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nǐ X wǒ Y: A Formal Idiom in Chinese

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Linguists have long been intrigued by the principles which govern the distribution and interpretation of proforms in languages. It is traditionally held that the function of personal pronouns is reference--deixis or anaphora (Lyons 1977). This paper investigates some peculiar uses of Chinese first and second person singular pronouns, *wǒ* and *nǐ*, which pose problems for general theories of reference.

Let us begin with a few examples:

- (1) *Háizǐmēn nǐ duǒ wǒ shǎn, bùgǎn jiànrén.*
kids you dodge I dodge not dare see people
'Every kid was hiding, afraid to be seen.'
- (2) *Liǎnggèzǔ nǐ cháng wǒ duǎn, zěngènnòng?*
two groups you long I short how to handle
'The two groups are unequal. How to handle?'
- (3) *Fūqī nǐ téng wǒ ái..*
husband wife you love I love
'The couple loves each other...'
- (4) *Yīwǎnjiǔ sìgèrén nǐ yī kǒu wǒ yī kǒu -dè*
one bowl wine four guys you one sip I one sip -ly
hē.
drink
'Four guys took turns sipping a bowl of wine.'
- (5) *Dàjiā nǐ pèng yī bēi wǒ jìng yī zhǎn -dè*
all you clink one glass I offer one cup -ly
guàntā.
make him drink
'Everybody was trying to get him drunk, clinking glasses with him one after another.'
- (6) *Tāmēn nǐ kàn wǒ, wǒ kàn nǐ, méiyǒu shuōhuà*
they you look at me I look at you not speak
'They looked at one another, didn't say a word.'
- (7) *Yǒudè jūnzǎng zhèngwěi zài nǐ tuī wǒ*
some commanders commissars under you push I
sǎng -dè qíngkuàngxià zhànle hǎojǐgè xiǎoshí.
shove -like circumstances stood several hours
'Some commanders and commissars stood for hours under the circumstances of pushing and shoving (i.e. being pushed and shoved).'

Evidently, the first and second person singular pronouns in 1-7 are NOT used with their ordinary deictic function: *wǒ* is not used by the speaker to refer to himself; *nǐ* is not used by the speaker to refer to his designated hearer.

Next, consider their usage in 8-9 below:

- (8) *Nǐ wú wǒ yǒu, nǐ yǒu wǒ duō ...*
 you lack I have you have I many
 [Speaking of marketing strategies] 'If one's competitor does not have a certain product, one should have it; if one's competitor has it, one should have a larger quantity...'
- (9) *Bùshǎo jǔbànjě wúfēishì nǐ tāo qián, wǒ píng*
 many organizers simply are you pay money I award
yǒu; nǐ huò míng, wǒ dé lì
 price you obtain fame I gain profit
 [Speaking of commodity contests] 'For many (contest) organizers, it is as simple as this: whoever pays (to enter the contests) they will award a prize; thus the contestants obtain their fame, and the organizers gain their profit.'

Here, as one can distinctly tell, *wǒ* stands for the one in the interest of which the marketing strategies apply (in 8), and the contest organizers (in 9); and *nǐ*, on the other hand, stands for the competitor (in 8), and the contestants (in 9). In more general terms, although not genuinely deictic, *wǒ* is intended by the speaker to refer to the party taken to be at the center of concern--the 'ego', and *nǐ*, the party taken to be the opposite side--the 'nonego'. I would call this QUASI-DEIXIS: the speaker, instead of being at the deictic center himself, intends that some specific entity be taken as the 'ego', which he may (as in 8) or may not (as in 9) implicitly sides with. Are the uses of *nǐ* and *wǒ* in 1-7 quasi-deictic? I would contend that they are NOT. In 2, for example, one cannot decide which of the two groups is at the center of concern, where the use of *wǒ* is based. Likewise, in 3, there is no justification for the husband, or the wife, being taken as the 'ego' and thus referred to by means of *wǒ* by the speaker. I will not discuss quasi-deixis any further, as it does not fall within the scope of inquiry of this paper.

We have so far assumed that *nǐ* and *wǒ* in 1-7 function somehow referentially. Since they are nondeictic, are they some kind of anaphoric devices, then? At first sight, they appear to be. Although neither makes discrete and specific reference to a particular entity, together *nǐ* and *wǒ* seem to be in coreferential relationship with some appropriate antecedent(s), e.g. in 1 with *háizǐmén* 'kids', in 2 with *liǎnggèzǔ* 'two groups', and in 3 with *fūqī* 'husband and wife'. It will be helpful (though not the task of this paper) to conduct a formal study of the syntactic and discourse constraints for such special anaphor-antecedent linkage. However, a general treatment of the issue in anaphoric terms is not without difficulty. A minor problem is that the anaphoric reference in question is not always determinable on purely structural grounds. Consider 7, which is excerpted from a Chinese government's report on the happenings in Beijing in early June, 1989. (The credibility of the report does not concern us here.) This statement occurs in a discourse context that says something about the siege of a military unit, the attacks on the soldiers, and the great restraint of the army. Hence 7 cannot be taken to mean that the pushing-and-shoving was done by, or between, the commanders and the commissars, although *jūnzhǎng* and *zhèngwěi* are structurally fitting antecedents for *nǐ* and *wǒ*, and are the themes of the passage as well (cf. Sanford 1985). It is only reasonable to conceive that the 'antecedent' of *nǐ* and *wǒ* in this case must be inferentially, rather than grammatically, assigned (cf. Bresnan 1971): the pushing-and-shoving was caused by 'the mob', which is not overtly mentioned.

The major challenge to an anaphoric account comes from the fact that, as a rule, ENTIRE *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions function UNITARILY as verbals (1, 3, 6), adverbials (4, 5), or adjectivals (2, 7) syntactically, making predications, semantically, of actions, manners, states, etc.; the personal pronouns within these expressions do not play any syntactic role as nominals, and thus do not play any semantic role as referring expressions. Put differently, in a particular utterance (such as 1-7), *nǐ X wǒ Y* has a holistic predicative

function, but neither *nǐ* nor *wǒ* has any separate referential function. Hence, the peculiar uses of the first and second person singular pronouns under discussion cannot be satisfactorily handled in terms of reference (deictic or anaphoric).

Based on 1-7, the following observations can be made:

(i) We have, essentially, a special construction consisting of the parallel structures: *nǐ X wǒ Y*. *X* and *Y* here stand for symmetrical units of verbs (1, 3, 7), adjectives (2), complex nominals (4), or complex verbals (5, 6). When they are complex verbals, each can contain an appropriate element of *wǒ* or *nǐ* (which is the counterpart of the *nǐ* or *wǒ* preceding the complex verbal) to indicate mutuality (see 6).

(ii) Semantically, *X* and *Y* function as equals, in the sense that their interchange does not affect the interpretation of the whole expression. In 1, *duǒ* and *shǎn* are close synonyms, meaning 'to dodge'. Changing from *nǐ duǒ wǒ shǎn* to *nǐ shǎn wǒ duǒ* has no effect on the overall interpretation, namely, 'everyone was hiding'. In other words, the matching of *X* with *nǐ* and of *Y* with *wǒ*, or the other way around, is not substantive, as far as the content is concerned; choices can be made in consideration of conventionality, novelty, tonal patterning, antithesis (relative to some adjacent corresponding expressions), etc. *X* and *Y* can even be antonyms, whose interchange, nonetheless, is not going to alter the reading of the expression as a whole. For instance, in 2 we have an antonymous pair *cháng* 'long' versus *duǎn* 'short'. Either *nǐ cháng wǒ duǎn* or *nǐ duǎn wǒ cháng* carries the same message: 'one long the other short--the two being unequal'.

(iii) Neither *nǐ* nor *wǒ* is intended, in this special construction, to be used referentially. They serve, rather, as a pair of contrastive terms, which suggest certain noncompositional meanings (see iv below). Like *X* and *Y*, *nǐ* and *wǒ* can exchange their positions (again, a matter of choice), with no consequence on the interpretation of the whole expression. Ex. 10 provides an illustration of *nǐ X wǒ Y* and *wǒ X nǐ Y* being juxtaposed antithetically:

- (10) *Yǒuhǎochù, dàjiā nǐ zhēng wǒ qiǎng; yǒukùnnán,*
 benefits all you contend I contend difficulties
dàjiā wǒ tuī nǐ ràng.
 all I yield you yield
 'For benefits, one vies with another; when it comes to difficulties, one yields to another.'

(iv) The interpretation of a *nǐ X wǒ Y* expression features a crucial noncompositional component, which is intrinsic in the construction and is suggested by the contrastive pair *nǐ* and *wǒ*. Four major subtypes of such noncompositional meaning can be distinguished: (a) each ... the same as the other (1, 7), (b) each ... differently from the other (2), (c) each ... to the other-- mutually (3, 6, 10), and (d) each ... after the other--alternately (4, 5).

In the literature of Chinese linguistics, only sporadic mentions have been made concerning such special usage of personal pronouns (see e.g. Wang 1959, Lü 1985, Zhang 1987). It has been noticed that another pair of basic deictic terms, the demonstrative pronouns *zhè* 'this' and *nà* 'that', have similar uses, as shown in 11:

- (11) *Nèijǐgèrén nǐ yī jù, wǒ yī jù, zhègè yī quán,*
 those people you one word I one word this one fist
nàgè yī jiǎo -dè zhémó tā.
 that one foot -ly torment him
 'Those fellows tormented him, each railing, beating, and kicking him.'

Here, with *nǐ X wǒ Y* and *Zhègè X nàgè Y* in juxtaposition, we can clearly see their similarities in structure, meaning, and function. Interestingly enough, a few other

contrastive deictic pairs are found to serve in some like constructions, as exemplified below:

- (12) *cǐ qǐ bǐ fú*
 this rise that fall
 'rise one after another'
 [*cǐ* and *bǐ* : classical forms of 'this' and 'that']
- (13) *jīntiān pī Zhāngsān, míngtiān dòu Lǐsì*
 today criticize Zhangsan tomorrow criticize Lisi
 'every day some one, or another, being criticized'
- (14) *zuò sī yòu xiǎng*
 left think right think
 'ponder from all angles'
- (15) *lái zōng qù jī*
 come trace go trace
 'traces of somebody's whereabouts'

Hence, there might be a *_X_Y* construction where the two slots could be filled in with a pair of contrastive deictic terms, including (in particular) *nǐ-wǒ* and *zhè-nà*.

To achieve a more significant generalization, let us shift our attention to the matter of internal structures of Chinese traditional four-syllable idioms (cf. Ma 1983, Xu 1980). We will focus on one of the most prevalent and productive patterns, in which the four elements are in crisscross parallelism structurally and semantically. The following subtypes can be differentiated:

- (i) The two parts (AB - CD) are semantically repetitive.
- (a) A and C are synonyms.
 (16) *gǎi tóu huàn miàn*
 change head change face
 'change the appearance but not the essence'
- (b) B and D are synonyms.
 (17) *tóng qiáng tiě bì*
 bronze wall iron wall
 'impregnable fortress [figuratively]'
- (c) A and C, B and D are synonyms.
 (18) *páng qiāo cè jī*
 side beat side beat
 'make oblique references'
- (ii) The two parts (AB - CD) are semantically adversative.
- (d) A and C are antonyms.
 (19) *tóng chuáng yì mèng*
 same bed different dreams
 'have different purposes behind the semblance of accord'
- (e) B and D are antonyms.
 (20) *yǎn gāo shǒu dī*
 eye high hand low
 'have grandiose aims but puny abilities'
- (f) A and C, B and D are antonyms.
 (21) *yǒu tóu wú wěi*
 have head lack tail
 'start something but fail to carry it through'

- (iii) The two parts (AB - CD) are neither simply repetitive nor plainly adversative.
- (g) A and C are synonyms; B and D are antonyms.
 (22) *tiāo féi jiǎn shòu*
 choose fat choose lean
 'choose whatever is to one's personal advantage'
- (h) A and C are antonyms; B and D are synonyms.
 (23) *dōng lā xī chē*
 east pull west pull
 'drag in all sorts of irrelevant matters'

As Xu (1980) points out, such pattern-interpretation pairings constitute an important source of idiomatic productivity. We are most interested in the last group (iii), where each pattern consists of a pair of synonyms and a pair of antonyms woven in a crisscross fashion. The synonyms contribute rather directly to the interpretation of the whole; whereas the antonyms serve as the two poles of a spectrum, suggesting the inclusion of everything or all possibilities within the range. Ex. 24 is given by Xu as a new idiom formed on the basis of an old idiomatic pattern (iii.h):

- (24) *nǐ zhuī wǒ gǎn*
 you catch up I catch up
 'overtake each other (in friendly emulation)'

To us, what is significant is not its idiomatic status--being conventionalized and noncompositional--but the fact that its *nǐ X wǒ Y* form is related to a more general idiomatic pattern. I would suggest that the nature of the *nǐ X wǒ Y* construction under discussion could profitably be accounted for in terms of the properties of a more general idiomatic construction--*A X Z Y*. *X* and *Y* are typically near synonyms, which contribute rather directly to the interpretation of the whole; *A* and *Z* are typically a pair of contrastive terms, (which are associated with the noncompositional component of the interpretation,) in the general capacity of the two poles of a spectrum, suggesting the inclusion of everything or all possibilities within the range. Thus, *nǐ X wǒ Y* and similar constructions involving other deictic pairs could be seen as variants of *A X Z Y*.

In this connection, I would tentatively distinguish two broad categories of *A-Z* terms. In one class, *A* and *Z* are substantives such as nouns, pronouns, demonstratives, and localizers (Chao 1968). The associated idiomatic meanings are 'EACH (doing the same thing, doing a different thing, doing something to the other, or doing something after the other)', 'EVERYthing', 'EVERYwhere', etc. We have already seen pronouns (*nǐ-wǒ*) and demonstratives (*zhè-nè*) being used as *A-Z* terms. In 25-29 below, nouns and localizers serve the same purpose:

- (25) *gōng shuō gōng yǒulǐ, pó*
 father-in-law say father-in-law right mother-in-law
shuō pó yǒulǐ,
 say mother-in-law right
 'each saying that he himself is right'
- (26) *shén bù zhī guǐ bù jué*
 god not know devil not detect
 'without anyone knowing'
- (27) *tiān fān dì fù*
 heaven overturn earth upset
 'everything being turned upside down'

- (28) *shàng cuàn xià tiào*
 up scurry down jump
 'run around (on sinister errands)'
- (29) *lǐ tiǎo wài jué*
 inside poke outside dig
 'sow dissension everywhere'

In the other class, A and Z are nonsubstantives (Chao 1968), typically adjectives; the associated idiomatic meaning is 'by EVERY means', as in the following examples:

- (30) *ruǎn tuō yìng kàng*
 soft delay hard defy
 'employ all sorts of tactics to resist'
- (31) *jīn lán màn dǎng*
 hasty block slow block
 'use various measures to hinder'
- (32) *sǐ chán huó rào*
 dead twine live wind
 'keep nagging someone by every means'
- (33) *hǎo shuō dǎi quàn*
 good talk bad persuade
 'try in every possible way to persuade'
- (34) *fǎn yī quàn zhèng yī quàn*
 reverse one persuade obverse one persuade
 'persuade from different viewpoints'
- (35) *héng dǎ shùn suàn*
 crosswise estimate lengthwise calculate
 'plan in view of various factors'

For a start, the focus of the present study is limited to only one A-Z pair, *nǐ-wǒ*. More extensive and thorough work on various A-Z types is prerequisite to a better understanding of this more general idiomatic construction--A X Z Y.

It is worth mentioning in passing that idiomatic patterns such as A X Z Y or X A Y Z may be prevalent among Sino-Tibetan languages (cf. Ma & Dai 1986). I have come across the following examples:

- (36) *q̣hɔ̄ɿ ṃyɿ ṭshɿ ɿ miɿ*
 that sky this earth
 'everywhere'
 [Language: Lahu, Branch: Yi]
- (37) *uʔɿ inɿ kɔʔɿ inɿ*
 down home up home
 'neighbors'
 [Language: Achang, Branch: Mian]
- (38) *ṇṭsḥiɿ ṭaɿ ṇṭsḥiɿ seiɿ*
 clean dead clean live
 'very clean'
 [Language: Miao, Branch: Miao]
- (39) *ṭsḥeiɿ vuɿ ṭsḥeiɿ muɿ*
 words go words come
 'rumors'
 [Language: Gelao, Branch: ?]

A cross-language survey, inside and outside the Sino-Tibetan Family, of the uses and features of such patterns will greatly enhance our knowledge about the linguistic, cultural, and conceptual aspects of this type of idiomatic constructions.

To understand the nature of *nǐ X wǒ Y*, I have resorted to the theoretical notion of idiomatic construction, or formal idiom (Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor 1988): a productive construction with special semantic/pragmatic properties not deducible from the general grammar. Moreover, it is important to point out that its idiomaticity, for language users, is realistically a matter of native usage (see the discussions of 'cultural idiomaticity' in He 1989a). This is explicated below from the perspectives of recognition and selection.

The idiomatic character of a *nǐ X wǒ Y* expression such as

- (40) *nǐ qiǎng wǒ duó*
 you snatch I seize
 'vie with each other for something'

is immediately and automatically recognized since it resembles the many popular four-syllable idioms, e.g.

- (41) *lóng zhēng hǔ dòu*
 dragon contend tiger fight
 'a struggle between two evenly-matched opponents'
- (42) *xiān zhǎn hòu zǒu*
 first behead then report
 'act first and report afterwards'

What really sounds familiar, and thus gives such expressions an idiomatic ring is their distinctive form--four monosyllabic terms in a two-two rhythm, and in crisscross parallelism structurally and semantically--a form traditionally favored in the culture and characteristic of idiomatic expressions. More significantly, from the psychological point of view, the familiarity of this idiomatic construction could perhaps be attributed to the existence of a number of conventionalized *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions, which are popularly known and frequently used. For example:

- (43) *nǐ sǐ wǒ huó*
 you die I live
 'life-and-death'
- (44) *ěr yú wǒ zhà*
 you cheat I cheat
 'each cheating the other'
 [Èr: a second person pronoun in ancient Chinese]
- (45) *nǐ yī yán, wǒ yī yǔ*
 you one speech I one talk
 'everyone joining in (in the discussion of something)'
- (46) *Nǐ hǎo wǒ hǎo, dàjiā dōu hǎo.*
 you good I good everyone all good
 'Everyone being happy (at the expense of principles)'

These have probably come to form a paradigm in the memory for the recognition, comprehension, and also free creation of other *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions.

In speech production, this construction might be selected for its special communicative effects. Stylistically, its use is characteristically informal and colloquial. For example, the

idea of mutuality can be expressed by either *nǐ X wǒ Y* or the adverb *hùxiāng*. Both can be used to talk about common activities in everyday life, with the former felt to be more casual-sounding (compare 47a with 47b below):

- (47) *Háizǐmén zàilóudào*
 kids in corridor
 a. *nǐ tuī wǒ sāng*
 you push I shove
 b. *hùxiāng tuī sāng*
 mutually push shove
 'The kids were pushing and shoving each other in the corridor.'

But when it comes to abstract and serious matters in formal speech and writing, only *hùxiāng* is standard and appropriate, as exemplified by the following set collocations:

- (48) *hùxiāng yīcún*
 'be interdependent'
 (49) *hùxiāng páichì*
 'be mutually exclusive'
 (50) *hùxiāng pèihé*
 'be cooperative'
 (51) *hùxiāng chèzhóu*
 'hold each other back'

Rhetorically, *nǐ X wǒ Y* is capable of producing an undulating rhythm and of evoking vivid imageries. Contrast, for instance, the uses of an adverb *lúnliú* 'alternatively' and *nǐ X wǒ Y* in 52:

- (52) *Yīwǎnjiǔ sìgèrén*
 one bowl wine four guys
 a. *lúnliúdè hē*
 alternately drink
 b. *nǐ yī kǒu wǒ yī kǒu -dè hē.*
 you one sip I one sip -ly drink
 'Four guys took turns sipping a bowl of wine.'

Describing the same event, 52a probably calls forth merely an abstract conception of turn taking, whereas 52b dramatically depicts the scene of the bowl being passed around from mouth to mouth among different individuals.

The polar terms in the *A X Z Y* construction, by virtue of their inherent senses, could produce striking hyperbolic effects, as might be perceived in:

- (53) *shén bù zhī guǐ bù jué*
 god not know devil not detect
 'without anyone knowing'
 (54) *yīn chā yáng cuò*
 YIN mistake YANG mistake
 'a mistake due to a strange combination of all sorts of accidental circumstances'
 (55) *tiān bù pà dì bù pà*
 heaven not fear earth not fear
 'to fear nothing at all'

There are quite a few familiar A-Z pairs, whose usage and interpretation are basically a function of convention, e.g. *nǐ-wǒ* 'you-I', *zuǒ-yòu* 'left-right', *dōng-xī* 'east-west', *héng-shù* 'horizontal-vertical', and *sǐ-huó* 'dead-live'. The construction also encourages individual imagination in the formulation and comprehension of expressions with unusual A-Z terms. Such idiomatic creativity is based on the language users' common cultural experience and knowledge, and realized through one's originality in thinking and talent in language use (cf. MacCormac 1986, He 1989b). Here are a few fine examples:

- (56) *Yījiāzǐ zhěngtiān jī chǎo é dòu ...*
 family whole day chicken quarrel goose fight
 '(Members of) the family quarreled and fought with one another all the time...'
- (57) *Háizǐmén jī yī zuǐ yā yī zuǐ -dè dòu tā*
 kids chicken one mouth duck one mouth -ly tease him
 'All the kids teased him.'
- (58) *Tā wén chī xiāngguā, wǔ chī xīguā ...*
 he civil eat muskmelon military eat watermelon
 'He ate muskmelon and watermelon (all day long) ...'

Speaking impressionistically, the imagery of chickens and geese (in 56) highlights incompatibility, of chickens and ducks (in 57), friskiness; the terms *wén-wǔ* 'civil-military' (in 58) suggest different manners of eating, viz. chewing gently and munching vigorously, respectively. An rhetorical device with remarkable vivifying effect, the A X Z Y construction is highly favored by the ordinary folks in daily communication.

The major purpose of this paper is to explore and specify the usage and interpretation of Chinese first and second person singular pronouns in the special construction *nǐ X wǒ Y*. A sample of data mostly collected from written texts has been examined against the general conceptions of deixis, anaphora, reference, and idiomaticity. The main points of the discussions can be summarized as follows:

(i) The uses of personal pronouns under consideration are neither deictic nor quasi-deictic (with a displaced 'ego' arbitrarily assigned by the speaker).

(ii) An anaphoric account in purely structural terms fails in some significant cases where appropriate antecedents, or more precisely, intended referents, have to be inferred from nonlinguistic contexts.

(iii) The most crucial fact is that, as a rule, entire *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions function unitarily as verbals, adverbials, or adjectivals syntactically--it thus follows that, semantically, whole *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions make predications of actions, manners, states, etc. The personal pronouns involved are NOT intended to have any separate nominal (syntactic), or referential (semantic), function at all. Hence, the real issue is NOT a matter of reference.

(iv) What we have here is essentially a formal idiom--*nǐ X wǒ Y*: a productive special construction, in which *nǐ* and *wǒ* work as a pair of contrastive terms (with no referential force), while *X* and *Y* are symmetrical structurally and equal semantically.

(v) The interpretation of an *nǐ X wǒ Y* expression includes a characteristic noncompositional component, which is intrinsic in the construction and is associated with the contrastive pair *nǐ* and *wǒ*. Four major subtypes of such idiomatic meaning can be specified: (a) each ... the same as the other, (b) each ... differently from the other, (c) each ... to the other, and (d) each ... after the other.

(vi) I have suggested a more general idiomatic construction A X Z Y, under which *nǐ X wǒ Y* is subsumed. This construction may be prevalent among Sino-Tibetan languages.

In short, the uses of *nǐ X wǒ Y* expressions follow not from knowing the general grammatical and pragmatic principles, but from being familiar with the form, meaning, and

effect of a special idiomatic construction--*ní X wǒ Y*. Crucially involved in the interpretation process is (instead of the assignment, or inference, of referents for the personal pronouns) the selection of appropriate idiomatic meanings for whole *ní X wǒ Y* expressions, guided by the principle of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986). I will address this issue in a separate paper.

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