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## The Family of Chinese Character-Type Scripts *(Twenty Members and Four Stages of Development)*

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**The Family of Chinese Character-Type Scripts**  
**(*Twenty Members and Four Stages of Development*)**

by Professor ZHOU Youguang

Chinese characters were originally the script for writing the speech of the Han people of China. Spreading to other peoples and countries, it became a family of character-type scripts, writing different speech forms of different peoples. At present I have at hand the materials of twenty members of the family; perhaps some others might be discovered later. By studying these scripts as a correlated and integrated system, we may understand more deeply the characteristics of Chinese characters and their influence on the development of oriental culture. Studying these scripts individually and separately is quite different from studying them collectively as a whole.

During the past two millenniums, this family has undergone four stages of historical development: (1) stage of transplantation, (2) stage of naturalization, (3) stage of imitation and (4) stage of creation.

**(1) Stage of Transplantation**

Chinese characters were at first spread in their original form of Classical Chinese. Confucian classics like *Three Character Classic*, *Thousand Character Essay*, *Four Books* and *Five Classics* were the common textbooks of East Asia for

thousands of years. The directions of spreading were at first to the south and to the east, and later to the north of the Great Wall.

To the south, the script spread to the Zhuang people of Guangxi and the Jing people of Vietnam. In 214 B.C. (33rd year of Qin-shi-huang), two prefectures or administrative regions were established in present-day Guangxi and northern and middle Vietnam. In 208 B.C. a Nan-Yue State was founded with present-day Guangzhou as its capital, and In 112 B.C. it became three prefectures of the Han dynasty. For the needs of administration, Chinese characters were brought to Guangxi and Vietnam. There Classical Chinese was used for more than 1,500 years.

To the east, the chinese script spread to Korea and Japan. In 194 B.C. a warrior of northeast China established a state in part of Korea. In 108 B.C. this state became 4 prefectures of the Han dynasty, and Chinese characters came to Korea. In the 3rd century A.D., Chinese characters spread from Korea to Japan. A Chinese scholar went to Japan from Korea, bringing with him such Chinese books as *Three Caharacter Classic* and *Sayings of Confucius* and became the teacher of the Prince of Japan.

## **(2) Stage of Naturalization**

After learning Classical Chinese, peoples began to write

their own forms of speech with borrowed characters, transforming the original Chinese characters into their own native symbols. For example, in the 7th century A.D., Koreans wrote their speech with Chinese characters to form a style of writing called Clerks' Reading; in Japan, a collection of native ballads appeared in 757 A.D. in which Chinese characters were used as a sort of Japanese syllabary. Chinese characters not only immigrated to, but were naturalized in Korea and Japan. Zhuang, Vietnamese and other peoples did the same thing.

### **(3) Stage of Imitation**

The stage of imitation came immediately after the stage of naturalization. This happened when the culture of the native peoples began a period of internal development. By this time, they found that the original Chinese characters were neither sufficient nor convenient to write their own forms of speech, and therefore coined new ones for supplemental purposes, according to the same principles of coining characters used by the Han people.

There are two ways of imitation: (a) imitation by propagation and (b) imitation by differentiation.

#### *(a) Imitation by Propagation*

Imitation by propagation is to coin new characters with the original parts of Chinese characters. There are eight scripts

made through imitation by propagation.

[1] Zhuang characters

The Zhuang people, the biggest minority nationality of China today (population: 13 million), live chiefly in Guangxi. They began to coin their own characters during the Tang dynasty (618-907) and used them widely during the Song dynasty (1127-1279). Zhuang characters contain about 70% of the borrowed and 30% of the supplementary types. There are about 4,000 individual Zhuang characters.

[2] Nam characters

Vietnamese call Chinese characters Confucian characters and those coined by themselves Nam characters. The earliest Nam characters appeared in inscriptions of the 13th century. Except for a very short period, Nam characters were used in folk literature only. Official writing continued to be Classical Chinese. There are about 2,800 individual Nam characters.

The above two scripts are the most important among characters made through imitation by propagation. The following six scripts belong to minority nationalities living in the mountainous regions of southwest China, and are therefore rarely known to the public even in China.

[3] Miao characters

The Miao nationality of today (pop. 5 million) live in southwest China, with Guizhou as the principal location. They were said never to have created their own character writing. But recently it was discovered that they have their own character writing with three varieties, all used in the western part of Hunan province.

[4] Yao characters

The Yao nationality of today (pop. 1 million) live in Guangxi and adjoining provinces. The oldest book in their own characters was written in 628 A.D., that is, during the Tang dynasty.

[5] Buyi characters

The Buyi nationality of today (pop. 2 million) live chiefly in the south of Guizhou. They have different kinds of books written in their own characters.

[6] Dong characters

The Dong nationality of today (pop. 1 million) live chiefly in the southwest of Guizhou. Their characters are all borrowed from the Han nationality.

[7] Bai characters

The Bai nationality of today (pop. 1 million) live in Dali autonomous prefecture of Yunnan. During the Tang-dynasty,

they learned Classical Chinese, and at the same time used their own character-based script. Their characters are still used informally today.

[8] Hani characters

The Hani nationality of today (pop. 1 million) live chiefly in Hani autonomous prefecture in Yunnan. Hani characters are still used in the small district of Mojiang.

The above eight scripts made through limitation by propagation are the chief members of the family of character-type scripts.

*(b) Imitation by Differentiation*

During the Song dynasty (960-1279), three nomadic peoples in north and northwest China established three kingdoms, all hostile to the Han people. They are: 1. the Liao kingdom of the Qidan (Khitan) tribe, 2. the Jin kingdom of the Nyuzhen (Jurchen) tribe and 3. the Xi-Xia (Da-Xia) kingdom of the Qiang (Tangut) tribe.

At first, these peoples had no writing at all. After having gained power, they started to create their own scripts. They hated to borrow characters from the Han people, but they could not escape the influence of Chinese characters. The result was imitation by differentiation, that is, to take the inner principle but not the outward appearance of Chinese characters.



[9] Major characters of Qidan

The Liao kingdom, existing for about two centuries (907-1125), created two scripts: major characters and minor characters. The major characters, proclaimed in 921 A.D., contain about 1,400 individual logographs, looking like Chinese characters at first glance but actually different. The minor characters are a kind of phonetic alphabet (see below). "Major" and "minor" imply the meaning of degrees of dignity.

[10] Nyuzhen characters

The Jin kingdom, existing for more than one century (1115-1234), followed the way of the Qidan and proclaimed their major characters in 1119 and minor characters in 1145. Their minor characters were lost in history. The major characters of the Nyuzhen have about 900 individual logographs.

[11] Xi-Xia characters

The Xi-Xia kingdom, existing for more than two centuries (1038-1227), proclaimed their script in 1036. Xi-Xia characters were popularly used in northwest China for more than two centuries, and many books were handed down in this script. They had about 6,000 individual characters. This number is near to the number of characters used today by the Han people. Perhaps the number span of 6,000-7,000 is the natural limit of human memory of logographs.

The above three scripts of northern and northwestern kingdoms were all forgotten in history. Recent studies have succeeded in deciphering them. Why were the Chinese characters of the Han people handed down to the present, although the Han people themselves were repeatedly conquered by other peoples? Conversely, why were the three above mentioned scripts lost in history, once their kingdoms were conquered? Must a writing system have a strong culture as its background in order to survive the vicissitudes of history?

[12] Shui characters

Another script made through imitation by differentiation is the script of the Shui nationality (pop. only 280,000), living chiefly in San-Du autonomous district of Guizhou. They coined about 400 characters, different not only from Han characters, but also from those of their neighboring nationalities. This strange phenomenon has yet to be explained.

**(4) Stage of Creation:**

**(Creation of Character-Type Alphabets)**

From coining logographic characters to creating character-type alphabets is in the history of Chinese characters a great transformation. There are eight such alphabets: six syllabic and two phonemic. The six syllabic

alphabets based on characters are:

[13] Japanese Kana (Katakana and Hiragana)

The Japanese created syllabic alphabets with simplified Chinese characters. At first, kana stood beside or outside of Chinese characters; half a millennium later, they joined the characters, becoming a part of the formal Japanese writing style. In 1982, a list of 1,945 commonly used characters was proclaimed, and Japanese writing of today has become kana mixed with fewer and fewer characters.

[14] Yi characters

The YI nationality of today (pop. 5 million), scattered in the southwest provinces of China, had their logographic characters long ago. Yi language has different dialects but lack a common speech for their nationality. In 1980, their characters were simplified to be a syllabary of 819 symbols for writing the dialect of Liang-Shan district in Sichuan. This is the only syllabary of a minority nationality used formally in China today.

[15] Geba characters of the Naxi nationality

Today's Naxi nationality (pop. only 240,000), living in Li-Jiang autonomous district of Yunnan, had their picture writing called Dongba, and another script of syllabic nature called Geba, with about 2000 symbols, used for religious

purpose.

[16] Lisu characters

Lisu nationality of today (pop. 480,000) live along the border of Yunnan. A Lisu farmer called Wang Renbo created a character-based Lisu syllabary in the 1920's, with about 1,000 symbols, used in his town of Wei-Xi. This perhaps is the last member born in the family of Chinese characters.

[17] Women's Script of Jiangyong.

This is another strange script, discovered in 1950's, and studied only recently by linguists. It is of syllabic nature with about 670 individual characters, used secretly between women (it is not known to men at all) in the small district of Jiangyong of Hunan Province. It is not the script of a minority nationality, but one that writes the native dialect of the speech of one group of Han people. At present, there are only about a dozen old women over the age of 70 who can still read and write in this script.

[18] Minor characters of the Qidan

This is a syllabo-phonemic alphabet, with its phonological principles derived from the ancient Uighur alphabet, and its graphic forms from Chinese characters. It has about 378 letters, arranged in squares to conform with the shape of Chinese characters.

附录

汉字型文字举例

壮字: 滄(水) 鷓(鸡) 肩(有) 古(我) 蓄(田) 歪(上) 歪(下)

喃字: 諾(水) 鷓(鸡) 肩(你) 吏(来) 糶歪(太阳) 糶陵(月亮)

苗字: 洛(水) 鷓(鸡) 猥(猪, 板塘)、狐(猪, 老寨) 匹(板塘)、扭(老寨)

瑶字: 哀(爱) 端(男) 歪(父) 歪(母) 望(嫩) 畚(羞) 艇(船)

布依: 纳(田) 打(河) 岂(石) 鮓(鱼) 糲(饭) 舛(胖) 蛮(村)

侗字: 消(你们) 尼亚(你) 拿屋师道鸟(拿房子给咱们住)

白字: 颠 憇 巽 嶙 田 無 憇 梁 努 隔 留。(有情高山无情河、分离咱)

哈尼: 妹(地) 靠(庄稼) 不妈(太阳) 莪(天) 鮓(鱼) 赳(走)

水字: 水(水) 丅(丁) 非(秋) 王(五) 𠃉(虎) 𧈧(鬼) 𩺰(鱼)

契丹大字: 丑(太) 丕(平) 芙(元) 寺(附加) 纟(酉) 采(年)

契丹小字: 菑(兴) 𠃉(宗) 衤(神) 𠃉(圣) 𠃉(大) 𠃉(孝) 𠃉(章)

女真: 朮(四) 月(月) 五(15) 日(日) 冬(衣) 帝(上京) 𠃉(于) 𠃉(驻)

西夏: 𠃉(人) 冬(虫) 𠃉(一) 𠃉(泥) 𠃉(麦) 𠃉(傲) 𠃉(工匠)

彝字: 𠃉(ba) 𠃉(bba) 𠃉(nba) 𠃉(hma) 𠃉(ma) 𠃉(fa)

异体字: [天] 𠃉 𠃉 (贵州大方) 𠃉 𠃉 (云南禄劝) 𠃉 𠃉 (四川凉山)

哥巴: 𠃉(帽) 丅(缝) 𠃉(不) 𠃉(裂) | 𠃉(夏) 𠃉(雨) 𠃉(不) 𠃉(怕)

傣傣: 𠃉(猪) 𠃉(牧) 𠃉(羊) 𠃉(牧) 𠃉(者)----(放牧猪羊的人)

女书: 𠃉(为) 𠃉(人) 𠃉(莫) 𠃉(要) 𠃉(起) 𠃉(黑) 𠃉(心)

(日文、朝鲜文、中文和注音字母, 从略。)

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