

SEMANTOGRAPHY and CHINESE WRITING

A Letter to

Dr.T.C.Backhouse
The School for Public Health
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The University of Sydney

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Dear Dr. Backhouse,

Please accept my thanks for your kind letter, for your interest in my work and for your desire to purchase my 3 books on SEMANTOGRAPHY. And let me express my joy about finding in you a man who has studied Chinese Writing, and sees Semantography from this point. You mention that you have tried to interest a number of people in Semantography, by referring to it as a simplified and logical kind of Chinese writing. I know that this approach must fail with anyone who has never tried to scale that second "Great Wall of China", as Lin Yutang calls Chinese Ideography. But for the scholar who has tried it, a world of wonder opens up.

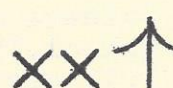
I write this letter on a waxstencil, and shall supply you with duplicates, so that you may distribute them to your friends. However, I beg to excuse all misprints and awkward sentence constructions, which I am surely going to commit, and which are so difficult to erase.

Frederick Bodmer and Lancelot Hogben, authors of THE LOOM OF LANGUAGE (Allen and Unwin 1944, London) wrote that seventeenth century Europe learned from Jesuit missionaries about Chinese Ideography, and considered a writing, which could be read and understood in all languages, a "nine-days wonder". Leibnitz, the great mathematician and philosopher (1646 - 1716) wrote letters to missionaries in China, and then developed his ideas about a simple and logical writing "similar to the Chinese, but better than theirs". However, he himself never tried to draw up even one single symbol, and the idea was considered a practical impossibility for 300 years. I claim now to be the first man, who has fulfilled Leibnitz prophecy, who said in 1679 "I think these thoughts will some day be carried out, so natural and agreeable appears to me this writing... for easy communication with distant nations... but if introduced also among us, WITHOUT HOWEVER RENOUNCING ORDINARY WRITING WOULD BE USEFUL IN GIVING THOUGHTS LESS SURD AND VERBAL THAN WE NOW HAVE".

In short, he wanted this new writing to comprise a simple Logic and Semantic, something which Chinese writing has not. Indeed, the Chinese symbols are much too complicated, cumbersome and archaic, and the product of thousands of years, in which many scholars have added complex symbols. But once you have learned the meaning of a Chinese symbol, you glance over it as quickly as you take in a complex chord when playing piano, and suddenly not the WORD, but the real THING stands vividly out in your mind. Here is one example and its counterpart in Semantography:

Chinese

Semantography



tree

forest

tree

many many many
(multiplication
mark)

grove

forest

As you see, Chinese writing is more "picturesque" than Semantography. But I have to use the abstract multiplication mark, because Semantography is designed to be typed on an ordinary-size typewriter (in which the capital letters only are replaced by line elements for the typing of the symbols).

And now an example of Chinese symbol combination. The meaning of "East" It is formed by the picture of the sun appearing between trees in the eastern sky. The symbol for "Sun" has been conventionalised through the "brush stroke" mode of writing.



The symbol for "Sun" in Chinese
Writing from the ancient to the modern

tree

east

Now ask your friends to close their eyes, and imagine vividly the golden fireball as it shines through the trees just after sunrise. And now imagine that children are accustomed to these symbols, and every time, they see the symbol for "east" they do not think of the various words for "east" in the various Chinese languages, but see vividly the sun between trees.

Now we can^{have} an understanding of what scholars claim: that Chinese poems are the worlds finest. Not the words, the real poetical image stands out. And now comes the miracle. A Chinese poem written 2500 years ago, can still be read in all the languages of modern China, whereas European poems in English, or French, or any other phonetically written tongue, written only 700 years ago, is incomprehensible today.

Centuries ago, Chinese governments tried to introduce a phonetic alphabet. But every attempt failed. The advantages of a writing which could be read and understood in all the many languages were too obvious. And here is another miracle.

European history shows that an invader impressed his language on the conquered country. We see the influence of Roman rule in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Roumania, etc. But the Roman language was invariably altered and different spelling and writing led to different languages in the different countries.

In China we see a quite different picture. Innumerable invaders invaded the country, but they did not impress their language on the conquered. They the invaders were absorbed in the end. Sinologists agree that this was due to the ideographic writing of the Chinese. The invading people learned Chinese thought and culture without any change in their own language. They could in the end read Chinese writing in their language. And slowly they became Chinese themselves. Thus the largest nation on earth was formed.

All sinologists agree about this point: that the main unifying factor on the Chinese continent was and is the ideographic writing. We cannot possibly conceive what Europe would be today, if Europe had an ideographic writing for the last 2000 years, if Shakespeare and all the great thinkers poets and writers would have written a writing which could be read and understood in French, English, Swedish, Bulgarian, Russian, etc. etc. An European Nation would have been a reality centuries ago.

People who have never been in China point to the great illiteracy percentage, and believe that this is due to the difficult Chinese writing. Such a conclusion is utterly false. There are not enough schools in the interior of China, and the children must help in the field. But where the Chinese man earns a little more than necessary, he sends his child to a school. This is the case in Shanghai, where even the poorest ricksha puller will give his child an education. Consequently private small schools are to be found in almost every street of Shanghai.

And how easy do these children pick up the Chinese characters. In China I have seen a unique sight, and I have even filmed it: street libraries. In all the other countries, if a child gets the smallest coin it will invariably turn it into a candy. But in China there are street libraries where children sit around and read the latest fairy tales.

These street libraries are not government subsidised. They are all private enterprise, run by elderly Chinese who sit in the sun, and make thus a living. They usually live in the house of their son, but the income they derives from his street library gives . the necessary independence and self-respect. In short: these street libraries strive, which means that the children are steady customers, which means in turn, that the complicated Chinese characters are easily learned.

I found myself marooned in China during the war. Then the Japanese took over, segregated me and my wife together with thousands of other European refugees. But I was oblivious to the anxieties and dangers of the war years. I fell in love with China, and with the Chinese culture.

In Europe I had many years practical experience in scientific library research, and I realised the great difficulties of scientific research, caused by the Babel of scientific publications. In China, and especially in Shanghai, the most international city of the world, I realised too that the peoples stick to their mother tongue, and won't take to Esperanto, etc. Even in ^{the} United States of America, in Canada, in Australia and in other literate countries, there are millions who speak almost exclusively French, or German, or Italian and not the official language of the country.

And consequently only in China could the idea get hold of me, that an ideographic writing could be the solution, a modern, simple, and logical writing, which everyone could read in his mother tongue. And so I set to work. It took me 7 years, and my 3 large volumes are proof, that I have tackled the problem even for scientific communication.

For your friends I shall show the symbol for "east, sunrise, etc. as it is written in Semantography:

					
compass	east	sun	earth	sunrise	day
					
sunday	tuesday	moon	month	april	september

With these last few symbols we are able to print an international calendar which could be read in all the languages of the world.

All what I have written about the advantages of Chinese writing are arguments which only the person will understand who has been in China and has seen an ideographic writing at work in the banks, the commercial houses the schools and even the universities. I hope that these pages will convince your friends, and will make them "Friends of Semantography". Please let me know how many copies you want of this letter.

I cannot show here how the Semantics and Logic of Semantography works. But I can only assert that once it is taught in schools, it will help to subdue the innumerable heated debates which are going on today in every home and in every community. debates which convince nobody, which lead nowhere, debates between husband and wife, father and son, man and man, debates which centre around vague, ambiguous and even fallacious meanings. A short training in Semantography makes the learner aware of such words.

In closing this letter I beg you and your friends not only for your moral, but also for your material support. At present, I am alone, and all the work, and all the printing and writing are financed by my earnings only. Bertrand Russell, foremost authority on logical symbolism has written, that spending money on Semantography means "performing an important Service to Mankind", and I hope you and your friends will do just this.

Yours Sincerely
C.K. Bliss
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