

## *The Culture of Language in Ming China: Sound, Script, and the Redefinition of Boundaries of Knowledge*

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For just over a decade, a small but growing number of scholars in the west have chosen to focus on one of the most demanding fields of knowledge in China's history: philology and its history. To the fewer than ten books on the history of philology, we now add Vedal's *The Culture of Language in Ming China*: an excellent and important addition based on solid, in-depth scholarship.

Vedal presents the book as a corrective to the tendency of philology studies to emphasize Qing-era scholarship. That's a bit of a straw-man argument: although many Qing-era scholars denigrated Ming (and often Song) scholars as a whole, many also paid substantive tribute to a select few highly regarded predecessors; and modern scholarship has certainly recognized, while admittedly downplaying, Song and Ming philological studies. Still, Vedal makes at least four significant interventions, alongside small contributions. First, his broad focus on Ming intellectual history (rather than flatly on Ming "philosophy") is a breath of fresh air. Second, the subjects he covers (especially linguistic, cosmological, and musical themes) have received little scholarly attention, particularly for the Ming, but also for other periods, and the nexus he posits among the various subjects is certainly original. Third, his examination of persons with diverse affiliations—Confucians, Buddhists, artists, etc.—highlights connections and ideas that are often invisible. And, lastly, the attempt in the final part of the book to go beyond the Ming to craft a longer historical narrative allows a cross-dynastic outlook, and, to my mind, also challenges the dynastic timeframe for intellectual history in principle.

The immediate significance of Vedal's intervention is, of course, that Ming authors of diverse nature extensively engaged with "the study of language." Let me reiterate: it is imperative to acknowledge this fascinating phenomenon. Is "the study of language," however, the same as "philology"? What kind of philological studies do we have before us? The answers to these questions about "the study of language" versus "philology" both bear on the thread Vedal seems to follow from the Ming through the Qing in that field of learning and resonate in his understanding of "the narrowing of the discipline" from Ming to Qing. Since that line of reasoning frames the book, I will return to it below, to add precision.

*The Culture of Language in Ming China* is divided into three parts: "Sound and Script"; "Singing and Speaking, Reading and Writing"; and "Philology: The Making and Remaking of a Discipline." The first part takes the reader into the world of Ming "study of language," and convincingly demonstrates that in that framework of

Ming intellectual practice many scholars related the sounds of language to cosmos and natural phenomena. The second and third chapters proceed from this nexus of language–cosmos–sound to the practice of reading and writing, that is, to script. Those Ming thinkers who accepted the nexus faced the challenge of representing the sounds of language in scriptural form. As these sounds of language were thought to have been intimately tied to nature and cosmos, it was of utmost importance that the script represent them precisely. In Chapter 2, Vedral draws into the discussion Buddhist scholars, alongside Confucian (specifically “Learning of the Mind” *xinxue*) scholars, since one way of having script echo sound was through a phonographic script; and arguably the most advanced language Ming thinkers knew of for doing that was Sanskrit. Sanskrit, however, was not a script—it made use of various scripts—and Vedral unpacks this issue to show how Sanskrit studies became part of the “language study” arena. He argues that despite the spike in Sanskrit studies and appreciation of the power of phonographic script, scholars in China remained faithful to their own “culture of logography” (66–72). Further reflection on the transformative power of language (beyond the “moral” dimension Vedral emphasizes)—which has been extensively studied for the Buddhist world of thought and practice—would deepen this discussion, and so would a reference to the ways in which Sanskrit fundamentally rejected scriptural form altogether. Likewise, one would expect a bit more discussion of Tibetan, which is almost completely absent from the book.

Chapter 3 turns from Sanskrit to the question of how Ming-era “Learning of the Mind” scholars understood the conventional Chinese script. Vedral shows that they “viewed written language as the framework of perception” and hence as a means to comprehend “sages’ mind” (74). Therefore, studying language meant moral training; it also meant that ancient graphs—more in tune with the ancient sages, and with nature—took precedence over phonographic script. Discussions on these topics, Vedral argues, also had bearing on larger debates on the “organization of knowledge” (indexing, classifying, and categorizing in particular). Again, while Vedral’s discussion is certainly substantive and fascinating, linking this type of “language study” to “philology” is problematic. In fact, the prime example in the first sections of Chapter Three, that of Wei Jiao (1483–1543) and his followers, demonstrates the gap between the two: Wei Jiao philosophized freely over the meanings of graphs, while philologists sought textual evidence to explain why a certain graph had a specific meaning. For Wei, such evidence was not a requisite.

The gap between “philology” specifically and the study of language more generally explains Vedral’s struggle in the first part of the book to differentiate between “dictionaries” and “philosophical lexicons.” Moreover, the historical actors’ references to the *Shuowen jiezi* similarly exemplify the categorical difference between, say, sixteenth-century scholars and late eighteenth-century scholars: both disputed aspects of this Han-era text, but the Ming scholars Vedral mentions had philosophical disagreements while scholars of the mid-Qing and later had mainly philological disagreements. These are very different matters, and Vedral—who alludes to Ming views of Wei Jiao—seems to be aware of that, yet he downplays the difference. I am not saying that Ming scholars had no interest in philology; they had, and Vedral successfully establishes that. But that interest, in general, was limited, and clearly subservient to their philosophical agenda. Conflating philosophy of language and philology is a categorical confusion that historians should watch out for in analyzing evidence.

Part 2 moves further into the realm of pronunciation, sound, and music. If the main concern in Chapters 2 and 3 is script, the main topic in Part 2 is the oral dimensions of

language. Vedal takes readers on a journey into the aesthetic arts: literary genres and opera in particular. In Chapter 4, the main theme is a long-term history of various attempts at standardizing the oral dimension, the pronunciation of language. Vedal demonstrates that the arts were tied to classical scholarship, and shows how attempts to understand or dictate how language should sound led to interest in historical studies of linguistic change. And not only were the arts tied to the traditional Chinese history of linguistics; these artistic and historical engagements with language also meant that new ideas (or theories) about language began to take shape. Vedal offers an excellent and solid brief historical analysis of changes in such endeavors—through the lens of standardization—all the way from the first millennium to the Ming (and even briefly reflects on the early twentieth century). One quibble: since his discussion of the Ming moves well into the latter half of the seventeenth century, the reader might understand the entire span of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as one big monolith; a more direct focus on the specific historical context that was part of the process (individual or general) would have assisted in differentiating motivations, reasons, and actors and hence make for a better informed analysis. This is certainly the case for the elephant in the room—the Qing conquest—but also for less grandiose historical changes, even personal ones. Take Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) for example: did his views on language change when he stayed at a Buddhist monastery?

Chapter 5 continues the emphasis on the aesthetic, but this time with attention to how classics were read, and particularly the poetic dimension of classical texts and the composition of poetry. The earlier (especially in Chapter 3) discussion of the nexus between reading/writing and morality reappears, but this time with a question mark. Vedal examines multiple voices and ideas concerning this nexus (or the lack thereof). But, eventually, the issue at hand is how philological methods that had been developed for study of the classics penetrated the literary sphere, and, simultaneously, how literary styles of reading infiltrated into the classical sphere through reading, interpretation, and composition methods. In both cases, the phonology—the sounds of language—played a major role. And in both cases the philological agenda also became relevant: literary and classical scholars alike used philology in order to make sure the sounds were correct, or to advocate for a historical development and change.

The last part of the book goes beyond the Ming to probe, first, how Ming texts were used during the Qing (Chapter 6); and second, how philology “narrowed” as a discipline (Chapter 7). In Chapter 6, Vedal argues that “Ming philology” provided an “alternative method of learning for those who disagreed with the premises of Evidential Learning” (169). But, again, the methods referred to are mostly “language study” methods, not philology. As Vedal notes, one of his prime examples of “Cosmological Approaches”—Long Weilin (1689–1756)—“believed” that “he could surpass the limitations of the textual record” by using “methodologies from music” (172). That is not philology but another type of scholarship or thought. In other words, the alternative Vedal presents to Evidential Learning philology was not another type of philology; it was another field. Looking at the distinction from the other side, other historians have already shown that philology certainly was used in other fields of learning (e.g., using philology to make scientific arguments), and not necessarily by scholars who shared a similar rationale or “philosophy.” Likewise, the discussion of Sanskrit and Manchu in the Qing period, while very interesting, confuses philology with linguistic studies in general.

Vedal successfully shows that many Ming texts did have an audience and an “after-life” during the Qing and into the twentieth century. In another move (Chapter 7),

Vedal seems to try to give Ming scholarship even greater space on the historical stage, and to assert that the “disciplinary communities”—a term he uses so as to avoid “discipline”—of the Ming formed the basis for later developments. The story here is quite short, neglects the social history one might expect, and relies a bit too much on nineteenth-century genealogies rather than on contemporary Ming and earlier Qing sources. Thus, for example, Vedal assigns Dai Zhen (1724–1777) a “pivotal” role because of his importance in the eyes of later writers, while during most of Dai’s lifetime he was in many ways marginal or dependent on peers (and students). Remarking repeatedly on the late-eighteenth century *Siku quanshu* editors as agents attempting to diminish and hide Ming scholarship, although not wrong, leads Vedal to neglect the larger historiographical picture that made these editors, who also had many other capacities, act the way they did.

Furthermore, the discussion of these disciplinary communities lacks a clear argument about what epistemology or methodology members of the communities shared; it does not explain the connections or ties between them; nor does it offer even a brief description of the historical actors’ sense of being part of such communities, in particular during the Ming. Once again, the conflation of the study of language and philology obscures matters. Although historical actors could certainly do both, the analysis of their endeavors requires differentiation for a better grasp of historical change, especially into the mid-Qing. Wei Jiao’s sixteenth-century community, for example, would look completely different from Dai Zhen’s in the eighteenth century in almost every conceivable parameter: from social ties, through shared methodology, and all the way to conceptions of facts and truth.

To conclude, let us return to the central question *The Culture of Language in Ming China* poses at the outset: “How late imperial scholars studied language and in what ways their practices reflect broader intellectual and literary trends” (2). My criticism aside, Vedal answers this question thoroughly and thoughtfully, making headway in hitherto uncharted waters. *The Culture of Language in Ming China* is a highly interesting and important book, not just for those specializing in late imperial China, but also for outsiders to the field, who are curious about the historical study of language. Beyond Vedal’s broad approach to Ming linguistics—bringing thinkers from Confucian, Buddhist, artistic, and literary spheres and cosmological, musical, and literary themes together into one discourse—and his long-term narrative, other contributions of the book include a meticulous introduction of a host of sources and manuscripts—not only from the Ming—that will surely pave the way to more scholarship on the subjects at hand, and to more fruitful and fascinating debates.