

# The Other Vernacular: Commoner Knowledge Culture Circa 1919

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**Abstract** This essay complicates our understanding of the May Fourth Movement of the late 19teens by isolating a layer of culture that was integral to the era but largely forgotten in later scholarship. This cultural layer of discourse and practice intersected with two of the Movement’s most iconic projects – connecting with “the people” and establishing a vernacular language. This view from the cultural margins helps us excavate the less known byways and potentialities of what has come down to us as an epochal history. It further leads us to question the inevitability of established historical trajectories: from May Fourth populism to the mass politics of the PRC, from the vernacular movement to the linguistic form that stabilized to become *baihua*.

**Keywords** “The people”. Folklore. Vernacular language. Common sayings. Hu Pu’an.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Confucian Populism in A Post-Confucian Age. – 3 Common Sayings In The Vernacular Moment. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) wrote with characteristic clarity and bite in 1919 that nothing was straightforward in the May Fourth era. “All things have two, three, or multiple layers and every layer has its own self-contradictions” (*simianbafang jihu dou shi ersanzhong yizhi duozhong de shiwu, meizhong you gege zixiangmaodun* 四面八方幾乎都是二三重以至多重的事物，每重又各自相矛盾).<sup>1</sup> While he was referring to divisions within the immediate academic May

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**1** Lu Xun 鲁迅 “Suigan lu wushisi” 随感录五十四 (Selection of Random Thoughts, 54) (1919), *Lu Sun quanji* 鲁迅全集 1 (Renmin wenzue chubanshe 人民文学出版社, 1982), 44-345. Cited in Luo



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Fourth culture, Lu Xun's observation is even more apt when we examine the layers of complexity that both converged with and extended beyond it.

This paper attempts to isolate several layers which intersected with two of the New Culture movement's most iconic projects – connecting with 'the common people' and establishing a vernacular language. The premise of the paper is that a view from the margins allows us to better assess what went on at "the centre".<sup>2</sup> It also leads us to question the inevitability of established historical trajectories: from May Fourth populism to the particular brand of mass politics in the People's Republic of China, from the vernacular movement to the specific linguistic form that stabilised to become *baihua*. Deeply situated fragments from the margins can help us to excavate the less known byways and potentialities of what has come down to us as an epochal history.

The fragments from the margins that serve as the centrepiece of this paper include two texts compiled by an individual and published by a press, each of which – texts, compiler, and publisher – are all but invisible in the narrative history of the events of May Fourth 1919.

The press is one of the most prolific producers of cheap print in the long Republic, the Guangyi shuju 廣益書局 ("Kwang Yih Book Co. Ltd") which was in operation in the decades preceding and following May Fourth.<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1903 largely as a supplier of civil service examination aids, the company shifted its focus to medical and daily-use texts from 1904, rapidly becoming one of the most prominent late Qing lithographic publishers. Guangyi agilely adapted to new technologies and shifting political, economic, and cultural regimes, profiting under the new Republican polity from 1912 and the New Culture movement later in the decade. While it continued to publish works in simple classical prose (*qian wenyān* 淺文言) through the early 1950s, its list included books in the new-style vernacular (*baihua* 白話 or *yuti* 語體) with new-style punctuation (*xinshi biaodian* 新式標點) by the mid-1920s.<sup>4</sup>

The vast majority of Guangyi's inventory was reprints which made it possible to save costs while servicing a reading public with an enduring appetite for both the classics and classic vernacular fiction. Guangyi also published a number of original works that were on the

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Zhitian, "Wenxueshi shang baihua," 76. Translated in Luo 2015, 280. The other translations, unless otherwise indicated, are made by the Author.

<sup>2</sup> On this and other key points about approaches to May Fourth, see Chen 2011, 8 on the importance of the margins.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller treatment of the Guangyi shuju, see Judge 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, (*Xinshi biaodian*) *Shunzhi yanyi* (新式標點) 順治演義 (Historical Novel on Shunzhi [with New-style Punctuation]); (*Xinshi biaodian*) *Kangxi yanyi* (新式標點) 康熙演義 (Historical Novel on Kangxi [with New-style Punctuation]). (*Guangyi shuju*) *Tushu mulu*, 52 [56], 53 [57].

margins of, and often conceived of as counterpoints to mainstream culture. The advertisement for a vernacular letter-writing manual asserted, for example, that “the recent flourishing of the vernacular [*yuti wenxue* 語體文學] had spurred the publication of a confusing array of countless works.” At the same time, there continued to be “a dearth of what common people [*putong shehui* 普通社會] really need: straightforward collections of vernacular letters. This publisher has now met that need”.<sup>5</sup>

Two of Guangyi’s signature original works were compiled by Hu Puan 胡樸安 (Yunyu 韞玉, 1878-1947), a prolific author whose writings on issues of critical interest in the May Fourth period – folklore and vernacular language – are virtually unknown to modern Chinese scholars.<sup>6</sup> From a relatively poor family in Jingxian 涇縣, Anhui Province, Hu Puan was the older brother of one of Guangyi’s editors, the poet and theorist Hu Huaichen 胡懷琛 (Jichen 寄塵, 1886-1938). Despite their humble background, the Hu brothers were well enough educated to establish themselves at multiple poles in the fields of publishing, politics, teaching, and journalism when they moved to Shanghai in 1906. Hu Puan wrote for and by some accounts edited the conservative *Guocui xuebao* 國粹學報 (The National Essence Journal), but also joined the Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmeng hui* 同盟會) and its literary affiliate the Southern Society (*Nanshe* 南社) in 1909. He edited seven newspapers over the course of his career including the revolutionary *Minli bao* 民立報 (The People’s Stand, 1910-13) but most of his 63 published works were in the fields of classical studies and philology. While continuing his scholarly and literary writing in the Nanjing decade, Hu also took on a local government post in Jiangsu.<sup>7</sup>

Neither the prefaces to Hu’s works, nor the sparse secondary references to his life mention the source that is most revealing of his thought and preoccupations at the time of May Fourth, a journal he edited and wrote for, the *Jiande chuxu hui huikan* 儉德儲蓄會會刊 (Thrift and Savings Society Journal), an offshoot of the society by the same name that he had founded in the early Republic, the *Jiande chuxu hui* 儉德儲蓄會 (Thrift and Savings Society).<sup>8</sup> In one of his many

<sup>5</sup> The text is the (*Gejie shiyong*) *Baishi chidu daguan* (各界實用)白話尺牘大觀 ([For use by all circles] Comprehensive collection of vernacular letters). (*Guangyi shuju*) *Tushu mulu*, 38 [rpt 42].

<sup>6</sup> Hung (1985, 210) notes that Hu Puan’s work on folklore and dialects was unknown to modern Chinese scholars, probably because he wrote in classical prose style and dealt with subjects in a traditional way.

<sup>7</sup> These details about Hu’s life are gleaned from the following sources which often overlap and contradict each other. Zhu 1923; Fu 2011, 138; Jin 2018, 4; Wang 2010, 134

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear when the journal started. The earliest issue in the Shanghai Library periodicals database refers to it as the inaugural issue which is numbered issue 4 and dates to 1922. Issues are not precisely aligned with calendar years. Extant issues in-

essays in this journal, Hu declared his opposition to what he called Western “material enlightenment,” a position shared by a number of Chinese intellectuals who, like Hu, had been horrified by the carnage of “the European War.” Hu strategically cited Western scholars who supported this view, most notably Bertrand Russell whose *The Problem of China* (Zhongguo wenti 中國問題) was serially translated in the *Thrift and Savings Society Journal*. At the same time, however, Hu was adamant that the value of Chinese thought was not predicated on Western sanction and that it was incumbent on Chinese scholars to further develop the special characteristics of Chinese learning.

The most notable of these characteristics was attentiveness to the world of spirit from which all desires for Western-style power and wealth had to be removed (Hu P. 1923, 1). Rather than offering a positive definition of this spirituality, Hu defined it negatively as material abnegation. He equated twentieth-century spiritual cultivation with classical examples of simple living from the Confucian *Analects*, the Daoist *Zhuangzi* and the Mencius.

With coarse rice to eat and water to drink [*fanshu shi yinshui* 飯疏食飲水], and my bended arm for a pillow [*qugonggerzhen zhi* 曲肱而枕之]; -I have still joy in the midst of these things [*le qi zai zhong* 樂在其中].

With a single bamboo dish of rice, a single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow alley (*yidan shi yi piaoyin zai lou-gang* 一簞食一瓢飲在陋巷).

Dressed himself in tattered robes quilted with hemp, yet standing by the side of men dressed in furs, and not ashamed (*yibi yun-pao yu yi huhe zhe* 衣敝襦袍與衣狐貉者立而不恥).<sup>9</sup>

To be above the power of riches and honours to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend.<sup>10</sup>

Using Neo-Confucian tropes, Hu appealed to would-be *junzi* in his own day – scholars with lofty ambitions (*gaoshang qi zhi zhi shi* 高尚其志之士) – to resist the latest fashions (*mizhe* 靡者) and remain indifferent to military force and financial power. In so doing they

clude: 4(1) 1922, 4(2) May 1923, 4(3) August 1923, 4(4) November 1923, 4(5) January 1924, 5(1) June 1924, 5(2) November 1924, 5(3) February 1925, 1 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Hu P. 1923b, 1. Confucian *Analects*: Book VII Chapter XV; Book VI Chapter IX; Book IX Chapter XXVI (Confucius 1971, 200).

<sup>10</sup> Hu P. 1923b, 1. Mencius III: II: 3 (Mencius 1970, 265).

would unconsciously transform those who had been misled by the allure of wealth and power (Hu P. 2011, 2).

Valorizing simplicity and authenticity, Hu Puan was deeply committed to penetrating the life world of the common people. He considered exhaustive knowledge of regional folkways to be imperative to a new politics in the post-Confucian age. He believed the words of ancient texts lived in the mouths of women and children on the street and should serve as the foundation of an authentic Chinese vernacular language. He developed these ideas in the two books that we will examine here: *Zhonghua quanguo fengsu zhi* 中華全國風俗志 (Record of Customs Throughout China) and *Suyu dian* 俗語典 (Dictionary of the Origin of Common Sayings), both published by Guangyi shuju in 1922, in the immediate aftermath of the May Fourth movement.<sup>11</sup>

## 2 Confucian Populism in A Post-Confucian Age

An unprecedented rise in the rhetorical prominence of ‘the people’ marked Chinese discourse from the late nineteenth-century. This was manifest in a myriad of publications and political slogans from Liang Qichao’s *Xinmin Congbao* 新民叢報 (New Citizen), founded in 1902, to revolutionary newspapers such as *Minli bao* to the very name of the Republic itself – the *Minguo* – founded in 1912.

How to engage, lead, follow, or guide ‘the people’ became one of the most intractable, multi-layered issues intellectuals grappled with in the May Fourth period. Liberal thinkers such as Hu Shi struggled with tensions between guiding or following, accommodating or moulding, uplifting or transforming the masses (Luo 2015, 298, 301, 305). Folklorists such as Gu Jiegang 顧頤剛 (1893-1980) collected folk songs and developed folklore studies but ultimately with an eye to advancing academic history rather than deepening connections with local culture (Li 2001, 40-1). Certain intellectuals, Lu Xun among them, had barely disguised disdain for *minjian* 民間 (culture), whereas socialists such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942) viewed it as China’s path to salvation.

Hu Puan’s objective in compiling his *Record of Customs Throughout China* intersected with this general early-twentieth century impulse to better understand the common people in order to create a more effective polity. “Chinese history is recorded in official books” which ignore matters related to the people (*minjian shi* 民間事), Hu Huaichen (1936, 1) wrote in his afterward to his brother’s collection. As a result there is a dearth of sources on the evolution of the nation

<sup>11</sup> The *Suyu dian* was registered with the Neiwu bu 內務部 on October 16, 1922. “Gongbu benbu,” 20.

(*minzu jinhua* 民族進化), the state of local customs and conditions (*fengtu liangyu* 風土良窳), and the nature of local social relations (*renqing houbo* 人情厚薄). Hu Puan's compilation had filled that lacuna.

Unlike a number of his May Fourth peers such as Gu Jiegang who went directly 'to the people' to collect information on local customs, Hu explained in his preface that he did not have the strength or the means to travel around the entire country. Instead he took a characteristically Confucian textual approach. He withdrew and read gazetteers all of which include material on customs. Together with a number of assistants – a Mr. Kan Diequn 關軼群 of Hefei, a Mr. Zheng Xiaoyan 鄭肖崖 of Jiangning, and his nephew Huisheng 惠生 (Daoji 道吉, 1894-1958) – he also copied traces of customs found in a range of other contemporary sources, including *biji* 筆記 (jottings), travel diaries, newspapers and magazines.

The completed compilation is in two volumes. The first volume includes the material Hu personally collected from gazetteers. Relatively concise, it is organised by province and then by towns and counties (*shixian* 市縣). The second volume includes the information culled from jottings, travel diaries, and the periodical press and focuses on current customs. More uneven in style than the first volume, it nonetheless follows the same the organisation with the addition of sections on Xinjiang 新疆, Xizang 西藏, and the Miao ethnicity 苗族. Each volume is 10 *juan* (Hu Y. 1923, 3). The result is a rich and highly accessible compilation that is rationally organised, and clearly written (Cui, Yao 2013, 111).

While Hu's text is aligned with the aim of engaging the common people that animated May Fourth activists, it diverges in terms of the means and the ultimate ends of this engagement. The complexity of Hu's historical and political stance is evident in his choice of the term *fengsu* rather than *minsu* 民俗 in the title of his work. *Fengsu* connoted civilising or acculturation (*jiaohua* 教化) in imperial Chinese discourse, and was redolent with notions of paternalism. *Minsu*, in contrast, signified the natural state of people before *jiaohua*. Ancient texts which were generally written from the perspective of government authorities preoccupied with *jiaohua* used the term *fengsu*.<sup>12</sup> In the May Fourth era, with the new emphasis on 'going to the people' together with the entry of the Western-inspired academic field of *Minsu xue* 民俗學 or Folklore Studies, *fengsu* was increasingly replaced by a newly-valORIZED *minsu* (Qu 1986, 151).

Hu's use of *fengsu* could thus be read as evidence of his alignment with earlier *jiaohua* projects and/or as his resistance to new May Fourth rhetoric. It seems, however, to signify neither. While *minsu*

<sup>12</sup> See Peng (2013, 117) on this shift in terminology. Peng does not extend his argument to Hu Puan's title.

was becoming increasingly prevalent in this period, the terms remained unstable. In May 1923 – a year after the publication of Hu’s work – Beida intellectuals in the Guoxue men 國學門 (National learning department) of the Beijing daxue yanjiu suo 北京大學研究所, debated whether to use *minsu* or *fengsu* in their investigation of folk songs (*geyao* 歌謠). They ultimately decided on *fengsu*, naming their organisation the Fengsu diaochahui 風俗調查會 (Society for the Investigation of Social Customs) (Peng 2013, 118; Wang X. 2010, 129). In this same period, the leading folklorist Gu Jiegang redefined *fengsu* as one component of *minsu*: while *fengsu* encompassed everyday customs related to clothing, food, housing marriage, funerals, and seasonal celebrations, *minsu* further encompassed religion, literature and art.<sup>13</sup>

Most importantly, Hu Puan’s *Record of Customs Throughout China* cannot be collapsed with earlier works on *fengsu*. It differs first and foremost from these late imperial works in its emphasis on the customs of commoners (particularly in the second volume) rather than the customs of the scholar-official elite responsible for *jiaohua* projects (Wang X. 2010, 134). His objective is to enable the “majority of people to seek happiness” (*duoshu ren mou xingfu* 多數人謀幸福) and to broadly disseminate knowledge of social customs. His notion of *fengsu* could best be defined as commoner traditions (*minjian chuancheng* 民間傳承) and folk customs (*minjian xisu* 民間習俗) (135).

At the same time, Hu set his work apart from contemporary folklorists who he criticised for not understanding the extent of variation in local customs. Those who boast of understanding the national situation generally only have partial knowledge, he wrote. A promotes one discourse that reflects the customs of A province but does not ask if it will be appropriate for B province. C promotes a discourse derived from the customs of C province, but does not question whether or not it would be appropriate for D – and on and on. Even if those undertaking this folklore work were extremely sincere in their desire to seek happiness for the majority of people, given their limited grasp of the national situation, they were, Hu declared, of no help (Hu Y. 1923, 3).

Hu obliquely suggests that a broad pan-national understanding of *fengsu* – of A, B, C, D, and more – could serve as the foundation of national consciousness. By explicating regional customs, some later commentators have argued, he was helping to create a national imaginary: making it possible for Chinese elites to concretely visualise the culture of everyday life throughout China’s land mass. His projected readers were not sages of the past tasked with changing customs but *guomin* 國民 (nationals) in training, tasked with better understanding their fellow compatriots (Wang X. 2010, 135).

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<sup>13</sup> Gu J. 顾颉刚 (1928). “Shengxiang wenhua yu minzhong wenhua” 圣贤文化与民众文化. *Minsu zhoukan* 民俗周刊 (Folklore Weekly), 5, 4. Cited in Wang X. 2010, 134.

The paratexts to the *Record of Customs* do explicitly address the theme of nationalism. In his preface to the compilation, Zhang Chizhang 張熾章 (Jiluan 季鸞, 1888-1942) who had served as a secretary for Sun Zhongshan 孫中山 (1866-1925), directly stated that the investigation of local customs was a means of developing national consciousness.<sup>14</sup> He was ashamed to admit that he agreed with foreigners who ridiculed China for lacking the qualities of a real nation and the Chinese people for lacking the qualities of citizens. This was because, Zhang argued, China lacked the two essential preconditions for nationalism – which he anachronistically draws from Sunzi’s *The Art of War*: knowing oneself and knowing the enemy (*zhibizhiji* 知彼知己), meaning, in the early-twentieth-century context, knowing one’s own country and knowing the world.<sup>15</sup> Knowledge of the world was deepening in China, Zhang noted, with enhanced maritime communication and increasing numbers of Chinese studying abroad. Knowledge of one’s own country, was, however, weakening as elite disdain for the *min* deepened in China by the day. Zhang complained that “people today can generally chat about customs in London and Paris, or show off their knowledge of Greece and Rome. But ask them about the situation in each province of China and they would be at a loss (*mangran* 茫然). They know neither the size nor the history of China.” Their ignorance of their compatriots is so profound that it is as if they belonged to a separate race. Despite China’s large territory and vast population, it was nothing more than a “large desert inhabited by a nomadic people” (Zhang 2011).

In his postface to his brother’s work, Hu Huaichen similarly laments the lack of Chinese national self-knowledge by way of the foreign gaze. He explains that when he was teaching at a certain university, a foreign professor had asked students, who in turn asked Hu, which books he could use to learn about Chinese customs.<sup>16</sup> Since, as Hu was embarrassed to respond, no such books existed, his only advice was to search through gazetteers, *biji*, and travel diaries all of which were scattered and not easy to collect (Hu H. 1936, 1). Hu Huaichen notes that he had himself wanted to fill this lacuna by compiling a book on sources of Chinese social history (Zhongguo shehui shiliao 中國社會史料) that would examine the little understood variance in Chinese customs over time and space. Because he was never able to find the time to undertake this project, however, he was

<sup>14</sup> Zhang who was from Yulin 榆林, Shaanxi, would also serve as an editor of the *Dagong bao* (L’impartiale). For a brief introduction to his life, see Wang X. 2010, 135.

<sup>15</sup> Zhang 2011 It is noteworthy that even in describing modern nationalism Zhang cites a classical Chinese source, Sunzi’s *Art of War*.

<sup>16</sup> This was possibly Hujiang daxue 滬江大學, which was run by an American and where the principle Wei Fulan 魏馥蘭 allegedly asked Hu to convert to Christianity. See Jin 2018, 6.



extremely grateful for the book Hu Puan had compiled from several hundreds of thousands of *juan* (1).

While Zhang Chizhang and Hu Huaichen invoked foreign views of China to underline the importance of Hu Puan's compilation on customs, Hu Puan made no such concessions to Western thought himself. In the preface to *Record of Customs*, he suggests that the rhetorical *min* May Fourth activists were so adamant about engaging was merely a construct of Western theory rather than the embodiment of Chinese reality.

He accused those who blindly introduced precedents and ideas from Europe and Japan (*baifan dongxi chengfa* 稗販東西成法) of doing so for their own political gain (Hu Y. 1923, 3). They vigorously promoted (*shengwei* 盛為) a discourse of freedom in China, a country that Hu claimed had no real social restrictions (*ben wu yueshu* 本無約束). They espoused a discourse of equality in a country with no fixed social stratification (*jieji* 階級). They rallied behind a discourse of economic exploitation (*jingji zhipai* 經濟支配) in a country devoid of capitalists. And they embraced a discourse on the sanctity of labour (*laogong shensheng* 勞工神聖) in a country that honoured the labour of farmers (3). Because the majority of people had not suffered from the ills these theories set out to address, they would be indifferent to programmes designed to liberate them from these fictive ills. Rather than increase the happiness of the majority, these ideas would merely serve the interests of a minority - May Fourth activists - in their scramble for power and profit (*zhengquan duoli* 爭權奪利) (3).

Engagement with the people, Hu Puan asserted in his *Record of Customs*, had to be based on concrete local realities. Instead of struggling to cut (Chinese) feet to fit (Western) shoes (*xiaozushilü* 削足適履), China needed to find a prescription appropriate to its current situation (*yinbing shiyao* 因病施藥) (Hu Y. 1923, 2). Such a prescription had to be based on knowledge of local customs which were products of Chinese history and related to Chinese culture (Hu Y. 1923, 3). To know ancient and current *fengsu* was to know China (Zhang 2011).

Acquiring knowledge of ancient and current customs was, however, a challenging task. China was vast, Hu wrote, and its local practices varied - with different manners (*feng* 風) every 1,000 *li* and different social customs (*su* 俗) every 100 *li*. From the Han to the Qing dynasties (with a brief Buddhist interregnum and a few short periods of division), Confucian ideology had been the unifying force that held this local cacophony of customs together, "propagating public norms" and "cultivating people's minds" (*shoushi renxin zhi ju* 收拾人心之具). Confronted with new Western ideologies from the mid-19th century, however, Confucianism could no longer hold, its discourse of benevolence and righteousness (*renyi* 仁義) powerless in the face of the new Western discourse of power (*gongli* 功力). With the demise of Confucian principles and the rise of Western in-

fluence, Chinese learning and ideology was fragmented (*fenlie* 分裂) and national unity had become impossible to sustain (Hu Y. 1923, 2).

Hu's understanding of national unity was ultimately at odds with the May Fourth project of national salvation and even with invocations of the nation in Hu Huaichen and Zhang Chihang's paratexts to Puan's own writings. This is most apparent in essays Hu Puan published in the *Thrift and Savings Society Journal* - a venue where he felt relatively unrestrained in expressing his disdain for emerging socialist and communist discourses. For Hu the labouring masses - whose knowledge he described as "lowly and weak" were not a new political vanguard that only had to be galvanized (Hu P. 1923b, 2). He acknowledges that the calm and tranquil (*chenjing tianmu* 沈靜恬穆) situation that prevailed in the past (when laborers presumably accepted their lot) was a feeble foundation (*pinruo zhi genji* 貧弱之根基) from the perspective of nationalism. But his perspective was not foreign-influenced nationalism but rather the great unity (*datong zhuyi* 大同主義) (2).

### 3 Common Sayings In The Vernacular Moment

Hu Puan further sought historical unity in his approach to the vernacular language. The May Fourth vernacular movement lacked such unity and was, again, in Lu Xun's formulation, multilayered. This was essentially because *baihua* was not a discrete entity that could be surgically lifted out of the classical language. Rather than recover or discover it, promoters of the vernacular language used one or a combination of approaches to construct it, including Europeanization (*Ouhua* 歐化), classicization, and popularization (*puji* 普及) (Luo 2015, 293-315).

Proponents of Europeanization insisted that methods of expression had to change in accordance with new modes of thought and methods of analysis influenced by the West (314). If the Chinese race was to enter the scientific world, the linguist and philosopher Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865-1953) asserted, it was necessary to scientize - and thus Europeanize - the vernacular (306). May Fourth intellectuals further debated the degree to which the vernacular language should be open to the classical language. For some, including Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), the vernacular was not sufficiently profound or varied and thus needed the enrichment of the classical language (301-6). Other leading figures emphasised that the new vernacular had to make accommodations for the common people (*shunying minzhong* 順應民眾). Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) was committed to listening to those at the lowest level of society, and finding the vernacular in "hybridized worthless literature" ('不肖' 文學) (Hu S. 1998; Luo 2015, 301). Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (Binglin 炳麟, 1868-1936) warned that it

was necessary to reform the language in such a way that those with the most basic literacy could continue to enjoy popular fiction from the ancient past (Luo 2015, 306).

Zhang's warning was well-founded. The Europeanized vernacular used in new May Fourth literature was more akin to a new classical language (*xin wenyan* 新文言) (Li 2001, 40) that was more difficult for the general public (*yibanren* 一般人) to understand than simple classical Chinese (*qianjin de wenyan* 淺近的文言) (Luo 2015, 294). Inaccessible to common readers (*zhengzheng laobaixing* 真正老百姓), this new literature was only enjoyed by young intellectuals devoted to pursuing the new (*bianyuan zhishi qingnian* 边缘知识青年) (298).

The language that was accessible to common readers included *suyu* 俗語, which encompassed folk adages, common sayings, and colloquial speech: the vivid and colourful expressions widely used in spoken Chinese, as *chengyu* 成語 are used in the written language. The key features of *suyu* are commonality and orality: it is the language that circulates in the mouths of the ordinary people (*gua zai laobaixing koutou shang* 挂在老百姓口头上) (Shanghai shudian 1984, 1).

*Suyu* had existed as a vocabulary category from the Western Han dynasty,<sup>17</sup> and *suyu* dictionaries had been published from at least the Southern Dynasties period (Zhu S. 1923, 139; Fu 2011, 139). The notion of *su* in the sense of popular or folk gained particular currency, however, from the 1900s when it was used in the titles of newspapers in the vernacular such as *Anhui subao* 安徽俗報 (Anhui vernacular journal) (Li 2001, 38). Over the course of the following decade, the status of *suyu* continued to rise, particularly among those who argued for the popularization of the vernacular language. In an essay entitled "A Preliminary Proposal on the Reform of Chinese Literature" (*Wenxue gailiang chuyi* 文學改良芻議) published in *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth) in January 1917, Hu Shi singled out the use of vernacular speech (*suyu*) and words (*suzi* 俗字) as one of the eight principles necessary to launch a literary revolution.<sup>18</sup> In an essay "On the Literary Revolution" (*Wenxue geming lun* 文學革命論) in the next issue of the same journal, Chen Duxiu similarly urged intellectuals to use *suhua* 俗話 to create new literature (Li 2001, 39).

As this invocation of *suyu* by New Culture activists as early as 1917 suggests, Hu Puan's publication of the *Suyu dian* in 1922 was directly precipitated by the vernacular movement: an example of the intersection of various layers at play in the May Fourth era. In the context of the

<sup>17</sup> Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 BC) used the term *suyu* in *juan* 5, "Guide" 貴德 of his *Shuoyuan* 說苑. See Wang Q. 1990, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Hu S. (1983). "Wenxue gailiang chuyi" 文學改良芻議 (A Preliminary Proposal on the Reform of Literature). *Hu Shi wencun* 胡適文存 (Collected Works of Hu Shi), 1. Taipei: Yuandong shuju, 1983, 16. Cited in Li 2001, 4.

current flourishing of the vernacular language (*yuti shengxing* 語體盛行), Hu states in his preface to the dictionary, the spoken language – he uses the term *yuti* rather than *baihua* – is being taken slightly more seriously. This has created the need for a dictionary of the sources of spoken language (*yudian* 語典) (Hu P. 1925). While Hu did not participate in the debates among proponents of the Europeanization, classicization, and popularization of the vernacular, his work served to bolster both the classicization and popularization approaches.

Hu had had a long-standing philological interest in the historical sources of *suyu*. His *Suyu dian* established elemental links between the vernacular and classical languages, by both highlighting the etymological legitimacy of the living vernacular and elucidating the deeper historical meaning of contemporary *baihua*. Many ancient phrases “lie hidden in the vernacular language”, Zhang Taiyan wrote in a statement with which Hu would have fully concurred. As a result, the vernacular language could not be mastered without knowledge of philology.<sup>19</sup>

Aspects of Hu Puan’s dictionary project were also congruent with the bottom up, or popularization approach to the vernacular. His point of departure in searching for the foundation of the spoken language was the *suyu* uttered by women and children in his own day. In his authorial preface, Hu Puan states that he had long been aware that *suyu* spoken on the streets had historical roots that could be traced in ancient *biji*. He was convinced that a dictionary of the origins of *suyu* would be of great benefit to the study of the spoken language (*yanyu* 言語) (Hu P. 1925).

While the *Suyu dian* may have been aligned with certain layers of the vernacular movement and its publication expedited by the events surrounding 1919, its compilation was in no way determined by May Fourth. Hu Puan’s long-standing interest in tracing the origins of *suyu* was motivated by his desire to recover historical and cultural unity, rather than create a new demotic language. His brother, Hu Huaichen, emphasised the theme of unity in his preface to the dictionary. Huaichen explained that written words and oral speech (*wenyan* 文言) had been united before the Eastern Han; the language on the streets (*jietan gangyu* 街談巷語) and the words of women and children (*furen ruzi* 婦人孺子) were all included in writing. When the oral and spoken languages separated, literature (*wenxue* 文學) developed two critical flaws: a lack of authenticity (*shizhen* 失真) as writing became increasingly ornate, and a lack of communicability (*buda* 不達) as textual language was gradually removed from practical use (Hu H. 1925). Well before the late 19teens Hu Puan had begun a collec-

19 Zhang Taiyan (1934). “the Relation Between the Vernacular Language and the Classical Language”. *Guoxue gailun*, 113-21. Cited in Chen 2011, 408.

tive enterprise of excavating the textual sources of common speech in an effort to realign the written and spoken languages. The project involved several members of his family – including Huaichen – each of whom was tasked with recording any current common sayings they encountered while reading *biji*. Hu Puan then tucked these sayings away in a box (1925).

The vernacular language movement provided Hu Puan with the impetus to take these items which had accumulated over the years out of the box. With the help of Huaichen as a fellow editor, and the assistance of his wife, Zhu Zhao 朱昭 (1890-1966); his daughter, the *guohua* painter Hu Yuan 渊 (born of his first wife, 1901-28); and his nephews Huisheng 惠生 (Daoji 道吉, 1894-1958) and Daohe 道和 (1903-1958), he was able to complete the dictionary in one year.<sup>20</sup>

This was impressive speed given the scope and innovativeness of the dictionary. Including over 7,300 entries,<sup>21</sup> it is organised along the lines of the *Kangxi Dictionary* (*Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典), but also, according to some, as functional as a modern specialised reference work.<sup>22</sup> It is divided into twelve parts (*ji* 集) ordered by radicals and number of strokes, and further sub-divided into sections (*bu* 部) which are also ordered by stroke number.<sup>23</sup> The entries feature various forms of *suyu* including single characters and compounds (*ci* 詞, representing 70 to 80% of entries) and idioms (*shuyu* 熟語 20 to 30%) – among them four-character sayings (*chengyu* 成語), proverbs (*yanyu* 諺語), two-part double puns (*xiehouyu* 歇后語), commonly used phrases (*guanyong yu* 慣用語), and miscellaneous sayings (Cui, Yao 2013, 112). Each entry lists the source for the saying, whether a text, a person, or a poem.

Hu Puan and his family drew on some 3,000 works in compiling the text. In his preface to the dictionary, Yang Shuda 楊樹達 (1885-1956) describes how Hu “exhausted as many early texts as he could in seeking the original source of an entry”. His method was, according to Yang, similar to that of “a tailor who sews patches of cloth into a rich tapestry, or a goldsmith who smelts broken bits of copper into a bell (*ji lingjian yi zhijin, rong sui jin er wei zhong* 集零縑以製錦, 鎔碎

**20** In Hu’s preface he names one of his nephews as Huisheng while the reprint refers to Daoji. I am assuming they are the same person. Hu P. 1925; Shanghai shudian 1984, 3.

**21** Hu Puan and his family continued to collect some 1,000 *suyu* after the dictionary was published. They had initially contemplated adding a supplement, but also realised that would be insufficient so their wish was that others would continue the work “*Suyu dian liyan*,” 2. The number of entries given in secondary sources varies from over 7,200 (Qu Yanbin, “Xiandai *suyu*,” 150) to 8,328 (Cui Lei, Yao Weijun, “Hu Pu’an de *wenxian*,” 112).

**22** On the claim to being a modern reference work, see Shanghai shudian 1984, 2.

**23** “*Suyu dian liyan*”, 1.

金而為鐘”。<sup>24</sup> The five most frequently cited sources in the dictionary are the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian, 455 entries), the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Former Han Dynasty, 442), the *Jinshu* 晉書 (History of the Jin dynasty, 383), the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (History of the latter Han dynasty, 332), and the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Mister Zuo's Annals, 213). Hu and his family also culled information from a range of less orthodox sources including category books (*leishu* 類書), *biji*, fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說), dictionaries or glossaries (*zishu* 字書), poetry talks (*shihua* 詩話), Buddhist scripture (*Fojing* 佛經), gazetteers (*difangzhi* 地方志), inscriptions (*beiwen* 碑文), and talk of the town (*minjian de jietangangyi* 民間的街談巷議) (Fu 2011, 140).

The *Suyu dian* was not only a feat of philology, however, but a guide to the nascent May Fourth vernacular. The paratexts to the dictionary repeatedly emphasise its practical purpose. The “Editorial Principles” (Liyan 例言) assert that the compilation exclusively features sayings that were currently used by “women and children”. These include sayings that were not *suyu* in the ancient past but have become *suyu* in the mouths of the masses (*zhongren zhi kou* 眾人之口). It does not include terms that were *suyu* in the past but no longer in use.<sup>25</sup> In his preface, Zhu Shizhe 朱師轍 (1878-1969) asserts that the compilation should serve as a bible (*miji* 秘笈) for those studying *baihua* in the early 1920s (1923). A 1925 advertisement similarly announces the dictionary’s usefulness in the current exuberant age of *baihua* (*baihua shengxing shidai* 白話盛行時代).<sup>26</sup>

Hu Puan asserted in his authorial preface that this focus on practical everyday use distinguished his dictionary from both previous collections of *suyu* and contemporary dictionaries. While two relatively recent *suyu* dictionaries, Qian Daxin’s 錢大昕 *Hengyan lu* 恆言錄 (Record of Everyday Expression) and Di Hao’s 翟灏 (1736-88) *Tongsu bian* 通俗編 (A Lexicon of Vernacular Expressions), cited a profusion of early texts, the sayings they recorded were no longer in use in their own day. Of little practical utility, the texts could be more accurately classified as dictionaries of *wenyan* rather than *suyu* (Hu P. 1925). They were also difficult to search and far from the standards of a modern dictionary (*cidian*) (Fu 2011, 139; Cui, Yao 2013, 112).

The *Suyu dian* was also unique in its own day. “Many scholars today have compiled dictionaries (*cidian*)”, Hu Puan noted in his own preface, “but few have compiled dictionaries that trace the sources of common sayings (*yudian* 語典).” This is most likely because “it is

<sup>24</sup> Yang S. 楊樹達. “Suyu dian xu” (Preface to Common Sayings). Hu Puan 胡樸安, Hu Huaichen 胡懷琛, *Suyu dian* 俗語典 (Common sayings, Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1922, 1925. Rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1983 (1984), 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> “Suyu dian liyan”, 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> (*Guangyi shuju*) *Tushu mulu*, 36, 2010 rpt, 40.

easy to find sources for *cidian* but hard to find sources for *yudian*" (Hu P. 1925). Yang Shuda's preface confirms that in the last ten years (essentially since the beginning of the Republic), numerous dictionaries (*zidian* 字典) and word lists (*cihui* 詞彙) have appeared in disorderly piles in book shops. None, however, are of this kind (Yang L. 2013, 1-3). An advertisement for the dictionary announces that the many new dictionaries and etymologies (*zidian* 字典, *ziyuan* 字源) on the market all approach language from the perspective of *wenyan*. None record useful *suyu*. Focused on the living language, the *Suyu dian* could be used to instruct members of various segments of society in the appropriate language to use in their social interactions (*yingchou de cizhang* 應酬的詞章). It was also helpful for those interested in reading a range of old- and new-style works such as treatises and editorials (*lunshuo* 論說), letters, textbooks, works of dramatic storytelling (*pinghua* 評話), and teaching materials (*jiangyi* 講義).<sup>27</sup>

While advertisements and paratexts emphasise the relevance of the *Suyu dian* to the rise of the vernacular, the dictionary is neither materially nor conceptually a product of the *baihua* movement. It features *suyu*, but actual entries are written in simple classical prose rather than *baihua*. The compilation also followed long-standing literati conventions, a possible reason for its relative invisibility in the post-May Fourth era (Hung 1985, 210).

The first of these conventions is the inclusion of a series of prefaces by luminaries well versed in the field. In addition to Hu Puan's authorial preface, and a preface by Hu Huaichen, one other allographic preface appeared in the text and a fourth was published in Hu Puan's journal, the *Thrift and Savings Society Journal*. Yang Shuda, author of the third preface, was a linguist and professor at Teacher's College in Beijing.<sup>28</sup> Zhu Shizhe, author of the fourth preface, was a compiler of the *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Draft history of the Qing dynasty) (Zhu 1923).

Both Yang and Zhu follow familiar prefatorial practice by situating the *Suyu dian* within a historical lineage of texts. This enables them to both emphasise historical continuity and highlight the superiority of Hu Puan's compilation. We learn from these various prefaces that precedents for the *Suyu dian* appeared as early as the Southern Dynasties. Liu Ji 劉霽 of the Liang dynasty's *Shi suyü* 釋俗語 (Explanation of Common Sayings) is recorded in the *Suishu* (Bibliographical Treatise in the History of the Sui Dynasty) although the text itself is no longer extant (Zhu 1923; Fu 2011, 139). Zhou Shouzhong 周守忠 (fl. 1208-20) of the Southern Song dynasty and Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488-

<sup>27</sup> (*Guangyi shuju*) *Tushu mulu*, 36, 2010 rpt, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Yang Shuda 楊樹達. "Suyu dian xu" (Preface to Common Sayings). In Hu Puan 胡樸安, Hu Huaichen 胡懷琛, *Suyu dian* 俗語典 (Common sayings, Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1922, 1925. Rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1983 (1984), 1-3.

1559) of the Ming, both compiled texts entitled *Gujin yan* 古今諺 (Ancient and modern proverbs) (Hu P. 1925). Qing scholars were even more attentive to *suyu* in the context of the evidential research (*kaozheng* 考正) movement although their texts all had shortcomings which the preface authors highlight. Liang Tongshu's 梁同書 (1723-1815) *Zhiyu buzhen* 直語補證 (Supplement on Common Speech), like a number of earlier works in this lineage, offered few citations and was not highly specialised (Zhu 1923). Du Wenlan's 杜文瀾 (1815-1881) *Gu yaoyan* 古謠諺 (Ancient Ballads and Proverbs) was a rich collection, but it only examined ancient proverbs, not current language (Zhu 1923). Qian Daxin's *Hengyan lu* and Di Hao's *Tongsu bian*, as noted above, were relatively comprehensive but not well-categorised (Zhu 1923).

Finally, the *Suyu dian* was, as we have noted, the product of family labour, not of a new-style editorial team. In contrast, the Shangwu yinshuguan's *Ciyuan* 詞源 published in 1915, for example, was the work of 50 compilers (Culp 2019, 46).

Hu Puan was also ideologically at a distant remove from the *baihua* movement. He expressed skepticism concerning the intellectual integrity and political aims of the movement in an essay published in the *Thrift and Savings Society Journal* in November 1923. Entitled "The Harm of Recent Scholarship" (Lun jinren zhixue zhi bi 論今人治學之弊), the essay focuses on the debate between what Hu calls *baihua* and *wenhua* 文話 - terms that stand in for new vernacular knowledge and established classical knowledge.

Hu is not particularly partisan in this debate. His essay is equally critical of proponents of *baihua* and *wenhua* who he uniformly chastises for weaponizing and politicizing literature in an effort to boost their individual reputations (Hu P. 1923a, 1). He is also impartial in his appraisal of the literary merits of the two language registers. Both *wenhua* and *baihua* have value, he writes, in terms of the two fundamental qualities of language: use (*yunyong* 運用) and elegance (*youmei* 優美) (1). He is, nonetheless, not sparing in his assessment of works written in *baihua*. He claims that they are shallow, straightforward (*qianlü* 淺率), and lacking in deep meaning. The numerous works translated into *baihua* - he is referring to works translated from *wenyan* rather than from foreign languages - do not convey (*ci moda* 辭莫達) the meaning of the original. He also insists that knowledge of *wenyan* is a necessary precondition for eloquence in *baihua*: the most readable works in *baihua*, he declares, are written by "those who have solid training" (*suyou gendi* 素有根底) in *wenhua* (1-2). He concedes that there are also many shallow and straightforward (*qianlü fanduo* 淺率繁多) works in *wenhua*. They are, however, relatively readable and if, successfully translated into *baihua*, would be accessible (1-2).

Hu further criticises scholars in both camps for lacking integrity (*zili zhi dao* 自立之道). By this he means that they lack a solid grounding in the knowledge they purport to possess and promote,



which forces them to make extraneous appeals to external authority in staking out their positions. If a *baihua* scholar does not understand mathematics, Hu claims, he discusses Russell. If he does not understand biology (*shengwu* 生物), he invokes Dewey. Similarly, if a scholar working in *wenhua* does not understand the classics and histories, he references Cui Dongbi 崔東璧 (Cui Shu 崔述 (1740-1816). If he does not understand philology, he alludes to the father and son Wang of Gaoyou 高郵王 (Wang Niansun 王念孫, 1744-1832; Wang Yinzi 王引之, 1766-1834) (2).

Hu takes further swipes at tendencies in May Fourth activism and scholarship. One is at what he presents as a new mania for public lecturing among New Culture activists. He laments that people no longer read books behind closed doors. Instead they mount platforms and make speeches (*dengshan yanjiang* 登壇演講). They do not seek knowledge of specialised subjects from books they hold in their own hands (*zhijuan wenye* 執卷問業). Rather they follow the crowd and listen to lectures. And while those lecturing should have knowledge and those listening should have some kind of intellectual foundation, this is not the case. Lecturers are ignorant of the topics on which they expound so they pepper their speeches with strange new words to pique their listeners' imaginations. And the listeners not only lack any sort of intellectual foundation, they also have no true intention of listening (Hu P. 1923a, 2).

Those engaged in research in the aftermath of May Fourth – possibly references to the Doubting Antiquity School (*Yigu pai* 疑古派) and the critics of the Neo-Confucian tradition – also come up short in Hu Puan's estimation. They work too quickly and are too beholden to novel and curious ideas. They seem to follow one of two paths, they either seek out hidden and secluded (*yinpi* 隱僻) Chinese works to supplement the latest Chinese discourses, or they try to overthrow well-established theories with a sole piece of evidence.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

Despite Hu Puan's unabashed criticisms of May Fourth ideology, both the *Suyu dian* and the *Record of Customs* have had an afterlife in post-Mao era: both have been repeatedly reprinted since the 1980s. According to the publisher of one of the reprint editions of the *Record of Customs*, the reason it was considered worth "dusting off" and republishing relates to Zhang Chizhang's statement in his preface

<sup>29</sup> Hu P. 1923a, 3. It is unclear precisely who Hu's targets are here. Possibly the Doubting Antiquity School (*yigu pai* 疑古派) and the Criticism of the Neo-Confucian tradition. I am grateful to Lianbin Dai for these suggestions.

to the original work, “to know past and present customs is to know China”.<sup>30</sup> The publisher of a reprint edition of the *Suyu dian* similarly linked Hu Puan’s philological approach to common sayings to the epistemological objectives of the root searching movement in the 1980s (Shanghai Shudian 1984, 2, 4).

The resurfacing of these works points to the incompleteness of not only Hu Puan’s particular projects – of historicizing all common sayings and capturing all local customs – but of the broader May Fourth projects with which they intersected. The nodes of convergence between the concerns of this seemingly inconsequential writer and those of leading May Fourth figures, highlights the period’s most intractable issues, issue to which the New Culture movement did not ultimately have sustainable answers. Full engagement with the *min* remains elusive in a country with vast income disparities and floating populations. Language reform has helped increase literacy while producing what many consider to be an historically and culturally impoverished language.

Lu Xun’s statement – that all things have two, three, or multiple self-contradictory layers – is instructive in considering the ways Hu Puan and his works deepen our understanding of the May Fourth moment. We could easily dismiss Hu as parochial – he had not travelled abroad and apparently did not know any foreign languages. But his parochialism illuminated the parochialism of his allegedly cosmopolitan intellectual counterparts who were well versed in the ways of Parisians and Londoners but ignorant of the breadth of local Chinese customs, and who wanted to turn a rich and resonant local vernacular into a foreign language. We could also dismiss Hu as atavistic in his commitment to a grand unity predicated on passive acceptance of social hierarchy. But his atavism was tied to a penetrating presentism that highlighted the absurdity of mechanically applying foreign-generated ideologies to radically different social, economic, and cultural realities. His philological passion was attuned to the way people actually spoke and paired with a commitment to valorizing what lived on.

Hu Puan was just one of many writers on the margins as the chaotic grid of May Fourth-era layers coalesced into the unidirectional narrative that has come down to us. Reconstituting their traces, some of which are resurfacing today, makes it possible for us to reassess and even de-centre the place of May Fourth in China’s long Republic.

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30 “Chubanzhe”, 2011.

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