

# Words from abroad in China

## Past, present and future

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**Abstract** Since the half of the twentieth century and still in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a heated debate has been going on in China about borrowings in Chinese lexicon; the peaks of this debate were reached during the 1950s and in the last ten years. In order to understand the features of such long-lasting debate, the analysis of the contents of a number of articles and of monographs dealing with borrowings in Chinese academic and non-academic journals and magazines appeared in both the above-mentioned spans of time has sketched the lines of the debating parties; a brief review of relevant official acts and statements has pointed out the lines of intervention of the State. It turned out that a persistent opposition is contrasting more and more overtly language purists and language pragmatists; Chinese government is trying to mediate between the two parties, but the latest acts indicate that the full-fledged domestic language policy, implemented by the PRC, is leaning towards a standardization and the consequent reduction of the number of borrowings in Chinese lexicon.

### 1 Introduction: the full-fledged language policy of a self-aware country

In the next ten years China will make a strong effort in order to complete the transformation of its society into a «society of knowledge», by promoting education, research and innovation. The principle of innovation has inspired the *Outline of China's National plan for medium and long-term education reform and development* (*Guojia zhongchangqi jiaoyu gaige he fazhan guihua gangyao* 国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要), which has been presented in 2010 in order to «give priority to education and turn China into a country rich in human resources [...], to enhance citizens' overall quality, boost educational development in a scientific way». Inasmuch as language is the basis of education, the vehicle for delivering any educative message, plans for the development of China's common national language have been considered necessary as well. Thus at the end of 2012 the Ministry of education and the State Language Commission (*Guojia yuwei* 国家语委) have published the *Outline of China's national plan for medium and long-term agenda for Chinese language and characters reform and development* (*Guojia zhongchangqi yuyan wenzi shiye gaige he fazhan guihua gangyao* 国家中长期语言文字事业改革和发展规划纲要, hereinafter *Language plan outline*).

The *Language plan outline* is far more than a simple administrative text, formulating ancillary tasks for the development of national education. The *Language plan outline* can be considered the latest step of China's full-fledged domestic language policy, pursuing the goal of enhancing the

establishment of Putonghua as a tool for national progress. As Li Yuming 李宇明 (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, pp. III-VI) puts it, China needs a widespread common language, therefore a language policy is advisable; but only linguistic awareness (*yuyan yishi* 语言意识), i.e. the «the awareness of the meaning of the language for each individual, for each community, for the whole society and for the country», may lead language policy to succeed and thence to «provide benefit for the country and for the people» (*liguo limin* 利国利民), that is why Li Yuming urges people to waken linguistic awareness (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, pp. V-VI). The *Language plan outline* is even more explicit: it establishes a relation between the development of the language and «the cultural self-awareness» (*wenhua zijue* 文化自觉) and «self-confidence» (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信) of the Chinese people and ultimately the broader goals of the construction of a «well-off society» (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) and of the «great renaissance» (*weida fuxing* 伟大复兴) of Chinese people (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 13).

Similarly to what has happened in the implementation of several national language policies and still happens now (cf. for instance Adamo, Della Valle 2003, pp. 7-18 or Wright 2004, pp. 122-135, on French language policy), one of the main concerns of China's language policy is the standardization of the language, the definition of the officially accepted patterns in all the areas of language and consequently the supervision and the control of the commonly spoken language. Among the most troublesome linguistic aspects to be supervised and controlled in any linguistic plan there are «lexical interferences» (hereinafter LIs; commonly called «borrowings»). China's *Language plan outline* is no exception: the standardization of the «employment of the words of foreign languages» (*waiguo yuyan wenzi shiyong* 外国语言文字使用) is among the first tasks to be accomplished (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 15). It is not the first time that LIs (*wailaici* 外来词) are attacked by one part of the Chinese cultural establishment and are defended by the other part of the scholarly world, as a sort of theoretical battlefield between opposite standpoints on language. In my contribution, I will concentrate on the approach to LIs of the Chinese scholars, the PRC institutions involved in language policies and the Chinese society, and the debates that have been going on this matter, with particular attention to the latest relevant events.

## 2 The prejudice against LIs

In different times and places, LIs have always drawn an anxious attention by scholars and governments. They were among the main objects of censorship of the earliest academies, such as the Accademia dei Lincei or the Académie Française, whose task was to settle the linguistic convention that their contemporary ruling classes wanted to impose upon their

subjects (cf. Wright 2004, pp. 54-57). Later, since Herder theorized that language is the embodiment of the spirit of a nation, the idea that language was to be preserved against foreignisms got even stronger. Even though contact linguistics, the field of research dealing with LIs, since the 1880s has gained general consensus and at present there would be hardly any scholar trying even to deny theoretically the existence of LIs (Thomason, Kaufman 1988, p. 1), nonetheless a sort of purist preconception against them still creeps even in the opinions of some scholars (as Francesco Sabatini and Gian Tommaso Scarascia Mugnozza admit; cf. Adamo, Della Valle 2003, p. 2; John Humbley in: Depecker, Dubois 2005, pp. 27-36). Although nearly half a century has passed, Weinreich (1968, pp. 99-103) described lucidly the phenomenon of language loyalty, which may explain the opposition between purist and conservatory linguistic standpoints and their opponents. Nativist positions are held by those who enjoy social privileges, usually the ruling classes, but feel threatened by cultural changes, in particular by the alarming competition of another language/culture: therefore they propose a standardized version of the language and recommend to choose and speak it as a sort of linguistic act of faith. Their opponents are those who choose the language of the competing language/culture; they often sustain anti-purist and sometimes anti-intellectual stands. Such a description, applied to societies where the competition between languages is only at the lexical level, may suit the situation of the opposition between those who warn against LIs coming from a foreign (but not really menacing) language/culture and those who do not.

### 3 Words from abroad, distant past

The rise of the scientific interest toward LIs in China started around the 1950s: it is no wonder that it bloomed in the period of the greater debate about the reform of Chinese language and its standardization. Similarly to the present situation, in those years LIs occupied a relevant part of Chinese lexicon, and each of them counted many variants, among which Chinese linguists had to choose those officially adopted. Such an activity caused them to reflect upon the theoretical definition of LIs, resulting in the formation of two parties. On the one hand there were those who upheld a restrictive notion (Liu 1958; Zhang 1958; Lü 1967, pp. 12-13 and Wang Li 1958, pp. 507-528): in their opinion, only phonetic loans and the original graphic (Japanese) loans were to be considered LIs. On the other hand, there were those who proposed a broader notion: in their opinion, a LI is any word created after any form of linguistic contact (Luo 1945; Zheng 1956; Wang Lida 1958). Japanese loans were a category of LIs drawing much attention: 'restrictivists' acknowledged as *wailaici* only the words created originally in Japan and not the words originally created in China,

later adopted in Japan and finally come back to China; on the other hand the 'broadists' maintained that the returned Japanese loans were LIs as well. In the issues of 1958 of the influential journal *Zhongguo yuwen* 中国语文 the debate reached its hottest point, with several articles, published one after another, disputing this matter.

There are two features of the 1950s debate on *wailaici* which deserve to be remarked. A major part of the debate was focused on the Japanese loans. It is reasonable to hypothesize that, inasmuch as they were the newest batch of LIs imported (the majority was not older than sixty years), they were still most easily detectable as «foreign», but yet already integrated into Chinese lexicon, inasmuch as they were written with *hanzi* and not with *kana*. The pattern proposed by Weinreich seems to fit this case: it was an instance of discrimination against words coming from a language/culture (only) felt as a threatening cultural competitor. Secondly, it is noteworthy that the 'restrictivists' merely insisted on the approval of a theoretical limitation of *wailaici*, while no real effort of thorough substitution with native neologisms was proposed. It is highly likely that it was considered unfeasible to substitute entirely such a large part of the lexicon, already deeply rooted; a theoretical narrower definition and consequently a shortened list of LIs must have been considered enough to exhibit a pure lexicon. On the other hand, the 'broadists' did not want to pursue any ideological goal, but just wanted to follow the international treatment of the matter.

In 1958 Gao Mingkai 高名凯 and Liu Zhengtan 刘正坛 published their *Xiandai hanyu wailaici yanjiu* 现代汉语外来词研究 (Study on loanwords in modern Chinese; Gao, Liu 1958); this work thoroughly studies lexical interference items in the Chinese lexicon, their origins and the patterns of their introduction, adopting the restrictive standpoint. Gao and Liu's study epitomized the restrictive viewpoint and, due to the exhaustive analysis of this matter, became the most authoritative reference book on the matter. The restrictive view afterwards prevailed to the point that the very subject of LIs lost the attention of the linguists. For example, in *Zhongguo yuwen*, after 1958 hardly any article dealing with LIs appeared for two decades, and even since 1980s they have been relatively rare.

#### 4 Words from abroad in China, recent past

The interest for LIs renewed in 1980s, when some brand new dictionaries exclusively devoted to them were published, some of them following the restrictive principle and some the broad principle; then the first monograph on LIs to appear after 1958 was Shi (1990), followed by Shi (2000). Shi Youwei took up the broad standpoint, which in times undermined the primacy of the narrow standpoint, gained common acknowledgement and in the latest two decades has become definitely prevalent: up to the latest

monographs and articles, linguists follow the international trend about contact linguistics, which considers as lexical interference items any lexical item created after whatever kind of linguistic or cultural contact, even though in different degrees (among the latest Wan 2007 or Zhou 2009). The theoretical framework for dealing with LIs is the broad one also in articles, even though scholarly activity is not so interested in them. As a matter of fact, *Cishu yanjiu* 辞书研究, one of the most important journals on lexicology and lexicography, since its foundation in 1979 up to 2013, published 107 articles having in their titles, in their abstracts or among their keywords *wailaici* 外来词, *wailaiyu* 外来语, *jieci* 借词 «borrowing», *yinyi* 音译 «phonetic loan», *yiyi* 意译 «semantic calque» or *zimuci* 字母词 «Latin-lettered word».

While Chinese linguists in general agree to the wide-sense notion of LIs, so that it can be stated that the controversy on LIs, discussed in the 1950s, has been settled, it is quite apparent that such an ardent dispute on LIs moved to the non-academic sphere of society. After carrying out a retrieval of the website of the *People's Daily*, it turned out that the word *wailaici* occurs in about 450 pages since 2000 up to the end of 2013; in about 90 pages the word occurs to label the origin of a word, while the other pages deal more directly with the topic of LIs itself. The label of LI, in these non-specialized articles, is attributed to very different groups of words: many of them are acronyms (as PM2.5, CPI, GDP or ATM) and phonetic loans (as *fensi* 粉丝 «fans» or *suwei'ai* 苏维埃 «soviet»), there are also some structural calques (as *qinian zhi yang* 七年之痒 «seven-year itch») or even some words belonging to more sophisticated patterns (as *dingke* 丁克 coming from the acronym «Double Income No Kids», according to Guo 2012; *haxibiao* 哈希表 «hashtag», as reported in a manual of informatics published by the education center Wanxue Haiwen [2008], or *meng* 萌 from the Japanese *moe* もえ, meaning «cute», «adorable», according to Wang 2010).

The retrieval of the articles above-mentioned has pointed out that there is a growth in the number of articles after the publications of comments, recommendations, declarations of guidelines or even laws establishing or simply suggesting a limitation in the use of LIs, especially phonetic loans, acronyms and the few direct transplantations, even the most popular ones. On 13 May 2004, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) transmitted the communication on the «Implementation of the project for the construction of a moral thought in the minors by its enhancement or amendment enacted by film and television broadcast»; it provides that morality is to be preserved by means of the prohibition to anchormen of scanty dresses, coloured hair and mingled Chinese with foreign languages or Hong Kong or Taiwan speech. On 1 March 2006, the Government of Shanghai, for the first time in China, declared illegal to use such words as *PK* or *fensi* 粉丝, by promulgating a regulation for the implementation of the language-related laws. It orders that public documents,

schoolbooks and news reports must not employ «web words», which are contrary to the standard of Chinese. On 7 April 2010, Jiang Heping 江和平, chief inspector of the national all-sport channel, CCTV5, prohibited to anchor men, journalists and subtitlers to use English acronyms as «NBA», «GDP», «WTO», «CPI» and ordered to use full Chinese definition instead. On 23 November 2010, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) ordered that every published item, may it be newspapers, books, web pages, audio-video products or else, must follow the rules of Chinese standard, therefore must be standardized; this means that foreign writing codes, incorrect grammatical rules are banned and that every proper foreign name must be translated carefully.

Such stances were welcomed by some commentators as Fu (2010), worried for the loss of purity of Chinese: they feel that Chinese is undergoing the «invasion» of English words, which, like little «ants», are making the «dam» of the Chinese language fall apart and transforming it into a «mingled up» Chinglish; therefore, a garrison of the Chinese language and the Chinese identity is called for, inasmuch as the employment of so many «English words» may nourish a sense of inferiority towards the West (Lin 2004, Wang 2006). On the other hand, official stances led to some discontent among netizens, expressed in blogs and forums. For instance, Gu (2010) warned that to ban all at once popular acronyms might not be well accepted by the public; Chao (2010) expressed opposition to a general and not reasonable standardization. The risk of the «one-cut» policy towards acronyms, mostly the generally used and generally known ones, is that Government may reveal a sort of political laziness and cause prohibited words, on the contrary, to become hot (Han 2010). In particular GAPP's regulation is only negative and lacks any positive guideline or recommended practices for substituting the LIs banned (Yi 2010); if positive, scientific method will not be provided, such a regulation might turn out to be a «dead rule, unable to keep under control and alive language» (Zhang 2010).

## 5 Words from abroad in China, present

In comparison with the Japanese loans, which linguists as Wang Li or Lü Shuxiang despised so much in the 1950s, the types of LIs against which purists have been striving in the latest years appear far more dangerous. After all, it is doubtful that in the 1950s and 1960s Japan could represent a really fearful cultural competitor, because of the wide cultural, economic and ideological distances between the two countries. Secondly, Japanese loans had long ceased to enter Chinese lexicon; at that time Russian LIs were far more recurrent instead, and some English LIs were insinuating Chinese lexicon as well. But what is most relevant is that the Japanese loans were written with *hanzi* and not with *kana*, therefore they could be

absorbed into Chinese quickly and quickly could lose their appearance of foreignness, leaving Chinese language graphic appearance untouched. Nowadays, the purists mostly dread *zimuci* (may it be pure acronyms, mingles of letters and characters or entire lettered transplantations): this is certainly due to the fact that now the West does exert a strong charm over Chinese people and Western ways have many followers; moreover, the invasion of *zimuci* is (described as) unceasing and skyrocketing; but what makes purists most anxious is that Latin letters and *hanzi* are poles apart, thus they cannot stand even the concurrence of the two writing codes, afraid that at first the concurrence may spoil the spirit of the Chinese language and that at last letters may exceed characters.

For this reason it is no surprise that in the latest years the opposition against LIs and in particular *zimuci* has grown extremely intense, to the point that a real «war for the safeguard of Chinese», after many years of advocacy, in 2012 was eventually launched. On 15 July 2012, the Commercial Press released the *Xiandai hanyu cidian - di 6 ban* 现代汉语词典—第6版 (Contemporary Chinese dictionary, 6th ed.) (*Xiandai hanyu* 2012; CCD6). This dictionary raised immediately some criticism on several aspects of its compilation; the most severe criticisms were against the compilation of a list of «words starting with Western letters» (mainly borrowed acronyms). The most outraged commentators of the CCD6 felt so appalled that around 110 of them on 27 August denounced one of the chief revisers, Jiang Lansheng 江蓝生, and her collaborators, to the GAPP and to the State Language Commission for violation of the laws and regulations concerned with language (Yang, Zhang 2012); very appropriately did Wang (2012) refer to such litigation as «linguistic lawsuit» (*yuyan guansi* 语言官司). The debate has arisen a hot interest, with forums held on the internet and reportages on several magazines (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 256). Besides this, a further evidence is that the retrieval of the website of the *People's Daily* has resulted in a number of around 317 pages where the word *zimuci* occurs, nearly all of them published after the 15 July 2012 and dealing with the alleged problem of *zimuci* in Chinese lexicon. Even though it has been pinpointed that the call for a «linguistic defense war» was first launched by the writer Wang Meng 王蒙 in his speech at the Culture summit forum in 2004 entitled «For the great renaissance of the Chinese characters culture» (*Weile hanzi wenhua de weida fuxing* 为了汉字文化的伟大复兴), and that ever since the rhetoric of linguistic «purity» (*chunjie* 纯洁), linguistic «pollution» (*wuran* 污染) and linguistic «defense war» (*baoweizhan* 保卫战) has gained momentum, the State institutions and the law had never been officially appealed.

## 6 Words from abroad in China, future

The denunciation signed by the hundred intellectuals against the CCD6 has had an undeniable advantage: it made the purists (or at least the leaders of the purist part of Chinese society) come to the fore, it shed a light on their identities; after browsing their names, looking up their carriers and activities, reading their articles, the shape of this purist faction and, by contrast, the shape of the other faction (which we will call «pragmatist») have turned out quite clear-cut. They all share a strong devotion to *hanzi*. As a matter of fact, most of the purists are linguists involved in *hanzi* studies (as Li Minsheng 李敏生, researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at Chinese Academy of social sciences and vice-president of the Beijing International Centre for research on Chinese characters or Wang Wenyan 王文元, researcher at the CASS); some are programmers involved in *hanzi* treatment (as Wang Yongmin 王永民, who developed the IME Wubi, or Yuwen Yongquan 宇文永权, who created a system for fast calculation); some are calligraphers (as Luo Yejian 罗业健); some are journalists (as Fu Zhenguo 傅振国, vice-director of the section for Education Culture and Science of the overseas edition of the *Renmin Ribao* and leader of the group of petitioners), translators (as Jiang Feng 江枫). Secondly, many of them are involved in associations for the protection and promotion of *hanzi* (as the Beijing International Association for *Hanzi* Studies [Beijing guoji hanzi yanjiuhui 北京国际汉字研究会]). Finally, many of them are active members of associations for the protection of Chinese traditional culture (as the Association for the Promotion of Chinese Traditional Culture [Zhongguo chuantong wenhua cujinhui 中国传统文化促进会]) and the promotion of the renaissance of China (as the Institute for the Renaissance of Chinese Culture [Zhonghua wenhua fuxing yanjiuyuan 中华文化复兴研究院]). Their opponents are usually lexicographers (such as Li Yuming or Zhou Hongbo 周洪波) or grammarians (as Lu Jianming 陆俭明): similarly to the 'broadists' of the 1950s, no ideological stand is detectable in their appeals but just serve the cause of linguistic research.

The 'war' between these two outlooks on language at first sight may look very severe, inasmuch as it insinuates the conflict between entities affiliated to the State Council (the GAPP and the SARFT, which had issued more and more restrictive notices limiting the diffusion of lettered words, and the CASS, whose lexicographical department has issued a dictionary, the CCD6, giving certain lettered words a sort of linguistic legitimation) and among scholars (the *hanzi* linguists and the lexicographers, all members of CASS).

The latest activities of the State Council are indicating that a conciliation between these points of view is being sought. One of the main criticisms against the restrictive policy on LIs introduced by Chinese official bodies in the last decade (put forward both by pragmatists and by some purists



as well), was that a prohibition without an authority charged with the task of watching over its enforcement and of proposing valuable substitute to the banned LIs would just create disorientation and eventually would turn out to be useless (cf. Jiang 2011). In order to overcome this gap, on 20 June 2012, the committee of expert of the Inter-ministerial Joint Meeting System for the Standardization of Translation of Foreign Languages (Waiyu zhongwen yixie guifan buji lianxi huiyi zhidu 外语中文译写规范部际联席会议制度) was summoned to establish a permanent structure. Created under the collaboration of ten ministries, agencies and educational bodies (such as the State Language Commission, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education, the GAPP, the SARFT and the CASS), its main task is to manage the work of translation of proper names of people, places and things. The chairman of the foundation meeting Li Weihong 李卫红, director of the State Language Commission and vice-minister of Education, has stated that lately *wailaici* has skyrocketed in Chinese lexicon: even though it is the sign of the wealth and of the development of Chinese language and culture by means of the openness towards abroad, the lack of standardization has done harm to the communication, thence the necessity of the application of a uniform procedure for translations of foreign words (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 57). It has immediately started working and on 23 October 2013, it has released the first batch of standardized terms (but some of them were known since April, cf. Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 4): among them some of the acronyms that most have drawn attacks on, like «PM2.5», officially translated as *xi keliwu* 细颗粒物, or «IQ», now definitely *zhishang* 智商.

The activity of the System of Standardization, no matter how scientific and cooperative, is a form of control on LIs. For this reason, pragmatist linguists still advise to ask opinions and proposal to language expert, otherwise the success of language policy may be short-lived (Li Yuming in Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. V); in fact, this alleged «crisis of Chinese» (*Hanyu weiji* 汉语危机) is just a groundless fear (as Lu Jianming has put it in a conference in 2011) and may well rest (Lu 2013). As Zhao Chunyan 赵春燕 and Zhou Hongbo put it, the opposition between reformists and conservatives has always existed; in China it can be traced back to the times of the introduction of Chinese Latin spelling systems, and still it is not really a problem of linguistics but a problem of «nationalism» (*mincai* 民粹). The fact that some commentators who reckon the problem of cultural (and therefore) linguistic invasion more compelling than the problem of Diaoyu archipelago is a sign of how sensitive such a matter is and how unreasonable the outcomes of such positions may turn to be. «It is not a problem of language, but a problem of where China wants to go, where Chinese culture wants to go» (Zhou, Hou et al. 2013, p. 262).

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