

In: *Proceedings of the 7th North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics (NACCL) and the 4th International Conference on Chinese Linguistics (ICCL)*. Volume 2. Edited by Tsai Fa Cheng, Yafei Li and Hongming Zhang. 1996. Los Angeles, CA: GSIL Publications, University of Southern California. Pp. 17-34.

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## SOUND SYMBOLISM AND THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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**0. INTRODUCTION.** Sound symbolism, the study of the direct relationship between the sound of an utterance and its meaning, has spawned many exciting new findings among the languages in the world. The most recent are published in a collection edited by Hinton et al. (1994a), entitled simply *Sound Symbolism*. The book needs no sub-heading, as it is a landmark collection on the subject. The research findings, together with references to earlier studies on different languages, leave no doubt in the reader's mind not only of the pervasiveness of sound symbolism across languages, but also of the significant role that sound symbolism plays in language, especially at the affective level. What is less obvious from studying the volume is to what extent sound symbolism operates in the modern Chinese language. This is because Chinese scholars have been conspicuously mute on this topic. To my knowledge, only a handful of such publications exist (e.g., T'sou 1978, 1994; LaPolla 1994 and references cited therein).<sup>1</sup>

The paucity of studies on sound symbolism in the Chinese language is due in part to the lack of a place for sound symbolism in traditional Chinese philology, and in part to the dominant view of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, as proposed by Saussure (1916). These two factors have operated in tandem to squelch any budding interest in the topic among more traditional or mainstream linguists. The present paper is an attempt to redress this. It is the author's contention that the Chinese language is extremely rich in sound

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<sup>1</sup> These are supplemented by a recent study by Chan (1995), and several other short studies conducted by graduate students at the Ohio State University. Of these, data on Shanghai from Jin (1995) and Yu (1995) are cited here. For earlier stages of the Chinese language, studies that deal with sound symbolism directly or indirectly include those by Karlgren (1934), Hu (1969), Pulleyblank (1973), and Chu (1995). Thanks go to Professor E.G. Pulleyblank for making Karlgren (1934) available to the author, and to Professor William S-Y. Wang for bringing Hu (1969) to her attention.

symbolic phenomena, and only a tantalizing taste, or whiff, of what can be discovered in the Chinese language on sound symbolism is offered in this paper.

Due to the paucity of research on sound symbolism in the Chinese language, the basis of the present study is Hinton et al.'s (1994b) introductory chapter, which outlines a typology of sound symbolism. Their typology consists of four categories, with differing degrees of sound-meaning linkage—from utterances with complete sound-meaning linkage, to language that is close to the arbitrary end of the language scale; that is, towards the end where there is presumably no direct connection between sound and meaning. The four categories are given in (1).

- (1) FOUR CATEGORIES OF SOUND SYMBOLISM
- a. Corporeal sound symbolism
  - b. Imitative sound symbolism
  - c. Synesthetic sound symbolism
  - d. Conventional sound symbolism

These categories will be discussed in turn, to explore whether and to what extent they are found in Chinese. Other related issues will also be addressed.

**1. CORPOREAL SOUND SYMBOLISM.** Corporeal sound symbolism is defined as “the use of certain sounds or intonation patterns to express the internal state of the speaker, emotional or physical (Hinton et al. 1994b:2). This category includes such involuntary, “symptomatic” sounds as coughing or hiccuping, expressive intonation, expressive voice quality, as well as interjections, sounds that are closely connected to emotional and physical states, and thus occur at the very fringes of what might be treated as sound symbolism. They are included, nonetheless, because of their relation to the biological roots of sound symbolism (and to language in general). Such sounds are often not written. For Chinese, only a few of these interjections can be found in the dictionaries. Some examples include the following utterances in (2):

- |     |    |           |           |                                   |
|-----|----|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| (2) | a. | 哎喲，真燙！    | aiyo, ... | Ouch, it's hot!                   |
|     | b. | 啊，你說甚麼？   | á...      | What did you say? (surprise)      |
|     | c. | 哼，誰信你的！   | hng, ...  | 'Humph!' (doubt)                  |
|     | d. | [ ]，是真的嗎？ | mí, ...   | 'Oh, really?' (doubt) ([ ] = ㄇ+母) |

As is common for interjections, they often do not conform to the phonological system of the language; for example, (2c-d) include syllabic nasals. A list of forty-two

interjections, with intonation contours and detailed comments, are given by Chao (1968:815-819), who further observes that in contrast to particles, interjections vary “much less, not only among the dialects but even among different languages.” Interestingly, despite making that statement, he then asserts, “but the arbitrary nature of interjections and their intonations is still the predominant factor in all interjections.” Chao has nothing to say about sound symbolism per se, and very little about onomatopoeia, the topic of the next section.

**2. IMITATIVE SOUND SYMBOLISM.** This category consists of onomatopoeic words and phrases that represent environmental sounds, not all of which are within the domain of the regular phonological system. Chinese has an abundance of onomatopoeic vocabulary. A large set consists of animal sounds, only a few of which are given in (3) as illustration. They are often reduplicated in actual usage. Polysyllabic forms can also be found, as exemplified in (4), representing bird sounds and other environmental sounds.

- |     |    |      |                  |  |
|-----|----|------|------------------|--|
| (3) | a. | 咪    | mī               | ‘meowing of a cat’                               |
|     | b. | 吱    | zī               | ‘chirping of small birds’                        |
|     | c. | 啾    | jiū              | ‘chirping of small birds or insects’             |
|     | d. | 哇    | wā               | ‘baby crying’                                    |
|     | e. | 咩    | mī/miē           | ‘bleating of a sheep or goat’                    |
|     | f. | 喵    | miāo             | ‘meowing of a cat’                               |
|     | g. | 嗡    | wēng             | ‘buzzing of bees’                                |
|     | h. | 呱    | guā              | ‘quacking of ducks, crying of frogs’             |
|     | g. | 咕    | gū               | ‘cooing of dove/pigeon/cuckoo; clucking of hens’ |
|     | h. | 噪    | zào              | ‘loud crying of birds and insects’               |
|     | i. | 嗚    | wū               | ‘noise made by baby pigs’                        |
|     |    |      |                  |  |
| (4) | a. | 吱喳   | zīzhā            | ‘chattering of birds or animals’                 |
|     | b. | 啾啾   | zhōujiū          | ‘twittering and chirping of birds’               |
|     | c. | 淅瀝   | xīlì             | ‘sound of rain or snow, or sound falling leaves’ |
|     | d. | 咕咚   | gūdōng           | ‘thud, splash’                                   |
|     | e. | 咕隆   | gūlōng           | ‘rumbling of thunder, rumble, rattle’            |
|     | f. | 咕嚕   | gūlū             | ‘rumbling of stomach, roll’                      |
|     | g. | 叮叮噹  | dīngdīngdāng     | ‘tinkling of a bell’                             |
|     | h. | 叮零噹啷 | dīnglíngdānglāng | ‘cling-clang of a bell’                          |

Thus far, all the examples are from Mandarin Chinese, which lacks checked syllables as well as syllables with voiced stop onset. Shanghai, which has both, provides an interesting case of exploiting the intrinsic pitch, amplitude and duration of segments for a three-way contrast of objects of varying sizes falling to the ground, as given in (5), from Jin (1995). In (6), based on Yu (1995), different degrees of loudness, and by extension, different degrees of politeness, in knocking on the door can also be indicated.

- (5) a. [pʊʔ luʔ tʊʔ] ‘sound of small object dropping on the ground’  
 b. [bʊʔ luʔ dʊʔ] ‘sound of bigger object dropping on the ground’  
 c. [boŋ loŋ doŋ] ‘sound of big and heavy object dropping on the ground’
- (6) a. [toʔ toʔ toʔ] ‘lightly, and politely, knocking on the door’  
 b. [toŋ toŋ toŋ] ‘knocking a bit louder on the door’  
 c. [doŋ doŋ doŋ] ‘knocking loudly (and rudely) on the door (as if kicking it)’

In addition, as noted by Jespersen (1922), echoic words can also be used to designate the being that produced the sound. Just a few examples are given in (7) of words in modern Chinese that seem to still reflect their onomatopoeic origin.

- (7) a. 貓 māo ‘cat’  
 b. 鴿 gū ‘a kind of pigeon’  
 c. 鴿 guā ‘the crow’ (老鴿)

There are probably many other names for birds and other animals that are likely to have onomatopoeic origins, but have since become obscured through sound changes. In some cases, the imitative sound origin is better revealed in some dialects though not in others. *Ya* ‘duck’ is a case in point, given in (8a), with Pulleyblank’s Early Middle Chinese (EMC) reconstruction included in parentheses. Another is *niu* ‘cow’ in (8b). (The velar nasal in Southern Min is phonetically [ŋ].)

- (8) a. 鴨 ‘duck’ Mandarin: yā  
 (EMC ʔaip) Cantonese: /a:p/  
 S. Min: /aʔ/

b.	牛	‘cow’	Mandarin:	niú
		(EMC ŋuw)	Cantonese:	/ŋau/
			S. Min:	/ŋu/

Imitative sound symbolism provides a natural basis for extending into naming, and the creation of new vocabulary items, a topic which Hinton et al. do not discuss. Related to this are names for sound categories to which the names themselves belong. In English, one finds the word ‘nasal’, for example, beginning with a nasal segment, and the same is true for some other terms such as ‘dental’, ‘liquid’, ‘voiced’, and so forth. A non-arbitrary, sound-meaning relationship is established in such cases. The same holds true for naming of many of the Chinese philological terms, including the four historical tones—Ping, Shang, Qu, and Ru—which still retains their tone category distinctions a dialect such as Cantonese (平 /p’iŋ.21/, 上 /sœŋ.24/, 去 /hœy.44/, 入 /yap.2/). In modern phonology, such terms as those given in (9) can be cited. *Yuanyin* ‘vowel’ in (9c) does not begin with a vowel per se, but the onset, nonetheless, stands in opposition to voiceless stops, which lie at the other end of the sonority hierarchy from vowels.

- (9) a. 喉音      hóuyīn      ‘guttural sounds’  
 b. 擦音      cāyīn      ‘fricative sounds’ (i.e., frication sounds)  
 c. 元音      yuányīn      ‘vowel sounds’

**3. SYNESTHETIC SOUND SYMBOLISM.** Central to the study of sound symbolism is this third category, which Hinton et al. (1994b:4) refer to as ‘synesthetic sound symbolism’. They choose the term ‘synesthetic’ because “this realm of sound symbolism can be defined as the acoustic symbolization of non-acoustic phenomena. Synesthetic sound symbolism is the process whereby certain vowels, consonants, and suprasegmentals are chosen to consistently represent visual, tactile, or proprioceptive properties of objects, such as size or shape.” Synesthesia provides the most important case in sound symbolism for the non-arbitrary connection between sound and meaning, through the metaphorical extension of onomatopoeia to sight, taste, smell, and touch.

With Hinton et al.’s focus on acoustic properties, features such as [acute], [grave], [flat], and [sharp], as well as voicing,  $F_0$ , and  $F_2$ , play a prominent role in the analysis of sound symbolism. Thus, as outlined in (10), based on Ohala (1994:340-41), it has been widely observed cross-linguistically that the concept of ‘small’ in sound symbolism is conveyed by one or more of the following acoustic properties: high tone; vowels with high  $F_2$  (that is, high front vowels, and [i] in particular); and consonants with high acoustic frequency, such as acute consonants (i.e., those that are apicals—articulated with the tip of

the tongue—and palatals), voiceless consonants, and ejectives. The concept of ‘large’, in contrast, is conveyed by one of the following acoustic properties: low tone; vowels with low  $F_2$  (that is, back vowels, and [ɑ] in particular); and consonants with low acoustic frequency, such as grave consonants (i.e., those that are labials and back velars), flat consonants (i.e., those that are labialized, retroflexed, velarized, or pharyngealized—the term ‘flat’, versus ‘sharp’ comes from music terminology), and voiced consonants.

(10) CONCEPTS ‘SMALL’ AND ‘LARGE’ IN SOUND SYMBOLISM

a. ‘SMALL’ conveyed by the use of:

- i. High tone
- ii. Vowels with high  $F_2$   
e.g., [i, ɪ, y, e]
- iii. Consonants with high acoustic frequency  
e.g., [acute]: apical and palatal C’s  
[sharp]: palatalized C’s  
voiceless C’s  
ejectives

b. ‘LARGE’ conveyed by the use of:

- i. Low tone
- ii. Vowels with low  $F_2$   
e.g., [ɑ, ɔ, u]
- iii. Consonants with low acoustic frequency  
e.g., [grave]: labials and back velars  
[flat]: labialized, retroflexed, velarized, or  
pharyngealized C’s  
voiced C’s

The dialects of Chinese, including Mandarin, generally do not exhibit an opposition between a low front [a] vowel, and a low back [A] vowel; consequently, an /i/ versus /a/ contrast for connotating smallness and largeness suffices. This universal tendency of associating /i/ with smallness and acuteness, and /a/ with large size, was first observed for Chinese by Sapir (1929) in his pioneering, experimental study of sound symbolism. LaPolla’s (1994) psycholinguistic study corroborates native Mandarin speakers’ intuition for size symbolism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Without having yet read the experimental studies cited in LaPolla’s article, I cannot comment on them at this time. It seems that Chinese linguists have only just begun to recognize sound symbolism in the language, though poets have long made use of the sound-meaning correspondence in their work.

The sound origin of size symbolism might be traced to such contrastive sets as shown in (11), with their direct onomatopoeic sources. /i/ is associated with soft, quiet sounds, and /a/ with loud sounds, the contrast stemming from their acoustic energy and amplitude.

- (11) a. 笑眯眯            xiào-mīmī        ‘smiling; with a smile on one’s face’  
          笑嘻嘻            xiào-xīxī        ‘grinning, smiling broadly’
- b. 笑哈哈            xiào-hāhā        ‘laughingly, with a laugh’

Note that although Hinton et al. do not mention visual cues, the difference in mouth aperture is also very obvious in face-to-face communication: /i/ is produced with small mouth opening, and /a/ with the mouth open wide, as one would in laughing boisterously. The use of /i/ for ‘quiet’ sounds, and the vowel /a/ for ‘loud’ sounds are further exemplified in (12) versus (13). The accompanying visual image reinforces the aural image, establishing an extension to the size-symbolic function of /i/ and /a/ in Chinese. In (12), note that the ‘quiet’ words are often accompanied by an acute consonant (dental or palatal).

- (12) Quiet:
- a. 靜                    jìng                ‘still, quiet, calm’  
b. 清靜                qīngjìng          ‘peace and quiet’  
c. 寂靜                jìjìng             ‘silence’  
d. 輕聲的            qīngshēng-de    ‘whispery’  
e. 私語/低語        sīyǔ/dīyǔ        ‘whisper’

The ‘quiet’ examples in (12) sharply contrast with the ‘loud’ examples in (13), which are accompanied by a sound-symbolic, enhancing grave consonant (retroflexed or back consonant).

- (13) Loud:
- a. 嘈                    cáo                ‘noise’  
b. 吵                    chǎo              ‘make a noise; quarrel’  
c. 響聲                xiǎngshēng      ‘noise’  
d. 噪聲                zàoshēng        ‘noise’  
e. 嘈雜                cáozá             ‘noisy’

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f.	叫喊	jiàohǎn	‘to yell’
g.	叫嚷	jiàorǎng	‘to yell’
h.	罵	mà	‘to scold’

The metaphorical extension of quiet, ‘small’ sound to small size, and of loud, noisy, ‘big’ sound to large size is a natural one, with an iconic basis that stems from our experience with the world. Consider, for example, three objects made of the same substance, differing only in size: when these three objects are dropped onto a surface from the same height, the loudest sound is created by the dropping of the largest object, and the least loud sound by the dropping of the smallest object. And if these three objects are made of metal, the highest acoustic frequency sound is clearly made by the dropping of the smallest object, and the lowest by the dropping of the largest object. Hence, our experience with the world around us tells us that, everything else being equal, the larger the size of an object, the louder is the sound it makes, and the lower is the acoustic frequency it produces. We further expect the larger the size, the heavier is the object, again, everything else being equal.

Given the above, it is not surprising that /i/—and other high front vowels with their high acoustic frequency—are not only associated with small size, but also with lightness in weight, shortness in distance (having a smaller sound), slenderness in shape, and so forth. The converse holds for the corresponding antonymous words with /a/, and other back vowels, as exemplified in the pairs in (14). Observe that *qing* ‘light in weight’ in (14a) has already appeared in (12d) for ‘light in sound’. Note further that the vowel contrast in (14a) is reinforced by a contrast in acuteness in the onset as well: *qing* has an acute onset (palatal [tɕʰ]) and *zhong* has a grave onset (retroflexed [ʈʂ]). A high tone on *qing* and a falling tone on *zhong* further heightens acute/grave contrast. In (14), both members of the antonymous pairs are marked, with association of acuteness for the first member, and gravity for the second.

(14) a.	輕	qīng	‘light (in weight)’
	重	zhòng	‘heavy’
b.	近	jìn	‘near’
	遠	yuǎn	‘far’
c.	細	xì	‘thin, slender; fine (re particles); thin, soft (voice)’
	粗	cū	‘thick, wide, coarse, rough; gruff/husky (voice)’

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- d. 低 dī 'low (in height)'  
高 gāo 'high'

A contrast can also occur with only one member marked, though the result is perhaps less salient. 'Short' and 'tall' in (15a) is a case in point. 矮 *ai* 'short' does not have a high front vowel per se; nonetheless, the word contrasts with its corresponding antonymous member, 高 *gao* 'tall', which is pronounced with all grave segments. Thus, *ai* is more acute compared to *gao*. The same reasoning also holds for the other pairs in (15).

- (15) a. 矮 ǎi 'short'  
高 gāo 'tall'
- b. 小 xiǎo 'small'  
大 dà 'big, large'
- c. 尖 jiān 'sharp (sounds)'  
團 tuán 'round, blunt (sounds)'
- d. 窄 zhǎi 'narrow'  
寬 kuān 'wide'
- e. 瘦 shòu 'thin, skinny'  
胖 pàng 'fat'
- f. 弱 ruò 'weak' (assoc. with small)  
強 qiáng 'strong' (assoc. with large)
- g. 這個 zhège 'this one (proximal)' (zhèi + CLASSIFIER)  
那個 nàge 'that one (distal)' (nà + CLASSIFIER)
- h. 快 kuài 'fast'  
慢 màn 'slow'

The last pair on the list (15h), is actually slightly different from the other pairs, even though the end-result is still the association of smallness with the first member, and largeness with the second. Both 快 *kuai* 'fast' and 慢 *man* 'slow' have the low /a/ vowel, and in fact share the same tone. Nonetheless, *kuai* is produced with a voiceless stop onset, which is associated with greater acuity as well as with more abrupt sounds; and *man* is

produced with an onset that is not only a nasal—and hence a voiced, sonorant segment—but also a grave segment (namely, a bilabial), and the syllable ends in a nasal. The greater acuteness of *kuai* and the faster tempo at which it can be uttered, can thus be associated with a faster, lighter movement; in contrast to the slower, more sluggish movement that would be associated with *man*. The quicker-slower, or staccato-legato, contrast is accomplished through the presence of multiple acoustic properties that operate in tandem to enhance the acuity-gravity contrast. As a result, in every-day utterance, to urge someone to hurry achieves the goal much more effectively if the words can be delivered more quickly. The fast tempo would reduce the duration time of an utterance such as (16a), *kuaiqu* making the imperative more urgent. In contrast, in escorting a guest out, for example, a polite host would never utter 慢走 *manzou* ‘good-bye, take care’ in a quick tempo, as it would suggest rudeness. The particular acoustic make-up of the syllables, *kuai* and *man* can thus serve to emphasize and accentuate their difference in pragmatic function.

- (16) a. 快去 kuàiqù ‘Go quickly!’  
 b. 慢走 mànzǒu ‘Good-bye, take care.’

Aside from pairs such as *kuai* and *man* ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ that do not exhibit vowel quality differences, there are, of course, antonymous pairs that are more exceptional, such as the pair in (17a), *ruì* and *dùn*. However, one wonders if compounds such as (17b-c) may not have been formed in part (or precisely) to neutralize, so to speak, the gravity of *ru* by including a member with acute segments (*jian* contains all acute segments phonetically, as is true for *li*).

- (17) a. 銳 ruì ‘sharp, keen, acute’  
 鈍 dùn ‘dull, blunt’  
 b. 尖銳 jiānrui ‘pointed and sharp, sharp, acute’  
 c. 銳利 ruìlì ‘sharp, keen’

To illustrate the above point further, consider another sound-symbolic contrast, namely, a light-dark contrast with /i/ versus /u/, which is fairly widespread across languages. That the high back vowel, /u/, with the acoustic feature [flat] for rounding, connotes darkness (cf. English ‘gloom, doom’) can also be observed in Chinese, as shown in 烏 *wu* ‘crow, raven; black color’ in (18a), together with the syllable in some compounds.

- (18) a. 烏 wū ‘crow, raven; black color’  
 b. 烏黑 wūhēi ‘pitch-black, jet-black’  
 c. 烏雲 wūyún ‘black/dark clouds’  
 d. 烏亮 wūliàng ‘glossy-black, jet-black’  
 e. 烏木 wūmù ‘ebony (wood)’

Chinese clearly like to use 烏 *wu* for ‘black’ even though there exists the word, 黑 *hei* for ‘black’. Notice, however, that between syllables *wu* and *hei*, the syllable *wu* has more grave properties. Thus, it is interesting that one way to enhance the gravity of *hei* (19a) is to string it together with syllables that have more [grave] and [flat] properties, as in (19b) and (19c), or in (18b) above, *wuhei*. (19c) is from Schlepp (1970:73) in his discussion of *sanqu*. His statement is worth quoting: “Meaningless syllables of different sounds were used occasionally in *san-ch’u*, creating effects similar to *tieh-tzu*. In the spoken language during Yuan there were certain curious expression, like the modern expression 黑咕籠冬的 (*hei-gulongdong-de*), meaning simply 黑 ‘black’.” The effect, with versus without the additional nonsensical syllables, is very different. The phrase in (19c), containing numerous grave and flat segments, is more expressive, more colorful, than the simple, denotative word, *hei* 黑 ‘black’.

- (19) a. 黑 hēi ‘black’  
 b. 黑糊糊 hēi-huhu ‘black, blackened’  
 c. 黑咕籠冬的 hēi-gulongdong-de ‘black’

With respect to *hei* 黑 ‘black’, dialects may also differ in their preference for what enhancing segments to use with it. Cantonese, for example, seems to like /ma/ and /ma:ŋ/, as illustrated in (20) (from T’sou 1978 and Fung 1995). Note that /m/, /a/, and /N/ are all [grave] segments.

- (20) a. 黑墨墨 /hak ma ma/ ‘black’  
 b. 黑盲盲 /hak ma:ŋ ma:ŋ / ‘black’

Aside from the gravity of /m/, there may be additional reasons for selecting that segment. The association of the /m/ onset in words for ‘cover’, ‘dark’, and ‘blind’ (noted by Pulleyblank 1973) can readily be found in the Chinese language. A sample of such words is given in (21). In (21e), note also the use of the low acoustic frequency of the grave segment for extending the meaning to ‘mournful, sorrowful’.

- (21) a. 盲 máng ‘blind; deluded’  
b. 冒 mào ‘to go forward with eyes covered; to cover’  
c. 默 mò ‘dark, secret; silent’  
d. 昧 mèi ‘obscure, dark’  
e. 悶 mèn ‘to cover; mournful, sorrowful’  
f. 蒙 méng ‘to cover; to conceal’  
g. 眯 mǐ ‘blind, as with dust’  
h. 冥 míng ‘dark, obscure’ (冥 mìng ‘night’)

At this point, recall that Hinton et al. only discuss acoustic properties. Articulatory properties should also be taken into consideration, particularly in cases of sound production that is visible to the human eye—such as mouth aperture—and can serve to reinforce the acoustic properties pertinent to sound symbolism. An interesting case can be cited here, extending beyond the five senses to attitudinal properties. In his sociolinguistic study, Hu’s (1991) observes that school girls in Beijing possess what he dubs a ‘feminine accent’ (女國音); that is, these girls produce the palatal series ([tɕ, tɕ’, ɕ]) as dental sibilants ([ts, ts’, s]), or as more fronted palatals ([tɕ, tɕ’, ɕ]). Hu offers the following explanation: “Fronted palatals and dentals sound more ‘fragile’ and ‘piercing’ to Chinese ears, and so more ‘feminine’, while alveolars tend to be more ‘blunt’ and ‘masculine’” (p.51). The adoption of the more fronted articulation of palatals is thus the desire to sound more feminine. Hu also remarks on another social factor at work, namely, “the requirement for girls and young women to display good manners by avoiding laughing and talking with their mouths wide open.” (p.53). That is, girls need to be more lady-like. Thus, a more demure, delicate, and feminine form of articulation of the palatal series is adopted, by using smaller mouth opening and more fronted articulation, yielding sounds with higher acoustic frequency that is highly marked for femaleness.

(22) Feminine Accent (女國音)

Palatal series ([tɕ, tɕ’, ɕ]) is produced as dental sibilants ([ts, ts’, s]), or as more fronted palatals in Beijing Mandarin school girls’ speech.

Perhaps a similar masculine/feminine coding is at work in the production of the affricates in Cantonese. It has been noted that male speakers tend to palatalize [ts] and [ts’] more than female speakers (Hashimoto 1972:120, citing another scholar’s observation). The palatalized forms would have comparatively lower acoustic frequency and would hence be more masculine-sounding.

Another gender-marked case can also be cited from Beijing Mandarin, namely, the more prevalent use of [ʋ], the labiodental variant of the labial approximant, /w/. As reported in Shen (1987), it is noteworthy that the labiodental variant is used significantly more frequently by female speakers than by male speakers. The labiodental approximant [ʋ] is produced with spread lips, and the teeth and lower lip are closer together in producing it. In contrast, the plain labial approximant, [w], is produced with lip-rounding and lip protrusion, and hence a [flat] segment. Low acoustic frequency occurs with [w], and relatively higher with [ʋ]. As a result, the production of [ʋ] could be perceived as more feminine.

(23) /w/ with two variants in Beijing Mandarin

[w]: lip-rounding, lip protrusion  
flat segment (low acoustic frequency)

[ʋ]: spread lips, no lip protrusion, lip and teeth closer together  
non-flat segment (higher acoustic frequency)

The above sociolinguistic observations suggest subconscious awareness of speakers to various sound-symbolic phenomena that are played back in the social setting. There are many other issues under this section that cannot be discussed due to space constraints. The sound-symbolic role of reduplication, tone contrasts, vowel lengthening, voicing contrasts, and so forth, have not been explored here, but must await future investigation. The above, nonetheless, provides a glimpse into the full extent that synesthetic sound symbolism plays in the Chinese language.

**4. CONVENTIONAL SOUND SYMBOLISM.** Conventional sound symbolism refers to “the analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meanings: e.g., the ‘gl’ of glitter, glow, glisten, glimmer, etc. in English. Hinton et al. emphasize the arbitrariness and conventionality of this category; that is, they view this category as being close to the arbitrary end of the language scale. The choice of the term, ‘conventional’, for this category, is somewhat unfortunate, because ‘conventional’ has two senses, the more general one referring to a rule, method, or practice that is established by usage and custom, and the more restricted sense that includes arbitrary determination. In the more general sense, conventional may or may not involve arbitrariness, whereas the more restricted sense treats conventions as arbitrarily determined. A more neutral term for this category might perhaps be ‘local sound symbolism,’ or ‘restricted sound symbolism,’ as this category involves phenomena that is relatively more language-specific, whereas

synesthetic sound symbolism reflects more universal tendencies. The example of ‘gl’ in English to connote brightness is obviously not available for languages that lack consonant clusters. A Chinese counterpart might be the use of /m/ for conveying ‘dark, cover, blind’, discussed earlier in (21). Observe, however, that although the selection of the segment /m/, per se, for conveying ‘dark, cover, blind’ might be language-specific, the selection of a *labial* (i.e., [grave]) segment, is motivated, and is by no means arbitrary. Moreover, one can argue for an iconic basis for the selection of /m/: it has a relatively long duration of lip closure, during which time the oral cavity is thrown into total darkness. One would, therefore, expect some other languages in the world to use /m/ (or a labial consonant, more generally), for conveying one or more of the concepts of ‘dark’, ‘cover’, and ‘blind’.

The same might also be said of the iconic use of labialized consonants for conveying the concept ‘round’ in Chinese. Presented in (24) is a group of words from different word classes pertaining to the concepts of ‘round’. One might note that the concept of ‘roundness’ further extends to those of curvature, oval shape, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

- (24) a. Circle, ring:
- |      |    |          |                 |
|------|----|----------|-----------------|
| i.   | 圓  | yuán     |                 |
| ii.  | 圈  | quān     |                 |
| iii. | 圓圈 | yuánquān |                 |
| iv.  | 圓周 | yuánzhōu | ‘circumference’ |
- b. Sphere, ball:
- |    |   |      |   |
|----|---|------|---|
| i. | 團 | tuán | (團/搏 tuán ‘to roll (s.t.) into a ball’) |
|----|---|------|---|
- c. Cylindrical mass, roll:
- |    |   |      |   |
|----|---|------|---|
| i. | 卷 | juǎn | (Also: ‘to roll (s.t.) up into a roll’) |
|----|---|------|---|
- d. Round, circular, annular, spherical:
- |      |     |             |                                       |
|------|-----|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| i.   | 團   | tuán        | ‘round, circular’                     |
| ii.  | 環形  | huánxíng    | ‘annular, ring-like’                  |
|      |     |             | (環 ‘ring, hoop; encircle’)            |
| iii. | 團圓的 | tuánluán-de | ‘(to describe roundness of the moon)’ |
- e. Ellipse:
- |    |    |         |  |
|----|----|---------|--|
| i. | 橢圓 | tuǒyuán |  |
|----|----|---------|--|

<sup>3</sup> Pulleyblank (1973) also contains a short discussion on this topic.

- f. To circle:
- i. 環繞 huánrǎo
  - ii. 環行 huánxíng
  - iii. 圍 wéi
  - iv. 繞圈 rǎoquān
  - v. 旋轉 xuánzhuàn
  - i. 團團轉 tuántuán-zhuàn ‘to turn round and round’
  - j. 旋 xuán ‘to revolve, spin, circle (return, come back)’

The association of labialization with ‘roundness’ is then further underscored by the absence of labialization in words that do not convey the concept, ‘round’. This is shown in the words for ‘line’, ‘square’, and ‘cube’ in (25).

- (25) a. 線 xiàn ‘line’  
b. 方 fāng ‘square’  
c. 立方 lǐfāng ‘cube’

Given the propensity for the natural association between labialization and ‘roundness’, one would predict that names of round objects that have a labialized onset would be processed faster, and retained longer in memory, than names of objects lacking labialization.

The examples above suggest a clear tendency for the concept ‘round’ to be conveyed using lip-rounding at syllable onset in the Chinese language. Note that in English, the pronunciation of /r/ also involves lip-rounding. Relevant to the discussion, are such words in English as ‘round, roll’, which involves lip-rounding. Labialized consonants in Chinese and /r/ in English share in common the acoustic feature, [flat]. Hence, the natural association of lip-rounding with the concept ‘round’ is not limited to Chinese. However, it is unclear at this time the extent to which the association of ‘roundness’ with lip-rounding is cross-linguistic, and can hence be viewed as a universal tendency. Further cross-linguistic research is needed. Within the Chinese language, the natural association can be extended to other words to form a word family à la Karlgren and Pulleyblank.

Hinton et al.’s category of ‘conventional sound symbolism’ also subsumes the creation of names for commercial products. A separate category would have been more appropriate, given that entire syllables, rather than subsyllabic components are involved. In any event, with respect to Chinese, the selection of particular morphemes to represent often meaningless syllables in a foreign language is instructive in not treating this category as

involving fairly arbitrary decision-making. Because of the nature of the Chinese language—where almost every morpheme has a meaning—a meaningless combination of syllables in a foreign language can be rendered into Chinese imbued with meaning. Consider, for example, the transliteration of some English words in (26). (26c) is only used in Cantonese.

(26) a.	vitamin	維他命	wéitāmìng (preserve + he/other + life)
b.	tank	坦克	tǎnkè (level/unrestrained + conquer)
c.	park (cars)	泊	bó (Cantonese: /p'a:k/) (to anchor)
d.	romantic	浪漫	làngmàn (wave/unrestrained + overflow)
e.	mini-skirt	迷你裙	mínǐ-qún (infatuate + you + skirt)

Examples of transliterations of brand names, including one place name, are given in (27). ((27d) 愛白牙 was an example many years ago from the author's father when he was living in Hong Kong during the 1950's. (27e) 必勝客 is also from Hong Kong.

(27) a.	Coca Cola	可口可樂	kěkǒu kělè (suit + mouth suit + joy)
b.	Ford	福特	fútè (lucky + special)
c.	Sunkist	香吉士	xiāngjíshì (fragrant + lucky + scholar)
d.	Ipana (toothpaste)	愛白牙	àibáiyá (Cantonese: /oi pa:k Na/) (love + white + teeth)
e.	Pizza Hut	必勝客	bìshèngkè (Cantonese: /pit siN ha:k/ (necessarily + success + guest)

The above suggests that one can be very clever in exploiting the nature of the Chinese script to impose meaning into the transliterations. Of course, for precisely the same reason, loan translations are often preferred in Chinese to avoid imbuing meaning that

can lead to misunderstanding. For the Chinese language, at least, the choice of the graphs for transliteration is often far from arbitrary or merely ‘conventional’.

**5. CONCLUSION.** The Chinese language flourishes in sound symbolism at every juncture of the scale in the typology of sound symbolism proposed by Hinton et al. The current study serves only as a preliminary investigation into this topic.

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