INTRODUCTION TO A SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME TO A DICTIONARY OF THE CHINESE PARTICLES

1.1. Purpose and aim

In this Supplementary Volume to A Dictionary of the Chinese Particles (henceforth abbreviated as the Dictionary and the Supplement), the grammatical usages of the post-classical era, from the 3rd century A.D. to the 8th century A.D. (the Six Dynasties period), are treated. The Dictionary itself (following the Chinese convention of particle lexicons) treated comprehensively only Classical and Han usage. Where Six Dynasties examples were given, they were (with some exceptions) further examples of usages already current in Han times. The exceptions (i.e. of usages peculiar to the Six Dynasties period) were drawn from such sources as the Hou Han Shu, the San Kuo Chib, the Shib Shuo Hsin Yü, the Shui Ching Chu, etc., it being noted that «Six Dynasties writers not only borrow from Classical precedents, sometimes in ways differing from those of Han writers, but also introduce features of current usage».

It is the purpose of this supplementary volume to treat these innovations of usage more comprehensively by drawing upon a far wider range of sources and by treating the language of the Six Dynasties period not as a homogeneous whole but as it develops.

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2 This is the draft of the Introduction prepared for A Supplementary Volume to his famous A Dictionary of the Chinese Particles on which W.A.C.H. Dobson was working before his death. This draft was completed by Dobson in November 1981, i.e. a few months before dying. As the Supplementary Volume has never been concluded, this Introduction has never been published. Considering the importance of the study, brought to our attention by Prof. M. Scarpa from the University of Venice, we have thought it deserving of a wider specialist audience and thus present it here. We would like to thank Dobson’s son, Iain St. C. Dobson, for granting us permission to publish it.

period by period. As will be shown, considerable changes occur in
the language particularly in the later centuries of the Six Dynasties
and these constitute an important chapter in the history and evolu-
tion of the Chinese language.

1.2. The material

A significant portion of surviving Six Dynasties literature consists
of the dynastic histories, of which no less than ten were written in
the period. Of a quite different kind is the important body of belles
lettres, poetry and essays and the like, of which the Works of such
important poets as Ts’ao Chih, Pao Chao, T’ao Ch’ien, etc. are
represented. Of a more mundane character, though very important
from a linguistic point of view, is the secular literature represented
by such works as the Chi Min Yao shu – practical handbooks whose
purpose is to instruct, written with few pretensions to «literary» and
«classical» style, but a precious source of current usage. Finally,
introducing the possibility of borrowing from non-Sinitic languages,
is the corpus of translations from Indic languages particularly from
Buddhist sources, where unique usages occur some of which become
domesticated in the language later.

1.3. The linguistic nature of the material

Despite its rich variety of style and subject matter, the material as
a whole shares certain grammatical features in common. An innova-
tion of grammatical usage, once established, tends to occur in all
genres of its period. While each genre has its own conventions and
characteristics, these are not such as to materially alter an overall
view of the development of the language, particularly in regard to
grammatical usage. Each genre reflects, in a general way, the progres-
sion in grammatical innovation, as this develops period by period.

The body of material treated in the Dictionary became «classical»
in the Six Dynasties period. This is reflected in the Six Dynasties
material, particularly in those genres which resort to «archaizing».
There are very few (if any) Archaic and Han usages which do not
occur somewhere, as a result of citation, allusion or deliberate
archaizing in the material. To include, in this Supplement, examples
of such usage would simply be to reiterate what has already been
treated in the Dictionary. For example, the dynastic histories, record
edicts, proclamations, memorials to the throne, etc., written in imita-
tion of Shu Ching models. This «chancery style» is replete with archaisms, formulaic phrases and the like as a result. Poets write «imitations» (tat) of Shih Ching poems, and use Shih Ching grammatical terms, not found in their less derivative pieces. Many allusions in the poetry of the period derive from classical poetry and retain the grammatical features of the original. This resort to archaistic forms is disregarded in this Supplement, since such archaisms have already been treated in the Dictionary in their original form and the source from which they are taken.

There is however a caveat to be entered here. Archaisms may occur in ways that do not accurately reflect Archaic Chinese usage. Though archaisms in general have been disregarded in the Supplement, note has occasionally been made of such «blunted usage».

It might be thought that in material so varied, regional differences («dialect») or hieratic and demotic forms (for example «chancery style» documents and «colloquial» literature) would introduce a complication so formidable as to render general statements about Six Dynasties usage valueless. In so far as the grammatical particles are concerned this does not prove to be the case. Innovation in the use or deployment of a particle or a syntactical form once established, is likely to occur in all genres of its period. It may be surprising, but nevertheless proves to be the case that with the exception of regional differences in the use of the personal pronouns, no innovation of usage of an existing particle, or the occurrence of a new grammatical coinage can be attributed exclusively to «colloquial» or «literary» sources or the language of a particular region.

That regional differences exist is attested in the material itself. But where comment upon it is made, it has to do with differences in vocabulary (e.g. «easterners say X for Y») or in phonology (e.g. where instances are given of speakers from different regions having difficulty in mutual comprehension). Phonological differences, however, because of the peculiar nature of the script, are not apparent in writing. Certain documents (e.g. Shih Shuo Hsin Yü) are traditionally thought to be «colloquial». However, purely in terms of grammatical

2 In the Dictionary, by contrast, the earlier pieces of the Ch'u Tz'u have grammatical particles peculiar to them, which do not occur elsewhere in Late Archaic material. The syntax of proper names and titles in the state of Ch'u differs from that of other regions (see my Late Archaic Chinese, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1959, 2.6.5.2., footnote 12). Despite the variety of provenance of Six Dynasties material, no similar unequivocal regional differences are discernible as far as grammatical usage is concerned.
usage, it is difficult to find particles or forms which are confined exclusively to such colloquial works.

What can be asserted with confidence, however, is that innovations of grammatical forms and usages, are pre-eminently a feature of the historical development of the language generally reflected in all its genres, and are not characteristics of regional or hierarchical peculiarities, whatever else these peculiarities may be. In treating the grammar of the language of the Six Dynasties, therefore, emphasis has been laid on the period of change and innovation, since such change is not exclusively the characteristic of any one genre but a feature of the period.

1.4. Periodization of the material

The pace of linguistic change during the Six Dynasties period is so marked as to necessitate a periodization far more precise than the genetic «Six Dynasties usage», hitherto employed in the Dictionary. A practical way of dealing with this is to classify usage by century. Innovation in syntax, in the occurrence of new grammatical categories, changes in the usage of extant particles and the occurrence of new particles, occur in an evolutionary progression. Change is particularly marked in the 5th and 6th centuries. Accordingly the material has been classified by the century of its provenance. The works analysed and their attribution to a period are as follows:

3rd century: San Kuo Chih, Wei Shu, Wu Shu, Wei Lüeh (? Han Buddhist Texts indicated by Zürcher)¹.
The Works of Ts’ao Chih, Chang Hsieh, Juan Chi, Ts’ai P’i, Pao P’u.

4th century: Hua Yang Kuo Chih.
The Works of Kuo P’o, Tso Szu, Lu Chi, Ko Hung.

5th century: Hou Han Shu, Shib Shuo Hsin Yü, San Kuo Chib Chu, Ch’i Min Yao Shu.
The Works of T’ao Ch’ien, Hsieh Ling-yun, Pao Chao, Hsieh Kuang.

6th century: Sung Shu, Yen Shib Chia Hsün, Yü T’ai Hsin Yung, Kao Seng Chuan, Nan Ch’i Shu ².

² The above list of genres is incomplete.
7th century: Pei Ch'i Shu, Ch'en Shu, Liang Shu, Chou Shu.

1.5. The Six Dynasties and linguistic change

In the Dictionary, 694 particles were treated. In this Supplement a further 350 are added. The Dictionary covered the period from the 11th century B.C. to approximately the 3rd century A.D. The Supplement covers the period from 4th to 8th centuries A.D. This disproportionate increase is largely to be accounted for by what I have elsewhere described as the revolution in enumeration and quantification in the Chinese language.

The corpus of enumerating auxiliaries increases from five in the Archaic period to some 300 in the Six Dynasties. In addition, a new form of enumeration occurs in the enumeration of the verb, where some 15 particles have the class meaning of «a time or turn». This proliferation takes place in the 5th and 6th centuries. Concurrently, the syntax of enumeration passes from the Archaic «noun/numeral/auxiliary» to «numeral/auxiliary/noun» (for example, ma i p'i > i p'i ma, «one horse») and from the Archaic «numeral/verb» to «verb/numeral/auxiliary». Both changes foreshadowing forms familiar in Modern Standard Chinese.

Two further innovations which have perceptible affinities with Modern Standard Chinese. Both have to do with developments in the verbal complex. The first is the occurrence of the direct object before the verb, marked with a particle in order to indicate this phenomenon, anticipating the use of pa in Modern Standard Chinese in similar circumstances. The second is the addition to verbs of motion of an auxiliary verb indicating the direction of the action of the main verb as seen by the speaker. The action may be seen as coming toward or away from the speaker, down to, or up, from the speaker. This, too, is a familiar feature of Modern Standard Chinese.

Though compiled in T'ang times, these histories are based on Six Dynasties' material.


In such works, for example, as Shui Hu Chuan, as the narrator shifts his point of narration, the auxiliary verbs themselves indicate this shift. Thus, in describing an incident in which a hill is climbed, if the point of narration is from the valley below, the verbs will indicate it. They will be, for example, «climbing away from» (cb'u), but when the narrator shifts his viewpoint to the top of the hill they will be «climbing towards» (lai). This «directional aspect» occurs first in the Six Dynasties period.