

## WHEN AND WHERE\*

Alexis Rygaloff

A question sometimes asked, by beginners or outsiders, is in substance: how come Chinese goes on sticking to as “clumsy” - if not “archaic”/a construction as ‘X-的時候/地方’, instead of “simply” making use of relative (otherwise interrogative) pronouns of the english *when, where, whenever, wherever*... type, on similar occasions (ex. : “when he came” - 他來的時候, ( ... ) where he lives/ - 他住的地方)? This question is a good one, pointing as it does:

1) to a certain degree of “versatility” - or /polysemy/, let’s say generality - of at least some of such pronouns, all interrogative and/or relative, in quite a great number of languages, including English: *when, where, who, which*; French: *quand, où ... qui, que*; or Russian: *kogda, gde ... kto, čto*; in contrast

2) to the non-existence in other languages including Chinese, of relative pronouns on the one hand, and, on the other, to the comparative rarity and “near-markedness” of properly interrogative pronouns for at least time and place: as 多會兒, 多咱, 多早晚 (with tone 2: 陽平 for 多), all meaning “when”, are both /colloquial/ and local (pekingese in any case) and 幾時 again /local/ (now cantonese) but also /literary/ as it seems; while 哪兒 with variants, for “where”, is hardly less unmarked than 什麼地方; this expression paralleling 什麼時候, uniquely unmarked for “when”.

In addition however, and for this reason the question thus raised is worth even more, it calls for another question, echoing itself as it were: how come English, French and like languages happen to trade as the actually do in this respect, instead of both “logically” and “economically” making just more extensive use of such words, in fact nouns, as *time* and *place*, which they do need anyway (and eventually have indeed) in order to currently express and convey distinctions having to do with precisely “time” and “place”?

(i) Now, it so happens (whatever the reason, or reasons)/ that English

\* Editor’s Note: This article is contributed to Volume 53 of this Bulletin in memory of the late Dr. Yuen Ren Chao. Since it arrived after the deadline, we are publishing it in this volume.

(and the like) is a language with //grammatical/ number/, of which Chinese on the other hand /or Japanese for that matter/ chances to be, /at least basically/, devoid. Therefore the actual meaning of 他來的時候 must be taken to be “(at) the time and/or times (when) he comes - or came”, and similarly: 他住的地方 “(at) the place(s) (where) he lives - or lived”. The answer then is clearly: why should Chinese bother itself too much with special “number-free” words, whereas the rule for the whole bulk of its lexicon is precisely this: to be “number-free”?

(ii) Chinese, however, is not totally devoid either of pronouns or of “interrogative words”. 誰 “who” appears to be both, and so does 什麼 in cases where something like 東西 “thing” may be thought of as ‘deleted’. And a remarkable feature of these two words is to begin with the same phonetic segment, whether in present-day (SH-) or in ‘Ancient’ (禪) Chinese, thus reminding of similar sets: with WH- in English, QU- in French... or D- in Japanese (*do/o* “how”, *do/ko* “where”, *do/no* “which” and so on). But here, in Chinese, another case at point appears to be 時 (not 地, true, but it’s not far away, and 處 or 所 come even closer)? Should then 時 be put in the list? Or is it just a coincidence? Suppose it is, but then another such “coincidence” would have to be accounted for: in Japanese, as this language, though allegedly totally unrelated to Chinese, whether genetically or typologically, appears to equally:

- 1) be devoid of “grammatical number”, and
- 2) get along without relative pronouns, while
- 3) making use instead of *toki* “time” and *tokoro* “place”
- 4) two words beginning with the same segment: T, and this segment as akin to D- (above) as possibly can be.