

# Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction

Wei Wang, Jianming Wu

Institute of Linguistics, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Email: 18354769590@163.com

**How to cite this paper:** Wang, W., & Wu, J. M. (2023). Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 13, 515-522.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2023.134032>

**Received:** June 13, 2023

**Accepted:** August 5, 2023

**Published:** August 8, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

What exactly does Chinese linguistics study? What topics, theories, developments and innovations begin to attract the attention of western scholars and have reached the general consensus of Chinese and western scholars or are still controversial constitute the core content of books introducing Chinese linguistics. *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction*, from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, combined with typology and sociolinguistics, can provide an accurate and complete overview of the Chinese academic level in the 2020s. They put forward many valuable new opinions, like “metacompound”, “new judgment methods for Chinese derivation and semi-words”, “non-isolated characteristics of Chinese dialects” and so on. This paper will first introduce each chapter of the book, and then review each aspect of it. The application value of this book is of great significance to the future direction of Chinese linguistics.

## Keywords

Chinese Linguistics, Hot Topics, Chinese-Western Comparison

## 1. Introduction

In a broad sense, Chinese linguistics covers the studies of Chinese history, characters, phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, and typology. In a narrow sense, the concept of Chinese linguistics can be considered as a theoretical and experimental study of any language or dialect within China. In the middle of the last century, it, which was born out of Chinese philology, began to prosper. Dialect investigation, grammar description, the introduction of western linguistic theories and the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language are flourishing. Especially in recent years, the number of publications and courses on Chinese linguistics continues to increase.

Such works as *The Chinese Language: An Essay on Its Nature and History*

(Karlgren, 1949), *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (Chao, 1968), and *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar* (Li & Thompson, 1981) started from the perspectives of American structuralism, functionalism, historical comparison, and typology to combine western linguistic theory with Chinese grammar and phonology, creating new schools of Chinese linguistics. Other similar books often require readers to have a strong research background, and it is difficult to balance the needs of Chinese and western readers. Crucially, such western books should not only enable readers to fully understand various hot topics in Chinese linguistics, but also enable Chinese readers to accurately grasp the comparative concepts of various English terms and their descriptive categories in Chinese, as well as understand the views of western scholars on these topics.

Only two classical books *Chinese* (Norman, 1988) and *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction* (Arcodia & Basciano, 2021), from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, combined with typology and sociolinguistics, can provide an accurate and complete overview of the Chinese academic level in the 20th century and 2020s. They put forward many valuable new opinions, like “ten criteria for Chinese dialect regionalization”, “five historical stages of Chinese language”, “metacompound”, “new judgement methods for Chinese derivation and semi-words”, “non-isolated characteristics of Chinese dialects”, “the correspondence between form and function of total verbal reduplication”, “new syntactic interpretation of verbal reduplication” and “three major clusters of fusional morphology”.

The main purpose of this paper is to sort out all hot topics of Chinese linguistics from past to 2020s, summarize and analyze the consensus and controversy between China and West, and test the feasibility of new ideas and methods in future research. The secondary purpose is to introduce the latest research methods, theories and concepts applied in Chinese linguistics, hoping to offering this most comprehensive western book in recent years to Chinese doctoral students majoring in linguistics. The necessity is to help Chinese and western linguists or scholars from different backgrounds fully grasp the various topics in Chinese, and understand Chinese history and Chinese characteristics.

## **2. New Opinions of Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction**

### **2.1. Three Confusing Aspects for Chinese-Western Readers**

The book consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the three aspects that readers are most likely to be confused about Chinese linguistics (the diversity of dialects, the reconstruction of history, and the uniqueness of characters), and advocates re-examining these aspects from diachronic and typological perspectives.

### **2.2. Chinese History and Writing System**

Chapter 2 clarifies the relationship among “Sinitic Language”, “Chinese”, “Modern Standard Chinese”, “National Language”, “Huáyǔ”, and “Dialect”. Authors’ innovation is based on the “correspondence between written language and spo-

ken language”, dividing the history of Chinese language into four stages: the pre-imperial period, the Qin and Han dynasties, imperial period, and modern period. They found four characteristics, i.e., the diversity of dialects, the carrying property of literary language, national unity, and the purpose of establishing a prestigious language, ran through these four stages all the time. In Section 2.3, they find that genealogy and typology are inconsistent with each other, and believe that this problem can only be solved by combining language contact and regional division, because Chinese dialects are essentially a fuzzy entity, i.e. the superimposition result of different diachronic strata and diatopic varieties of northern Chinese on central and southern dialects (p. 60).

Chapter 3 focuses on the writing system of Chinese and discusses its essence, quantity, history and function. Section 3.1 reviews the western understanding of characters: whether to use “ideogram” or “character”. By comparing characters and symbols, authors explain the design intention of Chinese writing system and affirm its rationality. Secondly, they introduce the size of character inventory investigated by western scholars, which indicates that the daily writing of Chinese is no more than 7000 - 8000 characters, but it depends on the field and individual ability (p. 70). By sorting out the respective application fields and purposes of phonetic character and simplified character, they also explain that the simplified character is more in line with the Chinese ideology and cultural tradition. In Section 3.3, they discuss the differences in the status and function of Chinese characters in the dialects and Chinese-Character Cultural Circle, and found that the strategy of selecting characters, national ideology, identity construction and social evolution were the root causes.

### 2.3. Chinese Phonology

Chapter 4 discusses the reconstruction of Chinese phonology. Authors argue that the starting point of Chinese phonology should be to reconstruct the articulatory features and a new phonemic contrast system in Middle Chinese through the rimebook/dictionary/table, and the actual phonological value can also be realized by comparison between modern Sinitic languages and Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean, and Sino-Vietnamese readings of Chinese characters (pp. 110-111). They always emphasize the importance of typology because three changes in the evolution from Old to Middle Chinese are particularly related to typology: the loss of consonant clusters, which led to the development of retroflex and palatal initials; the simplification of syllable codas plays an instrumental role in tones; the phonology of Old Chinese shares many similarities with Tibeto-Burman languages, and there is also indirect evidence that the evolutionary pathway of Chinese tone is shared by East Asian/Southeast Asian languages (pp. 118-123).

### 2.4. Chinese Morphology and Syntax

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 are more integrated with authors’ representative re-

searches, having higher guiding value and innovation. Chapter 5 discusses how to apply the western morphological concept to Chinese linguistics better. They believe that Chinese syllables and morphemes are identical, and put forward a new concept of “metacompound”. This means that Chinese syllables can be re-analysed as morphemes and become the basic components of hybrids, loan-words/calques and metacompounds, which also brings more possibilities for Chinese word formation analysis. They also reject the western views that “Chinese bound roots are similar to European neoclassical constituents or Italian bound roots” and reapply the term “neoclassical compound” to East Asian languages. According to the source, distribution, vocabulary type and register of the bound roots, the Chinese semi-words such as “jiā” which are really similar to western languages are sorted out by them. They point out that “the differences between compound and derivation” and “the characteristics of reduplication patterns of different word classes” are hot topics in premodern and modern Chinese. They explain from the perspective of construction morphology that derivational affixes do exist in Chinese, and prove it is the evolutionary result of compound constituents/grammaticalized morphemes, undergoing shifts/changes in meaning and distribution. Since total reduplication is a common feature of East and Southeast Asian languages, and verbal reduplication is a very common and productive pattern in Modern Standard Chinese (p. 178), they find that, the function of disyllabic or bimorphemic verbs is to express diminishing meaning and marking delimitative aspect, and its form is ABAB, which is the most stable and more preferred in Sinitic languages; the function of coordinative compound verbs is to show increasing meaning and adding repeated and alternative meaning to verb events, and the form is AABB, which is also only found in a few Non-Sinitic East and Southeast Asian languages. They also provide a new interpretation by means of Ramchand’s first phase syntax, based on the fact that those verbs carry only initiator and process markers. This shows that the reduplicant possesses the complement of the head of process and is incompatible with result marker, so the former can provide a boundary of the event. In addition, at the end of this chapter, they deconstruct the traditional morphological typology, and put forward in northern China there were three major clusters of fusional morphology, whose typical features are tonal/ablaut, ablaut, and tonal/rhotacisation. This phenomenon is summed up by them as a skewed areal distribution.

In Chapter 6, six topics are discussed: word order, differences between topic and subject, serial verb constructions, tense and aspect, argument structure of resultative compounds, and word classes. Authors try to demonstrate that Chinese has been VO word order from past to present. They found that OV order was only proved in three constructions: object focus sentences, personal pronoun as object in negative sentences, and interrogative sentences, which were not productive in the Han dynasty (pp. 212-213). Many Sinitic languages and Old Chinese show the “adjective-marker of comparison-standard” reference that

is consistent with VO order (p. 220). As for the order of relative clause and noun, they believe that although it generally violates the consistency of VO order in Sinitic languages, post nominal relative clauses in the Southernmost Sinitic languages still are consistent with the VO order of Southeast Asian languages. What's more, Arcodia suggests that this kind of research should be improved in two aspects. Firstly, it has different construction types in Sinitic languages, which can co-appear with the demonstrative, classifier, or without any relativizer, that is, it should not be limited to the relativizer “*de*”. Secondly, it is also closely related to register/dialect/region, which means that the typological characteristics of relative clauses are likely to be independent of areal influence. Section 6.2 indicates that there is no direct evidence to prove that Chinese has the concept of subject. Instead of a “construction” sharing structural and semantic properties, authors argue that serial verb constructions can be used for any sequence of verbs that are not marked by a distinct syntactic relation (p. 247). [Basciano \(2010\)](#) also proved that the concept of serial verb constructions was just a descriptive surface label, as  $[V V]_V$  compound actually have different underlying structures, headedness and interpretations. They think that if verb phrases are considered as a whole, Chinese may be said to have all Vendlerian verb classes (p. 262), and in terms of aspectual properties resultative compounds do not form a coherent category (p. 263), and hold that not all verbs commonly classified as resultatives imply the achievement of a result state (p. 265). In addition, [Basciano \(2010\)](#) also found that Chinese resultative compounds had less restrictions and more various combinations than English resultatives, verifying authors' view in this book with the help of the first phase syntax, i.e. “Chinese resultative compounds are left-headed”. It has the advantage of highlighting the hierarchical functional structure cross-linguistically.

### 3. Four Aspects in Innovations

This book analyzes 18 general topics and 50 sub-topics, each of which contains at least two minor topics, reflecting the diversity and comprehensiveness of the development of Chinese linguistic researches. It is the latest discussion and exploration of hot topics in Chinese linguistics, highlighting new topics, new methods new knowledge, and new ideas. These innovations are as follows.

#### 3.1. New Topics and Methods

All topics are supported by the universals and diversities in Sinitic languages, revealing the flexibility and irreplaceability of the research methods of diachronic linguistics and typology in the future development of Chinese linguistics. 18 general topics involve the comparative concept and descriptive category in Chinese, the history of Chinese, the classification of Sinitic languages, the understanding of Chinese characters, the writing history of Chinese characters, the function of Chinese characters, the reconstruction of Chinese phonology, the phonological division of Sinitic languages, the morphology of Chinese, the for-

eign words in Chinese lexicon, the recent trend of Chinese word formation, the lexical differences among Sinitic languages, the word order of Chinese, the subject and topic, serial verb constructions, tense and aspect, argument structures of resultative compounds, and word classes, showing the cognitive characteristics from the shallower to the deeper. Under each general topic, authors illustrate each sub-topic from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, because typological comparison and language description firstly need to be established on diachronic linguistics. Meanwhile, under the profound influence of typological research paradigms, they define the comparative concepts and descriptive categories related to Chinese in different Chinese-speaking communities in the Section 2.1, which is helpful for western readers to understand the subsequent knowledge framework and Chinese readers to apply the correct and appropriate terms.

This book takes western readers as the priority in its layout, the contrast between Chinese and western researches as its clue, and the consensus or controversy as its starting point. It strives to balance the needs of different readers as much as possible. It covers 40 different types of Chinese-Western controversies. Except for Chapter 3, the proportion of quantity distribution is relatively balanced. Chapter 2 involves 9 controversies: the differences between dialects and languages, the reliability of Chao's universal Chinese grammar, the identity of *Rhymes of the Central Plains* and *Rhymes in Mongol Script*, the innovation of national language, the periodization of Chinese, the internal structure and classification of the Sino-Tibetan family, the relationship between the Sino-Tibetan family and other families, the origin of northern and southern dialects, the classification standards of Sinitic languages. Chapter 3 includes 2 controversies: the origin of Chinese characters, the competition between phonetic and simplified characters. Chapter 4 covers 12 controversies: the reconstruction of Chinese, the reconstruction scope of historical materials, the nature and phonological basis of historical materials, the mystery of consonant clusters in Old Chinese, the syllable types in Old Chinese, the actual phonetic value of some initials in Modern Standard Chinese, the distribution and pattern of word stress, common characteristics of Wu dialects, the definition of Hakka dialects, common characteristics of Yue dialects, the origin of Min dialects, and the status of Hui and Pinghua. Chapter 5 contains 8 controversies: the judgment methods of free roots and bound roots, the standards of defining Chinese words, the reduplication patterns in Old Chinese, the definition of compound, the differences between words and phrases, the existence and judgment criteria of derivational affixes, the formation rules of abbreviations, and the development of translation strategies used in foreign words. Chapter 6 includes 9 controversies: the Chinese word order, the evaluation criteria of word order, the reason for the difference of word order between north and south Chinese, the judgment criteria of Chinese subject, the boundary of serial verb constructions, the existence of tense projection and tense marking, the lexical aspect types, the identifying criteria of word classes, the interpretation methods of multicategorical words.

### 3.2. New Knowledge and Ideas

The selection of each sub-topic highlights the different characteristics of the general topic. For example, Chinese books about the history of Chinese and similar western books such as *Chinese* all discuss periodization first and then phonology or morphology. But this book discusses history first and then periodization, mainly considering the different backgrounds of western readers. Although Section 2.2.1-2.2.4 are arranged from diachronic perspective, authors combine the most significant feature of each stage with section title. The pre-imperial Chinese was a unity of written and spoken languages, which can be represented by “language”. In the Qin and Han dynasties, the written language began to separate from the spoken language, so this period was characterized by “language and writing”. In imperial China, standard languages were the compromises of northern and southern dialects. In the strict sense, Mandarin was formed based on the “standard varieties”. In the modern period (1839-now), the national language was influenced by western and Japanese cultural patterns. After many major debates, it was finally determined as the unified Modern Standard Chinese based on practical application, so its label was “national language”. Sinology and topics are complementary and compatible in this book. For instance, in Chapter 2, in order to discuss the history of Chinese and Sinitic languages, it is necessary to combine the knowledge of national migration, the change of dynasties and strata.

## 4. Discussion

This book is worth discussing in the following three aspects.

### 4.1. Arrangement and Framework

The arrangement of some chapters is unbalanced in framework. Authors place Chinese language and Chinese characters respectively in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, which is influenced by the western view of “language is primary, character is secondary”. But Chinese books discuss characters/culture/sinology first, and then language. Thus, this arrangement may be slightly confusing to Chinese readers. Section 6.1 discusses the word order of Chinese dialects and the remaining sections just focus on Modern Standard Chinese. For beginners, the first thing they know about the field of syntax is the word classes. However, Chapter 6 puts this section at the end of the chapter, giving priority to word order (more difficult topic).

### 4.2. Breadth and Depth

The breadth and depth of topics can still be expanded. Section 3.1 ignores the mysteries of grapheme and phoneme, including the definition of grapheme and the corresponding relationship between grapheme and phoneme. The discussion of these topics is of vital importance to Chinese linguistics, because the corresponding relationship between grapheme and phoneme can provide the typolog-

ical basis for the controversy between Chinese characters and words, and deepen the understanding of Chinese writing. The theory of Chinese dialect regionalization in Section 4.1 is incomplete and very few domestic researches are involved. Section 4.2 only points out the most significant controversy in some dialects, but does not discuss the controversy in Xiang dialects. Chapter 6 does not cover many hot topics of great interest to Chinese readers, such as “Bei constructions”, “form-meaning mismatched constructions”, “the differences between subject and object relative clauses”, “the types of argument alignment”, “possessive structure”, “Chinese noun-verb inclusion hypothesis”, and “ambiguous sentence”.

### 4.3. Feasibility

The feasibility of opinions vary from Chinese to western readers. In Section 4.1, authors found that almost all the reconstruction agreed that Old Chinese had the larger inventory of final consonants, and that the typological features of Old Chinese reconstruction were far different from Middle/Modern Chinese and East/Southeast Asian languages, but had many similarities with Tibeto-Burman languages (pp.118-119). If we can combine the Sino-Tibetan comparison with reconstruction, it may have reference value for the unresolved topic of consonant cluster in Old Chinese. This idea is only suitable for western readers, but for Chinese readers, unless there are exact evidences such as unearthed historical materials to prove the Sino-Tibetan homology.

## 5. Conclusion

On the whole, the hot topics in this book are relatively comprehensive. Its analysis is detailed and thorough, and it is highly enlightening. It can be called a successful attempt to “systematically explore hot topics in Chinese linguistics” among Western scholars.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Arcodia, G. F., & Basciano, B. (2021). *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198847830.001.0001>
- Basciano, B. (2010). *Verbal Compounding and Causativity in Mandarin Chinese*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Verona.
- Chao, Y. R. (1968). *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*. University of California Press.
- Karlgren, B. (1949). *The Chinese Language: An Essay on Its Nature and History*. The Roland Press Co.
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar*. University of California Press.
- Norman, J. (1988). *Chinese*. Cambridge University Press.