The Vernacular Language Movement, which fostered a radical change in the writing style of Chinese composition, developed from century-long usage of a northern dialect in literature and gained momentum during the student and intellectual-led New Culture Movement (1917–1923). It won nationwide acceptance in the 1920s and has made a lasting impact on education, communication, and literary research.

The Vernacular Language Movement began with efforts of the radical wing of the educated elite in the early twentieth century. The efforts to replace classical Chinese (wényán) with spoken language (báihuà) in nearly all written works were stimulated by a sense of national crisis in the late nineteenth century. After sporadic, short-lived attempts at the turn of the twentieth century, the movement acquired momentum in the mid-1910s when using the vernacular in writing became a major agenda in the New Culture Movement (1917–1923), a period of student and intellectual protests. By the early 1920s vernacular in written Chinese finally gained nationwide acceptance as a reputable style in prose, poetry, and fiction and was officially designated the style for school textbooks.

The vernacular that became a national language in the 1920s was originally a northern dialect, spoken with varied local accents by people living in areas north of the Huai River. It acquired broader usage within officialdom, hence the name “Mandarin” (guānhuà). National mobility in warfare, social advancement, and economic activities had contributed to wider usage of Mandarin Chinese since the Song dynasty (960–1279). Fiction, which came to maturity during the Song dynasty and drew inspirations from Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) bianwen (stories of Buddha and his disciples written in vernacular) and Tang chuānqí (short stories, or romance), as well as storytelling and stage performance, were written in Mandarin Chinese. By the end of the nineteenth century, fiction written in the vernacular and often intended for social criticism had national circulation. Although it was a noticeable force in literature, the vernacular remained heterodox because wényán Chinese received institutional support as the normative style in the official Civil Service Examinations.

Several forces converged to propel the Vernacular Language Movement at the turn of the twentieth century. First among these, ironically, was awareness among the literati that wényán Chinese restrained China’s progress. Wu Rulun (1840–1903), a leading member of the Tongcheng School known for its elegant style in wényán prose, was among the first who viewed wényán as contributing to China’s backwardness in comparison with the West. He considered a standardized form of Mandarin Chinese to be necessary for providing mass education. Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), a diplomat to Japan and an activist in political reforms, advocated the vernacular and experimented in using it to compose poetry in classical form.

Awareness of the need for a national language in the
vernacular was sustained by the growing forces of nationalism and modern mass media at the turn of the twentieth century. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), the energetic political reformer and journalist, had a lasting impact on the generations after him through his promotion of “new fictions” as a means to enlightenment and national strength. Liang also wrote fiction and poetry in the vernacular that were read by many. His passionate appeal and innovative experiments inspired further attempts. Magazines that published “new fictions” written in spoken language—as well as newspapers such as Chinese Vernacular Newspaper, Hangzhou Vernacular Newspaper, Newspaper of Anhui Dialect, Anhui Vernacular Newspaper, Ningbo Vernacular Newspaper, Chaozhou Vernacular Newspaper, and Citizens’ Vernacular Daily—appeared in cities along the southeast coast. These publications, however, did not last long.

In 1905 wenyan Chinese lost its institutional ground when the Civil Service Examinations were abolished. The reform in education gave rise to a new generation of Chinese leaders whose education in Western-style schools in China or in the West gained social legitimacy. The most vocal advocates for the vernacular then were those who were well versed in both Chinese and Western traditions. Thus, it was not accidental that the most passionate discussion of language reform first took place among Chinese students abroad, who led the Vernacular Language Movement in the 1910s.

Language Reform

Between 1915 and 1917 a small group of Chinese students pursuing graduate degrees at Cornell, Columbia, and Harvard universities engaged in an informal but serious discussion of Chinese language reform. They all supported the ongoing New Culture Movement and saw language reform as necessary for a revolution in literature. Yet, some vehemently opposed introducing the vernacular into poetry. Ren Hongjun (1886–1961) and Mei Guangdi (1890–1945) held the deepest doubt about the feasibility of the vernacular in poetry, which they viewed as ill-matched for rhythm and elegance, the key elements in the form. Hu Shi (1891–1962), however, was determined to bring the vernacular into all forms of Chinese literature and composed verses in the vernacular as a means of debate with his friends. In 1917 he published an article entitled “A Preliminary Discussion on Literature Reform” in the New Youth, a magazine founded by Chen Duxiu, another advocate for literature in the vernacular.

The debate about literature in the vernacular instantly became a focus of the New Culture Movement, which

These members of the New Culture Movement advocated literature written in the vernacular language of the masses. Clockwise from left: Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, and Li Dazhao.
made *New Youth* its major forum. Qian Xuantong and Liu Bannong, two professors at Beijing University and major leaders in the New Culture Movement, engaged in a mock debate to promote vernacular literature. It caught national attention and became a memorable episode in the movement. In 1918 the Vernacular Language Movement established yet another landmark in publishing "A Madman’s Diary" by Lu Xun in *New Youth*. Other proponents, such as Zhou Zuoren, Liu Bannong, and Sheng Yinmo, also composed and published works in prose or poetry in the vernacular. By the end of the 1910s using the vernacular in written Chinese had gained acceptance beyond a small group of advocates and became a national phenomenon.

In the final phase of the vernacular’s rise, defenders of classical Chinese fought three rounds of battle before giving up. The first battle, ironically, came from Lin Shu and Yan Fu, who would otherwise be viewed as pioneers in modern Chinese literature and harbingers of the New Culture Movement through the influence of their translated works from Western literature and thought. Between 1917 and 1919 Lin Shu took a public stand against the vernacular by publishing three articles and two short stories. He attacked the Vernacular Language Movement by insinuating, through his fictional characters, that Chen, Hu, and Cai Yuanpei, their supporter and chancellor of Beijing University, were three “demons.” Yan Fu viewed Lin’s attack as “laughable” and refrained from making public statements. But Yan did express his disdain for the advocates of the vernacular as “spring birds and autumn insects” that would go away with the season. The second battle came from some scholars gathered around *Xueheng* magazine, who were mostly U.S.-educated scholars, while some, such as Ren Hongjun and Mei Guangdi, were friends of Hu Shi. The most active opponent of the vernacular among this group was Hu Xiansu (1893–1968), who wrote articles in debate with Hu Shi. Interestingly, the *Xueheng* group did not oppose a revolution in literature but warned against the radical tendency to abandon classical literature, a significant part of Chinese cultural heritage they cherished. The final attack came from Zhang Shizhao through the *Tiger Weekly* in 1925. By then the vernacular had been a “national language” for four years, since elementary school textbooks had been written in the vernacular in accord with an order from the Ministry of Education in 1920.

## Mass Communication

The Vernacular Language Movement succeeded in incorporating the language of the masses into written works yet remained a movement of the elite. Its long-term impact can be found in education, in national communication, in writing style, and in research on Chinese literature. Using the vernacular in textbooks made education more accessible to ordinary people. The vernacular further developed and reinforced the historical practice of using Mandarin Chinese as the national language of communication. As the strict rules of composition in classical Chinese were abandoned when written Chinese took the form of the vernacular, it opened the way to importing more foreign (Japanese and Western) elements into the Chinese lexicon, grammar, and composition. In 1927 Hu Shi published *A History of Vernacular Literature*. The work provided the Vernacular Language Movement with historical justification in the Chinese context and encouraged further studies of Chinese vernacular literature in the premodern period.

**LU Yan**

## Further Reading


Hu Shi. (1923). Wushi nian lai Zhongguo zhi wenxue [Chinese literature in the past fifty years]. In *Shenbao Guan, Shenbao wushi zhounian jiniance* [A volume in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Shenbao]. Shanghai: Shenbao.


© 2009 by Berkshire Publishing Group LLC