’s word should be “recited according to the language of the country” (T22[1421].174b). Finally, the Vinayakṣudrakavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda, translated by I-ching in 702 or 703, declares that “there will be no error if one is required to draw out the voice when reciting in the language of a given locale (*pradeśasvāra*)” (T24[1451].232c). There can be little doubt that, no matter which version of the *vinaya* Chinese Buddhists chose to follow, use of the vernacular was approved by the Buddha himself.

It is worth observing that Pāli, the language of the early Buddhist canon, was originally but one of the Prākrits (v. Hinüber 1986). Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (BHS), likewise, was actually a Prākrit with augmented elements from Sanskrit (Bender 1991). Aside from being the usual prose dialect of Sanskrit plays, Sāurasenī is a type of Prākrit used in the later Digambara scriptures of the Jains. Māgadhi is another type of Prākrit used in Sanskrit plays, but for persons of still lower rank than those who speak Sāuraseni. Ardha-māgadhi (semi-Māgadhi) is intermediate between Sāuraseni and Māgadhi and is important because it was used in the old Jain writings. Alsdorf (1980) has demonstrated that Mahāvīra (the founder of Jainism) and Śākyamuni Buddha shared certain Māgadhisms (Chi 1959). There are also clear

3 Jan Nattier (1991:3) makes the excellent point that the sentence recommending the use of the vernacular is absent in the Sarvāstivāda *vinaya*. This was, after all, probably the first sect to abandon the use of Prākrit in favor of elegant, classical Sanskrit. In her words, “It would not be at all difficult to see this absence as a deliberate omission.”

6 The quotation given here is preceded by these sentences: “If a bhikṣu in reciting a sūtra prolongs the sounds as though he were singing or chanting, that is a mistake. Therefore, a bhikṣu should not draw out his voice in song or chant when reciting the sūtras or the *vinaya*. If a bhikṣu recites the sūtras and other texts with the sounds of the *chandas*, he will commit a sin by overstepping the law.” The quotation is followed by this commentary: “*Chandas* refers to the method of recitation of the brahmans. They prolong the sounds and keep the rhythm by pointing with their finger in the air. The master sings first and the others follow along after him.” I have not been able to locate the equivalent passage in the *vinaya* of the Mahāśāmghikā (T22[1425].227–549), translated by Fa-hsien and Buddhahadra in 416–18.
similarities between Old Ardha-māgadhī and the language of the Aśokan pillar inscriptions, which is therefore also referred to as Aśokan Māgadhī. Māhārāṣṭrī or Old Marāṭhī was influential because of its use in the later scriptures of the Śvetāmbaras and in drama. Among the Viśbhaṇaś, or lesser Pārdhī, of which there are many, Saurāṣṭrī is interesting because it contains elements of Scythian dialects (Walker 1968:2.234–35). From this very brief survey of the Pārdhī (early Indian vernaculars), it is apparent that they were often used by religions and other social groups who stood outside of the dominant Vedic-Upāṇiṣadīc Sanskritic culture. Viewed in this light, the Pārdhī played the same role in Indian society that BHŚi and written VS did in China.

The whole approach to deśa-bhāṣā, an expression meaning “language of a country” which can be found already in the Mahābhārata (Poona Critical edition, 9.44.98; Calcutta edition, 9.2605; Madras edition, 40.103; Bombay edition, 45.103cd), may have stimulated or reflected the exercise of the vernaculars in India, unlike the attitude toward fang-yen (topolect, “the language of a place”) (Mair 1991), its parallel in China, which seems to have inhibited their use. There has always been such pronounced official disdain in China for the topolects (in favor of the standard language) that the notion of their being written down is virtually inconceivable. This is in contrast to the situation in India where familiarity with local languages was esteemed. Thus, among the 64 kalā (practical skills) cataloged in the Śāvitattvam, we find deśa-bhāṣā-(vi)jnāna (“knowledge of local languages”). This is immediately preceded by mlecchitaka-vikalpaḥ, which clearly signifies a babel of foreign tongues, and is followed by puspa-sākṣatka-nimitta-jñāna, the ability to understand the omens of heavenly voices. Given such a positive attitude toward the various deśa-bhāṣā, with the advent of alphabetic writing it has always been acceptable in India to record many different languages and dialects. Conversely, since any living language in India was performa merely a topolect, there was an almost insuperable prejudice against the writing down of vernaculars, even the spoken language of the capital.

The very notion of the Pārdhīs (prāktī, literally “made before”) as “natural” (i.e., unadorned, unrefined) languages versus Sanskrit (sanskṛta, literally “made together,” i.e., refined) as an “artificial” (in the Buddhist context) language differs markedly from the Chinese conception of the various fang-yen as vulgar (su) and LS as elegant (ya). Eventually, however, the Pārdhīs became decadent, and by about 550 C.E., various apabhramśa (deviations) spoken by the laukika (commoners) came into existence. We find no mention of apabhramśa in Vārāruci, the oldest Pārdhī grammarian who was writing around 579 C.E. (Cowell 1854). Hemacandra (1088–1172), on the other hand, interestingly defines apabhramśa as Pārdhī with additional infusions of popular (deśī) speech (Walker 1968:2.233).7

Were it not for the permissive Indian attitude toward the vernaculars, we would not have the present situation where there are over a dozen major Indo-Aryan official languages still being spoken and written in India, including some such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, and Oriya with rich literary traditions. This is not to mention the Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, which

7It is likely, however, that there were already written apabhramśa by the sixth century (e.g., an inscription of King Dharasena II of Valabbi refers to composition in apabhramśa) and they may even have existed by the third or fourth century (e.g., certain verses in the fourth act of Kālidāsa’s Vikramorvasīya). The bulk of later apabhramśa literature was mostly Jain works (eighth to twelfth centuries). See Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed. (1988), vol. 22, p. 618:2a; vol. 21, p. 50:1b; and vol. 1, p. 475:3a. Technically speaking, deśī is considered to mean language that is “non-derivable from Sanskrit.”
likewise have long and glorious literary histories. How starkly dissimilar the situation is in China can be seen by the fact that there was not even official recognition of Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) as an acceptable form of writing until the founding of the Republic of China in the first quarter of this century. The amount of unadulterated writing in the other vernacular Sinitic topolects and languages is so pathetically small as to be virtually nonexistent, except in fairly recent romanized transcriptions (mostly by Christian missionaries and their Chinese followers). Since about the Sung dynasty (960–1279), there was a rather surreptitious tradition of secular vernacular fiction and drama, based largely on the language of the capital. Before that, as I have shown, virtually all vernacular and semivernacular writing was done by Buddhists. And, to this day, it remains almost unthinkable to write down any of the topolects in a relatively integral form, although isolated topolectical expressions are occasionally added to Mandarin texts to give a bit of local flavor. Judging from the overall pattern of the development of the written vernacular in China, I believe we are justified in stating unequivocally that Buddhism was centrally involved in its establishment as a viable mode of expression.

The Concept of “National Language”

One might go even further to say that the whole idea of written national languages in East Asia as founded on the spoken vernaculars may well have been inspired by the Indian concept of deśa-bhāṣā introduced by Buddhism. The exact Sinitic equivalent of deśa-bhāṣā is kuo-yü. Before the coming of Buddhism to China, these two graphs, in the order given, meant only one thing: the title of a book in 21 fascicles traditionally said to have been completed by the historian Tso Ch’iu-ming in the year 469 B.C.E. Naturally, the Kuo-yü, like all other pre-Buddhist writing in China, was composed in LS. In this case, the two sinographs designate the individual accounts (yü) concerning each of the eight major contending states (kuo) that became prominent as the Chou dynasty began to break apart into spheres of influence. After the advent of Buddhism, however, the expression kuo-yü began to take on a radically different meaning, namely, the vernacular language belonging to a nation in the sense of a people who saw themselves as a separate politico-ethnic entity.

Perhaps the earliest occurrence of kuo-yü that may refer to a vernacular Sinitic topolect (fang-yen) is found in a Buddhist context. This is the account of Vighna’s translation of the Fa-chü ching (Dhammapada) in the Kao-seng chuan (Biographies of Eminent Monks) by Hui-chiao (497–544):

Vighna (Wei-chih-nan) was originally from India. For generations his family had professed a heterodox way, considering the fire sacrifices (presumably of the Atharva-veda or possibly of Zoroastrianism) as the true religion. It so happened that an Indian śramaṇa (monk), who was practiced in Hinayāna (“Lesser Vehicle”) and who was proficient in Buddhistic arts, wished to lodge in Vighna’s house at nightfall after a long journey. Since Vighna’s family subscribed to a heterodox way, they were suspicious of Buddhists and made him sleep outside in the open. During the night, the śramaṇa secretly uttered an incantation, causing the fire that was worshipped in Vighna’s house suddenly to be extinguished. Thereupon the entire household went out and respectfully invited the śramaṇa to go inside where they made offerings to him. The śramaṇa responded by causing the fire to light again with his incantatory arts. Perceiving that the supernatural power of the śramaṇa...
surpassed his own, Vighna happily and enthusiastically became an adherent of the Buddhadharma (the Buddhist doctrine).

Consequently, he abandoned his previous faith and left his family (prawraj) to follow the Buddhist way. Inducted as a monk by the śramaṇa, he received the teachings of the Tripitaka (the “three baskets” of the Buddhist canon), wonderful goodness, and the four Āgamas (division of the “Hinayāna” scriptures). He travelled to many countries, preaching and converting, and all whom he encountered accepted the faith.

In the year 224, with his companion Chu Lü-yen (the surname indicates that he was an Indian), he arrived at Wu-ch’ang (in Hupei province) where he presented the Sanskrit text of the Dharmapada, that is, the Sūtra of Verses on the Dharma. At that time, the gentlemen of Wu requested that Vignha produce [a Chinese version of] the scripture. But Vighna had not yet mastered the language of the country (kuo-yü) so, together with his companion Lü-yen, he translated it into written Sinitic (Han-ween). Lü-yen likewise had not mastered spoken Sinitic (Han-yen), so there were quite a few deficiencies. Their aim was to preserve the sense of the original, but their style approached plainness.

It was not until the end of the reign of the Chin emperor Hui (r. 290–306) that the śramaṇa Fa-li retranslated it in five scrolls, with the śramaṇa Fa-chü writing it down. Their style was somewhat ornate. Fa-li also produced four or so minor scriptures, but most of them were lost during the chaos at the end of the Yung-chia period (307–13).

Although this passage is valuable for its early mention of kuo-yü with the ostensible meaning of vernacular, it evinces the same sort of confusion between spoken and written language as well as between local and national language that has plagued Chinese linguistics right up to the present day. Han-yen and kuo-yü both imply spoken language, but kuo-yü here seems to indicate the local Ngua (Wu) toeploct (for which there never was a full written form until Christian missionaries much later created a romanized alphabet to record different varieties of Ngua speech and to publish religious tracts in them) whereas Han-yen would appear to indicate a national lingua franca. The relationship between Han-yen and Han-ween in this passage is unclear, as is the variety of Sinitic upon which they were based. Presumably, however, the basis for Han-yen was the standardized speech of the capital used by bureaucrats from around the country to communicate with each other (a precursor of kuan-hua or Mandarin). Han-ween must have been a current designation for LS (or, more precisely in this case, its BHSī variant).

It is remarkable that the first clear application of kuo-yü with the new meaning of a vernacular belonging to a separate politico-ethnic entity was to the language of a devoutly Buddhist non-Sinitic group of people known as the Tabgarch (T’o-pa in Modern Standard Mandarin transcription) who ruled over north China from 386–534 as the Northern Wei dynasty. These were most likely proto-Mongols (or perhaps a Turkic people) who were responsible for the building of the monumental assemblages of Buddhist sculpture at Yün-kang and Lung-men in north China. In the

8 This should, perhaps, more accurately be thought of as “the Pāli text of the Dhammapada.”

9 In the eleventh chapter of his Chiγokugo iβi tsūkō, Ohta [Ota] Tatsuuo describes the sporadic rise of Han-erb yen-yü (the [common] language of the Han people) as a legitimate mode of expression. He demonstrates not only that the development of the national vernacular was fitful, but that it occurred in the popular realm and that it was counterpoised to the LS of the elite. For an extensive discussion of the term kuan-hua and its history, see the next section.
“Bibliographical Treatise” ("Ching-chi chih") of Chang-sun Wu-chi (d. 659) et al., in the History of the Sui (Sui shu), part 1, we read that,

When the Later Wei (i.e., the Northern Wei = Tabgatch) first took control of the Central Plains, all of the commands for the disposition of their armies were given in “barbarian” language (i-yü). Later, when they had become tainted by Chinese customs (*jan Hua-ia), many of them could no longer understand their own tongue. So they began to teach it to each other, calling it their “national language” (kuo-yü).”

(4.32.947)

It is most intriguing that the “Bibliographical Treatise” lists over a dozen works (4.32.935, 945; Dien 1991:55a, 59b n. 87; Ligeti 1970:279–80) on a wide variety of topics written in Tabgatch and *Saerbi (or *Shirvi; Hsien-pei in Modern Standard Mandarin transcription), another powerful, supposedly proto-Mongol, group who were active in north China from the second century on. Unfortunately, none of these books survive, but it would be extremely valuable to know what script(s) they were written in. This tantalizing evidence from the “Bibliographical Treatise” indicates that it was possible to write Tabgatch and *Saerbi centuries before any form of Altaic writing known to modern scholars. What script(s) did the Tabgatch and *Saerbi use? This is a dark mystery whose solution may unfold a new and very important chapter in the history of writing. What is significant for our purposes here, however, is the fact that written Tabgatch and *Saerbi are openly referred to in the “Bibliographical Treatise” as kuo-yü or “national languages.”

Elsewhere in Chinese historical records, we can find references to such works as Liaoj shih kuo-yü [National Language History of the Khitan] and Chín shih kuo-yü [National Language History of the Jurchen]. These were presumably histories of the Khitan and Jurchen dynasties that ruled over much of north China during the tenth through twelfth centuries, written in their native Altaic and Tungusic languages. Although these books have also regrettably been lost, scattered inscriptional and documentary instances of writing in these sinographically inspired scripts do survive and scholars are working on their decipherment (SoFRanov 1991; Jensen 1969:195–97). It is clear that the earliest usage of the term kuo-yü (“national/vernacular language”), indeed right up to the end of the last dynasty, the Manchu Ch’ing, was almost always in reference to non-Sinitic peoples (Norman 1988:133).

The History of the Yuan Dynasty (10.115.2893) records that, in the spare moments when he was not attending to his troops, the great Mongol warrior-prince Khammala (1263–1302, son of Chen-chin [“True Gold’], who was Khubilai’s second son) would order one of his trusted advisers to lecture him on the Tsu-chih t’ung-chien [Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government], the quintessential chronologically arranged history of China compiled by Su-ma Kuang (1019–86), in the ‘national language,” meaning Mongolian. Manchu, too, was referred to explicitly in the same fashion. For instance, in Wei Yüan’s Sheng-wu chi [Records of Sagely Military Exploits] (1.9a), we read that “the literary officials were ordered to create a national script on the basis of the national language, using neither Mongol nor Sinitic writing.” Even the Vietnamese adopted the notion of a written vernacular with the creation of quàc ngữ. As used in Vietnam, quàc ngữ seems originally (perhaps as early as the fourteenth century) to have signified the spoken native language as opposed to Sinitic languages. Later, quàc ngữ was applied to chữ nôm (“script” + “vulgar” = “vernacular

It may be more correct to state that Tabgatch was the name of one clan (the royal clan) within the ethnic group known as the *Saerbi or *Shirvi.
writing”), a system for writing Vietnamese involving phonetic use of sinographs and the creation of new, wholly indigenous logographic symbols composed of tetragraphic components. Still later, the term Quốc ngữ was used to designate the French-sponsored romanized alphabet currently employed by the Vietnamese (DeFrancis 1978:83–87). The notion of Quốc ngữ as a written national language appears to have been borrowed by Vietnamese refugee intellectuals in Japan from kokugo (Modern Standard Mandarin, hereafter MSM, kuo-yü).

Mandarin as koine

Mandarin is, in effect, the close English translation of the MSM expression kuan-bua (“officials’ speech”) which, in the latter part of the Ch’ing period, was based on the dialect of the capital at Peking and which enabled the bureaucrats from the various parts of China whose native languages were mutually unintelligible to converse with each other. The word “Mandarin” was borrowed into English from Portuguese, which picked it up from Malay mintēri. Malay, in turn, acquired the word from Hindi mantri, which is from Sanskrit mantrin (“counselor, minister”) < mantra (“counsel”).

The term kuan-bua was in use from the Yüan period on and referred to the spoken language of officialdom (kuan-ch’ang), which was based on the speech of the capital (mostly Peking from that time till the present; Nanking speech was taken as the standard during the late Ming). There are many records from the Ming and Ch’ing periods that prove that kuan-bua was considered to be a prestige supradialect that bureaucrats from all over the empire were forced to learn if they wished to have a successful career. For most of them, this meant acquiring a second spoken language, not merely making minor adjustments in their pronunciation and vocabulary.

The complex of kuan-bua was deliberately changed by reformers around the end of the nineteenth century who wished to make it the lingua franca of all China, not just of the officials. Chief among these was Wang Chao (1859–1933), a high-ranking literatus who fled to Japan after the collapse of the Reform Movement of 1898. While there, the Japanese use of their kana syllabaries to overcome the difficulties and restrictiveness of the Sinitic script inspired him to devise his own spelling system called kuan-bua tsu-mu (“Mandarin letters”). Aside from courageously promoting this enlightened phonetic script during the late Ch’ing-early Republican period, Wang also energetically pushed for the adoption of Mandarin as China’s national spoken and written language. The following remarks from the introductory notes to his Kuan-bua ho-sheng tsu-mu [Letters for Combining the Sounds of Mandarin] serve to illustrate Wang’s attitude toward kuan-bua and his conscious effort to remodel it as a popular language for the whole Chinese nation:

Because the Chinese characters are difficult to understand, I wish to devise a script based on colloquial Pekingese. To facilitate popular usage, I do not refer to it as colloquial speech but rather as kuan-bua. The reason for this is to follow popular custom. North as far as the Amur River, west across the Tai-hang Mountains to Nanyang and Loyang, south almost to the Yangtze, and east to the ocean: all of

11 Paul Yang (1989) has shown that Standard Mandarin of the Ming dynasty was based on the Nanking topecnt, not that of Peking, in spite of the fact that the latter city was the primary capital for most of the dynasty. Nanking was the capital during the early Ming (1356–1421) and continued to serve as the secondary capital later.
the colloquial languages from north to south and from east to west for several thousand tricents [i.e., three hundred paces or about a third of a mile] are more or less mutually intelligible with the language of the capital, but the languages of provinces outside this area are mutually unintelligible. For this reason, it is most convenient to spread the language of the capital. Therefore, I call it kuan-hua. By kuan, I mean "public"; kuan-hua is thus "speech for public use." Its selection is appropriate because it occupies the greatest area and the largest proportion of the population.

Although Wang's explanation of kuan is quite different from its original meaning as "[pertaining to the] Mandarin[ate]," the linguistic features of the language in question were essentially the same in both cases. Wang Chao later played a blustery, belligerent role in enforcing northern Mandarin as the standard national language over the other topolects in February 1913, not long after the founding of the Republic of China (Ramsey 1987:7–8).

Kuan-hua corresponds to Jerry Norman's concept of a koine (a lingua franca developing out of a mixture of other languages) (1988:5, 48, 186f., 246, and 249) which may be traced back as early as the T'ang dynasty. This was a supradialectal form of speech which was normally based on the dialect of Ch'ang-an, Loyang, or K'ai-feng (capitals located along the central part of the Yellow River). The early Sinitic equivalent of the term koine is t'ung-yü ("common language"; cf. the current name for Mandarin in the People's Republic of China, P'u-t'ung-hua ["common speech"]), which dates to around the beginning of the Common Era. Strained attempts have been made to find evidence of such a commonly accepted pattern of speech even in the time of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). The usual reference is to ya-yen ("elegant language") which occurs in Analects 7.18. Much fantastic speculation has been uttered over the passage in question. Aside from the assertion that it demonstrates the existence of Mandarin in the sixth century B.C.E., the passage supposedly also "proves" that there was a connection with the nebulously conceived spoken language of the Hsia dynasty (whose historicity remains to be demonstrated, in spite of wishful thinking to the contrary). To arrive at this forced interpretation, ya is conveniently made to be a synonym of Hsia. Such readings are possible only if much violence is done to the original text, which is quite straightforward: "The language that the Master considered elegant is that of the Odes, History, Arts, and Ritual; these are all written in elegant language." Judging from the actual texts that have been transmitted to us, it is fairly certain that ya-yen is a designation for an early form of LS or, at best, a standard reading pronunciation. In any event, by no means can this sentence be legitimately used to construct a theory of a VS koine during the mid-first millennium B.C.E., whatever other data may or may not be available to construct such a theory.

We must observe that the koine did not correspond to the written language of government, which was always LS. Instead, the koine constituted the foundation of the emerging written VS. When spoken by individuals from various areas of China

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12I have benefited much from conversations on this subject with Tsu-Lin Mei who is currently preparing a major study concerning the grammatical influence of the koine on the topolects during the T'ang and Sung periods. In it, he will show how the Early Mandarin dialect of the mid-eighth century came to function as a koine and how, by the Sung, it had developed as a written vernacular both for popular literature and for limited bureaucratic purposes. Nonetheless, until the turn of the twentieth century, LS remained the sole sanctioned, official medium for writing and there was no conscious attempt to elevate the koine to the status of a national language.
outside of the urban centers upon which it was based, the koine was heavily affected by local pronunciation, lexicon, and, to a lesser extent, grammar—as is MSM today. The other Sinitic languages essentially remained unwritten and, indeed, "unwritable" because the set of morphosyllabic sinographs (han-tzu), though mind-bogglingly enormous, was inadequate to record accurately all the morphemes in the spoken vernaculars. At the same time, there were no conventions in medieval China for the alphabetic or syllabic spelling of connected Sinitic speech.

This situation is very different from that in medieval Europe where Latin was both sayable and writable and hence could serve as a complete vehicle both for the speech and the writing of the educated. Subsequently, just before and during the Renaissance, each national vernacular in Europe took on a life of its own separate from Latin. The development of the written vernaculars in Europe was also facilitated by an alphabet that was capable of recording with ease any variety of spoken language. In contrast, the sinographs inhibited the growth of the individual written vernaculars in China and tended to discourage even the writing of full-fledged Mandarin (it is usually contaminated by LS to one degree or another). Thus there is no flourishing literary tradition for Cantonese, Taiwanese, Shanghaiese, and the other VS languages as there is for French, German, Italian, English, and so forth. At best, there are scattered texts (only an exceeding few of which date from before the late nineteenth century) that include a smattering of elements of the various regional languages embedded in basically Mandarin or semi-Mandarin-semi-LS matrices to provide a bit of "local flavor."

The Japanese Inspiration for kuo-yü

It is paradoxical that the Chinese recognized one of their own spoken vernaculars as the basis for a national language (kuo-yü) only in this century. This occurred when the government of the Republic of China declared after the May Fourth Movement of 1919 that Mandarin was to be spread throughout all of China as the official language of government and education. The first person known to have used the term kuo-yü in reference to a Sinitic language was the scholar and educator Wu Ju-lun. In 1902, Wu went to Japan to observe the educational system there. He was deeply impressed by the success with which the Japanese government had spread the use of the Tokyo dialect as their kokugo (i.e., kuo-yü) (Ramsey 1991). Upon his return to China, Wu began advocating to the Ch'ing government the adoption of Mandarin as a national language. By 1909, various tentative steps had been taken in this direction, but the dynasty collapsed before they became a reality (Chung-kuo ta pai-ke ch'i'ian-shu, Yü-yen wen-tzu: 123ab). It remained for the Republic of China, under pressure from progressive intellectuals (Li Chin-hsi 1934), to make official what had slowly been becoming a reality ever since the arrival of Buddhism in China—the acceptance of the vernacular as a legitimate tool for writing.

It is not strange that Wu Ju-lun would have picked up the idea of a kuo-yü in Japan, for the Japanese actually had a strong consciousness of possessing a writable vernacular for centuries. The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari), for example, was written by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu in the vernacular (with phonetic kana) already at the beginning of the eleventh century. (Gender dynamics appear to have been operative in this and similar cases, such as that of the recently discovered Women's Script [Nü-shu] in Hunan. Phonetic scripts for representing the vernacular serve as
an empowering counterweight to the male-dominated morphosyllabic [or logographic] sinographs that are so splendidly well-suited for writing LS.) The Japanese preface (dated 1714) to the Fa-hua lun-shu (Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra) by the noted Chinese monk Chi-tsang (fl. 549–69), who was of Parthian descent, states that in preparing the blocks for printing “the national vernacular language (kokugo) has been added at the side.” (T40[1818].785a) Regrettably, modern editions have not preserved the running Japanese annotations.

In its earliest Japanese appearances, the term kokugo seems to have had more the connotation of “local vernacular” than of an official “national language.” In Tokugawa-period Japan, for example, it could even refer to Dutch (Ramsey 1993:3). All of this, plus the distinctly Sinitic ring to the word, recalls the Chinese usage of the term kuo-yü to designate spoken vernacular languages as opposed to the customary written language, namely kanbun (LS). As we have already seen, it was the Buddhists who introduced this notion to China and it seems to have spread from there to Japan. Only slowly, however, did the idea of Japanese kokugo as “local vernacular” become transformed into the status of “national language.” Not until around the middle of the nineteenth century did it gradually come to refer specifically to Japanese as the official national language of Japan. Slow as the transformation may have been, vernacular Japanese became the accepted, official language of the people who spoke it long before any variety of VS was sanctioned as the national language of China. It is ironic, in both cases, that the roots of the acceptance of the vernacular as the official language of the country lay in the Indian Buddhist concept of desa-bhāsa.

The seminal importance of Buddhism in the development of written vernacular Japanese during the early Heian (794–898) is recognized by Habein (1984:22) and Miller (1967:126). The role of Buddhism in the development of the kana syllabaries is detailed by Seeley (1991:ch. 4, 59–89), especially in such texts as the Abhidatsuma zōjuon (Abhidharmanavacayatasākhyā) and Ōkutsunararkyō (Aṅgulimālika-sūtra or Aṅgulimāliya-sūtra), both of which date to around 800 C.E. (also see Miller 1967:128).

Language Reform in Korea

While, like kuo-yü for Mandarin and quốc ngữ for Vietnamese, the concept of kug'o as the language of a modern Korean nation-state was inspired by Japanese kokugo, the Koreans themselves had a tradition of writing in the vernacular that stretched all the way back to the idu (“clerk readings”) and hyangch'āl (“local letters”) scripts. These depended on either Sino-Korean phonetic or native glosses (similar to Japanese on and kun readings of sinographs) and are attributed to Sŏl Ch'ŏng, son of Korea's greatest Buddhist thinker, Wŏnhyo, in the late seventh century. The hyangch'āl, used exclusively for vernacular songs and poetry (judging from the few surviving specimens), may already have died out before the advent of the Chosŏn (so-called Yi) dynasty in 1392. The earliest vernacular texts (songs and poems) in Korean literary history are found only in Buddhist sources, and most of them are by Buddhists on Buddhist themes (Lee 1959, 1961). The secular derivative of hyangch'āl—idu—lasted right down to the nineteenth century, even in spite of the coexistence of the alphabet (Ledyard 1992b).

In 1446 the enlightened King Sejong (1397–1450) promulgated Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm (“correct sounds for instructing the people,” also the title of the book in which the
king introduced this new system of writing) as an easily learned phonetic script for Korea. Of course, the elite Chinese-oriented Confucian literati were adamantly opposed to the use of a demotic script like Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm and gave it the pejorative name onmun (vernacular writing, literally 'proverbial writing') because it threatened their monopoly on literacy. The Sinitic script, which was the prevailing method for writing in Korea from the end of the seventh century, was clearly the preferred choice of most of the officials. Thus, although Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm was initially attacked by Korean intellectuals who had a vested interest in the cumbersome sinographs, during the twentieth century it has now become universally accepted in Korea (both north and south) as the standard form of writing called han'gul (Korean letters). Since 1948, there has been exclusive use of han'gul in the north, and the occasional admixture of sinographs has been steadily decreasing—now dwindled almost to nothing in general public usage (a small group of Sinitically oriented scholars still cling to the Chinese characters stubbornly, if only in a token fashion)—in the south.

The Koreans take great nationalistic pride in han'gul as a script that permits them to record accurately the sounds and words of their own language rather than LS or what amounts to various degrees of written creolization (if we may coin a phrase) that resulted when they were forced to rely on the sinographs. Florian Coulmas (1989:115–17) and Hans Jensen (1969:210–11) describe the contortions that Koreans had to go through when they tried to write their language with sinographs. King Sejong’s own intentions in creating the Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm are expressed in his preface as follows:

The speech sounds of our country’s language are different from those of the Middle Kingdom and are not confluent with the characters. Therefore, among the stupid [i.e., “common”] people, there have been many who, having something to put into words, have in the end been unable to express their feelings. I have been distressed because of this, and have newly designed twenty-eight letters, which I wish to have everyone practice at their ease and make convenient for their daily use.

(adapted from Ledyard 1966:224)

It is clear that Sejong was deeply concerned about literacy for the common people and that he believed a phonetic script permitting them to write out easily the sounds of their own spoken language would be much more appropriate for that purpose than the clumsy sinographs.

A similar attitude is expressed in Chŏng Inji’s postface to the Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm haerye (Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for Instructing the People), a commentary on the Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm prepared by a group of scholars commissioned by King Sejong:

In our Eastern Quarter, ceremonial, music, and literature are comparable to and imitative of those of China, but our local speech and rustic colloquial are not the same. Students of books are troubled by the difficulty of understanding the purport and meaning [of Chinese characters]; those who preside at processes are distressed at the difficulty of the twists and turns [of a legal text]. In olden days, Sŏl Ch'ong of Silla first made the Clerk Readings, and they are practiced in the government offices and among the people to this day. But all of them are used as borrowed characters; some grate on you, others stop you completely. They are not

13 For an excellent brief account of Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm, see Ramsey 1992. For more information on the history of han'gul, see Gari Ledyard’s superb dissertation which, unfortunately, has never been published. I have relied on it heavily for the account of Korean writing presented in these paragraphs.
BUDDHISM AND THE RISE OF WRITTEN VERNACULAR 733

Figure 3. Opening page of the preface to *Hunmin chong'um* [Correct Sounds for Instructing the People] by King Sejong (1397–1450). It was in this work that the Buddhistically inclined, enlightened ruler formally presented his alphabet for spelling vernacular Korean. National Treasure No. 70, preserved in the Kansong Art Museum. Ch’ŏn 1993:13.

just rustic and crude and unattested; when it comes to the realm of actual speech, not one in a myriad of them is applicable.

... Though only twenty-eight letters are used, their shifts and changes in function are endless; they are simple and fine, reduced to the minimum yet universally applicable. Therefore, a wise man can acquaint himself with them before the morning is over; a stupid man can learn them in the space of ten days. Using these in explaining books, one can know the appropriateness; using these in hearing a litigation, one can grasp the situation. Insofar as the phonology of characters is concerned, clear and eluvial can be distinguished; in matters of music and singing, the twelve semi-tones may be blended. There is no usage not provided for, no direction in which they do not extend. Even the sound of the winds, the cry of the crane, the cackle of fowl and the barking of dogs—all may be written.

(quoted in Ledyard 1966:257–58)

There can be no doubt that the devisers and advocates of the Korean alphabet were searching for a simple means that would permit their people to express their thoughts
and ideas in their own language and that they considered the sinographs to be ill-
adapted for that purpose. What is more, the striking formulation of the last sentence
manifestly derives from a remarkable expostulation in the preface to the Sung scholar
Cheng Ch’iao’s (1104–62) Ch’i-yin liêh [Compendium on the Seven Sounds] in which
he profusely praises the phonological sophistication of Buddhist monks (Mair
1993:338–39). Ch’iao’s Inji and his associates were obviously striving to emulate
the flexibility of Indian phonetic writing that was so much admired by Cheng Ch’iao.

It is significant that King Sejong and his wife (d. 1446) were both devout
Buddhists and that all except two of the earliest texts written in this new script
were Buddhist. The two exceptions are the stultifyingly Confucian Songs of Dragons
Flying through Heaven (Yongbi 作坊 ka, 1447) and the Sino-Korean glossary entitled
Tongguk ch’oong’un. As literature, the Buddhist works are quite impressive, certainly
far superior to the Songs of the Flying Dragons. Furthermore, although Hunmin ch’oong’um
(i.e., han’gul) is deservedly praised as an ingenious and accurate phonetic script, it
was based in part on Phags-pa, a Mongolian script devised by a Tibetan lama with
that eponym in 1260 to replace the modified old Uighur (に old Syriac ⌜ North Semitic
< Aramaic < North Semitic) script that had previously been used to write Mongol
(the modified old Uighur script survived as the usual way to write Mongol until
the twentieth-century importation of Cyrillic and was later adapted by the Manchus
to write their own language). The shapes of the Phags-pa letters were inspired by
Tibetan letters which themselves were modeled upon Indian Gupta letters. The
Tibetan script had been commissioned by the great king Song-btsan-sgam-po (ca.
608–50), who is credited with introducing Buddhism to Tibet. It is evident that
Khubilai was acting under Buddhist influence when he ordered Phags-pa to create
a new script for Mongol. The Buddhist impetus, in turn, carried through to King
Sejong’s Hunmin ch’oong’um. Also operative was Chinese phonology, in which King
Sejong and his closest associates in devising Hunmin ch’oong’um were quite learned and
which, in turn, was based on Indian phonological theories initially brought to China
by Buddhist monks during the Han and Six Dynasties periods. It is not surprising,
therefore, that Korean Buddhists enthusiastically welcomed the new alphabetic,
demotic script as an effective device for the propagation and study of their faith,
unlike the elitist, Confucian-minded officials who resolutely resisted it.

A further observation concerning the Buddhist affinities of phonetic writing
in Korea is that Hunmin ch’oong’um was preceded by an even more explicitly Indian-
inspired script, pömsö (= MSM fanshu, “Brahmanic script,” probably a form of
Siddham). The name, arrangement, and phonological composition of the script all
clearly reveal its ultimate Indian origins. Pömsö is still employed today for the
transcription of Sanskrit terms in Buddhist ritual texts (Jensen 1969:216).

Ledyard’s dissertation (1966) provides a great amount of detailed evidence that
Buddhism was indeed a key factor in the creation of the Korean alphabet. For
example, he delineates (pp. 261ff.) an alliance between the pro-alphabeticists and
Buddhists. He shows, furthermore (p. 267), that many of the earliest compositions
using the new alphabet were Buddhist, including a Korean translation of the
Prajñāpāramita-hydaya-sūtra (Heart Sūtra). He also notes (p. 90) that the good king
Sejong himself put his alphabet to work by composing odes in Korean on the life
and work of the Buddha. It cannot be emphasized too often that Sejong carried out
his Buddhist-inspired program of vernacular language reform in the face of fierce
opposition from the literati:

In the last years of his life, Sejong turned more and more to the comforts of
Buddhism, and this was tantamount to alienating himself almost completely from
the men of his time, whose hatred of that religion bordered on the pathological.
Although Ricci’s book was written in Literary Sinitic, it represented the first use of the Roman alphabet to indicate the sounds of a Sinitic language and ultimately led to the creation of convenient methods for writing all of the vernacular languages of China. Published here with the permission of the Vatican Library.

But Sejong had actually been sympathetic to Buddhism from early in his reign, and his remonstrators had fought him on this ever since 1426, when they petitioned him to have removed from his throne room a dhāraṇī written on one of the ceiling beams in Siddham letters.

(Ledyard 1966:90; the reference in the last sentence is to Sejong sillok, November 12, 1426, 34.3a)
But it was not just King Sejong whose Buddhist affinities stimulated him to concrete action aimed at the vernacularization of writing in Korea. Already nine centuries earlier, the Buddhist contributions to the establishment of an authentic Korean literature were absolutely essential:

The leading role played by Buddhists in the early history of Korean writing must be emphasized. . . . If what has survived of Silla poetry is any indication, it was Buddhists who wrote most of Silla's native literature. Buddhists preserved it through the Koryǒ period, and Buddhists wrote the biography of Kyunyǒ and the Sanγuk yusa and thus transmitted all we know of that literature to modern times. Even Sŏl Ch'ŏng, the great expositor of the Chinese (Confucian) classics, was the son of a Buddhist priest (the famous Wŏnhyo, b. 597), and would have grown up with the concern for the native language shared by his co-religionists. It was no accident that it was a man of this background who should have finally systematized long-standing practices in transcription into a practical way of writing Korean. It was not just in Korea that it was so. The role of Buddhism in the general history of writing in Asia is a story that, when it comes to be written in its entirety, will fill many interesting volumes.

(Ledyard 1966:57)

The role of Buddhism in the rise of printing is another important area of investigation that deserves attention. There is little doubt that printing in East Asia, from its very inception, was primarily a Buddhist phenomenon. In fact, the invention of printing itself may have occurred as an extension of the practice of impressing woodcut engravings of the Buddha's image on silk and paper and of duplicating dhāraṇī (charms or prayers, especially as used in Tantrism). Both of these practices were already widespread in China during the seventh century. By the eighth century, millions of dhāraṇī were being printed in Japan. For example, between 764 and 770, one million dhāraṇī were printed by the order of the empress Shōtoku (d. 769) and were deposited in small stūpas which were distributed to a number of major Buddhist temples (Goodrich 1960:117). The Buddhist monopoly on the early printing of books proper in Japan is noteworthy:

Printing after its introduction into Japan (about 740 A.D.) was confined to wealthy Buddhist monasteries until toward the end of the Kamakura period (about 1569) [sic] with the result that it was restricted either to Buddhist sutras or Chinese texts. There was very little secular printing in this period from 740 to 1569.

(Peake 1939:58)

The matter of Buddhism's contribution to the history of printing in East Asia, although related to the rise of the written vernacular in the sense that both pertain to the dissemination of learning beyond Confucian literati circles, is a separate question requiring intensive, specialized research of its own. Still, it is significant that this Indian religion had a decisive impact upon both of these fundamentally democratic developments concerning writing in East Asia that occurred at approximately the same time. This naturally leads us to a consideration of the broader issues of the sociology of knowledge, but these unfortunately lie beyond the scope of the present study. For the moment, however, it needs to be pointed out that the legitimization of the vernacular as a written medium, the invention of phonetic syllabaries and alphabets, and the invention of printing are all interrelated phenomena that would appear to stem from the Buddhist missionizing proclivity, namely, the desire to
spread the Buddha’s word as far afield and to as many people, regardless of their background or station, as possible.

Ledyard (1992a) has recently returned to the question of the significance of ’Phags-pa for the creation of han’gul in his “The International Linguistic Background of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People.” Along with him, we must make a specific disclaimer that Hunmin ch’ŏng’um was not merely a combination of ’Phags-pa orthography and Sino-Indian phonology, but a remarkable creation for
which King Sejong personally deserves much credit. Ledyard correctly and perceptively points out the connection between the Korean adoption of vernacular (i.e., native) language as a legitimate medium for writing (as opposed to LS) and the consequent need for a phonetic script with which to represent it. It was this motivation that impelled the king and his associates ingeniously to adapt ‘Phags-pa to their own purposes. The han’gul alphabet that resulted is marvelously well suited for the phonological representation of Korean and is justly hailed as being perhaps the most logically designed of all alphabets in the world. A drawback to the use of han’gul became apparent only in this century with the advent of modern information-processing techniques (mechanical and electronic). The tetragraphic (i.e., square) configuration of syllables (originally intended for ease of combination with the sinographs) in the Korean alphabet poses an obstacle to the efficient application of modern information-processing methods that are essentially linear (Chung 1991). There have lately been attempts to rearrange the script in a linear sequence and to mark word boundaries for greater efficiency in information-processing systems (Hannas 1993).

Conclusion

We have seen how, under the probable influence of the Indian concept of deśa-bhāṣā brought to China by Buddhism, numerous peoples in East Asia created a whole series of written vernaculars. While Chinese authorities stubbornly resisted recognition of any of their own vernaculars as a national language—probably due to the extremely high prestige and power of LS—the Buddhists used the vernacular liberally in their own writings. Once proffered as a functional alternative written language, use of the vernacular steadily grew until, by the late Ming-early Ch’ing, it is likely that as many books were being printed in vernacular or a heavily vernacularized literary style as in LS, notwithstanding the censure and ridicule of strait-laced scholars. Finally, even the Manchus, who already had their own written national language, which was swiftly dying out because of pervasive sinicization, yielded to the idea that their Sinitic subjects, too, needed a national language keyed to one of the spoken vernaculars. After the agitation of the May Fourth Movement led by progressive Chinese intellectuals and students, many of whom were exposed to radical ideas about language and other aspects of culture and society through the window of Japan, kuo-yü was publicly proclaimed the official written language of the nation. This marked the formal end of the multimillennial separation between book language (shu-mien-yü) and spoken language (k’ou-yü) in China.

That Buddhism played a crucial role in the evolution of the written vernacular throughout East Asia is beyond any doubt. The question remains, however: Which aspect of Buddhism was responsible for these momentous changes? Was there some religious doctrine belonging to Buddhism that fostered the written vernacular? Or was it due to a special Buddhist philosophical principle? Was it the fondness for storytelling, preaching, and public speaking by the early Buddhists in the language of the people? Did the ostensible orality of Buddhist scripture have anything to do with the origins of the written vernacular in China? Was the fact that most of the early translators of Buddhist texts into Sinitic were foreigners with a poor command of the literary language a significant factor? And did the phonological sophistication of Indian linguistic science lend credibility to the spoken vis-à-vis the written? What of the elaborate, rigorously defined Indian traditions of chanting and recitation?
And may the social values, institutions, and position of Buddhism have contributed to the rise of the written vernacular? Last but not least, did Buddhist practice have anything to do with the validation of the vernacular? Perhaps I have entirely overlooked some vital facet of Buddhism that contributed to this process. In the end, Buddhist support for the written vernacular may best be identified as a complex combination of diverse factors, all of which were determined by an integrated socioreligious ideology.

Abbreviations

B.C.E. Before Common Era
BHSi Buddhist Hybrid Sinitic
BHS Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit
C.E. Common Era
LS Literary Sinitic
MSM Modern Standard Mandarin
p.n. proper name
T Taishō Tripitaka (the standard edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon)
VS Vernacular Sinitic

Glossary

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<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>Abhidharmasamuccayavakyāḥ</td>
<td>阿毗達磨雜集論</td>
<td>Abhidharma-samuc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Hsuan</td>
<td>安玄</td>
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<tr>
<td>An Shih-kao</td>
<td>安世高</td>
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<td>Cheng Ch’iao</td>
<td>齊樵</td>
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<tr>
<td>ch‘eng-yü</td>
<td>成語</td>
<td>set phrase (so-called “idiom”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>chi</td>
<td>僧</td>
<td>gābhā verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi Hsien-lin</td>
<td>季羡林</td>
<td>p.n.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi Tsang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ch‘i-yin lüeh</td>
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<td>Compendium on the Seven Scripts</td>
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<tr>
<td>ch‘iang-ching-wen</td>
<td>講經文</td>
<td>sūtra lecture text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chih Lou-chia-ch’an</td>
<td>支樓迦讖</td>
<td>p.n.</td>
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<td>Chih Yao</td>
<td>支曜</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chin shih kuo-yü</td>
<td>金史國語</td>
<td>National Language History of the Jurchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chin-shih-nü</td>
<td>近事女</td>
<td>upāśikā lay woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chōng Inji</td>
<td>鄭麟趾</td>
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<td>Chou Yu-kuang</td>
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<td>Chu Ch’ing-chih</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Vernacular Writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pali pabbajjā leaving the home (to become a monk)</td>
<td>p.n.</td>
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### Chinese Terms and Meanings

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<td>Chu Ta-li</td>
<td>竺大力</td>
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<td>chū’ nóm</td>
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<td>chü-shih</td>
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<td>Chungoku rekishi bunpō</td>
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<td>Fa-chü</td>
<td>法巨</td>
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<td>Fa-chü ching</td>
<td>法句經</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fa-hsien</td>
<td>法顯</td>
</tr>
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<td>Fa-li</td>
<td>法立</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fa-hua lun-shu</td>
<td>法華論疏</td>
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<tr>
<td>fan-ch’ieh</td>
<td>反切</td>
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<td>方塊字</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fo shuo</td>
<td>佛說</td>
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<tr>
<td><em><strong>Fo-tien yü chung-ku Han-yü tz’u-hui yen-chiu</strong></em></td>
<td>佛典與中古漢語詞彙研究 &quot;A Study of the Relationship between Buddhist Scriptures and the Vocabulary of Middle Sinitic&quot;</td>
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### Other Terms

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<td>hsi</td>
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<td>漢兒言語</td>
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<td>Han-yen</td>
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<td>Hsi-tzu ch’i-chi</td>
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<td>hsi-wen</td>
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<td>Hsien-peii</td>
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<td>Hsien-yü ching</td>
<td>賢愚經</td>
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### Notes

- Vietnamese vernacular writing: pravrajyā, Pali pabbajjā
- Classical fiction: apāsaka layman
- A Historical Grammar of Modern Chinese
- A Historical Study of Chinese Language
- The Great Chinese Encyclopedia.
- Dharmapiyada
- Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra
- "Brahmanic" (i.e. Buddhist) hymnody
- Apāya skillful means
- Topolect
- Tetragraph
- buddhavacana, buddhabhāṣita
- Spoken by the Buddha; cf. 佛所說 (that which was spoken by the Buddha), 佛言, 佛語, 真佛語 (the true words of the Buddha), 諸佛語言 (the words of the various Buddhas)
<table>
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<td>Hui-yüan</td>
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<td>Hunmin chông'âm</td>
<td>訓民正音</td>
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<td>I-fang-ming</td>
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<td>I hsìn ch'üan hsìn</td>
<td>以心傳心</td>
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<td>入矢義高</td>
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<td>i-yü</td>
<td>夷語</td>
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<td>Jan Hua-su</td>
<td>染華俗</td>
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<td>Ju-chih, see Yuē-chih</td>
<td>如是我聞</td>
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<td>工巧明</td>
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<td>Kuo</td>
<td>國</td>
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<td>Li Chin-hsi, Kuo-yü yun-tung shih kang</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- Hsiian-tsang: Hua-i, Hua-yen ching, Hui-chiao, Hui-yüan, Hunmin chông'âm, Hunmin chông'âm haerye

**Translations:**
- 玄奘: Xuanzang
- 華夷譯語: Sino-Mongolian Translations
- 華嚴經: Avatamsaka Sūtra
- 慧皎: Huaihui
- 訓民正音: Correct sounds for instructing the people
- 訓民正音解例: Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for Instructing the People
- 鄉札: Local letters
- 義淨: Clerk readings
- 吏讀: Sūtra Spoken Thus
- 醫方明: 由ädbi-cikitsä-vidyāsthānā: Medicine
- 以心傳心: Transmission from mind to mind
- 夷語: "Barbarian" language
tainted by Chinese customs
- 如是我聞: evam mayā śrūtam Thus have I heard; var. 如是聞, I heard, etc.
said thus
- 漢文: LS as written in Japan
- 高名凱: Pinyin
- 高僧: Eminent monk
- 考證學: Biographies of Eminent Monks
- 國語: Spoken language
- 官話: Mandarin
- 官話合聲字母: Letters for Combining the Sounds of Mandarin
- 官話字母: Mandarin letters
- 國語: (Korean) national language
- 訓: the Japanese reading of a sinograph
- 工巧明: śilpa-karma-sthāna-vidyā arts and crafts
- 國: Country, nation
- 國語: National (vernacular) language; title of an ancient Chinese historical work
- 黎錦熙, 國語運動史綱: Outline History of the National Language Movement
Li-shih yen-chiu
Liao shih kuo-yü

VICTOR H. MAIR

Studies on History
National Language History of the
Khitan

First Steps in Being Able to
Comprehend at a Glance

Analects

place-name

mantra magical formula or
incantation

"Vernacular Materials in the
Compendium of Northern
Treatises of Three Emperors,"

Bibliographic Quarterly

*Mahāsāmatthavipāsyanā

adhyātma-vidyā psychology

Introduction to the Chinese
Phonetic Script

recite the name of the Buddha
women's script

Angulimālīka-sūtra or
Angulimala-sūtra

Chinese-style phonetic reading
of a sinograph used in
Japanese vernacular writing
written Vernacular Sinitic
semiliterary-semivernacular
Northern Wei transformation text
Brahmanic script (see fan-shu)
not to establish written words
common speech (i.e., Modern
Standard Mandarin)

p.n.

Vietnamese roman alphabet
thirty-six letters

Veritable Records of the Reign of
King Sejong

name of a place in Fukien
śabda-vidyā linguistics
to be

Transcripts from a Northern
Mission

śloka stanza

book language
BUDDHISM AND THE RISE OF WRITTEN VERNACULAR

Sŏl Ch'ong
Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Shib-chi,
Ssu-ma Kuang, Tzu-chib
T'ung-chien
su
su-chi
sung
Sung Lien, Yüan shib
T'a chib-tu lu

Takata Tokio, “Chibetto moji
shosha 'Chôkan' no kenkyû
(honbun hen),” Tóhô gakubô
Ta-lu ti-ch'ü po-shih lun-wen
t'sung-k'an

"T'ang-tai ch'an-chia yü-lu so
chien te yü-fa ch'eng-fen"

tsao-lu
teng-yün
t'o-lo-ni
Tongguk chông'un

T'o-pa
"Tonkô benbun shû" kôgo goi bo-i

"Tonkô benbun shû" kôgo goi
sakuin

"Tsai lun yüan-shih Fo-chiao
(te yü-yen wen-t'i)"

"Tsai t'an Fu-t'u yü Fo"

tsan
Tso Ch'i-ung
Tso chuan

"Tu-huo-lo-yü te fa-hsien
yü k'ao-shih chi ch'i tsai
Chung-Yin wen-hua chiao-
lui te tso-yung"

Tuan Li-fen, “Tsui-tsao ch'u-
hsien hsi-tz' u (shih) te ti-
hsia tsu-liao,” Yü-wen t'ien-ti

Tun-huang
t'ung-yü
tsu yüeh

Wang Chao

薛聰
司馬遷, 史記
司馬光, 資治通鑑
俗
俗講
俗人
頌
宋濓, 元史
大智度論
高田時雄, チベット文字
書寫「長卷」の研究
(本文編), 東方學報
大陸地區博士論文叢刊
唐代禪家語録所見の語法
成分
道路
等韻
陀羅尼
東國正韻
拓/托跋
「敦煌變文集」口語語彙
補遺
「敦煌變文集」口語語彙
索引
再論原始佛教的語言問題
再談浮屠與佛
頌
左丘明
左傳
吐火羅語的發現與考釋及
其在中印文化交流的作
用
段莉芬, “最早出現繁詞
「是」的地下資料,”
語文天地
敦煌
通語
子曰
王照

Records of the Grand Historian
Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in
Government
vulgar
lay lecture
gṛhasṭha householder
song of praise
History of the Yuan Dynasty
Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra
"Studies on the 'Long Scroll' in
Tibetan Transcription (Text),"
Journal of Oriental Studies
Mainland Region Doctoral
Dissertations Series
"Grammatical Elements Ob-
served in Zen Records of
Conversations from the
T'ang Period"
way, road
rhyme classification
dhāranī mystical charm, prayer
Correct Rhymes of the Eastern
Kingdom
Supplement of Colloquial Expres-
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chi”
Index of Colloquial Expressions in
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"A Reexamination of the
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"More about the Chinese
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p.n.
Tso's Chronicle
"The Tokharian Language: Its
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"The Earliest Excavated Mate-
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World of Language and Script

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Wei Cheng, *Sui shu*

Wei-chih-nan

Wei Yuan, *Sheng-wu chi*

**Texts**

1. 国俗言音所解誦習佛經
2. 隨諸眾生應與何音而得受悟應為說之，是故名為隨國應作.
3. 隨國音讀誦
4. 若方國言音須引聲者作時無犯
5. 後魏初定中原，軍容號令，皆以夷語。後染華俗，多不能通，故錄其本言，相傳教習，謂之「國語」.
6. 以國語講通鑑
7. 命文臣依國語製國俗，不用蒙字，漢字
8. 子所雅言，詩書執（→藝）禮，皆雅言.
9. 傍加國語

"History of the Sui Dynasty"  
Vighna (p.n.)  
"Records of Sagely Military Exploits"  
Literary Sinitic  
"I heard the World-Honored explain this [meaning]."

"Thus did I hear the worshipful World-Honored speak."

"The way of language is cut off, the workings of the mind are obliterated."

"Indo-Scythian," more properly Kushān or Kuṣāṇa; perhaps were originally Tocharians
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