

Book Review

Yurou Zhong: *Chinese Grammarology—Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

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The reform of the Chinese script is a crucial and far-reaching movement in modern Chinese history. When China ushered in drastic social transformations in the 19th and 20th centuries, its traditional writing system of characters was deemed by many Chinese elites to be incompatible with the pace of social progress, and therefore needed to be reformed. The book *Chinese Grammarology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958*, authored by Yurou Zhong, mainly explores the evolution of China's language policy towards its traditional writing system between 1916 and 1958, and situates the discussion of the Chinese script and literary reform in the framework of phonocentrism to reveal the self-awakening transition from complete alphabetization of Chinese characters to the final compromised scheme featuring simplified characters and *pinyin*. By and large, the book presents a grand sociolinguistic and historical study of language change, which associates the Chinese script reform closely with literary conventions, social movements, and global relations.

The book is reasonably structured, discussing in detail the origin, development, and containment of the Chinese script and literary reform. The introductory chapter centers on the notion of phonocentrism and elucidates how it privileged the Roman-Latin alphabetical system but ended up being critiqued by Chinese grammarology in the global wave of decolonization. Chapter 1 introduces the Chinese will for the alphabetization of the Chinese script, which gained support from both the nationalists and the communists in China. The chapter features Zhao Yuanren's 赵元任 advocacy for his Romanization scheme, Gwoyeu Romatzyh (GR), the GR drama score that he proposed for a more accurate presentation of the Chinese language, as well as the appearance of the Sound Spectrograph that broke alphabetical universalism for orthography. Chapter 2 presents the divergence of opinions between Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 and Zhao Yuanren regarding the Chinese script reform. Qu criticized the GR for its complexity and impracticality. Instead, he supported the Latinization of Chinese, which was driven by dialectal alphabetization, the rise of dialectology, and the Latinization Movement in the Soviet Union. This alternative scheme challenged the GR that was based on standard Pekingese as well as the standardized literary Chinese (*wenyan*), yet it also exposed the limitation (antinomy) of phonocentrism, for it gave rise to the issue of unintelligibility when the Chinese script became overly localized for writing various Chinese dialects.

Chapter 3 renders an informative discussion of James Yen's (Yan Yangchu 晏阳初) efforts in educating the Chinese laborers in Europe on literacy during the First World War. The language that the laborers learned to write in was neither the old *baihua* in the premodern Chinese *baihua* literature nor *wenyan*, but more in line with the phonocentric principles. The laborers' colloquialized written Chinese was linked by Hu Shi 胡适 to a new form of literary composition and contributed to the Chinese script reform. Moreover, Yen's literacy program also helped propel mass education in China and made new Chinese citizen training and rural reconstruction possible. Chapter 4 presents Chen Hegin's 陈鹤琴 acceptance of *baihua* as a more appropriate term for colloquialized written Chinese (*Yutiwen*) because of its linkage with Chinese linguistic traditions and its phonocentric feature. The chapter also reviews Tao Xingzhi's 陶行知 advocacy for Sin Wenz (the people's language) in face of Japanese invasion, and shows how the reform of the Chinese script could contribute to mass liberation and national salvation, a role that *wenyan* could not fulfill. Tao encouraged a new development of the Latinization movement, which lent support and legitimacy to the coexistence of alphabetic Chinese and character literature for the purpose of national defense.

Chapter 5 is the climax of the book. It presents the final socialist solution to the Chinese script reform and shows that *pinyin*, alphabetization of the Chinese script, was ideologically consistent with the socialist state and the creation of a proletarian culture. The chapter features Tang Lan's 唐兰 disagreement with total alphabetization. With the theory of Chinese character formation and the Chinese philological traditions, Tang argued for creating a national form of alphabetization by reforming the phonographic components in the old Chinese characters and turning a set of simplified characters into a phonetic alphabet, which he considered to be more in line with Marxist thought on linguistic and grammatological development. Moreover, Tang believed that writing is not merely recording speech but an accumulation of history, so he advocated for the separation of linguistics and philology. With these claims, Tang questioned the belief that oral speech comes before writing and the Roman-Latin alphabet is the primary instrument for phoneticization. This intellectual activism or criticism reflects Chinese grammatology and motions the Chinese script reform to a more self-determined direction. Hence, the final containment of the Chinese script reform played a critical role in the global movement of decolonialization, and revealed the situation that "phonocentrism culminates in its own negation" (p. 187).

The book ends with an epilogue about the author's meeting with Zhou Youguang 周有光, the "father of *pinyin*" who supported the Roman-Latin alphabet. It introduces the three tasks of the Chinese script reform in the socialist period – to simplify characters, to promote *Putonghua*, and to issue a *pinyin* plan. Most importantly, it points out Zhou Youguang's belief that the script revolution would succeed

eventually. Therefore, for Chinese characters to survive this revolution, it must continue to retain compatibility with the progress of modern technology.

Another merit of the book is that for narrating the development of the Chinese script reform, the author consulted a variety of primary sources which include the complete works of Zhao Yuanren, Tao Xingzhi, Chen Heqin, and Tang Lan, and the selected works of Qu Qiubai, Yan Yangchu, Liang Qichao 梁启超, Xu Dishan 许地山, Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶, and Zhou Youguang. The author also studied the correspondence between Zhao Yuanren, Bernhard Karlgren, and Fu Sinian 傅斯年, the collected correspondences of Tao Xingzhi, autobiography and memoir written by Hu Shi, Lao She 老舍, Yan Yangchu, and John King Fairbank, historical records of Chinese laborers in the First World War, and Chinese primers such as *the Last Five Minutes*, *Peasants' Thousand Character Lessons*, *Urbanites' Thousand Character Lessons*, *Masses' Thousand Character Lessons*. Other critical documents or essays in relation to the Chinese script reform were also consulted by the author, for example, *the Script Reform of Contemporary China*, Lu Xun's 鲁迅 *Voiceless China* and *Chinese characters and Latinization*, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique Générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*), Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, *Questions Regarding the Future of the Chinese Script* authored by Qian Xuantong 钱玄同, *Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龙 authored by Liu Xie 刘勰, and a compilation of plans for Chinese alphabetization from all over China. This myriad of primary sources allows different dimensions or phases of the script reform to be analyzed and discussed in fine detail.

Several other advantages concerning the content of the book are also noteworthy. Firstly, it puts the lesser-known history of Chinese laborers' participation in the First World War under the spotlight and features the laborers' growing nationalism when they developed Chinese literacy in Europe. Second, the book explicitly explains the antinomy or limitation of phonocentrism. For example, *Yu Guan* 玉官, the novel authored by Xu Dishan, demonstrates that the Latinization of the Chinese language gave Chinese minority people voice and a script for their own languages but could also deprive their voice in Chinese literature because local dialects written in Latin letters could become incomprehensible to readers who do not share the dialects. With these cases of language change in practice, the book elucidates the linkage between the Chinese script reform and the potential reform of Chinese literature, China's mass education, and the global movement of decolonialization. Most importantly, it points out the antinomy of phonocentrism because it eventually occasioned Chinese intellectual activism and critique, and resulted in the development of Chinese grammatology. It could be seen that the early Chinese preference for phonocentrism that "reduced the Chinese script to an inadequate technology for transcribing speech sound, stripping it of any civilizational value and exacting indisputable violence against Chinese culture, philosophy, and

epistemology in general” (p. 6) was transitioning to the second global moment of 1958 that “beckoned grammatological critique, anti-colonial politics, and the return of the science of writing” (p. 15). Last but not the least, the book informs that the survival of the Chinese characters would depend on the its constant parallel progress or evolution with the advancement of modern technology, which would require on-going intellectual activism from Chinese scholars and language policy makers.

The content of the book could be further strengthened if some of its shortcomings had been addressed. First, the source of illiteracy in China and its connection with *wenyan* seems not to be sufficiently explained and discussed. A review of the historical development of illiteracy as a major social issue in China may illuminate this linkage. A discussion of the impact of alphabetic language on reducing illiteracy with more solid evidence may also clarify the limitations of *wenyan*. Second, the book may also explore the *Genbun Itchi* Movement 言文一致运动 in Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912) that aimed at unifying the spoken and written Japanese language. Since classical Chinese formed the literary traditions in both China and Japan, it would be interesting to seek potential linkage between Japan’s earlier response to the phonocentric turn and the subsequent Chinese script reform. Third, in terms of the trend of thoughts, the book focuses on the proposals of leading scholars for the Chinese script reform. More voices concerning the reform from ordinary Chinese people such as Fu Xingsan 傅省三 (the Chinese laborer in France during the First World War) could have been incorporated to further balance the discussion of the topic, illustrating more of the Chinese mass population’s stance over the reform that was directed towards their advantage. In addition, with regard to the discussion of Yan Yangchu’s literary program that set the path for mass education and enlightenment in China, it beckons clarification on why political commentaries could undermine the urgency of the program and weaken the enlightenment on the agenda. Furthermore, the book presents the final socialist solution to the Chinese script reform but does not adequately explicate how the alphabetization cause later received diminishing support from the nationalists. Finally, Tang Lan’s claim, “Writing is a kind of accumulation of history” (p. 182), deserves more concrete examples to elucidate the process of history being accumulated through writing. These examples may enable the readers to better comprehend why full speech does not reflect or participate in this process.

Despite some limitations, this book is still worth careful attention from linguists, historians, and language policy makers. For those who consider taking the topic of the book further in research, they may contemplate over a few questions: (1) How should the Chinese script continue to align with the advancement of modern technology in China? (2) How has linguistics been separated from philology, or how has the separation influenced the development of the Chinese script? These concerns for future research could help widen the path for understanding the continuous evolution of the Chinese language and script in China.

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