

Chinese Cultural Studies:
Chinese Logographic Writing

Articles adapted from: David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) [pp. 200-201]

LOGOGRAPHIC WRITING SYSTEMS

are those where the graphemes [the smallest written unit of the language] represent words. The best-known cases are Chinese, and its derivative script, Japanese kanji. The symbols are variously referred to as logographs, logograms, or - in the case of oriental languages - characters. But there are two terminological complications. First, because Chinese writing derives from an ideographic script [where each grapheme has an abstract, and not necessarily a clear pictorial, link with the meaning of the word represented], with several pictographic elements [where there is a direct pictorial link with the word represented], the characters are commonly referred to as ideographs. However, this term is really not appropriate, as the characters refer to linguistic units, and not directly to concepts or things. Secondly, the characters in fact often represent parts of words or morphemes [for example "happi" in "happiness" constitutes a morpheme] as well as whole words, so that even the term 'logographic' is slightly misleading; but in the absence of a more appropriate term (such as "morphographic"), it continues to be used.

Several thousand graphemes are involved in a logographic system. The great Chinese dictionary of K'ang Hsi Kangxi (1662-1722) contains nearly 50,000 characters, but most of these are archaic or highly specialized. In the modern language, basic literacy requires knowledge of some 2,000 characters. Similarly, in Japan 1,850 characters are prescribed by the Japanese Ministry of Education and adopted by law as those most essential for everyday use. Of these, 881 are taught during the six years of elementary school.

Most languages make use of some logograms: a selection of widely used graphemes is given below. Note that these signs, which are familiar to many modern Westerners, mean the same thing in any language. In the same way Chinese characters mean the same thing whether they are read in a variety of Chinese "dialects", or even in Japanese, a language which is as unlike Chinese in its internal structure as it is possible for a language to be.

CHINESE CHARACTERS

Traditionally, Chinese characters are divided into six types (liu shu "six scripts").

hsing sheng

Most characters are of this type containing two elements. There is a semantic element, known as a "radical". This is combined with a phonetic element, whose function is to remind the reader of how the word is to be pronounced.

For example, the word "mother" ma is expressed by the semantic element "woman" followed by a phonetic indicator ma. The word for "scold" is also ma (with a different tone), and this is expressed by the semantic element "mouth" (repeated) followed by the same phonetic indicator. In both cases the meaning of the ma character when used alone ("horse") is disregarded.

chih shih

These characters represent abstract ideas and are closest to ideograms, for example

hui i

Compound characters in which the elements have a semantic connection, for example:

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chuan chu

Characters formed by modifying the shape or orientation of a character to produce a word of related meaning. For example the character for "corpse" derives from "man"

chia cheh

Characters that were borrowed from others of similar pronunciation For example

wan "ten thousand" derives from the use of this character for wan "scorpion".

hsiang hsing

A small group of characters that retain a close connection with original pictograms, for instance the forms for (a) "sun", "day" (ri), (b) "mountain" (shan) and (c) "field" (tian).

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The Sino Tibetan Family of Languages

[pp. 310-311]

The membership and classification of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages is highly controversial. The 'Sinitic' part of the name refers to the various

Chinese languages (often referred to as 'dialects'); the 'Tibetan' part refers to several languages found mainly in Tibet, Burma, and nearby territories. But

as there are notable similarities with many other languages of the region, some scholars 'adopt a much broader view of the family, so as to include the

Tai and Miao-Yao groups.

The Sinitic languages are spoken by over 1,000 million people. The vast majority of these are in China (over 980 million) and Taiwan (19 million), but

substantial numbers are to be found throughout the whole of South-east Asia, especially in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and

Singapore. Important Chinese-speaking communities are also found in many other parts of the world, especially in the USA.

There are nearly 300 languages in the Tibeto-Burman family, and these have been classified in several different ways. It is possible to identify 'clusters'

of languages which have certain features in common, such as the 50 or so Lolo languages, spoken by around 3 million people in parts of Burma,

Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and China. The 80 or so Naga, Kuki and Chin languages spoken in Burma and India, comprise another group. But groupings

of this kind display many differences as well as similarities and it has not yet proved possible to find a neat way of classifying these, and the other groups

thought to belong to the same family, into two or three types. It is by no means clear, for example, whether the small group of Karen languages, spoken

by around 2 million people in Burma, should be included or excluded from the Sino-Tibetan family.

After Chinese, Burmese and Tibetan are the two main languages of this family.

Burmese is spoken by over 25 million people in Burma as a mother

tongue, and several million more use it as a second language throughout the region. It has written records dating from the 11th century. Speaker

estimates for Tibetan are very uncertain, largely because of the influence of Chinese in recent years; but a figure of 34 million seems likely. There are several major dialects, which are sometimes viewed as separate languages. Written records date from the 8th century AD, treating largely of Buddhist religious subjects. The alphabet of this period, which reflects the pronunciation of the time, is still in use today. with the result that there is considerable divergence between spelling and modern Tibetan speech.

The Languages of China

[pp. 312-313]

Because there has long been a single method for writing Chinese, and a common literary and cultural history, a tradition has grown up of referring to, the eight main varieties of speech in China as 'dialects'. But in fact they are as different from each other (mainly in pronunciation and vocabulary) as French or Spanish is from Italian, the dialects of the south-east being linguistically the furthest apart. The mutual unintelligibility of the varieties is the main ground for referring to them as separate languages. However, it must also be recognized that each variety consists of a large number of dialects, many of which may themselves be referred to as languages. The boundaries between one so-called language and the next are not always easy to define.

The Chinese refer to themselves and their language, in any of the forms below, as Han - a name which derives from the Han dynasty (202 BC-AD 220). Han Chinese is thus to be distinguished from the non-Han minority languages used in China. There are over 50 of these languages (such as Tibetan, Russian, Uighur, Kazakh, Mongolian, and Korean), spoken by around 6% of the population.

THE CHINESE LINGUISTIC REVOLUTION

The 20th-century movement for language reform in China has resulted in the most ambitious programme of language planning the world has ever seen.

The programme has three aims: (i) to simplify the characters of classical written Chinese, by cutting down on their number, and reducing the number of strokes it takes to write a character; (ii) to provide a single means of spoken communication throughout the whole of China, by popularizing the Beijing-based variety, which has been chosen as a standard; (iii) to introduce a phonetic alphabet, which would gradually replace the Chinese characters in everyday use,

There have been moves to reform the language from as early as the 2nd century BC, but there has been nothing to equal the complexity of the present-day programme. in which frequent reference is made to the names of several different varieties of the Chinese language.

Wén-yán ('literary speech' or 'body of classical writing'). The cultivated literary language, recorded from around 1,500BC. and the traditional unifying medium for all varieties of Chinese. Its complex system of characters is explained on p. 200. It differs greatly from everyday speech, especially in its terse grammatical style and specialized literary vocabulary. It is now less widely used, because of the success of the current reform movement for written Chinese.

Wén-yán literary Style - Examples

These phrases, usually of four characters, illustrate the telegraphic literary style of Wén-yán. The nearest equivalent to this first proverb in English is perhaps 'Like father, like son.' Mao Zedong was particularly adept at incorporating classical features of this kind into his political speeches. The equivalent phrase for the second phrase would be 'It never rains but it pours'.

"Tigers do not breed dogs" _____ "Calamities do not occur singly"

Bái-huà ('colloquial language'). A simplified, vernacular style of writing, introduced by the literary reformer Hu Shih in 1917, to make the language more widely known to the public, and to permit the expression of new ideas. A style of writing which reflected everyday speech had developed as early as the Sung dynasty (AD 9~0-1279), but had made little impact on the dominant Wén-yán. However, the 'May Fourth Movement' (which originated in political demonstrations on 4 May 1919 after the Paris Peace Conference) adopted Hu Shih's ideas, and Bái-huà was recognized as the national language in 1922.

Pûtônghuà ('common language'). The variety chosen as a standard for the whole of China, and widely promulgated under this name after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. (In Taiwan, it goes under the name of guó yǔ, or 'national speech'; in the West, it is generally referred to simply as 'Mandarin'.) It embodies the pronunciation of Beijing; the grammar of the Mandarin dialects, and the vocabulary of colloquial Chinese literature. In 1956, it became the medium of instruction in all schools, and a policy of promoting its use began. It is now the most widely used form of spoken Chinese, and is the normal written medium for almost all kinds of publication.

Pin yin ('phonetic spelling'). After several previous attempts to write Chinese using the letters of the roman alphabet, this 58-symbol writing system was finally adopted in 1958. Its main aims are to facilitate the spread of Pûtônghuà, and the learning of Chinese characters. Pin-yin is now in widespread use. In the 1970s, for example, a new map of China was published using the alphabet, and a list of standard spellings for Chinese placename was compiled. New codes were devised for such diverse uses as telegraphy, flag signals, braille, and deaf finger-spelling.

The future of the reform programme is not entirely clear. It may be that pin-yin will ultimately supplant the general use of characters, or there may be a reaction to preserve the traditional written language. With Pûtônghuà, new varieties of regional pronunciation are certain to develop (for instance, Mao Zedong spoke it with a marked Hunan accent), which may lead to problems of intelligibility. And if Pûtônghuà is to succeed as a popular means of communication, it needs to anticipate the potential conflict with local regional dialects (for example, whether local words should be used). Much will depend on how flexibly the authorities interpret the notion of standard, and whether they are able to achieve a balance between the competing pressures of respecting popular usage (where there is a strong case for variety) and the need for national communication (which could lead to a form of centralized laying down of prescriptive linguistic rules).

Romanizing Chinese [p313]

Several systems of romanization for Chinese have been invented. The oldest in current use is known as Wade-Giles, introduced by Sir Thomas Wade in 1859, and developed by his successor in Chinese Studies at Cambridge University, Herbert Giles. This is the system which is most familiar to western eyes. In the 1930s, a system known as gwoyeu romatzyh ('national romanization') was devised by Lin Yu-t'ang and Chao Yuen-ren. During the Second World War, Yale University introduced an intensive programme of Chinese training for Air Force pilots, and introduced a new system, related more clearly to American pronunciation. But pin-yin has now become the dominant system.

The name for China illustrates some of the differences between these systems:

The Chinese characters are:

This is romanized in the different systems as follows:-

Wade Giles: Chungkuo

Gwoyeu romatzyh: Jonhhwo

Yale: Junggwo
Pin-yin: Zhongguo

Here are some familiar [Wade-Giles] spellings. with their pin-yin equivalents :

<u>Wade-Giles</u>	<u>Pin-yin</u>
Peking	Beijing
Canton	Guangzhou
Mao Tse-tung	Mao Zedong

For a more extended table of equivalents, see the Pinyin/Wade Giles Equivalency Table

For more information on Chinese see a general introduction to The Chinese Language and Pronunciation and
a more specific discussion of Chinese Logographic Writing

The Main Chinese "Dialects"

<u>Dialect</u>	<u>Where spoken</u>
Cantonese (Yüeh)	In the south, mainly Guangdong, southern Guangxi, Macau, Hong Kong.
Hakka	Widespread, especially between Fujian and Guangxi.
Hsiang (Hunan).	South central region, in Hunan
Kan	Shanxi and south-west Hebei.
Mandarin	A wide range of dialects in the northern, central and western regions. North Mandarin, as found in Beijing, is the basis of the modern standard language.
Northern Min	(Min North-west Fujian.
Southern Min	(Min The south-east, mainly in parts of Zhejiang, Fujian, Hainan Island and Taiwan.

Wu

Parts of Anhui, Zhejians. and Jiangsu.

A Chinese typewriter

The complexity of classical writing is well illustrated by this device - a Chinese typewriter. The tray contains over 2,000 characters, with several thousand more being available on other trays. The typist first aligns the tray, then presses a key, which makes an arm pick up the required character and strike it against the paper. The machine can type vertically and horizontally. It is a slow process, with good typists averaging at most 20 characters a minute.