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WESTERN POWERS IN CHINA BETWEEN 1920 AND 1930: FOCUS ON THE MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF THE SHANGHAI MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

1. Introduction

The 1920s were a pivotal decade in the modern history of China and particularly of Shanghai, which steadily increased its power on the international arena, from politics through finance to communication.¹ Shanghai gradually became the focal point of many activities that would eventually shape modern China; indeed, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation building was constructed in 1923, the *North China Daily News* building was set up in 1924, while in 1927 the Customs House was founded, and in 1929 the Shanghai Stock Exchange was opened. Such privileged role was also due to the fact that the city held a special status since, unlike other Chinese territories, its Municipality witnessed the presence of foreigners as rulers but not as owners of the land. This led to a situation where foreigners and locals coexisted with their own cultures and styles, first as separate—though interdependent—communities, then more and more intermingled.

It is against this socio-historical background that we need to view the Municipality of Shanghai between 1920 and 1930, whose Council's Minutes of Meetings (henceforth MoMs) are analyzed in the present paper. MoMs are a text type which has long been ignored by scholarly research, at least from the linguistic point of view, possibly due to its 'hybrid' status that places it halfway between legal documents and (press) reports. Bearing this in mind, the present study has a twofold aim; in the first place, by focussing on Shanghai MoMs from the early 20th century, we will delve into the evolution of the Western (largely British) management of municipal affairs on Chinese territory, paying special attention to the relations between such Western powers and local Chinese citizens at the time. Secondly, we will shed more light on MoMs as a textual type, with special reference to their structural and linguistic distinctiveness.

Hence, the present study intends to place itself at the crossroads between linguistic analysis, on the one hand, and socio-historical research on the other, viewing both as two sides of the same coin, under the conviction that historical-linguistic research cannot do without an adequate socio-historical contextualization, especially when intercultural aspects come into place, and that the study of historical documents for linguistic purposes can—and needs to—be of help to other disciplines like History and Sociology, but also International Relations and Public Diplomacy, in a fruitful interdisciplinary way.

Bearing in mind the twofold aim of this paper, we will first overview the Shanghai International Settlement and its Municipal Council at the time under scrutiny (Section 2); we will then illustrate the corpus that was exploited for this study and its linguistic analysis (Section 3), which will include the detection of possible structural changes that may have occurred over the last century to MoMs as a textual type (Section 4).

2. The Municipal Council of Shanghai International Settlement

Shanghai was occupied by the British forces in 1841 and became a British settlement in 1842, following the Treaty of Nanjing² which, along with other successive treaties, allowed foreign merchants to trade with anyone they wished on Chinese soil. The American Concession, opened in Shanghai in 1848, later merged with the British one to form the Shanghai International Settlement, while the *Concession française de*

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¹ An in-depth analysis of China's situation in the first half of the 20th century can be found in Buckley Ebrey (2010, 262-301), while thought-provoking overviews of Shanghai in the same period of time are provided by Wen-Hsin (2007), Xiaobing (2016) and Zhang (2015), among others.

² The Treaty of Nanjing, ending the First Opium War (1839-42) between the United Kingdom and the Qing dynasty of China, was signed on 29 August 1842.



Changhai, opened in 1849, kept its separate status. In turn, the Chinese retained control over the original walled city and of the area surrounding the foreign enclaves.

Shanghai was unique within the Chinese environment; indeed, the *1854 Shanghai Land Regulations* allowed Chinese citizens to rent/own real estate within the Shanghai International Settlement; moreover, due to internal conflicts and wars – including the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, along with the Second Sino-Japanese War – Chinese refugees started flocking to the Shanghai International Settlement.³ The rapid economic development of the Settlement attracted a large number of residents from other provinces and even overseas Chinese relocated there.

The *1854 Shanghai Land Regulations* can be considered the legitimate foundation for the Municipal Council. Its first edition—*1845 Shanghai Land Regulations*—was only applied to the British Settlement, clarifying and expanding its jurisdiction (Lian, 2010). In the following years, conflicts between British and American settlers intensified; hence, the *1854 Shanghai Land Regulations* was announced; as a result, the British consular body published a statement regarding the necessity of establishing a municipality, which was the origin of Shanghai Municipal Council, administrating all British, American and French settlements at Shanghai (Ye, 2015).

In the wake of the rapidly growing Chinese population in the Shanghai International Settlement, rights and interests of Chinese residents became a serious issue, which ignited a movement for Chinese political rights in the Settlement and Chinese representation in the Council. Undoubtedly, relations between rulers and locals took decades to smooth down; indeed, when in 1863 the Council was set up, it was composed only of elected representatives of the qualified foreign ratepayers. By the late 1860s the British Consul was the *de jure* authority in the Settlement, which was still wholly foreign-controlled in the early 1920s, the British holding the largest number of seats, followed by American and other foreign representatives.⁴ For decades no Chinese citizen was permitted to join the Council; however, the issue of Chinese representation became more and more topical, as confirmed by the frequent exchange of strong, opposing views between the Council (against any Chinese representativity) and the Diplomatic Consul (in favour), as shown in (1) and (2), drawn from our corpus, where members of the Council are outraged at the initiative taken by the Consul of writing a letter to the Foreign Affairs in Britain suggesting the appointment of two Chinese members in the Council:

- (1) The position of the Chinese in the Settlement is not unlike that of Guests in a Hotel; so long as they pay their bills they are welcome, even suggestions are welcome, but they cannot be permitted to run the Hotel. (January 2, 1920)
- (2) Mr Wilkinson protests at the act of the Consular Body in dealing with a matter such as this behind the backs of the Council. (January 6, 1920)

The situation gradually changed through the years, also under the increasing pressure on both the Council and the British government by the diplomatic body, on the one hand, and of Chinese citizens who made their voice more and more heard, on the other. The data from our corpus clearly show that the Chinese were increasingly allowed to contribute to the running of the Municipality. Finally, in 1928 the Chinese were admitted to the Council and, by 1930, a more inclusive attitude to the Chinese community was in place; on May 14, 1930, new Chinese members were even given a “hearty welcome” as new members (3):

- (3) On behalf of his foreign colleagues the Chairman extends a heartywelcome (*sic*) to the Chinese members upon their taking their seats on the Council. (May 14, 1930)

By then, the Chinese also ran a set of key activities within the Municipality and were allowed to express their views freely.

³ With a large number of immigrants in the Settlement, the real estate flourished and the price of the real estate skyrocketed (Li, 2017).

⁴ In the 1930s the International Settlement was still controlled by foreign staff from different nationalities; the British held the largest number of seats on the Council and directed all the Municipal departments.



3. The Corpus and its analysis

The Minutes of the Shanghai Municipal Council are collected in 28 volumes issued by the Council from its beginning in 1854 to its end in 1943. The MoMs were first hand- and then type-written from 1906 onwards. A joint project between the *Lyon Institute of Asian Studies* and the *Institute of History* of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences has made possible the digitalization in OCR format of all the typewritten documents, which are now publicly available.

For the compilation of the Shanghai MoM Corpus, the set of digitized MoMs issued between 1920 and 1930 was selected; then the OCR documents were rearranged in separate files corresponding to each of the 10 years scanned, and each MoM was tagged to easily trace and analyze it through the corpus. In the tagging, the following sections are identified, as transpiring from the corpus texts:

- Heading: name of the committee, date, time
- Attendees: present, absent
- Approval of previous minutes
- Topics and related decisions
- Closing: time of meeting termination, place and time of next meeting, signature

For the present study, the analysis concentrated on two years, namely 1920 and 1930, marking respectively the beginning and the end of the decade under scrutiny. This sub-corpus covers a total of 83 MoMs:

Tab. 1: MoMs issued by the Shanghai Municipal Council 1920-1930

	1920	1930
January	2, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 21, 28	6, 22
February	4, 11, 18, 25	12, 24, 26
March	3, 10, 17, 24, 29, 31	5, 12, 24, 26, 31
April	6, 8, 14, 21, 28	9, 17
May	12, 19, 26	14, 28
June	2, 9, 16, 23, 30	11, 25
July	7, 14, 21, 28	9, 23, 30
August	4, 11, 20	--
September	22, 29	3, 17
October	6, 13, 20, 27	1, 15, 29
November	3, 17, 24	12, 27
December	1, 8, 15, 20, 22, 29	8, 10, 15, 23

At the beginning of the decade weekly—if not by-weekly—meetings were frequent, along with “special meetings” summoned for very urgent affairs; in contrast, at the end of the decade, the Council met almost half as many times and allowed themselves recess in August.

This ties in with the diversity in topics discussed in the two years. Indeed, in 1920, the Council tackled not only matters of ordinary administration within the Settlement (“Building Contracts”, “Children’s Playgrounds”, “Parks”, “Drainage”, “Electricity”, “Telephone Connexion”, “Traffic”), but also, more frequently, knotty issues like internal security and order, almost exclusively with reference to the local Chinese (“Strike”, “Arrests and Search Warrants”, “Brothels”, “Disturbances”), strained relations with the local Press (“Criticism of Conductor in N.C.D. News”, “Newspaper Editors Unsuitable”) and with the Diplomatic body (“Consular Body—Action without Council’s Knowledge”), among others.

In turn, the topics reported in the 1930 MoMs lead to two main considerations; in the first place they are the litmus test of a more collaborative attitude of the foreign rulers towards the Chinese population compared to ten years earlier, as testified to by the Index headwords followed by their page references illustrated in (4); some of them require only one mention through the year, like the Chinese representation in the Council, while others recur regularly in the Minutes of different meetings:



- (4)
- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| a. Chinese Newspaper, request for subsidy. | 182 |
| b. Chinese District Court. | 47, 67, 74 |
| c. Chinese Language, use of for official documents. | 86, 91, 103, 109, 111, 132 |
| d. Chinese Government Bureaux in Settlement. | 265, 272, 278, 282, 288 |
| e. Council, Chinese representation | 3 |
- (From Index of Minute Book 37, 1930)

Secondly, rather than devoting great effort to the maintenance of internal order and to safeguard the ruling supremacy of the Council, as occurred in 1920, these MoMs show the increased interest of the 1930 Municipal Council in social activities (“Public Library,” “Orchestra & Band,” “House of Public Entertainment,” “House Numeration,” “Swimming Pool,” “Veterinary Surgeon”) and in a more inclusive type of society, opening up not only to Chinese citizens, but also to foreigners of different nationalities (Russian, Indian, and Japanese, among others), as in (5):

- (5)
- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| a. Royal Asiatic Society | 78, 181, 188 |
| b. Municipal Gazette, Chinese edition of | 103, 109, 111, 132 |
| c. Municipal Gazette, Russian edition of | 103 |
| d. Staff General
Indian Branch | 128 |
| e. Japanese Employees, pension scheme | 206 |
- (From Index of Minute Book 37, 1930)

In contrast, topics like difficult relations with the diplomatic body and with the press are hardly ever mentioned.

The qualitative analysis focussing on both content and structure makes up for the poor quality of the original typewritten documents, where it is difficult to trace single words automatically; at the same time, it also allows tracing and comparing the above-mentioned aspects in the whole *Shanghai MoM Corpus*.

3.1 Heading, attendees and approval of MoMs

Both in 1920 and in 1930, each Minute regularly starts with the following fixed phrase: “*At the (special) meeting of the Council held on DATE, at TIME, there are:*” the time being placed on a second line as in (6a and 6b):

- (6)
- | |
|--|
| a. At the special meeting of the Council held on Tuesday, April 6, 1920, at 11.30 a.m., there are: |
| b. At the meeting of the Council held on Monday, January 6, 1930, at 4.30 p.m. there are: |

The opening phrase is followed by the names of *Present* and *Absent* members, along with those of invited people, who are non-members of the Council asked to report on specific topics. These people, generally greeted with thanks by the Chairman, leave the meeting before decisions are taken (fixed phrase: “*X withdraws*”). Similarly, any member arriving after the beginning of the meeting is identified and recorded in the MoM with the fixed phrase “*X attends*” in correspondence to their respective coming or leaving, though no exact time is given:

- (7)
- | |
|---|
| a. The Commissioner of Revenue withdraws. |
| b. He Acting Treasurer attends. |
- (MoM July 23, 1930)



With reference to the approval of MoMs from previous meetings, the formulas regularly used both in 1920 and in 1930 are as follows:

The minutes of the meeting of ... / of the last meeting are (read and / submitted and) confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

Such fixed phrases are always in the passive form; indeed, passives are much more often exploited than actives throughout the corpus, as will be illustrated more in detail in Section 3.2 below.

The approval of the MoMs of the previous Council meeting is frequently followed by the approval of the MoMs of other bodies dependent on the Council, like the Public Utilities Committee, the Works Committee, the Traffic Committee, the Watch Committee, the Staff Committee, the Chinese Education Committee, and the Library Committee. In 1930 this practice is regular and pervades a number of fields—with several MoMs from different bodies being approved at Council meetings—while it occurs on a more sporadic basis in 1920 MoMs. This also testifies to a more articulated and inclusive structure of the Municipality in 1930 as compared to 1920.

3.2 Topics, related decisions and closing

When the Chairman introduces a new topic, two phrases are regularly used:

- *X explains / (proceeds to) inform(s)*
- *Members are informed that...*

There follows the position of the intervening members, which is introduced by the writer of the MoMs with a variety of reporting verbs, most frequently: *state, point out, express the view that, consider, suggest, doubt, be of the view that, point out, maintain, contend, reply, allude*:

- (8) Replying to Mr. Sheppard, the Director-General states that the semi-official approval of the Indian Government to Major Gerrard's transfer has been received, but its official sanction has yet to come. [...] He suggests that the case of Captain Martin should be deferred to the Watch Committee for detailed consideration. (MoM October 29, 1930)

Reporting verbs may also be placed in embedded clauses, clarifying that what is being reported is merely the speaker's view:

- (9) It is perfectly plain, he contends, that this Regulation presupposes that when the Council and the Ratepayers have agreed upon a change, they can-not put the suggested change into force except by the procedure laid down in the Regulation. (MoM January 6, 1920)

Similarly, the need to distance the writer from what is being written is also worded with epistemic interpolations like *in his opinion* and *in his view*:

- (10) Mr Sheppard doubts whether the Police are competent to undertake this work as in his view such duties are of a more specialised nature than the Police Department can reasonably be expected to perform. (MoM January 22, 1930)

Indeed, the analysis of MoMs has shown that the writers are very keen on disclaiming responsibility for what is being written, thus adopting the typical attitude of a reporter.

When summarizing the views taken by the participants without mentioning each intervention, the phrase "*the view prevails that*" is frequently adopted:

- (11) In further discussion the view prevails that the introduction of a condition forbidding strike is uncalled for and would be offensive. (MoM October 29, 1930)



Finally, the decision-taking phase is generally identified by the following phrases:

- *(Finally) members direct that.... X be + past participle*
- *At the conclusion of the discussion, it is decided...*
- *After scrutiny, X is (formally) approved / it is (formally) approved that*
- *After (brief) discussion, this proposal is unanimously/generally approved.*

Specifically, with reference to the voice of the verbs, the passive form is overwhelmingly favoured. In so doing, the report focusses on the fact being discussed or agreed upon rather than on the agents. This widespread practice leads to lengthy, complex sentences, which make full sections of the MoMs akin to legal documents:

- (12) The Policy Daily Report of the proceedings at a mass meeting held under the auspices of the Amalgamated Association of Street Unions in the Public Recreation Ground near St. Catherine's Bridge, yesterday morning is next read. (MoM January 2, 1920)

Indeed, since the Council was the ruling body on any aspect of the Municipality, MoMs relate decisions on disputes and MoM writers heavily borrow from the legal field, both in terms of structure and in terms of lexicon, as in (13), where the writer faithfully reports the Deputy Secretary's intervention as if it were delivered in court:

- (13) In connexion with the recommendation that a refund be made to the Land Investment Company of the amount of the outstanding fees received from them for the period 1926/29, the Deputy Secretary explains that from a legal point of view the position of the Land Investment Company and that of Mr. Feng Ping Nan, the other property owner concerned, is somewhat different inasmuch as the latter has never given an undertaking to defray this charge, although in order to get the connections he undertook to pay extra municipal rates. The architect employed in the erection of Mr. Feng's property had written to the Commissioner of Public Works that he understood a charge would be made, but Mr. Feng maintains that the architect was not authorised to bind him to any payment or informed him of the charge in question. Apart from contesting the matter in principle Mr. Feng refused to meet this charge on the ground that he was not legally liable and has been unable to recover this amount from the tenants of the property. In the circumstances therefore the Deputy Secretary doubts whether the Council can enforce payment of this charge in respect of the period for which thorough a clerical oversight no debit notes were rendered by the Council. The Land Investment Company, however, paid up the amount in arrear when subsequently presented with the debit notes although he is not aware whether it has been or will be able to reimburse itself from its tenants. Legally therefore there may be some difference in these two cases though from the point of view of equity the Council may consider that both parties should receive similar treatment in respect of the period for which the Council omitted to render debit notes. (MoM January 6, 1930)

All the examples above also testify to the fact that the writers of MoMs report in the present tense and use a set of proximal and distal forms of temporal reference in a deictic way, as if the Minutes were transcribed during the meeting. The same can be said for simple time adverbials like *now, soon, lately, recently, ago, today, tomorrow, yesterday*, along with complex time adverbials consisting of a deictic modifier and a non-deictic measure word, like *last/next + DAY/MONTH/YEAR*, or *this morning/afternoon/evening* (Levinson 1983, 75), as shown in examples (14-16).

- (14) He requests members' approval of process of execution this afternoon as also of action. (MoM January 12, 1920)
- (15) All necessary arrangements will be completed by tomorrow evening January 6. (MoM January 2, 1920)



- (16) Telephone Company Negotiations.—The Director General reports that M. Verdier called on him yesterday [...]. He gathered from M. Verdier that the proposals, the written text of which was received this afternoon, are such that agreement between the two Councils is possible. (MoM March 26, 1930)

Finally, when closing a meeting, throughout the corpus the same phrase is exploited as closing line: “*The meeting terminates at,*” followed by the signatures of the Chairman and Secretary. Starting from May 1920, the closing line is preceded by the approval of the Municipal Gazette, the official organ of the Shanghai Municipal Council, where the Minutes were officially published, along with letters from readers, financial statements on income and expenditures, municipal budget and any other topic that might be of interest to the ratepayers. Such approval was sporadic in 1920 and regular in 1930. The Gazette is “*submitted in proof and proved for publication*” within a couple of days of the meeting. Interestingly, starting from September 1930 the Chinese translation of the Gazette is also mentioned for approval and publication:

- (17) A letter from the Director of Chinese Studies forwarding “dummy” copies of the Chinese edition of the Municipal Gazette and drawing attention to the difficulties of publication simultaneously with the foreign edition is considered.
Upon the Chinese members stating that they do not consider any objection will be put forward by the Chinese Community if the Chinese edition is published a few days later than the English edition the proposal put forward by Mr. Kliene that in order to overcome the difficulties of translation, printing and proof-reading the Chinese Edition be published on the Wednesday following the day of publication of the English edition, is approved. (MoM 17 September 1930)

The issuing of a Chinese version of the Gazette in the first place, but most of all the fact that the Chinese members of Council are consulted and their advice followed to safeguard proper translation and consequently clear communication between foreigners and locals, is once again a sign of the change in attitude of the ‘rulers’ compared to the attitude exhibited by the MoMs of ten years earlier.

4. An overview of MoMs as a textual type

As summarized records of meetings from public/private organizations or institutions, MoMs serve the main purpose of informing attendees and non-attendees about what was discussed or happened during such meetings (Gutmann 2013, Hawthorne 1993). Often viewed as the mere ordinary burden of secretaries and clerks, their importance has largely been underrated as a mere ‘notarial act’; yet they “form a vital part” of the communication process (Team FME 2013, 4; Baker 2010). Indeed, in the first place, by reporting what happens inside institutions on the unfolding of their local/national/international relations with third parties, MoMs are a form of news in its own right; secondly, by issuing the decisions taken, they may also fall into the domain of legal documents, thus leading to a hybrid genre, where language contributes to (a) the performative role of taking decisions and (b) the communicative role of delivering such decisions to the public or anyway to whoever has the right to read such documents. The way this double function is put into practice, in terms of structure and linguistic specificities of MoMs, requires great attention to preserve the objectivity of the report and the neutrality of the (legal) act, thus avoiding any angle or attitudinal slant to transpire with reference to what is being summarized.

The following list, from a recent textbook on MoMs (Team FME 2013) details in order of occurrence the essential elements currently required when writing a professional MoM:

- *Heading*: name of the team or committee, and the date, as well as the location and time of the meeting
- *Attendees*: names of those who came to the meeting, those who sent their apologies and those who require copies of the minutes
- *Approval of previous minutes*
- *Action items* (items requiring action, including any unfinished business from the previous meeting as well as all current and new ones that now require attention)



- *Announcements*: any announcements made by the participants or those who sent their apologies, including proposed agenda items for the next meeting
- *Next meeting*: where and when the next meeting will be held
- *Signature line*

(Adapted from Team FME 2013, 6)

The above matches almost perfectly the structural elements that have been recorded in our corpus and that have been used for the tagging and the analysis reported in Section 3. The only difference is in *Announcements*, which in our corpus is not a separate item, but rather subsumed under the section *Topics and related decisions*. Judging from the data illustrated above, it can be concluded that over the last century the structure of MoMs has been maintained virtually unaltered.

5. Conclusions

Through the centuries, the West has given China different names, most notably *Serica* at Greek-Latin times, *Cathay* in the Middle Ages, and *China* since the Renaissance. The Chinese themselves have named their country differently: *Tiān xià*, *Huáxià*, *Shénzhōu*, *Jiūzhōu*, for example, have all been ousted by the now widespread *Zhōngguó* (“Central/Middle kingdom”). If giving a name is indicative of some sort of ownership, the diversified names of China, swinging between East and West, are particularly telling, especially with reference to the decade that has been the focus of the present paper. Corpus data tell us that the Western ‘colonizing’ interest for China/*Zhōngguó*—which led to clashes between languages, cultures and powers—gradually gave way to a more collaborative attitude, increasing respect for the Chinese population and a growing sense of shared collectivity.

Moreover, from a purely linguistic point of view, our data give account of Minutes of Meetings as a textual type that in the first half of the twentieth century was very similar to present-day MoMs, with lexical and structural specificities that position this textual type halfway between legal writing and news reporting.

In all, with its small piece in the mosaic, the present study has possibly contributed to casting new light on the relationship between East and West against the background of linguistic and socio-historical studies, in so much as the language of MoMs from early 20th century foreign rulers in Chinese territory has proved to be the litmus paper of their changing political standpoint.

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