

Haeree Park, *The Writing System of Scribe Zhou: evidence from late pre-imperial Chinese manuscripts and inscriptions (5th–3rd centuries BCE)*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Sampson

SUMMARY

If we ignore the “simplified” graphs introduced in the early decades of the current People’s Republic, Chinese script has been a fixed, standardized system since roughly 200 B.C. However, at that period its known history had already lasted for a millennium. (Its entire history must have been longer, since the inscriptions extant from ca 1200 B.C. already represent a complex, evolved system, but no earlier documents survived into historical times.) Until recently our data on early scribal practices that deviated markedly from the eventual standard were sparse; the first, short-lived imperial dynasty (221–206 B.C.) went to great lengths to burn all non-approved documents. However, recent archaeological discoveries have yielded a number of pre-imperial MSS of standard works written in ways showing many contrasts with the “received” versions of those works which have come down to us through the ages.

Before standardization, a given word could often be written in different forms, which might correspond to different words in the later standard script, or (more often) all but one of which might be disused. Haeree Park studies the nature of these differences, mainly though not exclusively via a pre-imperial copy of one of the Chinese “Thirteen Classic Books”, written on bamboo strips and now held in the Shanghai Museum. One of the Chinese names of the book is “Zhou Yi”, hence Ms Park’s term “Shanghai Zhouyi” for the text she compares with the received version of the book, which is also called “Yi Jing”, “I Ching”, or in English the Book of Changes – a work believed to date in its received form from perhaps the 8th century B.C. (Shaughnessy 1999: 338). The particular copy called the Shanghai Zhouyi was produced later, in the 4th century B.C., in the southern State of Chu.

(The latter time fell within what in Chinese terms was the “Warring States” period. Since terms like “Spring and Autumn”, “Warring States”, or “Former Han” will be unfamiliar to many Linguist List readers, I avoid them here in favour of quoting numbered centuries; but the two systems of periodization do not align neatly, so dates in this review must be taken as approximations.)

The “Scribe Zhou” of Haeree Park’s title is not the individual who produced the Shanghai Zhouyi. He is a shadowy figure possibly of the 9th century B.C. who is said to have been responsible for the general style of script used in the pre-imperial period. (“Style” here refers as much to the physical shape of graph elements, which evolved with changes in writing materials, as to the logical structure of graphs, which is an issue of more interest to linguists.)

Readers who are unfamiliar with the Book of Changes need to understand that it is a very strange work. It functions as an oracle in written form. A person needing supernatural counsel uses ritual randomizing techniques to generate a sequence of six binary digits, and for each of the 64 possible “hexagrams”, traditionally represented as piles of six broken or solid horizontal lines, the Book of Changes offers a

commentary which is supposed to contain helpful advice.

Ms Park sees the *Changes* as a favourable document for studying script variation, because of its “formulaic structure”. This might be optimistic. It is true that the entries for each of the 64 hexagrams are organized to a common pattern, but the content of the entries is another matter. Bluntly, no-one has a clue what they mean. Consider, for instance, two English versions of one (entirely typical) passage, part of the entry for the 010110 hexagram. Haeree Park translates this wording as “Cut off the nose and ear. Something is bound by a red rope and then it is slowly released.” Cary Baynes (1968) translates the same received wording as “His nose and feet are cut off. Oppression at the hands of the man with the purple knee bands. Joy comes softly.” (Baynes was translating from Richard Wilhelm’s German version, but the indirect translation route has nothing to do with the English wording contrasts.) One might wonder how prose like this helps to resolve crucial life dilemmas; more to the present purpose, if alternative versions of such prose have graphs at a given position that stand for different words in the standard script, how could one hope to use context or common sense to judge whether one graph has changed its application and originally stood for the same word as the other, or alternatively that the two versions meant different things? (Ms Park believes that the latter alternative is sometimes the case. For instance, she points out that two particular graphs frequently replace one another in Shanghai and received texts respectively, so that for instance in the entry for the 011111 hexagram the remark “The woman is stout” in the received text corresponds to “The woman is getting away” in the Shanghai text.)

Readers might wonder whether I am being fair to the text Ms Park has studied. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung spent years studying the *Changes* and regarded it as a “great” book, “a new light from the East” (Jung 1949: xxi, 1931: 145). But the nature of the book is as I have outlined it. I prefer the judgement of the Scot James Legge, who translated and expounded the Chinese classic works comprehensively and sympathetically for the West in the nineteenth century, but saw the *Changes* as a “farrago” (1899: 25). The only way I can explain Jung’s verdict is to suggest, cynically, that it is understandable for a purveyor of Western psychoanalysis to admire an example of another, Eastern kind of mumbo-jumbo.

Be that as it may, the *Book of Changes* exists, and Haeree Park offers an exhaustive study of script differences between the Shanghai and received versions. Her second chapter discusses the assumptions she makes about Old Chinese phonology (she uses a variant of the reconstruction proposed by William Baxter and Laurent Sagart 2014). Chapter 3 analyses the general nature of script differences between the two versions. Chapter 4 broadens the discussion to cover distinctive regional characteristics of script in the State of Chu. Chapters 5 and 6 draw various conclusions about early Chinese orthography, and there are appendices and an index allowing each individual difference between Shanghai and received texts to be checked.

In her introductory chapter, Ms Park claims that in the era when the Shanghai *Zhouyi* was produced, there existed “a set of rules that governed character variation, and at the same time the scope of variation was narrowed down to a manageable size by the conventions of a given time and place”.

EVALUATION

One admirable feature of this book is that production has been executed to a high and surely expensive standard. Because the discussion depends heavily on the detailed shapes of handwritten graphs, the prose is full of reproductions of graphs from the bamboo strips, set inline with the English text and often printed in colour. Sometimes long-obsolete graphs are typeset – I do not know how that was achieved. The publishers deserve warm commendation. On the other hand, they could only work with the material supplied by the author. In many other cases, manuscript graphs are reproduced in greyscale and are often illegible, because of lack of contrast between black ink and dark-grey bamboo (sometimes also because they are shown at too small a scale). This is a great pity, when image-processing software that could have improved legibility is now universally available. (Sometimes, too, parts of graphs seem to have been cropped off to left and right.)

The book reads like a doctoral thesis. I do not know whether it was one, but it has the virtues and also some of the drawbacks of the genre.

On the positive side, every topic covered is treated very thoroughly. And the book certainly gives readers a clear impression of the diverse ways in which the writings of given words were liable to vary in the centuries preceding standardization. I learned a great deal. We know that at an early period, after a number of words had been given graphs consisting simply of pictures of their meanings, the script was extended by using those graphs also for near-homonyms of the words they originally stood for; and then the resulting ambiguities were reduced by adding simple graphs related to the meanings of the respective homonyms, so that in the eventual standard script most words have a graph including two parts: a “phonetic” related to the Old Chinese pronunciation of the word, and a “signific” related to its meaning. For instance, the word for “emotion”, ‘qing2’ in Mandarin, is written by adding the “heart” graph to the graph for “green”, ‘qing1’ – in this case the words remain near-homonyms differing only in tone. All this is well known, but it was news to me that before the standardization it had become common for even words having simple graphs to be written with the addition of a logically-redundant signific or phonetic. For instance ‘mu3’, “mother”, originally and now written with a simple graph that appears to depict a woman with engorged breasts, was in the Shanghai Zhouyi written with the addition of the “person” signific.

The standard script has no diacritics of any kind: a graph is a graph. But in the Shanghai Zhouyi a double-tick mark was added to a graph to abbreviate two successive instances of the word in question. Remarkably, this was used even when the words were in separate clauses (in fact that was the usual case). In English, this would be like abbreviating “If you reply, reply promptly” as “If you reply2 promptly”. (The script had no analogue of commas.)

This material is excellent. On the other hand, like many PhD theses, the book is thorough even when dealing with topics having little real relevance. Many slightly-different reconstructions of Old Chinese phonology have been proposed by various scholars, but nothing in Haeree Park’s discussion seems to hang on those differences. So, rather than devoting a whole chapter to her preferred system, it would surely have been as satisfactory to refer to one of the previously-published systems and cite word-forms in that system.

Ms Park often seems to build large claims on minimal evidence. She repeatedly

ascribes deviations from the standard script to regional variation, ignoring the possibility that variation existed among individual scribes (which must surely have happened in China as it did in Europe). It may be that she has evidence that the points she mentions are regionally consistent, but she never seems to spell that out. Ms Park finds a single case where the word ‘zhong1’ “end” is written with “heart” rather than the standard “silk” signific; because this occurs in a clause with a human subject she decides that “end” must be intended in some special cognitive or volitional sense, though (this being the Changes) it is quite unclear what that sense might be.

Discussing alternation between graphs for two frequent words meaning “not have, not exist”, and pronounced in Old Chinese (according to Schuessler 2007) ‘maŋ, ma’, Ms Park takes for granted that (if they are related) this must be through the former containing an otherwise unattested suffix -ŋ of unknown meaning. Is it not more likely that ‘ma’ is a phonetically reduced form of an original ‘maŋ’? (That would be parallel to other Old Chinese full/reduced pairs of common words, e.g. personal pronouns.) It is evident that Ms Park has been influenced by the teachings of William Boltz, who is well known for views about the development of Chinese script which are idiosyncratic, and to my mind quite untenable (Sampson and Chen 2013).

In her introduction Ms Park tells us that we should assume that the script “of a given time and place in pre-imperial China was just as effective and unambiguous as the received script”. That is a large assumption, and if “a given time” extends to centuries earlier than the Shanghai Zhouyi it is surely wrong. Before significs were routinely added to simple graphs, the script must have been much more ambiguous than the later standard – which is unsurprising: as far as I know it is usual for early scripts to be relatively ambiguous.

Conversely, the author sometimes seems naive about straightforward matters. Near the middle of the book she explains at some length that a given simple graph can function as phonetic in one range of compound graphs, and as signific in another range. A reader who needs to be told that is unlikely to have got this far through the book, which is not addressed to non-Sinologists. At another point she suggests, as if it were an original thought, that the word ‘bei3’ “north” could be related to ‘bei4’ “back”. So far as I know it has long been acknowledged by everyone interested in such issues that these words share a common root, with the idea that the natural way to face is towards the sunny south.

Haeree Park’s introductory claim to offer “rules governing character variation” is fulfilled mainly by postulating two tendencies in script evolution up to the period of the Shanghai Zhouyi, namely tendencies towards “gravity” and towards “symmetry”. That is: where elements of graphs were eliminated or graphically simplified, this tended to occur in the upper parts of the graphs, while extra, sometimes purely “decorative” graphic material tended to be added to lower parts. And: graphic changes tended to leave left and right sides of graphs visually balanced.

In sum: there is worthwhile material in this book, but it is a volume which needs to be read cautiously.

REFERENCES

Baxter, William H. & Laurent Sagart. 2014. *Old Chinese: a new reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baynes, Cary F., translator. 1968. *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd edn. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jung, Carl G. 1931. In memory of Richard Wilhelm. In: Richard Wilhelm (translator), *The secret of the golden flower: a Chinese book of life*, pp. 139–151. London: Kegan Paul.

Jung, Carl G. 1949. Foreword to Baynes 1968.

Legge, James. 1899. *The Yi King* (2nd edn). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sampson, Geoffrey & Zhiqun Chen. 2013. The reality of compound ideographs. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 41.255–272.

Schuessler, Axel. 2007. *ABC etymological dictionary of Old Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Shaughnessy, Edward L. 1999. Western Zhou history. In: Michael Loewe & E.L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge history of ancient China: from the origins of civilization to 221 B.C.*, pp. 292–351. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.