

CHINESE CHARACTER: ZHOU YOUGUANG, THE FATHER OF CHINA'S PINYIN SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This is an article about The Man Who Made China a Literate Nation—a biography of Zhou Youguang, published in English only by Joint Publishing of Hong Kong in the autumn of 2023. The article describes Zhou's extraordinary life of 111 years, as the father of Hanyu Pinyin, the system of writing Chinese characters with Romanised letters in use since 1958. More than one billion Chinese have learnt it. Zhou chose to return to the mainland in 1949 and lived through the campaigns of the Maoist period. He spent 28 months in a labour camp in Ningxia, west China. In addition, he wrote 49 books, many critical of the Soviet Union, the Soviet model used in China and of Mao Zedong. In the last 20 years of his life, he was one of the few intellectuals in China willing to speak the truth in public. He lived so long thanks to an innate optimism, intellectual curiosity about everything and a Buddhist-like humility to see himself and his belongings as of little value.

When young children arrive in primary school in China, they first attend a Chinese language class where the teacher teaches them not Chinese characters but Pinyin, a romanization system using Roman letters with four different tones. Once they have mastered it, then the teacher starts to teach them characters; thanks to the Pinyin next to each character, they can read it. Without it, they would not know how to pronounce them. It is this system—full name Hanyu Pinyin (漢語拼音), meaning Chinese phonetics—which has turned China into a literate nation. It was introduced in 1958, when 80 per cent of the population was illiterate. Since then, a billion people have learnt Pinyin and the rate of illiteracy has fallen to below 10 per cent. In numbers of people it has made literate, it is the greatest achievement in linguistics in human history. The man most responsible for Pinyin is Zhou Youguang (周有光), director of the department in the Chinese Character Reform Commission (CCRC); in 1955, he was instructed to create a new romanisation system.

Zhou was one of the most remarkable Chinese intellectuals of the last two centuries. Born in January 1906, he lived under four ‘dynasties’—the Qing, the Beiyang government, the Kuomintang and the Communists. He died on January 14, 2017, one day after his 111 birthday. He wrote a total of 49 books. In 1949, he was working in London as the representative of a Chinese bank. He agonised over whether or not to live in a China under Communist rule; in the end, he decided to return, and spent the remaining 69 years of his life there. He lived through all the tragedies of Maoist rule. He spent 28 months in a labour camp in the western region of Ningxia and returned to Beijing to find that Red Guards had removed every single item from his apartment—not one piece of paper or photograph remained. He went back to his office to be told that he and other intellectuals were the ‘dregs of society’ and had no value; they would be given a minimum salary to keep them alive for humanitarian reasons only. He endured these humiliations with a Buddhist-like humility; he attached little importance to himself or his work.

Throughout his life, he retained an intense curiosity about everything, earning the nickname “Encyclopaedia Zhou” (周百科), and a warmth and openness that won him many friends, Chinese and foreign. After his official retirement in 1991 at the age of 84, he turned out books and articles on a wide range of topics. He was one of the few Chinese intellectuals willing to criticise publicly the government of Mao Zedong and the Soviet model which Mao had followed. Since some books could not be published in the mainland, they were published instead in Hong Kong and Taiwan. His advanced age and high status as the “Father of Pinyin” saved him from arrest and prison and allowed him to meet a constant stream of visitors. On the last day of his life, he was due to meet American Dr Vinton Gray Cerf, one of the founders of the Internet. Cerf wanted to thank him for Pinyin, which had become one of the most important tools that Chinese use to access the net. Cerf was about to leave for Zhou’s apartment when he heard the news of his passing. He made a plaque, written in English and Chinese: ‘In memory of Zhou Youguang whose brilliant and persistent invention of Pinyin helped to bring the Internet and its applications within reach of the Chinese-speaking community.’ I venture to say that, when Zhou arrived at the gates of Paradise, the angels opened the gates for him without the need of the interview or examination of documents required for the rest of us. Who else

among us has used their time on earth to such a good purpose?

He was fortunate to be born into an upper middle class and well-educated family in Changzhou, Jiangsu province, one of the most prosperous regions of China. He studied at primary and secondary schools in the city. The Changzhou Middle School was an all-male boarding establishment, where the standard of English was very high. World history, chemistry, geography and biology were all taught in English. Then, in 1923, he went on to St John's University in Shanghai, one of the top colleges in China. His family could not afford the fees, but a friend graciously stepped in and provided the money he needed. He chose economics as his major, with linguistics as an elective. The university used English as its medium of instruction. An excellent student, he appreciated the culture of his teachers—many of them foreigners—to promote a critical faculty among their students and give them only limited homework. Two years later, he was among 553 students who left St John's after it refused to allow them to join a citywide strike against the killing by British-led police of nine protestors in the May 30th Incident. They set up a new university, Kwang Hwa, from which he graduated two years later. On April 30, 1933, in Shanghai, he married Zhang Yunhe, the well-educated daughter of a wealthy Suzhou family. She went on to become one of China's leading experts on Kunqu Opera.

Their marriage was very happy and lasted more than 70 years. For his graduate studies, Zhou preferred the United States, but did not have the money. So he went to Japan, where he studied at Kyoto Imperial University and learned Japanese. After his return to Shanghai in 1935, he worked at the Bank of Jiangsu and taught economics at Kwang Hwa University.

For Zhou, like millions of Chinese, the war with Japan which started in 1937 was a Calvary. With his family, he escaped to Chongqing, the wartime capital. He became an official of the Agriculture Bureau, a unit of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and was deputy commissioner for Sichuan province. Its mission was to feed and clothe the members of China's armed forces and the population under the control of the National Government. To avoid Japanese bombing, Zhou and his family moved 36 times. He narrowly escaped death on several occasions. In April 1942, in Jinhua, Zhejiang province, Zhou met James Doolittle, one of the most famous American pilots of World War II who had just led 16 bombers over

Tokyo in the first American bombing raid over the Japanese capital. After the raid, the pilots flew westward and landed or bailed out by parachute in China. Zhou served as interpreter between Doolittle and his fellow pilots and the Chinese officers hosting him. In 1946, when he was working in New York, Zhou visited Doolittle in his sumptuous office at the Shell Oil Company, where he was a vice-president. On his return to Chongqing, Zhou learnt of the loss of their six-year daughter to peritonitis; the medicine she had been taking in Shanghai was not available in Chongqing.

At the end of the war, the family returned to their home in Suzhou and found there was nothing left; during their eight-year absence, everything had been taken. Zhou went to work for the Xinhua Bank, which sent him to run its operation in New York. During his two years in the United States, Zhou seized every opportunity to learn and to meet Americans. He attended lectures and read until closing time at the New York Public Library. His job enabled him to meet managers and chief executives of large companies. He came to admire many things about Americans—their optimism, entrepreneurship and openness. He also admired the factors behind America's economic success—the intense competition between companies, the financial system, the railway system and the widespread use of shorthand. There was much China could learn. At Princeton University, he met Albert Einstein.

Then he spent a year in Britain, which was falling behind the USA as an industrial power. He found rationing and foreign exchange controls in place, even after the war. During 1949, his final year in London, he and his wife had to make an existential decision—whether to return to a China under Communist control? Thanks to three years of working abroad, he had foreign exchange savings enough to start a new life in the USA. He was fluent in English and had a network of contacts and experience in business and teaching that would have brought a comfortable life in the USA. His American friends told him not to return. But his Chinese friends had a different opinion. They said that life in the USA would be comfortable but without meaning. Since it was already a developed country, what contribution could he make as a foreigner? The USA had a deep well of talent and Chinese had no say in politics. After 12 years of war and destruction, China had so much rebuilding to do, and qualified people like Zhou could make an important contribution. In the end, he decided to return. His

family and that of his wife lived in China; they had sent their son to school in Suzhou, not Manhattan. Like many intellectuals, he detested the Kuomintang and believed the promises of the Communist leaders to introduce democracy, freedom of assembly, opinion, organisation, publication, to strike and organise opposition parties.

Back in Shanghai in late 1949, Zhou continued to work at Xinhua Bank and lectured in economics at Fudan University. Then things began to change dramatically, more rapidly than Zhou had imagined. The new government nationalised all the banks and merged more than 20 faculties of economics. He continued to teach; but, like his colleagues, he had to throw away his materials and teach only translations of Soviet textbooks. His students asked him to explain Keynesian Economics, but he did not dare. He had no time for Soviet 'economics'. In 1951, the first campaign began; some staff of the banks were so frightened that they took their own lives by jumping out of their offices on the Bund. Working for the People's Educational Publishing Company, Zhou's wife was labelled 'a big tiger' and had to write a 'confession' of 20,000 characters; it was not accepted. She was traumatised, her weight fell to 40 kilograms and her teeth fell out. She returned to live with Zhou in Shanghai. Finally, the investigation found nothing against her. The trauma was so profound that she and Zhou decided that she would never return to full-time work again. 'If I had been working during the Cultural Revolution, I would certainly have died,' she said.

In 1955, Zhou's life was transformed. The government moved him from Shanghai to Beijing to the Chinese Character Reform Commission (CCRC), where he would work for the rest of his life. He had published two books on how to use the Roman alphabet to write Chinese. Mao Zedong read the second, *The Subject of the Alphabets* published in November 1954. It persuaded him to accept a phonetic system based on the Roman alphabet, rather than one using strokes of the characters or the Cyrillic alphabet. It was a momentous decision. The move saved Zhou from prison and possibly worse. During the anti-rightist campaign of 1957, professors of economics in Shanghai were a prime target, especially those who had studied or worked in 'imperialist' countries. If he had still been in Shanghai, he would have been sent to prison or labour camp; some professors took their own lives.

At the CCRC, Zhou was put in charge of the division responsible for creating a phonetic system. He threw himself with his customary

energy into understanding the different systems used around the world.

It took him and his team three years of intense work. They were subject to sharp criticism; some said pinyin should not be based on the Roman alphabet and that he was “a slave of the West.” He and the team created an alphabet as close as possible to the sound of the characters; they added to each character one of the four tones in Mandarin. In 1958, Mao gave his approval. Then Pinyin was formally approved by the CCRC and then the National People’s Congress. He and the government began to spread the new system across China, especially in the schools. It remains in use today.

Zhou was invited to join the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), the top advisory body to the government. He served in it for more than 20 years until he resigned in protest after the military crackdown in June 1989. Through his participation, Zhou met national leaders including Mao, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. He watched helpless as the party implemented one campaign after another—the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In the first, his new position in the CCRC and as a specialist in linguistics—politically neutral—saved him from persecution; but many of his friends were affected, sometimes with tragic results. On the Great Leap Forward, he later said in an interview: ‘it led to the death of tens of millions of farmers and a very sharp fall in output of grain. The people had nothing to eat ... In recent years, I read foreign materials which gave a conservative estimate of 45 million dead from starvation. It was the biggest disaster in the history of China.’

But he did not escape during the Cultural Revolution. He was labeled a “counter-revolutionary academic authority” (反動學術權威) and had to live in a “cow pen” for such undesirables in a garage of the CRCC. He and his wife had to dispose of their many books and destroy many precious photographs. In November 1969, he and other “bad elements” were sent to a labour camp in Ningxia, west China. ‘We had to swear an oath that we would never return to our original homes,’ Zhou said later. ‘In fact, it was an oath to say that society did not need people like us. We were the dregs of society. This was the Soviet model. The Soviet Union sent old intellectuals, capitalists and landowners to places north of the Arctic Circle’ They did farm labour, self-evaluation and studied the works of Mao Zedong. One

assignment was to guard the sorghum harvested by the camp with another inmate. This turned out to be Lin Handa (林漢達). With a Ph.D. in education from Colorado University, he was Vice-Minister of Education in the 1950s; in 1958, he was declared a “rightist” and, during the Cultural Revolution a “counter-revolutionary”.

How did Zhou survive this ordeal? He said later: ‘The Cadre School was very interesting. I turned a bad thing into something enjoyable. I was an optimist and never lost hope. I believed that every bad thing would finally become a good thing.’

It was this spirit that enabled him to live until 111 and achieve so much in his life. In the spring of 1972, he finally returned to Beijing, having spent 28 months in Ningxia. When he and his wife entered their apartment, they found that the Red Guards had stripped it of everything—books, articles, notes and photographs. This was the second time in their life that they had lost everything. He was remarkably calm. ‘During the Sino-Japanese war, there was death and escape,’ he said. ‘Compared to the suffering of that war, the Cultural Revolution was a minor matter. I had no attachment to the items in our house. This attitude was a big help. Our feeling toward assets was very shallow. We felt that it was something outside the body. There is a saying in Buddhism: “If you regard items outside the body as important, your spirit will suffer pain”’.

After the Cultural Revolution, one of his jobs at the CCRC was to receive foreign guests. At that time, not many people in China had his foreign language and social skills. His guests gave him gifts; he never took them home but left them in the official car for the driver to give to his family.

But his verdict on the Cultural Revolution was scathing. He said that it continued for several years after Mao’s death, and no fundamental changes until the early 1980s. ‘So it actually lasted for 15 years. What was the purpose of this catastrophe? I do not understand.’ One of the thousands of deaths during the Cultural Revolution was that of Liu Shaoqi, Chairman of State between 1959 and 1968. He died on the morning of November 12, 1969 while living under an assumed name in Kaifeng, Henan province. ‘Liu’s death was very tragic. It is said that, when he died, he was naked. His body was wrapped in a mat and thrown into a crematorium without a name ... I do not understand. Why was there destruction on such a large scale? The whole education system was shut down for 10 years, influencing an

entire generation of people. The Cultural Revolution caused a loss of trust in the Communist Party. This crisis of trust was very frightening. In the early 1950s, the country's political system was stable and the government was methodical. Under the leadership of Zhou Enlai, people had trust in the government. But one movement after another destroyed this trust—including the anti-rightist movement and the People's Communes.' The concentration of power in the hands of one man, Chairman Mao, he said, was like that of many emperors in Chinese history. 'So some people said that Chairman Mao achieved two formidable things in his life. One was to create New China. The other was to destroy it.'

Pinyin gradually became the international standard for written Chinese. In 1982, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) adopted it, with the number ISO-7098. In 1986, the United Nations adopted Pinyin. Singapore adopted Pinyin for teaching Chinese in its schools, shortly after launching its Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979. In the USA, agencies of the Federal Government, the scholarly community and the media adopted Pinyin. On October 1, 2000, the USA Library of Congress started to use it.

Between 1980 and 1985, Zhou left China several times, to visit Hong Kong, Hawaii and the United States. Between October 1984 and February 1985, he spent four months in the USA, travelling from California through the Midwest to New York. Famous as the scholar who had created Pinyin, he was in great demand as a lecturer; he spoke at universities in Santa Barbara and Yale and at the United Nations. During this period, his main project was as one of three editors charged with translating 10 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica into Chinese. The first Chinese version was published in 1985, in 10 volumes, with more than 7000 topics, 5000 maps and a total of 24 million characters. Since then, the Chinese version has continued to expand, reaching 20 volumes in 2007. Zhou was an ideal person for this project. Interested in everything, he had a broad knowledge of many subjects, in addition to his specialties of economics and linguistics.

The greatest contribution of Pinyin has been to enable tens of millions of Chinese to become literate in their own language, as well as to help millions of foreigners to learn it. It has also played a major role in taking Chinese into the electronic age and turning it into the second most used language on the Internet, after English. This is something beyond the imagination of Hu Shih, Chao Yuen-ren and

other language reformers of the early decades of the 20th century. With the rapid improvements in technology, there are today many ways to input Chinese into a computer, including voice recognition. Pinyin remains one of the most popular, for both Chinese and non-Chinese.

At the end of 1991, Zhou officially retired, two weeks before his 85th birthday. At that age, most people would have chosen a life of long lunches, chess, card and mahjong games with their family and friends, tourism, reading novels and naps after lunch. But Zhou did the opposite. During his remaining 26 years, he wrote more than 20 books; he averaged one article a month and one book every three years, published on the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They covered a wide range of subjects, including history, literature, anthropology and poetry as well as his specialties of linguistics and economics. He lectured at Beijing and People's Universities. As he grew older, he became increasingly critical of the Communist Party, the Soviet model it had adopted, its version of history and its treatment of intellectuals like him. These subjects could not be addressed in publications in the mainland. But the authorities left him alone, probably because of his high status and advanced age. He said in an interview in April 2010: 'When you are young, you are naïve and follow blindly. In old age, you start to explore the truth. I am 105 and could die tomorrow. It is no problem to say the wrong thing. Others who write articles must be careful.' Another thing that sustained him was a constant stream of family, friends and visitors, Chinese and foreign. He was delighted to see them and exchange news and opinions. They marveled at his smile, jokes, optimism, stamina, encyclopedic knowledge and willingness to speak the truth. Foreign journalists sought him out for this reason. He was one of the few people in Beijing willing to say publicly that the Emperor had no clothes.

How did he live so long? He did not drink or smoke, nor eat health supplements. 'Do not get angry. Be more tolerant,' he said. 'I am an optimist. Whatever difficulties you face, see the good aspect. The bad aspects will slowly pass ... My best tonic is remaining curious and continuing to learn.' He was also sustained by humility and contentment with a simple life. 'My life is very ordinary, with no special value. I am an average person ... God is too busy and has forgotten me.' When visitors praised him as "the Father of Pinyin", he would modestly answer that he was "the Son of Pinyin" or one of its main creators. 'It is the result of a long tradition from the later years

of the Qing dynasty down to today. But we restudied the problem, revisited it and made it more perfect.’

On 14 August 2002, he lost his beloved wife, at the age of 93. They had been married for 70 years. ‘At 93, we should say that death is normal. Her passing was a bolt from the blue. I had never imagined one day when we would not be together. Such a blow suffocated me, but I had no alternative but to accept the law of nature ... I thought that, since I was four years older than she, I would go sooner.’ On 22 January 2015, his son, Zhou Xiaoping, a meteorologist, died, at the age of 80.

Zhou passed away on 14 January 2017, one day after his 111th birthday. His funeral was held on January 19 at a funeral home in an eastern suburb of Beijing, attended by family members and many friends. His passing provoked an outpouring of grief. ‘You were my dear friend for decades,’ wrote Victor Mair, Professor of Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania. ‘I wish that you had gone on living forever. You will be sorely missed, but yours was a life well lived. As the “Father of Pinyin”, you have had an enormous impact on education and culture in China. After you passed the century mark, you spoke out courageously in favor of democracy and reform. Now, one day after your 111th birthday, you have departed, but you will always be in our hearts, brimming with light, as your name suggests’.

Mark O’Neill (www.mark-oneill.com) has lived in Asia since 1978. He has written 14 books on Chinese history and society. Of these, eight have editions in Chinese as well as English. He was inspired to write a biography of Zhou Youguang due to Zhou’s great contribution to humanity, in common with the subjects of O’Neill’s other biographies—his grandfather, an Irish Presbyterian missionary in Manchuria from 1897 to 1942; Sir Robert Hart, Director-General of the Imperial Maritime Customs from 1863 to 1911; and Dr Hu Shih, who was, like Zhou, one of China’s great intellectuals of the 20th century. Born in London, England, O’Neill was educated at Marlborough College and New College, Oxford and worked in Washington D.C., Manchester and Belfast before moving to Asia.

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