Between Syntax and Discourse:
A Prolegomenon to A DISCOURSE GRAMMAR
OF MANDARIN CHINESE*

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Researchers in Chinese grammar have long recognized the limitations of the Western theoretical framework of syntax that has been imposed on the study of Chinese grammar since Ma Jianzhong's *Ma Shi Wen Tong* toward the end of the 19th century. For example, Chao (1968) adopts the notion of 'topic' instead of the Western 'subject' as one of the immediate constituents of the Chinese sentence.[1] Since then, topic has become a familiar term to most grammarians in the characterization of Chinese and other similar languages in spite of the lack of a precise definition for it. Through the development of Chinese grammatical study in the past twenty years or so, 'topic' has been utilized to creat further functional notions, such as 'topic prominency' (Li and Thompson, 1976), 'topic chain' (Tsao, 1979), 'secondary topic' (Tsao, 1990), and many others. Topic structures in Chinese are also well recognized and worked on in the GB theory (Li, 1990: 197-200). They all represent a departure from the mainstream Western linguistic thought and a new direction for Chinese linguistics.

While the tremendous amount of work done on 'topic' has certainly helped answer many structural and functional questions in Chinese grammar, there are a lot more problems that can be raised concerning the further understanding and explanation of the grammar of the language. For instance, are there other functions for the verbal suffixes, such as *le* and *zhe*, than their aspectual marking function? Why is it that adverb sets such as *you*, *zai*, and *hai* are interchangeable in isolated clauses while they are not always interchangeable in larger contexts despite their near synonymity (Chen, 1993)? Why is it that the third-person pronouns *ta* and *tamen* tend to occur less frequently in Chinese than their counterparts in many Western languages? How can a Chinese 'sentence' be given a more precise definition than 'expressing a complete thought' while English and other Western languages seem to have a better structural definition for it? Why is it that many native Chinese grammarians have perceived the Chinese language as having a predominantly 'liushuiju' (literally, 'flowing-water sentence') structure[2] as distinguished from other Western types of sentences? These are, of

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[1] The word 'sentence' is used here as a pre-theoretical term for Mandarin Chinese, as there has not been any rigorous definition for it in the literature of Chinese linguistics. Defining what a 'sentence'is like in Mandarin should be one of the main tasks of discourse grammar.

[2] *Liushuiju* is meant to denote a sentence structure where clauses are lineally arranged without a hierarchical structure. It is said to be the characteristic way of combining Chinese clauses into sentences. (See, for example, Shen, 1988: 447.) This view is based on the preoccupation that Chinese is non-inflectional and therefore any notion expressed by inflection in Western languages is not applicable to Chinese.

course, just a few of the questions that may be raised within the context of current research in Chinese grammar. Attempts have been made to explain such facts but, unfortunately, many of them have only appealed to linguistic bias and conjecture through native intuition (Cf. Shen, 1988).

Underlying all those questions, however, there is one fundamental problem with the traditional, and some of the current, grammatical theories. That is the strict adherence to 'sentence grammar'---grammar that limits itself within the confines of the sentence. In other words, most traditional and many currently dominant grammatical theories are only concerned with the structure of the sentence, without recognizing the fact that the form of a sentence may be affected by extra-sentential factors. When the criteria of such a sentence grammar are applied to a language like Chinese, it is immediately obvious that the model is far from being adequate for describing the structure of a linguistic system that lacks an elaborate formal apparatus of tense-aspect, case marking, voice, modal auxiliaries, etc. in terms of the familiar structural signals that prevail in Indo-European languages. Chinese, in particular, re-lies heavily on relative ordering of constituents, inter-clausal coreference, particles, and seman-tic correlates, among many others, to signal syntactic structure as well as discourse relations. It is therefore indispensable, on the one hand, to account for the syntactic structure of Chi-nese in terms of signals different from the ones familiar to most Western grammarians and, on the other, to utilize discourse notions to uncover the inner workings of the clause/sentence structure of the language. The presence of the verbal suffix -le, for example, is not only to satisfy the need for marking the perfective aspect, but also to indicate the organization of clauses into larger units. (Cf. Chu and Chang, 1987.) Thus, the grammatical description of the suffix -le cannot be regarded as complete without consideration of its discourse functions.

Facts like the above have in many ways convinced the present author that a mean-ingful grammar of Mandarin Chinese must take into consideration what has generally been swept aside as irrelevant to syntax because of its functional and pragmatic nature. One of the purposes of such a grammar is, for example, to show that functional and pragmatic fac-tors, such as information structure and the relative degree of foregrounding and background-ing, are not only relevant but also crucial to the determination of the structure of a clause in Chinese. Another such purpose is to demonstrate that there is not necessarily a clearcut di-viding line between syntax and discourse but rather a continuum extending from one to the other.

It is on the basis of beliefs like the above that the present author has been working in the areas of Chinese syntax and discourse. He has thus called his work *Discourse Gram-mar* rather than the more prevalent term Discourse Analysis.

1.1. Discourse Grammar -- What Is It ?

The term *Discourse Grammar*[3] is here used to designate the area of linguistic inquiry

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[3] The term 'discourse grammar', from now on, will be used in the sense as defined at each progressive stage. As far as I know, the term has not been utilized by any other

that unites the study of the syntax of the clause on the one hand and the study of the organization of clauses into larger structural units on the other. It covers the syntax of the clause and the combination of single clauses into what might be perceived as similar to 'compound sentence' and 'complex sentence' in Western terminology as well as combining these 'sentences' into even larger units like the 'paragraph'. More importantly, however, it deals with the effect of such combinations on the internal structure of the clause.

An example of the discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese may be taken, again, from the use of the verbal suffix *-le*, which has been regarded as the perfective aspect marker of the language. As a perfective aspect marker, however, it doesn't parallel many of the known uses for Western languages. Though it does often mark a past action or event in its entirety (Comrie, 1976: 12); yet, even more often, such an action or event is NOT so marked in Mandarin. Otherwise, *-le* is used for something else. (Cf. Chu & Chang, 1987; Chang, 1986.) These latter cases cannot be simply dismissed as optional or be reasonably explained on the basis of perfectivity without taking into account the discourse functions of the suffix. A specific instance is the deletion of *-le* in a series of action verbs except the last one to signal their relatedness.

Another example concerns the relative positioning of the reason-consequence clauses containing the conjunctive adverbs *yinwe* 'because' and *suoyi* 'therefore'. It is often said that Chinese grammar strictly observes the iconicity principle of cause-effect/reason-consequence and therefore the *yinwei*-clause as a statement of 'reason' invariably precedes the statement of 'consequence' in the form of a clause with or without *suoyi*. As a matter of fact, there ARE cases where we find the reverse order of the consequence clause without *suoyi* before the reason clause with *yinwei*. These cases then are often conveniently labelled as Westernization. Admittedly, there are cases of Westernization where no justification of reversing the order can be found. If we take a closer look, however, some instances of the reverse order may be well jstified on the basis of discourse cohesion, just like the preposed and postposed *if-* and *when*-clauses are in English (Ramsey, 1987).

Given the rough definition of a discourse grammar proposed at the beginning of this section, the discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese then must be able to relate the structural descriptions of such grammatical items as the verbal suffixes and the relative order of clauses to the cohesive organization of a block of discourse. In other words, it must account for how the structure of a clause may affect the cohesion of the linguistic form within which the clasue occurs. Conversely, it must also be able to demonstrate in what ways discourse may require that a structural unit, such as a verb or a clause, take one form over any other for reasons of felicitous organization.

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author with a specific definition. I have used it as the title of a graduate linguistics course at the University of Florida and the National Chengchi University in Taipei to designate an area of study delineated here.

Thus, a discourse grammar in our sense is distinct, in some significant ways, from what is generally known as discourse analysis in linguistics. We address the following three areas of difference.

First, while discourse analysis is by and large communicatively oriented, discourse grammar is structurally oriented. The prevailing view of discourse analysis is that discourse is a process and it takes 'words, phrases and sentences which appear in the textual record of a discourse to be evidence of an attempt by a producer (speaker/writer) to communicate his message to a recipient (hearer/reader)' (Brown and Yule, 1984: 24). The chief purpose of a discourse grammar is, on the other hand, to examine the structure of discourse: what structural devices are used to perform what functions?

Secondly, while discourse analysis is concerned with both spoken and written discourse (though for many researchers spoken discourse is the primary concern); discourse grammar at this stage mainly deals with the written text (cf. Liao, 1992). This is not a distinction by nature but one by convenience. Since discourse grammar is at its infant stage, it has to start from something that is more tangible and better understood. By taking written language as its data base, discourse grammar may not have to worry about intonation, speaker attitude,[4] performance factor, etc., all of which are less well understood than overt written signals, especially in terms of Mandarin Chinese.

Thirdly, discourse grammar emphasizes both the effect of discourse organization on the structural grammar of the clause and that of grammar on discourse, while there is no such emphasis discernible in the usual practice of discourse analysis. This has to do with the primary motivation of the researchers invovled, e.g. Tsao, Liao, Chu and Thompson. Most of them started with syntax in their academic career, but were disillusioned by the restrictive approaches in the syntactic theories at that time. They turned to discourse for solution to the syntactic problems that they had to deal with. They have now been firmly convinced that there exists in discourse a large body of reasonable explanations for syntactic problems, which would otherwise seem to be arbitrary or even unaccountable. This naturally leads to why there is a need for a discourse grammar, especially for Mandarin Chinese.

Before we go on, some clarification is in order. Discourse grammar here, in one way or another, bears quite some resemblance to one view of discourse analysis, which Brown and Yule (1985: 24-25) terms discourse-as-product. Typical of this view is the cohesion approach such as exemplified in Halliday and Hasan (1976). It is obvious that many of their notions on cohesive ties are adopted in discourse grammar.

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[4] Of course, there is a dilemma when modality is considered. Although modality (which is speaker attitude and, sometimes, a guess on the hearer's attitude) is explicitly expressed by sentence particles and modality adverbs in Mandarin, there is a lot more than those structural signals.

1.2. The Need for a Discourse Grammar

In early 70s, some syntacticians started to feel uncomfortable about the solutions that autonomous syntax had to offer for many syntactic problems. Among those problems were, just to name a few, pronominalization, reflexivization, definiteness interpretation, tense-aspect marking, relativization, and subordination. What autonomous syntax like transformational grammar did was to set up a rule for each and every syntactic phenomenon to generate grammatical forms and rule out ungrammtical ones. While such rules in a grammar may certainly be made related to each other and most of them may be made general enough to subsume certain portions of related phenomena under them, they don't really offer any further rationale for why there are such forms. Thus, one can not feel satisfied with such rules unless one is willing to accept them as the ultimate explanations. This dissatisfaction led to the formulation of many other theoretical frameworks such as generative semantics, case grammar, lexical function, etc. One of the further developments resulted in functional syntax, which paved the way for discourse grammar.

Some of the problems that find autonomous syntax insufficient are illustrated below.

(A) **Pronominalization**. Pronominalization, for example, is supposed to occur within a sentence, e.g.

> (1. a) When Dad$_i$ comes home, he$_i$ will be mad.
>
> b) When he$_i$ comes home, Dad$_i$ will be mad.
>
> (2. a) Dad$_i$ will be mad when he$_i$ comes home.
>
> b) * He$_i$ will be mad when Dad$_i$ comes home.

In the (a) sentences, forward pronominalization is said to have occurred and there is no restriction that forbids such forward process. In the (b) sentences backward pronominalization is said to have occurred, but there is some restriction that forbids such a backward process. Sentence (2.b) is ungrammatical just because it has violated the restriction. While it is true that the ungrammaticality of (2.b) is the result of violation of some rule, the acceptablity of (1.b) may not be by the same token that the other sentences in such sets are acceptable. The following pair that Kuno (1980: 131) gives illustrates the problem:

> (3. a) * In John's portrait of Mary$_i$, she$_i$ found a scratch.
>
> b) In John's portrait of Mary$_i$, she$_i$ looks sick.

Any syntactic constraint should be applicable to both or neither of (3.a) and (3.b). As a matter of fact, the same argument also applies to forward pronominalization: (Kuno, 1980: 130)

> (4. a) * In John$_i$'s dormitory, he$_i$ smoked pot.
>
> b) In John$_i$'s dormitory, only he$_i$ smoked pot.

According to Kuno, the problem involves whether the nominals in question are thematic or not. Pronominalization therefore is not merely an INTRAsentential operation and it has to go beyond the sentence boundaries to find a more plausible solution.

Pronominalization in Chinese is notoriously irregular in terms of syntax. Any account for the many uses and non-uses of third-person pronouns in Chinese must address a larger domain than what has usually been equated to the Western sentence. (See, for example, Cherry Li, 1985.)

(B) **Reflexivization**. The solution to reflexivization has long seemed to be the corner stone of formal syntax. In early generative grammar, it was often used as the starting point for tranformational rules. Later in the GB theory, it has formed part of the basis for the binding theory. One would think that it ought to have been solidly established and universally accepted as a grammtical rule. Recent research, however, has discovered that many cases of the reflexive pronouns in English and other languages are not accountable by such rules. Zribi-Hertz (1989: 707-8) cites the following examples as reflexivization on the principle of 'emphasis' and 'domain of point of view':

> (5. a) ARTHUR$_i$'s fulsomeness seemed to embarrass the Baron as much as it did HIMSELF$_i$.
>
> b) MARY$_j$ eventually convinced HER SISTER SUSAN$_j$ that John had better pay visits to everybody except THEMSELVES$_{ij}$.

And here is a line in a memo from a department office secretary to the faculty:

> (6) After checking the rolls return them to MYSELF or Bev.

In Mandarin Chinese, the problem seems to be even more complex. Chu (1989: 101-6) presents a survey of 60 native speakers on the use of *ziji* 'self'and *taziji* 'him-/herself' in various contexts. He finds that while the binding principle can correctly apply to the use of the reflexive pronouns in single clauses in Mandarin, in cases where more than one single clause are involved the notion 'theme' must be invoked to provide a better explanation. (Also cf. Xu, 1993.) The analysis of the Korean reflexive *caki* seems to involve a hierarchical ranking of the coreferential NPs. (See O'Grady, 1987; Kang, 1990, for example.)

(C) **Aspect Marking**. In most theories of syntax, tense and aspect have merely been treated as a problem of cooccurrence of verbal inflections with appropriate auxiliaries within a clause. The more substantial problem of choosing one tense or aspect over another is relegated to rhetoric. Only recently has the use of tense and aspect attracted the attention of theoretical linguists such as Hopper (1979) and Givon (1984). Aspect, in particular, seems to bear more on discourse than on anything else. Hopper (1982: 4) suggests for aspect 'a core function which is discourse-derived and in some sense universal, and a set of additive functions which are not universal (though some of them may be common) and which represent grammaticized semantic extensions of the discourse function.' Foreground in discourse seems to be closely related to the perfective aspect in French and Russian (Hopper, 1979: 217-8). In Mandarin Chinese, the perfective aspect marker *-le* performs, among many others, a forward linking function (Li & Thompson, 1981: 640-1) or a 'peak' and an anteriority function (Chang, 1986: 105-114), all of which are discoursal in nature.

Especially disturbing is the problem of when the perfective aspect marker *-le* in Mandarin does or does not occur. E.g. in single clauses like the following:

(7. a) Zuotian wanshang women kan dianying.
        yesterday-evening we see movie
        ' Last night we saw a movie.' b) Zuotian wanshang wemen kan*le* dianying.
        yesterday-evening we see-ERFECTIVE movie
        ' Last night we saw a movie.'

there doesn't seem to be any difference between them in isolation. The difference shows only when one asks whether there is anything following the given statement. The statement in (7.a) doesn't seem to be finished, but the one in (7.b) sounds more complete. An explanation for this kind of phenomenon has to come from connected discourse instead of isolated clauses/sentences.

The problem of aspect in syntax can be further illustrated by the verbal suffix *-zhe* in Mandarin. Chu (1987) claims that there are three levels of function for this durative aspect marker: semantic, syntactic and pragmatic. While its semantic function is to signal a durative aspect and its pragmatic function is an interactive one, Chu's syntactic analysis of the suffix is to treat it as a means of subordination in both the simple and the complex sentence. This analysis, in fact, should be regarded as a discourse solution to the problem rather than a syntactic one. That is, the decision of when to use the subordination and what to be made subordinate is based on discourse rather than on syntax. E.g., the choice between the following forms depends more on discourse needs than anything else: [5]

(8. a) Ta tiao*zhe* wu chang ge.
        (s)he dance-*zhe* dance sing song
        ' (S)he sings while (s)he dances.'
    b) Ta chang*zhe* ge tiao wu.
        (s)he sing-*zhe* song dance dance
        ' (S)he dances while (s)he sings.'

Despite the fact that (8.a) and (8.b) are syntactically different but semantically (i.e. propositionally) equivalent, the selection of one over the other depends entirely on whether *chang ge* 'singing' or *tiao wu* 'dancing' is taken to be the main theme of discourse.[6]

(D) **Subordination**. As it was mentioned in the preceding sub-section (C), though subordination is a syntactic device, it anchors its motivation in discourse. The anatomy of the syntax of subordination, therefore, cannot be fully understood unless a discourse view of the structure is incorporated.

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[5] But see Chen (1986 and 1987).

[6] The term 'theme of discourse' is being used in its loose sense to show 'what is being talked about as the main idea.'

In terms of discourse, a claim has been made and generally accepted that independent clauses are for main events in a narrative but subordinate clauses are for background descriptions or non-eventline happenings. This absolute dichotomy, however, has recently been challenged.

Thompson (1987: 451) finds that 'while a majority [of the temporally sequenced events in a written narrative] are coded by independent clauses, a significant subset are "subordinate".' In each of these cases, she claims, 'the use of a subordinate clause allows the writer to accomplish a text-creation goal *in addition to* the obvious one of maintaining the temporal line.' Some of her text-creation goals of the subordinate structures are: (1) to indicate dependency of one event on another (p. 446), (2) to signal simultaneity of one event with another (pp. 446-7), and (3) to perform a relating-back function (pp. 447-9).

Mathiessen and Thompson (1988: 275) find that 'it is impossible to define or even characterize "subordinate clause" in strictly sentence-level terms.' They claim that 'in written English discourse, a certain kind of what linguists have called "subordinate clause".....can usefully be viewed as grammticalization of a very general property of the hierarchical structure of the discourse itself.'[7] (ibid.)

Fox and Thompson (1990) show that the form of a relative clause in English conversation (i.e. whether the head NP is a subject, direct object or object of a preposition, etc. and whether the relativized NP is a subject, direct object or object of a preposition, etc.) can be reasonably explained 'by the information-flow patterns characteristic of English discourse....' For example, '...Existential-Head relative clauses tend to be S-relatives, since the grounding for the human Existential Heads is typically either main-clause grounding[8] or proposition-linking, and the relative clause generally does not serve an anchoring function.' (p. 314)

Finally, Myhill and Hibiya (1988) deal with the problem of 'subordination' in another light. Skeptical of the assumption that non-finite verbs as a form of subordination must be background, they find that, in terms of grounding, 'non-finite forms occupy a position between fully finite forms and other subordinate forms.' (p. 395)

It is quite obvious that demands of discourse heavily affect the structure of syntax. Despite the general view that syntax makes available formal devices for discourse, it can perhaps be more appropriately claimed that discourse provides a basis for such syntactic forms.

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[7] One of my students and I have found that one of the major differences between Chinese and English in grammar and discourse is that many discourse markers in Mandarin Chinese are not as much grammaticalized as their counterparts in English. See Liu and Chu, 1993.

[8] 'Grounding' is here used to designate certain ways of relating one term or proposition to another in a given discourse. Fox and Thompson (p. 300) recognize three central kinds of grounding: anchoring, main-clause grounding and proposition-linking. It is to be distinguished from the term 'grounding' in connection with foreground and background in narrative structure.

1.3. From Grammar to Discourse

We have argued above that there is a close and indispensible relation between syntax and discourse. While discourse relies to a certain extent on grammatical markings to express its organization, many syntactic devices have their roots in discourse. It is therefore safe to say that one cannot fully understand grammar without also taking discourse into consideration or vice versa. But when we start to look at such a relation in Mandarin Chinese, we immediately find ourselves confronted with an entry problem in terms of methodology---that is, the problem of beginning research activities in a relatively uncharted area.[9] To start from Chinese discourse is unrealistic because there is virtually nothing to start from in that area.[10] It is then perhaps more practical to begin with the problems in Chinese gammar that have not been sufficiently dealt with in the current theory of syntax.

A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese, therefore, should first take up those syntactic features in Mandarin Chinese that seem most likely to be operating at the sentence level, yet have not had a reasonable explanation within that domain. This includes aspect marking and sentential adverbials. From there, it should move on to areas that have less syntactic relevance. This covers clause-particles and modality. Finally, it should enter the purely dicourse-oriented domain. This embodies such notions as topicality, information status, grounding structure. These latter notions, however, necessarily involve syntactic structures such as pronominalization, subordination, and clause-combining. The studying of these notions will profitably result in a relatively precise definition of what the unit above clause might be like in Chinese. In other words, is there a structural unit in Mandarin Chinese that can compare with the sentence in Western grammar? If yes, what is it like structurally? A positive answer to the questions should lead to another level of discourse structure---the definition of paragraph and its organization.

1.4. A Mandarin Chinese Discourse Grammar -- What Is It Like ?

On the basis of the discussions in the preceding sub-sections, we are now in a position to lay out a blueprint for a discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese. At this point, the requirements that it must meet seem to be the following:

(A) A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese must distinguish between grammatical markers which are for purely syntactic purposes and those which are also relevant to discourse. It is the latter markers that it must be able to treat reasonably and convincingly. They include such devices as aspect marking, pronominalization and subordination. All of them have traditionally been treated as purely grammatical devices or processes with little or no attention paid to their discourse functions.

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[9] Cf. Sanders and Wirth (1985: 9).

[10] There is certainly some pioneering work done in this area, such as by Liao Qiu-Zhong in the 1980s, which can be considered purely discourse. Most of his publications reappeared in Liao, 1992. Other works such as by Tsao, Li & Thompson, and Chen Ping mostly deal with syntactic problems seeking discourse solutions.

(B) A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese must determine whether markers that are amphibious in nature are actually syntactically oriented or discoursally motivated. Only after such determinations have been made can any reasonable explanation be offered for why a given marker is used in both ways. The sentence-final particle *le* seems to be a syntactically oriented marker that is extended to signal discourse functions, while other sentence-final particles like *ne, me,* and *(y)a* seem to be discoursally oriented but their interpretations are often restricted within the sentence.

(C) A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese must attempt to discover discourse signals that have not been grammaticalized. Such signals have traditionally been neglected in linguistic study, but their importance in a discourse grammar is self-evident. The relative order of clauses and the use of adverbs, especially in terms of their position in a clause, seem to belong to this category in Mandarin Chinese.

(D) A discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese must recognize grammatical notions that have impact on discourse but have not so far been utilized in the study of Mandarin Chinese discourse. This covers the notions of state vs. action (and the finer distinctions in-between), marked vs. unmarked verb forms, and the transitivity scale. Shades of subordination, for example, may be expressed in Mandarin by different forms of the verb in addition to the explicit subordinate conjunctions. Such functions, by which clauses are put together in an orderly manner, are inevitably relevant to the organization of discourse.

(E) Finally, a discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese must propose an integrated framework that is based on commonly accepted theories of discourse in general but at the same time is compatible with the peculiarities of the language. Such a proposal represents the ultimate contribution of discourse grammar to the better understanding of the Chinese language.

As an introduction to discourse grammar of Mandarin Chinese, the aim of this paper is not to present a comprehensive inventory of whatever there is about the discourse of the language. It rather points out a few ideas of what is possible for investigation in the field. As was stated above, the main thrust at present is on written discourse. Hopefully, the little research currently under way will, in the words of an evaluator of a project by the present author, 'be instrumental in attracting and concerting more efforts to further pursue the issue' in Chinese discourse.

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