The Role of Chinese Characters in Maintaining China's Unity throughout History

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Abstract: This paper explores the pivotal role of Chinese characters in maintaining China's unity throughout history. It contrasts the stability of logographic writing with the variability of alphabetic systems, highlighting how Chinese characters fostered cultural convergence and national cohesion, contributing to a unified recognition of the Chinese nation. In contrast, the alphabetic system's close connection to speech sounds made it more susceptible to change, leading to linguistic and cultural fragmentation in regions such as the Roman Empire. The enduring stability of Chinese characters has been crucial to China's long periods of unity.

1. Introduction

Reflecting on the different historical trajectories of ancient China and the Roman Empire, we see that China remained a unified country throughout most of its history, with only three notable periods of division: the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. In contrast, the Roman Empire followed an opposite path: after 422 years of unification, Europe never again returned to a unified state. From the perspective of linguistic studies, what role did the two distinct writing systems play in shaping these outcomes? In this essay, I will begin with a brief overview of the evolution and classification of writing systems. Next, I will summarize the characteristics of two distinctive writing systems— logographic and alphabetic. Following this, I will compare the divergent historical trajectories of two great civilizations: ancient China and the Roman Empire. Finally, I will explore the role of Chinese characters in maintaining China's unity over time.

2. The Evolution and Classification of Writing Systems

2.1 The Evolution of Writing Systems

Key hallmarks of human history from savagery to civilization are agriculture, metallurgy, complex technology, centralized government, and writing [1]. Writing is a great advance, with the advent of writing, knowledge could not only be communicated but also stored. We can define writing as the symbolic representation of language through the use of graphic signs [2]. However, unlike speech, writing is a skill that has to be learned through sustained conscious effort rather than acquired naturally in the community.

In terms of human development, writing is a relatively recent phenomenon. The earliest writing for which we have clear evidence is known as "cuneiform", marked on clay tablets about 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. About 3,000 years ago, inscriptions were being used in an ancient script that has a more obvious connection to writing systems in use today [2].

The development stages of writing system can be mainly divided into 6 phases [2].

Pictograms: When some of the "pictures" came to represent particular images in a consistent way, we can begin to describe the product as a form of picture-writing, or pictograms. Although pictograms are one of the earliest forms of representation, many of the signs we use today are still pictograms. For instance, the image of a red circle, a cigarette and a red line crossing it is commonly used to indicate "smoke free".

Ideograms: When the use of pictograms becomes more fixed and symbolic, it becomes ideograms. The distinction between pictograms and ideograms is that ideograms are more abstract. However, neither pictograms nor ideograms represent the sounds of language.

Logograms: When the relationship between the symbol and the entity or idea becomes sufficiently abstract, we can say that the symbol is a logogram. $, 8, % are some examples of the modern logograms, each symbol represents a word. These logograms are widely used across languages, although the way they are read may vary, a literate person is able to understand them regardless of the language in which they are used, without knowing their pronunciation.

Rebus writing: At some point of logographic writing, some symbols are used to represent both meaning and sound. This general pattern of using existing symbols to represent the sounds of words in a language is often described in terms of rebus principle. In this process, the symbol for one entity is taken over as the symbol for the sound of the spoken word used to refer to that entity. That symbol then comes to be used whenever that sound occurs in any words. In modern English, especially in social media and text messaging, people often use "CU" for "see you", "4U" for "for you". In these cases, "C", "2" and "U" illustrate a process of rebus writing.

Syllabic writing: A writing system that uses a set of symbols, each representing the pronunciation of a syllable, is known as a syllabic writing system. In Modern Japanese, both Hiragana and Katakana are forms of syllabic writing, with each symbol corresponding to a specific syllable.

Alphabetic writing: An alphabet is a set of written symbols, each one representing a single type of sound or phoneme. Modern European writing systems are primarily alphabetic.

This outlines the general evolution history of alphabetic writing systems. However, not all writing systems are syllabic or alphabetic. For example, Chinese characters are non-alphabetic, the distinction between alphabetic and non-alphabetic systems emerged between the stages of logogram and rebus writing. Chinese characters are classified as logographs, because they represent the meaning rather than sounds, whereas the alphabetic writing system took a different path, focusing on representing the sounds of language.

2.2 The Classification of Writing Systems

The three most common writing systems are alphabetic, logographic and syllabic.

In an alphabetic system, each symbol (or letter) represents a single sound (phoneme), which may be a consonant or a vowel. The representatives of alphabetic writing system are Latin alphabet, Greek alphabet, Cyrillic alphabet, and Hebrew alphabet. In a logographic system, each symbol represents a word or a morpheme (the smallest unit of meaning). Chinese characters belong to this category. In a syllabic system, each symbol represents a syllable, which may consist of a consonant-vowel (CV), vowel (V), or consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) structure. Japanese Hiragana and Katakana, which represent syllables in the Japanese language, are of this type.

However, in this essay, for the purpose of analysis, we will focus only on alphabetic and

logographic writing systems.

3. The Characteristics of Logographic Writing and Alphabetic Writing System

3.1 The Characteristics of Logographic writings

Chinese is one and the only alive complete logographic writing system [3]. While Japanese also incorporates logographs, particularly Chinese characters (Kanji), which were borrowed from Chinese writing since the end of 4th century, it primarily uses a syllabic system (Hiragana and Katakana).

3.1.1 Tight Connection with Meanings

Chinese characters are not phonetic representations; instead, they function as logograms, with each character typically conveying a distinct semantic unit. Xu Shen in Eastern Han Dynasty summarized Chinese characters into "the six principles of writing" in his book of *the Explanatory Notes of Chinese Characters*: pictographs, indicative characters, phono-semantic characters, ideographs, transfer characters and borrowed characters.

Pictographs directly depict objects or concepts through stylized visual representations. They evolved from ancient drawings into modern abstract forms while retaining their pictorial essence. For example, the "mountain" character (pronounced as "shan1") looks like three peaks on a horizontal line, with the middle peak standing higher, resembling a silhouette of a mountain range. Similarly, the "moon" character (pronounced as "yue4") preserves its original crescent shape, immediately evoking the object it represents. The "eye" character (pronounced as "mu4") features a vertical rectangle with two horizontal strokes inside, representing both the shape of an eye and its iris. And the "tree" character (pronounced as "mu4") consists of a central vertical trunk with multiple branching strokes radiating outward, resembling a tree.

Indicative characters, also known as simple ideographs or self-explanatory characters, represent abstract concepts through symbolic visual forms. These characters convey meaning through their structural composition rather than pictorial representation. Classic examples include the Chinese characters "above", "beneath", "concave" and "convex". The "above" character (pronounced as "shang4"), is formed by a short mark positioned above a horizontal line. The "below" character (pronounced as "xia4"), is formed by a short mark positioned beneath a horizontal line. The "concave" character (pronounced as "ao1"), features inward-curving lines that suggest a depressed surface, and the "convex" character (pronounced as "tu1") is characterized by outward-curving lines that imply a protruding surface. In each case, the meaning is immediately apparent from the character's visual design. The positional relationship between elements clearly indicates "above" and "below", while the distinctive shapes of the curves directly represent "concave" and "convex" concepts.

Compound ideographs, also called logical aggregates or associative idea characters, are characters that combine other components to form a new meaning. For instance, the "brightness" character (pronounced as "ming2") is the combination of the "sun" and "moon" characters, representing the two brightest natural objects. The "dismantle" character (pronounced as "jie2") is composed of three components: "horn", "knife" and "ox"—visually suggesting the action of cutting an ox apart, including its horns.

Phono-semantic compounds, the most common character type in modern Chinese, consist of two essential elements: a semantic component indicating meaning and a phonetic component suggesting pronunciation. A representative example is the "river" character (he3), which combines the "water" semantic radical with the "can" phonetic component (ke3). Here, the water radical associates the character with aquatic meanings, while the phonetic component provides the vowel sound "e". Another example is the "spider" character (zhu1), formed by the "bug" semantic radical and the "red"

phonetic component (zhu1). Here, the "bug" radical associates the character with certain types of animals, while the phonetic component gives it the same pronunciation.

Transformed cognates are characters that are used in different contexts but retain the same meaning or a related meaning.

Loangraphs are the existing characters being adapted to write other words with similar pronunciations.

These 6 types of characters all have semantic bases. The phono-semantic characters account for nearly 90% of the modern Chinese characters. However, the pronunciation rule is not completely predictable. Overall, Chinese characters are more connected to their meaning rather than to their pronunciation.

3.1.2 Stability in the Temporal and Spatial Dimensions

Chinese characters have been in use for thousands of years, but they have not always existed in a unified form. Prior to the Qin Dynasty, for nearly two millennia, the various kingdoms in China operated under independent political systems, each with its own distinct writing styles and pronunciations [4]. It was not until 221 BC, when the First Emperor of Qin unified China, that a standardized writing system was implemented, together with unified wheel axles, tracks, and standardized weights and measures. Since this reform of the writing system, Chinese characters have remained stable for over two thousand years. As a result, modern Chinese scholars are still able to read and analyze ancient written texts with relative ease. Furthermore, Chinese primary and secondary students are required to learn poems, articles, and proses spanning over a thousand years of history, which is hard to imagine for students of other languages.

China is a vast country covering 9.6 million square kilometers, with geographical barriers such as rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys and swamps naturally dividing regions and their people. Over its long history, factors like migration, socio-economic changes, cultural evolution, and political and administrative arrangements have contributed to the formation of seven major dialect groups: Mandarin, Wu, Gan, Xiang, Min, Hakka, Yue. Even within these groups, the differences between varieties are so huge that it can be further divided into sub-dialects. There is a saying to describe this phenomenon: The tones and pronunciations change every ten li (approximately 5 km). Imagine the challenge of drawing isoglosses in such an intricate dialectal landscape!

Despite the diversity in spoken languages across regions, a common written form has historically served as a unifying thread. For example, the "however" character (ran3), the corresponding pronunciation in spoken Mandarin word is "ran", the Cantonese--- "jin", and the Wu--- "zø", with differences in tone, consonants and vowels. Yet speakers of these dialects are fully aware of the divergences. Even if they cannot understand one another's speech, they recognize that they are all referring to the same Chinese word, expressed in their respective dialects. As a result, this shared written language meant that books and government documents didn't need to be translated from one dialect region to another. Though the pronunciation might be vastly different from the North to the South, the meaning remained consistent, bridging the linguistic divides across China.

3.1.3 The Advantages of Chinese Characters

The one of the most obvious advantages of this system is that people who speak distinctly different dialects or even different languages can understand one another through a unified writing system.

There was another interesting phenomenon called "Sinitic Brush-talk" among countries in the ancient East Asia. Despite language barriers, educated individuals generally recognized Chinese characters. Thus, when meeting each other, they could "use the writing brush instead of the tongue" to communicate through the mutually understandable Chinese characters [5]. That is because since

the Han and Tang dynasties, Chinese culture has profoundly influenced the cultures of neighboring countries including Korea, Japan, Ryukyu and Vietnam. Before the second half of the 20th century, Chinese Characters have been the official written form of Vietnam [6]. While the spoken languages of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and China are markedly different—distinguished by unique pronunciations and grammatical structures, making verbal communication unintelligible—these nations were able to engage with one another through the shared use of written Chinese due to centuries of exposure to Chinese texts and culture. Beyond the use of the same writing system, such connection forged a Han cultural sphere, and China's neighbors at times were proud to be joint inheritors of this great Sinographic tradition, which is a gateway to centuries of the best moral and political philosophies and time-honored novels and poetry [7].

The stability of Chinese characters over time and across vast regions has endowed them with enduring vitality. However, the flip side of the separation between pronunciation and written form is that the system is challenging to master. It takes Chinese students more than 10 years of study to learn approximately 4,000-5,000 characters, which is necessary for them to become proficient readers and writers.

3.2 The Characteristics of Alphabetic Writings

3.2.1 Tight Connection with Sounds

The most remarkable fact about the alphabet is that it was invented only once. It was created by Semitic peoples around 1500 BC. Every alphabet in the world—Hebrew, Ugaritic, Greek, Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic, Tamil, Malayalam, Korean—derives in one way or another from the original Semitic development [8]. The Roman alphabet itself was the end product of a long process of adapting and refining from earlier scripts.

Alphabetic writing is closely connected to speech sounds, recording the pronunciation of the spoken forms. The English writing system is alphabetic in a very loose sense, there are many irregular correspondences between sound and the symbol due to the influence from multiple languages, a lack of standardized spelling, and the Great Vowel shift. In contrast, other alphabetic systems, include Russian, Spanish, and Italian are much more regular. As a result, speakers of such languages find it easier to master the writing systems, provided they know the spoken forms.

3.2.2 The Advantage of Alphabetic Writing

One obvious advantage of alphabetic writing systems is their ease for promotion. Unlike Chinese, where learners need to master more than 4,000 basic characters, typically, students of alphabetic languages only need to master fewer than 40 letters and their spelling rules.

However, this same characteristic of alphabetic writing makes it more prone to change. On one side, when speakers encounter an unfamiliar item or idea, they can easily invent a new sound and, consequently, a new written form. On the other hand, pronunciation tends to change due to factors like geography, immigration and assimilation. As the sounds of speech change, the spelling conventions often change accordingly. We can observe from the cases of British English, American English, and Australian English that over a period of more than 200 years, significant differences have emerged in their vocabulary and grammar.

4. The Influence of Writing Systems on the Fates of Two great Civilizations

From a political perspective, the period of unity in ancient China far exceeded the periods of fragmentation. The unified periods, including those of the Xia, Shang, Western Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, summing up for about 3,000 years. Through the whole

history of China, there were only three major periods of fragmentation: the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770 BC-221 BC), the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220 AD-589 AD), and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907 AD-979 AD), totaling around 1,000 years [9]. Chinese classical writer Luo Guanzhong once wrote in his novel: the great trend of history is that after long division, there must be unification; after long unification, there must be division. This idea holds true for ancient Chinese history, but does it apply to other parts of the world as well?

The situation in Europe is largely the opposite. Europe's periods of unity were far shorter than its periods of fragmentation. Europe was unified only during the Roman Empire, at its peak, with a territory covering much of Europe, parts of Asia, and Africa, totaling around 5 million square kilometers. However, the rest of the history was marked by division. The longest period of unity in Europe lasted from 27 BC, when Roman Empire was established, to 395 AD, when the Empire was divided into the Western Roman Empire (395–476 AD) and the Eastern Roman Empire (395–1453 AD). Since then, Europe has never been reunified under a single state.

China always returned to a united state, whereas, in contrast, Europe never did. From the perspective of language study, what roles do the two different writing systems play in this process?

Writing is a symbol of thought, and also a way of thinking. Due to the stability of Chinese logographic system, even during the period of division, a shared script helped cultivate and shape a common way of thinking. Much to the chagrin of modern linguistics, which treats only the spoken as real language and writing as a secondary indication of speech, the fact is that cultures generally recognize themselves as having 'the same language' so long as they share the same written language, regardless of how much variation there may be in how they speak [10]. This suggests that the same language, particularly its written form, plays a crucial role in cultural recognition. One supporting argument is the character "however"(ran3), as noted in Part 2, it is pronounced very differently across China; nevertheless, speakers still regard these varied pronunciations as the same word. And when asked why, they usually cite the existence of the identical written character as proof. In contrast, Speakers of English and German, on the other hand, do not think of "yes" and "ja" as the same word; rather, they would say that "ja is the German word for yes" and vice-versa. In colloquial usage, English speakers normally say, not yes, but yeah or even "yah"– phonetically identical to German "ja", but they consider yah and ja as different words in different languages. The different forms of writing are the key to this peculiar perception.

The Chinese system, by allowing so much more latitude in the visual-sound link, enables belief in a single Chinese language much more robustly than an alphabet does, even for a pair of languages as closely related as English and German. Imagine, if there was no one unified logographic writing system in China, and all seven of its largely unintelligible dialects used alphabetic writing to record their speech—would these seven dialects still be considered dialects, or would they be seen as seven different, unintelligible languages? Most of the Chinese speakers would be reluctant to choose between the two options. Once the mutual tie of the written form is lost, how could the speakers still perceive a connection between them, given their vast differences in pronunciation?

The robust writing form contributes to a centralized government. The legislations, decrees and policies from the central government can be passed down to administrative units without alteration, ensuring no confusion in the process and no need for translation. Local governments only needed to read the content of the document in their own dialects to the illiterate residents, and the same meaning remained the same. In contrast, The Roman Empire, also a vast country with many dialect regions and different languages, applied the alphabetic writing system. On the one hand, decrees issued by central government needed to be translated into different written languages, which caused great difficulty in governing a vast empire; On the other hand, people from different dialect areas modified Latin according to their local speech, and as a result, after centuries of development, the written language in different regions of the same country became vastly different. For example, In the book

of *Latin Story of a World language,* the wall inscriptions in Pompeii, show features of this linguistic shift before 79 CE: the spelling of the perfect tense "-curavit" as "-curaut" reflects the ancient pronunciation of "au" as "o," closely resembling the later Italian past tense "-ò" [11]. This gives us a glimpse of how Latin eventually evolved into Romance languages. Dialectal differences eventually evolved into differences in written language, and the cultures that grew out of these linguistic roots inevitably developed huge disparities. Overall, the eastern part of the Roman Empire was significantly influenced by Hellenistic characteristics, while the western part became more Latinized. Over the long course of history, these cultural differences accumulated over time and became entrenched. The growing cultural divide in the Roman Empire led to instability. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in the later period of ancient Rome, imperial decrees had to be translated by specialized personnel before being issued to the eastern parts of the empire.

5. Conclusion

The stability of Chinese characters has played a pivotal role in fostering cultural convergence and national cohesion throughout China's history. Unlike alphabetic systems, which are closely tied to phonetic changes and regional dialects, Chinese characters have maintained a consistent written form across vast geographical and temporal distances. This consistency has allowed people from different regions, speaking mutually unintelligible dialects, to communicate effectively through a shared written language. As a result, Chinese characters have served as a unifying force, bridging linguistic divides and reinforcing a collective cultural identity.

The contrast between China and the Roman Empire highlights the profound impact of writing systems on the historical trajectories of civilizations. While the Roman Empire's alphabetic system contributed to linguistic fragmentation and cultural divergence, China's logographic system facilitated cultural inheritance and political unity. Even during periods of political fragmentation, the shared written language preserved a sense of common identity, making reunification more attainable. This enduring stability of Chinese characters has not only strengthened national cohesion but also ensured the transmission of cultural and historical knowledge across generations.

Whether the logographic writing system caused the long unity of the country or vice versa is a chicken-and-egg question. While the writing system has undoubtedly contributed to cultural and political unity, other factors—such as centralized governance, efforts to standardize language, and cultural homogeneity—have also played significant roles. The interplay between these factors and the logographic system has created a reinforcing cycle: a unified writing system supports centralized governance, and centralized governance, in turn, promotes the standardization and preservation of the writing system.

The cases of ancient China and ancient Roman offer valuable insights into the role of writing systems in shaping the fates of civilizations. It supports that a stable, shared written language can serve as a powerful tool for maintaining cultural and political unity. While the logographic system is not the sole factor responsible for China's long periods of unification, its role in fostering cultural recognition, national cohesion, and centralized governance shouldn't be overlooked.

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