

Sinocentrism and the Written Word

It is often said of the ancient Chinese that they thought themselves to be the most, and sometimes only, civilized culture in the world. While efforts have been made, as in Hershey's The Open Empire, to portray China in a more integrating light, periods of great nationalism and xenophobia have the vocabulary to match them. China is the "center kingdom", and those surrounding the center are "people from outside the center kingdom", "barbarians", or "hairy ones". That the continent's first and most influential written language originated in China can only have added to their sense of superiority. China would have a considerable head start for its written language, having already canonized the founding texts of its philosophy and ritual while even its most advanced neighbors were still developing (or copying China's) written words. The ability to study a standard text rather than relying on oral transmission of all knowledge, which must have done wonders for integrity and consistency, cannot be discounted. Finally, in the Chinese word for civilization and culture, *wen hua*, the "*wen*" is literally "writing"¹. Thus, a culture without writing or without a comparably well-developed writing system, in Chinese eyes, could hardly be considered a culture at all. It may be an exaggeration, but many sinocentric tendencies must have originated in China's pride for its written words. Here I intend to

¹ and can also mean "script, literary language, civil, refined, etc.". Perhaps in favor of openness, however, the "*hua*" can mean "change, transform, melt, etc." (Concise C-E E-C Dictionary)

trace and summarize the events in which Chinese characters formed and became a system of writing, in the context of how each stage of its development and usage perpetuated the concept of sinocentrism, which like the language itself, remains remarkably intact today.

Probably the central tenet of sinocentrism is the belief in China as the origin of civilization, and as will be emphasized here, a basic requirement of civilization is a system of writing. Having the earliest and most influential writing system in the area, while being always surrounded and menaced by less-developed cultures, would seem to justify its view of itself as the center of its known world. As we progress through time, it will be helpful to think of Chinese civilization and its writing system as first the origin, second the most comparatively advanced, third the zenith, and fourth as doggedly superior for having been the first three and the inability of those more powerful to appreciate this. For the bulk of this essay, I will cite examples from each of these proposed stages.

For the origin, we turn to works by Keightley and Boltz². Keightley draws attention to the origins of Chinese both for its great antiquity, dating roughly to the second millennium B.C., and for its isolation. He claims that its script remained logographic rather than alphabetic largely due to lack of exposure to the latter type. Near East and Mediterranean cultures of more recent times, he contrasts, have had always to confront a wide variety of languages and scripts (p.68). Another important factor in the formation of Chinese writing may seem less apparent, though already very important in other areas of ancient culture.

² Boltz's work is drawn from citations in Keightley's notes; I was unable to find an actual copy of his book.

A most interesting premise in Keightley's essay is the analogy of the genuinely Chinese tradition of ancestor worship with the system of writing, falling just short of claiming that the practice itself caused the script to take its basic form. His connection is drawn from the rituals of a two stage burial, the second stage taking place some time after the corpse had decayed, necessary to complete the "long process" of dying. He first notes, "only when the bones had been cleaned and laid out in the proper position...the deceased was known to be truly dead" (p.71). He equates the ordered arrangement of strokes with the arrangement of the bones and concludes that "[j]ust as religious rituals turned the deceased, once alive, into an ancestor with whom one could communicate..., so did the use of graph strokes turn the word that had once been spoken into a written form of communication" (p.75). If one is to subscribe to this idea, having little doubt of the Chineseness of ancestor worship, the importance placed on writing by the Chinese should come as no surprise. While he admits the suggestion may seem extreme or simplified, it would be consistent in that the sources of both are and have always been Chinese.

Given such a source, the Chinese writing system could be considered a pure and defining trait of nationality. This in some part must be lacking in cultures whose language was borrowed and altered from a foreign source--be it Chinese, Latin, or any other. Such countries may well (and do) have pride for their language and literature but can never reach the extent of the Chinese, who have a clearly documented view of a domestic source. Through time one can again see the Chinese self-perception evolve from the beginning as the only nation with a writing system. As exposure to other cultures grew, some even with systems not derived from the *hanzi*, they could still be proud of having an

older, better developed one. This comparatively well-developed writing system could be used as a tool to unite the country, adding one more clear line of demarcation between Chinese and non-Chinese.

The importance of national unity in writing can be seen in a formative event, especially interesting to westerners, presented by Boltz (pp. 176-77). By his accounts of Eastern Zhou and Han manuscripts, “there was...a trend, around the third to first centuries B.C., to desemanticize the script,...to write characters whose value was purely phonetic.” The effect, to foreign learners of the language, might have made for greater ease in reciting texts, perhaps offering easier access to Chinese culture. However, this trend was summarily erased by the unification of China under the Qin and Han, leaving the language dauntingly inaccessible to foreigners not raised on memorizing it.

There were, however, state-sponsored measures meant to ease the burden of recognizing the sounds of thousands of characters. Most significantly under the unifying Han, in 213 B.C. one Li Si was commissioned by the emperor (known for a great burning of the books using previous or other systems) to standardize the rather ingenious radical system. This reform addressed the large number of homonyms in the language, assigning new characters with a common radical to distinguish their meanings in writing. Thus, one unaccustomed to the tonality or abundance of homonyms in spoken Chinese might be less confused to read the characters, presuming s/he could memorize them. The use of familiar radicals in different characters provided phonetic hints, a thankful reform to any learner of the language, and an imbedded system in all characters since then. Naturally there were considerable faults to this sweeping edict, and they will be discussed in comparison to an example from a later date. We now leave linguistics for more sociological issues.

Chinese script has always had integral connections to status and art, which certainly define cultures worldwide, though doubtfully connected to writing the same way or to the extent as in China. Concerning the first examples of written characters, Keightley notes the added importance of carving characters into the oracle bones, rather than writing them with a brush, as any literate person could do. Showing the investment of labor the king was willing to put toward this ritual of magic, “already by the end of the second millennium B.C., divination, religion, political power, and writing were closely bound together” (p.70). Before the discovery of the oracle bones, the largely aesthetically-based and pictorial script on ancient bronzes was thought to be the origin from which more conventional styles emerged. The style on the bronzes, *chuan-shu* or seal script, depicted traditions and events in a highly artistic manner, evoking images of the period, eventually giving way to more practical standardization under the Zhou. Tseng says of the Zhou regulation (p.30) that the calligraphic style consciously exchanged some of its “magical vitality” for “seriousness as a tool of statecraft.”

Thus writing would continue its roles, each more clearly defined and refined, both as a practical tool to serve humanity and as decorative art. Seal script would retain use in bronzes and other art, with the practical sign of status as on kings’ seals, while increasingly simplified styles served the more mundane tasks. Moore (p.53) cites the bird-script of south-east China as an extreme of ornateness, as on a 5th century B.C. sword on which “decorative style and textual arrangements virtually abandoned any demand for legibility.” As in the language in general, a higher status was apparent in those who bore such ornamented possessions as well in those who could create and decipher them.

What set the Chinese apart then as much or more than now, was their emphasis on the harmony

of practicality and beauty, nowhere more clear than in their love for calligraphy, the beautiful writing through which China's most profound knowledge is promulgated. All of my sources in some way bemoan the status of Chinese calligraphy as being sparsely represented and not widely understood in the West, which seems vastly to prefer the pure practicality of frill-less typesets. Willetts speaks at length of Wang Hsi-chih (A.D. 307-365), while touching on several central themes:

We come now to Wang Hsi-chih, by general consent the greatest figure in the history of Chinese calligraphy, a Beethoven or Goethe in stature, while necessarily lacking the universality of the former...But we must bear in mind that the Chinese genius is polymath. Nowhere in the rest of the world has a society produced such a continuity of men, like Wang Hsi-chih, who were not only master calligraphers but at the same time poets, painters, philosophers, politicians, and other things as well. (p.83)

In the same vein as applied to the whole of society, Keightley attaches further significance to China's case because "so few cultures have so intimately combined high literacy, high civilization, and aesthetic prowess" (p.68).

Forrest's introduction puts it more eloquently and all-encompassing than I could:

The greatness of a language does not flow from the numbers of its speakers but rather from the degree of perfection which has been given it in fitting it as an instrument of higher literature and as a vehicle of cultured thought. The greatness of a language is thus a reflection of the height of civilization of its speakers.

Thus it follows that the finest calligraphers of the Tang dynasty used their "instruments" to provide "vehicles" for the great poets of the day, these elevated few often being one in the same. Presumably this multi-faceted greatness and combined embodiment made for uniting the very height of all culture in a perfect harmony of style and substance. Believing this, as a large proportion of the Chinese began and continue to do, one could hardly expect less than revered pride in their past. Any accomplishment or culture to follow had to be measured against this paragon, and even the most sweeping domestic movements in the twentieth century (such as the fall of imperialism and the cultural revolution) found

certain values to be insurmountable. As long as such values continued to be held, no foreign influence could compete for Chinese hearts and minds.

The Tang dynasty was also noted for selecting officials based on the quality of their calligraphy. To base an assessment of character on an exclusive, sometimes elite, domestic art could only reinforce disparaging views of foreigners, whose writing skill and style would almost certainly be inferior if it existed at all. Whether to judge a man's character by his brush style is accurate or appropriate in the first place, however, seems highly questionable. In that sense, one not versed in ink and brush, such as a foreigner, might actually receive a fairer assessment, if the primary fault could be overlooked.

Knowing the temperament and background of a calligrapher was also useful in critiquing his work. As cited in Chang (p.4), the style of a great general is noted as praiseworthy, for evoking images of victory in battle, while Chinese collectors long looked down upon another prominent aristocrat's work, primarily for his service in the Mongolian Yuan dynasty. A contemporary of the Tang master Ouyang Hsün (A.D. 557-641), noted to be a favorite model for students, attributed his "rigid, cold" calligraphy to him being a "stingy person" (p.4). Yet another critic from the same time period uses this connection between art and artist to portray him as "outgoing,...exposing muscle and bone in his writing," and "on the attack with a charging force" (Tseng, p.170-71). That critics have differing views of art is nothing new, but both appreciate a certain strength in his form. If these are valued traits of masterpieces, perhaps they are intended to be passed on to those learning from or imitating them. In the sense that Ouyang wrote from a position of greatness, himself serving in the great Tang court, a student or foreigner's introduction to calligraphy should be a strong, imposing one. Chang even makes

special note of Korean envoys to the Tang Court, sent to purchase scrolls by this renowned and aged *po shih* (top scholar).

I have so far ignored the problems of spinning national pride into self-centered xenophobia. While such accomplishments are usually and rightly noted as sources of heritage, they must also partially cause such extant phenomena, negatively viewed by outsiders, as sinocentrism. I would suggest that after a certain point pride does indeed become a sin, wherein as a growing extension of greatness and a measure to maintain its superiority, some valued cultural facets become elitist, inefficient, and otherwise esoterically inaccessible. In terms of writing as a cultural index, I cite an example from Forrest (p.39), noting that Li Si's standardized list of characters contained only 3,300 forms, and centuries later "K'ang-hsi's great dictionary of 1716, which has so far remained the standard work of reference on the language...contains about 40,000 different characters." The smaller number was said to be insufficient to read either Confucian classics or later poetry, indeed around the minimum needed to understand a contemporary newspaper. The excesses of the latter were clear in that 34,000 of those listed were "quite useless".

Both cases illustrate the imperial importance placed on China's written language to project its cultural prowess, as well as imperfect attempts to regulate it for some national, cultural goal. The Han dynasty, facing myriad regional variations, likely needed a systematic standard to promote unity. This proved to be highly influential, but so great a change that even the high scholars, responsible for its propagation, were unable or refused to implement it completely. Forrest here makes an early citation of a theme that still resonates today, as well as throughout Chinese history, "that the conservatism of

the scholars was the chief obstacle” to modernization (p.41).

One could speculate in a number of ways as to the causes and effects of the character expansion to follow. For my purposes, I suggest the issues of art and superiority. Tseng (p.354) notes that hanging scrolls became popular decorations in the late 13th and 14th centuries, allowing for professional calligraphers to “live on their art” and resulting in “more attractive compositions,...greater variety of sizes and designs, all adding to the decorative sense.” A greater arsenal of characters, while semantically redundant or empty, may well have added to visual value, creating the incentive to invent and preserve superfluous characters. However, Tseng laments these as a departure from the pure origins of calligraphy, a point where such uses and results have negative connotations. In doing so, “[t]he spontaneity of passion and wisdom, that link between the artist and his artwork was loosened”.

Also, as neighboring countries borrowed heavily from the Chinese writing system, sometimes even imitating it precisely, there would always be impetus to maintain an advantage in the number and variety of characters. After all, no imitator could possibly compete with the richness of the original Chinese system, and considerable pride could be drawn from knowing what only an elite scholar would know, by means of recognizing obscure characters.

I suggest in closing that for many and extended periods, China’s self-centered view was at least justified for indeed being the most advanced civilization in the world. As this status is internationally determined by scholars and artists, for perhaps having an even more lasting role than politicians, it is fitting that during these periods, China was home to the finest of all of these esteemed positions. The

continuation of such opinions, despite not meeting these criteria for a given time, is a likely product of the all too human tendency to find comfort, strength, and even arrogance in the glory of one's past.

For a nation which was once the most advanced and powerful in the world, especially in one which has seen its status topple to one of backwardness over the course of the later millennium, to maintain a sense of cultural superiority in the minds of its people its glorious past must be easily returned to or never left at all. Indeed, by Forrest's mid-1970's account, modern books are still printed in either Tang or Song style characters, assumedly still integrated in the simplified versions now used. Despite a sweeping simplification of the writing system and a cultural revolution denouncing all things past and imperial, Chinese society remains deeply traditional, and its concept of high culture and beauty may never lose its connection to its beautiful writing. If sinocentrism is a negative byproduct of Chinese writing, it surely pales in comparison to the role played in uniting a diverse people.

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