

Jeroen Wiedenhof, review of William G. Boltz, *The origin and early development of the Chinese writing system* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1994). Published in *T'oung Pao*, Volume lxxiii, livres 4-5, 1996, pp. 381-385.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE/BOOK REVIEWS

William G. BOLTZ, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, American Oriental Series, Volume 78. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1994. x + 205 pp. Notes, Illustrations, Glossary of technical terms, Abbreviations, Bibliography, Indices. ISBN 0-940490-78-1

The Chinese script is a steady source of both popular fascination and academic enterprise. Over the last century, new materials have shaken up traditional knowledge more than once. The discovery in 1899 of oracle bones dating back to 1200-1050 B.C. initiated the systematic study of ancient writing in China. In 1973, manuscripts from the late third and early second century B.C. were excavated from a tomb in Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 in the province of Húnán 湖南. Some of the works discovered there had been handed down by tradition, making extensive comparative studies possible.

Boltz's study examines the first millenium of writing in China against the background of writing traditions elsewhere. The book consists of three main sections. In the "prolegomena" (pp. 1-28), some theoretical definitions are carefully explained. Boltz's work continues a tradition initiated by Peter Alexis Boodberg (1903-1972), who is credited for part of the techniques and terminology. Part one, "the Shang formation" (pp. 29-126), approaches Chinese writing from a wide angle, offering a well-illustrated comparison of the ancient writing systems of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. Boltz points out the similarities in the ways these scripts developed from crude pictorial foundations to increased graphic sophistication. Part two, "The Ch'in-Han reformation" (pp. 127-177), starts out from the standardization of the script during the Qín 秦 dynasty (221-206 B.C.). It introduces some notions of early lexicography against the background of the Chinese world-view. In particular, it attempts to explain why Chinese writing had to forgo the alphabetic development witnessed in other scripts. In the back of the book, the reader is supplied with a glossary of

technical terms, an index of Chinese characters discussed in the text and a general index of topics. The book is well printed and readable to every graphic detail.

The introductory treatment of the phenomenon of writing focuses on the distinction between drawing and writing. The defining characteristic of the latter, in Boltz's view, is its connection with speech. His purpose here is to ban out the popular misconception that Chinese writing somehow represents concepts directly, without the intermediary of the Chinese language. As Boltz reminds us (p. 4), the perception of Chinese writing as a *lingua universalis* was a major issue in G.W. Leibniz's time. In the late 1930s, it was the subject of a private skirmish between H.G. Creel (1936, 1939) and P.A. Boodberg (1937, 1940). Boltz even shows us contemporary exhibition notes from the British Museum portraying Chinese writing as a "concept script" (p. 7). Still, the issue can no longer be the subject of fruitful academic discussion, and Boltz need not have elaborated on the subject to the extent he has.

This also raises the question of Boltz's intended readership. The tone of the book is unquestionably erudite. Interested laymen may be put off by its technical vocabulary. Educationally speaking, some minor inaccuracies may confuse the academic novice. The "conventional scheme of 214 classifiers" used to arrange characters in Chinese dictionaries was not "established during the K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722)" (p. 94), it was designed by Méi Yǐngzuò 梅膺祚 and used in his *Zhūì* 字彙 dictionary of 1615. A page reference from the *Shuō wén gǔ lín* 說文詁林 'Forest of explanations of the *Shuō wén*' is introduced with the words "the *Shuō wén ku lín* says" (p. 121). The quotation is in fact from Xú Xuàn's 徐鉉 "received" version of the *Shuō wén* dictionary. The *Shuō wén gǔ lín*, indispensable for any study of the *Shuō wén*, is after all no more than a collection of text versions and commentaries cut up and arranged character by character.

The technical vocabulary is carefully explained and listed in the glossary. Boltz stops short of indulging in Boodberg's (1957) terminological excesses, but some of his nomenclature lacks functionality, e.g. where duplicate terms are introduced. "A zodiograph that is already conventionally associated with one word may be used to write a second word the *meaning* of which is readily suggested by the *depictive quality* of the graph itself [...] This we call the *homosemous* or *parasemantic* use of a graph" (p. 62, original

emphasis). The same notion is subsequently restyled "polyphony" (pp. 63, 102). In some cases, Boltz's technical names lack intuitive adequacy. His "zodiograph" derives "from Greek *zōdion* 'a small picture, painted or carved'" (p. 54; cf. Boodberg 1957: 114). As Boltz explains, "[w]hen a given drawing [...] is the picture of an object, and stands for that object, we call it a *pictograph*, and we may reckon it as a precursor of writing, but not as writing proper [...] When that same drawing comes to stand primarily for the *name* of the object, i.e., for the *word* rather than for the *thing*, then the graph is writing, and we can, following Boodberg, call such a graph a *zodiograph*" (p. 54). Yet Boodberg speaks of pictograms and zodiographs quite interchangeably (1957: 114), and for Boltz's zodiographs, the literal sense of 'a small picture, painted or carved' fails to bring across the crucial notion that they record speech. In the same discussion, Boltz quotes the common 'no smoking' pictogram (a 'no parking' symbol superimposed on a burning cigarette) as an example of "graphs that stand as a kind of shorthand notation for acts, but do not represent any specific utterance of the language" (p. 53). He proposes to call these pictograms "dromenographs", but the origin of this term escapes me. On the whole, Boltz runs the risk that some of the inspiring ideas that lie behind the barrage of technical terms may not come across.

It is unfortunate that the last part of the book should be so short, for the question which Boltz is driving at could have been pursued a little further. In this part, the course taken by the Chinese script is phrased in a negative fashion. The last section of the book is entitled: "Why the Chinese Script Did Not Evolve into an Alphabet" (pp. 168-177). In comparing the Chinese script as it has been handed down since Hàn 漢 times (206 B.C. - A.D. 221) with the evidence unearthed at Mǎwángduī, Boltz's conclusion is that "the script of the Ma wang tui manuscripts was in many cases on the brink, so to speak, of a widespread desemanticization and true phonogrammatic regularity, that is, a regularity in association of a single graph with syllabic sound, irrespective of meaning" (p. 170). In his view, such trends were "natural enough in a strictly evolutionary sense" (p. 176), but they were checked by the reaction of scholars in the third century B.C. who feared that the conventional relationships between graphs, meaning and sound would collapse. "In this fashion, then, desemanticization was arrested, the appearance of an increased number of asemantic

phonograms was precluded, and the Chinese never developed a syllabary or an alphabet" (p. 177).

The contemporary use of *nǚ shū* 女書 'female writing' has been reported from Húnán province since 1931, and it has roused much academic interest since the 1980s. Despite the limited significance of this isolated phenomenon, it displays the kind of syllabic development Boltz is looking for (Xiè 1991: 8). But there is also a methodological question: are syllabaries and alphabets really the only "natural" representatives of human writing? The comparison with other writing systems could have been saved from a one-sided approach by pointing out positive aspects in the development of the Chinese script. Surely longevity must fit Boltz's evolutionary metaphor. It is almost too self-evident that the characters unearthed from Lord Lì Cāng's 利蒼 tomb at Mǎ-wángduī can still be read, partly understood, freely copied out, enjoyed in the form of calligraphic scrolls and recognized by myriads of Chinese readers. In these days of cyberspace mobility and multitasking functionality, length of breath is hard to come by. The computer generation, oblivious of its lack of basic education in penmanship, is complaining that it cannot read our handwriting. It is hardly surprising that the development of electronic scanning techniques has not led to a rehabilitation of the handwritten book. Boltz correctly points out a crucial factor distinguishing writing from its pictorial ancestors, viz., its direct link with the spoken word. But there is more: no writing can exist without the writing hand, its fingers clutching brush, stylus or pen. Keyboard typing and mouse mobility cannot substitute for this defining characteristic. An alphabetic letter can be replaced by a single keystroke. Chinese characters have come a long way. They may yet outlive keystroke input methods and TrueType scalability.

### References

- Boodberg, Peter A. (1937). "Some proleptical remarks on the evolution of archaic Chinese". *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 2, 329-372.
- (1940). "'Ideography' or 'iconolatry'?" *T'oung Pao* XXXV, 266-288.
- (1957). "The Chinese script: An essay on nomenclature (the first hecaton)". *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, Volume XXIX, Part I, 113-120.
- Creel, Herrlee Glessner (1936). "On the nature of Chinese ideography". *T'oung Pao* XXXII, 85-161.
- (1939). "On the ideographic element in ancient Chinese". *T'oung Pao* XXXIV, 265-294.

Xiè, Zhì mí n, 谢志民 (1991). *Jiāngyǒng "nǚ shū" zhī mí*. 江永“女书”之谜 [The mystery of “female writing” from Jiāngyǒng]. Zhèngzhōu: Hénán Rénmín Chūbǎnshè 河南人民出版社.

Leiden University

Jeroen WIEDENHOF