
SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 5

December, 1987

Chinese Characters and the Greek Alphabet

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Chinese Characters and the Greek Alphabet

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Editor's note: Eric A. Havelock is the distinguished author of *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976), and other seminal works on the relationship between orality and literacy. He has served as the chairman of the Classics Departments at both Yale and Harvard. The present paper is adapted from the author's *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 51-53, 326-327, and 346-348. The "Introduction" was written expressly for *Sino-Platonic Papers*.

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An Introduction

A scholar like myself who is not a Sinologist and yet ventures the proposition that Chinese languages should be rewritten in the Greek alphabet (or "Romanized", to use the current term) is treading on uncharted territory (for him) and does so at his peril. All the more am I grateful for the support this view is now receiving from professional Sinologists, in particular at the University of Pennsylvania. As a student of Hellenism, a culture which developed on the other side of the world from China, I offer this brief apologia.

Over the years, I have become convinced that Hellenism as a culture represents not a static condition of uniform sublimity mysteriously achieved and maintained as an effect of some racial advantage. Rather it should be understood as an evolving process, governed by a dynamic of change, as both language and thought underwent transformational alteration caused by a transition from orality to literacy. The instrument of change is discerned to be the invention of the Greek alphabet, at a quite late stage in the history of developing cultures.

The unique virtue of this instrument, and cause of the cultural dynamic, was its superior technical efficiency, as compared with all other writing systems known to have existed before Greece, or which have continued to be used since Greece. Its efficiency rested on an analysis of the components of linguistic sound, reducing them to an atomic table of elements, themselves unpronounceable, which by combination produced the syllables of actual words that were pronounceable.

Speech is an acoustic reality, writing a visual one. Performance of the former has been perfected through a million years of natural selection in the evolutionary process. The latter is a trick which we began to learn only yesterday (in terms of evolutionary time). To "hear" language (and to "say" it) is programmed in our genes; to "see" it (and "read" it) is not. The job of the written word is to trigger a memory, if possible automatic, of the **sounds** of the spoken word. The Greek alphabet can do this exhaustively with lightning speed and minimum of effort, once the atomic table has been memorized. The visual operation, which is artificial, is reduced to a minimum, so much so that the visual table can be taught to small children completely while they are still extending the range of their spoken vocabulary. The two meld together, so that "reading" can become an automatic reflex. No other system so far as I am aware has ever approached this condition.

I looked around the world "from China to Peru" and concluded that those peoples and cultures who had adopted the Greek invention had set the pace in the development of law, literature, science, and philosophy, culminating in the industrial revolution -- had in fact invented "modernism". Those using other script systems -- Arabic, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Japanese -- had tagged along, employing the alphabetic script in varying degrees of "modernism". The reason for this is perceived to be that their script systems, of varying character, all in varying degree kept getting in the way: a barrier between the speech act as it actually sounds and its visualization on paper. None of them could be imposed easily upon the genes of small children so successfully as to meld into an automatic reflex at the unconscious level.

Chinese writing, I concluded, offered a special and extreme case of this difficulty. The system required memorization of literally thousands of visible objects, which take on a visual reality of their own interposed between sound and vision. Their existence violated the principle that the "sighting" of symbols, being an artificially learned exercise not programmed in our genes,

should be reduced to the minimum possible interruption in the transfer backwards of visual memory to acoustic memory. In effect, Chinese calligraphy over the centuries, instead of enlarging the original oral-acoustic range of meaning in spoken language, as acoustic memory was triggered by looking at a limited set of recurring objects on paper, had increasingly demanded mastery over a quite separate and very elaborate system of visual patterns. This drained away energy which in alphabet users is applied to recalling what is actually said -- **especially in extending the range of what is said** -- the possibility of novel and unexpected statement, the richness of the unexplored, as first framed orally.

I conclude this "Introduction" with a quotation from Victor Mair's essay "The Need for an Alphabetically Arranged General Usage Dictionary of Mandarin Chinese" (*Sino-Platonic Papers*, 1):

If only there were a lexicographer of Liang Shih-ch'iu's ability who also had the perspicuity to arrange his dictionary by sound rather than radical!... No wonder most of us are so sour and gray by the time we reach fifty! The amount of time consumed and the spirit expended in this sort of meaningless, not to mention destructive, type of activity is beyond calculation.

These remarks are addressed to the special problem of constructing a usable dictionary of Chinese. But I speculate (admittedly in the absence of a personal knowledge of the tongue) that the native Chinese who simply reads his native script undergoes a similar expenditure of effort, on a smaller scale, and an analogous expenditure of spirit, in an act of careful decipherment which for users of the Greek system becomes painless and automatic.

I

The example of Chinese may be thought to constitute an exception to the rule which insists that writing and language represent completely separate functions, and indeed increasing acquaintance in the West with Chinese has encouraged the mental confusion between a language and its script. This is because Chinese script is logographic, that is, a sign represents a whole word, not its phonetic components, and by combining signs into larger units or "characters" individual words can be "hyphenated" so to speak with each other to convey a meaning which each by itself would not convey. Because of this "plus" effect, it is tempting to classify the Chinese system as "ideographic" as though it was being used to symbolize "thoughts" or "concepts" directly. There is a sense in which a word when pronounced becomes an idea, though idealist philosophers would presumably reject such a view with vehemence. The possibility of entertaining it is responsible for much argument between those who insist that Chinese is logographic and those who maintain it is ideographic.

The three points to be emphasized here however are simply these: (i) because of the correspondence between signs and spoken words, taken as wholes, the unwary can be deluded into thinking of the characters as fully "phonetic" in the Greek sense and (ii) into thinking that spoken Chinese and the written characters in which it is expressed together constitute two aspects of a single language system; (iii) since a sign represents a whole word, and the character a combination of whole words, and since the words of any language are theoretically infinite, it is clear that the Chinese system cannot meet the requirement of economy in the number of signs, a requirement that any system which endeavors to symbolize the phonemes of a language however approximately can readily meet. The net result is that the *average* Chinese, as opposed to the specialist, is limited in the number and variety of statements he can read easily, because his ability to accommodate the shapes of a variety of symbols in his memory is also limited. If the aphorisms of Chairman Mao with their restricted vocabulary and syntax were acceptable to the Chinese masses as a guide to attitude and action, this is precisely because they were both easily read and orally memorizable.

For a literate Chinese to increase his reading vocabulary (using the term "literate" in its Chinese but not its European sense) requires a stringent discipline in, among other things, the

memorization of inscribed shapes. Can this be said to have reversed the normal course of evolutionary development? The common conventions of language as encoded in our brain are acoustic, not visual. Man's ability to think is correlated biologically with his ability to speak, and to communicate in oral speech in whatever dialect his language group have chosen to use, that is, to share with each other. Is it even possible that the dominance of written (or "book") Mandarin, which makes unified communication available by non-acoustic means, may have inhibited any tendency to draw the spoken dialects closer to each other, a tendency which alone could furnish China with a spoken *lingua franca* ? This may explain the familiar paradox of a China both highly civilized and yet curiously "backward" in a very special sense, and also the continuing difficulties which China is likely to encounter in being "understood" by other cultures. Could it be argued that if the Chinese revolution seems to be a response to the needs of rural society, whereas the Russian is an urbanized phenomenon, this difference corresponds to that which exists between the users of two different forms of written communication, the one archaic, the other alphabetic?

In European systems of writing, whether Semitic or Greek, the letter shapes behave phonetically, and their shape is only incidental to this function. Yet it has been historically true that even so, the shapes of letters as they have come into existence have exercised a curious if illogical fascination over the artistic imagination of the users. Strictly speaking, written orthography should behave solely as the servant of the spoken tongue, reporting its sounds as accurately and swiftly as possible. It need not and should not have a nature of its own, and the Greek system when it was invented seemed to have conformed to this specification. The artistic fascination of the Chinese with the calligraphy of the ideogram has had its counterpart in the development of scripts and their elaboration in European and Arabic countries. This visual development of the written signs has nothing to do with the purpose of language, namely instantaneous communication between members of a human group. On the contrary, in Arabic as in Latin, **the elaboration of the script as a visual object, carried out in competing local centers of calligraphy, has narrowed the field of expertise which can recognize and use the script.**

II

The hold exercised by the Chinese characters upon the mind and emotions of educated Chinese is only the most striking example of the tendency to identify script with national culture. The present writer still remembers addressing a seminar of Chinese nationals at Yale University in 1943 at a time when the necessities of war were pointing to a closer diplomatic and technical collaboration between China and America; and how cordiality in the audience changed to hostility when the suggestion was made that the writing of Chinese could profitably be placed on a phonetic basis and Romanized in the interest of more fluent written communication. It is reported today of modern Yugoslavia that the differences between the dominant Serbs and their Croatian compatriots are rendered all the more acute by competition between rival alphabets in which the Roman version used by the non-Serbs appears to be prevailing over the Cyrillic, thus aligning Yugoslavia with the West rather than with Russia. The result is often offensive to Serbian patriots and even Serbian intellectuals. The mental and moral gulf which separates Westernized peoples from the Chinese on the one hand and from the Arabic-speaking peoples on the other is reinforced by a feeling that the scripts of the non-Westernized nations have a value of their own linked with some traditional wisdom or esthetic sensibility. In the case of the Arabic nations this conviction is reinforced when the script is elaborated for calligraphic purposes as in patterns imposed on woven materials developed as a substitute for the graven image forbidden by Islam. Such manipulation of script as it embodies esthetic virtue can also be regarded from the standpoint of communication as a technological vice, becoming a divisive obstacle to readership and so defeating the theoretic objective of any script, namely, readiness and speed of recognition. It may indeed be true that loyalty to a given script, usually to be identified with national feeling of some kind, increases in direct proportion to the difficulty with which the script is read.

III

Confronting the alphabetized cultures across the world are those cultures which still employ non-alphabetic scripts with which we should include that group, fast disappearing, which has employed no script at all and has remained until recently culturally wholly in the oral epoch. The closest neighbors of the alphabetic cultures are those that use the Arabic or Sanskrit scripts descended from the North Semitic shorthand syllabaries. In the other hemisphere the Chinese offer a special case of a script neither alphabetized nor phonetic. The Japanese use a syllabic system of their own. Can it be an accident that in the contemporary world during the last century we are able to observe the non-alphabetic cultures striving with might and main to catch up with and emulate that science and the thought which we call "Western" or "European" but which can receive the more accurate technological definition of "alphabetic"? It may be objected that they appear to be able to catch up without changing their calligraphic system. But is this really true? The interrelations between the two groups which, in historical justice, I shall call the Greek and the pre-Greek is quite complex and the catching up is managed by various devices which in fact reveal how the historical value of the pre-Greek systems is compromised when they are considered as systems of communication. The devices are as follows:

First, the concept of vocalization may be borrowed from the Greek system and supplied as an addendum to the script in the form of assists to reading (the *matres lectionis*) or by way of diacritical marks to assist the reader in making the correct acoustic choices. This makes the script more adaptable to novel statement. Or secondly, and more commonly, the information, scientific and thoughtful, available in the Greek script is borrowed and translated into the local script. The process is continual. As it occurs it testifies to the historical priority of the alphabetized information. This acts as the leader and the non-alphabetic culture becomes the follower. Since the abilities of all spoken tongues to conceptualize are theoretically identical across the world, a Japanese can orally express what the West has taught him. Transferring the statement to his own script, he will then be able to recognize and to read what he already knows, as did the scribes of antiquity. But the free production of novel statement in his own script will remain difficult.

Or thirdly, a tongue which is alphabetized is introduced alongside of the local one by an invader or conquerer, commercial or imperial. The script thus introduced competes with the local script and either wholly displaces it or supplies the educated classes with the concepts and know-how needed for modernization. This is the case, for example, with India and is partially true of all cultures coming into contact with the Greek system and trying to make terms with it -- the Japanese, the Chinese, the modern Egyptian and Syrian, and so forth. The foreign information can be supplied in Roman script or in Cyrillic script -- it makes no difference. Europe and America on the one hand, and Russia on the other, united by their common alphabetic advantage, now are in the position to supply both ideas and technology as foreign influences, resented perhaps but greedily accepted by their non-alphabetic clients.

It is no accident therefore that purely oral habits of thought and experience and oral forms of literature have survived so much more tenaciously in the Arabic countries, in China, and in Japan. The Sayings of Chairman Mao, for example, are indeed "sayings" even if written in Chinese script, oracular and terse in the manner of Homeric aphorisms. So are the statements of the Koran. The concreteness of this kind of speech, its poetic simplicity and its directness, can prove attractive to the literate mind, reminding us that we may have paid some price for the conquest of the West by the Greek alphabet. This raises a large and dubious question which cannot be answered here.

What our story, however, has demonstrated is the astonishingly checkered, not to say hazardous, career of a reading device which we in the West now take so much for granted. Historians have acclaimed the "triumph of the alphabet," but the triumph was often compromised, sometimes bitterly contested, and to this day is only half won.

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