
Expanding considerably upon her well-known introduction *L’écriture chinoise*, reissued periodically in the *Que sais-je ?* booklet series since its first appearance in 1970, Viviane Alleton’s (henceforth: VA) fine overview of Chinese writing for a general French-speaking audience perambulates the apparent conundrum that a writing system as complex, unwieldy and learner-unfriendly as the Chinese, has managed the transition into a computer-age modernity so swiftly, unfractured, and largely unresisted. To this end, a dozen chapters with around twenty pages each offer sometimes historical, sometimes systematic introductions to the writing materials (“Du plastron de tortue au clavier d’ordinateur”, pp. 15-33), character structure (“Qu’est-ce qu’un caractère chinois”, pp. 35-51), the psycholinguistics of reading (“Lire: l’œil et l’oreille”, pp. 53-68), numeracy and character ordering schemes (“Écritures des savoirs, savoirs de l’écriture”, pp. 71-87), the origins of Chinese writing (“Débats sur l’origine”, pp. 89-102), transcription and romanization movements (“Les tentations de l’alphabet”, pp. 103-118), loanword incorporation and technical script processing (“Mots et techniques venus d’ailleurs”, pp. 119-136), literacy vs. orality and the public space (“Peut-on être illettré en Chine ?”, pp. 139-156), writing reform and character abbreviation (“Diversité des formes”, pp. 157-175), calligraphy (“Calligraphie”, pp. 177-190), as

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well as script contact and the incorporation of alphabetic writing into the Chinese script (“Cohabitations sans mélanges”, pp.191-206), before culminating in a cultural history of European misapprehensions and biased projections about Chinese writing (“Pourquoi tant de chimères?”, pp. 207-226), and a brief envoi (pp. 227-232).

The author, who has experienced several crucial political periods of the 20th century, during which the Chinese writing system was declared dead prematurely, unperturbedly describes her book to be “ni encyclopédique, ni polémique” (p. 227). Yet the unmistakeable subtext of VA’s scholarly disquisitions and her sometimes seemingly circumstantial aperçus scattered throughout the book, is a dauntless rationalist drive for demystification, a dedicated deconstruction of the recurrant crypto-nombrilisme of exoticizing European alterity constructs, which has given rise to the need to even explicate the “défi de la modernité” of the Chinese script in the first place. Rather than summarizing her arguments and achievements, I will in the following merely confine myself to a few minor quibbles and question marks.

Sometimes, the level of generalizations in these interlinked essays is a bit worrying for the sinologist, but probably unavoidable if talking to a wider interested readership. Thus, while it is true, as the introduction states (p.11), that many Chinese use pīnyīn 拼音 as the method to input characters on a standard computer keyboard, quantitative assessments by the Mozilla (Firefox) Corporation a few years ago still showed the non-alphabetic “wǔbǐ zìxíng 五筆字型” (a.k.a. “Wáng Mă 王碼 code” after its inventor Wáng Yŏngmíng 王永名, *1943-) just as popular in the mainland, and various types of the character-decomposition and assembling method “Cāngjié 倉頡” still far ahead of Pīnyīn in the Taiwan and Hong Kong realms of unabbreviated character processing.

Bronze inscriptions have not appeared “peu après” the oracle bone inscriptions, as claimed in chapter 2 (p. 17), but both systems co-existed for at least two centuries of temporal overlap (as
correctly noted on p. 97) along with, incidentally, inscriptions on stone from the Shāng dynasty. Nor did the use of illustrations have to wait until the appearance of silk as a new writing support under the Hàn (p. 19): it is already attested in bamboo-slip writing since at least the Qin documents from Shuǐhǔ地睡虎地, presupposing a careful planning of the layout on the slips and their fastening with cords before drawing across them. The explanation in the interesting section on page layout, of why Chinese characters are sometimes displayed “tête-bêche” (p. 30), remains incomplete with regard to the most commonly encountered case of the inverted graph for “luck” fú福, if one fails to mention that this superstitious practice actually builds upon an acoustic pun, paronomastically playing on the homophony of “to turn upside down” (dào到, id.) with “to come” (dào到, id.) in many Chinese dialects, or, as some other theories would have it, the simultaneous homophony with dào祷 “to pray for”.

Descriptions in chapter 3 are sometimes sloppy, as in the sketch of Modern Mandarin syllable structure (p. 39 seq.), where the main vowel is said to be the tone-bearing unit, when there is good evidence that it is the moraic segment in the rime, regardless of whether this happens to be a vowel or a consonant (Duanmu 1990), or even the syllable as a whole (Yip 1996), which plays this role. There are also minor inconsistencies here and there, for instance when Cantonese is said to be “one of the dialects of Chinese which has final consonants” (p. 41), apparently in contradistinction to Mandarin, when the description on the preceding page has just mentioned “/n/ ou /ŋ/” as finals for the Northern Standard (which, phonetically, has in fact at least five codas -[n], -[ŋ], -[ɹ], -[N], -[m], if assimilation variants are not discounted). Doubtlessly, VA intended to refer to ‘stop’ or ‘plosive consonant here’.

Moreover one should not forget the compensatory effect of the diminished number of possible initials in Cantonese (18) if compared to Mandarin (24), as well its restrictive phonotactics,
allowing for some 630 licensed onset-rime combinations with the
tone, which, at the end of the day, is not that far removed from the
413-odd onset-rime combinations in Modern Mandarin. Equally
imprecise is the talk about identity of finals (p. 43) as a motivating
factor for the usage of phonetic elements within one phonetic
series, when the examples quoted (p. 43, n. 3, all ending in -ao)
clearly show that what the author had in mind were rimes.

However, here and elsewhere throughout the book, the gist of
discussion always points in the right direction, even if some details
are occasionally slightly anecdotal or problematic. Thus, it is not
true, that the original translation of bùshōu 部首 as “radical”
stemmed from a “perspective d’une classification des notions
comme ‘radical’” (p. 44). As Friedrich (2003) has shown, it was
due to a freehanded incorporation of the radix concept of tri-
consonantal lexical stems in Hebrew, known to the early missionary
translators from their training in Biblical Semitic linguistics, into
the Chinese context. The list of those “Classenhäupter”, as von der
Gabelentz (1840-1893) still quite literally renders the Chinese term
in his Grammatik of 1881, was also not reduced by the editors of
the Kāngxī 康熙 dictionary of 1716 to the number of 214, as
quoted here (p. 45) and ad nauseam in the secondary literature, but
already by Méi Yīngzuò 梅膺祚 (1570-1615) in his Zǐhuì 字彙
of 1615. This, incidentally, is the reason why the Berlin physician
Christian Mentzel (1622-1701) already operates with a list of 214
classifiers in his Clavis Sinica, which directly continued Andreas
Müller’s (1630-1694) Propositio super clave sua Sinica and
profoundly influenced Leibniz’ (1646-1716) theory of universal
languages (cf. Mungello 1999: 91). Contrary to VA, the notion of
claves or clés is thus, if anything, older than that of the radical (cf.
also Kim 2009, chap. IV).

Quotations are sometimes vague, as on p. 23, when a passage
from the famous painter and aesthetcian Shítāo 石濤 (ca. 1642–
1707) is quoted from Pierre Ryckmann’s translation without page
numbers, or on p. 27, when a culturally conservative critique of the
The detrimental influences of woodblock printing on the value of the book during the Yuan period is left anonymous, instead of referring properly to the *Luòshì shìyí* 羅氏識遺 of the radical philologist Luó Bì 羅璧 (*fl.* 1279), as does his equally unmentioned modern translator, from whom the passage is quoted (Drège 1991:103).

On the other hand, some interesting theories of VA would have merited further elaboration, for instance the idea that the rise of the mass reproduction technique of ink-rubbing is related to the advent of calligraphy during the Early Medieval period (pp. 25-26). It seems more likely that such “estampage” procedures were first developed for purposes of conserving pictorial carved stone reliefs, rather than for writing. That the slow consolidation of movable type printing vis-à-vis woodblock printing is ascribed to predominantly aesthetic reasons (p. 28) is not *prima facie* implausible. But it probably also had economical reasons, grounded in the non-necessity of industrial style mechanization in an already fairly mobile society, increasingly stuck in the stabilization effects of what Mark Elvin has famously called the “high level equilibrium trap” (Elvin 1972). Also, not only a considerable number of foreign terms is transcribed phonetically (p. 47, n. 1), but, as the author is well aware of elsewhere throughout the book, the same of course goes for many “kenematic” particles and even content words within Chinese, which could not be represented within the system otherwise.

Again, it is true that vocabulary growth in modern Chinese has by and large been achieved through various composition and word formation techniques, i.e. without necessitating the creation of new characters, but the phenomenon is not fully absent either. Some writers such as Wáng Wénxīng 王文興 (*1939–) in Taiwan have been experimenting with self-created characters in a vein of lexical playfulness reminiscent of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* or Arno Schmidt’s *Zettels Traum*. The subversive *cǎo ní mǎ* 草泥馬 (“grass mud horse”) internet “meme” of early 2009, which initially concocted a wicked pun on the most common contemporary
Chinese genital curse in the shape of a fluffy, clueless pseudo-alpaca, has not stopped by creating “ten great mythical animals” (shí dà shén shòu 十大神獸) with similar double-entendre names on the web, but corresponding special characters for some of them were also invented. They even have subsequently been submitted for consideration to the UNICODE consortium, due to their regular appearance on the internet. A similar kind of creativity may be observed with respect to dialect characters, as in the well documented case of Cantonese (cf. Cheung & Bauer 2002), also touched upon by VA in chapter 9 (pp.166-74).

Chapter 3 summarizes the major findings of psycho- and neurolinguistic studies on reading during the last decades, often in contrast with English or Japanese experiments. It stresses the involvement of phonological recoding in the reading process of Chinese and its harnessing of brain areas in online processing, homologous or at least close to those involved in alphabetic reading. It thus effectively undermines the very idea of “ideography”, with its corollary of half-baked cultural background assumptions (on which see, e.g., Unger 2004), so dear still to many a sinologist’s and philosopher’s uninformed heart. Although the references VA gives in this chapter are mostly to psycholinguistic “classics” from the 70s and 80s, and the findings have been considerably refined and remodelled with the massive advent of functional brain imaging techniques during the last decade (for recent overviews see e.g. Kuo, Yeh et al. 2004, Ren, Liu & Yan 2009; for extensive bibliography search for “Chinese reading” at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/), her general conclusions are still valid and worth repeating in a world no less fascinated, it seems, with “ideographia”, than Europe during the Early Modern period (on which see, e.g., Porter 2001).

It is also good to see, that her scientific hunch is fully in place, when she devotes a section to the importance of motor control to the acquisition of characters, lamenting that “[t]es recherches sur le rôle de la mémoire motrice dans l’apprentissage
de l’écriture ne sont pas très nombreuses et pour le chinois je n’en connais pas” (p. 68), when it was precisely this topic which was most vividly debated in psycholinguistic research on Chinese writing during the past couple of years (cf. for the major exponent teams of the controversy Tan, Spinks et al. 2005 vs. Bi, Han & Zhang 2009). Or when she addresses the issue of “la perte de savoir écrire” (p. 68, also pp.135-136), when this is coming into the focus of our Chinese colleagues working on the peculiarities of acquired dysgraphia in Chinese recently (see, e.g., Yin, He & Weekes 2005).

Details in this chapter are once more disquieting. Thus, it is quite nonchalant to claim that there is no necessary connection between a “water” classifier in the writing system and the “water” semantics of a complex character in which it features, by glossing xiāo 消 as “supprimer”, mǎn 滿 as “complet” or hàn 漢 / 漢 as “Chinois, chinois” (p. 54), when xiāo, of course, means “to melt, to thaw” in Classical Chinese and mǎn is regularly glossed as “to overflow, inundate”. The principality of Hán, after which the petty official Liú Bāng 劉邦, (lacking a respectable family pedigree which would have enabled him to choose a lineage name for it), famously named the dynasty which he headed, of course derives its designation from the river name ‘Hàn’. It only became redefined as an ethnonym “Chinese, China” during the troubled times of foreign domination in the Early Medieval period, when foreigners used it as a dissociating exonym for the dwellers of the Central Plains (Elliott 2009).

Elsewhere VA remains unnecessarily vague, as when the writing abilities in Chinese society are said to have been “pas moins diffusée qu’en Europe” (p. 67, with nods to Gernet), when we sense in the light of Evelyn Rawski's pathbreaking work, just how difficult such sweeping assessments are even for the well-documented period of Late Imperial China (see Rawski 1979, to be read in conjunction with von Mende 1998). This is, after all, also brought out very nicely by VA’s own excellent survey of the historical development of illiteracy and the various functional
application realms of semi-literacy in China in chapter 8 (pp. 139-156), which is illustrated by a wide array of well-chosen examples, ranging from the first codification of law in the bronze tripods of Zhèng 郑 in 536 B.C. to the uncontrollable usage of SMS texting as a prime information channel during the outbreak of SARS in 2003. She succeeds, here as elsewhere, very convincingly in debunking the widespread dichotomization of an “oral-discursive” West and a “literary-static” East as an excessive ideological construct, which may be traced back to German idealism (p. 156), and, one might add, probably even further beyond this to the Medieval period, as documented in the works of Jean-Michel Poinsotte and Folker E. Reichert on early European perceptions of East Asia.

The chapters on the history of character ordering and retrieval techniques, the origins of writing in China, the standardization of the national language and its accompanying romanization movements in the 19th and 20th centuries (chap. 4-6) each provide very balanced overviews. These are, after all, quite well-trodden areas of Western interest in Chinese writing, and we are happy to now have an extremely copious exposition of the latter topic in Kaske’s magisterial monograph (Kaske 2008), which appeared too late to be consulted by the author. In the section on the origins of writing, VA stresses the idea that it was the monosyllabic structure of the Old Chinese language which was conducive to the invention of a logosyllabographic writing system, originating with Steinthal (1852), and more recently resurrected by current theoreticians of writing such as William G. Boltz and Peter Daniels. Notice, however, that this would run into problems if current theoreticians of Old Chinese syllable structure, such as Laurent Sagart and Pan Wuyun, were correct in their assumption that the underlying language had “sesquisyllabic” words as well (Sagart 1999, Pan 1998), or, in a comparable case, if Proto-Maya was not monosyllabic either (cf. Houston, Robertson & Stuart 2000).
Chapter 7 on the incorporation of loanwords into the Chinese writing system opens with the observation that transcription has been employed in cases, where the translators “ne réussissent pas à élaborer une traduction convenable – et acceptée” (p. 119). While this is certainly true, it is nonetheless only part of the story. Already Medieval Buddhist translators like Xuánzàng (602-664) debate this issue in the famous discourse on “five categories not to be translated” (五種不翻), but rather to be transcribed, i.e. for considerations of word magic and mantra secrecy, avoidance of polysemy, absence of the designated object in the target language, maintenance of traditional practice or religious authority. Structurally similar factors may also come into play in the modern world, even if with slightly different motivations such as in-group acceptance, when, e.g., Northern Mandarin speakers use the originally Cantonese transcription 花臣 for “fashion” (pronouncing it huāchén instead of faa¹ san⁴², of course) instead of the regular translation shízhuāng, simply to sound “cool”. The word “cool” itself, incidentally, ubiquitous in its transcribed form kù 酷 during the 90s, has been said to be increasingly replaced by the functionally equivalent translation term shuāng 爽 again, during the recent years (Kane 2006:163), which shows, that the stability of such transcription usages is notoriously hard to predict. Again, it is also only true grosso modo, that the phonology of Mandarin and other dialects “n’a pas été affectée par la multiplication des mots transcrits, puisqu’aucune syllabe étrangère n’y figure” (p. 123). Opening up the 新華字典 新華字典 s.v. “KA 咖” makes it immediately clear, that all characters with this pronunciation listed there, if not purely onomatopoetic, are transcribing foreign phonemes, as indeed, in the well-known cases of kāfēi 咖啡 “coffee”, kāchē 車“cart-vehicle > truck”, kǎqiūshā 喀秋莎 “Katyusha (rocket)” etc. It might even be argued that it was the incorporation of those foreign phonemes /ka/ into the writing system, which paved the way for the later acceptance of irregular pronunciations in such non-transcribed slang expressions.
as kāyóu 撈油 “abuse a privilege”, now so well-entrenched in the contemporary language, that it can be separated to incorporate a modifier (kā láobǎn de yóu 撈老板的油 “take advantage of one’s boss”). In most cases, however, translation will still allow for more precision and stability than transcription, as nicely shown by VA’s example of the translation terminology for word classes and parts of speech in Chinese, which through its systematic distinction of -ci 詞 vs. -yu 語 is even more precise than the original language from which the expressions were calqued (pp. 122-123; correct, on the same page, the transcription of 迷你裙 to mǐnǐqún instead of “mí-nǐ-jún”). Her general conclusion that, against a widespread contention, it was not the Chinese writing system which presented “un obstacle à l’acquisition de nouveaux savoirs” (p. 137) is definitely justifiable and true, and documented with fine examples throughout these pages.

The topic of interaction with “the Other” is taken up again in chapter 11 (pp. 191-204), which could have thus been placed right after chapter 7. Here again, she effectively undermines the idea of an isolated development in a secluded “central kingdom”, by quoting examples of foreign writing in China, ranging from the use of Siddham, over Sogdian, ‘Phags-pa, and several other systems of the “national minorities”, down to the integration of English words into everyday communication via SMS, and the hyper-hybrid chatroom Chinese, bristling with spontaneous phonetic loans, abbreviations, and English letter insertions. On the other hand, she also shows how the continuity of Chinese writing, despite such periodically recurring foreign challenges, and along with its presumably autochthonous origins, provides for a “fort sentiment identitaire” (p. 191), very visible in the politically self-confident People’s Republic of today.

Chapter 8 (pp. 157-175), her presentation of character variation, abbreviation and dialect writing (cf. above) leaves little to be desired, except that repetition of the standard narrative regarding the Qin 秦 unification of the script (pp. 158-159) could have been
avoided. It has long been shown by Galambos (2006, based on a Berkeley dissertation of 2002) to be the product of a unifying early imperial ideology as well, rather than an apt description of the historical situation, which always allowed for much more variation than the historiographers would have us believe. The presentation of the failure of the second proposal on character simplification during the Cultural Revolution (pp. 163-4) and the “anarchistic” creation of popular abbreviations is interesting, all the more since it is usually neglected in comparable accounts. It could have profited, however, from a more historical perspective, as is elsewhere provided, for instance, in Roar Bökset’s Long Story of Short Forms (Bökset 2006).

Given her overly modest self-qualification as an amateur, “n’en ayant pas la pratique” (p. 177), her chapter 10 in fact very succinctly summarizes the main forms, periods, exponents and techniques of the fine art of calligraphy, including delightful sidelights on its relationship with painting and its inextricable entanglement with politics, which one tends to forget easily, even if daily reminded of the nexus by Mao’s calligraphy emblazoning the Rénmín Rìbào title page. It is to be regretted, however, that this chapter is not illustrated at all.

The final chapter 12 again opens a big critical panorama of European misconceptions on Chinese writing system as being “ideographic”, “pictographic”, “translingual”, or, indeed “universal”, working upwards through the corresponding discourse figureheads from João d’Acosta in the 15th century, through Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), John Webb (1611-1672), Bacon (1561-1626), the Jesuit figurists in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Leibniz (1646-1716). To be sure, one has read most of these narratives in greater detail elsewhere. But when the author is hammering home her credo in the last paragraph entitled “Regarder un caractère n’est pas lire” (p. 226), in her unagitated, sober conclusion (pp. 227-232); when she stresses the contiguity of the cognitive mechanisms employed in the processing of all writing systems, alphabetic or logographic
(p. 207), and when she insists on the importance of the spoken language, underlying in all its varied forms and developments the written, one is positively hopeful, at last, that the general readership to which this book is dedicated, will have also registered the take-home message. And this is no minor achievement in an atmosphere. The PRC media industries producing fodder for the crypto-nationalist participants in the guóxuérè 國學熱, and when even a large part of the mainstream academic discourse on writing in China itself, slips into a mystification of the Chinese writing system again, certain to be propagated as a national emblem world-wide through the Confucius Institutes alluded to in VA’s last sentence (p. 232).

In conclusion, then, this is a timely, erudite and enormously readable book, nourished as much by a lifelong academic occupation with Chinese writing, as by a passion for a disenthralment from the most woeful and persistent clichés surrounding it. I currently know of no other volume in a Western language, or, for that matter, in Chinese, which achieves the same kind of balance, and wish it many curious readers!

REFERENCES


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