Old Scripts, New Actors:
European Encounters with Chinese Writing,
1550-1700*

Bruce Rusk

[Bruce Rusk is Assistant Professor of Chinese Literature in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University. From 2004 to 2006 he was Mellon Humanities Fellow in the Asian Languages Department at Stanford University. His dissertation was entitled "The Rogue Classicist: Feng Fang and his Forgeries" (UCLA, 2004) and his article "Not Written in Stone: Ming Readers of the Great Learning and the Impact of Forgery" appeared in The Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies *66.1 (June 2006).]*

* * *

But if a savage or a moon-man came
And found a page, a furrowed runic field,
And curiously studied line and frame:
How strange would be the world that they revealed.
A magic gallery of oddities.
He would see A and B as man and beast,
As moving tongues or arms or legs or eyes,
Now slow, now rushing, all constraint released,
Like prints of ravens' feet upon the snow.
— Herman Hesse[1]

Visitors to the Far East from early modern Europe reported many marvels, among them a writing system unlike any familiar alphabetic script. That the inhabitants of Cathay "in a single character make several letters that comprise one

---

[1] Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, (New York: Picador, 2002), pp. 432f.

word" had been noted in the thirteenth century,[2] but only in the sixteenth did more detailed information arrive from missionaries trailing the expansion of Iberian trade networks. These accounts sparked curiosity, debate and speculation that reflect both difficulties in formulating descriptions of Chinese writing and the variety of uses to which they were put. The conclusions drawn were the outcome of an encounter not simply between Western observers and facts on the page in China but, at least as importantly, between the means two cultures had developed for thinking about writing. Nor was this a simple collision of civilizations: the interests and expectations of the Europeans often fortuitously matched those of their Chinese hosts and informants. Had the encounter taken place a century earlier or later, the coincidence of expectations would have been less. The issues are similar to those raised by the 'invention of Confucianism' by Jesuits in China and their readers in early modern Europe that has been debated in these pages.[3] Many still-current notions about Chinese writing have been traced to misrepresentations or misinterpretations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic missionaries and their readers. Without assessing the subsequent history of Western views of Chinese writing, which deserves more study itself, this essay examines both sides of the initial contact and argues against affixing priority to either European 'interpretation' or Chinese 'reality'.

European Contexts

So strange was this new script that at first sight it could appear literally monstrous. The cryptographer Blaise de Vigenère (1523-1596), in one of the earliest presentations of Chinese and Japanese characters in French, likened them to the semihuman creatures of Mediterranean myth:

> These hieroglyphic characters of China and Cathay are extremely difficult to learn to read and write because they are made up of various images of beasts, birds, trees and plants—in short, of all that nature produces—and act as shorthand[4] for them. Some [do so] singly and others are joined several together to form a character standing for more

---

[2] Willem van Ruysbroeck [William of Rubruck], *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253–1255*, translated by Peter Jackson, (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1990), p. 203.

[3] See Nicholas Standaert, "The Jesuits Did NOT Manufacture 'Confucianism'," *EASTM* 16 (1999): 115-132.

[4] For de Vigenère, 'notes', which I translate as 'shorthand', often refer to signs representing an entire word, as in Ciceronian shorthand.

> than one word, like, as it were, centaurs, chimeras, sphinxes
> and similar monstrosities composed of multiple natures.[5]

If such an analogy seems the product of ignorance, it bears asking nonetheless
why de Vigenère chose it. Part of an answer is hinted at by the Jesuit Matteo
Ricci (1552-1610) who, unlike de Vigenère, was in China and knew the language
well enough to compose books for an educated audience. Ricci too found mon-
sters. In a work introducing European mnemotechnics to Chinese readers, he
described a method for recalling individual syllables based on the *fanqie* 反 切
system used by many traditional dictionaries to indicate the pronunciation of
characters. Under *fanqie*, a syllable is 'spelled' with two characters, the first
providing the initial phoneme and the second the final sound. For instance, the
reading of 龍 *long* ('dragon') can be described with the characters 盧 *lu* ('cot-
tage') and 容 *rong* ('face'): l+ong = long. Normally, the two characters were
chosen for pronunciation alone, without regard to meaning, but Ricci took the
system in another direction:

> There is another method, which is to combine two images
> into a single entity. The first half is the initial and the second
> half the final, using the *fanqie* method to distinguish [words].
> Thus a human head and the body of a beast, or an insect's
> head and the body of a bird, or humans and birds, beasts, or
> insects—anything animal or vegetable, anything with form—
> are combined by halves into a single entity … Hence a man
> (人 ren) with a goat's (羊 yang) head stands for 'shake'
> (r+ang = 攘 rang); an iron nail (丁 ding) on a hen (雞 ji) for
> 'low' (d+i = 低 di); a horse's (馬 ma) head on a dog's (狗
> gou) body for 'acre' (m+ou = 畝 mou)…[6]

The 'magic gallery of oddities' continues with a fish-headed man, goose-headed
tortoise, and human-browed ape. Ricci's method of making A and B into man
and beast is akin to the rebuses and 'visual alphabets' he knew from European
memory treatises, in which an image (of a tool, bird, person, etc.) stood for the
letter with which its name began and words could be spelled out as a row of ob-
jects.[7] Because each Chinese character represented an entire syllable in a square

---

[5] Blaise de Vigenère, *Traicté des Chiffres ou Secretes Manieres d'escrire* (Geneva:
Slatkine Reprints, 1992, reprint of Paris 1586 ed.), f. 325rᵒ.

[6] Matteo Ricci, *Xiguo jifa* 西 國 記 法 (Mnemotechnics of the Western Lands), p.
17b, late-Ming woodblock, repr. in Michael Lackner, *Das vergessene Gedächtnis: Die
jesuitische mnemotechnische Abhandlung* Xiguo jifa*: Übersetzung und Kommentar*
(Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), p. 126 (translation on pp. 45f.). Note that some of
these *fanqie* readings do not hold in Modern Standard Chinese.

[7] Lackner gives the Italian example of *che*, 'that', indicated by a headless goose
(*oche*).

unit rather than as a horizontal sequence, Ricci fitted the head of one 'letter' onto the body of another, 'spelling' characters by squeezing their constituent sounds into the same imaginary space. This visual juxtaposition bred his mutants. Ricci's outlandish hybrids also conformed to the prescriptions of classical memory treatises to choose striking images; in the words of the most detailed early Latin source of the art, "[i]f we see or hear something exceptionally base, dishonourable, unusual, great, unbelievable, or ridiculous, that we are likely to remember for a long time", hence "assigning certain comic effects" was one way to create memorable mental pictures.[8]

Replacing difficult-to-remember words with easy-to-recall images was key to the classical and medieval art of memory, which involved the reduction of things to be remembered to ordered symbols (the images) and the manipulation of these in a fixed frame (the buildings and rooms of the imaginary places, *loci*, which Ricci translated as *wei* 位). The technique of converting complex information into mental images was applied beyond the art of memory: Frances Yates and Paolo Rossi have shown its importance to medieval and Renaissance philosophy, classification of knowledge, linguistic theory and visual arts. Even after practice of the art began to fade in the early modern period, techniques and ideas derived from the translation from language to image and back again flourished, as did debate about their validity and application.[9] Rather than creating visions in one's head, could one communicate ideas by drawing images on a page? In the early

---

On visual alphabets, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 2001 [1966]), pp. 124–127 and plates 6b, 7b and 7c. Yates doubts that these alphabets were of much help in the memorization of long texts.

[8] *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III, xxii, cited in Yates, *The Art of Memory*, pp. 25f. Ricci's and de Vigenère's monsters were certainly more comic than terrifying. Rabelais, for instance, speaks of "harpies, satyrs, bridled goslings, horned hares, saddled ducks, flying Billy goats, yoked stags and other such devices light-heartedly invented for the purpose of mirth", "Author's Prologue" to *Pantagruel*, cited in Marie-Luce Demonet, *Les voix du signe: Nature et origine du langage à la Renaissance (1480–1580)* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1992), p. 177. Modified from *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, translated by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 37.

Such creatures hold an important place in the history of Western rhetoric and logic and were an important link between theories of language and of images. On the trajectory of these ideas, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Making it Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device" and "Idols and Likeness: A Passage in Origen and its Vicissitudes," in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, translated by. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 1-23 and 95-108. On monsters in this period, including the comic aspect, see Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 20-54, especially pp. 35, 41-43.

[9] Yates, *The Art of Memory*, *passim*, and Paolo Rossi, *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*, translated by Stephen Clucas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). See also Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, translated by James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

sixteenth century Thomas Murner (1475-1537) went so far as to translate abstract logical propositions into a book of images, complex icons in which each detail represented part of the text.[10]

More widespread were the emblems or devices which became a craze after the success of Francesco Colonna's (d. 1527) *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a fantastic dream narrative replete with such symbols and allegorical explanations for them; Aldus Manutius (1449-1515), who printed the magnificent 1499 first edition, drew from it the famous dolphin-and-anchor logo of his publishing house. Such emblems, whether taken from received sources or newly invented, were used as marks of families, individuals, and groups, or stood on their own to express a concept or phrase through a composite image. Renaissance writers described such emblems as 'hieroglyphic', since the principle behind them was that which underlay ancient Egyptian writing as they understood it from classical sources.[11] Most early Greek writers on Egypt, the most authoritative sources before the archeological finds of the eighteenth century, believed that hieroglyphics communicated directly, without the mediation of language. For instance, the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (205-270) said of ancient Egyptian wise men that they,

> when they wished to signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements, but by drawing images and inscribing

---

[10] Rossi, *Logic*, pp. 58f. See also Jean-Claude Margolin, "Mathias Ringmann's *Grammatica Figurata*, or, Grammar as a Card Game," *Yale French Studies* 47 (1972): 33-46. The images grew out of an educational card game Murner devised.

[11] This relationship is explicit, for example, in the title and structure of Henri Estienne's *L'art de faire les devises: où il est traicté des hiéroglyphiques, symboles, emblèmes, ænygmes, sentences, paraboles, reuers de medailles, armes, blasons, cimiers, chiffres & rebus: avec vn traicté des rencontres ou mots plaisans* (Paris: Iean Paslé, 1645; English translation by Thomas Blount, *The Art of Making Devises*, London, 1646). Chap. 1 deals with hieroglyphics and explains the similarities and differences from other symbols and emblems. See also Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1970), pp. 48-61. On the problems of definition of emblems and on recent scholarship, see Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem: Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), chap. 1.

For a visual example of the association see the Egyptian-themed frontispiece to the *Iconologie* of Ripa-Baudoin (1636) reproduced in Madeleine David, *Le débat sur les écritures et l'hiéroglyphe aux XVIIᵉ et XVIIIᵉ siècles et l'application de la notion de déchiffrement aux écritures mortes* (Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1965), plate 4.

in their temples one particular image of each particular thing,
they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible
world.[12]

The description implies a tantalizing promise of profound, nonverbal communi-
cation. Europeans had long seen Egypt as a land of priestly mysteries, a view
fostered by the *Hermetic Corpus* of mystical texts allegedly composed by the
ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus but in fact written around the third
century AD. In the late fifteenth century and through the sixteenth these books
received devoted attention as the foundation of philosophy and mysticism: Mar-
silio Ficino (1433-1499), even before finishing the first complete Latin Plato,
translated the recently recovered *Corpus* for Cosimo de' Medici and went on to
translate Plotinus.

Ficino and his friend Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) connected the study
of Hermetic, Platonic and Neo-Platonic texts with the use of cabalistic methods,
emphasizing the power of language as well as that of images as they drew on
figures from the art of memory, which gained an aura of mystic secrecy.[13] For
Ficino, hieroglyphics were visual symbols that did not represent words but in-
stead communicated through a divinely-inspired correspondence between thing
and image: "The Egyptian Priests did not use individual letters to signify myster-
ies but whole images of plants, trees or animals; because God has knowledge of
things not through a multiplicity of thought processes but rather as a simple and
firm form of a thing."[14] What was signified was not the thing itself but "myster-
ies", for despite their apparently simple form, hieroglyphics remained ambiguous,
communicating at a level language could never reach and accessible only to those
who knew their secrets. Another ambiguity lay in the meaning of individual sym-
bols. The *Hieroglyphics* of Horapollo, a Greek text purporting to interpret Egyp-
tian hieroglyphs, was rediscovered in 1419 and circulated widely in manuscript
before a Latin translation was printed in 1505. Although it was the most impor-
tant received text for interpreting specific signs, it was no straightforward Egyp-
tian-Greek dictionary but rather gave differing interpretations of specific glyphs,
offered multiple glyphs with the same meaning, and never attempted to explain
what a string of them would mean. The same imprecision was evident in the
'hieroglyphic' emblems so popular in the sixteenth century. For example, while
the Aldine dolphin-and-anchor stood in the *Hypnerotomachia* for 'hasten

---

[12] Plotinus, *Ennead* V.8.6, Loeb Library ed., translated by A. H. Armstrong, p. 257.
See also Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition*
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1960]), pp. 45f. and 64. Plotinus, who was
probably born in Egypt, worked at the Library of Alexandria.

[13] See David, *Le débat*, chap. I.

[14] Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Basel, 1576), p. 1768, cited and trans. in E. H.
Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought," *Journal of
the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948), p. 172.

slowly'[15] in Andrea Alciati's (1492-1550) *Emblems* it represented a prince, who is to his subjects as the stabilizing anchor and helpful dolphin are to sailors.[16] Conversely, the injunction to 'hasten slowly' could be expressed with entirely different signs such as the crab restraining a butterfly selected by Geffrey Whitney in his *Choice of Emblemes*, a device supposedly dating back to Augustus.[17]

Figure 1: Hieroglyphic symbols from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*[18]
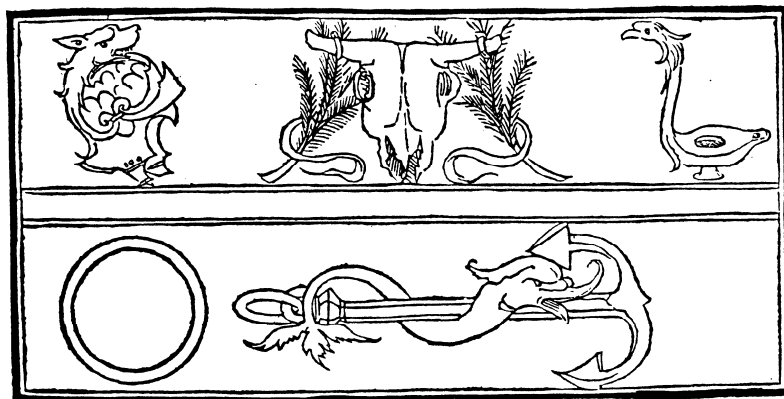
SOURCE: Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1499), p. 69.

Because both emblems and hieroglyphs were image-based they were language-independent, just as for writers on hieroglyphics it hardly mattered what language the ancient Egyptians had spoken.[19] Thus de Vigenère, in his work on codes, says of Egyptian hieroglyphics that they are,

> strictly speaking, only a sort of cipher. It is true that there is no distinction of letters, syllables and words to form specific sentences. But they are distinct markings and shorthand containing in a single place an entire meaning (much as do our

---

[15] Compare long explanation in Erasmus' *Adages* II, 1, 1.

[16] Andrea Alciati, Emblem no. 144, in *Emblemata: Lyons, 1550*, translated and annotated by Betty I. Knott (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 156.

[17] Geffrey Whitney, *A choice of emblemes, and other deuises, for the moste parte gathered out of sundrie writers, Englished and moralized* (Leiden: Plantin, 1586), p. 121.

[18] First line: "Patience is the ornament, protection, and guardian of life." Second line: "Always hasten slowly" (motto of Augustus).

[19] This view, while that expressed by the figures of most interest here, was not held so universally nor always so straightforwardly by Renaissance writers on language. See Demonet, *Les voix du signe*, pp. 399ff.

> emblems, the which they greatly resemble) to express some
> mystery of the divine or secret of nature.[20]

He went on to connect these ancient and modern hieroglyphics with the pictographs and *quipus* (record-keeping cords) of the New World and to distinguish them from true, alphabetic writing, convertible into the codes which are the ostensible topic of his treatise.

De Vigenère's labeling of Chinese characters as 'hieroglyphic' and as 'shorthand' indicates an assumption that both operated along similar lines, that like Egyptian writing they were a problem case. As Madeleine David notes, thinking about hieroglyphics in the context of codebreaking and speculation about a possible Egyptian alphabet were notable steps toward decipherment.[21] Equally significant, however, was the attempt to incorporate Chinese into a universal, comparative framework as one of fifty-six "alphabets of various nations". The novelty of this undertaking is illustrated by the difficulty de Vigenère had in finding Chinese writing to reproduce: The page headed "Alphabet of China and Japan" is blank; samples and a detailed account of their origin were later printed in a nowrare supplement.[22] The place of Chinese was tentative, its status as alphabet contradicted by its monstrous nature as not-quite-writing.[23]

---

[20] De Vigenère, *Traicté des chiffres*, f. 10v°. See also ff. 317f.

[21] David, *Le débat*, p. 28.

[22] De Vigenère, *Traicté des Chiffres*, f. 327r°. On the editions of the *Traicté* and its bibliographic history, with particular attention to the Chinese-Japanese supplement, see J.-F. Maillard, "Aspects de l'encyclopédisme au XVIᵉ siècle dans le *Traicté des chiffres* annoté par Blaise de Vigenère," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance* 44.2 (1982): 235-268. The supplement appears in only two surviving copies of the work, including that at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris reproduced by the 1996 Slatkine reprint.

Donald Lach did not have access to a copy with the Chinese sample, and thus mistakenly assumed that the first compendium to include it was Claude Duret's *Thrésor de l'histoire des langues de cest univers* (published almost three decades later). Nonetheless his treatment of de Vigenère is insightful; see Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), vol. II/3, pp. 511ff. The sample of Chinese and Japanese script had been in circulation since 1585 but this was its first appearance in France. For a detailed analysis (with no mention of de Vigenère) see O. Nachod, "Die ersten Kenntnisse chinesischer Schriftzeichen im Abendland," in *Hirth Anniversary Volume* (*Asia Major*, I, London: Probsthain & Co., 1923), pp. 235-273. On Duret's *Thrésor*, which like de Vigenère's work describes fifty-six languages but does so in much greater detail, see Robert Jeantet Fields, "Science et mysticisme: à la recherche de la langue originelle dans le *Thrésor* de Duret," *Romance Notes* 25.1 (1984): 57-64.

[23] De Vigenère also includes some 'Egyptian' alphabets, one of which had been called, though he doubts the identification, hieroglyphic. See *Traicté des chiffres*, ff. 319r°-321r°.

Ricci's Mediation

Ricci's monsters did not arise from the same uncertainties. He knew that Chinese writing represented spoken words and sentences; his problem was how to connect the script back to the images his mnemotechnics required in a manner accessible to Chinese readers. The ingenious solution was to introduce an indigenous discourse that had already defined a relationship between written words and images. The importance of this innovation is underscored by a rhetorical shift in the treatise. The first three sections of the book, on the general principles of memory, application, and the 'places' read like a translation of a Latin *tractatus* on the art, down to the transliterated names of famous Occidentals, with the exception that the examples of words to memorize are Chinese. But the fourth section, on the 'creation of images' (*lixiang* 立象), begins in an entirely different tone:

> I have heard that Chinese writing is the progeny of six principles of character formation (*liushu* 六書). The six principles of old began with pictographs, next came simple indicatives, then compound ideographs, then phonetic compounds, then loan characters and finally related pairs. All the others made up for the insufficiencies of pictography and the principles of everything were then accounted for.[24]

Ricci reminded Chinese readers that the transition from image to writing was immanent in the history of the script. The six principles (see Table 1) were described in texts from the third century BC and were explained in detail in the first complete dictionary of Chinese characters, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explanation of graphs and analysis of characters) by Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 55-c. 149). They provided the framework for traditional etymology and theoretical paleography, since they accounted for both the development of the script (from a putative primitive pictographic stage to a largely phonetic later stage) and for relationships between characters (for instance, one graph acting as a phonetic or semantic component of another). The sole difference between this passage and what a Chinese author might say is that Ricci qualified his subject as 'Chinese writing' where a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) scholar would just have 'writing'.

---

[24] Ricci, *Xiguo jifa*, 11a. (Lackner, *Das vergessene Gedächtnis*, pp. 34f.).

Table 1: Six principles of character formation, with examples[25]

Zhishi 指 事	**simple indicative** visual representation of abstract concepts *shang* 上, 'up'; *xia* 下, 'down'
Xiangxing 象 形	**pictograph** iconic representation of a physical form e.g., *niao* 鳥, 'bird'; *shan* 山, 'mountain'
Xingsheng 形 聲 or *xiesheng* 諧 聲	**phonetic compound** combination of phonetic element and (usually semantic) qualifier *huang* 蝗, 'grasshopper' from the phonetic *huang* 皇 and *chong* 虫, 'insect'
Huiyi 會 意	**compound ideograph** two graphs combined to express new meaning, with no phonetic element *ming* 明, 'bright' from *ri* 日, 'sun', and *yue* 月, 'moon'
Zhuanzhu 轉 注	**related pairs** similar graphs for words of related pronunciation and meaning *kao* 考, 'deceased ancestor', and *lao* 老, 'old'
Jiajie 假 借	**loan character** characters used for another word of the same or similar pronunciation *wan* 萬, 'scorpion' for *wan* 'ten thousand'

Ricci went on to summarize the history of Chinese scripts:

> Present-day characters [have evolved] from Greater Seal
> Script to Lesser Seal, from Lesser Seal to Clerical, from
> Clerical to Regular, with vulgar characters mixed in as well.

---

25 Table based on Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, second ed. (Los Angeles: Asia-Pacific Institute, 2001), p. 252, and William G. Boltz, "*Shuo wen chieh tzu*," in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographic Guide* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), pp. 429-442. See also Françoise Bottéro, *Sémantisme et classifications dans l'écriture chinoise: Les systèmes de classement des caractères par clés du* Shuowen jiezi *au* Kangxi Zidian (Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1996). The *locus classicus* is Xu Shen 許 慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說 文 解 字 (Explanation of graphs and analysis of characters) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), chap. 15A, p. 1b.

As the distance from antiquity increases, characters mutate from their original forms and the natural writing of times past is now thought strange. What current fashion prizes would have been considered unbearably strange in antiquity, yet it is happily used without question, so the choice of images for the [memory] technique will be based on the characters preferred by current fashion, with only occasional mention of ancient writing.[26]

This sketch of Chinese paleography is again typical. It indicates that Ricci was aware of the stages the script had passed through and of the notion that the earliest forms were more natural and thus preferable to modern ones.[27] The concept of a normative ancient language and its revival was familiar to Ricci from European contexts: it is reminiscent of the myths of Adam's naming of the animals and of the Tower of Babel; some held that this primal language was recoverable (and might bring supernatural powers). Such attempts at recovery could proceed in several directions: Identification of a known language, usually Hebrew or one's own vernacular, with the tongue of Adam; discovery in a remote corner of the world of an island of pre-Babel language; reconstruction of the original speech from distorted traces in modern tongues or from first principles such as onomatopoeia and the anatomy of speech.

---

[26] Ricci, *Xiguo jifa*, 11a (Lackner, *Das Vergessene Gedächtnis*, p. 35). Ricci does have occasional recourse to archaic forms as the basis for memorization.

[27] Because of the ambiguity of *wen* 文, the phrase *xiri ziran zhi wen* 昔 日 自 然 之 文, translated as "the natural writing of times past", could also be rendered "the patterns of nature as used in times past".

Figure 2: Mystic alphabets of Atonius de Fantis.[28]
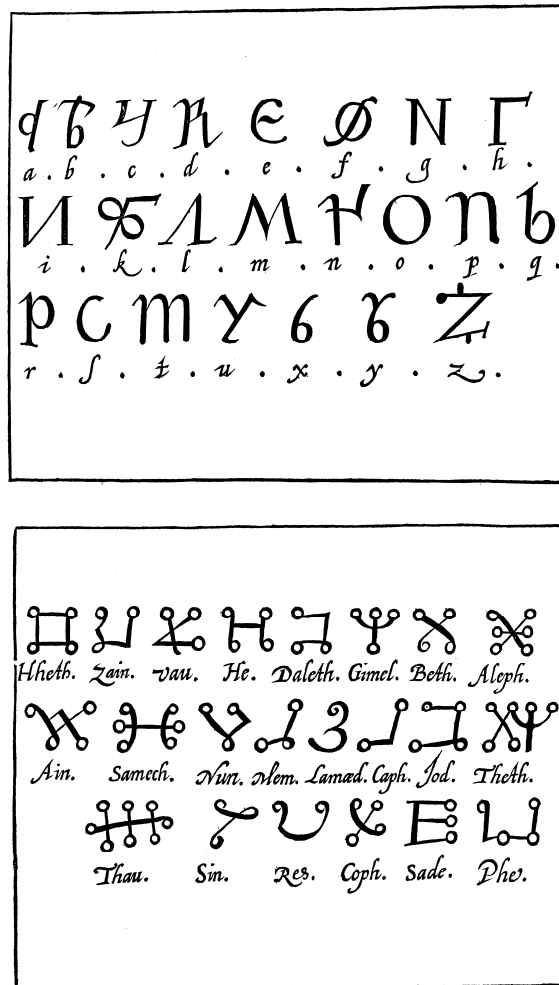
SOURCE: Blaise de Vigenère, *Traicté des chiffres*, ff. 340r°, 340v°.

Theories of the natural or divine origins of speech and writing loomed large in early modern debates about language both in China and in the West, albeit with

---

[28] "Astrological and geomantic alphabet" (above) and "alphabet of secret philosophy" (below).

some differences in focus.[29] Seventeenth-century European theories of language generally emphasized the sounds of words while contemporary Chinese ones more often focused on the appearance of the writing. Nonetheless, the recreation of ancient seal and clerical scripts would not be strange to Ricci. The humanist hand on which many 'Roman' typefaces were based was known as *litterae antiquae*, though it derived not directly from antiquity but from late medieval manuscripts.[30] More exotic scripts, some genuine and some invented, were avidly collected by those with an interest in language, particularly devotees of cabala and Hermeticism. Among them was Blaise de Vigenère who, while downplaying the value of novel scripts for cryptography, reproduced several fabulous alphabets among his fifty-six (Figure 2).[31] His inclusion of Chinese and Japanese was the happy meeting of a longstanding desire and a newly-available resource. Marsilio Ficino, Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), Antonius de Fantis (fl. 1530-1546) and others had avidly assembled examples of different kinds of writing, including ones attributed to Hebrew patriarchs, angels and demons. These were curiosities for some but for the *magus* or cabalist they could evoke powerful, even dangerous forces.[32] Even for the more sober scholar, knowledge of multiple languages and scripts was a desirable and increasingly necessary form of erudition.

---

[29] In Europe, the notion of language as a natural, spontaneous phenomenon was identified with Cratylus, from his eponymous dialogue with Socrates.

[30] Martin Davies, "Humanism in Script and Print in the Fifteenth Century", in Jill Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 48f. Conversely, Ingrid Rowland notes the importance of archaizing, Gothic characters in the printed editions of the forgeries of Annius of Viterbo (again, the late medieval harks back to antiquity). Rowland, *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 58, 75f.

Erasmus' educated Bear similarly concludes, "Write a speech of Cicero's in Gothic letters, and even Cicero will seem uneducated and barbarous." "The Right Way of Speaking Latin and Greek: A Dialogue", translated and annotated by Maurice Pope, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, edited by J. K. Sowards (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), vol. 26, pp. 390f.

[31] See the apology in de Vigenère, *Traicté des chiffres*, f. 286r°.

[32] On the mania for collecting alphabets in the fifteenth century, see Demonet, *Les voix du signe*, chap. 2. The material Demonet cites (Agrippa, Trithemius, Postel, Ambrosio) provided many of de Vigenère's alphabets.

Figure 3: 'Ancient scripts' from a popular encyclopedia of 1597
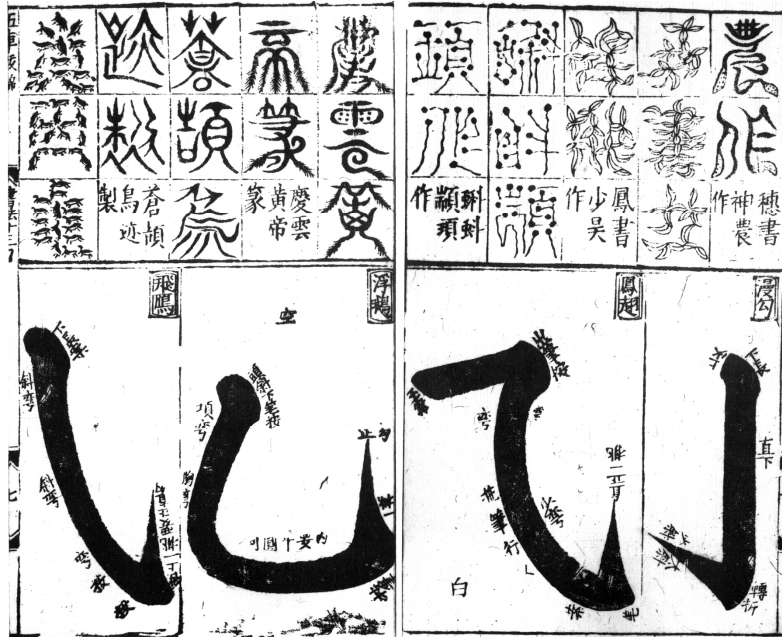
SOURCE: *Wuju bajin* 五車拔錦 (1597), chap. 13, pp. 6b-7a.

Chinese Contexts

Ricci's wistful recollection of the decline of ancient Chinese writing was not a translation of European ideas, however. In sixteenth-century China, interest in ancient scripts was widespread and reached all levels of society. Many literati collected ancient objects bearing inscriptions and celebrated the discovery of new ones (many fake), which they disseminated through ink squeeze rubbings and woodblock prints. For the less educated, encyclopedias for daily use (*riyong leishu* 日用類書) offered capsule histories of writing, including examples of various forms (Figure 3). And even the semi- or non-literate could decorate their houses with New Year's prints featuring a hundred supposedly ancient forms of characters such as *fu* 福 ('good fortune') and *shou* 壽 ('longevity'; see Figure 4).[33]

_____

[33] It is clear from the layout of these prints that one block was used to produce the ring of 100 characters and another (or several) was used for the central picture. This is

More scholarly readers turned to Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasty works on etymology, which emphasized its role as a component of a broad education and a key to understanding classical texts. As Zhou Boqi 周 伯 琦 (1298-1369) wrote in a postface to his *Liushu zheng'e* 六 書 正 譌 (Correcting errors in the six principles of character formation), "Alas! Without clarification of the six principles of character formation, etymology (*xungu* 訓 詁) and lexicography (*mingyi* 名 義) cannot be perfected. If etymology is imperfect, the Five Classics and the words of the sages and worthies will in turn be obscured."[34] Zhou's dictionary gives old forms of each character, based on Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*, and often lists contemporary or 'vulgar' (*su* 俗) forms as 'incorrect' (*fei* 非). While Zhou's book and others like it provide passive knowledge of etymology, useful for understanding ancient texts, they do not ask the reader to engage in the reproduction of such characters. During the mid- and late Ming dynasty, however, this activity was increasingly prominent. On the one hand, a passing acquaintance with certain archaic scripts could be gained by those with limited book learning through illustrated encyclopedias. *Wuju bajin* 五 車 拔 錦 (Five cartfuls of books divulging their splendor), for instance, provides in the upper register of its section on calligraphy examples of a variety of archaic scripts as well as a table of variant ancient forms of common radicals (Figure 3).[35] On the other hand, many well-educated literati were engaged in the *production* of such characters, including formal seal and clerical scripts as well as more exotic scripts such as 'bird' and 'insect'.

---

also shown by the fact that the same set of characters is sometimes found with different central images.

[34] Zhou Boqi, *Liushu zheng'e* 六 書 正 譌 (Correcting errors in six principles of character formation), Microfilm of Yuan ed., preface 1356, Beijing Library (now in National Central Library, Taibei), "Houxu," p. 3b.

[35] *Wuju bajin* 五 車 拔 錦 (Five cartfuls of books divulging their splendor) (Tokyo: Kyuko Shoin, 1999 repr. of 1597 ed.), *juan* 13. The same characters were frequently reproduced in other Ming and Qing encyclopedias such as *Wanbao quanshu* 萬 寶 全 書 (Complete treasury).

The level of education expected of readers by the encyclopedia's compilers is clear from the contrast between the upper and lower registers: the lower provides instructions on holding and moving one's brush to create neat, well-balanced regular script and a table of eight common mistakes, while the upper register, aside from examples of archaic scripts, offers a guide to deciphering the highly stylized square forms commonly used on name seals and pointers for reading cursive handwriting. These two issues (writing legibly and reading 'hard' but widespread forms) were major challenges for individuals with limited formal education.

Figure 4: Print of Laozi surrounded by one hundred forms of *shou* 壽 ('longevity')

SOURCE: Polychrome print, Suzhou, 1577.

In mid- and late-Ming China, paleography was not just background knowledge for generalists, it was also an active field of inquiry for specialist amateurs with a variety of agendas. A spate of new paleographic works appeared in the Jiajing reign-period (1522-1566) and thereafter. In 1530, for instance, the first printed paleographic dictionary to include large numbers of characters from bronze ves-

sels appeared.[36] At the same time, Wei Jiao 魏 校 (1483-1543) was finishing his
Liushu jingyun 六 書 精 薀 (Essentials of the six principles of character forma-
tion),[37] which built on Song-Yuan works by Dai Tong 戴 侗 (*jinshi* 1241) and

---

[36] Zhu Yun 朱 雲, *Jinshi yunfu* 金 石 韻 府 (Rhyming epigraphic dictionary). Zhu's
dictionary went through several editions in the late Ming and early Qing. I have only seen
later editions, which were expanded by the printer Yu Xianmo 俞 顯 謀 and again by Lin
Shangkui 林 尚 葵 (as *Guang Jinshi yunfu* 廣 金 石 韻 府). These are printed in color
(some in red and black, some in red, blue and black).

The first rhyming paleographic dictionary to survive is Xia Song 夏 竦 (984–1050),
Guwen sisheng yun 古 文 四 聲 韻 (Ancient script according to four-tone rhyme-order).
Of the sources listed for its character forms, approximately 22 are other dictionaries, 44
other books (including classics and other books carved on stone) and 21 are stone inscrip-
tions (mostly Han and later); I am uncertain of the nature of eight other sources. Zhu
Yun's bibliography begins with a similar set of sources, probably taken from the *Guwen
sisheng yun* just as Xia incorporated much of the *Han jian* 汗 簡 (Sweated bamboo strips)
by Guo Zhongshu 郭 忠 恕 (d. 977). It adds a few later dictionaries, for a total of 26, has
about the same number of stone inscriptions, and draws on a handful of additional books.
In addition, however, the Ming dictionary uses 37 inscriptions from artifacts such as
bronze vessels and implements from the Shang, Zhou, Qin and Han. Guo, *Han Jian*, "xu",
pp. 2a–2b, and Xia, *Guwen sisheng yun*, *shang* 5a–8b, in *Han jian Guwen sisheng yun*
(Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983). See Zhu Yun, "Guwen suochu shuzhuan" 古 文 所 出 書 傳
(List of paleographic sources), in *Jinshi yunfu*.

Other surviving epigraphic dictionaries include Du Conggu 杜 從 古 (twelfth cen-
tury), *Jizhuan guwen yunhai* 集 篆 古 文 韻 海 (A sea of rhymes collected in ancient seal
script), Qing ms., in *Beijing tushuguan zhenben congkan* 北 京 圖 書 館 珍 本 叢 刊. The
earliest is perhaps Zhao Jiucheng's 趙 九 成 *Kaogu tu shiwen* 考 古 圖 釋 文 (Explana-
tions of the *Kaogu tu*), a phonetically organized index of bronze inscriptions in the *Kaogu
tu*. Without more information on its author, the book's dates are unknown (I have found
no biographical information on Zhao, but presumably he was not the famous Ming *weiqi*
圍 棋 master of the same name). Xue Shanggong 薛 尚 功 compiled a rhyming diction-
ary based on his compedium of early inscriptions, but it is lost, as is another by Wang
Chu 王 楚 (twelfth century).

Two important works survive from the Yuan: Yang Jun 楊 鈞, *Zengguang zhongding
zhuanyun* 增 廣 鐘 鼎 篆 韻 (Expanded rhyming dictionary of seal script on bronze ves-
sels) and the fourteenth-century monk Daotai's 道 泰 *Ji zhongding guwen yunxuan* 集 鐘
鼎 古 文 韻 選 (Selected rhyming dictionary of ancient scripts collected from bronze
vessels), both Qing mss. in *Beijing tushuguan zhenben congkan*. For a list of lost Song
epigraphic works, including some dictionaries, see Yang Dianxun 楊 殿 珣, "Songdai
jinshi yishumu" 宋 代 金 石 佚 書 目 (Bibliography of lost Song dynasty works on ep-
igraphy), *Kaogu* 考 古 4 (1936): 204–228.

[37] The book was first printed in 1540 under the auspices of his nephew Wei Ximing
魏 希 明 (1502–1540), but had been circulating in manuscript for several years.

Yang Huan 楊 桓.[38] Wei's book, while organized as an encyclopedic discussion of character formation, presented itself as more. Wei was an advocate of the 'Learning of the Mind-and-Heart' (*xinxue* 心 學) which in the early sixteenth century had become the most influential alternative to the state-sponsored orthodoxy associated with the brothers Cheng Hao 程 顥 (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi 程 頤 (1033-1107) and with Zhu Xi 朱 熹 (1130-1200).[39] The purpose of Wei Jiao's dictionary was to link etymology to this Learning of the Mind-and-Heart. In a preface addressed to the emperor, Wei suggested that character styles needed reform to reconnect them to their ancient heritage, since meanings inherent in the structure of characters had been obscured over the course of their long evolution. Ancient writing, he claimed, was a product of the ancient sages' grasp of Heaven-ordained commonalties in the mind-and-heart of all people.[40] Wei Jiao placed blame for the rupture in written forms squarely on the head of Li Si 李 斯 (280?-208 BC), chief minister to the founding emperor of the harsh Qin dynasty (221-207 BC) and architect of many of its institutions. He lamented the damage Li Si had done:

> Alas! Long has the Zhou been lost and long have the writings of the Heavenly Kings been unavailable for study. The Qin, having seized the throne by evil means, took over the script and unified it. Later generations have had Li Si as their only teacher and ancient script from the pre-Qin period has all but vanished. The other forms that exist are the disparate scripts of the various [Warring] States, but even these cannot be [fully] investigated.[41]

For Wei Jiao, the Qin marked a Babel-like shift in Chinese script and a concomitant decline in cultural-political order:

> The period up to the Three Dynasties is one system, and the time since then another. The Qin dynasty marks the dividing line. The reason is that the Qin did not learn from the ancient teachers or former kings, and successive dynasties have

---

38 Yang Huan was the author of the *Liu shu tong* 六 書 統 (The system of the six principles of character formation). Dai Tong's 戴 侗 (fl. thirteenth century) *Liushu gu* 六 書 故 (Origins of six principles of character formation), printed in the Yuan and again in the Ming and Qing, was a widely-quoted authority on paleography. Its introduction has been translated by Lionel C. Hopkins as *The Six Scripts, or The Principles of Chinese Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

39 In Huang Zongxi 黃 宗 羲, *Mingru xue'an* 明 儒 學 案 (Case studies of Ming Confucians), *Chongren xue'an* 崇 仁 學 案 (Case studies of Chongren), chap. 2.

40 Wei Jiao, *Liushu jingyun* 六 書 精 蘊 (Essentials of the six principles of character formation), 1540 ed., "xu" 序, in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四 庫 全 書 存 目 叢 書.

41 Wei Jiao, *Liushu jingyun*, "xu", pp. 1a-b.

modeled themselves on the Qin. Alas for the six principles
of character formation! Born a millennium later, I lament the
long obscurity into which This Culture [or This Script, *si-
wen* 斯 文] has fallen.[42]

The explicit purpose of Wei Jiao's dictionary was to repair this loss by reviving
early written forms and thereby restoring the moral truths inherent in them. For
example, his reconstruction of an early form of the character *shan* 善 ('good',
'goodness') preserved key aspects of the concept of goodness. It incorporated,
from top to bottom, an abbreviated form of *mei* 美 ('beautiful', 'ideal'), one *xin*
心 ('mind-heart') and two *yan* 言 ('speech'). His definition extrapolated from
this structure a vision of innate human goodness:

Shan ('good'): That towards which the nature sponta-
neously tends. The pure essence. It is expressed in perfect
measure, ideal (*mei* 美) beyond words. It comes entirely
from within. The nature is not formed from without. It can-
not be simulated through education. It is made up of *mei*
with the addition, by related pairs,[43] of *xin* 心 ('mind-heart').
This shows people the teaching rooted in Heaven. Why does
[the character] also contain two *yan* 言 ('speech') elements?
Speech is the voice of the mind-heart. If one speaks with
goodness, others will respond with goodness. The common-
alties among people's mind-hearts reveal the mind-heart of
Heaven.[44]

The form Wei proposed appears to be of his own invention; no earlier source
includes *xin* ('mind-heart') in the character. Wei's philosophical concern for the
mind and its innate goodness, however, made this addition attractive. The form

---

42 Wei Jiao, *Liushu jingyun*, "xu", pp. 3b-4a. Wei alludes to Confucius' confidence in
celestial protection of This Culture (*siwen*) against the threat of sociopolitical breakdown
in *Analects* 9.5. As Peter Bol notes, Wang Anshi 王 安 石 (1021–1086) had similarly
made the *wen* in *siwen* mean "script," but saw the pre-Qin script as lost and recoverable
only from first principles rather than philology. Wei Jiao, on the other hand, starts from
surviving remnants of ancient scripts and the six principles of character formation out-
lined in the *Shuowen*. See Peter Bol, *"This Culture of Ours": Intellectual Transitions in
T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 1-3, 232-233. Cf.
Winston Wan Lo, "Philology, an Aspect of Sung Rationalism," *Chinese Culture* XVII/4
(December, 1976): 1-26, and Lo, *The Life and Thought of Yeh Shih* (Hong Kong: Chinese
University Press, 1974), pp. 20-22, 27-29.

43 Among the six principles of character formation (Table 1), Qiu Xigui has called re-
lated pairs (*zhuanzhu*) "the murkiest". Qiu, *Chinese Writing*, pp. 156 ff.

44 Wei Jiao, *Liushu jingyun*, chap. 3, p. 10a.

shan 譱, identical but for the absence of the *xin* element, appears in *Shuowen jiezi* and is also attested in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhou li* 周 禮, also known as the *Offices of Zhou, Zhou guan* 周 官), a text purporting to describe the institutions of the early Western Zhou (c. 1025-771 BC) state.[45] Because of its peculiar history, the latter text was a paleographic treasure-trove: according to Ban Gu's *History of the Han Dynasty*, it was rediscovered early in the Western Han (206 BC-AD 8) but lay ignored in the imperial archives until the usurper Wang Mang 王 莽 (45 BC-AD 23) made it part of the blueprint for his New Dynasty (AD 9-25). Having languished untouched for so long, its Warring States (475-221 BC) characters were unchanged, whereas other Classics had been transcribed into more modern script. Since the text was a repository of older forms, many scholars of the *Rites of Zhou* also studied etymology and vice versa. Most famously, the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) statesman Wang Anshi 王 安 石 (1021-1086), who made the *Rites of Zhou* the foundation of his political reforms, wrote a dictionary of etymologies based on literal readings of the parts of characters, without regard to phonetic or other considerations.[46] Wei's student Wang Yingdian 王 應 電 (fl. 1540) built on his teacher's work in his *Tongwen beikao* 同 文 備 考 (Thorough study of the unified script), which was concerned less with finding morality in etymology than with the application of paleography to textual studies.[47] Wang wrote extensive commentaries on the *Rites of Zhou*, proposing

---

[45] See Duan Yucai's 段 玉 裁 (1735-1815) commentary in *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說 文 解 字 注 (Explanation of graphs and analysis of characters, with annotations) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), p. 102 (chap. 3A, pp. 32a-b).

[46] Wei Jiao's interpretation of *shan* and other characters is reminiscent of Wang Anshi's speculative etymologies, though Wei himself drew no such connection.

Other scholars who worked on both the *Rites of Zhou* and etymology include, for the Song, Xue Jixuan 薛 季 宣 (1125-1173) and Wang Yuzhi 王 與 之; for the Ming, Yang Shen, Chen Fengwu 陳 鳳 梧 (1475-1541), and Luo Hongxian 羅 洪 先 (1504-1564); for the Qing, Jiang Yong 江 永, Dai Zhen 戴 震 (1724-1777), Duan Yucai 段 玉 裁 (1735-1815) and Sun Yirang 孫 詒 讓 (1848-1908). Scholars working on paleography, generally, wrote only on the *Zhou li*, not the other two ritual classics, the *Etiquette* (*Yili* 儀 禮) and the *Record of Rites* (*Li ji* 禮 記), as these were not repositories of vestigial character forms.

[47] On the relationship between Wang Yingdian's work and his teacher's, see Mao Xibing 毛 希 秉, "Lu Tongwen beikao xu" 錄 同 文 備 攷 序 (Prefatory notice to the thorough study of the unified script) in Wang, *Tongwen beikao* 同 文 備 考 (Thorough study of the unified script), *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* repr. of 1541? ed., "xu", pp. 4a-5b. The modern editors date this edition to 1540, but it contains a preface by Luo Hongxian dated 1557 and so must have been produced after this point.

changes to readings of key terms in various other classics on the basis of a study of characters in ancient texts and on bronze vessels.[48]

For many Ming writers, the hope that archaic forms could be restored came with specific expectations about the nature of early characters, especially primitivism, the theory that writing had developed phylogenetically from simple to complex forms and that the earliest scripts must in some respects have been more 'natural' than current ones.[49] The idea was already old: the sage Fu Xi 伏 犧 is said in legend to have invented the trigrams of the *Change Classic* (*Yijing* 易 經) after observing patterns in the heavens and on living creatures. According to the *Appended Verbalizations* (*Xici zhuan* 繫 辭 傳, also known as the 'Great Commentary'), one of the Ten Wings of the *Change Classic* attributed to Confucius, Fu Xi got the idea for knotted ropes and nets from the trigrams, and such ropes were used for record-keeping until society grew more complex and later sages replaced them with true writing. By the late Warring States period, the inventor of writing had been identified as Cang Jie 倉 頡, court historian under the legendary Yellow Emperor.[50] According to Xu Shen, Cang Jie's pictographic characters were based on direct observation of objects while characters with phonetic elements were invented later.[51] The notion that characters were originally pictographic grew over time, so that by the thirteenth century Dai Tong claimed in his dictionary that all older forms were pictographic and later stylizations were corruptions. Dai did not repeat the Cang Jie legend; instead he proposed a developmental anthropology in which the growing complexity of society created the need for increasingly detailed record-keeping, citing as evidence the practice among contemporary non-literates of keeping records with notches in wood.[52]

The primitivist view thus encompassed two claims about early writing: that early characters were directly pictographic and that they were simple and based on natural forms. Proponents of the Old Script (*guwen* 古 文) versions of the Classics invoked the second argument, encapsulated in the Cang Jie legend, to defend the zoomorphic characters in which these texts were allegedly transcribed.

---

[48] See Wang Yingdian, *Zhouli yi zhuan* 周 禮 翼 傳 (Wings of commentary to the *Rites of Zhou*). This list of changes is reprinted in his dictionary as well, where it becomes part of a systematic discussion of character reforms.

[49] The complexity and contentiousness of the issues surrounding the history of Chinese characters are made clear by John De Francis in *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984). For a clear outline of the state of the art in Chinese scholarship, see Qiu Xigui, *Chinese Writing*.

[50] Cang Jie is referred to by Xun Qing 荀 卿 and his one-time student Han Fei 韓 非. The latter trained Li Si 李 斯, who in his capacity as chief minister of Qin compiled a table of characters named after Cang Jie. See *Xun zi*, *juan* 21; *Han Fei zi*, *juan* 49.

[51] Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, chap. 15A, pp. 1a-b.

[52] Dai Tong, *Liushu gu*, 1784 ed., "Liushu tongshi", 六 書 通 釋 (General explanation of the six principles of character formation), pp. 13b–14b. See Hopkins, *The Six Scripts.*

Thus Kong Yingda's 孔 穎 達 (574-648) scholia on the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚 書) affirm that the 'tadpole' script of the Old Script Classics on bamboo slips supposedly discovered during the reign of Han Wudi 漢 武 帝 (r. 141-87 BC) was a writing system invented by Cang Jie and used continuously from antiquity until the late Zhou. According to Kong, this 'morphographic' (*xiangxing* 象 形) script was supplanted during the Zhou by seal script but did not fall out of use until the advent of the clerical script in the Qin.[53] Such claims about the history of writing became the framework for epigraphic research. Song antiquarians, the first to analyze systematically large numbers of early artifacts, tended to assume that the more the writing on an item differed from well-known later forms and the more it seemed to be made up of elements drawn from nature, the more ancient the object was. Hence a few objects bearing completely indecipherable inscriptions were classified as from the Xia (traditionally, c. twenty-first to sixteenth centuries BC) whereas others engraved in the difficult-to-read bird or insect script, which arose in the Warring States period, were labeled Shang (c. sixteenth to eleventh centuries BC). Likewise, an image marked on an object, for instance the outline of an elephant on an ancient bronze vessel, was treated as not simply a picture but as a word (Figure 5).[54] The work of many of these Song antiquarians was well known in the late Ming and their decipherments were collected in paleographic dictionaries.

---

[53] Kong takes the term from Zheng Xuan 鄭 玄 (127-200), distinguishing *xiangxing* as the "pictographic" principle of character formation in the *Shuowen* from its sense here as "morphographic", that is, writing taking the form of some other thing, such as an animal or plant. He also notes that tadpole script was not the same as insect script, traditionally said to have been the script used on banners. *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚 書 正 義 (Correct meanings of the *Book of Documents*), 1815, Ruan Yuan ed., chap. 1A, pp. 13b-15a.

[54] Inscriptions were not the only basis for dating by Song antiquarians; they also analyzed the structure and decoration of artifacts, especially bronze vessels. On their methods, see Richard Rudolph, "Preliminary Notes on Sung Archaeology," *Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1963): 169-177, and K. C. Chang 張 光 直, "Archaeology and Chinese Historiography," *World Archaeology* 13.2 (1981): 156-159. On the problems of interpreting early symbols such as clan signs, and of treating them, as many archaeologists do, as 'proto-writing', see Robert W. Bagley, "Anyang writing and the origin of the Chinese writing system," in Stephen Houston, ed., *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 190-249.

The Xia inscriptions were widely credited; see Xue Shanggong, *Lidai zhong ding, yi, qi, kuanshi*, pp. 1a-b; Wang Qiu, *Xiaotang jigu lu*, pp. 69a-b. Zhao Mingcheng 趙 明 誠 (1081-1129) did not assign a date to the inscription in his *Jinshi lu* 金 石 錄 (Record of epigraphy), *Shike shiliao xinbian* 石 刻 史 料 新 編 ed., chap. 11, p. 1b.

Figure 5: Elephant marks from ancient bronze vessel, read by Song dynasty paleographers as the character *xiang* 象 ('elephant')
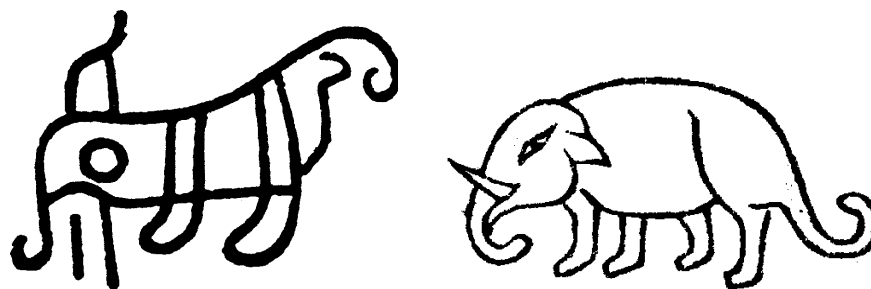
SOURCE: Wang Qiu, *Xiaotang jigu lu*, p. 8b, and Xue Shanggong, *Lidai zhong ding, yi, qi, kuanshi*, p. 13b.

Some used these ideas about the history of scripts to try to imagine how ancient books would have looked. Thus the Yuan calligrapher Zheng Biao 鄭 杓 (fl. 1320s) believed that although Han dynasty writers lumped all ancient scripts together as 'tadpole script', in fact a wide variety of scripts had been in use in the Shang-Zhou period.[55] His commentator Liu Youding 劉 有 定 (fourteenth century?) explained that none of the pictographic and morphographic scripts invented by the early culture heroes had been discarded:

> As literature grew more complex a variety of scripts was needed to write it. Some [texts] were written in a single script, such as the tomb-cover of Xiahou Ying 夏 侯 嬰, but these were not extended pieces.[56] As bamboo slips accumulated, ancient scripts could be preserved without change. By the [time of the] Six Classics of Confucius, their words were certainly abundant! How could they be written in tadpole script alone?
>
> The preface to the *Documents* says that the *Ancient Script Documents* along with a commentary and the *Analects* and *Classic of Filial Piety* were found in the wall [of Confucius' house], all in tadpole characters. The script of the historian (*shizhou* 史 籀) was thoroughly disseminated by the Qin, only ancient script (*guwen* 古 文) had long been abandoned. Hence few people at the time [of the Han dynasty] knew it. Among [the characters in the Old Script Classics] were a few

---

[55] Zheng Biao, *Yanji* 衍 極 (Ultimate abundance), in *Meishu congshu* 美 術 叢 書, juan 1-2.

[56] On this inscription see Bruce Rusk, "The Rogue Classicist: Feng Fang (1493-1566) and his Forgeries," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004, pp. 184ff.

characters in tadpole script, which were especially hard to read. They simply called all of it 'tadpole script' because that was what gave them the most difficulty.[57]

Liu Youding argued that the Classics were complex documents containing original material from different periods and thus would naturally have accumulated the scripts of various eras.

Others took a more direct approach to reimagining the Classics. In the Southern Song, Xue Jixuan 薛季宣 (1125-1173) had written the *Book of Documents* out in *ligu* 隸古, a reconstructed form of early clerical script. In the 1520s, Chen Fengwu 陳鳳梧 (1475-1541) undertook the more ambitious project of transcribing all Five Classics in the older seal script. In his preface, Chen lamented that genuine texts in ancient script were unavailable: "In my official capacity I have travelled around the capital and provinces and repeatedly sought out the ancient Stone Classics, but could not find them in their entirety." Thus he put the Classics into seal script himself and had the work printed (Figure 6).[58]

[57] Liu Youding, commentary to Zheng Biao, *Yanji*, pp. 361 f.

[58] Chen Fengwu 陳鳳梧, *Liujing zhuanwen* 六經篆文 (The Six Classics in seal script), preface, pp. 2a, 3a. I have seen two incomplete copies of the book, one at the National Library in Beijing (including the preface) and one at the Sonkeikaku in Tokyo (no preface).

The printing blocks were carved between 1525 and 1527 at the Xuedao Academy 學道書院 in Suzhou. The academy, founded in the thirteenth century, had been reconstructed in 1523 by the local prefect, Hu Zuanzong 胡纘宗 (1480-1560), who supported the printing project.

Chen Fengwu seems to have relied on dictionaries to produce his seal script and consciously varied his forms somewhat, as is evident from Figure 6: the character *wan* ('ten thousand') is written both in the standard form 萬 and the alternate form 卍. Perhaps Chen tried to alternate the forms to increase the visual appeal of his pages, but doing so undermined the etymological authenticity of his project: the swastika form, which appears in many Yuan and Ming dictionaries as the ancient form, originally entered China as a Buddhist symbol and was only given the pronunciation *wan* by Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 684-704) in 693. Some time later it became an alternate form for 'ten thousand'. Perhaps the swastika form appealed to lexicographers because its geometric shape fit the assumption that the earliest forms of common characters would be simple: the standard form *wan* 萬 was a phonetic loan for a word for scorpion, and was far more complex than any of the other characters for numbers. On the characters created by Wu Zetian, see Jean-Pierre Drège, "Les caractères de l'impératrice Wu Zetian dans les manuscrits de Dunhuang et Turfan," *Bulletin de l'École française d'extrême-orient* 73 (1984): 339-354. On idealized forms of characters for numbers, see Rusk, "Rogue Classicist", pp. 256ff.

There is a similar problem with the "ancient" form 埊 for *di* 地. The relationship is complex because some of the new characters promulgated during Wu Zetian's reign were genuine older forms, while others were invented.

Figure 6: Chen Fengwu, *Liujing zhuanwen* 六 經 篆 文 (The Six Classics in seal script), 1527
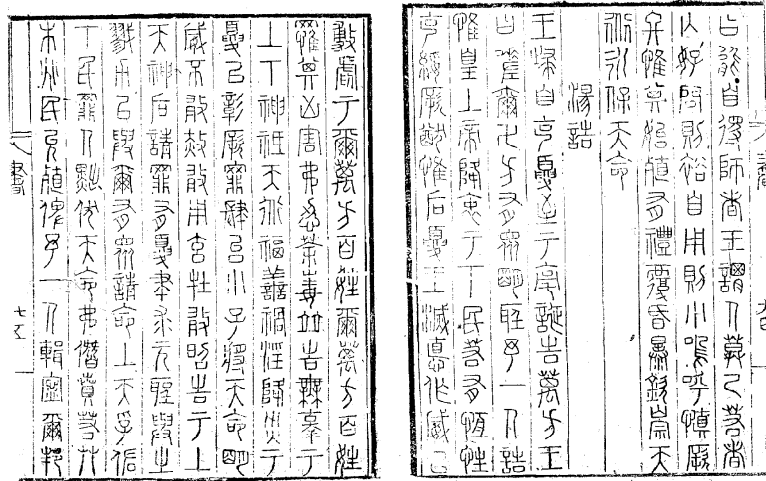
SOURCE: Chen Fengwu, *Liujing zhuanwen*, 'Tang gao' 湯 誥 ('Announcement of Tang'), Shu, pp. 94b-95a.

This interest in systematic visual representation of ancient scripts, typical of the scholarly milieu of the Jiajing reign-period, is dramatically illustrated by the boom in paleographic dictionaries. Many well-known scholars active or born in the Jiajing reign-period also compiled such works, including Cui Xian 崔 銑 (1478-1541), Feng Fang 豐 坊 (1493-1566?), Zhu Mujie 朱 睦 㰌 (1516-1586), Lü Kun 呂 坤 (1536-1618), Jiao Hong 焦 竑 (1541-1620), Chen Di 陳 第 (1541-1617) and Zhao Yiguang 趙 宧 光 (1559-1625). Most prominent and prolific was Yang Shen 楊 慎 (1488-1559), among whose 200-plus titles are 30-odd dictionaries of various types.[59] The most thorough and one of the most suc-

---

According to Zhang Huan 張 寰 (1486-1561), the characters were in fact written by the calligrapher Chen Chun 陳 淳 (1483-1544). See Zhang, "Baiyang xiansheng muzhi ming" 白 陽 先 生 墓 志 銘 (Tomb inscription for Mr Baiyang), in Chen, *Chen Baiyang ji* 陳 白 陽 集 (Works of Chen Chun) (Taibei: Xuesheng shuju, 1973 rpt. of 1615 woodblock ed.), p. 2a. See also Michael Marmé, *Suzhou: Where the Goods of All the Provinces Converge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 208-210.

[59] See Wang Wencai 王 文 才, *Yang Shen xuepu* 楊 慎 學 譜 (Charts of Yang Shen's learning) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), pp. 159-162.

In 1550 Yang finished the *Liushu suoyin* 六 書 索 隱 (Index to the six principles of character formation), in which he decried the state of paleography in his day and the damage done by Tang, Song and Yuan works. While based on the *Shuowen*, it incorpo-

cessful of all these dictionaries was Zhu Yun's 朱 雲 *Jinshi yunfu* 金 石 韻 府 (Rhyming epigraphic dictionary), first published in 1530 and often reprinted. It combines characters from earlier dictionaries with a wide range of other sources, including bronze vessels and stone inscriptions. According to a preface by Feng Fang 豐 坊, such a work was of more than pedantic interest:

> Someone once said, "Learning that is not specialized is incomplete." Shiwang 時 望 [Zhu Yun 朱 雲] is certainly specialized! Why does he not embark on the Great Way but [toil at] the details of a minor art? I explain it thus: the Way does not distinguish between grain and chaff; in learning there is no distinction between lesser and greater. In application there is an order of first and last, but fundamentally one thread runs through it all.[60]
>
> When light and dark [Heaven and Earth] were first separated, the people did not have any knowledge of learning. Then notches began to be cut into wood. So Pao Xi [Fu Xi] drew the trigrams and the Imperial Historian [Cang Jie] set up the system of writing. It was entirely through writing that they instructed the people; they were simply the first to do so. Epigraphic remains contain traces of the thoughts of the sages and worthies of the Three Dynasties, and if you take sincere delight in them, in spirit and demeanor, it will be as if you could see them in person. You can come to a nonverbal understanding of the atmosphere of flourishing virtue [of their time]. By first understanding the atmosphere of the sages and worthies and then seeking it out, one realizes how unlike one is to the sages and worthies.[61]

Studying the earliest forms of characters, an apparently menial task, became a key to the recovery of the moral teachings of the ancient sages. Understanding how they wrote was essential to understanding what they taught, but it meant bypassing the meaning of the words in favor of an appreciation of nonverbal wisdom inherent in the signs themselves.

---

rates many bronze forms and tries to recreate the *zhou* 籀 or *guwen* 古 文 forms of a select list of characters. Most of his other dictionaries were phonological or dealt with glosses of characters in classical texts.

[60] Alludes to *Analects*, 15.3.

[61] Zhu Yun, *Jinshi yunfu*, preface ("yuanxu") by Feng Fang, pp. 3a-4a.

The Encounter

As in the approach to paleography advocated by Feng Fang, the visualization techniques in Matteo Ricci's memory treatise also had to bridge a gap between word and image. It was not a long leap, since intellectual tools for connecting words to pictures were readily available to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese scholars. In both Europe and in China he could appeal to an antiquity when sages had stored their wisdom in simple but profound symbols that had been lost or distorted over time. For Renaissance scholars these sages were Thoth-Hermes and his Egyptian priests and their symbols were hieroglyphs; for Ming literati they were Fu Xi and Cang Jie and their symbols were trigrams and pictographs. Both myths could be seen as addressing similar problems and the one be made to serve the function of the other. As Howard Goodman and Anthony Grafton have argued, adopting foreign novelties to classical and Biblical categories, just as classical Greco-Roman knowledge had been tamed by Christianizing it, was normal practice for European scholars of Ricci's day and the integration of Chinese myths about the origin of writing is typical of Ricci's working method in other fields.[62]

While treating Chinese as a type of hieroglyphics was one way to assimilate a discovery to Europeans' horizon of expectations, the *rara avis* could still escape its pigeonhole. Michael Ryan has asserted, *contra* the mass of evidence assembled by Donald Lach and others, that discoveries in Asia and the Americas had little effect on the European psyche.[63] It is not surprising that news from abroad was read in light of existing categories, but sometimes new wine reacts with old bottles and both are transformed, as is certainly the case with 'hieroglyphics'. Chinese was not really a 'hieroglyphic' writing system, as early modern Europeans understood the concept—though neither, for that matter, was ancient Egyptian. Nonetheless, incorporating Chinese into that category, and then being forced to rethink the term in light of increasingly precise information, pushed some early Egyptologists to reconsider hieroglyphics and led others to understand writing in new ways.[64] The comparison between Egyptian and Chinese and the latter's status as a living language provided a perspective for refining theories about how writing worked. For example, shortly after the *Traicté des chiffres* appeared, José de Acosta (c. 1539-1600) independently reached a conclusion similar to de Vigenère's in his treatise on the *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (first ed.

---

[62] Howard L. Goodman and Anthony Grafton, "Ricci, the Chinese, and the Toolkits of Textualists," *Asia Major*, third series, 3.2 (1990): 95-148.

[63] Michael T. Ryan, "Assimilating New Worlds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23/4 (1981): 519-538. For a more moderate view, see Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[64] See David, *Le débat*, chap. 2.

1590), which combined firsthand knowledge of the New World with information on China and Japan gleaned from his fellow Jesuits' reports. He contrasted the "pictures and ciphers" of Chinese writing and American pictographs with the letters of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Whereas letters "were invented to refer to and immediately signify the words we pronounce",

> Signs that are not arranged in such a way as to signify words, but only things, are not called letters, nor are they truly letters even though they are written, just as a picture of the sun cannot be called writing, or letters representing the sun, but simply a picture. Nor can other signs that have no resemblance to the thing but serve only as reminders be described as writing, for the person who invented them did not do so to represent words but only to denote that thing.[65]

This description of the mnemonic function of pictographs recalls the workings of the art of memory. Although Acosta does not mention a connection with Egypt, the division between word-based writing and memory-based pictures is clear. Yet Acosta, always an acute observer, also provided evidence that challenged this sharp dichotomy: he noted the problems a system of images would pose for recording "proper names, especially foreign ones, for these are things that they have never seen, nor could they have invented a picture for them." He concluded, after asking Chinese he met in Mexico to write his name and noting the experience of his colleagues in China, that "they use the device of taking the proper name and finding something in their language that resembles that thing, and then they write down the picture of it."[66] In other words, a symbol could be used solely for its phonetic value. This discovery of the rebus principle was a crack in the bottle labeled 'picture-writing' into which Acosta had poured Chinese, Japanese and Mayan glyphs. Two centuries later, with Champollion, the vessel would burst asunder—and from precisely the same flaw, the transcription of proper names.

Kircher's Chinese Collections

Even before detailed missionary reports were published, European scholars with an interest in languages sought to add Chinese to their catalogue of alphabets. No later than 1555, Cardinal Marcello Cervini (1501-1555, Pope Marcellus II for the last three weeks of his life) attempted to enlarge his linguistic knowledge by

---

[65] José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, translated by Frances M. López-Morillas, edited by Jane E. Mangan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 334.

[66] Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 337.

obtaining a Chinese 'alphabet' and copying it along with some Armenian, Etruscan, and musical symbols.[67] With more than the most superficial contact, of course, the expectation of an alphabet was bound to be disappointed. When the Dominican Gaspar da Cruz (d. 1569) wanted to learn about Chinese writing from a native speaker, "[I] asked him to write the ABC for me. He wrote only four characters down. I asked him to write out all the letters of the ABC, and he told me that he could not do it then and there, as there were more than five thousand." Da Cruz concluded that Chinese has "no fixed letters" but rather "a great multitude of characters, signifying each thing by a character."[68]

As we have seen, Chinese scholars in the late Ming were just as avidly collecting and printing unusual scripts of their own, be they genuine characters from ancient bronze vessels or fanciful creations attributed to legendary heroes. A hypothetical missionary shopping at a Beijing bookstall in 1490 might have found a few works on paleography, most written 150 or more years earlier. In the 1590s there was much more selection, including both reprints of old works and a wide range of new ones, many of them handsomely printed dictionaries drawing on bronze vessels and other early sources. He could also find theoretical discussions of the origins of the Chinese writing system and works examining the authenticity of the various source texts on which they relied. But even if he passed up these dense scholarly tomes, and picked up instead a cheap edition of a household encyclopedia, he would discover, sandwiched among the charts of auspicious dates, the home remedies for sick oxen and the stretching exercises for better health, supposed examples of the most ancient forms of Chinese writing and a brief account of their development.

---

[67] See Lach, *Asia*, vol. 3/II, pp. 511–515, 530, and plate 97. Marcellus II (b. 1501, r. April 9 – May 1, 1555) was, as cardinal, an avid scholar, linguist and bibliographer of the Vatican Library. Lach thinks it likely that the Chinese characters in the 1555 document derive from a sample received from a Japanese convert in Rome in 1555, but this would not explain why the pronunciations indicated are closer to Chinese than to Japanese.

[68] Gaspar da Cruz, "Treatise in which the things of China are related at great length...," translated in C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), pp. 161–162.

Figure 7: Four of Mengying's eighteen scripts (Inscription of 967)

SOURCE: Mengying, "Mengying shiba ti zhuanshu" 夢 英 十 八 體 篆 書 (Eighteen forms of seal script by Mengying), in Gao Xia 高 峽, ed., *Xi'an beilin quanji* 西 安 碑 林 全 集, chap. 26, pp. 2621-2632. NOTE: These sections contain, right to left: 'lesser seal' (*xiaozhuan* 小 篆), 'fungus' (*zhiying* 芝 英), 'tadpole' (*kedou* 科 斗), and 'hanging dew' (*chuilu* 垂 露) script. The text in smaller characters identifies each script and describes its origin. The original is a facsimile of an ink squeeze and thus white-on-black; the shading has been reversed.

This is more or less what happened. Characters from one of these encyclopedias (probably, according to Knud Lundbæk, a version of the *Wanbao quanshu* 萬 寶 全 書 (Complete treasury) were carefully copied into Athanasius Kircher's encyclopedia of Egypt, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, and his work on China, *China Illustrata*, where they are treated as genuine ancient forms. The labels identifying the characters have been distorted almost to the point of illegibility by the copyist, but the 'ancient scripts' are drawn clearly (compare Figure 8, from Kircher, to the virtually identical characters in Figure 3 from a 1597 encyclopedia).[69] Kircher's source was authentic, if not scholarly. The 'ancient' characters that appear in such popular encyclopedias were ultimately based on the decorative scripts of the Warring States period, which passed through the imagination of calligraphers

---

[69] The origin of Kircher's characters is detailed in Knud Lundbæk, "Imaginary Ancient Chinese Characters," *China Mission Studies (1550–1800) Bulletin* 5 (1983): 5-22, and Lundbæk, *The Traditional History of the Chinese Script from a Seventeenth Century Jesuit Manuscript* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988).

such as Tang Xuandu 唐 玄 度 (fl. 837) and the monk Mengying 夢 英 (fl. 967-999). On a stele now at Xi'an, Mengying transcribed a poem using 18 different scripts, many shaped like things: leaves, tadpoles, dewdrops, blades,… as embellishments to the strokes of the characters or as components of the characters themselves (Figure 7).[70] Each script is given an origin, usually tied to some legendary figure. However imaginative, this approach was rejected by many, such as the Song connoisseur Mi Fu 米 芾 (1057-1107) who said that "the seal script of Mengying and his ilk is not antique and is unfounded."[71] The rejection was reaffirmed by some Ming connoisseurs, who also had to deal with other texts in the same vein such as copies of the *Diamond Sutra* by the Ming monk Daoken 道 冐 in which each of the scripture's 32 sections was written in a different script. Other texts list more scripts, 56 in one well-known case, over ninety in others. The very need to refute them suggests their popularity. Starting in the 1590s, these scripts became a staple of commercially-produced encyclopedias and eventually found their way into dictionaries.[72]

**Figure 8: 'Ancient' Chinese characters,
from Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata***
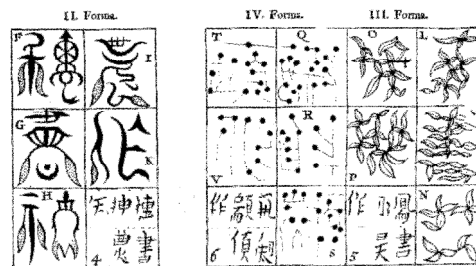
SOURCE: Kircher, *China Illustrata*, Part VI.

---

[70] The idea of a panoply of coexisting scripts, many patterned after natural objects, was common; a work attributed to Wei Xu 韋 續 (Tang Dynasty) but probably composed in the Song lists 56 different scripts. Wei Xu, *Mosou* 墨 藪 (A gathering of ink), in *Shiwan juan lou congshu* 十 萬 卷 樓 叢 書, in *Baibu congshu jicheng*, pp. 1a-5b. Mengying's list is based on Wei Xu's or, just as likely, vice versa. Later lists reach 100 scripts.

[71] Mi Fu, *Shu shi* 書 史 (History of calligraphy), in *Meishu congshu*, p. 70.

[72] The *Wuhouqing zihai* 五 侯 鯖 字 海 (Fine selection from the sea of characters) includes in its introductory chapter much of the same set of material as is reproduced in the popular encyclopedias. This dictionary, probably printed in the 1620s or 1630s, is a typical product of the lower-middle tier of late-Ming publishers: its association with two of the most famous writers of the time—compilation by Tang Xianzu 湯 顯 祖 (1550-1617), preface by Chen Jiru 陳 繼 儒 (1558-1639)—is clearly spurious and it contains a disparate array of material stitched together from a variety of sources.

Just as outlandish as the characters chosen by Kircher, at first sight, are the etymologies offered by his student Martino Martini (1614-1661), who spent many years in China as a missionary and wrote an influential history of the Chinese empire. Martini shared his teacher's belief that ancient Chinese writing was related to Egyptian hieroglyphs, but was also interested in the Chinese legends of the origins of writing and recounted how Fu Xi had invented the earliest symbols, the trigrams of the *Change Classic*. He included a table of etymologies, placing pictures of things side-by-side with the characters that represented them, on the assumption that the former evolved into the latter (Figure 9). These etymologies may seem forced, and the reduction involved in picking only a few, simple characters inevitably overemphasizes the pictographic aspect to the detriment of other features. But was Martini wrong? As with Kircher, tracing his Chinese sources is more revealing than pointing out errors. Robert Mungello mentions in passing that Martini had "a Chinese book which recorded six different styles of ancient writing."[73] This was a work on *liushu*, which in some cases can refer to six written forms but in this instance almost certainly refers to the six principles of character formation, the basis of all traditional studies of etymology (Table 1). Unlike Kircher, who mistook a *Farmer's Almanac* for the National Weather Service, Martini may have been relying on serious scholarly works. Why, then, do his etymologies seem so absurd? Did anyone believe that the idea 'chicken' was expressed with a sketch of a barnyard fowl?

---

[73] David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 131.
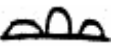
Figure 9: Martino Martini's Chinese etymologies

SOURCE: Martino Martini, *Sinicæ Historiæ deca prima*, 12.
NOTE: Characters in the column to the left are the original, ancient
forms, those on the right are the modern form, except that nos. 1 and 2
are reversed.

In short, yes. Table 2 shows how most of these forms can be traced to precedents
in what at the time would have been an impeccable paleographic source, a Yuan
dynasty dictionary based on rubbings of bronze vessels. Despite copyists' distor-
tions, it is clear that he was working with material that ultimately derived from
ancient models. While the birds are handled in a distinctly European fashion, the
dragon matches neither European nor contemporary Chinese depiction. It does,
however, include recognizable elements from a bronze vessel character inter-
preted by antiquarians as 'dragon'. Of the six characters, all but one are consis-
tent with what Martini would have been able to discover from a scholarly dic-
tionary.[74]

---

[74] Table 2 shows possible bases for four of the characters. There is no close analogue
to the form for *niao*. Note that the two forms of *shan* have been switched by the printer.

Table 2: Origins of Martini's etymologies

Character	Martini's forms		Chinese paleographic dictionary[75]	
	modern	ancient	form	source (page, vessel name)
shan mountain 山				2.52b (Yi yi 伊彝)
ri sun 日				6.9b (Shi Mao dun 師毛敦)
long dragon 龍				2.7b (Chi fu zhong, *Kaogu* [*tu*] 遲府鐘、考古)
zhu master 宔				not attested in paleographic sources but a 'dictionary word'[76]
niao bird 鳥				
ji fowl 雞				2.33b (Xiong Ding zun 兄丁尊, Zhou Dan yi 周單彝)

---

[75] The characters are from Yang Jun 楊鉤, *Zengguang zhongding zhuanyun* 增廣鐘鼎篆韻, in *Wanwei biecang* 宛委別藏.

[76] I have not found a paleographic source for the character *zhu* 宔, but it too is evidence that Martini was working with a dictionary. This *zhu* is equivalent to the more usual *zhu* 主 in certain ritual contexts and as a variant in some texts but it is extremely rare: in the 3,400-plus books in the eighteenth-century *Siku quanshu* (Imperial Library of the Four Treasuries), it appears a mere 35 times: 27 occurrences are in dictionaries and of the remaining eight only four are from Martini's time or earlier.

Universality

Despite uncertainties about its origin and nature, a consensus arose in Europe concerning certain features of Chinese writing, aspects of which survived into the twentieth century. Virtually all commentators agreed on three basic features of Chinese: that its characters were ideographic, that the language and writing system were monosyllabic, and that it was a universal script in the limited sense that it allowed people who spoke different languages to communicate in writing.[77]

For Europeans, one of the most intriguing aspects of Chinese writing was its use by speakers of different vernaculars (commonly referred to as 'dialects') within China and of different languages in neighboring states. Gaspar da Cruz, who traveled extensively in Southeast Asia and briefly in China, recorded the following:

> But withal you must know that they also use certain characters to write names which are or seem to be outlandish. This is the reason why in all China there are many tongues, in sort that one man cannot understand another by speech, nor do the Cauchinschinas [Cochinchinese] understand the Chinas [Chinese] nor the Japões [Japanese] the Chinas when they speak, yet they all understand each other in writing. For example, the character which signifieth 'heaven' to them all, being written in the same way by them all, some pronounce it one way, and others in another, but it signifies 'heaven' equally to them all.[78]

Alvarez Semedo (1585-1658) also indicated that "though [Chinese characters] are proper only to China, yet they are used in all the neighbouring Kingdomes, every one reading them in their owne language, as among us it is in the figures of the numbers & of the starres, which are the same over all Europe, and yet every nation calleth them by different names,"[79] making this feature of Chinese, in the words of Ricci and Trigault, "a singular advantage to which we had never previously adverted."[80]

The identification of Chinese characters with hieroglyphics reinforced the idea that the former could be used by people of many regions and nations, even

---

[77] These are three of the six "myths" about Chinese identified by John DeFrancis in *The Chinese Language*.

[78] Da Cruz, "Treatise," in Boxer, *South China*, p. 162.

[79] Alvarez Semedo, *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (London: John Crook, 1655), 31.

[80] Louis J. Gallagher, S.J., *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci: 1583-1610* (New York, Random House, 1953), p. 28 (translation of Trigault's 1617 edition of Ricci's diaries).

without a common spoken language. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) had made such claims for Egyptian symbols, which he contrasted with alphabetic writing:

> The Egyptians employed the following sign language: a god was represented by an eye, Nature by a vulture, a king by a bee, time by a circle, peace by an ox, and so on. They maintained that each nation knew only its own alphabet, and that eventually all knowledge of it would be lost—as has happened with our own Etruscan: we have seen sepulchers uncovered in city ruins and cemeteries throughout Etruria inscribed with an alphabet universally acknowledged to be Etruscan; their letters are not unlike Greek, or even Latin, yet no one understands what they mean. The same, the Egyptians claimed, would happen to all other alphabets, whereas the method of writing they used could be understood easily by expert men all over the world, to whom alone noble matters should be communicated.[81]

If one could understand everlasting hieroglyphs without knowing the tongue of the ancient Egyptians, the same might be true of Chinese writing. Likewise, if Asian diplomatic intercourse took place in Chinese characters, written identically but read in the vernacular of each nation, the characters would be more like Alberti's unchanging hieroglyphs than the Latin that served the same function in Europe. It thus seemed to Europeans that Chinese was a script composed of tens of thousands of symbols for things, readable in any number of different languages. Filippo Sassetti (1540-1588) concluded that "the Chinese appear to possess no alphabet or basic characters and that such characters as they have represent an idea [*un concetto*] and are consequently infinite in number."[82]

As John DeFrancis has extensively argued, Chinese was not a universal, supralinguistic writing system. Most characters (upwards of 90%) contain some phonetic element. Though pronunciation is often indicated imprecisely, reflecting variations over time and space, because ancient Chinese and its many modern descendants ('dialects') are phonologically related the hint will often be helpful (just as 'nation' is [ˈneɪʃən] in English and [nasjɔ̃] in French—nary a phoneme in common, but both predictable from the phonetic rules of the language), but only to someone familiar with a Chinese pronunciation. What brought about this glossolalic miracle? For missionaries *did* see Japanese, Koreans and some Southeast

---

[81] Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), VIII/4, p. 256. This passage is discussed in Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1970), pp. 32f.

[82] Cited in Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. II/3, p. 514. It is testimony to the strength of this myth that even so able a scholar as Lach summarizes Sassetti's as an "essentially correct description of Chinese." (p. 515).

Asians unable to speak Chinese communicating in writing through 'brush talks' (*bitan* 筆 談). Moreover, philosophical and religious discourse within Japan, Vietnam and Korea, even for internal consumption, took place mainly in Classical Chinese. Learning to read and write this 'universal' language was *not* a simple matter of converting ideas into Chinese characters. First, although speakers of different languages read Chinese characters in different ways, the readings were generally approximations in that language's phonetic system of Chinese pronunciation. Another factor that exaggerated the appearance of ease for European observers was the heavy borrowing from Chinese by other Asian languages: according to one estimate sixty to seventy percent of modern Japanese vocabulary is made up of Chinese words and words invented in Japan out of Chinese elements.[83] Finally, studying Chinese meant learning a new grammar, often quite different from one's native tongue, and even in China the grammar of the classical language was quite different from that of everyday speech. In Japan, which had the advantage of a Sinicized vocabulary and the obstacle of a dissimilar grammar, Chinese was read and taught through *kakikudashi* 書 き 下 し, a complicated system of intralinear annotations to indicate how to reorganize sentences according to Japanese word order and add the inflections Chinese lacks and Japanese requires—in effect, translating the text while leaving it intact on the page.

The notion that Chinese acted as a universal language in Asia, coupled with the assumption that it communicated concepts, not the sounds of words, fostered the unrealistic hope of a 'key' to Chinese which would allow anyone to understand and possibly compose a text in Chinese without knowing the language—a sort of *kakikudashi* for Latin or German. Starting in 1667 Andreas Müller attracted the interest of Kircher, Leibniz, and others with his claim to be developing such a *clavis sinica*. While Müller's project has been disparaged as a pipe dream at best and fraud at worst, its contemporary plausibility becomes comprehensible in light of attempts to invent techniques to overcome linguistic barriers. Kircher, for instance, had undertaken a similar project in his polygraphic (more properly, pasigraphic) system for putting messages into a code that could be read in Latin or one of four European vernaculars. This polygraphy was designed to act as precisely the sort of key Müller sought to create, and it was only one of several attempted universal languages from this period.[84]

Indeed, in the seventeenth century the news that Chinese was a hieroglyphic *scripta franca* for East Asia spurred attempts to imitate it through the creation of a new universal language. Most famously, Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* noted the efficacy of Chinese in the Far East and proposed that a simi-

---

[83] De Francis, *The Chinese Language*, p. 157.

[84] On Kircher's pasigraphy, that is, a system for communication with a universal language that that can be converted mechanically into any natural language, see George McCracken, "Athanasius Kircher's Universal Polygraphy," *Isis* 39.4 (1948): 215-228. See also Eco, *Search for the Perfect Language*, chap. 9.

lar system of 'real characters' be contrived for communication of scientific and other knowledge.[85] In England, the proposal was taken up in earnest by George Dalgarno (c. 1620-1687) and under the auspices of the Royal Society in a project led by John Wilkins (1614-1672). As most of these systems were principally graphical, the 'languages' created were, like hieroglyphics as traditionally understood, not so much languages as graphic systems which could be *converted into* a classical or modern tongue. This was precisely how the proponents of these schemes imagined Chinese operated.

The lessons from China, however, were not all positive. The praise missionary reports lavished on its graphic system was balanced if not outweighed by complaints of the travails the fathers underwent in learning the language, especially in the memorization of thousands of characters.[86] The discovery of Chinese characters spurred on the search for a universal language, but in fact it also warned of a major limitation on any such system, that of human memory.[87] Most universal language schemes organized concepts into numbered or named rows and columns that betrayed their derivation from the memory arts. Yet a major reason these schemes were abandoned was, ironically, the difficulty of keeping the coding system in one's head. More fundamentally, they shared the assumption that a word was a marker for a concept and that these concepts could be reduced to a non-verbal form. Chinese 'hieroglyphs' were thought to do this too, but not systematically enough for proponents of new universal languages. George Dalgarno, in a 1660 broadsheet, combined admiration for Chinese achievements with certainty that his proposed 'universal character' would surpass theirs, which remained tied to images:

> You far-seeing Chinese, do not, we beseech you, render blind us one-eyed ones, anxious as we are to look more intently at your affairs, by displaying enchanting images [*fascinata spectra*] in place of letters. Do not keep those civilized and barbarous peoples (there being no difference between the two), who seek your companionship, apart from your society by means of the towers and walls of monstrous characters [*Monstrosorum Characterum*]. This is certainly art's ultimate cure, to allure you into full participation in human society. If

---

[85] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, edited by Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 120. Kiernan (pp. 313f) suggests missionary reports as a source for Bacon's knowledge of Chinese writing, but an intriguing possibility is that he also relied on de Vigenère's account.

[86] Kircher, whose knowledge of China came from his fellow Jesuits, also notes the challenge of memorizing characters. See Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, p. 160.

[87] Rossi, *Logic and the Art of Memory*, chap. 7.

> this were less efficacious, it would take not arts but arms to
> drag you away from this obstinacy.[88]

However grotesque the European Cyclops, it is Chinese graphic monsters that bar from the portals of that nation the global commerce a yet more universal script (or its military equivalent) could bring.

The Monosyllabic Language

Jesuits further reported, with some amazement, that the entire vocabulary of Chinese was monosyllabic, unlike any tongue they knew from Europe, the Near East, or the Americas. Thus Ricci wrote:

> All Chinese words, without exception, are monosyllabic. I
> have never encountered a dissyllabic or polysyllabic word,
> although a number of words may have two or even three
> vowel sounds, some of which may be diphthongs.
>   When I speak of diphthongs I have in mind our European
> nomenclature. The Chinese are not accustomed to speak of
> vowels and consonants because every word, just as every ob-
> ject, is represented by its own ideograph, or symbol, used to
> represent a thought. The number of ideographs is, therefore,
> equal to the number of words, and the unit of diction is not
> the word but the syllable.[89]

This conclusion is incorrect, as George Kennedy showed almost fifty years ago. Chinese is not monosyllabic, since there is no period in the known history of the language of which we can say with certainty that syllables always acted as the smallest meaningful semantic units.[90] But it is wrong for interesting reasons.

---

[88] George Dalgarno, "Omnibus Omnini Homnibus" ("To All Men of the Whole World," broadsheet of 1660), in David Cram and Jaap Maat, ed. and trans., *George Dalgarno on Universal Language: The Art of Signs (1661), The Deaf and Dumb Man's Tutor (1680) and the Unpublished Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 120f.

[89] Ricci-Trigault, cited in Boxer, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 26f.

[90] George A. Kennedy, "The Butterfly Case (Part I)," in *Selected Works of George A. Kennedy*, edited by Li Tien-yi (New Haven: Yale University Far Eastern Publications, 1964), pp. 273-322 (originally appeared in *Wennti* 8 (1955): 1-47) and "The Monosyllabic Myth," *Selected Works of George A. Kennedy*, pp. 104-118 (originally appeared in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 71.3 (1951): 161-166). See also De Francis, *The Chinese Language*, pp. 176-188.

A related but distinct issue in Western understanding of Chinese is the "absence" of morphology in Chinese. For an insightful study of both Chinese and Western views of the

In English, we recognize that not all syllables are meaningful on their own, since some words are monosyllables ('ant'), some are compounds ('anthill'), and are others bi- or polysyllables where the parts cannot be taken on their own (there is no 'ant' in 'antic' or 'antimony'). But what makes a word a word is how it is distinguished in writing, not necessarily how it sounds in speech ('anthill' is one word, 'ant hill' two); since the Middle Ages, European languages have separated words with spaces before and after, but not all writing systems do so.[91] Chinese writing works somewhat differently: each character represents one syllable, without visual division of groups of characters into compounds. When Europeans saw Chinese written in discrete characters, they mapped these units onto their notion of 'words', so that each square unit representing one syllable became a discrete semantic unit. This translation of categories is inexact, however. Many Chinese compounds are more like *antimony* than *anthill*: the parts have no semantic function outside the whole. Kennedy cites the example of characters with the element *chong* 虫 ('insect') in a major twentieth-century dictionary: variant forms aside, 187 of 373 characters have no meaning or use outside of bi- or polysyllabic compounds.[92] He laments the mistaken impression given by Chinese-English dictionaries that translate each character separately, for example defining the two characters *hu* 蝴 and *die* 蝶 (that combined as *hudie* make up a word for 'butterfly') both as 'butterfly'. He notes that a modern Chinese dictionary cites no example of either character used independently, and concludes that *hu* is not a word on its own.[93]

Where did this mistaken impression come from? Although it would seem to flow naturally from the misreadings of sixteenth-century Europeans, the conclusion that one character, and thus one syllable, forms a 'word' was overdetermined: this is close to how sixteenth-century Chinese saw their language as well. When Gaspar da Cruz asked his Chinese informant to explain the 'ABC' he had written, the latter did so word-by-word, which is to say, character-by-character: 'heaven-earth-man' (*tian di ren* 天 地 人). And if da Cruz had sought to learn more of the language by acquiring a dictionary, most would have been dictionaries of characters, not compounds; in general, reference books whose entries were compounds were encyclopedias (*leishu* 類 書) providing citations from received

---

issue, see David Prager Branner, "On Early Chinese Morphology and its Intellectual History," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13.1 (2003): 45-76.

[91] On the importance of this feature of European writing, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1982) pp. 121ff., and Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), chaps. 3 and 8.

[92] Kennedy, "The Butterfly Case," p. 297.

[93] In fact characters were sometimes torn from their original contexts by later writers, especially poets, who created compounds such as *fengdie* 風 蝶 ('windborne butterfly'), and *die* appears in the (bisyllabic) names of many insects. But *hu* seems never to have been used this way outside of the binome *hudie*.

texts, not pronunciation, definition or etymology. The basic unique of lexical, etymological and phonological analysis was the monosyllabic graph, and indeed there was no term for 'word' as distinct from 'character' until the twentieth century.[94] When, two decades after da Cruz, Ricci went on to study the language, he naturally absorbed this view, which would have arisen from the study of any dictionary.

The Ideographic Myth

The ideas that each character functions on its own, as a word does in a European language, and that it communicates a single concept, independently of language, combine in the notion that the Chinese writing system is 'ideographic', that each character represents a discrete concept independently of the language of the reader or writer. Once the universal and monosyllabic nature of Chinese is questioned, so must claims about its ideographic nature. The ideographic myth (ironically, the term 'ideogram' was coined by Champollion, who proved that Egyptian hieroglyphs were used phonetically) was, it should now be clear, reinforced by a variety of peculiarly European concerns. Thus Leibniz, interested less in hieroglyphs or emblems than in abstractions, saw the Chinese writing system as "based more on intellectual considerations such as number, order and relations, so that there are only detached traits which support any resemblance to some type of material form",[95] and hence a suitable model for his proposed creation of a universal writing system for logic and mathematics. Nonetheless, he shared the assumption that a Chinese character represents a concept, if in a more rarefied manner. These notions have died hard. The *Oxford English Dictionary* still defines 'ideograph' as "[a] character or figure symbolizing the idea of a thing, without expressing the name of it, as the Chinese characters and most Egyptian

---

94 The *Hanyu da cidian* 漢 語 大 詞 典 (Great Chinese dictionary) cites Lü Shuxiang's 呂 叔 湘 (b. 1904) claim that the first use of the word *ci* 詞 to refer to "a basic linguistic unit" was in Zhang Shizhao 章 士 釗 (1881-1973), *Zhongdeng guowen dian* 中 等 國 文 典 (Intermediate Chinese grammar, 1928). One might add the 1915 *Ciyuan* 詞 源 (Source of words), a dictionary of polysyllabic compounds. In any case I know of no clear pre-1900 use of either this *ci* 詞 (or *ci* 辭) to mean 'word' in a general sense.

A few pre-modern Chinese dictionaries do have entries of more than one character. Notable early examples are the *Erya*, and Liu Xi's 劉 熙 *Shiming* 釋 名 (Names explained, c. 200); a Ming example is Lin Maohuai 林 茂 槐 (*jinshi* 1595), *Zhushu zi kaolüe* 諸 書 字 考 略 (Brief study of characters in various books), all of the entries in which are two- or three-character compounds. But I have seen no explicit discussion of what makes up a 'word' as opposed to a name, a character, or a syllable.

95 Leibniz, letter to Bouvet, translated in Mungello, *Curious Land*, pp. 204f.

hieroglyphics."[96] These notions remain strong even among native speakers of Chinese and Japanese, leading one observer to conclude that, in Japan, Western views of Chinese characters were so influential that they have become virtual *doxa*, and the imported ideographic myth has taken unshakeable hold through a Westernized education system.[97]

Unfortunately the irony is fabricated: while the ideographic interpretation is a misconception, it was not contrary to indigenous ways of thinking about writing. Various myths about the origins of writing emphasize its derivation from natural patterns, from the trigrams of the *Book of Changes*, or from pictographs, but none treats writing explicitly as a record of spoken words. Similarly, the very structure of most Chinese dictionaries reinforces the idea that characters were discrete units that directly express meaning. While some dictionaries, especially those for poets and of archaic forms, were arranged phonetically, the majority of Ming and earlier dictionaries were organized by keys (*bushou* 部首, often called 'radicals'), a part of a character which often gives a hint of its meaning (most characters in the names of insects and other crawlies such as snakes and worms have as their key *chong* 虫; most characters with *cao* 艸 on top are names of plants or parts of plants).

Lexicographers since Xu Shen in the second century had forefronted the graphic aspect of writing by singling out semantic elements. By organizing the keys in particular ways they presented their dictionaries as encyclopedic overviews of the written language, which meant, since the language encapsulated the wisdom of the ancients, knowledge of the world. Xu Shen selected as the first of his 540 keys *yi* 一, the number one and graphically the simplest character; his final key was *hai* 亥, twelfth and last of the Earthly Branches (*dizhi* 地支) used for reckoning time and other cosmological purposes. Xu's choice of alpha and omega reflected the idea that the script, like the hexagrams of the *Change Classic* from which it was derived, corresponded to the myriad of things and states of affairs in the world. *Yi*, a horizontal line, is congruent with the solid line that stands for *yang*, positive essence, in the *Changes*; like *yang*, it represents the generative moment of all existence. Xu defined it as "the inception of the ultimate beginning. The Way is established by the One, which creates and defines Heaven and Earth, and brings to completion the myriad things." *Hai*, by contrast, is "the tenth month, when the faint *yang* rises to meet the abundant *yin*." This was explained by the derivation of the top part of the character from 二, the ancient form of 'up' (*shang* 上) and the bottom part from 'man', 'woman', and a stroke

---

96 *Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00111229>

97 J. Marshall Unger, "The Very Idea: The Notion of Ideogram in China and Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 45.4 (1990): 391-411.

resembling the form of an embryo.[98] Thus these two keys represent the start and end points of the cycle of *yin* and *yang*. Indeed, as Françoise Bottéro has argued, the fixing of 540 keys was far from arbitrary, since 540 is the product of six (the number of *yin*), nine (that of *yang*), and ten, the complete number representing the cardinal directions.[99]

Although many later dictionaries did not strictly adhere to the numerological system of the *Shuowen*, the expectation of correspondence between the organization of the world and that of the script remained powerful. While dictionaries meant as practical references tended toward systematization through phonetic or stroke count orderings, many of those dealing with paleography aimed at a different kind of rationalization. In the Song and Yuan, works on etymology took on an encyclopedic character, putting the keys into topical groups such as Heaven, Earth, Man, Flora, and Fauna. Words with common keys stayed together, so that in most cases similar terms but in some cases unrelated words were classed under keys unrelated to the concrete meaning of the group. Under 'celestial patterns', (*tianwen* 天 文), for example, appear the keys for Heaven, sun, and moon, but also clouds, wind, rain, fire and so forth. Thus many words for cooking, because their key is 'fire' (*huo* 火), appear in the 'celestial patterns' section. These categories derive from those of the ancient thesaurus, the *Erya* 爾 雅 (*Approaching elegance*, third century BC?), but unlike the *Erya* these Song, Yuan and Ming dictionaries were both encyclopedic and etymological, since below the major categories (Heaven, Earth, Man) characters were organized on the basis of graphic structure. This reinforced the idea that the script corresponded to reality in a primal way.

---

98 Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, chap. 1A, p. 1a, and chap. 15A, p. 20b. See Bottéro, *Sémantisme et Classifications*, pp. 60-62.

99 Bottéro, *Sémantisme et Classifications*, pp. 69-71. The list of characters included under *yi*¸ and the explanations of its role as a graphical element in other characters, confirms that Xu Shen saw it as signifying the *yang* principle. The inclusion of approximately 10,000 characters may also have been meant to supply words corresponding to the 'ten thousand things' (*wanwu* 萬 物).

Figure 10: Table of contents of a sixteenth-century etymological dictionary

SOURCE: Tian Yiheng, *Da Ming tongwen ji*, 1582 Wuyuan ed., "mulu", 1a-1b.
NOTE: The first *juan* (chapter) lists abstract concepts (represented by circles and lines), the second, third and fourth list things related to Heaven (including rain, sun, and moon).

Lexicographers of a philosophical or cosmological bent could incorporate further abstractions. Zhao Huiqian's 趙撝謙 (1352-1395) dictionary, which became very popular in the late Ming, opens with a discussion of the relationship between characters and the trigrams of the *Changes*. Wei Jiao, similarly, preceded his section on Heaven with a category of figures (*xiangshu* 象數); some earlier writers had put numbers (*shuwei* 數位) first. Tian Yiheng 田藝蘅 (1524-1574?) organized his widely-cited dictionary, *Da Ming tongwen ji* 大明同文集 (Great Ming compendium of the unified script), along the same lines but began with concepts such as the 'primal ultimate' (*yuanji* 元極), 'numinous ultimate' (*lingji* 靈極), 'supreme ultimate' (*taiji* 太極), and *yin* and *yang*, each represented by an abstract figure. Another sign ⬤ combines the 'three powers' (*sancai* 三才) of Heaven, Earth and Humanity: the upper, white semicircle stands for *yang* (Heaven), the dark bottom for *yin* (Earth) and the two-pronged sign traversing them is *ren* 人 ('human'). Thus 'diagrams' (*tu* 圖) and written characters are interchangeable (Figure 10).[100]

---

[100] The examples are taken from the *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* facsimile of a 1582 edition of the *Da Ming tongwen ji juyao* 大明同文集舉要 (Highlights of the Great Ming compendium of the unified script). It is unclear whether it differs from the *Da*

Bouvet's Hermetic Monster

The Europeans most strongly and directly influenced by these imagistic interpretations of Chinese characters were the Figurists, a group of Jesuits, mostly French, who exegetically extracted from early Chinese texts prefigurations of Christian revelation. Goodman and Grafton have shown that many of the Jesuits' approaches to Chinese texts derived from their humanistic education and were typical of one sort of apologetic reading of non-Christian texts.[101] The etymological speculations of the Figurists are particularly complex: they involved both a European 'toolkit' which included cabalistic and Hermetic approaches and some rather specialized instruments they picked up in China. The best known Figurist, Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), latched onto late-Ming speculative lexicographers such as Wei Jiao and Wang Yingdian (see p. 43) for both technique and specific claims (he cited Wei's 1540 *Liushu jingyun* as a source and one of his etymologies was taken from Wang's *Tongwen beikao*).[102] By this time in China, the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911), this approach was yielding to others that relied more on collecting reliable epigraphic specimens or on reconstructing ancient phonology, so Bouvet had to turn to somewhat dated materials for his research.[103] Ironically, the cultural accommodation he sought was becoming outmoded in Europe as well, as shown by the resistance his findings provoked.

Key to the Figurists' use of the Chinese Classics in their system of prefigurations was the integration of early China into world mythohistory and of its major figures into a set of global equivalences. For instance, Bouvet equated the ancient sage-king Yao 堯 with Noah, taking the character of his name apart by treating the top part, *yao* 垚 ('lofty'), as three crosses and the bottom, following Wang Yingdian, not as *wu* 兀 but as *ren* 人 ('man').[104] Perhaps the most important

---

Ming tongwen ji. All copies I know of have the former as their full title and the latter as running title.

[101] Goodman and Grafton, "Toolkits," *passim*.

[102] See description of Bouvet's *Specimen Sapientiae hieroglyphicae seu Theologiae symbolicae priscorum Sinarum propendum omnibus viris Apostolicus, & ceteris nationum orientalum conversionem, ardenter desiderantibus* (JS IV, 5A), in Albert Chan, *Chinese Books and Documents in the Jesuit Archives in Rome: A Descriptive Catalogue: Japonica-Sinica I-IV* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 518-522.

[103] On the development of phonological research, see Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*, pp. 251-259. On the abandonment of visual approaches to paleography for phonological ones, see Qianshen Bai, *Fu Shan's World: The Transformation of Chinese Calligraphy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), chap. 3, and Lothar Ledderose, *Die Siegelschrift (*Chuan-shu*) in der Ch'ing-Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1970).

[104] François Secret, "Quand la Kabbale expliquait le 'Yi King' ou un aspect oublié du figuratisme du P. Joachim Bouvet," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 195 (1979), p. 51. Compare Wang Yingdian's treatment of Yao in *Tongwen beikao*, chap. 2, p. 11a.

equivalence was that of Fu Xi, legendary inventor of the system of the *Changes* and thus ultimately of writing, with Hermes, who had already been identified with Thoth (like Fu Xi, reputed inventor of writing) in Egypt and Zoroaster in Persia, recipients both of pre-Christian revelations, as well as the patriarch Enoch. To establish the identification between Fu Xi and Hermes, Bouvet relied on a deconstruction of the sage's name, which he gives as "Pao Xi Taihao Fu Xi" 庖 犧 太 昊 伏 犧. Fu Xi's name took different forms, and Bouvet has selected one that best makes his case; Pao Xi and Fu Xi are alternate versions of the same name, phonetically equivalent at an earlier time, but Bouvet kept them separate. He translated the first two and final characters as "stand[ing] for an immolated victim ready to be offered in sacrifice", which he related to Enoch/Hermes' institution of social order and ritual.[105] The characters Taihao, the middle part of the title, "mean 'thrice great' and 'greatest', and correspond precisely to the idea of 'Trismegistus', the highest title which Occidentals have given their Mercury, for the same reason that Fu Xi is called Taihao in ancient books."[106] Although Bouvet did not cite a source for the assertion that Taihao, which would normally mean something like 'great and brilliant', specifically meant 'trismegistus' (thrice-great), he was able to make this claim thanks to a careful study of Chinese dictionaries. In one of them he must have found the very rare character 夶, composed of the element *da* 大, 'large, great', repeated three times. It first appeared in the *Longkan shoujian* 龍 龕 手 鑑 (Handy keys in dragon-niches, preface 997) by the monk Hangjun 行 均, where it was undefined but described as 'vulgar' (*su* 俗) and its pronunciation listed as *tai* 太 (the Tai from Fu Xi's title).[107] Only in a few Ming and Qing dictionaries is it firmly identified as a variant of *tai* 太 (most modern dictionaries refrain from defining it).[108]

---

[105] This reading has a solid basis. Xi 犧 (the second and sixth character) does mean 'sacrificial victim' (usually an animal) and Pao 庖, which means 'kitchen', was supposedly a nickname given to Fu Xi because of his work preparing sacrificial animals. Although he is not presented in Chinese sources as the institutor of all rites, he is credited with the invention of marriage. See Kong Yingda's scholia on the *Li ji*, in *Shisan jing zhushu*, 十 三 經 注 疏 (Notes and scholiæ on the Thirteen Classics) chap. 14, pp. 7a-8b, chap. 15, p. 4b.

[106] Bouvet, letter to Jean-Paul Bignon, September 15, 1704 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. fr. 17 240, 17-36), in Claudia von Collani, ed., *Eine Wissenschaftliche Akademie für China* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), p. 43. See also discussion in von Collani, *P. Joachim Bouvet S.J.: sein Leben und sein Werk* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1985), pp. 189–199. I have emended Bouvet's Romanizations to Pinyin.

[107] Hangjun, *Longkan shoujian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 357.

[108] The first Ming example I have found is from the forger Feng Fang 灃 坊, in his epigraphic dictionary *Jinshi yiwen* 金 石 遺 文 (Epigraphic remains), *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* reprint of Qing ms., p. 526c. He uses the same form in his forged classical texts, for instance in his version of the *Change Classic*, *Gu Yi shixue* 古 易 世 學 (Ancestral studies on the ancient *Changes*), Ming ms., Shanghai Library, chap. 1, p. 16b.

The pivot of Bouvet's etymological *tour de force* was a connection between Fu Xi's name and the Egyptian hieroglyph that, he believed, stood for Hermes-Thoth, portrayed in European works as a cynocephalus (baboon or dog-headed man):

> The character *fu* 伏 is the chief and most significant in the name of Fu Xi, being made up of two others, *quan* 犬 and *ren* 人. The first means 'dog' and is even close in its pronunciation to the Greek κύων, and the second means 'man'. This is nothing but a hieroglyph that corresponds with absolute precision to the cynocephalus, the hieroglyph with which the ancient Egyptians most frequently depicted their Hermes or Mercury.[109]

Bouvet conjured up an image (had he been reading Ricci on memory?) that corresponded in his mind with the icon he understood as representing Hermes in Egypt. This type of etymologizing had been suspect in China at least since the time of Wang Anshi (see p. 43 above), and by Bouvet's day the cutting edge was phonological rather than visual, so to find precedents for his approach he had to dig up largely forgotten sources such as Wei Jiao's dictionary from the 1530s.

Conclusion

To turn Fu Xi into a cynocephalus, Bouvet had to perform one further trick: ignoring an indigenous Chinese monster. In myth and early art Fu Xi was portrayed with the body of a serpent and a human head. It is not hard to imagine why Bouvet would leave this detail out of his account: Hermes was not a snake, so this image would not have strengthened the case.[110] Worse, convincing Chris-

---

One possible source for Bouvet is the *Wuhouqing zihai* 五侯鯖字海 (Fine selection from the sea of characters), another the related *Wuhouqing pianhai* 五侯鯖篇海 (Fine selection from a categorized sea). I have examined the former but not the latter, a Vatican Library copy which Robert Mungello identifies as an important source for Kircher. From Mungello's description (*Curious Land*, p. 217), it would appear that the two works are similar.

The three-*da* form of *tai* appears in *Wuhouqing zihai* (chap 4, p. 25b), though not in the more standard *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (Kangxi Dictionary), nor in the late-Ming *Zihui* 字彙 (Character lexicon) on which it was based.

[109] Bouvet, letter to Bignon, in von Collani, ed., *Eine Wissenschaftliche Akademie für China*, pp. 43f.

[110] Hermes was, however, associated with snakes in the context of a rod, the Karykeion (Roman Caduceus of Mercury), entwined by two serpents.

tians to take seriously an ancient Chinese sage might have been complicated by admitting that the latter had taken the same form as Satan.

Such selectivity was unavoidable with claims so extravagant, but similar choices permeate European descriptions of Chinese writing; the most notable absence is of discussions of indigenous understandings of the Chinese script. While Jesuits in China drew heavily on late-Ming works on lexicography and paleography, they had little to say about the core tenets of Chinese etymology. Even more strikingly, Knud Lundbæk has shown that a Latin discussion of the six principles of character formation composed in the 1660s for inclusion in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (a Latin translation of the Four Books) was left out of the printed version of 1687. Athanasius Kircher, to whom Prosper Intorcetta (1625-1696) almost certainly showed the manuscript, reproduced the fanciful characters of the folk encyclopedia (Intorcetta thought them genuine too) but paid no attention to the summary of Chinese etymological thought.[111]

Europeans writing about Chinese absorbed information through a complex set of filters, the first and most crucial of which was made up of missionaries in China with access to native speakers, to a wide range of books, and even to some ancient artifacts. They found in the work of their Chinese counterparts some enterprises relevant to key European issues, such as an exploration of the relationship between image and word and an active inquiry into ancient and unusual writing as a means to recover lost wisdom. It was on the details, however, that these expeditions foundered. Ricci's Sinified mnemotechnics brilliantly enlisted the six principles, and the cultural memory that writing had once been pictographic, to urge readers to think as he did and turn words back into pictures. The limited impact of his technique suggests that his monsters were not provided with the spacious, well-lit quarters they needed to survive.[112] The lines Ricci juryrigged between word and image were able to telegraph the outlines of the technique, but the message may have been too strange for his audience. Europeans were more willing to turn Chinese characters into monsters, whether to be wondered at, like de Vigenère's, to be slain, like Dalgarno's, or to be hailed as divine messengers, like Bouvet's.

Chinese writers also fit exotica into their own worldviews. Sometime before Ricci created his monsters, Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590) and some friends had a fan decorated with passages in various foreign languages written by official interpreters in Beijing. Wang classified and described the object in terms of resemblances between the scripts and different forms, ancient and modern, of

---

[111] Lundbæk, *The Traditional History of the Chinese Script from a seventeenth Century Jesuit manuscript* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988), *passim*. Lundbæk argues that the essay was probably written by Intorcetta.

[112] The only remaining early copy is in Paris, not having survived or been reprinted in the country where a truly effective shortcut to examination success would hardly have been ignored by commercial printers.

Chinese characters.[113] He was not interested in how the scripts worked, only how they looked. Similarly, Fang Yizhi 方 以 智 (1611-1671) described numerals he learned from Jesuit sources in the context of a discussion of the origin of Chinese characters; though he noted that Hindu-Arabic digits were simple to write he did not inquire into the mathematical system behind them.[114]

These reactions may seem superficial, focused on mere appearances, but the mereness of surfaces is not given, nor were surfaces always taken to be arbitrary. The appearance of written characters meant everything—they meant *through* their appearance—and getting it right mattered. Leaving one dot out of a character meant failure on an examination, the difference between success and failure in life.[115] Characters were just as important in religious Daoism, whose practitioners wrote strange, powerful and unpronounceable words that controlled gods. Though we tend to think of written symbols as pointing to something else, to their content or to speakable words, it is worth recalling how much time people spent lingering under these signs rather than visiting the places they named. Jesuit reports rarely fail to remind the reader of the years of drudgery the fathers spent memorizing characters; after so much quality time with their dictionaries they absorbed and could reproduce much of their content, but turning knowledge of Chinese into knowledge about Chinese proved more difficult. Although no *clavis sinica* was ever found, for like any human language Chinese could not be reduced to a mechanical system, the desire to make each character fit neatly into the order of the universe was shared for a time by scholars from both ends of Eurasia.

---

[113] Wang Shizhen, *Yanzhou shanren sibu gao* 弇 州 山 人 四 部 稿 (Draft of Wang Shizhen's works in four categories), *Siku quanshu* ed., chap. 132, pp. 18a–19a. On the impact of non-Chinese writing systems on earlier Chinese phonology, see Françoise Bottéro, "Chinese Characters Versus Other Writing Systems: The Song Origins of the Distinction Between 'Non-Compound Characters' (*wen* 文) and 'Compound Characters' (*zi* 字)," in Jiang Shaoyu and Ken-ichi Takashima, eds., *Meaning and Form: Essays in Pre-Modern Chinese Grammar* (München: Lincom Europa, 2004), pp. 1–17. See also Saroj Kumar Chaudhuri, "Siddham in China and Japan," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 88 (December 1998).

[114] Fang Yizhi, *Tongya* 通 雅 (Comprehensive elegance) (Beijing: Zhonghua shudian, 1990, reprint of 1666 ed.), chap. 2, pp. 32a-b.

[115] On the importance of characters in examinations, see Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 377-379.