

An Anatomy of Chinese

Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics

PERRY LINK

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Introduction

This book has grown from files that I have kept for more than three decades on items that have fascinated me about the Chinese language. When I dug into those files a few years ago I found that, in order to interpret their contents responsibly, I would need to read in a number of fields—prosody, cognitive science, philosophy of mind, comparative politics, even music theory—that were largely new to me. I asked colleagues for introductions to those fields and, with my store of Chinese examples serving as test cases, found the resulting exploration both pleasurable and rewarding.

Academic specialties in the early twenty-first century bristle with their own jargons, and nearly every area I turned to required an investment of time before I felt I was getting what was there to be got. Each investment, in the end, was worthwhile. Special jargon does serve a purpose when it allows expression of thought that could not have been put as precisely in ordinary language. But that said, I should say as well that I often found the jargon of subfields to be not entirely necessary: the same thought could often have been put, just as clearly or more so, in plainer language. Why we academics like jargon is an important question. It relates to why many humanities and social science disciplines are becoming more self-contained, growing as if in parallel universes; why students can be puzzled as they move from economics to anthropology to literature, even if their teachers claim to be sharing a subject (“China,” for example); and why