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# Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958

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***Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916-1958.* By Zhong Yurou. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Xiii, 279 pp. ISBN: 9780231192637.**

Zhong Yurou's *Chinese Grammatology* examines the rise and fall of "phonocentrism," the "systematic privileging of speech over writing" (2) that underscored disbelief in Chinese characters as a linguistic technology cut out for the modern age, a perspective shared by many intellectuals debating language reform in Republican-era and early PRC China. Over the course of five chapters spanning four decades (1916-1958), Zhong, first, locates the provenance of phonocentrism within a global rising tide of scripts reforms where alphabetical writing reigned supreme. Subsequently, she tracks the types of transmutations that phonocentrism underwent during the Republican era. And finally, she argues that its eventual containment in the early PRC paradoxically enabled the foundation of a powerful "Chinese grammatology," which predated Derrida's *On Grammatology* (1967) by a decade and "instantiated a more organic and dialectical answer to the problem of phonocentrism" (15).

After introducing the two most visible legacies of phonocentrism – the split between simplified and traditional characters and pinyin as an auxiliary Romanization system – Zhong contextualizes her study against previous attempts at devising alternative spelling methods for Chinese (the *fanqie* system, various missionary schemes, the late-Qing Phonetic Script movement, etc.) which she argues did not challenge the legitimacy of characters to the same extent that subsequent schemes did. Delving into the roots of this phenomenon, the first chapter of *Chinese Grammatology* retraces the origin story of the Chinese Romanization movement through the life and intellectual trajectory of its main architect, Yuen Ren Chao 趙元任 (1892-1982). The chapter proceeds to show the entanglements between alphabetical writing and the scientization of language: from Chao's deploring the lack of focus on phonology in Chinese philology when he was a student in 1916, to his recording of phonographs to promote the first national pronunciation in the early 1920s; also important was his later formulation of the Kuomintang-endorsed Gwoyue Romatzyh to transcribe Beijing dialect and the new national pronunciation based upon it and his time working as a consultant with Bell Labs on the characteristics of speech with the sound spectrograph in the 1940s.

The next chapter inaugurates part 2 by introducing the competing Chinese Latinization movement as being the first of three transmutations that phonocentrism underwent during the Republican era (1912-1949). Focusing on Qu Qiubai's 瞿秋白 (1899-1935) devising of the Soviet-influenced Chinese Latinized Alphabet (*Latinxua Sin Wenz*), chapter two investigates the politico-linguistic differences and similarities between this CCP-championed scheme and its above-mentioned KMT rival. It focuses on tonal marking, understandings of the relationship between the national language and dialects, and Latinization's championing of local speech, mass education, and the representation of the masses through literature. The theoretical potential and practical pitfalls of representing these "real voices of the masses" through the medium of an alphabetized script are then put to literary test through a close reading of Xu Dishan's 許地山 (1893-1941) novella *Yu Guan*. Following up on the question of access to education and plain speech writing, chapter three examines the work of James Yen 晏陽初 (1890-1990) and Fu Xingsan 傅省三 (fl. 1919) with Chinese laborers enrolled in the YMCA literacy programs in Europe. Zhong probes how plain-speech writing developed in the context of the literacy program was retrospectively

reappropriated into the fold of May Fourth and *baihua* discourse, and the ultimate erasure of the laborers themselves that derived from it. The subsequent chapter tracks the third and final “transmutation” of phonocentrism through the mass education movement heralded by Tao Xingzhi 陶行知 (1891-1946), Chen Heqin 陳鶴琴 (1892-1982) and Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶 (1894-1988). Practicing a character literacy system devised through the coalescing of statistical linguistics and experienced-based methods despite their Latinization sympathies, these education advocates enabled, Zhong argues, some degree of reconciliation between alphabetic writing as a purported tool of mass liberation and the colloquialized written language (語體文 *yutiwen*).

Finally, the fifth and last chapter focuses on the work of the newly-founded Chinese Script Reform Committee (中國文字改革委員會 *Zhongguo wenzi gaige weiyuanhui*) in the first years of the People’s Republic of China to explicate how “the phonocentric ideology imploded from within” in a global moment of anti-imperialism and decolonization (38). Focusing on some of the dissenting voices of the Committee, the paleographer Tang Lan 唐蘭 (1901-1979) and philologist Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 (1911-1966), Zhong analyzes Tang Lan’s careful navigation of early PRC politics to propose his own composite system based on an alphabetized and simplified script, one that would redefine characters as capable of evolving to conform to Marxism thought. This feat, she argues, laid the groundwork for the ideological U-turn that occurred a few years later when Zhou Enlai announced the sudden retrograding of pinyin from a scheme meant to replace characters to a simple auxiliary learning system. In this, she says, Tang “delivered the most unexpected surprise—the Chinese script ha[d] always already been phonetic—and gestured toward a radical reconsideration of grammatology.” (170)

Deeply researched, Zhong Yurou’s monograph shines brightest in leveraging a wide array of little-used sources to explore the sociopolitical climate and tensions that surrounded language reform in Republican China. The efficacy of Zhong’s writing style deftly shows the scope and scale of debates and reforms in a watershed moment of linguistic crisis when everything was temporarily on the table – including the replacement of Chinese by Esperanto. For example, Zhong offers a splendid exploration of Yuen Ren Chao’s little-known translation of A.A. Milne’s “Camberley Triangle” into characters and Gwoyeu Romatzyh, a theater-scripting feat that mixes phonetic and musical notation indicating pitch, overtone, and duration qualities of speech sound for the purpose of stage guidance (47). Not only is this coalescing of musical notation and phonetics for theater fascinating in itself, but it opens doors to probe further how interdisciplinarity was conceived in Republican China in the context of the rise of linguistics as a science, as other linguists variously experimented with folklore studies and other realms of research. Many other such passages open compelling avenues for further study, such as Zhong’s descriptions of the “*Peasants’ Thousand Character Lessons*, *Urbanites’ Thousand Character Lessons*, *Masses’ Thousand Character Lessons*, *People’s Religion Primer*, and *Elementary Peasants’ Religion Primer*” (229) in the People’s Education series. In the context of the politics and ideological implications of differentiated media and scripts so well explored in *Chinese Grammatology*, one might ask what was inferred (and by whom) about the linguistic needs of the primers’ various audiences and their relationship to the state that such different textbooks were produced, for instance, for countryside and urban dwellers.

By inscribing the debates at hand in the context of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, the monograph commendably brings Chinese history into dialogue with a series of academic

fields that often remain too Eurocentric up to the present day. However, by doing so, the book sometimes runs the risk of overstating its argument while missing some truly fascinating, more direct historical linkages that Zhong's in-depth primary source work could have enabled.

First, while acknowledging herself that Tang Lan never used the terms *grammatology* or intended a conversation with either Gelb or Derrida, the book insists that “Tang's original term *wenzi xue* 文字學... could hardly be translated otherwise, for it constituted a disciplinary stance against linguistics with critical connotations.” (189) Yet, Tang Lan gives his own translation of that very term in the source text at hand, explaining that *wenzi xue* is nothing other than 小學 *xiaoxue* (traditional Chinese philology, phonology, and semantics). After carefully explaining how it differs from paleography, philology, etymology, and hieroglyphics in the Western sense, Tang adds that “this peculiar science that Westerners are incapable of understanding” should be titled “The Science of Chinese Characters.” In English.<sup>1</sup> While in the introduction of the book Zhong Yurou rightly hints that the containment she discusses in later chapters was to be “deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical tradition (*wenzixue* 文字學)” (15), the fifth chapter's presentation of *wenzixue* as Tang's original coinage obscures that the term was common enough to be defined in the epochal Republican-era *Cihai* dictionary, and erases broader efforts to “rejuvenate the old science of Chinese philology” (15) which were already well at play in the Republican era. To give just one example, the linguist Liu Dabai opened his 1933 treatise on philology with the very sentence “*Wenzi xue* is a science [*kexue*], one which explains the nature and usefulness of characters.”<sup>2</sup> Still, I do agree with Zhong that Tang Lan's 1948 *The Science of Chinese Characters* was a vastly powerful critique of Eurocentrism, one that showed Western categories and scientific labels as lacking universalism and emphasized that the Chinese linguistic tradition had more to bring to the table as a critical tool fully adaptable to contemporary debates about language reform. But maybe more could be garnered from letting Tang's formidable critique stand on its own first, and in its own historical context, before proceeding to discuss what the differential implications between Tang Lan's “science of Chinese characters” and Derrida's “grammatology” might have been.

Secondly, the book tends to conflate “phonocentrism” with “alphabetization” in a narrower sense, which sometimes glosses over the fact that the Chinese tradition had long understood characters to combine semantic and phonetic components. Even in its narrower sense, the idea that characters were “equipped to represent speech sound, thanks to their phonetic radical” (p. 183) was hardly something new in the 1950s. The idea of using ideophonographs (*xingshengzi* 形聲字) for building phonetic scripts had already been discussed to varying degrees over the previous three decades, whether by Qian Xuanton in 1922, proponents of *Sin Wenz*, or even within the Gwoyueh Romatzyh movement.<sup>3</sup> Tang Lan himself had discussed “phonetic compounds” as early as 1935<sup>4</sup> and, in the preface to *The Science of Chinese Characters*, credits Qian Xuanton with the first foray into exploring links between etymology and phonetics.<sup>5</sup> In this light, Tang's attempt to leverage philological

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<sup>1</sup> “這一種西方人所不能理解的特殊的學科，我們只把它叫做「中國文字學」（The Science of Chinese Characters).” in Tang Lan, *Tang Lan quanji*, 6:394.

<sup>2</sup> “文字學是一種科學 是說明文字底性質和效用，” Liu Dabai, *Wenzixue gailun*.

<sup>3</sup> Qian Xuanton, ‘Hanzi geming!’, 11.; Ni Haishu, ‘Dafu meiguo John de Francis jun guanyu zhongguo wenzi gaige de wenti’, 457.; Zhou Bianming and Huang Diangcheng, ‘Quoyu Romatzy Sin Durbeen’, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Galambos, ‘Medieval Ways of Character Formation in Chinese Manuscript Culture’, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Pingyuan and Hockx, *Touches of History*, 369.

tradition echoes interestingly other attempts by *pinyin* reformers to build legitimacy on the recuperation of late-Qing and early-Republican heritage.<sup>6</sup> For instance, some published material by the Commission for Script Reform introduces the 1913 conference on the unification of pronunciation as “the first conference in the history of China that discusses the unification of *hanyu pinyin* as well as the *hanyu pinyin* scheme” and legitimizes it as an “important document for the history of *hanyu pinyin*.” Even more compellingly, Zhong’s fascinating foray into Tang’s proposal for a composite script composed of “fifty-one initials and fourteen finals... to be used in combination with a minimum of eight hundred characters” published in the *Compilation of Pinyin Proposals from Around China* (p. 174) could be entirely reread in light of its uncanny resemblance with the first *zhuyin* scheme and incredibly ingenious leveraging of traditional Chinese philology’s “initials” and “finals” (*shengmu* 聲母 / *yunmu* 韻母) proposed here by Tang. By subsuming a list of “fifty-one initials and fourteen finals”<sup>7</sup> – which was broader than the twenty-four initials and fifteen finals of *zhuyin*<sup>8</sup> – under “shengmu,” Tang’s real *tour de force* was to put forward a system in effect composed of one syllabary and eight hundred common Chinese characters that, in everything but the name, was modeled after Japanese (of all languages) in the immediate aftermath of World War Two.

In sum, Zhong Yurou offers broad-yet-nuanced insights into the cultural debates that surrounded script reform in Republican and early PRC China, using “phonocentrism” as a lens to take a fresh look at a series of famous and lesser-known alphabetization schemes. And while the implications of her analysis for Chinese linguistic and political history could at times be taken further, *Chinese Grammatology* remains an impressive foray into the linkages between script revolution and literary modernity that attempts to build bridges with academic disciplines beyond Chinese history.

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## Notes

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<sup>6</sup> Wenzi gaige chubanshe, *1913 nian duyin tongyihui ziliao huibian*.

<sup>7</sup> Tang’s system combined the same signs as zhuyin for phonemes already noted by the scheme, and added other radicals to compose his syllabary. For instance: 不 *bu*- 卜 *pu*- 母 *mu*- 夫 *fu*, 比 *bi*- 匹 *mi* 米, etc. *Gedi renshi jilai hanyu pinyin wenzi fang’an huibian*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Yi, *Xin zhu guoyu fayinxue*, 10–12.

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