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# Chinese alphabetization reform: Intellectuals and their public discourse, 1949-1958

Wansu Luo

*Iowa State University*

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**Chinese alphabetization reform: Intellectuals and their public discourse, 1949-1958**

by

**Wansu Luo**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

Program of Study Committee:  
Tao Wang, Major Professor  
James T. Andrews  
Jonathan Hassid

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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## ABSTRACT

From 1949 to 1958, a language reform aimed to revolutionize Chinese writing was a popular topic in the People's Republic of China. Intellectuals that proposed the reform believed they could replace Chinese characters with a letter-based alphabetic system. In theory it could help reduce education time and raise literacy rate. The reform lasted nine years and produced the notation Pinyin system, which is still in use today. This reform was overlooked by many historians. While the Chinese Communist government was officially in charge of the reform, the linguists were able to maintain their agency. And in the process, they influenced the Chinese public to work as momentum for the reform. These influenced heavily impacted the progress of the reform. Chinese linguist created the public discourse to encourage the reform when the government was reluctant to change Chinese language. They garnered enough support from the public to persuade the government to begin a language reform. Then they took suggestions from the public and debated about the correct path of the reform. The inside debate led to further divide among linguists when their arguments became public knowledge. Over time, the public grew wary and suspicion toward these intellectuals and the language reform as well. The chaotic Hundred Flower Campaign and the Anti-Rightist Movement antagonized the situation. And soon, the distrust turned into public outcry and protests. The Communist party eventually decided to shut down the reform, most likely due to the public objection, causing the reform to end without achieving full alphabetization. The reform showed Chinese intellectual's incredible maneuverability inside the authoritarian regime. The fact that these intellectuals and the public could heavily influence a government-controlled reform demonstrated their agency and ability inside a "not-yet- rigid" system.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese intellectuals believed that a simplified, letter-based writing system would be the perfect symbol of modern China. So, the phonetic alphabetic system they created in the 1950s, commonly known as Pinyin, was not only a modernized language, but also a sign for modern society. Intellectuals had calculated that a person would need to acquire knowledge of three to four thousand characters to achieve a functional literacy in writing Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Since Pinyin could phonetically spell out each character, it naturally became the most important tool for anyone trying to learn Chinese. While Pinyin is accepted worldwide today as the official phonetic system for Chinese,<sup>2</sup> its origin is often neglected in the literature. Being a stepping ladder for beginning students was only one part of its goal.<sup>3</sup> Pinyin was originally designed to be a separate phonetic writing system that would eventually replace the stroke-based character system. Even though the second goal was never accomplished, it generated years of discussion and interaction among Chinese political leaders, accomplished intellectuals and the public. Unfortunately, historians tend to dismiss the power and influence of these discourses.

### Historiography

Historians' dismissal of these discourses resulted from their lack of knowledge on the Pinyin system itself or the Chinese language reform in general. The reform began in 1949 was the third attempt at Chinese alphabetization. The 1950s reform inherited decades of precursory social influences and intellectual debates from the previous reforms, yet most scholars analyzed it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>2</sup> The Pinyin system is accepted by the International Organization of Standard as the official system to spell all Chinese characters since 1988. This international organization is dedicated to compiling correct terms for all languages since its founding in February 23, 1947. It is also one of the first organizations granted general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social council.

<sup>3</sup> Yuwen Chubanshe bian [Language Writing Council eds.], *Wenzi Gaige he Xiandai Hanyu Guifanhua Gongzuo: 40 zhounian jinian shouce* [Language Writing Reform and Modern Chinese Standardization Work: 40 Years Commemoration] (Beijing: Yuwen publishing house, 1995), 13.

singular event without considering its complicated background. In the limited literature on this issue, intellectuals were described as silent participants who only passively received and carried out orders in a restricted political system. Therefore, scholarly analysis on the Chinese “phonetic over character” campaign in the 1950s often focus exclusively on the roles of top leaders at the cost of influence of Chinese scholars. Scholars like Wang Aiyun argued that the communist party and Mao Zedong’s guidance were the sole reason for the success.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, scholars like John DeFrancis and Peter Hessler, who focused on the failure of achieving the goal of total Latinization, blamed it on the overbearing totalitarian government.<sup>5</sup> The focus of those works is limited to the Communist party members, or in some cases, one or two top leaders only.<sup>6</sup> This top-down assumption limited historian’s perspective by ignoring other crucial participants in the campaign and their agency. While the PRC government played an important part in the language reform process, the intellectuals and the public deserve our further attention. Chinese intellectuals managed to maintain their own agency in a restricted political system, and successfully expressed incredible maneuverability to initiate and push for the language reform. The discourse they created also played a major role in the reform, the interaction between the public and the intellectuals began the official reform, and in a certain way, ended the reform as well. Historians need to insert both intellectuals and the public into the conversation of language reform to understand the full complexity of the reform and how intellectuals’ thoughts, discussions, and interactions led to government responses.

### **Historical Background**

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Aiyun, *Zhongguo Gongchandang Lingdao de Wenzhi Gaige* [The Script Reform Led by Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: Renmin Ribao Publishing House, 2015), 3.

<sup>5</sup> John DeFrancis, “Mao Tsetung and Writing Reform” in *Perspectives on a Changing China: essays in honor of Professor C. Martin Wilbur on the occasion of his retirement* by Joshua A. Fogel and William T. Rowe (Boulder Colorado, Westview Press, 1979), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hessler, “Oracle Bones” in *The New Yorker* (February 16, 2004) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/16/oracle-bones>. Accessed on September 2, 2018



To expand historians' perspective on the Chinese language reform in the 1950s, one needs to put it into historical context. The conversation over language reform began prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 when established scholars conducted two major language reforms: a campaign under the rule of the Nationalist government of China in the 1920s, and a small-scale reform led by the Chinese Communist Party in Yan'an and surrounding regions from the 1930s to 1940s. The reason for these two campaigns could be traced back to the late Qing era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Numerous intellectuals speculated about the reason for Qing's decline when Chinese troops seemed powerless against modern Western weapons on the battle field during the Opium Wars. One speculation that garnered public support pointed toward the nature of the Chinese language. China was one of the handful nations in the world that continued to use a non-phonetic script, and students would need to grasp two separate systems to truly master the Chinese language: writing and speaking. Intellectuals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century believed that the hardship of the complicated system prevented millions of ordinary Chinese people from becoming literate and therefore stumped China's advancement and modernization.<sup>7</sup> Communist scholars were emulating the concurrent language reform in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> They advocated a total Latinization because it represented total equality and socialism.<sup>9</sup> It would improve literacy rate by introducing an easier language and shorter learning curve for the masses. Therefore, it would also distinguish new China from the feudal Qing government.<sup>10</sup> Intellectuals from both groups made

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<sup>7</sup> Qian Xuantong, "Hanzi Geming" [Character Revolution] in *Guoyu Yuekan* [National Language Monthly] (Unknown Publishing House, 1923-1), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ni Haishu, *Zhongguo Yuwen de Xinsheng: Ladinghua Zhongguozi Yundong Ershinian Lunwenji* [Reborn of Chinese Language: Latinization Movement in China for Twenty Years] (Beijing: Shidai Publishing House, 1949), 54.

<sup>9</sup> Wang Xuewen, *Lun Zhongguo de Wenzhi Gaige* [Language Reform by Chinese Communists] (Taipei: Dawn Culture Co., 1978), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Zhu Hua, "Kangzhan Shiqi de Jianghuaihua Xinwenzi Gongzuo he Jianghuaihua Xinwenzi Fangan Jieshao" [Jianghuai Dialect Reform Movement and Planning During the War] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly] 1 (1950), 7.

it their life's work to create a "less complicated" system for future Chinese students.<sup>11</sup> Scholars truly believed that a simpler Chinese language system could aid the creation of a modern China. After decades of debates, experimentations and interruptions, this belief became the ultimate dream for many scholars.

### **Methodology and Sources**

This complicated past determined the post-1949 language reform's convoluted nature, especially when Chinese intellectuals had to become the initiator to justify the reform to the new government. They summarized the previous reforms and analyzed the reasons behind their failure. Despite strong academic support, the previous Nationalist language reform ceased to matter when the government began struggling with the Sino-Japanese war and the Communist threat.<sup>12</sup> The Communist reform failed to accomplish much because the reform movement in Yan'an and surrounding region could not afford to provide enough reading materials to teach their students.<sup>13</sup> In 1949s, Chinese intellectuals believed they could do better than these previous reforms conducted by the Nationalist government and the Yan'an Communist Party. Scholars proposed that for a new language reform to take root in Chinese society, they would need more than academic theories and scholarly enthusiasm. Intellectuals must persuade the government to supply funds and support and regulate the educational system. At the same time, they need to create a much bigger and more efficient public discourse to promote the language reform to the public and the new government of China.

Therefore, Chinese intellectuals and the public discourse made up an important part of the language reform. The reform was promoted by a group of overseeing intellectuals that involved

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<sup>11</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Zhou Youguang Yuyanxue Lunwenji* [Zhou Youguang's Essay on Linguistic] (Beijing: Shangwu Publishing House, 2004), 106.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Zhou Youguang Wenji Dier Juan* [Zhou Youguang Essay Collection No.2] (Beijing: Zhongyang Fanyi Publishing House, 2013), 88.

<sup>13</sup> Su Peicheng, *Dangdai Zhongguo de Yuwen Gaige he Yuwen Guifan* [Language Reform and Regulation in Contemporary China] (Beijing: Shangwu Publishing House, 2010), 28.

modern linguists, writers, traditional Chinese language experts and many more established scholars in other fields. Most of them inherited different beliefs from previous reforms. Between 1949 and 1958, these intellectuals organized numerous national surveys asking for opinions and suggestions.<sup>14</sup> They also created at least five nation-wide journals with hundreds, if not thousands, of publications dedicated to this issue.<sup>15</sup> For example, *Guangming Daily*, one of the most well-known national newspapers created a special column about language reform that ran for about three years.<sup>16</sup> The column operated as a platform for both professionals and the general public to debate the ongoing reform. During those nine years, arguments appeared concerning the procedure of the reform due to the active involvement of those intellectuals. From the published works between 1949 and 1958, there were more than one hundred linguistic theoretical journals written by established scholars. But with every professional article, there were usually five to eight short comments or suggestions from the public. Scholars often answered these comments in their later publication. These communications and interactions made the reform active and volatile. From this complex discourse, we can begin to see the importance of the vibrant, ubiquitous discussion initiated by persistent intellectuals under a controlling political system.

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<sup>14</sup> In total two national surveys were conducted, mostly toward literate people.

<sup>15</sup> *New Language Weekly* and *Knowledge of Literature* were popular journals during the time and were more productive. *Chinese Literature*, *Phonetic System* were journals that were only around for one or two years.

<sup>16</sup> *Guangming Daily* was one of the most important newspapers at the time, it was founded by the Chinese Democratic party and was very popular among intellectuals. *People's Daily* also periodically printed articles about Language Reform, though they never began a special column.

## CHAPTER 2: INTELLECTUALS AND THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE: LANGUAGE

### REFORM FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END

#### Origins of the Reform

Sporadic discussions about potential language reform began to surface months before the founding of the People's Republic of China. In April 1949, scholars formed a private association to discuss the possibility of a new alphabetization reform. According to their discussion, this reform would be a two-step movement: the first step was to create a notation system that used alphabetic letters (Latin or another kind); the second step was to gradually retire the use of Chinese characters and replace them with the previously designed notation system, until it became the only official script. The committee believed that the hardship would lie with the second step since it would not be possible to achieve without support from the government. Considering Chinese people's strong attachment to their language and characters, it would be difficult to persuade them to abandon the traditional language and switch to a phonetic system without some official legislation that regulated public education.<sup>17</sup>

These intellectuals made multiple attempts to recruit the Chinese government support even when the government showed no interest in this topic. The association held a small meeting to address this issue in May 1949. Members included famous scholars like Wu Yuzhang, Li Jinxi, Luo Changpei, Hu Yuzhi, Ye Shengtao, Lu Zhiwei, Chen Dingmin, Ye Dingyi. All members were well-known scholars of the time, and most had a background in linguistics, Chinese literature, or ancient languages.<sup>18</sup> The committee members had hoped to attract the government's attention on the reform, but it proved more difficult than they had thought. During this meeting, the founding member Wu Yuzhang announced that he had briefly discussed the matter with one of the top

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<sup>17</sup> Ma Bin and Lin Li, *Zhongguo Wenzhi Gaige de Jige Wenti* [Few Questions about Chinese Language Reform] (Beijing: Zhanwang Publishing House, 1986), 103-117.

<sup>18</sup> Names of committee members could be found in the linguistic journal *New Language Monthly* they founded in 1949 and various memoirs.

communist party leaders, Liu Shaoqi.<sup>19</sup> According to Wu, Liu Shaoqi's opinion on the issue was not positive at all. In fact, Liu refused to discuss the subject of language reform to avoid misinterpretation by the public as interest in reform from the government. Even though he didn't forbid discussion, he made it clear that none of those discussions regarding language reform would be considered as a government project from the Communist Party.<sup>20</sup> Probably, after two failed attempts at language reform, the Chinese Communist Party was reluctant to go down the same path. Or because the Chinese Communist Party believed that their previous reform attempt had already accomplished enough, so there would be no reason to try again. Either way, the new government's hesitance was understandable. After all, a national language reform would affect many aspects of the society, so it could easily lead to public protests and social instability, even with careful planning and meticulous strategies.

Frustrated but persistent, Wu wrote directly to Mao Zedong on August 25, 1949 and listed benefits of another language reform, hoping to get a positive feedback. Wu proposed that Latinization would adhere to the following three principles: scientific in theory, international in design, and easy in practice.<sup>21</sup> Wu made the promise that the reform committee would try its best to develop an alphabetic system that would meet all three requirements. Another benefit of the new language was that it would allow easy communication with other countries in diplomacy and promote literacy rates. Unfortunately, Wu didn't get an immediate response from Mao.<sup>22</sup> Two day after receiving this letter, Mao Zedong forwarded the proposal to three other well-known scholars,

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<sup>19</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian[Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo yilai wenzhi gaige gongzuo biannian jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publisher, 1985), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Shinian Rushui: Zhou Youguang Bainian Koushu* [Zhou Youguang's Dictation about Language Reform] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2015), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Wu Yuzhang, *Wu Yuzhang Wenji* [Wu Yuzhang Essay Collection] (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1987), 631.

<sup>22</sup> Wu Yuzhang, 619.

Guo Moruo, Ma Xulun and Shen Yanbing, asking for their opinion.<sup>23</sup> A few days later all three scholars responded to Mao. They agreed with the theory behind the alphabetic system, but also expressed doubts about its ability to achieve a total character replacement.<sup>24</sup> On August 29, 1949, Mao Zedong wrote back to Wu. Mao agreed that it would be the right path for the Chinese to have a new alphabetic script, but he still wouldn't provide the government support the committee wanted.<sup>25</sup>

### **Building Public Support**

Without the official support, members of the association decided to create a public discourse on their own to boost publicity for language reform. On October 20, 1949, merely twenty days after the founding of PRC, the association changed their name to the Chinese Language Reform Committee and held their first national meeting.<sup>26</sup> Over forty intellectuals specialized or interested in linguistics attended the conference and agreed to create an alphabetic system by themselves, preferably using Latin letters.<sup>27</sup> Two months later these intellectuals founded a highly professional journal in Shanghai called the *New Language Weekly* to discuss this new alphabetic script. Wu Yuzhang, Wei Que and a few other committee members cofounded the journal and paid for the expenses. From this journal, the public could monitor their designing process almost like a weekly report, and it created a platform for the whole society to discuss the issue. The journal periodically published articles regarding Chinese alphabetization in general, including previous attempts before

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<sup>23</sup> While Guo, Ma and Shen were great scholars, but not linguists. Guo was a well-established writer, Ma was a calligraphy expert and Shen was a literature critic. They were specialists in Chinese literatures, but lacked knowledge in linguistics. However, for communist leaders, their status as established scholars were enough to consult on the issue.

<sup>24</sup> Wu Yuzhang, *Wu Yuzhang Wenji* [Wu Yuzhang Essay Collection] (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1987), 625.

<sup>25</sup> Wu Yuzhang, *Wu Yuzhang Wenji* [Wu Yuzhang Essay Collection] (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 1987), 641.

<sup>26</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Shinian Rushui: Zhou Youguang Bainian Koushu* [Zhou Youguang's Dictation about Language Reform] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press 2015), 41.

<sup>27</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 5.

1949. It also included topics related to other aspects of language reform, like character simplification and mandarin regulation.<sup>28</sup>

The lack of official recognition from the government pushed intellectuals to accept multiple forms of language reform in order to garner any support they could get from the public. They hoped to begin a large scale reform after accumulating enough positive voices from the people. The *New Language Weekly* was perfect for the committee to raise public awareness and seek public support. The journal lasted two years, with more than one hundred issues and thousands of articles. It began only publishing professional linguistic theories and successful language reform stories around China, and gradually it attracted many people to express their opinions in the journal.<sup>29</sup> There were letters sent in from school teachers, writers, and even military officers that had concerns with raising literacy rate for soldiers. Eventually the journal switched its focus from academic articles by linguists to letters from the public and their opinions on the matter. Due to the efforts made by these scholars, by mid-1951, language reform grew into a national topic. While scholars kept promoting the importance of language reform, more and more articles began appearing in various major national newspapers.<sup>30</sup>

The alphabetization reform took an interesting turn after debates officially took off on journals and newspapers: while committee scholars found an avenue to spread their ideas of alphabetization to a boarder audience, the public discourse also began to affect the intellectuals themselves. Since the reform committee desperately sought public approval, scholars didn't limit the theme of the journal to their ultimate goal: character replacement with Latinization. Many

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<sup>28</sup> R.M.S, "Zhejiang Daxue Xinyuwen Yanjiuhui Diyiji Zongjie Baogao" [The First New Language Conference in Zhejiang University] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], December 31, 1949, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Zhang Zhi, "Tan SW he Hanzi Hunhe Yingyong" [The mix use of SW and Chinese Characters] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], February 25, 1950, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Tang Lan, "Zhongguo zwenzi Gaige de Jiben Wenti he Tuijin Wenmang Jiaoyu, Ertong Jiaoyu Liangwenti de Lianxi" [Basic Problem with Chinese Language Reform with Literacy Problem and Children Education Problem] in *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], October 9, 1949, 2.

scholars recognized that it was a radical proposal that may not be accepted by the Chinese general public. Instead they allowed all kinds of topics to appear in their journals to boost publicity of the reform movement. Some of the topics of articles were drastically different from Latinization. For example, the invention of the SW system. A local school teacher with initials SW invented this system to work temporarily as an alphabet teaching tool for Chinese characters in early 1950, and it spread to the nearby<sup>31</sup> military base soon after.<sup>32</sup> One of the officers on the base published an article in *New Language Weekly* to praise the system's practicality, calling the system a "miraculous offer from the new marvelous communist China."<sup>33</sup> The inventor was initially inspired by the Nationalist government's character reform from the 1920s, when linguists used twenty-nine symbols pulled from ancient Chinese texts to create an alphabetic system. In the new design, the SW system used twenty-eight symbols to make it more efficient.<sup>34</sup> Ancient Chinese symbols provided a sense of familiarity for students, which became its advantage. But it also had a noticeable disadvantage compared to Latin letters, since symbols were more complicated and difficult to write and read. At first scholars reserved comments on the negativities, and focused on the SW system's positive feedbacks from the public, even though they were doubtful of its efficiency. But gradually the symbol alphabet began to win scholars over. Since teachers already adopted the SW system to teach students and soldiers, its effect was more tangible than any other theoretical system envisioned by the reform committee. With the SW system receiving more and

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<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, none of the articles mentioned the full name of the teacher or where he or she taught. And since the officer didn't offer enough information of his base, we could not tell where the school or the military base were.

<sup>32</sup> Benbao Jizhe [Staff Reporter], "SWY Xinwenti Yundong" [SWY New Language Movement] in *Xinwenti Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], August 1, 1949, 2.

<sup>33</sup> R.M.S, "Yuyan Luxian he Wenzi Luxian" [Route of Language and Route of Character] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], July 26, 1950, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Zhang Zhi, "Tan SW de Duwu he Cidian" [Talk about SW Reading Materials and Dictionaries] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], January 17, 1950, 6.



more praises from the public, many Latinization supporters in the committee also began to acknowledge the benefits of a symbol-based system.<sup>35</sup>

The growing possibilities of language reform began to receive more attention from scholars and became part of the discourse that enriched the field of language reform and promoted public discussion. Many people began writing to linguistic journals like *New Language Weekly* and various newspapers to express their concerns. Most letters addressed their fear of character replacement that would lead to a possible chaotic period. Many people suggested that to achieve absolute alphabetization, China would need to come up with a step by step strategy. One of the most popular short-term plans that kept showing up in papers was character simplification.<sup>36</sup> It wouldn't be as efficient as Latinization or even alphabetization, but simplifying would alleviate the difficulty of learning Chinese characters. Before it appeared on national journals, most intellectuals considered the idea of character simplification a remote possibility that would quickly become obsolete. But with more and more suggestions coming in applauding the idea, intellectuals had to take those into consideration for their future planning. Many people viewed these new reform possibilities, like character simplification, as exciting new fields worth exploring. But it also means that the attention of the Language Reform Committee no longer focused exclusively on character alphabetization.

After nearly two years of public promotion, the idea of language reform finally gained enough public momentum and successfully attracted the attention of the government. By creating and expanding a public discourse, linguists maneuvered inside the political system to increase their own agency. Around the winter of 1951, Zhou Enlai, the second in command of the PRC government, announced the party's decision to set up an official Communist Language Reform

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<sup>35</sup> Li Pu, "Ba Women de Gongzuo he Dangqian de Yundong Jiehe Qilai" [Combine our Work and the Current Movement] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], December 2, 1950, 4.

<sup>36</sup> "Diyijie Quanguo Gongnong Jiaoyu Zhong de Yige Zhongyao Ti'an" [The First Proposal on the Education Conference for Peasants and Workers] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], October 20, 1950, 12.

Committee, much like the private one set up by linguists alone, and incorporated this new department into the Education Council.<sup>37</sup> A few months later, the government reevaluated all members from the previous committee to determine their qualification to join the new one. The government also stipulated that that they preferred to accept all reform possibilities instead of limiting the transformation to alphabetization. After receiving the government's sanction, the new committee divided up into five branches, each tackling one aspect of the reform problem, including alphabetization, collating characters for potential simplification, teaching experimentation, textbook publishing and liaison work. Due to the limited number of members on this new committee, positions were usually interchangeable with many scholars simultaneously holding two or three positions across the field.<sup>38</sup>

The new committee became the intermediary between the government and Chinese public, and they had to listen to suggestions from both sides. Since the new committee often allowed intellectuals to switch positions to work, it also gave more leeway for certain intellectuals to think beyond alphabetization. With the government in control of the formal procedures, intellectuals received more political and financial support than they had before. In 1951, numerous official discussions and conferences were held to discuss funding allocation for projects like prospective teacher training program and new textbook printing, all dedicated to promoting a smooth transition for future reform.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, intellectuals didn't immediately cut off the connection they made with the public, even after the previously popular linguistic journals began to decline after the committee transitioned from a private organization to a government committee. Linguists still regularly published their accomplishments on national newspapers, but without the platform of

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<sup>37</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], 11.

<sup>39</sup> Wang Aiyun, *Zhongguo Gongchandang Lingdao de Wenzhi Gaige* [Chinese Language Reform Led by the Communist Party] (Beijing: People's Daily Publishing House, 2015), 71.

journals, the public had to seek another way to maintain communication. From 1951 to 1953, thousands of letters came to the committee with advice, questions, and some privately designed alphabetic systems from factory workers, students, scholars, and other interested groups of people.<sup>40</sup> The collected pamphlets contained more than one hundred alphabetic systems were published in 1954 and 1955, years after the suggestion reached the committee. Today we wouldn't be able to know if the committee took any of those suggestions into consideration, and neither could the public in the 1950s. Base on later literature, the public surly felt this neglection. In less than two years, the public began calling the committee a “elitist coop” and the reform a “unrealistic madness.”<sup>41</sup> The public was slowly losing their own voice in the reform and it caused a much more serious problem for the reform movement later.

### **Internal Disagreement**

While the enthusiasm continued for language reform after its official incorporation into the Education Council, the committee remained usually quiet and unproductive for several months on their alphabet design. For some linguists on the committee, the freedom to pursue their dream, namely language reform, only exacerbated doubts they began to have about alphabetization and Latinization. After two years of interaction with the public, some committee members began to see other possibilities. As a result, a few intellectuals began to actively seek paths of reform other than alphabetization. Since the committee was composed of only about a dozen intellectuals, these oppositionists formed a serious obstruction for the reform process. The situation became more serious in early 1952 when more than one scholar, who previously advocated for total alphabetization, publicly questioned its feasibility. In their words, an alphabetic system composed

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<sup>40</sup> Zhongguo Wenzhi Gaige Xiehui Bian [Chinese Language Reform Council Eds.], *Gedi Renshi Jilaide Hanyu Pinyin Fangan Yi* [Phonetic Systems from all over China Volume 1] (Beijing: Chinese Language Reform Publishing House, 1954) and *Gedi Renshi Jilaide Hanyu Pinyin Fangan Er* [Phonetic Systems from all over China Volume 2] (Beijing: Chinese Language Reform Publishing House, 1955)

<sup>41</sup> Pu Zhixiang, “Wodui Pinyin Wenzhi Jidian Bujin Xiangtong de Kanfan” [Some of my Different Opinion About Language Reform] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], August 8, 1957

of Latin letters would be too much and too soon for China.<sup>42</sup> They suggested a better path, such as a symbol-based system or character simplification, which could solve the issue of over-complicated Chinese characters.<sup>43</sup>

In mid-1952, the stagnant project of alphabetization suddenly became the focus of contention after Mao Zedong's intervention in the Language Reform Committee. Even though the Chinese government was initially reluctant to pursue another language reform in 1949, many top leaders including Mao, were monitoring the linguists' progress. Rumor among committee intellectuals believed that Mao even brought the question directly to Joseph Stalin to glean some wisdom from the Soviet's own language reform, wishing for more guidance from the PRC's ally the USSR. According to one of the committee members Zhou Youguang, who wrote a memoir sixty years after this event, this specific meeting was believed to have occurred sometime between 1949 to 1951 during Mao's visit to Moscow.<sup>44</sup> Based on Zhou's memoir, we know some fragmented information about this meeting.<sup>45</sup> Mao brought up the topic of Chinese language reform and asked for directions. Instead of offering a direct response, Stalin gave an ambiguous answer and advised China to have a unique language.<sup>46</sup> Mao thought about Stalin's words after he returned to China, and in 1952, he publicly issued an equally vague instruction in the *People's Daily*. According to the guidance to the language reform, the reform committee would need to design a language system that would comply with the "Chinese culture."<sup>47</sup> With this one sentence order, but no more explanation, intellectuals had no choice but to interpret its meaning based on

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<sup>42</sup> "Yong Guangda Qunzhong Zuiliaojie de Yuyan he Wenzi" [Use the Language Most Familiar by the Public] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], April 17, 1951, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Wei Liang, "Sucheng Shizifa he Pinyin Wenzhi Yundong" [Fast Literacy Program and Alphabetization Movement] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], January 1952, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Shinian Rushui: Zhouyouguang Bainian Koushu* [Zhou Youguang Dictation about Language Reform] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2015), 76.

<sup>45</sup> It is more likely that the meeting occurred in 1949, since Mao didn't make a trip to Moscow in 1950 or 1951.

<sup>46</sup> Since this meeting was likely informal, I could only piece together the general conversations based on memoirs and autobiographies.

<sup>47</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Shinian Rushui: Zhouyouguang Bainian Koushu* [Zhou Youguang Dictation about Language Reform] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2015), 57

their own understanding of Chinese culture. Unfortunately, for the reform committee, the existing differences in the interpretation of “Chinese culture,” and how they would work on language reform, led to more disagreements among scholars. The new order not only restricted linguists, but also divided them.

The language reform had thus fallen into chaos since committee members couldn't reach an agreement on the representation of Chinese culture. Some believed that only traditional characters count as the symbol of Chinese culture. Some believed that symbols would be a better representation. Some insisted that Latinization could be Chinese as well. There were others believe that any system designed by Chinese scholars would count. Since Mao's order prevented compromises among linguists, they had no choice but to seek out public support again. Only this time they were more interested in expressing their own argument than listening for the public opinion. For the next several years, language reform committee members published over a hundred articles in various newspapers discussing the issue.<sup>48</sup> Each side listed advantages and benefits they believed to be true for their envisioned language system. At the same time, they also listed to the shortcomings of the competition's system, hoping to gain more support on their side. Privately, the committee divided itself into sections, while the actual reform was put side without progress.

The symbol-based system was the most popular opponent against Latinization. Its advocates praised its practicality, stability and its appeal to Chinese history over Latin letters. Linguists who supported symbols didn't suddenly abandon their previous dream for a Latin-based system. Instead they were proposing a middle ground as a first step to soften the impact on common people. In their vision, Chinese characters would be replaced first by a symbol-based system, then they would

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<sup>48</sup> A separate section was created on *Guangming Daily*, one of the most popular newspapers, to discuss issues concerning language reform, including professional articles written by experts and suggestions or comments from different reform enthusiasts.

begin experimenting with Latinization.<sup>49</sup> Many of these scholars kept referencing the SW system's success achieved in 1950 and 1951. For over a year, numerous reports claimed that illiterate soldiers only spent less than three months to master the new alphabet and were able to use it to read and write documents.<sup>50</sup> And many believed that SW's predecessor, the original symbol notation system created in the early 1920s, could generate even boarder success in China. This previous symbol system achieved relative success with document notation and translation. Although the reform in the 1920s was suspended a few years after its proposal, most intellectuals believed it was due to the interruption of wars, not the shortcoming of alphabet itself.<sup>51</sup> These stories showed intellectuals that there could be a way other than Latin letters,<sup>52</sup> namely an alphabet that wouldn't forsake Chinese history and culture to replace everything with western letters.<sup>53</sup> Certainly a system, designed using ancient symbols from Chinese texts, would count as complying to "Chinese culture," as Mao Zedong requested.

However, the disadvantages of a symbol-based alphabetic system were also easily found and constantly left open for Latin letter advocates to attack. Many Latinization supporters claimed that the superiority of PRC could only be shown by designing a better alphabetic system and culturally separating itself from pre-1949 China.<sup>54</sup> But it would be close to impossible to cut ties with the previous reform, since symbol systems such as SW were clearly inspired by the symbol alphabet created in the early 1920s. At the same time, many linguists still believed that letter-based language

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<sup>49</sup> Shangguan Gongpu, "Lading Zimu he Minzu Ganqing" [Latin Letters and Cultural Sentiments] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], February 1955, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Benbao Jizhe [Staff Reporter], "SWY Xinwenzi Yundong" [SWY New Language Movement] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], August 1, 1949, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Huang Xiaolei, *Minguo Shiqi Yuyan Zhengce Yanjiu* [Language Policy Study During National Period] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Publishing House, 2013), 56.

<sup>52</sup> R.M.S, "Yuyan Luxian he Wenzi Luxian" [Route of Language and Route of Character] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], July 26, 1950, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 13-16

<sup>54</sup> Zhang Yan, "Xinwenzi Lilun Jianghua Diwujiang" [New Language Theory NO.5] in *Xinwenzi Zhoukan* [New Language Weekly], January 17, 1950, 9.

systems were superior to symbol-based systems.<sup>55</sup> They argued that in the previous reform, intellectuals from the 1920s only deemed their symbol-based system as an acceptable notation system, but it was not mature enough to work as a separate writing system.<sup>56</sup> So if the PRC used a total Latin-letter based language system, it would prove that the new China was more culturally and politically progressive than the old government. By this definition, Latin letters would serve as a sign of modernization. While attacking symbol-based alphabets, Latin advocates kept working their way to promote total Latinization by stressing its advantages at application and political significance, articles kept appearing on newspapers and journals promoting the benefits of having a letter-based system.<sup>57</sup>

Many Latinization intellectuals argued that using Latin letters as alphabetic system would help to achieve easier communication with foreign countries in diplomatic correspondence.<sup>58</sup> Foreigners would no longer require special guideline to learn Chinese pronunciation.<sup>59</sup> They also deduced that eventually the symbol-based system would prove too complicated for China as well, since it remained hard to read and write. When that time came, future linguists would most likely need to create another Latin letter system.<sup>60</sup> Compared to their adversaries, Latin letter supporters' disadvantage lied with their inability to justify that a language system based on foreign letters could ever conform to Chinese culture as Mao Zedong ordered. Many linguists made promises publicly, arguing that any system designed by Chinese scholars would be considered part of

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<sup>55</sup> Zhi Ou, "Luetan Women de Xinnian" [Talk about our Beliefs] in *Xinwenzi Yuekan* [New Language Monthly], April 1950, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Zhi Ou, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Lin Handa, "Guaigun Dibushang Datui" [Unstoppable Force] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], December 8, 1953.

<sup>58</sup> Guo Moruo, "1952.02.05 Zhongguo Wenzhi Gaige Yanjiu Weiyuanhui" [1952.02.05 Chinese Language Reform Committee] in *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 18.

<sup>59</sup> Zhou Youguang, "Zai Yuwen Gongzuo Zhong Cujin Zhongsu Youyi" [Encourage Relationship between China and Soviet during Language Reform] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], August 1953, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Wu Yuzhang, *Xinwenzi yu Xinwenhua Yundong* [New Language and New Cultural Movement] (Beijing: Huabei University Press, 1949), 20.

Chinese culture. But the public remained dubious on this issue as questions of western and Latinization influence on China and Chinese culture kept appearing in national journals.<sup>61</sup> Intellectuals knew they couldn't convince the public overnight on this issue, so they switched their focus to promote Latinization's political significance instead. According to Latinization intellectuals, destruction of Chinese culture by replacing Chinese characters would be the most communist gesture, since the new language put all people on the same knowledge level.<sup>62</sup> To prove their point, linguists went to look for Mao's previous speeches to support this argument. All they could find was a single sentence from early 1940s where Mao made one comment about "revolutionary language" and the possibilities with Latin letters.<sup>63</sup> Linguists promoted this sentence far greater than reality, believing that they found another command from Mao that would counteract his "comply to Chinese culture" order.

An opportunity for the Communist Language Reform Committee to resolve this internal argument presented itself in March 1952 during the very first government approved national meeting hosted by linguists. During this meeting various intellectuals expressed their opinion about Chinese culture and how it could be applied to designing a language system. Unfortunately, differences between the symbol supporters and letter advocates were too severe to be resolved within one meeting.<sup>64</sup> The discussion continued with articles appearing in national newspapers and journals. Gradually the debates focused more on ideological issues or even personal attacks against individual intellectuals on the opposite side, instead of debates basing on linguistic

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<sup>61</sup> XS, "Lading Zimu Pinyin de Minzu Xingshi he Feiminzu Xingshi" [National Latin Letters or International Latin Letters] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], November 1954, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Chen Wenbin, "Tantan Riben de Wenzhi Gaige" [Talk about Japanese Language Reform] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], November 1954, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Multiple articles between 1953 and 1955 mentioned Mao's words, which could be found in Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji* [Selected Words from Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Mao Zedong Publisher, 1967), 219.

<sup>64</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 12.



merits.<sup>65</sup> For example, traditionalists accused the other side using phrases like “letter equals traitor,” and radical Latinists would fight back with accusations “obsolete old goat with their character.”

With these escalated attacks from both sides, the committee was forced to accept that they couldn't simply convince their opponents and therefore proposed a settlement. In April 1953, the reform committee finally reached a temporary agreement to work on two different systems simultaneously: a symbol-based system and a Latinization system.<sup>66</sup> A few weeks later during the eighth national meeting hosted by the alphabetization section of the committee members, the decision was presented to the Education Council and was approved. The alphabetization section of the Communist Language Reform Committee thus officially separated into two groups, the first would keep following Mao's order, while the second group kept promoting Latinization.<sup>67</sup> After the separation, the committee was finally able to refocus its energy on designing new systems to reform Chinese characters.

While the internal separation of the committee prevented public arguments, many intellectuals chose another way to promote their plan for language reform. Even with the official approval to work on Latinization, its supporters still worried about being overpowered by the much more popular symbol-based system. After careful consideration, they decided to preserve the possibility for Latinization by proposing a further compromise. Latinization scholars were willing to accept a symbol-based system given that their letter-based system would also be legitimized by the government. This idea was first proposed in 1951 by Li Jinxi, one of the most adamant

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<sup>65</sup> XS, “Hu Shi he Wenzhi Gaige” [Scholar Hu Shi and Language Reform] in *Yuwen Zhishi* [Literature Knowledge], December 1954, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 16

<sup>67</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], 14

Latinization advocates on the language reform committee.<sup>68</sup> He corresponded with Mao Zedong and three other linguists but never got a clear response. So, three years later in 1954, after discussing the situation with his colleagues in the Latinization section, Li wrote to Mao asking for support once again.<sup>69</sup> This backup plan ensured that Latinization would still be put to use no matter which group of intellectuals won this contest. Mao approved this plan soon after its proposal. On the surface, this looked like a lost battle for the Latinization scholars, but in reality they managed to preserve their goal and their agency.

In October 1955, the Latinization linguists won the battle after the Communist Language Reform Committee summarized their work of the past three years and presented it to the government. In total, the committee produced not one, but five different language systems. Despite the small victories, the official split inside the committee may have stopped the debate, but it also stalled any real progress. Intellectuals who worked on symbol-based systems designed more than one system, but couldn't decide which one to present. In the end, Mao received three different systems using ancient Chinese symbols, one which used Cyrillic letters and one using Latin letters. After reviewing all three symbol-based systems, Mao was gravely unsatisfied with the result and believed that all three were still too complicated for the Chinese public.<sup>70</sup> One of the committee leaders Wu Yuzhang took the chance to openly express his doubts about the practicality of symbols and pleaded to Mao to reconsider switching the focus to Latinization.<sup>71</sup> To persuade Mao away from his previous order that the new alphabet must comply to "Chinese culture," Wu pointed out that Chinese culture could have a wide range of meanings for different people. As a result, even

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<sup>68</sup> The three linguists were Ma Xulun, Wu Yuzhang and Wei Que. All scholars dedicated their work to promote Latinization.

<sup>69</sup> *Wenzi Gaige Chubanshe Bian* [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Wenzi Gaige Chubanshe Bian* [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], 24.

<sup>71</sup> Zhou Youguang, *Shinian Rushui: Zhou Youguang Bainian Koushu* [Zhou Youguang Dictation of Language Reform] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2015), 168.

brilliant intellectuals on the committee couldn't decide on one set of alphabets, leaving the symbol-based system an undesirable choice.<sup>72</sup> Mao Zedong eventually conceded and directed the language reform committee to abandon the idea of the symbol-based system and pointed in the direction of designing a Latin letter alphabet system. Two months later, the first draft of the Latin-based system (the future Pinyin system) was presented to the party, and received approval from the Education Council of China. However, instead of announcing it as a legitimate language script which would replace Chinese characters, the Education Council introduced it to the public as a notation system that will only be used to denote characters' pronunciations.<sup>73</sup> Essentially, the Latinization system would be a tool useful for teaching Chinese, not a replacement for traditional characters. Since the committee switched its focus from symbol to Latinization in such a short time, the public failed to keep up with the new trend. It was likely that by introducing Latinization as a notation system, the Education Council could give the public more time to adjust to the new reality.

Nevertheless, the acceptance of the Pinyin notation system became a positive sign for the Communist Language Reform Committee to keep pursuing a total Latinization program. In September 1956, committee member Wu Yuzhang spoke at the Eighth National Congress of the CCP, introducing the next step of language reform to all government officials. According to Wu and the reform committee, linguists would focus on publicizing the new Pinyin system by encouraging people to use letters from the system instead of characters. The committee believed that since Latin letters were much easier to read and write, they would replace more and more Chinese characters. Eventually all Chinese people would start using Pinyin as an independent script system, thus achieving the goal of total Latinization. Furthermore, the meeting decided to

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<sup>72</sup> Wu Yuzhang, *Wu Yuzhang Wenji* [Wu Yuzhang Essay Collection] (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House 1987), 676.

<sup>73</sup> Benbao Jizhe [Staff Reporter], "Quanguo Wenzhi Gaige Huiyi Jieshao" [Introduction to the National Language Reform Conference] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], December 26, 1955

incorporate this next stage of language reform into China's Second Five-Year Plan and proposed Pinyin education experimentation on a national scale.<sup>74</sup> For unknown reasons, the commitment of Pinyin to the Second Five-Year Plan was never published by intellectuals, and the only record found was in a book with day by day language reform event in a chronological order published in 1985.<sup>75</sup> From the public's perspective, the majority of the public speculated that Pinyin was not very popular among government officials. As a result, the Pinyin system raised more public doubts and praises.

### Outside Criticism

The Language Reform Committee didn't realize that their temporary success with Pinyin only indicated the beginning of the end for language reform. About one year after the announcement of Pinyin notation system, the reform was shut down by the government with a firm orders to prevent another attempt. The suspension was arbitrary with limited explanation for the committee and the public. Without access to archival records, the best I could do is to piece together a scenario by looking at the last year of the reform, which was filled with chaos and heated arguments. These arguments no longer focused on technical issues of alphabet design, instead they leaned toward personal attacks against committee linguists. The nature of the reform and the validity of the committee, were questioned by the public as well, causing major turmoil that inevitably was too strong for the committee to handle.

In late 1956, the committee further decreased publishing about language reform after the Eighth National Congress of the CCP. They intended to allow adjustment, and avoid protest from the public, but the avoidance only acerbated the public's growing suspicion of the Pinyin system.

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<sup>74</sup> Chinese Five-Year plans contain general guidelines the party leaders organized for the whole country, including financial plans, industrial plans, education plans and many others. The first Five-Year plan started in 1953, but the party believed that the goal was already met in 1956 therefore was ready to begin the second plan.

<sup>75</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 39

Since most people lacked knowledge of the committee's day to day process, or they divided responsibilities to handle more than one alphabetic system, many expressed concerns for the sudden change of focus from symbol to letter. They feared that it caused the committee to submit a second-rate alphabetic system that was pieced together haphazardly at the last minute. The public announcement for future total Latinization based on the Pinyin system fueled their anxiety. Many even began to doubt the necessity of the reform, since in their mind it only produced a "subpar" system after seven years of work. Very soon the public discourse linguists carefully cultivated to promote their reform turned against them, creating a crisis the committee had never seen or anticipated before. Intellectuals were used to internal debates among committee linguists, since language reform was a controversial topic from the very beginning. But public disagreements against the whole committee was a new territory for them. Not knowing how to react, the committee linguists handled the situation to the best of their ability, but chaos still followed quickly afterwards.

The first wave of public attacks came from a group of Chinese intellectuals who were not involved in committee activities. The reform committee's two famous critics Tang Lan and Chen Mengjia had been questioning the movement since it began. Tang was an expert in classical Chinese who devoted his life to ancient Chinese literature and antiquities, and Chen was a famous poet who specialized in ancient Chinese verses. Both had reservations about language reform and made their opposition clear throughout the process.<sup>76</sup> But since they were never part of the reform committee, their opinion was often ignored. The situation changed in late 1956 when public protest against language reform reached an unprecedented high level. Tang Lan and Chen Mengjia became positive examples for many others as pioneering figures, heroes that were "brave enough to speak

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<sup>76</sup> Tang Lan, "Zhongguo Wenzhi Gaige de Jiben Wenti he Tuijin Wenmang Jiaoyu, Ertong Jiaoyu Liangwenti de Lianxi" [Basic Problem with Chinese Language Reform with Illiteracy Issue and Children Education Issue] in *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], October 9, 1949.

the truth.”<sup>77</sup> Similar protest articles began to appear written by other famous intellectuals, doubting everything the reform committee had done for the past seven years.<sup>78</sup> Although none of them were linguists, they were all well-respected intellectuals. Some were household names in China, like Jian Bozan, who served on the Education Council and wrote multiple books about ancient Chinese history.<sup>79</sup> All these open oppositions from respected writers, scientists and scholars encouraged the public to question the language reform and the reform committee.

At this point, the public discourse had accumulated enough doubts and bitterness toward the language reform committee. Following the footsteps of the famous scholars, the Chinese public began voicing their own opinion as well, and their doubts quickly turned into accusations. While professional intellectuals questioned the disadvantage of the Pinyin system by using their expertise, most of the public lacked the training or knowledge to do so. Therefore, their criticisms tended to focus on triviality, like political implications between the lines. In some extreme cases, they questioned the linguists’ intention by scrutinizing their personal experience. The political implications of the Latinization system were brought up and debated repeatedly. Some argued that the reform committee directly disobeyed Mao’s order by switching from symbol to letter, and should be punished for insubordination. Reporter from the *Guangming Daily* boldly stated that: “They may have achieved some meager success with this Pinyin system, but it is no excuse for them to go against Chairman Mao.”<sup>80</sup> The public pushed this argument further and began questioning if the reform committee was an anti-communist, anti-government organization. They

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<sup>77</sup> Tang Lan, “Zhongguo Wenzhi de Jianhua he Pinyinhua” [Chinese Language Simplification and Alphabetization] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], August 31, 1955.

<sup>78</sup> Benbao Jizhe [Staff Reporter], “Gei Wenzixue yi Yingyou de Diwei: De Tang Lan Xiansheng de Tanhua” [Treat the Science of Linguistic with Respect] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], January 16, 1957.

<sup>79</sup> The list of opposers’ names could be found on journal *Pinyin* [Phonetic System], No.3, 1957. List include Tang Lan, Chen Mengjia, Jian Bozan, Yu Pingbo and many more.

<sup>80</sup> “Zenyang Taolun Hanyu Pinyin Fangan” [How to Discuss the Pinyin System] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], March 14, 1956.

argued that the committee linguists deliberately designed a crippling language system to destroy China. According to one of the protestors, “It doesn’t deserve celebration, but punishment.”<sup>81</sup>

In early 1957 the public criticism took a turn for the worse when it coincided with the “Hundred Schools of Thought” movement directed by Mao Zedong to encourage criticism of the government.<sup>82</sup> In the beginning of this new movement, criticizing was considered an act of patriotism to help the Chinese government grow. The Language Reform Committee was officially part of the government structure and was already under scrutinizing by the public. Many participants of the “Hundred Schools of Thought” movement targeted the reform to fulfil their patriotic duty. Articles from opposing intellectuals once again were published on national newspapers to express their discontent with Pinyin and the reform. Tang Lan and Chen Mengjia were the most qualified of the critics to analyze the Pinyin system and make scholarly judgments. But they were not professional linguists and had no experience on designing alphabets. Other critics from academia had even less to offer on linguistic knowledge.

These intellectuals jumped on the chance to prove their loyalty to the government by attacking a bad element inside the political system. They were geologists, chemists and architects who could only speculate on the shortcomings of language reform, so they rarely touched on actual linguistic theories or scientific methods. Instead of keeping their argument in a scholarly context, many critics had no choice but to focus on attacking the committee’s intention and “questionable” political affiliation. Words like “thoughtless,” “rash process,” “not proletarian” or “with zero regard for Chinese common people” could be found in dozens of articles.<sup>83</sup> The critics focused on

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<sup>81</sup> Ye Jinyue, “Buyao Kuada Pinyin Wenzhi de Youdian” [Don’t Exaggerate the Benefit of Pinyin] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], June 14, 1957.

<sup>82</sup> The “Hundred Schools of Thought” movement in 1957 only lasted a few months then it was believed that all the criticisms against the party angered Mao. A few months later the movement came to a full stop, then almost all intellectuals who criticized the government were punished politically.

<sup>83</sup> Chen Mengjia, “Guanyu Hanzhi de Qiantu” [The Future of Chinese Characters] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], May 19, 1957.

bashing Latinization linguists to belittle the reform and the Pinyin system.<sup>84</sup> And their passionate words often invited more published criticism from the public. A popular article in national newspaper stating “Latinization would bring chaos to China” received more than a dozen supporting articles where various authors quoted and applauded the criticism.<sup>85</sup> Opposers also questioned the legitimacy of the new language system as it was designed by a group of arrogant scholars who separated themselves from the proletarians. The committee was called “an elitist cult that had lost touch with the basis,” therefore their design must be unrealistic as well.<sup>86</sup> Speculations of the internal work of the reform committee was also one of the popular topics. Some controversial articles accused the committee of controlling the whole Chinese intellectual community by bullying and threatening their critics. A few even went further and hinted that most committee members were against the idea of Latinization but forced by the person in charge to keep quiet.<sup>87</sup> The most famous article wrote about the opinion from an unknown chemist, hinting that the reform committee didn’t want to reform Chinese language. In this article, the alleged chemist believed Mao Zedong’s constant interruptions led to discontent in the committee and a subpar Pinyin system as final production out of spite.<sup>88</sup>

The Language Reform Committee tried their best to fight back when they faced accusations from multiple directions. At first, they tried to keep the argument on a professional level. In July 1957, the committee invited more than a dozen intellectuals opposing the Pinyin system to a conference for a professional discussion. The meeting lasted a few days but accomplished very

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<sup>84</sup> Pan Mo, “Yige Putong Gongmin de Yijian” [A Chinese Citizen’s Perspective] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], June 14, 1957.

<sup>85</sup> Li Shiqing, “Taolun Hanzi Yaobuyao Gaige shi Biyaode” [It is Necessary to Discuss Language Reform] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], June 27, 1957.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang Wei, “Pinyin Wenzi yu Gudian Wenxue” [Pinyin Letters and Ancient Literature] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], July 25, 1957.

<sup>87</sup> Xi Ren, “Zai Wenzi Wenti shang Zhankai Zhengming” [Express on the Issue of Language] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], June 14, 1957.

<sup>88</sup> “Yiwei Shengwu Xuejia dui Wenzi Gaige de Yijian” [A Chemist’s Opinion on Language Reform] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], April 28, 1957



little, since scholars often deviated from linguistic debates. Despite the committee's best effort to maintain a professional atmosphere, the guest intellectuals focused mostly on political implications and kept referring to the reform committee as the "bad element" inside the Chinese government.<sup>89</sup> No doubt the "Hundred School of Thought" movement had adversely influenced the process, and resulted in a politicized chaos with attacks and accusations.

After the failure of the conference, the Language Reform Committee linguists quickly realized that they shouldn't keep passively receiving accusations without fighting back. All the aspersions in national newspapers and journals were not only discrediting their work for the past eight years, but also destroying their reputation and possibly their livelihood. However, it would prove difficult to dispute those accusations with academic debates only. Eventually committee intellectuals realized that they could only retaliate by using the same tactic against their opponents. They would have to abandon their focus on linguistic theories and discredit their accusers in order to gain the upper hand. In less than a month, multiple articles began appearing in newspapers arguing against their opponents.<sup>90</sup> Their counter-accusations angered the opposite side, exacerbating the situation.

The worsening relationship between the reform committee and its opposition further deteriorated in late 1957 when the "Hundred Schools of Thought" movement came to a sudden end. Soon after the movement began, Mao Zedong realized his mistake of allowing all Chinese people to criticize the government. He and many top party leaders received many more complains than they thought possible and were annoyed by them. They feared that too many questions would shake the foundation of the communist government, so the party curtailed the movement immediately. This also meant that those who spoke out during the window of openness now had

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<sup>89</sup> "Wenzi Gaige Huiyi" [Language Reform Conference] in *Pinyin* [Pinyin], No.3-4, 1957.

<sup>90</sup> Shi Shi, "Bo Chen Mengjia bing Zhiwen Guan Xi" [Dispute Chen Mengjia and Question Guan Xi] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], August 22, 1957.

to bear the consequence of their words. For the Chinese government, those disgruntled intellectuals posed a threat that should be disciplined. Very soon they branded those intellectuals “rightists” and issued punishments.<sup>91</sup> They were considered unstable elements in the society that should be punished, jailed or executed.

At this point, the Language Reform Committee devoted all their energy to arguing against their opponents instead of Latinization work. The Anti-Rightist movement added extra pressure for the committee to prove their legitimacy. The only solution they could think of was to portray their as villains.<sup>92</sup> The committee insisted that the previous attacks done by critics undermined very important work led by the communist party,<sup>93</sup> and therefore undermined the Chinese government.<sup>94</sup> They listed all previous criticisms and stated that those words were “delusional,” “naïve,” or “unrealistic.”<sup>95</sup> This retaliation proved effective a few months later when the government branded several opposing scholars “rightists.”<sup>96</sup> Some of them were sent to prison, some lost their job and some simply disappeared from public view. A few became popular targets and branded as scapegoats again in later political movements.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ma Xueliang, “Hanzi Gaiyong Pinyin hui Yinqi Tianxia Daluan me” [Would Changing Character to Alphabet Create a Turmoil] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 89.

<sup>92</sup> Wang Li, “Pipan Youpai Fenzi Chen Mengjia Guanyu Fandui Wenzi Gaige Huangmiu Yanlun” [Criticize Chen Mengjia’s Ridiculous Comments about Language Reform] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 76.

<sup>93</sup> Pan Shan, “Ping Guan Xi he Chen Mengjia Dui Wenzi Gaige Wenti de Taidu” [Comment on Guan Xi and Chen Mengjia’s Attitude Regarding Language Reform Issue] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 109.

<sup>94</sup> Cen Qixiang, “Dule ‘Yiwei Shengwuxuejia dui Wenzi Gaige de Yijian’ yihou” [After Reading ‘A Chemist’s Opinion on Language Reform’] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 76.

<sup>95</sup> Ni Haishu, “Wuliao de Gongji” [Tedious Attacks] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 61.

<sup>96</sup> Du Songshou, “Youpai Fenzi Zenyang Liyong Wenzi Gaige Wenti xiang Dang Jingong” [How did Rightists used Language Reform Issue to Attack the Communist Party] in *1957 Nian Wenzi Gaige Bianlun Xuanji* [Selected Debates on Language Reform in 1957] (Shanghai: Xinzhishi Publishing House, 1958), 117.

<sup>97</sup> Chen Mengjia was once again labelled as a “bad element” that had anti-revolutionist tendencies during the Chinese Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. A more detailed interview of Chen could be found in Peter Hessler, “Oracle Bones” in *The New Yorker*. February 16, 2004. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/02/16/oracle-bones>

The promise of entering the next stage of reform was made in late 1956 by the reform committee. But soon after the government announced it to the public, criticisms began to appear in papers and distracted all committee members. So instead of working on language reform, the committee spent more than a year's time arguing in newspapers and journals. Instead of placating their opponents, they provoked more vicious attacks. These desperate attacks helped the reform committee out of their immediate political dilemma, but it also pulled the intellectuals away from promoting further language reform. Very soon the committee had to pay the price for their neglect of work and their inability to control the public discourse.

### **End of the Reform**

The argumentative cycle came to a sudden end in late 1957, when the committee received several orders from the party to suspend the reform. Hu Qiaomu, Mao Zedong's personal secretary and liaison with multiple government sectors, held an informal gathering with the committee linguists and made a few announcements.<sup>98</sup> Before this meeting, the official name of Pinyin was the Pinyin notation and writing system, even though the government only introduced the notation part to the public. During the meeting, Hu announced that top leaders decided to abandon the plans for further reform.<sup>99</sup> The official name for the Pinyin system was changed to Pinyin notation system instead of notation and writing system.<sup>100</sup> These decisions essentially limited the possibility of the Pinyin system to grow and replace characters. So instead of a step toward total Latinization, Pinyin could only help pronounce Chinese characters.<sup>101</sup> During the meeting, Hu

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<sup>98</sup> Zhu Shiyuan and Li Liangzhi, *Hu Qiaomu Shuxin Ji* [Letters written by Hu Qiaomu] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2015), 103.

<sup>99</sup> Hu Qiaomu, *Hu Qiaomu Tan Yuyan Wenzhi* [Hu Qiaomu and Language Script] (Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 2015), 188.

<sup>100</sup> Wenzhi Gaige Chubanshe Bian [Language Reform Publishing Eds.], *Jianguo Yilai Wenzhi Gaige Gongzuo Biannian Jishi* [Language Reform Chronology After the Founding of New China] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1985), 76

<sup>101</sup> Ling Yuanzheng, *Xuehao Yonghao Zuguo de Yuyan Wenzhi: Hu Qiaomu de Yuyan Wenzhi Sixiang* [Learn to Use Chinese Language: Hu Qiaomu's Idea on Language and Writing] (Beijing: Language and Literature Publishing House, 2008), 118.

criticized the reform committee members for being unproductive for the past year. Hu had many encounters with the committee over the years and had observed their everyday work. In his words, the committee members became “lazy scholars who only cared about their morning tea and newspaper but actually did nothing useful.”<sup>102</sup> The government eventually got tired of their fruitless everyday fighting.<sup>103</sup> According to his later correspondence with Ye Laishi and Hu Yuzhi,<sup>104</sup> Hu complained about the committee many times, “The committee wasted precious time. They bickered on paper and made promises they couldn’t keep. They didn’t do any real work for over a year, and the government couldn’t wait around forever.”<sup>105</sup>

The formal announcement of the end of language reform was made in early 1958 with Pinyin as the official notation system for the Chinese language. On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1958, Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai announced at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference that the government officially ended the language reform, and this would be the last attempt.<sup>106</sup> Few linguists objected to this decision, but their protests were ignored and soon forgotten. After the conference, linguists kept publishing articles in newspapers aiming to rectify this result, but none were powerful enough to make a difference.<sup>107</sup> *Guangming Daily* quickly canceled the special column previously dedicated for language reform, and other newspapers followed this example. The committee had no other choice but to change their direction and focus on paths other than Latinization.<sup>108</sup> In the next few years, many advancements were made on Mandarin regulation,

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<sup>102</sup> Hu Qiaomu, *Hu Qiaomu Tan Yuyan Wenzhi* [Hu Qiaomu and Language Script] (Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 2015), 194.

<sup>103</sup> Hu Qiaomu, 207.

<sup>104</sup> Both Ye Laishi and Hu Yuzhi were famous intellectuals in 1950s and were close to Hu Qiaomu.

<sup>105</sup> Zhu Shiyuan and Li Liangzhi, *Hu Qiaomu Shuxin Ji* [Letters written by Hu Qiaomu] (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2015), 191-194

<sup>106</sup> Zhou Enlai, “Dangqian Wenzhi Gaige de Renwu” [The Current Task of Language Reform] in *Hanyu Pinyin Fangan de Zhiding he Yingyong* [Design and Application for Pinyin System] (Beijing: Language Reform Publishing House, 1983), 8.

<sup>107</sup> Ma Xueliang, “Hanyu Pinyin Fangan Caoan de Gongbu Duiyu Fazhan Shaoshu Minzu Wenhua de Yiyi” [The Announcement of Pinyin System’s Impact on Chinese Minority Culture] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], January 13, 1958.

<sup>108</sup> Wu Yuzhang, “Putonghua Jiaoxue Chengji Guanmohui Kaimuci” [Introduction Speech on Mandarin Education Conference] in *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], July 22, 1958.

minority language design and character simplification. Scholars set up education programs for teachers and adult students. By 1960, Chinese people had accepted the reformed language as the new norm. The issue of Latinization, or alphabetization of Chinese characters, was quickly forgotten.

### CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

The Chinese language reform has been neglected by most historians. The few existing works tend to focus on the role of the government and dismiss other participants. However, after careful examination one can see that the reform was a complicated process with many agents involved. The Chinese government did play an important role in the reform, but it was not the only crucial participant. Language reform, especially Alphabetization, became a widely popular topic in early 1950s in China after the intellectuals' promotion of the issue. The public discourse they created was volatile and lively with hundreds of opinions from different people. One can only truly understand the reform by examining their involvement as well as the government's.

Chinese linguists from the late 1940s inherited the belief of alphabetization from previous reforms and began advocating another when the communist government was reluctant to do so. They successfully promoted these reforms to the Chinese public through national linguistic journals and created an active public discourse. The support from the public eventually convinced the government for another attempt at language reform. After the formation of the official reform committee, the decreased communication and internal debates among committee members began to create fissures inside the dialogue. The decision to follow the path of Latinization caused discontent and doubts and quietly manifested itself until the public began fighting back. The public protest combined with the "Hundred School of Thought" and "Rightest" movements resulted in turmoil and chaos. Linguists were preoccupied with fighting their accusers and ignored their work. Eventually the government had to shut down the alphabetization reform due to the public outcry and the committee's ineffectiveness. This public discourse that Chinese intellectuals created made the reform possible in the beginning. Then the lively debate determined the path of Latinization. In the end, the discontent public additionally contributed to the end of the reform process.

Using newspapers, journals of the time and memoirs published recently, I can piece together most of the story of language reform. Sadly, most government records on this subject are stored in the Chinese National Archive where historians could not gain access to the facility. As a result, it is difficult to see the entire picture of the language reform. The evidence I gathered for this paper could trace and explain the Chinese government leaders' actions and reaction, but it came nearly impossible to know their private thoughts. Perhaps in the future when historians could gain access to Chinese national archives, we can once again look at this language reform with some new light.

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