Dante and the Chinese Vernaculars

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Abstract

Dante’s unfinished treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* (1303—1305) is the world’s earliest theoretical statement on writing in vernacular language. Its arguments on the status of vernacular writing are not only fundamental to understanding the rich linguistic variety of European literature, but may also be considered in relation to cultures outside of Europe. This paper brings them to bear on the Chinese field. It notes that in Chinese literary culture the classical language and the written vernacular of the north have enjoyed unchallenged sway, while non-Mandarin, particularly southern vernaculars have failed to establish fully fledged literatures. Considering the questions that arise when Dante’s arguments confront the Chinese case, and the difficulty of answering those questions, the paper concludes that what China has thus gained in cultural unity it has lost in richness of cultural diversity.

The **Dictionary of the vernacular or spoken language of Amoy** first published by Carstairs Douglas in 1873 bears a dedication ‘to Rev. James Legge, D.D., as an acknowledgment for much kindness, and a tribute to his unwearied labours as a Christian missionary, and his pre-eminent position as a Chinese scholar.’ All very natural and fitting (an expression of affection and respect between missionary colleagues. But in another sense there is an irony about the dedication of this particular book to James Legge. The Douglas dictionary was one of those pioneering works of nineteenth-century missionary enterprise in China that acknowledged the vernacular languages of the south-east and raised them to the dignity of subjects for serious study. It grew out of the protestant missionary’s aim to reach out to individual souls, however humble, and preach to them in their own mother tongue. Legge too devoted a great part of his life’s energies to that kind of missionary work, among speakers of one of those south-eastern languages. Yet the intellectual enterprise which occupied his mind, and in which he achieved so much, was profoundly different (the quest for China’s classical tradition, ancient, universal in the Chinese world, and accessible only through years of academic study. In fact the two men, Douglas and Legge, between them speak for the two sides of a great and familiar polarity which dominates Chinese experience, then and now (universal values matched against local customs, high culture matched against vernacular intimacy.

I shall ask certain questions about this polarized system. They are questions that would perhaps only occur to a European, or to someone approaching China from the direction of European culture. And they are no doubt unanswerable, since they really take the ‘what if?’ form of counterfactual questions that events have already removed from reality. But such questions are still worth asking, because they make us focus our thoughts and perceptions more sharply. Putting it most simply, I want to ask why in many parts of China high written culture and vernacular intimacy are poles apart, rather than inseparable from one another. Douglas makes the point quite plainly in the preface to his Dictionary:
The vernacular or spoken language of Amoy... is spoken by the highest ranks just as by the common people, by the most learned just as by the ignorant;... the main body and staple of the spoken language of the most refined and learned classes is the same as that of coolies, labourers, and boatmen. (p.vii)

(A statement that could just as easily be made of the Cantonese, Hakka, and other languages, then or now.) With this he contrasts ‘the so-called “written language” of China’ this written language, as it is read aloud from books, is not spoken in any place whatever in any form of pronunciation. The most learned men never employ it as a means of ordinary oral communication even among themselves. It is in fact a dead language, related to the various spoken languages of China somewhat as Latin is to the languages of South-western Europe. (ib.)

But he goes on to make this point:

Of course every missionary, and every one who would be counted a scholar, must study the written character too, for the Vernacular or Colloquial cannot for a very long time to come possess any literature worthy of the name. (p.ix)

So my main question is: why? (I ask this even allowing for what we now know about writings in the Southern Min and other great vernaculars of China.) And a second question will ask: how might things have been different?

In Europe the situation actually is different, and has been for hundreds of years. There too a continent is bound together, though in complex ways, by a common (Judaeo-Christian) culture, a common classical heritage, legal traditions, institutions, and learning. Yet it is the home, not just of many vernacular languages, but of several great vernacular literatures, each with deep historical roots. And modern Europeans take that situation for granted. They read and write the languages their nations speak, and communicate with their regional past through the same written media.

The fundamental statement of this great characteristic of European culture, without precedent or rival, was Dante Alighieri’s unfinished Latin treatise De vulgari eloquentia (On eloquence in the vernacular’). It was written between 1303 and 1305, at a stage in Dante’s life before he embarked on the great poetic work in Italian vernacular which would raise him to the highest place in European culture: the Commedia, or Divine Comedy. Seen in terms of his own career, the treatise can be read as a practising vernacular poet’s attempt at a theoretical and critical framework for the large project which lay ahead of him. He chose there to write about his own vernacular tongue and to analyse some of his own verse. But for him these were merely useful, accessible examples of truths which he maintained were universal. His theoretical statements and rigorous arguments addressed the whole universe of human language, some people think in a startlingly modern way. That is why, although he knew little about China and less about its languages, I want to suggest that those statements and arguments can confront Chinese experience and help us formulate our questions more clearly.

‘I find that no one, before myself’ he begins, ‘has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular.’ And surely that claim still stands, even when we take account of China. So too do the basic definitions:

I call ‘vernacular language’ that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or, to put it more succinctly, I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses. There also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us, which the Romans called gramatica. The Greeks and some (but not all (other peoples also have this secondary kind of language. Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study. (ib.)

The term gramatica of course refers to Latin, ‘a literary language governed by rules’, seen not as a natural tongue with its own organic history, but as an unchanging, artificial language shared as a common medium by speakers of many different vernaculars. We can agree that the Chinese are among those peoples with such a secondary kind of language, a language that requires lengthy study, and a language beyond the reach of many individuals who nonetheless have absorbed their vernacular tongues from infancy, without instruction. These definitions present no challenge to Chinese perceptions.

But the next statement apparently does:
Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular: first, because it was the language originally used by the human race: second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words: and third, because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial. (ib.)

What for Chinese sensibilities is deeply problematical here will be the claim for vernacular tongues of greater nobility than classical and learned languages. Dante is being polemical, no doubt, but not in the sense of disdaining the use of Latin as a language of learning: he wrote this very treatise in clear and eloquent Latin, as the philosophers and scientists of Europe would continue to do until at least the seventeenth century, with Newton and Descartes, and beyond. Dante will argue rather that the vernacular, in prose and poetry, goes beyond it to serve a higher eloquence.

With this we can contrast the well-known comments of Lin Qinnan, when he challenged the early twentieth-century enterprise to establish northern baihua as a literary language. All the rickshaw boys and peddlers in Beijing and Tianjin could be regarded as professors because their vernacular is more grammatical and correct than the Fukienese and Cantonese dialects, he suggested to Cai Yuanpei. Implied in this securely traditional view is the ranking of vernacular language, universal among the local society which uses it, with the lowest and humblest members of that society: those rickshaw boys and peddlers can, by this view, speak for the best that their language has to offer. Vernacular language as a literary medium in China was then (less than a hundred years ago) still associated with the common people, with the popular literature that is unfit to enter the courts of refined society, is not valued by the scholarly elite. This is what Douglas had in mind when he claimed in 1873 that ‘the Vernacular or Colloquial cannot for a very long time to come possess any literature worthy of the name.’

Already, of course, different questions arise here: the privileging of the northern Mandarin vernacular as a standard for the whole of China, and the tension which that creates with the remote populations speaking southern languages. But the underlying point remains clear: in China, particularly beyond the bounds of the Mandarin dialects and their literary tradition, vernaculars, though spoken by the whole of society, are closely associated with local, common or vulgar culture. The proposition that the vernacular is ‘more noble’ than standard literary language sounds deeply antipathetic, particularly in pre-modern China.

Dante surveys the spoken languages of Europe and uses simple lexical tests to separate out three great divisions, assigned in broad terms to southern, northern and eastern Europe. Languages to the north of a certain line express assent by saying ‘io’ (or cognate words); to the south of that line lies a large system which shares a rich vocabulary of words in common we would now associate this with the Romance group of languages. But he also finds this southern system divided into three, again distinguished by the words they use for ‘yes’: ‘oc’ (in what is now southern France and north-eastern Spain) ‘oil’ (now northern and central France); and ‘si’ (the Italian peninsula and Sicily). Each of these languages, Dante says, has served as a medium for fine writing, though in different styles and with different strengths. Next, taking the last, ‘Italian’ group as his specimen, he focuses more closely on finer subdivisions, first distinguishing the left-and right-hand sides of the Italian peninsula, then pointing out many differences within them. He concludes:

So we see that Italy alone presents a range of at least fourteen different vernaculars. All these vernaculars also vary internally...; moreover, we can detect some variation even within a single city... For this reason, if we wished to calculate the number of primary, and secondary, and still further subordinate varieties of the Italian vernacular, we would find that, even in this tiny corner of the world, the count would take us not only to a thousand different types of speech, but well beyond that figure.

I have followed these pages of Dante’s treatise quite closely in order to establish a parallelism with China. For there too linguistic scholars are able to use a typology based on lexical and other features to distinguish a northern from a southern group of languages. And there too it is possible to look at the southern group and see different languages within it (the Yue vernaculars, the Min vernaculars, the Hakka, and so on. And again it is easy to see those languages subdividing into dialects (the Southern Min into Xiamen, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou, Chaozhou; the Yue into Guangzhou, Yangjiang, Zhongshan, Taishan, Tengxian; the Hakka into Meixian and Huayang. The point is that when Dante wrote about the southern vernacular tongues in his own experience, he was describing a situation not unlike the situation in southern or indeed in other parts of China.

Nevertheless, in affirming that the vernacular tongue is more noble than the gramatica, he is not really talking about languages directly comparable to Guangzhou dialect, Taishan dialect, Quanzhou dialect, Zhangzhou dialect or
Meixian dialect. For Dante’s treatise next goes on to examine critically the many Italian vernaculars to find which of them is the most respectable and illustrious’. His verdicts are quick and famously harsh. Some dialects are ugly, some brutal, some too feminine, some too virile. Not one of those local vernaculars measures up to Dante’s standard of nobility. Instead, he finds, the poets of Italy have distilled from them collectively a language which shares their finest points without suffering their faults. It belongs to the whole of Italy and interacts dynamically with the languages spoken there.2

To describe the qualities of that language Dante uses four distinctive adjectives, to each of which he devotes a careful explanation. He calls it illustrious’, pivotal’, courtly’, and authoritative’. By these words he means that it throws light on those who use it and is itself illuminated by its users, ... all other Italian vernaculars revolve around it, ...if Italy had a royal court it would be used there, ... and if the best minds in the country were united in a curia, or tribunal, it would be used there.

The passage setting out these crucial statements openly explores the noble vernacular’s relationship with the notion of a polity and its institutions (the cultural leadership of a feudal court and the dignity of legal tribunals. It implies a parallel between an elite language-community and a matching political entity. And this idea can be linked far beyond the shores of Italy to other vernaculars which in their written forms have served as an expression of national or regional identity. Of course we see the same force at work in the modern world. Eric Hobsbawm argues that national languages are ‘almost always semi-artificial constructs’, imposed after rather than before the creation of nations, often with the help of the printing press; but he notes that dialects associated with the area of royal administration became the foundation of the literary idiom in France and England.35 What is striking about Dante’s Italy is the existence (or concept) of a viable all-Italian vernacular at a time when no central court or system of judicial control held the whole community together. Writers of the vernacular created, in Dante’s view, the language for a polity even when it had no real existence.

From most points of view it’s a serious loss that De vulgari eloquentia remained so incomplete. Dante ended the first book with a sketch of his further intentions:

I shall go on... to discuss the following questions: whom I think worthy of using this language, for what purpose, in what manner, where, when, and what audience they should address. Having clarified all this, I shall attempt to throw some light on the question of the less important vernaculars, descending step by step until I reach the language that belongs to a single family.36

The unfinished second book then begins with a discussion of the vernacular in its highest form, used for the treatment of the noblest subjects, which are ‘prowess in arms, ardour in love, and control of one’s own will’.37 There is some detailed analysis of the lyric form called canzone and its stylistics. But the work breaks off before Dante comes to his analysis of the middle level of poetic style.

In the sense that this treatise serves us with a set of ideas to test on the Chinese vernaculars, its incompleteness leaves us deprived. We would have found it stimulating to read Dante’s views on the proper use of middle-level, lower-level and domestic vernacular behaviour. But there is enough here to give a sharper focus to the questions put at the start of this paper. We can explore China’s polarized language culture more searchingly by watching how he describes a fully nuanced vernacular literature.

It is undeniable that Dante’s treatise, like all his work, grows out of a historical situation. Like any other text it is a chronologically determined and culturally embedded artifact.38 I have sampled the modern scholarship on De vulgari eloquentia (which is lively and by no means unanimous), and learned that all kinds of interpretive strategies can be drawn from Dante’s personal, political and intellectual situation in fourteenth-century Italy. There are those who discover the energies of his supra-regional noble vernacular39 in the fact that he was a political exile from his home city, Florence.40 Others find in his orderly analysis of Europe’s language groups a version of the taxonomies beloved of mediaeval thinkers. There are signs, too, that Dante had changed his mind about these fundamental ideas during the years leading up to the treatise. He had once regarded the Latin language as more noble than the vernacular, for its quality of immutability: now, it seems, he did a full U-turn.41 And even in the careful representation of the illustrious vernacular that we find in De vulgari eloquentia there are deep tensions lurking: the more refined and general that language is conceived to be, the more distant it gets from the natural’ quality of tongues really spoken by human societies, and the closer it gets to the frozen abstractness of the gramatica. These
are all fascinating problems which occupy the minds of Dante scholars, but which don’t promise very much to those of us beyond the reach of European mediaeval studies.

And it is not very encouraging to be reminded how easily modern minds have attributed to Dante certain intellectual feats which belong more to the nineteenth century than the fourteenth. More than one scholar has credited him with inventing the generic analysis of language, or with founding Romance philology, or even historical linguistics. But these enthusiastic bouquets were smartly removed by Marcel Danesi in an article of 1991.\textsuperscript{xvii} Dante’s mind thought within the terms of his own time, and we should resist the temptation to project on to his work the seductive habits of thinking we have inherited from the nineteenth century. (Still, Danesi is disposed to credit Dante with anticipating the synchronic study of dialects.)\textsuperscript{xviii}

Once all that has been said, however, we still have to face the question of universals. Chinese and Europeans belong to the same human species. Articulate speech is common to all that species, one of its defining characteristics. Dialectal proliferation is also universal: we are able to wander hand-in-hand with Dante quite easily through China’s regional linguistic geography. And we have no trouble recognizing in China the Dantesque polarity between a formal, universal written language and a complex of interrelated vernaculars. So where do those universals end and the limited cultural particulars begin? Where is the knife edge that separates European from Chinese linguistic behaviour? Why do multiple vernacular literatures lie on the far side of that separation? These are the questions I want to ask now.

They are intensely disturbing questions which, when asked, are prone to attract quick, fiery retorts. But the retorts, which all seem so obvious and self-evident to the speakers, differ strongly from one another. And not all of them stand up well to analysis. It seems that each of us grabs an instant explanation from the stock of ideas lying uppermost in our mind. Our answers to the questions often convey more information about our own individual mind-set than about the problems themselves. Still, several of them need to be thought through seriously.

First: has anyone in China ever said anything comparable to Dante’s position? Here is a passage from deep inside the Confucian tradition. It was written by the early Tang commentator Kong Yingda (574(648). Addressing a text from the Xi ci (系辞) appendix to Yi jing (易经) [子曰，书不尽言，言不尽意 ‘writing does not do full justice to speech, and speech does not do full justice to ideas’], he wrote this interpretation:

In this passage the Master raises a question himself, saying that the ideas of the sages are difficult to perceive. The reason they are difficult to perceive is that writing is the means by which speech is recorded. In speech there are many fine intricacies; sometimes [the speech of] Chu and of Xia is different; and there is speech which has no written equivalent. So even if we wish to transcribe it in writing it is not possible to do full, exhaustive justice to that speech. Which is why [the text] says writing does not do full justice to speech’. That ‘speech does not do full justice to ideas’ is because the ideas are deep and subtle, not capable of imitation in speech.

What I find absorbing here is his characterization of speech. The three features which make it so difficult to put in writing are precisely those of vernacular tongues: the proliferation of small, fuzzy markers which lend so much to the rhetorical articulation of spoken utterance; the regional distinctiveness which separates the northern tongue of Xia (perceived heartland of pre-imperial culture) from the southern tongue of Chu; and the existence of lexical items for which no written equivalent is available. So a writing system inadequate for the expression of such speech needs must be one which lacks fine intricacy, which fails to recognize regional distinctiveness, and which restricts itself to an established written lexicon, even when speech ventures beyond it. In a word, classical Chinese. That was the perception of Kong Yingda in the early seventh century, when no doubt a fully developed means of writing out the vernacular was not available or conceivable. We can follow his empirical observations clearly to this day (not least in Douglas’s dictionary. But Kong implies value-judgements too. He conveys a clear sense that speech, though inadequate to the full depth of sagely ideas, would still be the closest verbal access we could get to their wisdom: so, with its syntactic, regional and lexical distinctiveness, it claims a higher place than the shorthand of the classical language through which that wisdom actually comes down to us. All of this, remember, six centuries before Dante.

We might debate at length how much, or how little, common ground is shared by those two men. For Kong Yingda vernacular was the inimitable speech of the sages; for Dante it was the language of Adam, man’s universal and natural medium of communication. At the very least there is a strong line to be drawn between their two
programmes: Kong Yingda was doing his best to interpret a line of scriptural text; Dante was an active poet, set on defining and refining a medium for his own work, and he would indeed leave this treatise unfinished when he turned to the great poem which would establish Italian vernacular in the eyes of the world.

The germ of Kong Yingda’s idea did not perish unnoticed in China. When new sages appeared, in the shape of the Chan Buddhist masters of the Tang and later, their utterances were transcribed in a literature of dicta that we know as yulu（语录）. This was a vernacular literature for reasons close to Kong Yingda’s thinking: it transcribes the ipsissima verba, the very words, of the masters.xx But I cannot trace a link between it and a culture of creative writing in vernaculars.

Kong Yingda does one more thing for us. He very explicitly anticipates an argument that I often hear from those who want to explain the lack of developed vernacular writing in regional China. The Chinese script, they say, unlike alphabetical scripts, is suitable for the writing of only one standard language. Without an alphabet to write them down, regional vernaculars are effectively invisible: no standard written forms are available to do full justice to their distinctive syntactical markers and lexis. I remain unimpressed by this argument. The Chinese script is ancient, it was certainly not designed to meet the specific needs of northern Mandarin dialects, and Kong Yingda’s remarks seem to reflect exactly that perception. Yet writers later found ways to exploit the script to cope with northern China’s rich and changing vernacular culture. If that could be done in the north, why not in the south? It is clearly true that in China the script failed to evolve into an alphabet or syllabary (as it did in Japan for the purposes of writing a fundamentally different type of language),xxi and it does lack the flexibility and versatility of alphabets. But the problem was not insoluble, and the range of solutions adopted by vernacular publications in southern China is succinctly described by van der Loon:

> each regional language not only distinguishes itself by a large number of colloquial expressions, but also often differs from its neighbours in basic vocabulary. If those words are etymologically related, the same character can be used; and the character is even retained for etymological doublets within the regional language. For unrelated words a character can be borrowed from a synonym, that is a word with the same meaning; for example Hokkien gau, “wise” is written with the character for hian (Mandarin hsien). Such semantic loans are however totally unsuitable for the most common words of the language, especially grammatical particles, substitutes and auxiliaries (words for “this”, “such”, “how”, “will”, “for” and many others) which in the southern vernaculars are often radically different from Mandarin. Here the adoption of synonyms would either cause ambiguity or fail to express the living language altogether. Hence in these cases preference is given to the borrowing of characters belonging to a homonym, words with same sound but a different sense. Examples of such phonetic loans in Hokkien are the characters for ti, “which”, originally belonging to the word ti, “to meet with”; and guan, “we”, which has been borrowed from Guan, a rather infrequent family name. For several words entirely new characters have been created.

All this does not mark anything revolutionary in the history of the Chinese script. The same principles can be traced to high antiquity; and they were extensively followed when Mandarin was first written down. Unfortunately, since the adapted and newly created characters of the regional languages were never officially sanctioned, one looks in vain for them in even the most extensive dictionaries. (p.91)

In brief, the problem lies not with any limitations of the script, but with the standardization of solutions devised for the writing of southern vernaculars. Official sanction and published dictionaries represent one way to standardize such solutions. But in Europe it was the example and leadership of major vernacular writers, like Dante himself, which set standards for others to follow and emulate in writing their language.

Kong Yingda gives us a model for seeing vernacular language as a high form of communication. Does it follow, if problems of written script can be dealt with, that Chinese writers can produce high literary forms of vernacular writing to parallel what Dante achieved? Of course vernacular writing is well established and well acknowledged in China. There is a copious recognized literature of prose narrative and drama, some of it the work of powerful creative minds and superlative stylists. But it forms a corpus almost entirely contained within the northern dialect system. It was endorsed in pre-modern times by editors and publishers, and in modern times by critics and cultural leaders, and that has placed it in a strange relationship with the reading public. This Mandarin literature has gained a place within a central canon of received Chinese culture. It belongs to all China. Speakers of other vernaculars can learn to use its language and read its works, but they must set aside their mother tongue to do so. Their reading and writing draw their resources not from the natural fluency of a language they speak from childhood, but from the skills of a language acquired through education and training (in a word, gramaatica, Dante’s second kind of
language. To put it like this is less provocative than to characterize Mandarin as ‘foreign’, a description which most Chinese people will strongly resist. But the experienced reality must seem little different.

We may still feel, especially reading Book II of De vulgari eloquentia, that China has achieved some close parallels with what is described there. The development of a sophisticated song literature, with refined subject-matter, long and short lines, stanzaic patterns, disciplined rhymes (all this, as the analysis of canzoni reveals it to us, is strongly evocative of Chinese ci and qu 词和曲). No-one will deny that China’s rich corpus of lyrical poetry holds a proud place among the achievements of that culture; nor will anyone deny a bond with the vernacular in the language of ci and qu. But the broader questions remain. The subjects treated in this verse are circumscribed, they fall short of the serious public issues addressed and the high rhetoric deployed in shi poetry. The passage of many centuries has also had the effect of fusing ci and qu into the central canon of Chinese literary culture: these forms outlived their contact with a dynamic spoken language environment to become an extension of classical culture. In this way they departed from one more of Dante’s perceived principles of vernacular behaviour:

Our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time.

So vernaculars will grow, evolve, perhaps even wither and die. It is grammatica, the language of immutable rules, that transcends those distances of space and time. That is surely the quarter where ci and qu now belong. We should take a closer interest here in whatever vernacular forms later took their place.

The moment has come to recall the by no means invisible literatures in non-Mandarin languages. Certain linguistic regions (most conspicuously Wu, Yue and Southern Min boast a rich literature of ballads, songs, stories and plays. Printed and manuscript versions have circulated there until quite recently, and these bear a genuine relationship to the culture of performing arts. Literary historians see them characteristically as a branch of folk art. Historical linguists find and study in them the expedients by which the Chinese script can be made to represent the features of languages beyond its strict historical reach. There is some agreement that these regional lyrical and balladic literatures stand in a certain relationship to a broader system (themes, metrical forms, even diction and narrative style often seem to straddle the regions and suggest a background standardization controlling the local distinctiveness. Perhaps, by comparison with full-blooded colloquial usage, these texts give a relatively pale experience of their parent tongues. But they are undeniably vernacular literature, and it seems very believable that Dante would have described something like them if he had completed the full scheme of De vulgari eloquentia. The point, I suggest, is that they would correspond to what in that scheme he calls the less important vernaculars’, to which he intended to proceed descending step by step until I reach the language that belongs to a single family’. They would belong among the middle-level or lower-level vernaculars.

I have used lightning sketches here to suggest a simple but large conclusion. The existing books of Dante’s treatise pronounce vernacular language to be mankind’s noblest voice, the medium for his highest literary endeavours: yet China’s regions offer no true equivalent to this register of language or literature. The unwritten or lost parts of his treatise would have explored middle or lower registers of vernacular behaviour: that, by contrast, is what we do find on the edges of regional culture in China.

The question Dante seems to invite us to explore, then, concerns the high vernacular. And since he so carefully defines it by reference to social and political institutions, comparison with China ought perhaps to begin there. The political landscape of thirteenth-and fourteenth-century Europe presented a patchwork of church lands, autonomous kingdoms and feudal domains, some loosely grouped under the Holy Roman Empire. The vernacular literatures of the time grew up within that fragmented scene and found favour and patronage among those who used their languages. At first sight we can hardly match that situation with the centralized imperial system of Tang and post-Tang China, where (at least in principle) power, patronage and courtly values were concentrated in the imperial metropolis, and provincial government was administered by mobile career officials. The system aimed to preempt the rise of regional power-centres in favour of central authority. Its language culture, with a standard classical written medium and a northern-based official speech, supported its political structures. There seems little here of a kind to encourage regional vernacular cultures.

Yet it is still possible to argue for a debate between medieval Europe and imperial China. For one thing, although some European vernacular literatures did flourish in particular centres of regional power with their own courts and
institutions, yet in Italy, as Dante testifies himself, a great vernacular literature emerged even without such a centre of power. He finds that a language can derive the noble qualities of royal institutions from its own inner strengths, not needing the support of a political reality. It follows that we need not expect the development of a regional vernacular literature to be contingent upon surrounding political structures.

It is also clear, meanwhile, that China has not lacked scope for regional centres of culture. The land was politically divided for long stretches of historical time, and some of the regional dynastic units did offer courtly environments for literary culture. One of them was the Former Shu (前蜀) in the tenth century, a court which fostered a significant literary culture and made an early home for *ci* poetry. Even within large established dynasties the imperial system had room for regional courts: in the fifth century Liu Yiqing (403(444), royal prince of the Song based at Jingzhou on the middle Yangzi and Jiangzhou (江州) in modern Jiangxi, attracted a literary entourage; so in the fifteenth century did the independent-minded Ming royal prince Zhu Quan (1378(1448), who resided for part of his life in NanChang, Jiangxi and developed a productive literary career there. Despite Zhu Quan’s creative skills in the northern lyrical drama, there is no sign of a local vernacular culture developing from this or from the other examples just given. The point is rather that China’s political system did not preclude *regional centres of culture*. We need to find some other way to explain why these were not *centres of regional culture*, in the sense of developing high vernacular literatures.

If there was a moment in Chinese history when something like that came close to happening, it was surely in the Jiangnan of the late Ming. Great economic prosperity, a sophisticated printing and publishing trade, a gathering of remarkable literary talent, a vogue for creative experiment with vernacular and folk forms (these should surely add up to conditions for real achievements in vernacular literature. And one central figure of that time and place, Feng Menglong, did publish books of folk-songs in Wu dialect. But his main literary effort went into works in the standard classical idiom and the northern-based literary vernacular. No powerful tradition of Wu vernacular literature followed from his writing.

The same could be said of Zhao Ziyong and his Cantonese love songs published in 1828 as *Yue ou*. Perhaps work like this might be compared to the *canzoni* literature that lay in the background to Dante’s treatise. But to suggest that is to draw attention to the difference (for no Dante emerged to raise these poems of Yue into a literature of power, authority and status; nor, after a generation, did a Boccaccio come forward to establish an eloquent prose in the same tongue.

Now approaching its end, this paper might echo the thoughts of Fernand Braudel, in his book on the identity of France. He reflected that if the French in 1494 and in 1672 had focused their efforts on crossing the Atlantic and concentrating on America, instead of sending ill-starred expeditions to Italy and Holland in those years, then things might now be very different. Dreams, all of that’, he wrote; but in refashioning history, in imagining it different, do we not then understand it better, as it is irremediably written?’

Supposing we daydream about China. If, as I believe, background conditions could exist in east and south-east China for the emergence of independent vernacular literatures, what might have followed if great writers had come forward to launch them? That means imagining that China could claim, alongside its classical and Mandarin vernacular literatures, a group of southern and eastern literatures to rival those of Italy, France and Spain. Perhaps this thought seems absurd. But why should it seem absurd? Is there something ignoble about those southern tongues, spoken in different forms by millions of civilized people and used by them as the voice of their living experience? If, for Dante, the vernacular tongue is more noble because it is natural to us’, are these tongues not natural to their speakers? Or is it that in the Chinese world what is natural, intimate and common to all members of a community has no place where high matters are being explored? I find it hard to say yes to any of those questions. I cannot see that these vernaculars should be any less noble than Polish, Dutch, English or French. I cannot accept that they are not natural to their speakers, nor that they do poorly in uttering the full range of their speakers’ human needs. I would also find it very difficult to argue (or explain) that the civilization which devised Confucianism, structuring its entire political culture upon domestic and personal relationships, and which endorsed Mencius with his universalist doctrine of human nature, should see mankind’s most natural and fundamental possession as alien to serious discourse.

This paper has restated the problems, not answered them. In the event the Chinese have used their written language as a tool of cultural unity, to match the political unity of an empire or a nation state. The enterprise has been a great one, and the result has been one of the strongest forces in human history. But it is matched by the loss of a richness and diversity that might have been achieved if things had been otherwise.
References

i This essay takes its direction from the late Piet van der Loon’s paper “The literature of the regional languages of Southeast China”, in Annamaria Baldassi, ed., Le minoranze e le autonomie regionali in Asia e in Africa raffronto con il caso Sardegna, (Orientalia Karalitana: Quaderni dell’Istituto di Studi Africani e Orientali, Numero Speciale), Cagliari 1991, pp.89-94. That paper, though short, reflects his long research engagement with historical dialect studies and popular publication: its exposition and formulation of the central issues are authoritative and clear. The present piece extends the discussion in a particular direction, arising from van der Loon’s comment (p.93): ‘Truly, the Chinese sense of cultural identity is very strong, but should everything else be sacrificed for its sake?’ I am grateful for discussion and reactions from a number of different audiences with whom I have shared the thoughts in this paper.


iv Botterill, p.90, note 1.


vii Botterill, pp.16-19.

viii Ibid., Book I, x, pp.22-23.

ix Ibid., Book I, x, pp.24-25.


xii Botterill, Book I, xix, p.45.

xiii Ibid., Book II, ii, p.53.


xv This is the guiding theme of Marianne Shapiro, De vulgari eloquentia: Dante’s book of exile, Lincoln, Nebraska and London, 1990: see pp.4ff.

xvi Cecil Grayson, “‘Nobilior est vulgaris’ : Latin and vernacular in Dante’s thought”, in Centenary essays on Dante by members of the Oxford Dante Society, Oxford 1965, p.69.


xviii Danesi, p.255.

xix Zhou yi zhu shu 7.30b 31a, in Shisan jing zhu shu, Song edition reprinted by Ruan Yuan, 1816. Repr. Kyoto 1971. Dr Hsiao Li ling first drew my attention to this passage in a different context.

xx Cf. van der Loon, p.89.


xxii Compare van der Loon: “a comparison with Europe, where the Italians would not dream of giving up their literature in favour of French, carries no weight for, as most of my friends would say, Mandarin is not foreign” (p.93).

xxiii Botterill, Book I, ix, pp.21-3.
