Information Crisis in Twentieth-Century China

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In the 1920s, China was perceived by many as being in a full-blown "information crisis," with some arguing that the country should follow the path of Vietnam or Turkey and undergo a complete reform of the country's character-based writing system. Republican China witnessed a proliferation of experimental Chinese character organization and retrieval systems – used to organize new Chinese dictionaries, telephone books, name lists, card catalog systems, and indeed the entire taxonomic structure of the Chinese character information environment. The "character retrieval problem," as some referred to it, attracted a diverse group of linguists, library scientists, political authorities, and publishing houses. While their many dozens of novel systems and approaches varied greatly, a commonly held objective was the creation of a "transparent" and thoroughly disambiguated system of organizing the Chinese language – one that could be readily used by the "everyone," and which abolished any and all uncertainties of performance. It is this pair of concepts – of transparency and disambiguation – on which the present paper concentrates.

In their efforts to develop a "transparent" system – one that could be used by "anyone and everyone" – Republican-era language reformers necessarily ventured into a site of political contestation: defining the Chinese everyman, in terms of capacities, limitations, tendencies, instincts, etc. This becomes intriguing for us in two ways. First, within the ongoing consideration of early twentieth-century Chinese sociopolitical conceptualization of the citizen and the people, here we gain insight into how language reformers were engaging in this discussion. Second, from the perspective of history of technology, we find in such debates over the "Chinese everyman" one of the earliest discussions of design and human-machine interactionism within a Chinese context. Early 1910s and 1920s writings by character retrievalists bear striking resemblance, both in the topics they discuss and their preoccupation with imagining the abilities/constraints of "average users," to the types of questions that will become formalized in such professional-academic fields as Design and HCI.