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Chinese Philology and the Scripts of Central Asia

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M.V.Sofronov

CHINESE PHILOLOGY AND THE SCRIPTS OF CENTRAL ASIA

The period of the tenth to fourteenth centuries was a time when the peoples who conquered Northern China established their own states and proceeded to create their own written culture. They rightly saw the basis of a new state culture in their own script. The Kidan state of Liao was established in 916 in the northeastern part of China. It was conquered by the Juchen state Jin in 1126. The Tangut state of Hsi Hsia was established on the northwestern frontiers of China in 1032. All of these states created their cultures in accordance with historical circumstances and taking into consideration the achievements of older cultural centers of East and South Asia.

The oldest and most powerful philological tradition which exerted an influence on the scripts of Central Asia was that of the Chinese. This tradition developed under the specific conditions of the Chinese character script. Primarily, it elaborated the problem of the explanation of the meanings of the characters and the establishment of their correct readings.

One of the important achievements of the traditional Chinese philology was the method of fanqie ("cut and ^Plice") according to which the unknown reading of a character is described by means of two other characters with known readings. Originally fanqie was designed, presumably under the tutelage of Indian phoneticians, to indicate the readings of characters in the philological works. With the development of Tantric Buddhism in China it was extended to the transcription of Sanskrit dharanis and related texts. In these transcriptions, Sanskrit syllables with phonemic components distributively incompatible in Chinese were constructed. In these cases the Sanskrit syllable was rendered by two Chinese ones. This pair of Chinese syllables formed the fanqie binom provided with

appropriate diacritics. For rendering initial consonant clusters, two or three Chinese syllables were used respectively for clusters of two or three Sanskrit consonants. These binoms or trinoms were provided with diacritics, respectively *er he* ("two together") or *san he* ("three together"). This method of transcription constituted the counterpart to the orthographic techniques of the rendering of consonant clusters in Sanskrit and Tibetan syllabic scripts.

Thus Chinese philologists who worked in the field of transcribing Sanskrit and other foreign texts developed suitable techniques for coping with them despite the limited phonological capabilities of the Chinese script. The next step they might have taken was to create something analogous to the alphabet for transcription, i.e., a set of symbols where one Chinese character stands for one syllable of Sanskrit. But this did not happen. Characters used for the purpose of transcription have not been completely standardized. In principle, any character of the Chinese script can be used for the purpose of transcription. The most frequent binoms tended to coalesce in one character. They were purely phonetic characters describing the spelling of a foreign syllable. Ordinarily these characters were not included in dictionaries, the exception being *Longkan shoujian*, edited in ^{the} Jucen state of Jin.

Both the Chinese and the Sanskrit philological traditions hold the syllable to be a unit of the graphic rendering of language. The oldest scripts of Central Asia were syllabic as well. In the syllabomorphemic languages, the syllable is the basic meaningful unit of language. In other types of languages, the syllable as a rule is not a bearer of independent meaning. Therefore, the graphic rendering of syllables in languages of this type has different semantic functions. In the first case, a syllabic letter renders a monosyllabic word or meaningful part of it; in the second, it renders part of a word without its own meaning.

The Kidan great script was created in the state of Liao in 920, soon after its establishment. According to evidence from the *Qidan guozhi*, it consisted of 3,000 characters. But immediately afterwards the invention^{of} the Kidan small script was revealed. Actually, it is hard to judge to what degree the latter was alphabetic, for the body of the script has still not been established, though we know quite a lot about it. It is essential to note that, for the Altaic languages, to which Kidan belongs, the character script proved to be unfit. This is the main reason why the alphabetic script appeared a few years after the Kidan characters.

The creation of the Tangut script took into consideration the experience of the Kidan script and typological features of Tangut itself. Tangut was a syllabomorphemic language, therefore each syllable could be rendered graphically with a separate meaningful character. The principles of composition of Chinese characters were evidently laid down as a base for the process of the creation of the Tangut script. One of them was a strict separation of meaningful and phonetic characters. The main principle of the creation of the Tangut phonetic characters was *fanqie*. The reading of these characters was the sum of readings of two characters in accordance with this method. Tangut characters for transcription had no meanings of their own and were utilized just to render sounds. Thus the Tangut character script was complemented by phonetic characters which on the whole may be considered as an unstandardized syllabic alphabet.

The Tangut script which has been conserved in numerous texts may provide us with some general ideas about two other scripts of Central Asia – Kidan and Jucen. To one degree or another, both scripts contain logographs for the graphic rendering of a word – monosyllabic in Tangut and polysyllabic in Kidan and Jucen. These were used together with transcriptions of foreign words. The proportion of logographs and phonetic characters is different from these scripts – logographs prevailed in Tangut, phonetic characters prevailed in the Kidan and Jucen scripts, whose logographs functioned dissimilarly.

Logographs are featured both in a semantic and phonetic role in Kidan but not in Jucen script.

All Central Asia scripts have one remarkable peculiarity: the number of phonetic characters is uncertain. Phonetic characters constitute for them a kind of unstandardized syllabic alphabet. The lack of standardization of phonetic characters was the reason these scripts proved inconvenient. Chinese script, cumbersome but relatively standardized, proved in the long run more convenient than Kidan and Jucen. As for the destiny of the Tangut script, it has been decided by historical factors.

The influence of the Chinese script on the scripts of Central Asia may be seen as well in the composition with phonetic characters of words and other meaningful units. Phonetic characters of Tangut script are square in shape just as Chinese characters (or "tetragraphs" *f a n g k u a i z i*) are. Phonetic characters of Kidan and Jucen script describing a meaningful word are arranged in either a square or rectangle. This method of arrangement was in accordance with the semantic goal of fitting the meaningful linguistic unit in a square. Remarkably, the same method of arrangement was even adopted for the Korean script.

In accordance with Chinese rules for writing characters, the phonetic characters of Kidan and Jucen script are read from left to right and from top to bottom. However, the correct reading of syllabic script requires knowledge not only of the direction of reading, but also of the rules of orthography.

It is well known that the syllables which render the reading of a word may be read in a number of ways; two of these are the separate and the combined reading of characters. There are several methods for the combined reading of syllabic characters known in Central Asia: Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan; we must also take into account the influence of the alphabetic Uighur and Turkish scripts. Hence, the question of the orthography of Central Asiatic scripts is ~~complicated~~

determined by their complicated interrelation. The most promising field of work on this issue seems to be a study of the links between the Chinese scripts and other scripts of the region.

The first orthographic problem of Kidan and Jucen scripts is the problem of the types of a syllables rendered by phonetic characters. Neither Kidan nor Jucen has been satisfactorily deciphered. Modern scholars rightly connect Kidan with Old Mongolian, and Jucen with Manchu. Therefore, the structures of syllables both in Kidan and Jucen seem to be similar. This means that there are syllables consisting of a single vowel (V), consonant and vowel (CV), vowel and consonant (VC), and closed syllables of CVC type. It would be natural to suppose that at the onset of a syllable the number of possible consonants may be rather large, but at the end, their number might be limited.

Syllables of these types may have their own graphic form, whether unique or multiple. The experience of syllabic scripts shows that open syllables of CV type proved to be most practicable. By means of open syllables and simple rules of application, words of any structure may be rendered. But this is not the case with the Kidan and Jucen scripts. The Chinese philological tradition, which most probably is the source of the rules of their orthography, admits both open and closed syllables for the transcription of foreign words. It provides as well three methods for rendering foreign syllables: direct syllable-to-syllable transcription and two methods of syllable construction, i.e. *fanqie* and *erhe*. Actual studies of Jucen script show situations where both open and closed syllables are rendered with the syllabic characters. A similar state should be expected in the case of the Kidan script.

To understand the problems of Kidan orthography, it is helpful to examine the transcriptions of Chinese words which are frequent in Kidan texts. Unlike Kidan words proper, the phonetic appearance of which is still unclear, the pronunciation of Chinese words rendered by Kidan script is quite well known now. These transcriptions may provide us with abundant data as to technique. It is necessary to note

that Chinese monosyllabic words are seldom rendered with one syllabic character of Kidan script. As a rule, they are rendered with two or three characters. This method of transcription implies that the structure of Chinese syllables differs from the structure of syllables in Kidan. Chinese syllables consisting of initial, medial, ^{and} final may be rendered in Kidan script only in an analytical way.

Chinese syllables without medials and diphthongs were transcribed with one character of the small Kidan script. For instance, there are a number of syllabic characters in Kidan script which correspond to single syllables in Chinese: 𐰃 fu - Chin. 夫 fu 'man', 𐰄 wang - Chin. 王 wang 'prince', 𐰅 di - Chin. 帝 di 'emperor', 𐰆 fang - Chin. 方 fang 'side', 𐰇 tian - Chin. 天 tian 'heaven'. Most of these characters of the great Kidan script were designed to render words borrowed from Chinese. It is easy to see that the majority of them belong to "high" lexics. More ordinary Chinese words for which there were no appropriate characters of the great script were rendered with two or three syllables read as fanqie, especially if they contained final consonants, medials, or diphthongs.

For instance, syllables with final consonants were rendered with two characters: 𐰈 wen (modern spelling) - 𐰉 wang + 𐰊 - un, 𐰋 shan - 𐰌 ś- + 𐰍 - an. Syllables with medial -i- are rendered with three characters: 𐰎 jian is rendered as 𐰏 ki + 𐰐 ia + 𐰑 - am = kiam. Here the first character of the transcription renders the initial, the second one the medial -i- and the syllabic vowel, the third one the syllabic vowel and the final consonant -m. The manner of reading of these syllables seems to be considered as a kind of progressive fanqie (ki+ia)+-am. The Chinese syllables with diphthongs were rendered in the similar fashion. In the proper name Fushou, the first syllable was rendered with one syllabic character 𐰃 fu, but the second - with three: 𐰌 ś- + 𐰉 -ou + 𐰒 - u = 𐰓 sou. The technique of the selection of the third syllable of fanqie is noteworthy. These syllables serve to render the final element of the syllable - the final consonant or the final element of ^{the} diphthong.

The syllabic vowel of the last character in the fanqie spelling series corresponds to the syllabic vowel of the second character of the series.

The orthography of Kidan words proper differs from the orthography of the transcriptions of Chinese words. Here, our examination is limited to reliable constructions. One of the reliable readings of Kidan words is tamga 'seal' in the case form, with suffix -un. Its reading was rendered with three syllabic characters: 令 ta, 用 mu, 弓 kun. Theoretically, there are three ways of reading this sequence – first as separate syllables (tamukun), second, as fanqie (tukun or tamun), third as sanhe (tmkun) or partial erhe (tmukun or tamkun). Of the above mentioned methods of reading, only the last agrees with our knowledge concerning the typology of Altaic languages. We may suppose that in this case the first syllable was read completely, and the last two were read as fanqie. According to this rule, the word mori 'horse' in the respective case forms which occur in inscriptions is not moriji, but morji, not moriin, but morin. Graphic syllables of Kidan script do not coincide with linguistic ones. Consonant clusters at the junction of morphemes were rendered graphically with the help of two syllabic letters read as erhe.

Thus the Kidan script possessed an orthography directly derived from the Chinese philological tradition. Kidan syllables may be rendered with corresponding single syllabic letters from the small Kidan script or with^a sequence of letters consisting of two or three components. In the transcription of Chinese words these sequences are read as fanqie and with rendering of Kidan words proper they are read as erhe. It was easy for Kidan writers to select the appropriate letter for a syllable of the mother tongue, hence the fanqie method for rendering of Kidan syllables was unnecessary in Kidan orthography. Additional problems arose only when consonant clusters at the junction of two morphemes were to be rendered in Kidan script. In these cases, Kidan orthography resorted to the method erhe well known from Chinese philology.

Jucen script was invented in the beginning of the twelfth century, went into effect at 1119 and existed until the sixteenth century, when Nurhachi decided to create a Manchu alphabet based on the Mongolian script. The same ideas are seen in the design of both Jucen and Kidan scripts. There are a number of logographs with one meaning in Jucen script: 丕 abuha 'heaven', 斡 fan 'south' and so on. The remaining characters of the Jucen script were phonograms which served for the graphic rendering of one or two syllables. The relation of a syllabic character to the meanings of syllables rendered may be different. In one case it may represent a disyllabic morpheme: 朱 ishi 'arrive', 仞 dondi 'listen to', 育 baha 'to receive', etc. In the other case it may be a simple graphic rendering of a pair of syllables: 北 ali occurs in the words 北老 alibe 'to get' and 北利 alin 'mountain'.

The major part of Jucen phonograms were purely syllabic characters irrelative to Jucen morphemes, i.e., they are the letters of a syllabic alphabet *sensu stricto*. Among them are characters for rendering monophonemic syllables: 尒 a, 床 e, 南 i, 床 o, biphonemic syllables CV: 尔 ba, 崇 do, 文 mu, or VC: 朱 an, 立 en, 刊 in, etc. Altogether these characters number as many as 698. Among them are two characters for a, e, i, u. Biphonemic syllables have just one graphic rendering.

Polysyllabic Jucen words consisting of two or more open syllables are ordinarily written as a sequence of letters corresponding to the respective syllables of Jucen: 朱寿 sege 'year', 南次 imara 'goat'. The predominant type of syllables in Jucen were the open syllable and the syllable with nasal sonant -ŋ at the end. Combinations of syllables of this type did not result in consonant clusters at the junction of morphemes, therefore the Jucen script did not need *er he* in its orthography. Syllables with diphthongs or closed syllables with -ŋ at the end were rendered with two characters related to each other as *fan qie*. For instance, 北利 alin 'mountain' rendered with the syllabic characters 北 ali and 利 in, 北土 taun 'number' – with the syllabic characters 北 tau and 土 un.

The transcription of Chinese words by means of the Jucen script was brought about with specific graphic devices, as in other scripts of Central Asia. One of them was the use of special characters for transcription. There are a good deal of characters of such kind in Jucen script: 汉 han, - 庄, 天 tian - 卒, 宫 gong - 祭. The remaining Chinese words were transcribed in the following way: for rendering open Chinese syllables, open Jucen syllables were used; for rendering closed Chinese syllables with -n and -ng at the end, sixteen special characters were provided to render respective finals. Chinese syllables with diphthongs and consonants at the end were rendered with the following types of transcriptions: 政 zhi+eng=zheng, 列 li+ye=lie, 翠 cu+wei=cui, etc. Syllables with the medial cuokou sometimes were rendered with three characters. In the inscription "Praise to the Victories of the Great Jin", the syllable 原, yuan 'source' was rendered with three syllables - 拽 ngen, 弁 ya, and 索 yan. This method of transcription corresponds to the transcriptions of such syllables in Kidan script.

The tradition of the Jucen syllabic script and fanqie as its orthographic device was conserved in the Manchu alphabet which superseded the Jucen script. The orthographic principle of he sheng, according to which Manchu syllables with diphthongs and the final consonant -n were rendered as na+an=nan, na+ai=nai, but not as na+n=nan, na+i=nai, was transferred to the Manchu script immediately from Jucen orthography, and through Kidan script descends from the Chinese philological tradition.

The orthographic principles of the three Central Asiatic scripts examined above have a common source – the Chinese philological tradition, primarily the techniques of transcription of foreign languages. These techniques offered a set of devices for the rendering of foreign syllables with the help of corresponding Chinese syllables and the construction of syllables which were alien to the syllabic structure of Chinese by means of fanqie and erhe.

Editor's note: Although the author and I have worked together on this paper for more than a year, difficulties in the mail service between the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as the special features of computer technology in the two nations, have made it virtually impossible to achieve an error-free final print-out. Consequently, we apologize for any misprints that may still mar the appearance of this valuable and informative paper.

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