

Chinese Grammatical Studies by Christian Missionaries :
Centering on Those by the 19th Century English Protestants

何 群 雄

Mashi Wentong 馬氏文通 (Shanghai, 1898) is widely acknowledged as the first grammatical study of Chinese using European methodology. This research, however, deals with earlier studies and consequently sheds light on a long neglected “blind corner” in the history of Chinese grammatical theory. Although there are various reasons this literature has been not given much attention, it is mainly due to the era of philology in which they presumed their “scientific standard to be low.”¹

The research was structured with the vertical time flow of historical development and the horizontal analysis using the theoretical principals of purpose, theory, method and terms, which are seen in the various works.

In my paper I assumed the first introduction of the notion of grammar in Chinese history to have been in the *Yuan* (元) dynasty. This is based on preliminary research which found records in *The Travel of Marco Polo*, which ask for the “dispatching of 100 wise men from the Pope” who are “versed in the seven arts.”² There may be other similar descriptions from around that time, but a focused study in that area must be left for another time. Also included is an outline of the history of language training at a monastery in early times, and the exchanges between Chinese students abroad (brethren in Europe, to be exact) and European sinologues, which is the historical background which sparked the outbreak of Chinese grammatical study. In addition, this author treats the necessity of finding

dictionaries and other materials written by missionaries because only late works, such as grammar books that have “grammar” or “arte” in the title, remain today.

Generally, there are two periods in the history of Christian missions in China, with the early 19th century marking the turning point. Catholic missionaries from Romance races such as Italy, France, Spain and Portugal were active in the first period, while Protestant missionaries from Germanic races such as England, America and Germany were more numerous in the second. The racial, lingual and cultural differences of the missionaries could have influenced the different views of China and Chinese, but a conclusion could not be reached because written materials by the Romance missionaries were not available. Analysis of the materials collected, however, implies that continuity between the two periods is more prominent than the divergence between them.

Using all the materials collected, the more than 200 year history of Chinese grammatical study is elaborated on in the paper, beginning with M. Martini's *Grammatica Sinica* (1682) and F. Varo's *Arte de la Lengua Mandarinina* (1703), the earliest materials available, to *Mashi Wentong* in the late 19th century. The main focus is on the three 19th century missionaries: Robert Morrison (1782~1834), Joshua Marshman (1768~1837) and Joseph Edkins (1823~1905); and their respective books: *A Grammar of the Chinese Language* (1815); *Clavis Sinica* (1814); and *A Grammar of Colloquial Chinese, as Exhibited in the Shanghai Dialect* (1853) and *A Grammar of the Chinese Colloquial Language, Commonly Called the Mandarin Dialect* (1857). The reasons for choosing these are threefold: 1) these 19th century studies developed based on the previous 200 years of study; 2) Morrison and Marshman are pioneers in the revival of Chinese grammatical study in the 19th century. These two books have features, respectively, which warrant them a place in the history of Chinese grammatical theory; and 3) Edkins is the last great sinologue who actually came to China as a missionary with a remarkably high level of colloquial

grammar.

Morrison's Grammar deals with practical grammar. In his book he says: "The object of the following work is to afford practical assistance to the student of Chinese. All theoretical disquisition respecting the nature of the language has been purposely omitted."³ With this acknowledgement, he completed his grammar, making full use of the grammatical studies done by missionaries which were based on the corresponding "English to Chinese" or "Chinese to English" semantic relations. So far as parts of speech are concerned, his Grammar is not very different from *Mashi Wentong* and the general structural system of today, but his references on syntax seem insufficient.

Marshman's *Clavis Sinica*, on the other hand, deals with the grammar of literary language (*wenyan* 文言). As he had never been to China but was trained in Chinese at an early stage by Catholic missionaries, his view on Chinese, as well as his grammar, was heavily influenced by a Catholic interpretation. *Wenyan* is the most sophisticated and established style of Chinese writing, nurtured through works of Chinese classical writers. Therefore, he claimed, examples must be from the classical works when writing a grammar book. The examples cited in his book are, accordingly, from works before the *Qin* (秦) dynasty, such as the *Analects of Confucius* and the *Discourses of Mencius*, thus resulting in a grammar of classical Chinese.

In his theory of Chinese characters, he compares the Chinese character system with Greek. "Character" is "word" and "radical" (部首) is "morpheme." His grammatical study extended over observation of the construction of characters; he interpreted that the "man" radical and the "woman" radical reflect gender, the "hand" radical and the "food" radical are often used for verbs, and the "tree" radical and the "stone" radical are often used for nouns. Such character theory is not found in any form in any other place and is therefore very suggestive in the history of Chinese grammatical study or even of Chinese character study.

After the Opium War, Christian missionaries were allowed to go into interior China and they studied the dialects very closely, broadening their areas of study and conducting careful research for the sake of carrying out their missionary work. *A Grammar of the Chinese Colloquial Language, Commonly called the Mandarin Dialect*, and *A Grammar of Colloquial Chinese, as Exhibited in the Shanghai Dialect* by Edkins, are good examples of the efforts and achievements and will remain essential material in the future for the study of the 19th century Chinese. The fact that these two books by Edkins with such a high standard existed already 100 years earlier is no doubt surprising.

In the end, materials this author found about Bi Huazhen, a scholar in the late *Qing* (清) dynasty who was cited by Edkins, are introduced. This is intended to call scholars' attention to the relationship between grammatical studies by scholars in the late Qing dynasty and "missionary grammar" and its perspectives, with the hopes of seeing a more detailed study done in the future.

It is a fact that since the end of the Ming dynasty, discussions on "xu (虛) /shi (實) /si (死) /huo (活)" became more frequent and closer to the notion of "grammar." The relation between the *Ma* brothers, *Xiangbo* (1840~1939) and *Jianzhong* (1845~1900), and churches is also pointed out. This is another "blind corner" in academic study.

In this research, purpose, theory, method, and terms in "missionary grammar" are discussed broadly by using various elements of the theoretical structure of grammatical study.

(1) Purpose. "Missionary grammar" began as a kind of practical grammar in order to teach Chinese to new missionaries who came to China. At the same time, closer research into the correspondence of grammar and vocabulary was needed in order to translate Chinese classics into Western languages and the Bible to Chinese. This resulted in advancements in "missionary grammar." The general approach was to point out the

semantic correspondence between Western languages and Chinese by employing the knowledge of grammar that had already been acquired by the missionaries.

(2) Theory. Some of the Jesuit missionaries, including Matteo Ricci, believed Christianity had taken root in China long ago. They concluded that certain expressions in Chinese classics such as “the King of the kings,” (*shangdi* 上帝) and certain customs like “Reverence of Heaven,” (*jingtian* 敬天) were the remains and evidence of early rooted Christianity. Studies on this triggered “Chinese rites controversy” and were thus prohibited by two edicts by Clementus XI in 1715, and Benedictus XIV in 1742. J. H. M. de Premare (1666-1735) is one of those who secretly continued studying. These ideas were inherited by Protestant missionaries in the 19th century. They translated Sinim, a place name in Isaiah 49:13, into “*Qin*” (泰), and claimed that the Chinese were the descendants of Havilah, a grandchild of Ham, and that the Chinese language and characters had been conveyed from the West. In addition, some of the missionaries were well versed in many languages, including Greek and Latin. They made comparative studies of Chinese and Sanskrit, Hebrew or Greek based on these ideas. Some even proposed “a shared etymology theory of Eurasian races.”

(3) Method. From the beginning, two confrontational methods of Chinese grammatical study are applied; one was to apply the Latin grammar faithfully to Chinese. Latin was a common language among the intellectuals in Europe at that time and Latin grammar was the grammar. No other grammar models except Latin were available for the writing of Chinese grammar. Note that this was not peculiar to Asian languages, including Chinese. “Substantially, the first Portuguese grammar, *Grammatica da Lingua Portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1540) by Joao de Barros, and other grammar books which followed were written based on the framework of the Latin grammar. This situation lasted quite a while. In other European countries, there were similar trends.”⁴

Yet, even under academic conditions such as these, there were some rare

exceptions in Chinese grammatical studies, as seen in the efforts of Premare. "Quitting the beaten track of the Latin grammarians, he struck out a method entirely new among Europeans." ⁵ As a result, a very interesting work, *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* (*Chinese Note*) has appeared. He thoroughly researched Chinese classics and characters, and made a kind of particle (*xuci* 虛詞) dictionary founded on the Chinese theory of *xuzi* 虛字. This is the first book to convey the nature of the Chinese language to Europe.

In the 19th century, theoretical studies of Chinese grammar advanced further as Protestant missionaries made the best of both methods. The recognition of the nature of Chinese was "English occupies a middle position between the classical European languages and monosyllabic languages of Asia. To the former it is related by its tense and case endings, etc.; to the latter, by its formation of compounds and its auxiliary verbs, etc." ⁶

As to the grammar: "If a common sentence be examined it is usually found to contain words of two kinds, viz. some that have a sense of their own independent of their use in any particular sentence, and others that are employed only for grammatical purposes, to express relations between words, to connect sentences and clauses, and to complete the sentences, so that it may be clear in meaning and elegant in form." ⁷ These words are, respectively, *shici* (實詞 substantives), and *xuci* (虛詞 particles). They found "the laws of combination existing in groups of words" ⁸ in Chinese. Words or a combination of words cannot be completed as a sentence without particles. "The examination of the groups referred to is in great part the province of etymology. Their union by the help of particles into sentences, it is the office of syntax to expound" ⁹ They understood that "*shici* theory + *xuci* theory = Chinese Grammar."

Furthermore, studies carried out did not stop on the level of Premare's *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*, "a dictionary of particles with copious examples of their use," but rather found out "the laws of the language and arrange(d) them in the most natural and convenient manner." ¹⁰ The result was a

classification and arrangement of *shici*, *xuci*, and rules for combinations based on an analytical model of English or Latin grammar. Here, the most distinguished sub-classifications in Chinese are *shici* and *xuci* because “the importance of considering Chinese words in this simple manner is apparent, when the character of many of them is kept in view. They may be used as noun, adjective, or verb”¹¹ because Chinese does not have the phonetic inflexion.

Theoretical systems of grammar underwent great changes in order to be applied to a wide range of research subjects from Latin and European colloquial languages to Chinese. Alternations of roles of a part of speech revealed in phonetic inflexion and “control-correspondence” relations of each part within the syntax were important to explain most of Latin grammar. Particles and word orders were not so important. In the studies of European colloquial languages and agglutinative languages of nomadic tribes in the middle of the Eurasian continent, word orders and particles attracted some attention, but none so much as Chinese study did. Since there are no phonetic inflexions in Chinese, *xuci* and word order were the most crucial parts in the grammatical study. Inevitably, the Chinese grammar study, its contents and methods, became radically distinct from the Latin grammar, and a grammatical study came to mean a nominal study of rules for combinations of words.

(4) Terms. *Mashi Wentong* is considered by scholars to be the first work to establish the basic terms of the Chinese grammar. In reading the “missionary grammars”, however, it seems that the missionaries were the pioneers in interpreting *xu* (虛)/*shi* (實) as the opposition of substantive/particle, and *si* (死)/*huo* (活) and *jing* (靜)/*dong* (動) as noun/verb opposition.

The terms “*xu/shi/si/huo*” appear in literature on the art of verse making, since the *Song* (宋) dynasty, where the terms are used to account for the nature of a word. However, the meanings of the technical terms are not yet clearly defined. In most cases, the *xu/shi* opposition functioned as

an opposition between a meaningful word, and an essentially meaningless word which only served a grammatical function. Occasionally the opposition used was a verb/noun opposition. Si/huo and jing/dong were analyzed semantically and sometimes distinguished as “noun/verb,” but in many cases often used to explain the changing roles of the parts of speech by phonetic variations.”

In his book *A Grammar of the Chinese Language*, Morrison wrote, “the verb is, the Chinese call *sang tsee* (生字), ‘a living word,’ in contradiction to the noun, which they call *see tsee* (死字), ‘a dead word.’”¹² “The verb is also denominated *tsung tsee* (動字), ‘a moving word,’ and the noun is *tsing tsee* (靜字), ‘a quiescent word.’”¹³ Marshman, in his *Clavis Sinica*, uses the particle as a larger classification unit under which adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection are unified. Later Edkins introduced a more subdivided classification. As to classifications of parts of speech and translations of terms, in my thesis I gave charts of their relative contents in grammar books and dictionaries written by missionaries, comparing them with *Mashi Wentong*, and pointing out inherent successions between them.

(5) Characters. Grammar is a graphology of writing skills. Therefore, Chinese characters were often included in “missionary grammar.” Chinese characters, Marshman notes, “speak to the eye rather than to the ear,”¹⁴ which illustrates a fundamental difference from the Roman alphabet. Each letter of the alphabet is a phonetic symbol. A meaning comes first; sound is useful in conveying the meaning, and letters are used to record the sound. This process can be described as “meaning → sound → letter.” On the contrary, Chinese has a different relation between character and sound. The alphabet does not function without accompanying sound, while Chinese characters do function without sound if visually recognized. In Chinese, a meaning does not require sound as a mediator but directly connects to a character. Its process is exactly the opposite of the Roman alphabet: “meaning → character → sound.”

Here, a problem arises. Grammar is a graphology of writing skills. Unlike European languages whose letters express sound, a Chinese character is not directly connected with sound. What then, should be the foundation of Chinese grammar? The most simplistic approach was to start by focusing on sound and shirk from the complication of characters. However, this approach would make it more difficult to write a Chinese grammar, and in the end require more effort. Starting from characters and taking a “*shici* theory + *xuci* theory = Chinese grammar” was thus the most earnest approach.

When missionaries came to the Far East, they were amazed to find that writings in classical Chinese served as the common language of the upper class in most parts of East Asia, in spite of ethnic and linguistic differences. The way in which this fact was accepted, however, depended on the period of history and the power balance between the East and West. Before the 17th century, missionaries admitted the linguistic environment in the East was superior to the fragmented situation of European languages, and the concept of “a universal language” based on Chinese characters was introduced. However, with the fall of the Chinese Empire after the Opium War, anything Oriental was thought inferior. In addition, as Chinese characters were too troublesome for Occidentals, a movement to abolish Chinese characters began, claiming that they should be replaced by the Roman alphabet. Value judgements searching for inferiority and superiority often accompany encounters with things that are different, and it takes a while to recognize, as in structuralism, that relative values are equal.

In screening materials for this report, I deliberately excluded missionary views that seemed similar to Chinese, and writings that only edited Chinese works. I zeroed in on the works which had a different perspective from the Chinese, because it is in these differences where issues that we often overlook are likely to exist. Examining these issues will bring a new

viewpoint to the study of the Chinese language. If there should be any mistake or misunderstanding in writings by a missionary, it is not to be disdained. It is of no use to present studies to underestimate previous studies by judging them on the standards of today. In the history of theory, rather, it is more profound to indicate a "blind spot" in our time, than to justify the time in which we live.

Notes

¹ Chugoku gogaku Kenkyu kai 中国語学研究会 (The Chinese Language Studies Society): *Chugoku gogaku Jiten* 中国語学事典 (*The Encyclopedia of Chinese Linguistics*); 1st ed. Konan Shoin 江南書院, 1958. 315.

² Marco Polo (translated by Adago Matsuo 愛宕松男): *Tohou kenbun roku* 東方見聞録 1 (*The Travel of Marco Polo*); Heibonsha Toyo Bunko 平凡社東洋文庫, 1970. 13.

³ R. Morrison: *A Grammar of the Chinese Language*; Serampore Mission Press. 1815, preface.

⁴ Rodriguez, Joam (translated by Mineo Ikegami): *Nihongo shou bunten* 日本語小文典 (*Arte Breve de Lingoa Iapoa*; Macao. 1629) Iwanami Syoten 岩波書店; 1993. 253.

⁵ The Notitia Linguae of Premare, *Chinese Repository* Vol.16; Canton, 1847. 266.

⁶ J. Edkins: *A Grammar of the Chinese Colloquial Language, Commonly Called the Mandarin Dialect*; Shanghai London Mission Press, 1857. iii

⁷ *ibid.* 98.

⁸ *ibid.* i.

⁹ *ibid.* 96.

¹⁰ *ibid.* ii.

¹¹ *ibid.* 99.

¹² R. Morrison: *A Grammar of the Chinese Language*; Serampore Mission Press, 1815. 113.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ J. Marshman: *Calvis Sinica*; Serampore, 1814. 4.