

W10 - Writing, Text, Image in China

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Part I: The Foundation of Western Sinology

Introduction to Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978)



- **Background:**

- Renowned Swedish Sinologist, founder of Western research into Chinese philology.
- Graduate of Uppsala University (1909).
- Conducted field research in Shanxi and Shaanxi (1910–1912) on Chinese dialects.
- Served as President of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Gothenburg and Director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.

Introduction to Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978)

- **The Name “Gao Benhan” (高本漢):**
 - **Phonetic coincidence:** “Gao” resembles his surname; “Benhan” resembles “Bernhard.”
 - **Cultural double entendre:** “I am originally a Han person” (*Wǒ běnlái jiùshì Hànrén*).
 - Signified his lifelong dedication to Chinese studies and his identity as “Han at heart.”
- **Scholarship:**
 - Inherited Qing Dynasty philology traditions integrated with Western linguistic methods.
 - Annotated the *Book of Rites (Liji)* and *Book of Poetry (Shijing)*.

Karlgren on the Survival of Culture

- **The “Grand Ambition”:**

- **Core Thesis:** Classical Chinese (Wenyan) must not be abolished.
- **The Consequence:** If abolished, the spirit of Chinese culture and cultural transmission ceases to exist.
- **The Translation Problem:** Karlgren argued it is impossible to translate the vast heritage (e.g., Siku Quanshu) into the vernacular. Vernaculars are mutable and unstable; the volume of heritage is too vast.

- **Parallel with Chen Yinke:**

- While Karlgren worked in Europe on phonology, Chen Yinke worked in China on historical reality.
- Both agreed: The distinction between Han and Hu (foreigners) is cultural, not racial.
- **Conclusion:** Traditional Chinese culture embodies universal truths, validated by scholars from both East and West.

Karlgren's Summary – Point 1: A Vehicle for High Civilisation

- **Global Prominence:**

- Chinese occupies a status in East Asia comparable to Latin and Greek in Europe.
- It exceeds European languages in the scope of application (population).

- **Cultural Continuity:**

- Western languages became vehicles for high civilisation only recently (last few hundred years).
- China possesses **4,000 years of literature.**
- Literature matured centuries before the Common Era (philosophy, history, art).

Karlgren's Summary – Point 2: The Visual “Esperanto”

- **Unity through Writing:**

- China has multiple spoken dialects but a single written language.
- Classical Chinese acts as a **Written World Language** (Esperanto).
- **Example:** An order from Beijing is understood everywhere visually, even if the spoken reading varies completely between Cantonese and Mandarin.

- **Temporal Unity:**

- It allows intimacy with the ancients.
- A poem from the Han Dynasty and a poem from the Qing Dynasty are linguistically accessible to the reader without special study of phonetic evolution.
- *Contrast:* English speakers struggle with texts from just 400 years ago; Chinese speakers access 2,000+ years of history.

Karlgren's Summary – Point 3: Ideographic Stability

- **Ideographic vs. Phonetic:**
 - Chinese is a system of symbols representing **meaning**, not speech sounds.
 - Pronunciation changes; meaning remains.
- **The Argument Against Alphabetisation:**
 - Adopting an alphabet would force the abandonment of 4,000 years of culture.
 - **Homophones:** Excessive homophones make alphabetised Classical Chinese unintelligible.

shi	shi	shi	shi	shi	shi
史	獅	石	尸	市	十
history	lion	stone	corpse	market	ten

Karlgren's Summary – Point 3: Ideographic Stability

- **The “Clean” Separation:**

- Classical Chinese separates the written form from the “vulgar” vernacular changes.
- From antiquity to the early 1930s, Chinese people used Classical Chinese for recording events to avoid ambiguity and maintain conciseness.
- Modern readers use modern pronunciation for ancient words, bypassing the need to reconstruct ancient phonology to understand the *meaning*.

Karlgren's Summary – Point 4: Structure and Evolution

- **Chronology:**

- **Origin:** c. 3000 BC (Henan Oracle Bones show already refined writing).
- **Stability:** Forms fundamentally stabilised by the beginning of the Common Era.

- **Evolutionary Stages:**

- **1. Picture-writing:** The most ancient form.
- **2. Logical Aggregates (Ideographic Compounds):** Theoretical combinations.
- **3. Phono-semantic Compounds:** Radical + Phonetic.



Karlgren's Summary – Points 5 & 6: Classics and Art

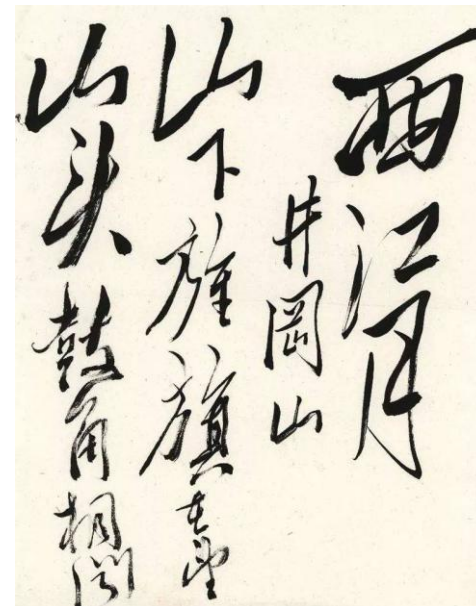
- **Point 5: The Classics:**

- Confucius as the “saviour of Chinese culture” during a chaotic era.
- The “Five Classics” moulded the Chinese mind.
- Later literature is “dyed with the colours of the Classics.”

Karlgren's Summary – Points 5 & 6: Classics and Art

- **Point 6: Calligraphy as Art:**

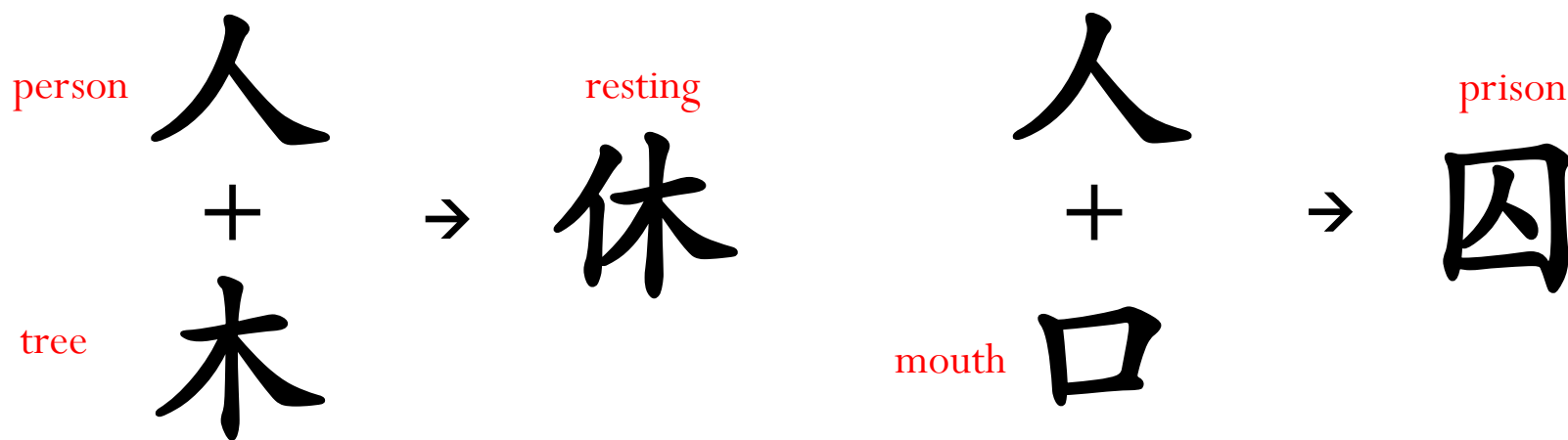
- Chinese writing is a native creation, unlike Western alphabets (borrowed from Phoenicians/Egypt).
- **Aesthetic Value:** Rich, pleasing forms; “like a beautiful noblewoman.”
- **Relation to Painting:** Calligraphy is the mother of painting. The two are often combined (poems on paintings).
- **Decoration:** Chinese decorate with text (aphorisms), not just images.



Karlgren's Summary – Point 7: Pedagogy

- Is it hard to learn?

- Learning the standard script (*Kaishu*) is not arduous.
- Method: Learn common single-body characters →→ learn components →→ unlock compound characters.



Karlgren's Summary – Point 7: Pedagogy

- **The Method of Recitation:**

- Grammar exercises are ineffective for Classical Chinese.
- **The Key:** Repetitive recitation. “Read a book a thousand times, and its meaning will self-manifest.”
- **Traditional Education:** Children memorise classics before fully understanding them. These become “keys” to all later study.
- This creates a shared cultural psychology and reverence for history.

Part II: The Scandinavian School

Søren Egerod

- **Søren Egerod (Danish Sinologist):**
 - **“Binding Agent”:** Writing binds Chinese culture, whereas language distinguishes Western cultures.
 - **Continuity:** Writing allows moderns to view residents of Anyang (3000 years ago) as “one family.”
 - **Sacred Nature:** Writing influences politics and receives worshipful respect.

Toynbee, Arnold Joseph. “Half the World: The history and culture of China and Japan.” (1973).

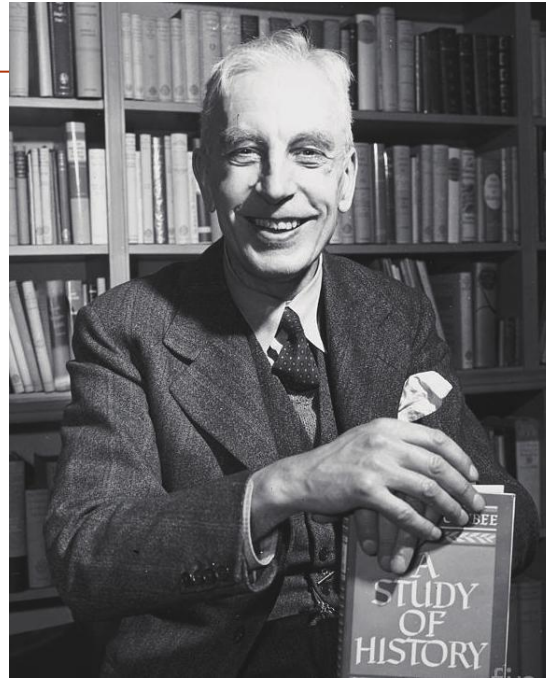
Cecilia Lindqvist



- **Cecilia Lindqvist (Swedish Sinologist):**
 - **“The Universe in a Square Inch”:** Characters condense thousands of years of life experience and observation of nature.
 - **Visual History:** In a character, one sees mountains, rivers, and life.
 - **Cognitive Continuity:** Writing styles changed (Oracle →→ Bronze →→ Modern), but the *cognition and reproduction of reality* remained constant.

Part III: Philosophers and Historians

Dr. Arnold Toynbee on the “World Language”



- **The Proposal:**

- Chinese characters could become an international written communication script (like Arabic numerals for numbers).

- **The Argument:**

- **Phonetic Defect:** Pronunciation changes rapidly (e.g., Ancient Greek vs. Modern Greek = mutually unintelligible).
- **Logographic Advantage:** Concepts remain stable.

Dr. Arnold Toynbee on the “World Language”

- **The Thought Experiment:**

- If Confucius (5th c. BC) met Mao Zedong:

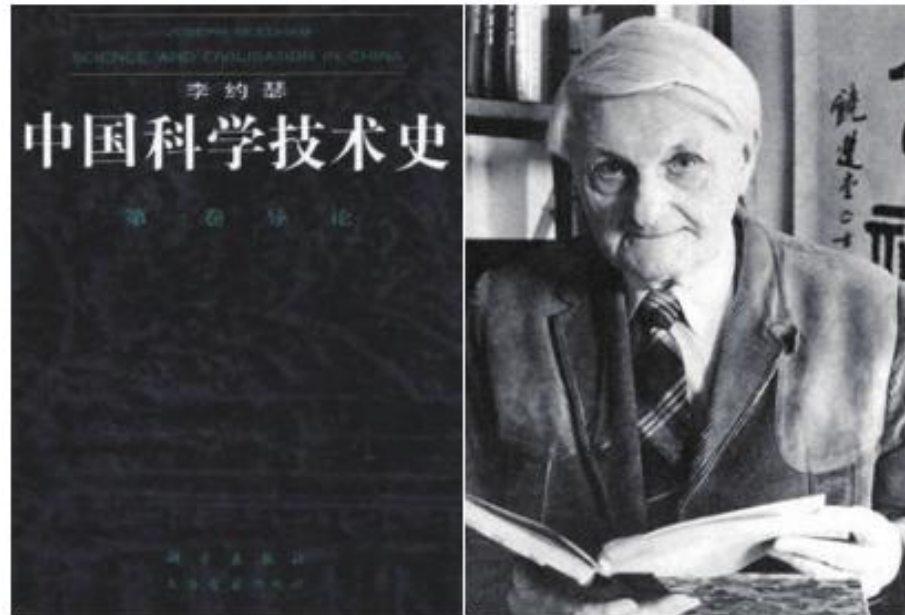
- ✓ **Spoken:** They could not communicate.

- ✓ **Written:** They could communicate perfectly using Classical Chinese.

- *Conclusion:* Phonetic scripts have a major defect (mutability); Chinese overcomes this.

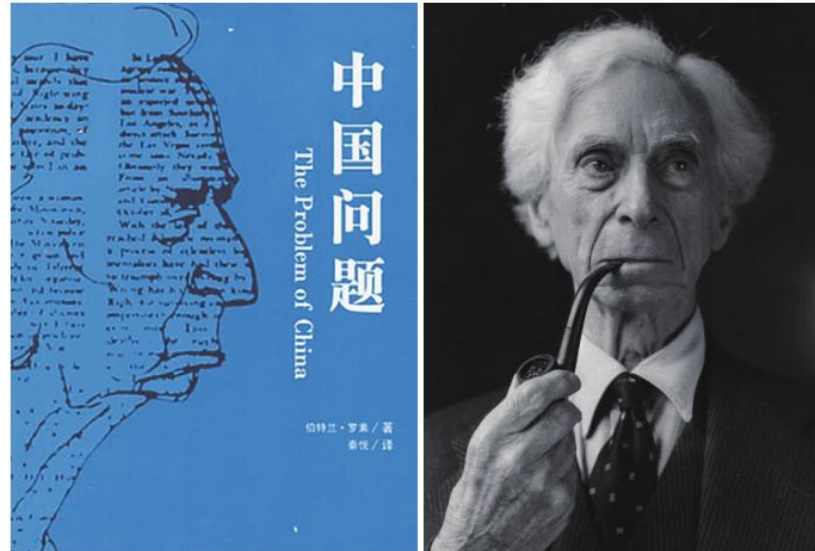
Toynbee, Arnold. "A study of history: Illustrated." (1972).

Joseph Needham and Bertrand Russell



- **Joseph Needham (Biochemist/Sinologist):**
 - **Description:** “Refined, concise, and jade-like.”
 - **Utility:** The best tool created by humanity for expressing deep thoughts and emotions.

Joseph Needham and Bertrand Russell



- **Earl Bertrand Russell (Philosopher/Logician):**

- **Three Features of Chinese Culture:**

- ✓ 1. Ideographic symbols (not phonetic).
- ✓ 2. Confucian ethics replacing religion.
- ✓ 3. Meritocratic selection of officials (Imperial Exams).

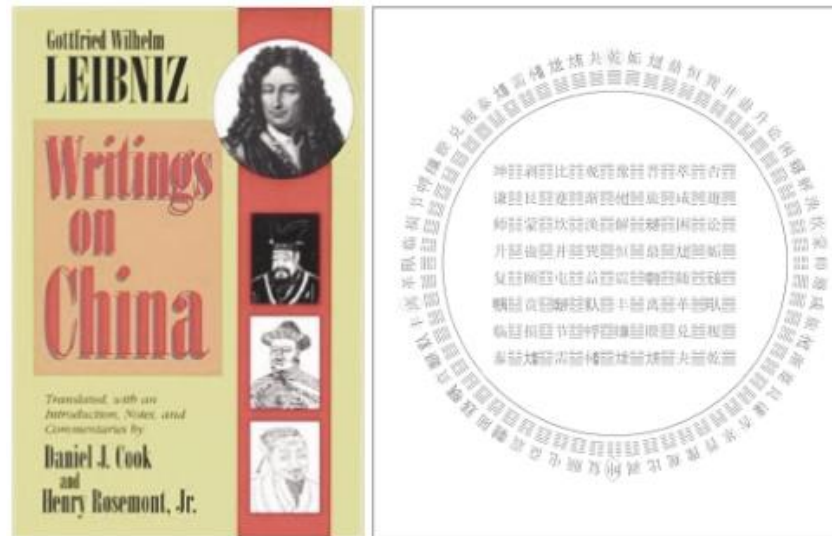
Russell, Bertrand. *The Problem of China: Bertrand Russell's Thought-Provoking Analysis of China's Social and Political Challenges*. Prabhat Prakashan, 2021.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz on “True Characters”



- **The “Universal Character” (Characteristica Universalis):**
 - Leibniz sought a system where symbols represent *ideas* directly, not sounds.
 - Cites Chinese and Egyptian as examples of “True Characters.”

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz on “True Characters”

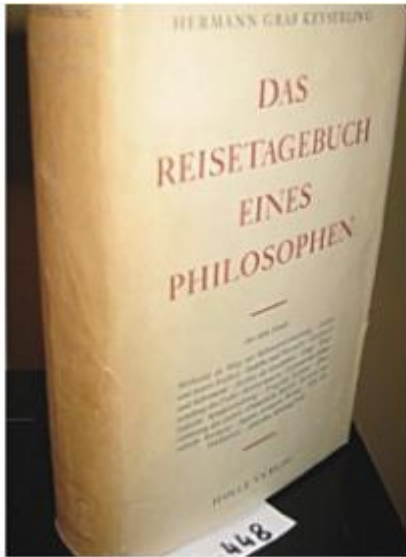


- **Mathematical Logic:**
 - Ideographic symbols have unique “names” but universal meanings.
 - Allows speakers of different languages to communicate concepts (like the *I Ching* binary connection).
- **Visual Communication:**
 - A system “understood by the eye.”
 - If established correctly, it expresses the principles of all things as basic knowledge.

Part IV: The German Perspective

Aesthetics and Spirit

Count Hermann Keyserling



- **Aesthetics:**

- Chinese writing is the “highest art.”
- Demands the hand of an artist; good calligraphy is as priceless as a masterpiece painting.

Count Hermann Keyserling

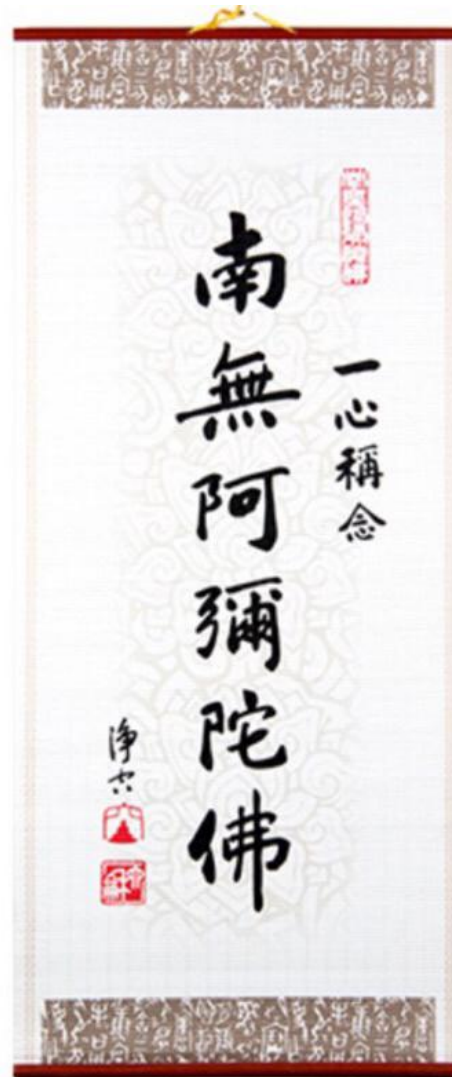
- **Spiritual Connotation:**

- Western languages (French, German, English) cannot express metaphysical consciousness well.
- Chinese uses symbolic images to stimulate “amazing associative abilities.”

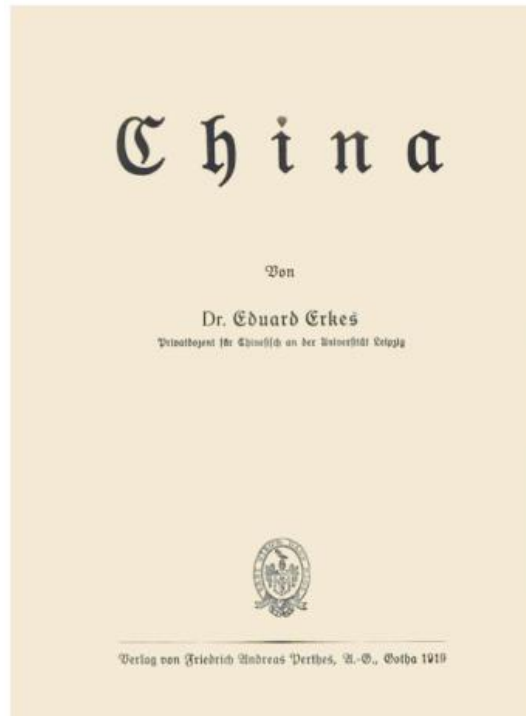
- **Example:** The Confucian Philosophy in three characters:

- 1. **Zhi (致):** Devote/Extend (Total concentration).
- 2. **Zhong (中):** Middle/Centre (Doctrine of the Mean).
- 3. **He (和):** Harmony (External manifestation).
- *Conclusion:* These three characters encompass the entire Four Books.

Count Hermann Keyserling



Dr. Eduard Erkes



- **The Perfect Tool:**

- “The most perfect communication tool created by the human spirit.”
- Faithfully retains pictographic characteristics while adapting to abstract.

Dr. Eduard Erkes

- **Practicality:**

- Mastering 3,000—4,000 characters is sufficient.
- It functions perfectly for modern life (telegrams, typewriters).

Eduard Erkes, China, Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1919, p.124.

Carl Emmo Vissering

- **Civilizational Resilience:**

- Europe is a “colourful mosaic” (fragmented); China is a continuous lineage.
- **Absorption:** China absorbs foreign influences (nomadic tribes, Indian Buddhism) and turns them into parts of its own culture.

- **Rebuttal to Spengler:**

- Oswald Spengler argued all cultures must decline.
- Vissering argues China is the exception: dormant power allows it to break free from confusion and move toward new prosperity.