

Book Review



Handel, Zev, *Sinography: The Borrowing and Adaptation of the Chinese Script*.

Leiden: Brill, 2019. 369 pages.

This is an important and wide-ranging book. Its central theme is that in countries around the periphery of China, the way in which the Chinese script was adopted to write languages other than Chinese was profoundly influenced by the typology of the language in each area. This is a macro-thesis, a high-level theory, and the author is the first scholar to take up this idea and explore its ramifications seriously and across virtually the whole geographic region. This has clearly been a mammoth undertaking, and the author is to be commended for his bravery as well as his devotion and determination to carry this pioneering project through to completion.

The scope of this study is broad and encompasses almost the entire East Asian macro-region. There is one chapter reviewing the early history and typology of the Chinese script itself, and then chapters on Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, each a small monograph in itself, loaded with significant detail on the early history of the region, including the history of early human settlement, linguistic and cultural history, linguistic typology of the dominant regional language, and specific details about the way in which the Chinese script was adopted and adapted over time. These three regions – Korea, Vietnam, and Japan – are then used as the basis for a chapter of comparative analysis in which the connection with language typology is explored more systematically. Handel goes on in the remaining chapters to look at other languages in the Chinese cultural sphere – Zhuang, Khitan and Jurchen – and to look at the Sumerian and Akkadian material in the cuneiform script, in order to frame a perspective external to the Chinese cultural area, and finally to turn in Conclusion to an argument about script typology that is elevated to the highest level, that of human universals.

Typology is a discipline within linguistics devoted to establishing the general characteristics of particular languages within the broadest possible

comparative framework. Topics include studies on basic sentence configurations such as the variety of sentence types, basic word order within sentences – such as SVO (subject-verb-object) or SOV (subject-object-verb) – presence or absence of parts of speech (such as adjectives or prepositions), basic morphology – the ways in which units of meaning (morphemes) combine with affixes and infixes to form ‘words’, and the phonological characteristics of the morphemes themselves in terms of typical syllable structure, number of syllables, and so on.¹

The languages covered in Handel’s first few chapters – Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese – show clear disparities in basic language typology. To oversimplify the matter, Chinese is an isolating language, with one-syllable morphemes that form compounds but do not normally combine with prefixes, suffixes or infixed morphemic elements. It normally exhibits a basic preference for SVO word order, and indicates time frame and completion or non-completion of action by the addition of separate time phrases and modal particles. Vietnamese, an Austroasiatic language distantly related to Mon and Khmer, is now also an isolating language of the monosyllabic type, in which every syllable has a meaning. Korean and Japanese, by contrast, are agglutinating languages, in which morphemes typically combine into larger units but where the boundaries between them are normally clear-cut. Japanese and Korean share many features with other northeast Asian languages such as Tungusic languages, including a preference for verb-final SOV word order and grammatical relations indicated with post-posed grammatical particles.

Throughout the East Asian area, the Chinese character script was either originary or adopted as the writing system for writing the local language. Handel’s basic argument is that the way in which the Chinese writing system was adopted and adapted was profoundly influenced by the typological differences in the languages themselves. It is one thing to make this basic point in this way; it is quite another to document it in detail, which is what Handel has done.

The scope and purpose of the book are set out clearly at the beginning. Handel is careful to set aside any suggestion that his basic thesis is deterministic in any narrow sense. The relevant passage is worth quoting (p.3):

...writing is also a cultural and political phenomenon, integrated into all manifestations of civilization and human cultural expression. No one theoretical framework or set of principles could conceivably account for

1 For an up-to-date and authoritative overview of the field, see *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Typology*, edited by Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon (2020).

all the varied phenomena subsumed under the study of writing and writing systems.

He goes on (p.4):

The claim made here is that linguistic features are among the powerful factors affecting writing systems, and that they impose very real constraints within which the cultural forces that affect writing systems must operate. They limit the possible directions of development and change, and make some pathways of development more likely than others.

The key finding of Handel's study is that agglutinating polysyllabic languages like Korean and Japanese put more emphasis on the disambiguation of Chinese-character text by the development of some graphs into phonetic determinatives (characters used as phonograms, for their sound value), and use of those graphs to represent grammatical particles and affixes. Monosyllabic isolating languages like Vietnamese will have no need to do that, but rather "put more emphasis on the creation of innovated logograms to represent native morphemes, forming them from structural elements already present in the Chinese system." (p. 311) For both types, Handel sees the need to avoid ambiguity in written expression as a key motivating factor.

The basic framework of Handel's discussion is set out in the Introduction, and follows the tradition of nomenclature and analysis developed by Boltz (1994) and, much earlier, by Boodberg (1937). Chinese characters are referred to as 'logograms', a term that serves to indicate that the unit of writing with its square shape represents a 'word', that is an individual morpheme or unit of meaning. Adapting a logogram to write another morpheme can take place either through P, phonetic adaptation, or S, semantic adaptation. In plain language, Chinese characters can be borrowed either phonetically or semantically. This is possible in the Chinese case because both the reading pronunciation and the meaning are present in each graphic unit. In the discussion in subsequent chapters, readers will need to get used to a text in which general types are often referred to with acronyms: PAP, PAL, SAL, SAP, DAL and so forth. These however are abbreviations explained in the Introduction, and cross-linked in the Index.

Handel identifies phonetic adaptation and semantic adaptation as the primary mechanisms whereby the script of one language can be borrowed to write another. He returns to this question in the Conclusion, after reviewing the Sumerian and Akkadian evidence. Here also there is a passage which is worth quoting (p.309):

A comparison of the early development of these four inventions of writing shows that the mechanisms of extension are both simple and universal, and must therefore be intuitively obvious to human beings once the crucial breakthrough of associating signs with words has been achieved.

For the study of writing systems, this is a very important statement, and scholars will want to pore over the evidence Handel presents in this book and test the limits of its applicability.

For my part, having worked on Zhuang traditional character texts for some years now, and investigated the ways in which Chinese graphs were either borrowed wholesale or subjected to a wide variety of graphic transformations in order to represent the Zhuang language in written form, and having also looked at the evidence from other writing systems (Sumerian, Akkadian, Mayan, abugida, etc.), I am happy to confirm that these two mechanisms are indeed basic. They are ever-present. However, this is not by any means the end of the story. For representing Zhuang, a Kra-Dai (Tai-Kadai) language closely related to Thai and Lao, Zhuang scribes had many other tricks up their sleeves. Quite apart from graphic transformations and inventions, the ways in which standard Chinese characters are used in traditional texts included as many as twelve different mechanisms, including two- and three-stage serial borrowing, catalytic readings (reading only part of a character), reading a graph for another in the same graphic-phonetic series, and so on (Holm 2013, 51–60). Of course, one could respond that these are manifestations of a set of vernacular writing systems, rather than a standard script taught in the schools and promoted by the national government. In many cases, the complexities seem designed to prevent other people from using the texts, rather than to facilitate communication.

In a work as wide-ranging as this, there are bound to be a few loose ends. Just in very general terms, readers will find some of the discussion heavy-going. One reason for this is that a lot of the definitions and key discussions in the first few chapters take place “off-stage”. There are references to the relevant works, but no short summaries in the text of the book here that would allow us to see at a glance what the term means or what the argument is about. Readers will have to follow up and chase down these references, and then come back and evaluate Handel’s arguments in light of them. This is an important scholarly work, and a little bit of extra work on readers’ part will be worth the trouble.

Handel’s discussion of the early history of human settlement in the areas outside China, and identification of the language families spoken by the earliest settlers – or the settlers that were there at the time the Chinese came on the

scene – will also need to be carefully read and evaluated. In some sections, references are sparse. We read in the chapter on Vietnam for example that the Hundred Yue “almost certainly included members of the Tai-Kadai and Mon-Khmer language families.” (p. 125) No reference is given for this statement, but lurking in the background here is possibly the continuing influence of an article by Jerry Norman and Mei Tsu-lin on the Austroasiatics in South China (Norman and Mei 1976, 274–301). Norman and Mei’s Austroasiatic theory has now been debunked (Sagart 2008, 141–143). The bulk of the evidence on the Hundred Yue indicates that the Tai-Kadai connection is more credible.

The discussion about language typology for each of the major languages discussed is also something that is worth readers’ close attention. Both Chinese and Vietnamese underwent typological shifts, Chinese between the classical period of Old Chinese during the Zhou dynasty and the Qin-Han transition to the imperial period, and Vietnamese sometime in the first millennium. Chinese syllable structure shifted from a complex Sino-Tibetan pattern with prefixes and infixes that was atonal to a simplified syllable phonology, and Vietnamese shifted from a morphemic structure closer to the Austroasiatic pattern, with many sesquisyllabic morphemes, to a simple monosyllabic pattern not unlike Chinese. Both the timing and the nature of these typological shifts require further elaboration. The discussion here continues to rely heavily on Norman (1988) for Chinese. For reconstructions of Old Chinese, Baxter and Sagart’s *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* (2014) is cited, but their findings are not effectively incorporated into the narrative. Handel’s view is that from its inception there was no fundamental change in the nature of the Chinese script: it was logographic, even in the pre-Qin period (Handel 2019, 31). What is missing and needs to be factored into this discussion is Baxter and Sagart’s argument that “the pre-Qin script was primarily syllable-based, not word-based” (Baxter and Sagart 2014, 64). That meant that it required “about a thousand graphic elements”, rather than 5,000 to 10,000. This argument is persuasive. Handel comments on p. 37 that in the pre-Qin period “the linguistic units represented by Chinese characters are less easy to characterize”, and he infers that this is because Old Chinese is incompletely understood. Actually though, using a Chinese character to write a different homophonous word is commonplace in classical texts. Characters used in this way are called *tongjiazì* (通假字) ‘interchangeable graphs’. There are dictionaries full of them (Bai 2008).² The eminent Chinese linguist Wang Li devotes an entire section in his textbook of classical Chinese (*Gudai hanyu* 古代漢語) to a discussion of this phenomenon.

2 See for example Bai Yulan 白於藍, *Jiandu boshu tongjiazì zidian* 簡牘帛書通假字字典, Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe 2008.

Far from being a phenomenon confined to the pre-Qin period, it seems that the Chinese writing system maintained this option of syllable-based reading even as the language typology shifted and the written representation of Chinese became more evolved. Paradoxically, this perspective on the latent potential of the Chinese script can be used to strengthen Handel's basic argument, not undermine it.

If such perspectives are factored into the narrative about the adoption of the Chinese script by speakers of other languages, we can expect some real advances in our understanding of all these complex issues in future, with Handel's foundational work as one of our main points of reference.

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