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Representing the Future:

Zur kulturellen Logik der Zukunft

[transcript]

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Translation, the Introduction of Western Time Consciousness into the Chinese Language, and Chinese Modernity

SINKWAN CHENG

Time has been a politically charged concept in the West since antiquity.¹ The Christians were able to face down their Roman executioners by proposing that the kingdom of the Christian God would outlast that of Rome, and that martyrdom would send them on to eternal life. Marx examined the quantification of time as the medium of the exploitative generation of surplus-value. Time is also a driving force behind nationalism and colonialism. Benedict Anderson discussed the homogeneous, empty time of the imagined community. The imposition of clock time by Western colonizers on the colonized radically disrupted and altered

1 I wish to thank the following institutions for their generous fellowship support that made this project possible: the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University, Ustinov College and Hild Bede College at Durham University, and the International Institute for Asian Studies at Leiden University. Special thanks are also due to Professor Jing Guantao and Professor Liu Qingfeng for granting me access to their research data on semantic changes in late Qing and early modern China, as well as to their assistant Ms. Tzu-yu Hsu for her gracious help.

native peoples' relationships to labor and time by objectifying both as commodities. The new calendar imposed by the colonizer distorted the natives' relations to customs and habits,² to the self and to community. Above all, time conceived in terms of progress played critical roles for justifying both colonialism and decolonization.

In short, time has been used as a tool of both oppression and liberation from a very early stage in Western culture. For this reason, time has been repeatedly a major issue for revolutions and revolutionaries. The French Revolution, for example, created a revolutionary calendar, and declared that time and human history began anew.³ Lenin promoted the revolutionary vanguards on the grounds that the elites were ahead of their *time*. Under the title »Translation, the Introduction of Linear Time Consciousness into the Chinese Language, and Chinese Social and Political Modernity«, my book project analyzes the importation of linear time into the Chinese language and its ramifications for Chinese politics and society. Due to space limit, this essay will confine itself to summarizing the main arguments of my book manuscript.

My book demonstrates how, in the late nineteenth to the early 20th century,⁴ translations of Western texts introduced a new temporal di-

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- 2 The colonizer also imposes a new calendar severing the natives' ties to their own culture by institutionalizing new festivals and rituals to inscribe new cultural memories, routines and habits.
 - 3 The idea of beginning anew, of wiping out hitherto existing history carries both liberating and totalitarian potentials. Time is thus also tied to violence. Part II of my project analyzes the violence during the Cultural Revolution in relation to the new time consciousness in China.
 - 4 Since the late 1890s, Chinese translations of Western concepts quite often went through the detour of Japanese translations. Before the First Sino-Japanese War, however, Europe was China's model, and translations were produced directly from Western texts. Direct translations gradually resumed after the end of 1905 due to a change in Japanese regulations regarding Chinese students. At around this time, the Chinese government once again promoted Europe and the United States instead of Japan for

mension into the tenseless Chinese language and gradually brought about a linear time consciousness in China. The time consciousness gave the Chinese a new concept of the future and laid the path for China's modernization. Drawing from Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, my book elaborates the subject at hand via an analysis of two waves of temporalization of the Chinese language. Particular attention is paid to the second wave given its radicality and its controversial social and political consequences.

The book is divided into an introduction and two parts.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction to my book identifies a significant lacuna in current Translation Studies and Chinese Studies scholarships – a lacuna which my project undertakes to address. When discussing the contributions made by translation to China's modernization process, scholars have been focusing on the *content* of the texts being translated. Hardly any attention has been paid to the ways in which translation, through effecting changes in the Chinese language, has transformed the Chinese people's *Weltanschauung* at a fundamental level – only with that transformation did China become truly ready for modernity. For example, tenses did not exist in classical Chinese. But given the prominence of the temporal dimension in Western languages, time markers were gradually invented for the Chinese language as Chinese intellectuals engaged in translations of Western texts. These time markers brought a linear concept of time to Chinese society, and only with that new way of experiencing time could ›the modern‹ become conceivable for the Chinese people. It is not surprising that China's linguistic revolutions took place alongside the country's quest for scientific, economic and political modernity.

overseas studies. Translating from Western sources became the trend again in the second half of the 1910s, and certainly no later than 1919.

PART I. THE TWO LINGUISTIC REVOLUTIONS AND THE TEMPORALIZATION OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

China underwent two major linguistic revolutions: the New Culture Movement (1917-1923) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Continuous between the two waves was a temporalization of the Chinese language. Driven by an eagerness to launch China into the progressive future, both movements featured a strong temporalization of the Chinese language. Also connected to this modernization urge was an attempt to simplify the Chinese language in order to facilitate mass literacy and create for a new China an educated citizenry capable of withstanding challenges from various colonial powers. (Arguments for simplifying Chinese characters gained momentum with the New Culture Movement. In 1920, Qian Xuantong published his »Proposal for Reducing the Strokes of Chinese Characters« in »The New Youths«. His »Agenda for Adopting Existing Simplified Characters« was endorsed by the Education Department of the Nationalist Government in 1934.)⁵

5 The approved language reform was never put into effect under the Nationalist Government who could ill afford the expenditure of any energy and resources aside from coping with the increasing pressures from both Japanese aggression and the expansion of Chinese Communism. Arguments for character simplification in support of Chinese modernity began before the New Culture Movement (1917-1923). Lufei Kui's 1909 proposal for using simplified characters in education is a case in point. The May Fourth Movement, however, helped bring to the forefront of many Chinese intellectuals' attention that language reform would be fundamental for the modernization of China. Before long, participants in the Movement argued that traditional Chinese writing system should be either simplified or completely abolished. Fu Sinian, a leader of the May Fourth Movement, denigrated Chinese characters as »the scribbling of ox-demons and snake-gods« (牛鬼蛇神的文字). Lu Xun, a radical intellectual who waged war on the

The temporalization of the Chinese language gathered full momentum after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895 when Chinese intellectuals recognized the urgency of modernization. One good example of this temporalization was the wide currency gained by the neologism *yundong* (used to translate the Western political concept ›movement‹) since the end of the 19th century – a term which gave the May Fourth and the Vernacular Movements their names, and which frantically multiplied during the Cultural Revolution. »Movement« was closely related to all kinds of »isms« which, as Koselleck pointed out, was a future-loaded expression prevalent in 18th and 19th century Europe.⁶ All »isms« legitimized themselves in terms of what they promised to be, rather than what they were. All »isms« were thus asso-

»cannibalistic« feudalism (吃人的旧礼教), issued the following sensational warning: »Keep the Han script and China shall surely be destroyed« (汉字不灭, 中国必亡). Traditional Chinese writing continues to be blamed from time to time for holding back Chinese economy from the late 19th to the early 20th century. See, for example, Yen Yuehping's »Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society« (2005).

- 6 A number of scholars have adopted Koselleck's analysis about the temporalization of the German language to analyze a similar development in other European languages during the *Sattelzeit* (around 1750-1850). During this period, Western languages became charged with a strong future dimension and teleological overtone: »Time‹ affected the entire linguistic stock and, from the period of the French Revolution at the latest, colored the entire political and social vocabulary. Since then, there has hardly been a central concept of political theory or social programs which does not contain a coefficient of temporal change, in the absence of which nothing can be recognized, nothing thought or argued, without the loss of conceptual force. Time itself becomes a title of legitimation open to occupation from all sides. Specific legitimizing concepts would no longer be possible without temporal perspective« (Koselleck 2004: 248).

ciated with *movement* forward from the present into the future.⁷ Significantly, it is by virtue of being transformed into concepts of movement that these concepts »made obligatory intervention into everyday political affairs« (Koselleck 2004: 249).

PART II. THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION, THE RADICAL TEMPORALIZATION OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE, AND ITS AMBIGUOUS LEGACY

Eager to launch China forward into modernity, the New Culture Movement promoted not just the vernacular but also multiple temporalized expressions of Western origins such as ›movement‹, ›emancipation‹, ›progress‹ and ›development‹.⁸ Compared to the New Culture Movement, the linguistic revolution launched by the Cultural Revolution was much more self-conscious, radical and aggressive in promoting a new concept of time to accelerate China's modernization. Its consequences were also more controversial. This second linguistic revolution was multi-faceted, including the official replacement of simplified

7 All »isms« thus necessarily took on the form of »movement« – that is, moving from the present into the future. Take, for example, Koselleck's remarks on »republicanism«: »Republicanism was therefore a concept of movement which did for political action what ›progress‹ promised to do for the whole of history. The old concept of ›republic,‹ which had previously indicated a condition, became a telos, and was at the same time rendered into a concept of movement by means of the suffix ›ism«« (Koselleck 2004: 273).

8 ›Progress‹, ›development‹ and ›emancipation‹ – some of the best known key concepts promoted by the modern West in connection with its linear narrative about the *telos* of human history – had been eagerly embraced by Chinese intellectuals after the First Sino-Japanese War. Chinese reception of such Western ideas reached its first climax in the May Fourth Movement in 1919.

for traditional characters and the radical equalization of everyone as ›Comrade‹ in salutations. Eager to rush China ahead during the Cold War period, the Chinese language was radically temporalized during this time. The term ›new‹ (新) became ubiquitous as, for example, the promises of a *new* society, a *new* China, and the destruction of the old for the new (破旧立新).⁹ Equally omnipresent was the term ›modernization‹ (现代化), ›modern‹ invoking the concept ›new‹. Despite the fact that the word *xin* (新) had existed for centuries prior to the Cultural Revolution, it used to refer to periodic renewals on a *cyclical* temporal scheme. A good example would be Shang Tang's famous saying recorded in ›The Great Learning‹ (大学): ›If it's possible to renew oneself one day, one should renew oneself everyday‹ (苟日新, 日日新, 又日新). After the May Fourth Movement, the term became progressively associated with a radical breakthrough on a linear temporal scheme. However, it was during the Cultural Revolution that *xin* (新) truly took on the meaning of absolute newness in the French Revolution sense of starting *ex nihilo*, of which the Communist slogan ›Destroy the old to establish the new‹ (破旧立新) is a rough equi-

9 One good example is the campaign dubbed ›Smashing the Four Olds, Establishing the Four News‹ (破四舊, 立四新) as per Article 16 of the Central Committee's ›Decisions Concerning the Launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution‹ (关于开展无产阶级文化大革命的決定) passed on August 8, 1966. The article called for the smashing of any residue of feudalistic and bourgeois elements in order to establish the ›Four News‹. ›The Four Olds‹ refers to the old mindsets, old culture, old customs and old habits. Replacing all these ›outdated‹ elements were ›The Four News‹ – new mindsets, new culture, new customs and new habits. According to Geremie R. Barmé, the ultimate goal of the campaign was ›[...] to create a transformed, and universally applicable, Chinese civilisation under the guiding light of Mao Zedong Thought – though ›civilisation‹ itself was eschewed.‹ (Barmé 2013: xv)

valent.¹⁰ This is not surprising: although the Cultural Revolution demonized the West, Communism originated from the West, and Marx was a great admirer of the French Revolution.¹¹

10 The transplantation of *xin* (新) from a cyclical to a linear temporal scheme gave the word an emotional charge hitherto unknown. *Xin* became a promise of an absolutely new beginning – a promise of deliverance of the Chinese people from the oppressions of both feudal corruptions and foreign aggressions, and a promise to set China on an *irreversible* path of emancipation and self-determination. The new semantics of *xin*, in other words, inaugurated a new cultural matrix making possible various utopic programs for the radical remaking of the nation and its people. In the words of Melvin Richter: »[...] historicized and future-loaded concepts greatly increased the emotional charge, intensity, and polarization of passions in political and social life [...]. Such changes in concepts of time also helped create the horizon within which political and social concepts functioned thereafter« (Richter/Richter 2006: 349-50). Interesting comparisons can be drawn between the semantic charge of *xin* in China's newly acquired linear time consciousness, and the visionary semantics injected into the Western term »revolution« when it was transposed from a cyclical to a linear temporal horizon. The latter term changed meaning with the French Revolution – from its original reference of »revolting back« (as in the Glorious Revolution) to that of an absolute break with the past (as in the French Revolution). Until the late 18th century, the term had invoked the association of an astronomical body going around an orbit and returning to its original position. The Glorious Revolution in 1688, for example, alluded to the restoration of the rightful monarchy. Even violent forms of political disturbances were interpreted as disruptions which would finally be restored to their original order. With the French Revolution, however, the term »revolution« changed meaning decisively. The French Revolution declared itself to have made an absolute break with previous human history in its entirety – a declaration the French sought to make good with the inauguration of a revolutionary calendar. From then on, »[...] »Revolution« was completely temporalized, such that Jacob Burckhardt could define the French Revolution

The eagerness to speed up modernization by destroying the old in order to facilitate the birth of the new saturated the language of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, future-loaded languages became benchmarks for separating the progressives from the conservatives and the counter-revolutionaries, with those preferring a slower temporal pace accused of holding China backwards. A problem inhabited this frantic valorization of the new in language. As Koselleck points out, the future-oriented languages of modernity are based on (future) expectations rather than (past) experience.¹² In fact, ›the lesser the experience,

as ›the first period of our current revolutionary world epoch« (Koselleck 2004: 250). Set into a new linear temporality, ›revolution« became an irreversible proceeding precipitating an ever-extending self-determination of the whole humankind. As Melvin Richter observes: »Especially significant for establishing such horizons oriented towards the future were eschatologies, religious or secularized, which made political actors conceive of themselves as either already living in an unique period, or else in one that would make history by transforming the world as hitherto known.« (Richter/Richter 2006: 350)

- 11 Communism was more aggressive than many other movements in claiming the future for itself. The declaration by Marx and Engels from the first part of »The German Ideology« provides us with a glimpse into their rigorous future orientation: »Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real movement which abolishes the present state of things*. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence« (emphasis mine, S.C.).
- 12 Koselleck characterizes such future-loaded languages as follows: »[...] they are not based on a predefined and common experience. Rather they compensate for a deficiency of experience by a future outline which is supposed to be realised. The basic pattern, the constitutive difference between the store of experience (*Erfahrungshaushalt*) and the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*) in temporalization, marks all of these key-concepts (*Leitbegriffe*).« (Koselleck 1997: 21)

the greater the expectation, and the more visionary and ›inspiring‹ such language becomes. *However, precisely because such language owes more to hope than experience and trumps experience with expectation, its visionary quality leaves unclear how such future goals are to be attained* and what their costs would be. The last part of my project demonstrates how the abuse of a utopian language and social consciousness both reflect and effect chaos, conflicts, and violence during the Cultural Revolution.

ORIGINALITY OF THE PROJECT

1. No writing in any discipline to my knowledge traces China's modernization to the temporalization of the Chinese language.
2. Translation Studies scholars have overlooked the intimate links between language and consciousness when discussing the spread of modernity from the West to China by limiting themselves to the content of the texts being translated.
3. Discussions of the Cultural Revolution so far have failed to detect the various neologisms and political jargons such as *yundong* and *xin* as symptomatic of a radical temporalization of the Chinese language during this period.
4. The proposed topic has timely significance. In the age of globalization and digitalization, and with the rising prominence of China on the world stage as well as the ever-changing relationships between China and Taiwan, there are heated debates throughout East Asia as different countries feel the need to agree on a common adoption of either simplified or traditional characters. Note especially that such debates are by no means confined to the Greater China region, but include countries such as Korea and Japan.
5. I am not aware of any previous studies that have considered how a language grounded in expectations rather than experience both reflects and effects chaos and conflicts during the Cultural Revolution.

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13 Anmerkung der Herausgeber: Mit * markierte Titel sind als weiterführend zu verstehen.

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