

Chinese Language Reform

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There have appeared in recent months a number of reports and articles in the press concerning decisions made by the Chinese Committee for Language Reform—a committee set up by the government of the Chinese Peoples' Republic in Peking—to bring about far-reaching changes in the orthography of the Chinese language.

It is, perhaps, only natural for some reports, written by those not acquainted with the technicalities of the Chinese language, to give the impression that what is happening in China is the result of a deliberate policy on the part of a Communist government to wipe out the culture of the past in order to prepare the way for a new Communist culture of the future.

Without denying that the Peking government has as its aim the Communizing of the whole of Chinese life and thought, it is clear, from any study of Communist literature on the subject, that there is no desire to forget the past. On the contrary, the aim is now to bring the past, with its culture and literature, under the searching light of Communist theory in order to discover the dialectical process which has culminated in the present order of things.


How, then, must we view the plans which have now been put forward and which, in some degree, have already been implemented? Only, I would suggest, in the light of certain cultural and social changes which are traceable throughout China's long history. Such changes inevitably issue in a broadened demand for knowledge, and the molding of new cultural forms requires a medium which is adequate for the conveying and recording of the new streams of thought. In other words, social and cultural changes, which may be the result of new economic or idea factors, will frequently demand a more adequate method of literary communication. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of pure linguistic development over a period of time, but it does frequently involve the type of drastic change now envisaged by the Chinese government.

A brief outline of the development of Chinese orthography, with each change placed in its historical setting, will be helpful at this point.

Earliest Chinese Writing

The earliest examples of Chinese orthography still extant are to be found on the Oracle Bones dating from the final period of the Shang Dynasty (circa 1100 B.C.). As the name given to these fragments implies, these bones (i.e. bones of animals and tortoise shells) found in large quantities towards the end of the last century, but still the subject of much study and discussion, were used primarily for oracular purposes.

We cannot begin to discuss all the implications of this most valuable material here. What is important for us is that the system of writing on these bones already indicates a long period of orthographical development, the stages of which can be clearly traced. In this system, all the principles of Chinese script development have already been incorporated so that, although it is not possible to reconstruct with much certainty the historical situations which called forth the creation and application of new principles (although this should eventually prove possible once archaeological discoveries which are at present being made on a large scale have been thoroughly digested), the certainty of such important historical and cultural changes during this period can be presupposed.

Although China has not been alone in its use of ideographic writing, the nature of the Chinese language, with its immutable monosyllables, had undoubtedly proved a potent force in the preservation of this form of orthography. The fact that there are no declensions of nouns or conjugations of verbs, such as appear in the Indo-European languages, has created a situation where little pressure has been put on the Chinese mind to spell out variations. When it was necessary to indicate a 'person' or 'man', because there was no aural variation of the word, whether it was used to indicate a specific 'man' or 'man' in general, or to record the plural 'men' or the possessive 'man's' or 'men's', one simple graph could suffice: hence the drawing  *ren*,¹ a man with two legs.

Other common examples of this method of indicating meaning rather than sound are as follows:

¹The system of Latinization used in this article is Gwoyeu Romatzyh. This does not apply to names of persons.

山	now written	山	shan	'mountain'
口	" "	口	koou	'mouth'
雨	" "	雨	yeu	'rain'
日	" "	日	ryh	'sun'
月	" "	月	yueh	'moon'
馬	" "	馬	maa	'horse'

There are also the numerals, the first three of which are written thus:
 一 *i* 'one', 二 *ell* 'two', 三 *san* 'three'.

Complications in Ideographic Writing

Now, although such a mode of writing may serve to indicate a fairly wide range of concrete objects, and to a limited extent, as in the numerals, abstract ideas, it is clearly inadequate for expressing more complicated ideas. The next stage, therefore, consisted in the combination of two or more ideographs, still indicating, however, the meaning and not the sound. There was, for example, the word 宀 *mian*, which is the drawing for 'roof'. This was combined with the ideograph 女 *neu* meaning 'woman' thus: 安 (now written 安 *an*). By making this combination of a woman under a roof the inventor intended optimistically to indicate the word 'peace' or 'tranquility'!

But even such happy ingenuity proved inadequate. Heavier demands were made upon those whose responsibility it was to express ideas in writing, and there evolved a kind of phonetic system. It may be that this development was partly caused by a growing sound-consciousness resulting from contacts with peoples speaking other languages. Whether this was so or not, the first step in the direction of phonetics was the borrowing of one ideograph to indicate another word with the same sound. There was, for example, the word 'how?' which was pronounced *an*. What could be simpler than to borrow the word already existing for 'peace' etc., and to make it, with its similar sound, take on the meaning 'how?', trusting the context to indicate to the reader the fact that the drawing for 'peace' used in this place indicated the homonym 'how?'.

Separating Homophones

Because of the paucity of monosyllabic variants, it is inevitable that Chinese should contain a considerable number of homonyms.

Although this peculiarity of the language has been exploited to the full, both in serious literature and comic verse, it obviously proved necessary to separate words overlapping in sound by means of some orthographical technique. It was at this stage that the next step was taken in the development of a phonetic system. Existing ideograph units were employed to form compound characters on a phonetic basis. For example, the word for 'inch', which was originally drawn 𠂇 (a hand with a thumb—the unit of measure—marked by a dot, and which is today written 寸 *tsuen*), was placed beside the word for 'tree', 'wood' 木 thus 村. In this new character, also pronounced *tsuen*, the word 'inch' acts as a phonetic, and the word 'wood' leads one to think of 'timber' or 'trees' which are connected with the countryside or country dwellings.

This brings us immediately to an important principle in current written Chinese: that one element in a compound character frequently determines, more or less specifically, the nature of the thing or idea indicated.

Once this technique had been hit upon, there was no limit to the number of words which could be given a written form. Professor B. Karlgren, in his book *Sound and Symbol in Chinese*, from which I have already taken some examples, gives numerous illustrations, two of which are reproduced below.

坊	紡	訪
<i>fang</i>	<i>fang</i>	<i>faang</i>
'district'	'spin'	'ask'

The common phonetic here is 方, *fang* meaning 'square'. Beside the first example is placed the determinator or radical 土 'earth'; hence the meaning 'district'. Beside the second appears the radical 糸 'silk'; thus is indicated the word 'to spin'. By putting the radical 言 'speech' beside our phonetic we have indicated the word 'ask'.

It was also discovered that by this method it was possible to invent characters for words not strictly homophonous, but which approximated to each other in sound. The word 工 *gong*, an ideograph for a carpenter's square, became a very common phonetic entity in numerous words such as 功 *gong* 'merit', 紅 *horng* 'red', with the silk radical, 江 *jiang* 'river', in which the radical is 'water', and so on.

Sufficient has been said to indicate the main lines along which

Chinese orthography developed, and as stated earlier, all these principles are to be found in the earliest script extant, dating back 3,000 years and more. In these early historical times, then, the methods for recording new words were already clearly indicated, and up till recent times these methods acted as the basis for further developments in the Chinese script, so much so that by the time the great dictionary produced in the reign of Kangshi in 1716 was compiled some 49,000 characters had to be included.

What changes can then be said to have taken place over this immense period of time? Would it not be true to say that all the revolutionary developments had already taken place by the dawn of China's history? Relatively speaking, yes, for barring the tremendous growth in vocabulary, the underlying orthographic principles remained constant. Nevertheless, certain fundamental changes of form have taken place as the result of social and cultural developments, and if these have been conservative in comparison with what is happening today, this is simply because the social and cultural changes forced upon China as a result of increasing pressure from the Occident over the past hundred and fifty years have brought about widespread eruptions in all levels of Chinese life, so much so that nothing short of a complete revolution in the mode of recording all this intellectual and social turbulence is possible. You cannot continue pouring new wine into old bottles without the old bottles reaching breaking point, and this is surely what has happened to the Chinese language. The first bottle to break, to pursue the metaphor, was the bottle of literary style; the second, the bottle of the written symbol.

To go back, however, to the early history of Chinese writing, important changes did take place, but primarily in the way characters were drawn.

Attempts at Standardization

The first important modification of this kind took place in about 800 B.C. With the collapse of the Shang Dynasty (circa 1100 B.C.), and the setting up of the Jou Dynasty (c. 1100-246 B.C.), considerable changes took place in social organization. The Jou emperors ruled on principles approximating to feudalism, and thus there developed a considerable interchange of relations between the nobility, to whom were delegated the duties of ruling the various fiefs which made up the nation. Rivalries inevitably developed, and at times agreements

and alliances were made between the heads of one group of states against another. Under such circumstances, it was only natural that the art of writing should be acquired by other than those specializing in religious practices. Recorders were enlisted in the feudal states and at the court of the Emperor, and it is to these men that we owe our earliest historical accounts.

It was a recorder, Jow by name, who produced a book (c. 800 B.C.) entitled *Fifteen Essays on the Great Seal*, in which he attempted to systematize the Chinese script and thus make it a fitter tool for recording events. But this Great Seal script still proved cumbersome, and scribes shaped the characters in whatever way they saw fit. The situation degenerated to such an extent that further reform proved necessary.

When the Chyn Dynasty (246-207 B.C.) eventually created a unified nation by conquering all other feudal states, the Prime Minister, Lii Syh, carried through the unification of the diverse scripts used in the various states and termed the new style 'Small Seal'. This Small Seal script, though simpler and easier to write, and although brought into use throughout the nation by the new highly centralized government, again proved inadequate once the Chyn Dynasty had given way to the Hann (206 B.C. - 222 A.D.). During this latter period—one of the most glorious in Chinese history—new ideas began to find their way from other nations into China. Buddhism reached China from India, and trade with the Roman Empire brought much new thought and knowledge via the trade routes. Great efforts were made to gather historical and philosophical material from the earlier dynasties, and some of the most important commentaries, lexicographical compilations, and translations appeared.

Writing with a Brush

The still somewhat clumsy orthography of the Chyn Dynasty gave way to forms written in the Lih or official style. Whereas previously much of the writing was done with a stylus of bamboo or wood (although there is now evidence that brushes were known as writing instruments a thousand years or so earlier than was hitherto believed), a fine brush now became the usual implement, with silk as the writing material, and shortly afterwards paper, which was probably invented in A.D. 105.

With a brush, it is possible to obtain smoothness and beauty, as well as speed, so that it is no wonder that calligraphy became an art in itself, having intimate connections with Chinese painting. It was only natural also that with such a smooth writing instrument, running-hand styles should develop of varying intelligibility—though all with their own beauty according to the ability of the writer.

With very slight modifications, the scripts developed in Hann times have remained as standard to the present day.

Changes in Chinese orthography are not, then, something new, but a part of the long history of Chinese script development. They are advocated at the present time, in one form or another, by Chinese scholars both inside and outside the mainland. What matters at the moment, however, are the reforms being introduced by the Peking government. These fall under two main headings: (1) the introduction of simplified Chinese characters in stages of a few hundred at a time, and (2) the eventual elimination of characters and the introduction of a genuine phonetic script based on the Roman lettering used in the West.

Simplified Characters

Simplified characters are, in the main, characters which have actually been in common use in handwriting for centuries, but which have never been given official recognition. On February 1, 1956, 230 of these characters were adopted officially in all publications brought out on the Chinese mainland. Since that date several further lists have been accepted and are now in general use. No doubt this process will continue. Examples are as follows:

Old official form		New official form
雲	<i>yun</i> 'cloud'	云
電	<i>diann</i> 'lightning' 'electricity'	电
處	<i>chuh</i> 'place'	处
與	<i>yeu</i> 'and' 'with'	与
開	<i>kai</i> 'open'	开
廣	<i>goang</i> 'broad' 'wide'	广
歡	<i>huan</i> 'joy'	欢

Such changes naturally raise important pedagogical questions as well as raising problems for compilers of lexicons, but these subjects need not detain us here.

Latinization

It is with the introduction of an alphabet based on Roman lettering that the real break with the past comes. The introduction of abbreviated characters is merely the latest stage in the formal development of the script as previously mentioned. Latinization will be the completion of the literary revolution which expressed itself in the reform of literary style in 1917. From that date, Chinese writers have moved progressively towards a style of writing approximating everyday speech. The aim now is to produce this everyday speech in an alphabetic orthography, so that what is written may become easily available to the whole nation, which has still a very low rate of literacy. But before Latinization can be widely introduced, certain basic requirements will have to be met. One of these is the introduction of standard spoken Chinese in every province of the nation. In order to achieve this, school teachers are receiving intensive courses in the 'Common Language', and most schools now use this dialect (basically Peking Mandarin) as their medium of instruction. Characters, which can be read with any pronunciation without changing their meaning, were an important unifying factor in the nation. The abolition of the main subsidiary dialects is now necessary if numerous local literatures are not to develop and unity is to be maintained.

There is a need also for the spoken language to become less monosyllabic. Developments in this direction have indeed been going on for some considerable time. These have so far lain in the use of more than one character to indicate a term. The word for 'typewriter', for example, is a combination of three monosyllabic words 打字機 *daatzyhji* (literally, 'strike-characters-machine'). Now a term like this can be written in Latinization as a three-syllable word, as shown in the example. Clearly, in a language with so many homonyms, the creation of numerous such polysyllabled or composite words is necessary if a piece of writing is not to become hopelessly ambiguous.

The next problem is that of "tone." As is widely known, Chinese words are also diversified by the tonal pitch of each monosyllable. The number of tones varies from one dialect to another, but the official

dialect has four only. Part of the task, then, of any phonetic script will be to indicate the tone as well. Let us take some examples: *chi* (pronounced *chee*) when pitched in the first tone means 'seven', and is written 七. In the second tone it means 'ride' and is written 騎. In the third tone it is 'rise' written 起, and the fourth tone gives 'gas' or 'air', written 氣.

It will be quite obvious that with the characters, which are all quite distinct, no ambiguity is possible, but all these words, when written with one spelling *chi*, and without tonal indications, would become highly ambiguous within the context of any but the simplest sentence.

Proposed Script

This brings us to the script now being advocated. It is important to note at the outset that the government treats this whole plan for Latinization on a long-range basis. It is realized that much time must elapse before the whole country can understand and speak the National Language with any facility. But the government is, nevertheless, determined to proceed with preparations, so that once the time is deemed ripe for change, the change will be made. Proposals now being put forward are bound to be of a tentative nature.

In February 1956, a plan for the use of a 30-letter alphabet was put forward for discussion. This plan, recently modified again to include only 26 letters similar to those used in English, and cutting out a few symbols originating from the Cyrillic script, is the culmination of a long history of alphabetic experiment. Without going into details, it is interesting to note that this history began in the 16th century with experiments made by the great Roman Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci and his coworkers. Among other phonetic systems advocated have been the Japanese Kana and the 注音字母 *Juhin tzyhmuu*, alphabets basically related to the Chinese script. Missionary systems of Latinization have found their place and, as in the case of Amoyese, still have an important function. The Amoy Romanized Bible is still the most popular translation of the Scriptures in the Church of Formosa.

The present plan, however, owes most to the experiments made by Chinese and Russian linguists over the past thirty years. A Latin alphabet was devised and widely used among Chinese residents in the U.S.S.R.'s Far Eastern Region, and Communist scholars have main-

tained an interest in the subject through various official and semi-official committees. Finally, in 1955 six alphabets were put forward for consideration. Four of these were blocklike letters derived from the Chinese characters; the other two were the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. Despite the adoption of Cyrillic by the Mongolian Autonomous Region, this alphabet was rejected and Latinization advocated. The following is a sentence written in the proposed script:

Simplified characters: 刘太太请吃一点儿年糕吧

Latin script: Liu taitai, King chi idianr niangau ba.

Translation: 'Mrs. Liu, please eat a little New Year cake'.

So far as the tones are concerned, it is expected that key words in a sentence will carry diacritical marks, thus indicating more precisely the words implied. In our sample sentence, the words could, therefore, be written thus: *Liu taitai, kīng chī idīanr niāngāu ba.*

Although the use of diacritical marks has been popular among some educators, and is at present in vogue in Yale University, one very widely used system has been that devised by Sir Thomas Wade, in which tones are indicated by numbers. *King* (pronounced *ching*), a third tone word, is written in the Wade system *ch'ing*³. The employment of diacritics is, of course, a common method used in many languages to indicate stress or tone. One may, nevertheless, regret that another system, known as Gwoyeu Romatzyń, which incorporates the tone in the spelling, has not been more favorably received. This system, put out in 1926 by Professors Chao Yuen-ren, Lin Yu-tang, and others, though well received in America and Britain, never received the government support necessary for its general adoption. Our sample sentence, in this system, would be spelled as follows:

Liou tayx, chiing chy ijihdeal niangau ba.

Once this system has been learned, there is no need for any extra marks or numbers to be incorporated. The spelling of each word is completely adequate to indicate both pronunciation and tone. One obvious advantage of this system is that the language can be typed on any standard typewriter.

One is bound to ask what the advantages and disadvantages will be once Latinization has been adopted. The advantages will, undoubtedly, be numerous. Literacy will be easily achieved over the whole

nation, and scientific writing will no longer have to be a mixture of Chinese ideographs and Latin letters.

The disadvantages will be tremendous also, for direct contact with China's long history of literary achievement will be lost. Clearly, it will not be possible simply to transpose the old literature into a phonetic script. It is planned to continue publishing early literature as before, but it will become, like all other classical literatures, a subject for study in the institutes of higher learning. Any knowledge of this heritage will have to be mediated to future generations by specialists through translations into modern Chinese.

The aim of this article has been to give an indication of the context into which the present linguistic revolution in China can be fitted. For any detailed exposition of the orthographical developments in their various stages, recourse must be had to the writings of such scholars as Professor B. Karlgren, as well as to a host of booklets and pamphlets now being published by the Peking government. The most up-to-date material in English concerning the whole question of China's language reform as dealt with by the Peking government is to be found in *China's Language Reform*, published by Yale University.

Memorizing is Not Reading

Many missionary translators are very much concerned about the spread of literacy among the speakers of the language in which they are working. Others, strangely, are not. "Our people just learn to read by reading the Bible," one said as his excuse for not conducting an organized literacy program. "We had a contest and very few people made more than two or three mistakes in reading the Scriptures," was another missionary's remark.

A very revealing incident happened, however, with one of these "readers" who was "reading" as tape recordings were being made for radio broadcasting. When the "reader" came to the bottom of one page, he turned over two pages at once instead of one. However, he kept on "reading" what was on the page he had skipped. Many of the people were not readers at all, but memorizers.

This is not a criticism of memorization, but memorizing is not reading. Reading habits among a people rarely just "grow." They usually have to be fostered and encouraged, and tests of reading ability have to be made with new, unmemorized material. Most of all, however, there must be an adequate supply of literature if reading is not going to be simply memorizing.