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Sound & Symbol in Chinese

by

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NOTES ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF CHINESE

The vowels a, e, i, o, u, ü are pronounced as in German.
ε is the 'neutral vowel' of English about, German Knabe.
i is a vowel the value of which may be approximated to by attempting to pronounce i (as in bit) with the teeth shut close.
The apostrophe, as in k'ú, marks a strong aspiration, k-å-ú.
k' and t's are both pronounced as ch before i and ü.
h and s represent the German 'ich-laut' before i and ü.
h before all other vowels the German 'ach-laut'.
j is the sonant sibilant of French jamais, English pleasure.
CHAPTER I

The scholar who examines the structure and evolution of human speech finds material of the highest value in every one of the several thousand languages of the world. The phonetic laws and inflexions of a South Sea language or a Negro language may be just as instructive, in the comparative study of linguistic, as the corresponding phenomena in Latin or German. The non-specialist public, on the contrary, attaches a widely varying value to the different languages. On the one hand, a language is considered of more practical importance the larger extension it has, i.e. the greater the number of people who speak it; on the other, a language is appreciated in proportion as it possesses a rich and valuable literature and thus plays a great part in civilization. It is remarkable that Europeans have until recent times paid but scant attention to a language which in both these respects must be said to occupy a very prominent place among the languages of the world, namely, Chinese. Spoken by a larger number of people than any other language, it is at the same time a language having a venerable and extensive literature, a language which has played in eastern Asia a part comparable to that of Latin and Greek in Europe.

An exact figure of the number of people who speak Chinese as their mother tongue cannot be given; the census in China is far less reliable than in Western countries, and the rough estimates of recent years have given very different results. We can therefore only state, in the way of approximation, that Chinese is spoken over an area in
eastern and central Asia that is larger than Europe, and by a population of something between 300 and 400 millions. There are, moreover, considerable Chinese colonies in other parts of the world, especially in the Straits Settlements and in the west of North America. And to this it must be added that it serves as the literary language of Japan, Korea, and Annam.

Not only does Chinese exceed in extent the most widely spoken European languages, such as English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, but it may make good its claim to a position equal with theirs as a civilizing influence. While it is only during the last few hundred years that the Western languages have become the media of an advanced culture, China can produce a literature four thousand years old, a literature which, some centuries before Christ, had reached full maturity, and comprised works of philosophy and of historical research as well as works of a purely literary or aesthetic character.

In putting the age of Chinese literature at four thousand years we are giving an approximate figure only. And here we are brought face to face with the first great problem that has to be considered in the study of the linguistic conditions of China. How far back can we trace the Chinese language? What can be ascertained about its origin and early history? In endeavouring to find an answer to these questions scholars have tried two different methods.

The first of these methods was adopted by certain European scholars in the nineteenth century, who, following the trend of current opinion, supposed that a civilization in most cases is not produced spontaneously, and that it is seldom autochthonous, but is the cumulative result of migrations. They attempted to relate Chinese with certain languages of western Asia, and postulated a migration in the third millennium B.C. through central Asia to the northern
China of to-day. F. von Richthofen, an eminent geographer but no sinologist, speculated upon the routes of the proto-Chinese wanderers, and another scholar, Terrien de Lacouperie, endeavoured to demonstrate that the Chinese originally resided near Babylonia, and that they learned there some variety of cuneiform writing from which Chinese script was ultimately developed.

Now these theories suffer from the disadvantage that they have not been substantiated by valid evidence. None of the attempts to connect Chinese with West-Asiatic languages has as yet been successful. Concerning the affinities of Chinese one fact only has been established, that it forms, together with Siamese and some other languages in Farther India, one branch, the Siamo-Chinese branch, of a great family of languages, the Indo-Chinese family, the other branch of which is the Tibeto-Burman group. But the affinity of even these languages with Chinese is somewhat remote, and hitherto it has been impossible to undertake a serious scientific investigation of the question whether the Indo-Chinese family of languages has any connexion with other families, such as the Altaic (which comprises the Turkish languages and with which are usually coupled Korean and Japanese), the Semitic (Hebrew, Arabic, &c.), the Finno-Ugrian (Finnish, Lappish, Hungarian), or the Indo-European family (which embraces Sanskrit, Greek, the Latin languages, the Slavonic, and the Teutonic languages). Thus the attempts to solve by theories of migration the question of the earliest history of the Chinese language have so far entirely failed.

A more reliable method of approaching the problem is to try to unravel by the light of the literary traditions of China the fortunes of the people and their language in the remote ages of antiquity. That Chinese civilization is of a high antiquity is well known. There is even among
Western peoples a much exaggerated idea of this antiquity, and it is not uncommon to hear it asserted that a highly developed Chinese civilization existed 5,000 or 6,000 years B.C. The Chinese themselves do not put their claims so high. They, like other ancient races, recognize a legendary age of ample dimensions; they date the beginnings of authentic history from the three great emperors Fu-hi ¹ (whom they place in the twenty-ninth century B.C.), Shênnung ('the heavenly husbandman', twenty-eighth century), and Huang-ti ('the yellow emperor', twenty-seventh century). With their names they associate the rise of various cultural elements, such as the art of writing and religious worship. The golden age proper they place still later, under the three great emperors Yao (twenty-fourth century), Shun (twenty-third century), and Yü (about 2,200 B.C.). It is mainly to these that they attribute the creation and development of the Chinese social organization. Thus, according to the tradition of the Chinese themselves, their civilization does not reach back nearly as far as the Egyptian—though it may well equal it in total duration, for Egyptian civilization has been long extinct, while the Chinese of to-day are the true successors and heirs of Yao, Shun, and Yü.

Thus far Chinese tradition. What does modern criticism say to it? Does it confirm or refute the chronology of Chinese authorities?

There are two kinds of materials to which the investigator resorts in order to answer this question, antiquities and literature; but in regard to both of these very grave difficulties confront him.

Most of the highly civilized peoples of the ancient world, such as the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Greeks, have handed down great treasures of antiquities and manuscripts which make it possible for modern scholars to penetrate

¹ For the pronunciation of the Chinese words see p. 4.
deeply into their history. In China, where the people can boast of an incomparable reverence for their ancient history, we have good reason to expect abundant remains of this kind. The greater is our disappointment to find that the material is extremely scanty. This deplorable fact is due to two circumstances.

In the first place, the later epochs of the history of China have been anything but quiet and peaceful. In the long course of centuries dynasty has followed dynasty in motley succession; the struggle for power has been unceasingly bitter, and destruction has followed in its wake. From time to time the country has been overrun by wild nomadic hordes such as Huns, Mongols, and Manchus—these latter as recently as the seventeenth century—all characterized by violent vandalism. During these troubulous times ancient works of art in metal have been melted down, libraries have been devastated, and what is left of antiquity is a mere remnant. But it must be remembered that the Chinese have a religious reverence for the grave, which prevents archaeological excavations. The rich treasures that are certainly hidden in the historic soil of old China are consequently still beyond the reach of the explorer.

Among the rare antique objects that have been spared there are not many which give us direct help in fixing more exactly the age of Chinese civilization. A number of bronzes are preserved, but their inscriptions—where these exist—are meagre and unilluminating.

The case was otherwise with the interesting discoveries made some twenty years ago in the province of Honan, a centre of the oldest Chinese civilization. Here were found a great number of bones and tortoise-shells—several thousand pieces, it is said—with ancient inscriptions carved with some sharp instrument. In certain quarters these precious finds were viewed with suspicion. The Chinese
are eager collectors and skilled forgers of antiquities, and it was but natural to expect fraud for commercial ends; and a careful examination showed that the suspicions were not entirely unjustified; a large percentage of the inscriptions were forgeries. It was easily proved that the bones were in fact all ancient, but, while some pieces had characters with sharp clear lines, there were others with little flaws in the edge of the line; it was evident that some enterprising people had found inscribed pieces and had imitated the inscriptions on others, and that the decayed bone had not allowed of carving without giving a broken and blurred line. But genuine specimens were numerous, and there was no difficulty in distinguishing them. Moreover, a mineralogist detected in the grooves of the genuine inscriptions certain crystallizations proving that the pieces had been buried in the soil for a very long time.

Unfortunately, these precious relics were scattered by sale in all directions. But a considerable number found their way into Western collections, and Chinese archaeologists have published facsimiles of a number of others. It appears that these shells and bones were used for purposes of divination in ancient China; they were touched with some red-hot instrument, and the cracks that were thus caused were interpreted according to their resemblance to various characters; on the back of the fragments were inscribed the subject and the date of the inquiry, and the inscriptions that have survived are of this kind.

Sinologists do not agree upon the age of these inscriptions. While some scholars do not consider them to be older than the tenth century B.C., others attribute them to the Shang-Yin dynasty, 1766–1122 B.C. (according to Chinese tradition). The latter view has much in its favour. As we shall see later, the Chinese had an extensive writing practice as early as the beginning of the Chou dynasty (1122–