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Punctuation: Its Use in China and Elsewhere

In 1974–75, when Professor Janusz Chmielewski and I were both at Cambridge University, I had the pleasure of getting to know him better, both as a distinguished scholar and as a friend and warm human being. During that year, he and I pursued research on differing aspects of the classical [written Chinese language: what I here call Literary Chinese. For him this primarily meant further exploration of the field in which he had already produced brilliant published results: the relationship of language to logic in China.¹ For me it primarily meant investigation of what I would call the dynamics of Literary Chinese: its dominant structural patterns, the morphological and literary devices by which it functions, and the extent to which these encourage or discourage its use as a precise, clear and practical medium for scholarly and “scientific” communication. What follows, with modifications, is one of the still unpublished chapters from the monograph I wrote in Cambridge during that year.

Beside stylistic balance and other features of Literary Chinese discussed in that monograph, another device exists—punctuation, which, had it been perfected and popularized, would have substantially lessened the difficulties of handling the Chinese written language. As we shall see, a crude proto-punctuation can be found in certain Chinese texts going back as early as the third century B. C., yet until recent times punctuation in China remained under-developed, sporadically used, and often looked down upon as a vulgar device unworthy of the true scholar. That traces of the same attitude sometimes appear even now is suggested by what an excellent student of comparative literature, Achilles Fang, has said in his witty article, *Some Reflections on the Difficulty of Translation*:²

¹ See especially his *Notes on Early Chinese Logic*, published in eight installments in RO from Vol. XXVI/1 (1962) to Vol. XXXII/2 (1969).

² In: Arthur F. Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese Thought* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1953), pp. 263–285; the quotation that follows is on p. 273.

"Most Chinese texts can be readily punctuated... If a translator cannot correctly put dots and circles in the body of his text, obviously he is not ready for translation; he will have to wait some more years... The so-called punctuation marks in Chinese texts, which any school child of ten can put down, represent nothing much beyond breathing pauses. They are neither grammatical nor logical."

Perhaps not for an Indo-European grammarian, yet their importance for textual understanding will, I hope, become apparent in this article. If Chinese punctuation is really as simple as Mr. Fang asserts, one wonders why famed commentators and modern scholars have so often differed in their understanding of classical Chinese texts, syntactically as well as semantically. The following example, selected because of its brevity, comes from the *Lun yü* or Confucian *Analects*, 9.1:

Tzu han yen li yü ming yü jen

子罕言利與命與仁

The passage is traditionally regarded as a single sentence and hence rendered as: "The Master rarely spoke about profit and fate and humanity." However, two major difficulties confront this rendition: intellectually, the fact that Confucius did in fact speak very often about humanity (*jen*) in the *Lun yü*; and grammatically, the fact that the use of *yü* twice here in the same sentence as a conjunction ("... and [*yü*] ... and [*yü*] ...") is quite exceptional. Suppose, however, that we divide this allegedly single sentence by inserting a full stop in the middle. The passage now reads: *Tzu han yen li. Yü ming yü jen*. With this division into two sentences, the two *yü* words can no longer remain conjunctions and have to function as verbs instead: "to permit, allow, give forth, share," etc. At once the passage becomes both intellectually and grammatically acceptable: "The Master rarely spoke about profit. He gave forth [his ideas] on fate [and] gave forth [his ideas] on humanity." The change in meaning is made possible solely by inserting a single full stop.³

When Mr. Fang asserted that any ten year old child can put down the Chinese dots and circles, he probably did not think of the marking of proper names as part of the punctuation process. Yet modern Chinese punctuation, as compensation for the fact that the characters cannot be capitalized, commonly marks off proper names by inserting a straight line under or beside them. (For book titles, the line is a wavy one.) Of course there is little gain in so doing when the names are well known, but when, as often happens, they are obscure (as in many historical texts), or when they have common meanings of their own that can confuse the reader, the failure to indicate them can sometimes cause real trouble.

In the *Shih chi* (Historical Records), for example, near the end of its biography of the Lord of Meng-ch'ang (famed statesman of the state of Ch'i of the 4th—3rd centuries B. C.), there is an episode in which the lord has fallen into disfavour with

³ For further details see Derk Bodde, *A Puzzling Passage in the Confucian Analects*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" 53 (1933), pp. 347-351; reprinted in: Derk Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Charles Le Blanc and Dorothy Borei (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981), pp. 383-387 (with new introductory comments on pp. 27-29).

the king of Ch'i. His faithful follower speaks on his behalf to the king, telling him that if the Lord of Meng-ch'ang is cast off, then "Ch'in will become the cock and Ch'i will become the hen." In other words, Ch'in will triumph in the long struggle between these two Warring States principalities. After saying this, the envoy adds the following cryptic words:⁴

Tzu tse lin tzu chi mo wei yi

雌則臨淄即墨危矣

"Hen, then overlook Tzu thereupon ink in-danger indeed!"

Still today, Tzu remains the name of a river in modern Shantung province (where Ch'i was situated) and therefore should constitute one of the knowns in this dubious equation. Let us suppose that one of Mr. Fang's precocious school children is handling the text and has also studied sufficient English to attempt a translation into that language. He or she, armed with the indubitable fact that Tzu is the name of a river, will no doubt also know that *chi*, "thereupon," is customarily followed by a verb. Accordingly, he will quite likely clutch at the idea that *mo*, "ink", when used as a verb, can conceivably mean "to become black, to darken." These suppositions will thus result in the sentence: "Being the hen, it [Ch'i] will then overlook the Tzu [river] and thereupon will indeed become dark and in danger!" This at least translates all the words and conveys a sense of impending doom, even though it leaves unexplained why and how the state should be overlooking the Tzu and—a strange grammatical feature—why "then" should be followed by "thereupon" in the same clause.

Let us suppose now that the school child has followed Mr. Fang's advice to wait a few years before translating the sentence. During the interim he will have learned that Lin-tzu, "Overlooking-the-Tzu," is actually the name of the Ch'i capital, so called because it stood on the bank of the Tzu river. He will accordingly confidently translate: "[If Ch'i] is the hen, then [its capital] Lin-tzu will thereupon indeed become dark and in danger!" So happy will he be to have made such good sense that he too will probably not be unduly bothered by the redundancy of "then" followed by "thereupon."

Finally, let us suppose that the school child has become a mature scholar. By now he knows that words in Literary Chinese are not always what they seem, and he also notices, as he examines the sentence, that its surface meaning fails to provide the kind of stylistic balance one normally looks for. Realizing that Lin-tzu is a place name, he will consult his Chinese historical geographical dictionary, and there, to his pleased surprise, he will make the discovery that *chi mo*, "thereupon ink," is actually the name of another city in the state of Ch'i. Accordingly, he will triumphantly produce a translation that yields excellent sense as well as perfect stylistic balance: "[If Ch'i] is the hen, then [its cities] Lin-tzu and Chi-mo will indeed be in danger!" How simple it would all be if the author, Ssu-ma Ch'ien (ca. 145-ca. 86 B.C.), had only

⁴ *Shih chi*, chap. 75, p. 23 (Takigawa Kametarō ed.).

taken the trouble to mark his proper names to start with! But also how much less challenging to the reader!

Let us look now at some examples of punctuation in pre-modern China. Primitive division-markers very occasionally occur in texts recovered from archaeological sites of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220).⁵ From near the end of the period come the surviving fragments of seven Confucian classics that were inscribed on stone tablets in A.D. 175. On the largest of them, a small portion of the *Kung-yang chuan* (Kung-yang Commentary) on the *Ch'un ch'iu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), dots are used to divide each yearly entry from its neighbours.⁶ Analogous dots (or sometimes horizontal bars) also appear on somewhat earlier Han administrative documents, notably those recovered from the Chü-yen military outposts in Inner Mongolia (approximately 100 B.C.-A.D. 100).⁷

It would be possible to cite still earlier Han examples, but since 1975 this is no longer necessary because of the discovery in that year of the Ch'in legal texts at Yün-meng hsien, central China, all of which pre-date the Ch'in unification of China in 221 B. C. and thus belong to the earlier portions of the third century B. C. Punctuation dots occur on a very few of them, where their primary purpose is to indicate topical rather than syntactical divisions (which, however, necessarily coincide with the ends and beginnings of sentences). Of the 383 Yün-meng items that Professor H u l s e w é has recently numbered and admirably translated into English, only 46, according to my count, contain punctuation dots—a ratio of 1 out of every 8.32 items. In these 46 items, moreover, the dots frequently appear only very irregularly and incompletely.⁸

⁵ For information on Han punctuation I owe much to Dr. Michael L o e w e, Lecturer in Chinese at Cambridge University, who took considerable trouble to list various references for me. I regret that most of them cannot be cited here for lack of space.

⁶ See Tsuen-hsuei T s i e n, *Written on Bamboo and Silk* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1962), p. 76 and Plate XIII A on p. 78, where, for example, a dot can be seen in the second column from the right immediately before the entry beginning: "In the fifteenth year..."

⁷ The following are instances reproduced or mentioned in Michael L o e w e, *Records of Han Administration* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1967, 2 vols.): nos. 14.11, TD 1 and 7, MD 6, 8 and 9. Others could be cited, but *in toto* they would only be an infinitesimal fraction of the more than 10,000 inscriptions and inscription fragments recovered from Chü-yen alone. The purpose of the dots is evidently to indicate the beginning of an inscription. In these inscriptions, however, this has little practical value because, even without a dot, the beginning of the inscription is adequately indicated either by starting the inscription on a new wooden strip or separating it, when on the same strip, by a blank space from the preceding inscription.

⁸ See A.F.P. H u l s e w é, *Remnants of Ch'in Law* (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1985), in which 3 out of the 110 items in section A have dots; none out of the 29 items in B; 12 out of the 26 items in C; 22 out of the 190 items in D; 9 out of the 25 items in E; and none in sections F and G, respectively containing 2 and 1 items.

The important point to note in all these Ch'in and Han examples, therefore, is that the dots (or horizontal bars), when they appear at all, serve primarily to indicate topical divisions. Moreover, because of spacing or using of a new wooden strip to begin a new section, most such divisions would in any case be fairly self-evident without the dots. Thus the primary purpose of the dots is *n o t* to indicate syntactic pauses, either between or within sentences (although, as noted above, divisions in subject matter necessarily coincide with divisions between sentences). In other words, the dividing dots are basically *t o p i c a l* rather than *s y n t a c t i c*, and as such more analogous to paragraph indentations than to true punctuation marks. At most, therefore, they represent only a crude proto-punctuation and not a punctuation system *per se*.

Five hundred and more years after the Han, punctuation had apparently made some but still only limited progress, to judge from several of the Tun-huang manuscripts. Two of these may be mentioned as examples: the texts of songs (*ch'ü* 曲) brought back by Pelliot to Paris. The song on one manuscript consists of two seven-character lines followed by six lines of five characters each; a black punctuation dot marks the end of each line. The other manuscript contains three songs with lines of varying length, each punctuated in the same way save that the dots are written in red ink.⁹ In all these cases, although the dots represent a progressive development, their value is somewhat limited because, even without them, the rhythm of the songs would be strong enough to reveal their basic pattern.

Only after printing became common, and then only rarely, were Chinese books produced with dots or small circles systematically inserted to show successive sentences or clauses within sentences. Examples of such syntactic punctuation are found in printed books of the Southern Sung dynasty (1126–1279), but it is possible that the practice goes back somewhat earlier.¹⁰

From a later period (early Ming), a particularly handsome example of a punctuated work (though in manuscript only) is the largest encyclopaedia ever compiled by man, the *Yung-lo ta-tien* (Yung-lo Great Encyclopaedia), whose 11,095 manuscript volumes were completed in 1408 but never printed because of the enormous expense.

⁹ The songs (catalogued as *Pelliot chinois* 3251 and 3911) are reproduced in figures 44–48 of Plates XXII–XXIV in J a o Tsong-yi and Paul D e m i é v i l l e, *Mission Paul Pelliot, Documents conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale, II: Airs de Touen-houang* Editions du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, (Paris 1971). For descriptions of the songs, including their punctuation, see J a o's introduction in *Chinese*, pp. 92–95. The dating of the entire collection ranges from the K'ai-yüan period (713–741) to 979.

¹⁰ Y e h T e - h u i 葉德輝, *Shu-lin ch'ing-hua* 書林清話 (Chats About Books) [1920; Taipei reprint of 1973], pp. 33–34, lists examples of Southern Sung punctuation. However, Professor T s u e n - h s u i n T s i e n (University of Chicago), in a personal communication to me, first refers to Y e h's book and then expresses his own opinion that printed punctuation probably pre-dates the Southern Sung.

In the 349 volumes now surviving from a series of disasters culminating in the Boxer uprising of 1900, the punctuation markers, consisting of small circles in red ink, are clearly visible.¹¹ Although these markers fail to distinguish between what in Western punctuation would be indicated by commas, full stops, question marks, and so on, and make no attempt to indicate proper names, their presence is still extremely helpful. Thus it is cause for real regret that the example of the Yung-lo encyclopaedia was not widely followed, so that as late as the nineteenth century, works punctuated in this way constituted only a small fraction of the total printed output. The popularization of punctuation had to await the present century, when it was inspired by Western models.

Today practically all Chinese books (except photographic reproductions of old texts) are printed with modern (Western) punctuation which, however, by no means always completely utilizes the signs available. Curiously, the publications least fully punctuated tend to be newspapers, in which proper names are often unmarked even though the constant influx of new ones from all parts of the world would seem to make such marking particularly desirable. The reason, perhaps, is the extra typographical burden the practice would impose on a medium necessarily pressed for time. Many texts from the past, however, have in recent years been reprinted in new punctuated editions both in the People's Republic of China and in Taiwan.

How does the Chinese experience compare with that in other civilizations? In India, prior to the introduction of modern (Westernized) printing, Sanskrit manuscripts and inscriptions maintained no divisions between words. Furthermore, the tendency of the highly inflected language was to build words up by combining more and more lexical units, until a single compound "word" could have as many as twenty separate meaningful components, and a single "sentence" could cover two or three pages. The only punctuation mark was a vertical bar used fairly often in inscriptions to indicate the end of an epigraph, and less often the end of a section or a sentence. However, there was no consistency in this regard. No device was used to indicate proper names—a fact which, because most such names also have a meaning, could, as in China, create much confusion. In short, punctuation was less developed and common in pre-modern India than it eventually became in pre-modern China.¹²

In the Islamic world, before the present century, the situation was virtually the same. No punctuation was used, whether it be full stops, commas, or paragraph

¹¹ For details on the encyclopaedia and its history, see Kuo Po-kung 廓伯恭, *Yung-lo ta-tien k'ao* 永樂大典考 (A Study of the Yung-lo Great Encyclopaedia) [Commercial Press, Shanghai 1938].

¹² Personal communication from Dr. Ludo Rocher, Professor of Sanskrit, University of Pennsylvania, whose help is gratefully acknowledged, supplemented by A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (Sidgwick & Jackson, London 1954), pp. 389–390 and 396, and D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1965), p. 5.

divisions; individual words were separated in some texts but not all; and no specific device served to indicate proper names—again, as in Sanskrit and Chinese, a cause of much difficulty.¹³

In Hebrew the situation has long been somewhat similar. Yet the greatest problem has lain not in the absence of punctuation in the ordinary sense but rather in the fact that the letters of the ancient Hebrew script represented only consonants and not the intervening vowels (though a few consonants did at times also serve as vowels). This meant that uncertainty and ambiguity could often arise for any written word that could be vocalized in more than one way and thus yield more than one meaning. During a long period, traditions of pronunciation were transmitted orally, but then, beginning around the seventh century, a system of points or accents was devised to indicate the vowel values following the consonantal letters to which the accents were attached. These marks thus ended the possibility of ambiguity for any later texts that used them. However, they did not end uncertainty about the correct vocalization of texts written before the system had been devised. Moreover, in later centuries the vocalization signs were, by no means, universally used. Even today, for example, the Torah scroll (Pentateuch), that is read in synagogues as part of the service, must be completely unpointed and unvocalized in any way.¹⁴

In the Western world, the history of punctuation has been both different and more complicated.¹⁵ In ancient Greece inscriptions were for the most part written continuously save for a few instances from before the fifth century B. C., in which phrases were separated by a vertical row of two or three points. Likewise, in the oldest literary texts (papyri of the fourth century B. C.) the beginning of a line introducing a new topic might be underlined by a horizontal bar. Such is the only punctuation

¹³ Personal communication from Dr. Roger M. A. Allen, Professor of Arabic, University of Pennsylvania, to whom I am likewise much indebted, the more so as this subject has not been systematically studied.

¹⁴ For this and further information I am very grateful to Dr. Judah Goldin, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, University of Pennsylvania. A good example of ambiguity resulting from the absence of vocalization is the sentence in Isaiah 54:13: "When all your sons are instructed by the Lord, through your sons peace will increase." A *midrash* (exegesis of Scripture) suggests that the word here vocalized as *banayikh*, "your sons," may just as properly (for homiletical purposes) be vocalized as *bonayikh*, "your teachers," resulting in the sentence: "When all your teachers are instructed by the Lord, through your teachers peace will increase." See Judah Goldin, *From Text to Interpretation and from Experience to the Interpreted Text*, "Prooftexts" 3 (1983), pp. 157–168 (especially p. 159 for the *midrash* citation).

¹⁵ For European punctuation, I am indebted to a personal communication from Dr. Lloyd W. Daly, Professor Emeritus of Classical Studies, University of Pennsylvania, supplemented by the excellent survey by T. Julian Brown, *Punctuation*, in: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th ed., Chicago 1974), *Macropaedia*, Vol. XV, pp. 274–277. The achievements of Aristophanes of Byzantium are discussed in greater detail in Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship, from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1968), pp. 178–180. See also, for developments in the fifteenth century, Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, Selling and Reading, 1450–1550* (Wiesbaden 1967), pp. 136–137.

mentioned by Aristotle. The first real punctuation system, in which prototypes of the full stop, comma and colon were used, as well as marks of quantity, accents, etc., is attributed to Aristophanes of Byzantium, librarian at Alexandria, ca. 200 B. C. For centuries, however, this system was seldom employed in its full form but did become the basis for modern Greek punctuation beginning in the ninth century.

In the Roman world, punctuation was commonly sporadic and unsystematic; although Latin inscriptions from the earliest examples onward often used points to separate words, books were for centuries written with continuous script. Significantly, the first text to be really well punctuated was the Vulgate Bible, for which a system indicating phrases was devised by its translator, St. Jerome (died 419/420).

In mediaeval times, the major developments consisted of improvements in the punctuation of Biblical and liturgical manuscripts that were devised under Charlemagne by his Anglo-Saxon adviser Alcuin (director of the palace school at Aachen, 782–798). This system spread through Europe together with the new Caroline miniscule script, and reached its perfection in the late twelfth century. By the fifteenth century, the early printed Bibles were all carefully punctuated.

Thus punctuation took a course in Europe very different from that followed in the non-Western world. Although the system invented around 200 B. C. was often ignored for long periods thereafter, it left a seed that was ready to spring up when conditions became propitious. Religion would seem to have been a major impelling factor, especially when printing enabled the Bible to be brought to larger numbers of people than ever before.

In the non-Western civilizations, one may suspect that the differing situation sometimes stemmed, at least in part, from a differing conception of the purpose of writing. In China writing was regarded as an instrument of prestige and power, to be exercised by a small élite primarily for communication between its own members rather than for mass communication. Without this proprietary attitude, there would seem no reason why in a country where printing had been invented, and where a rudimentary punctuation had been known for a considerable time, the latter could not have been eventually elaborated and universalized just as it was in the West. The failure of this to happen until the twentieth century, together with the parallel failure of written *pai hua* (the written form of the colloquial language) to replace the esoteric literary language until the same century, are equally indicative of deeply rooted traditional attitudes toward the popularization of language. In the Western world, where a similarly proprietary attitude had also of course long been prevalent, the fact that it ultimately broke down may, in part, be due to ideological factors such as religion. Probably, however, it derived even more from a wide range of socio-economic forces that significantly differentiated Western Europe from other societies.

Among the non-users of punctuation, China at least enjoyed the advantage that its written symbols were readily distinguishable from one another, in contrast to the *scriptura continua* too often found in other civilizations. Moreover, in contrast to European and other languages, the vocabulary of Literary Chinese includes a good

number of final particles and introductory words that fairly often—although far from invariably—help to determine the beginnings and ends of sentences or clauses, even without explicit punctuation. Some scholars would therefore argue that Literary Chinese had less pressing need to develop a punctuation system than, say, did English.¹⁶

To this other scholars (including myself) would reply that such advantages are more than offset in Literary Chinese by several troublesome syntactic and stylistic features, notably its absence of morphological change. To take Arabic as a single contrasting example, its usual lack of word separation was “not as desperate a situation as may at first appear, since the morphology of Arabic is such that it is usually possible to work out each word as a discrete unit on morphological grounds without the necessity of referring to the graphological symbol on the page.”¹⁷

In Literary Chinese, as we have seen, failure to punctuate could sometimes create serious ambiguity. Probably more important, however, is the fact that this and other difficulties, even when successfully resolved in individual instances, placed the reader under constant pressure to focus his attention on the externals of the text—grammar and stylistics—at the expense of its inner content. The same criticism, *pari passu*, no doubt applies to the creator of the text as well as its reader. All of this, we must suppose, reinforced a tendency, among many writers and readers, to direct more attention than would otherwise have been the case toward literary and philological matters, and correspondingly less toward broader topics outside the world of language and literature.

Perhaps most important of all was the already-mentioned proprietary attitude toward literacy and book knowledge, of which non-punctuation was an important but, by no means, the only example. In short, it is the conclusion of this article that non-punctuation was only one of several features—the others discussed at length in my monograph but not here—that must have discouraged efforts to turn Literary Chinese more definitely away from its literary conventions and more positively toward becoming a truly simple, unadorned and practical instrument for precise communication.

¹⁶ This is the thesis of Dr. Joseph Needham of Cambridge University, personal communication. Some of the common final particles in Literary Chinese are *yeh* 也, *yi* 矣, *yen* 焉, *hu* 乎 and *tsai* 哉, but there are others as well. An excellent recent discussion of syntactic matters is Christoph Harbsmeier, *Aspects of Classical Chinese Syntax* Curzon Press, London and Malmo 1981.

¹⁷ Remark by Professor Roger M. A. Allen, in personal communication referred to in note 13.