

Discussion on *The Usage of Punctuation Marks*

Nianfeng Huang

Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong 526061

Abstract: *The Usage of Punctuation Marks* (GB/T15834-2011) has been adopted as a national standard for many years; however, certain areas may benefit from further improvement. The main points are as follows: firstly, it is advisable to add an introduction to the dot mark “.”; secondly, it would be beneficial to expand the scope of the book title mark; thirdly, establishing a proper noun mark in modern Chinese texts is recommended; and fourthly, the repeated use and combination of question and exclamation marks should take into account the punctuation practices of ancient Chinese literature.

Keywords: Punctuation Usage; Shortcomings; Revision suggestions

1. Introduction to the addition of the Dot Mark “.”

The Usage of Punctuation Marks does not specifically include this symbol, though it provides a special note: “Special symbols used in fields such as mathematics, currency, collation, dictionaries, and annotations do not belong to punctuation marks.” The dot mark is neither a mathematical symbol nor a specialized symbol in any other field; thus, it should be classified as a punctuation mark.

In terms of usage, the dot primarily functions to denote sequence, intervals (e.g., year, month, and day), and chapter numbers in texts. The standard function is primarily ordering, while the interval function appears between serial numbers, such as 2.1 and 2.1.1.

Regarding intervals in dates, Annex A of the *Supplementary Rules for the Use of Punctuation Marks* states:

A.4: Supplementary Rules for the Use of the Dot Mark: When using Arabic numerals for abbreviated dates, a short hyphen should connect the numerals instead of the dot mark. Although the short hyphen is suggested, the dot mark remains widely used in date formatting, such as “2010.03.02”.

Appendix B, *Description of Punctuation Marks*, further elaborates:

B.3.3: When numbering Arabic, Latin, or Roman numerals without parentheses, the dot mark should follow as a punctuation symbol (originating in a foreign language).

B.3.5: Combining Arabic numerals with dot marks indicates the end of each hierarchical level.

It is worth noting three points regarding Annex B’s descriptions:

(1) It may be inaccurate to state that the “dot mark belongs to foreign punctuation” since, although it originated in English, it has been adopted into Chinese as a functional mark and should no longer be regarded solely as foreign. Similar marks, such as “?” and “!” originally from other languages, are now established punctuation in Chinese.

(2) When used to express hierarchical relationships in texts, the dot mark functions not only for ordering but also for separating the levels of hierarchy, as between the first and next levels.

(3) The description of the dot mark is incomplete and does not include its use in date intervals, such as “2023.8.30”, which is not common in English date formats.

Therefore, the *Usage of Punctuation Symbols* should include a detailed introduction to the dot mark, recognizing it as part of Chinese punctuation (originating from foreign usage) and elaborating on its functions within the Chinese language.^①

2. Expanding the Scope of Book Title Usage

The Usage of Punctuation Marks specifies guidelines for book titles:

Basic Usage To mark titles of books, volumes, articles, publications, newspapers, and documents. To mark titles of films, television shows, music, poetry, sculpture, etc. For software names primarily in Chinese or with Chinese dominance. For abbreviations of work titles.

When a title appears within another title, use double quotation marks for the outer title and single for the inner title.

As one of the proprietary names, there was no special title previously. The title number is likely related to the English title specifically marked in italics. However, the title has far exceeded its intended scope. For example, the following non-title names are used: the

sculpture name (“Oriental Dawn”), the TV program name (“Light and Shadow”), and the computer software name (“Computer Guard”). In real life, when mentioning antivirus software like 360 Security Guard, Microsoft Computer Butler, 2345 Security Guard, or Tencent Computer Butler, the title is generally not used. Many writers refer to “thinker” or “broken arm Venus” without the title or quotation marks, such as:

Example 1: The broken arm of Venus is the first century BC work.....(Half-naked artistic charm? Interpretation of the Venus statue, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1693163084903953922&wfr=spider&for=pc>)

Example 2: The work integrates the profound spiritual connotation with the complete characterization.....(Appreciation of the statue of thinkers (Symbolism of the statue of thinkers), <https://www.diaolongke.com/news/43812.html>)

It is worth considering that since sculptures can have titles, punctuation rules state that titles can “indicate the names of various works that appear in the paragraph.” Does this mean that titles cannot be added to other works, such as architectural ones? Famous structures like “Free Idol,” “Small Waist,” and the “Water Cube” could also have titles.

On the other hand, in practical language usage, the widespread application of titles frequently deviates from punctuation guidelines. This discrepancy arises not solely because punctuation marks inherently encompass titles, but also due to the absence of a dedicated punctuation mark (or specific terminology) for modern Chinese text titles, as explained further below.

This paper advocates for broadening the application of appellations based on practical utility, incorporating names derived from sculptures and television into the appellation category, as well as encompassing titles pertinent to the subjects at hand, including book titles, course names pertaining to cultural achievements, and research project titles—such as Modern Chinese courses and research endeavors like “Comparative Studies of Ancient and Modern China.” Despite repeated efforts to discourage these usages, they remain prevalent in linguistic practice, owing to the fact that individuals view them as proper names lacking distinctive symbols and thus instinctively apply the label of titles associated with books and culture. In the present scenario, the sphere of book title utilization can be expanded in alignment with public usage psychology and practices.

Moreover, the punctuation rule states that modern Chinese texts should not use names and must use labels instead. Using quotation marks is inconsistent with social understanding, as they are viewed as “references,” not name symbols. Titles are perceived as more appropriate for naming, leading to their common misuse.

3. Establishing a Marker for Special Names in Modern Chinese Texts

The specifications for using “special names” in the *Usage of Punctuation Marks* are as follows:

Basic Usage of Special Name: Proper nouns in ancient texts, such as names of people, places, states, nations, dynasties, eras, religious terms, official titles, and organizations. These terms, along with other proper nouns, such as unit names, official titles, events, conferences, and titles, should use alternative markers in modern Chinese texts, like quotation marks or title punctuation.

Clearly, the current guidelines for special names are meant for classical Chinese texts and do not apply to modern Chinese. In instances where such a label is necessary, alternative markers—like quotation marks or title numbers—are recommended. However, in modern Chinese contexts, there are cases where proper names may need special highlighting, yet there is no suitable punctuation available for this purpose. Although quotation marks or title markers could be used, both are somewhat inadequate. Quotation marks are commonly associated with “reference” and are not generally recognized as name markers, while using title markers may contravene title usage standards.

For example, if a cement road donated by community benefactors is named “Health and Longevity Road” by the organizers, there is no ideal symbol to properly emphasize this name in the text:

Example 3a): This health and longevity road was constructed through community donations.

Example 3b): This “Health and Longevity Road” was constructed through community donations.

Example 3c): This *Health and Longevity Road* was constructed through community donations.

In Example 3a), the phrase does not effectively highlight the road’s name as intended. Example 3b) uses quotation marks, which adhere to standard punctuation but may not convey the intended emphasis. Example 3c) capitalizes on a title marker, effectively emphasizing the name but does not conform to standard punctuation. In practice, however, the third format is often used, reflecting the lack of a truly appropriate symbol.

To address this gap, we propose establishing a new symbol specifically for special names in modern Chinese texts. Rather than a horizontal line (as it is less recognizable as punctuation in modern contexts), this new marker, potentially named “name mark” or “designation mark,” could serve as a standardized option, meeting the need for a distinctive label and avoiding the confusion associated with using other markers.

4. The Use of Combined Question and Exclamation Marks in Ancient Chinese Literature

According to *Usage of Punctuation Marks*, “4.2 Question Mark” specifies:

4.2.3.3: When multiple questions are posed, or when the tone of questioning intensifies, question marks may be stacked, with a maximum of three. In cases lacking extreme emotional emphasis, question marks should not be stacked.

Unlike the use of other individual punctuation marks, the question mark and exclamation mark can overlap and combine. Special attention should be given to punctuation in ancient Chinese literature.

The author believes that stacking question marks and exclamation marks serves to strengthen emphasis and depends heavily on context. In ancient Chinese, determining the meaning can sometimes be challenging. Using a single question or exclamation mark is often sufficient to convey the intended tone. Thus, it is common for ancient Chinese literature to avoid stacked questions or exclamation marks.

However, the combination of a question mark and an exclamation mark is different. This combination is not merely reinforcing; it introduces both questioning and exclamatory tones, which are essential for clear expression. Therefore, the combination of these two marks should be used in ancient Chinese literature, especially in contexts that include questioning or exclamatory words.

Despite this need, the combination of the question mark and exclamation mark remains rare in ancient texts. For example:

In *The Analects of Confucius*, The Master said.

This passage, quoted by Yang Jianqiao (2010:151)^[3], explains that “‘hu’ indicates doubt, and ‘zai’ serves to strengthen the rhetorical question.” Here, “zai” functions as an exclamation, reinforcing the rhetorical tone; however, the punctuation only includes a question mark, failing to fully capture the exclamatory tone.

Additional examples where exclamation marks might have been appropriate are provided by Yang Jianqiao (2010:146, 153)^[3]:

While question and exclamation marks are often used together to clarify modern texts, ancient Chinese literature typically lacks this combination, sometimes resulting in ambiguous expressions. For instance, in Yang Bojun’s translation of *The Analects of Confucius*:

Example 4: “Original: “He shi yu ren!” Translation: “How could it only be the way of benevolence?””^[4] (pp. 90-91).

Although an exclamation mark is used here, both the phrase “he shi” and “how” imply a question. “?!,” might more accurately capture the tone.

Example 5: “Original: “Gong Bo Liao qi ruo ming he!” Translation: “What could Gong Bo Liao do about my fate?””^[4] (p. 218).

The single exclamation mark omits the interrogative sense of “ruo...he” and “what,” making “?!” more appropriate.

Example 6: Original: “Wu shui qi? qi tian hu!” Translation: “Whom would I deceive? Heaven?”^[4] (p. 128).

Here, the original text uses an exclamation mark, while the translation includes a question mark. The proper punctuation would be “?!” to convey both emotions fully. Similarly, Wang Li (2014) presents this as a question rather than an exclamation^[5] (p. 87), though another instance combines both marks.

Again, the original uses an exclamation mark “!”, while the translation opts for a question mark “?”. The combination “?!” would more accurately reflect both question and exclamation.

This variance highlights how some sentences end in a question mark while others use an exclamation mark, as seen in:

Example 7: “The gentleman, the original and born. Filial piety younger brother also, the foundation of people and!”^[4] (p. 3)

Example 8: “The gentleman, the original and born, filial piety brother also, the foundation of people and?”^[6] (p. 242)

The end punctuation in these examples is appropriate; otherwise, each expression would be misaligned.

Notably, Wang Li (2014) seems to support using both question and exclamation marks. In his analysis of the modal term “zai,” he writes:

Wang’s analysis implies that both punctuation marks “?!” are appropriate when both questioning and exclamation are intended. However, he does not apply this consistently in his own work, making it challenging for others to follow.

It seems necessary to clarify that question and exclamation marks can indeed be combined where needed, particularly in sentences that convey both questioning and exclamatory tones. This approach aligns with practical language use and may help resolve ambiguities in punctuation within ancient texts.

Acknowledgment: The National Standard of the People’s Republic of China, GB/T15834-2011 Punctuation Mark Usage[1] (hereinafter referred to as “Usage of Punctuation Symbols”), has been in effect for many years. The author believes that, while valuable, this standard has areas that could be improved.

References

- [1] General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China, Standardization Administration of China. Punctuation symbol usage (GB / T15834-2011) [M]. Beijing: China Standards Press, 2012.
- [2] Ming Maoxiu. Full angle or half angle?—Punctuation mark usage (GB / T15834-011) refers to the defect [J]. Technology and Publishing, 2015 (4).
- [3] Yang Cambridge. Ancient Chinese Handsense [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2010.
- [4] Yang Bojun, translated notes. The Analects of Confucius translation [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012.
- [5] Wang Li. Chinese Grammar history [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014.
- [6] Shen Jiaxuan. Beyond the subject-verb structure — on speech law and on speech format [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2019.