

Semantography Series No. 136

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IS CHINESE WRITING

REALLY A PICTO-IDEOGRAPHY?

Important: It is necessary to read also No. 29 of this Series and also pages 6,21,22,48,59,69,84,102,638, of the books on Semantography

In many chapters of my 3 books on Semantography and in a number of issues of my Semantography Series I have referred to the Chinese writing. I have told of the great mathematician Leibnitz who heard of Chinese writing being a symbolic script and who evolved the idea of a Symbolis Universalis like the Chinese, but "better than theirs." I have told of the great advantages of Chinese script, being readable by people speaking different languages. I have cited the great sinologist Basil Hall Chamberlain, who said in 1904 that "ideographic writing will surely achieve the final victory over phonetic writing." I have also told that sinologists agree that the main unifying factor, which unified many races speaking many languages into the largest nation - was the Chinese script which all the different tribes and the different invaders soon learned to read in their own languages. Those sinologists maintain that a European nation would have been a reality centuries ago, if Europe had an ideographic script which Britons and Bulgars, Frenchmen and Finns, Spaniards and Scandinavians could have read in any of their languages.

It is amazing how little is known about Chinese script outside China. But even inside China you will find the most divergent ideas about their writing even among Chinese. In the same way you will find many people who differ about the correct writing, correct use and especially about the origin of many words in English, French, German etc. I shall give here but one example.

I was a poor immigrant when I came to war-torn China in 1940 and it was very hard for me to make a living in a foreign country and with no means at my disposal. Consequently I had little time to absorb myself in the most absorbing and fascinating Chinese writing. Slowly the thought of constructing a modern symbolic script took hold of me. With greater interest I studied what I could see of Chinese writing on shop signs, notices in the street, etc. when I went about my business. Chinese whom I showed then the first symbols of my Semantography could easily discern the origin of Chinese characters and here we differed sometimes. For instance, it is easy to see that my symbol for human male  is directly taken from the Chinese character of the same form  (shown below). However, I maintained that my symbol shows an upright being on two legs, whereas the Chinese character shows the outline of a penis, the male genital. My Chinese friends were greatly shocked, and demanded an explanation. I then asked them to explain to me what the character for female human means: . This they could not do, because the lines do not show anything referring to a human or female characteristic. I too was very much puzzled about the lines of the character for woman  until I happened to see a Chinese shop sign written in old-style Chinese. The oldest Chinese characters show round lines, as for instance in the sign for sun . Later, the Chinese calligraphers developed the brush stroke technique and all round lines disappeared in favour of fairly straight strokes (sun ) That shop sign was written in old Chinese, somewhat similar to what we sometimes find in England YE OLDE SHOPPE. And there in that old shop sign I found the old-style writing for the meaning of woman  a perfect pictorial outline of a female genital, the vagina opening.

outline of upright humans on legs

outline of male and female genitals



human male
man

human female
woman

human male
man

human female
woman

same

in Semantography

in Chinese writing new

and old style

This example shows how I had to analyse Chinese characters myself and how I came to quite different opinions than the prevailing ones. I wish to stress the fact that I was entirely disinterested in learning the so-called Shanghai dialect. All the Chinese men and women with whom I did business could make themselves understood in English and that was enough for me. It is only during my analysis of shop signs that I came upon the fact that Chinese is actually a hodge-podge of some pictographs, some ideographs, but in the majority - phonographs, used in a crazy way. I shall try to explain this in the next paragraphs.

No doubt, in the beginning Chinese was a purely pictorial writing. Later on ideographs had to be invented to stand for unpicturable meanings. But then phonetic characters were used. There are different explanations for this. I offer two. No doubt, phonetic characters have their advantages, and Chinese scholars must have heard from earlier travellers, but surely from Marco Polo's father and uncle who came to China in the 13th century that in Europe a phonetic script is used. There were many attempts to introduce a phonetic script with simple characters, but all those attempts, made during the centuries, failed. In Japan, where Chinese characters were used, a phonetic script the kana was introduced in the 8th century. But even today it is solely used for inflections only. One small newspaper in Japan is solely printed in kana. All the others use Chinese characters. This prompted Chamberlain to his prediction (see overleaf).

The other explanation which I offer is that unfortunately Chinese languages are monosyllabic. Now, when you try to form as many monosyllables as you can (for instance ba, be, bi, bai, bo, bou, boo, bu, then ca, ce, cai, etc. etc.) you will arrive at not more than 400 possible syllables. How to express many thousands of meanings with only 400 sounds? It is impossible, and therefore Chinese sounds have hundreds of different meanings. Li has about 100 meanings. This is called a homophone (same sound). Consequently when a Chinese said Li, nobody knew for certain which of the hundred meanings he has in mind. The only way to make himself understood was then to use a synonym word, which means the same, but has a different sound. For instance Pi means in Shanghai Chinese a pig. But Pi has many other meanings. So the Chinese added Se, which means Swine. "Pig" the Chinese says "Pig-Swine" in order to be understood. When they learn English and come upon a monosyllabic word like Look, they are afraid that it may have many meanings and therefore they usually say Look-See. Another help to overcome the monosyllabic handicap is to use a word (and sign) which is a classifier, and classifies the next sound whether it falls into the human class, animal class, furniture class, a class which refers to things which one can count in pieces, etc.) A Chinese boy when he answers the door bell, will come to his master and say: "Two piece girls outside." He is afraid that "girls" may have another meaning and therefore he puts the classifier for "pieces" before.

This terrific handicap of monosyllabism has developed into a strange hodge-podge. Going through the streets of Shanghai I looked for ever recurring signs and found the one below, which means "overseas". It is found in the name of every foreign company and forms together with another character the meaning of overseas company. As you can see, it is composed of two characters. Together it means Ocean (overseas).

 ocean sound: <u>yan</u>	 water drops (classifier)	 sheep sound: <u>yan</u>	Note: In other Chinese languages <u>sheep</u> and <u>ocean</u> have the same sound, but differing from <u>yan</u>
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These compound symbols originated somehow as follows: There was first the sign for sheep  pronounced yan. Then the ocean was given the same sound: yan. Then a pun was devised. Yan means either a sheep or the ocean. But to classify the ocean yan, the few drops of water were put in front ; thus yan, ocean .

Lin Yutang, the famous Chinese essayist, living in New York, has devised a complex typewriting machine, which is described in the NEW YORK TIMES (18th October 1952): "This typewriter represents a triumph of simplification. It has only seventy-two keys and fewer than 1400 pieces of type. After many years of study, Dr. Lin found that Chinese characters - of which one dictionary lists 45,000 - could be classified by their top and bottom configurations. He concluded that most of these needed for modern communication could be formed from seventy or eighty left-hand components, each constituting a classifier, and about 1300 right-hand components, each constituting a phonetic". (Underlines mine)

In short: Chinese is a curious phonetic writing, in which quite different pictures and ideographs stand for sounds only, with a few picto-ideographs used too.

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