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Sharron Gu. *A Cultural History of the Chinese Language*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012. v + 264 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6649-8.

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## Language in China

The introduction to this book proclaims that it is “a general history of the Chinese language” that “illustrates the evolution of the Chinese repertoire of expression as it accumulated and transformed” (p. 1). The author cautions us in her introduction that American sinologists have a “fragmentary” “knowledge and comprehension of China” and that all sinologists, “Chinese or otherwise,” are limited by “a language and methodology that is derived from Western theories of social science and humanities” (p. 5). With this book Sharron Gu sets out to rectify this state of affairs and presumably provide a solid history of the Chinese language that is grounded in a more unfettered, culturally sensitive approach. Sadly, the results fall far short of that goal.

Written in a breezy, informal style, this volume contains no clear thesis, thematic focus, or central argument. It is a loose collection of impressions and thoughts about Chinese language and culture presented in a highly haphazard, almost stream-of-consciousness-like, fashion. Partially accurate notions and quasi-factual statements are strung together into eight chapters divided into two larger parts. Part 1, “Music, Dance and the Sound of Poetry,” contains chapters titled “Music, Dance and Words,” “From Pictures and Graphs to Words,” and “The Music of Poetry.” Part 2, “Painting, Theatre and the Imagery of Poetry,” contains chapters titled “History of Painting,” “Imagery and Narrative of Nature,” “Rhythm and Imagery of Feeling,” “Poetry on Stage,” and “A Few Final Words.”

A brief look at the text reveals the inflated meaninglessness that pervades this volume. Chapter 2, “From Pictures and Graphs to Words,” Gu tells us, “explains how Chinese was born, grew and transformed from drawing to writing and from a system of pictures to that of characters and words made of graphic symbols” (p. 33). Yet all effort the chapter undertakes toward that end is doomed to founder because this study completely fails to

take into account the fundamental distinction between speech–spoken language–and writing, and that writing initially arose as a visual representation of speech. Instead, the author seems erroneously to believe that words arise because Chinese characters (graphs) were invented to represent meaning. Thus we are presented with the following description of linguistic evolution in Chinese: “As graphic words accumulated, their pictorial variations multiplied and the boundaries between words began to overlap. At this time, the distinctions were mainly pictorial: the same symbol indicated different meanings if it was presented in slightly different positions or in various proportions and sequences, single or double, up or down, upside down or inside out, leaning to the right or the left. With this purposeful alternation (to make new distinct meaning) or by accidental misuse (the writer meant one graph, yet used another by mistake), the shape of writing began to lose its precision and visual control. Thus, the form of characters was continuously in a state of flux because any alteration in the shape of the script would produce either confusion or repetition of the existing vocabulary. After centuries in which pictorial and ideographs continued to multiply and diversify, simplification became necessary. During the simplification, convention took over and graphs began to lose their visual edge” (p. 38).

This is truly a strange take on the evolution of Chinese characters. It overlooks any notion that writing, and the sound and meaning it represents, is based on the spoken word. Instead we are told that “graphic words” tossed and turned in the vicissitudes of time and eventually “lost their visual edge.” A few pages later we are told: “After centuries of evolution and renovation of its written form, ancient Chinese maintained its graphic script.... Chinese survived mainly because it abstracted its pictographs into ideograms and continuously simplified and standardized. To simplify writing, Chinese script was

further reduced from graphic characters into strokes and combinations of strokes until they became a visual alphabet with its smallest components in image rather than in sound. Although concrete images had disappeared from the appearance of its script, Chinese maintained its visual structure and it remained organized by strokes and their combinations. These visual (as distinct from phonetic) distinctions still determine differences in meaning and connotation of the language” (p. 42).

The notions that (a) a language will *abstract* its pictographs into ideograms, and (b) visual distinctions *determine* differences in meaning, are nonsensical concatenations that contribute nothing to our understanding of the evolution of writing in China. Then, a page later, we are presented with an additional illogical notion that new characters are created “by expanding the established boundaries of meanings”: “The accumulation of Chinese characters was driven by two separate goals which were contrary and complementary at times: to create new characters by expanding the established boundaries of meanings and to distinguish the newly invented meanings from the existing ones. In other words, it alternately strengthened the boundaries of meanings by redefining graphic distinctions and relaxed them by adding increasingly refined distinctions” (pp. 43-44). One is at a loss to understand exactly what it means to “expand the established boundaries of meaning.” And whatever that is, certainly Chinese characters were not created for that end. They evolved to represent language.

In the same pages, the author does let on that there is a phonetic element to the structure of Chinese characters as well. But the presentation is flawed by further misapprehension of fundamental concepts: “The majority of Chinese characters have two parts: a graphic part to define meaning and a phonetic part to determine pronunciation. This combination order is the key to the understanding of the origins and development of meaning” (p. 42).

Chinese characters represent words or morphemes wherein pronunciation and meaning are joined within, and according to the constraints of the *spoken* Chinese language. The author is referring here to a type of Chinese character known as *xíngshēngzì* (phonograms), which indeed are the majority type of character in Chinese. The “phonetic” part represents, more or less accurately, the pronunciation of the spoken word or morpheme indicated by the character; the “graphic” is a determinative element added to reduce or eliminate the possibility of misinterpretation where ambiguity arises when a given phonetic is used to represent more than

one word or morpheme having the same or similar pronunciation. The former does not *determine* pronunciation; and the latter does not *define* meaning. Moreover, this particular character structure has nothing to do with “the origins and development of meaning,” which is to be found in a realm of speech and the mind quite apart from the written symbols (Chinese characters in this case) that merely serve to represent the spoken word. The end of the chapter provides a baffling summary of this volume’s interpretation of the evolution of Chinese characters: “[Chinese] achieved the balance between graphical refinement and phonetic sophistication through two opposite, alternating or simultaneous efforts that encouraged and increased variations and refinement while at the same time controlled its expansion by filtering its repertoire to increase efficiency” (p. 52). What this is intended to mean is thoroughly opaque.

From here, we jump into chapter 3, “The Music of Poetry,” which begins: “It took Chinese poets many centuries to establish a rhythm for their poetry that was suitable for the Chinese language. During this process poetry was saturated with music at times and departed from it at others. The interaction and mutual influence between words and music drove poetic imagination as it redefined and clarified rhythm and tone” (p. 53). Thus we are off on a wild ride, during which we are told that tones in Chinese developed out of poetic necessity: “[From Han times] Chinese literary poetry needed a new system of rhythm that was capable of maintaining its inherited form as well as keeping pace with linguistic change. After centuries of experimenting with words and music, poets found the solution in their large repertoire of vowel endings: *píng* [even] and *zè* [uneven] tone. They decided to widen and reclassify the tonal distinctions that had already started to develop after influence from foreign languages, such as those from southern Asia. They began to formulate a tonal system by instigating and regulating four tones of the language” (p. 62).

While it might be possible to argue that tones in Chinese contribute to the rhythm of a phrase, though not in a fully metric sense, they have nothing to do with vowel endings in Chinese—and the *píng* and *zè* contrast in particular is entirely unrelated to vocalic distinctions. The Chinese poets indeed learned to *classify* tonal distinctions once they became aware of them in their language sometime around the fourth century. But tones evolved as natural linguistic features of their speech. Poets did not consciously “widen” tonal distinctions or “instigate” the four tones.

Chapter 3 goes on to present a “small collection of

Tang regulated verses in pinyin Chinese with the English translations,” as well as some discussion and interpretation (p. 68). The *pīnyīn* Romanized transcriptions are intended to give readers a sense of the poetic rhythm, and commendably they include tone marks. However, this book does not provide a guide to *pīnyīn* pronunciation. Many hapless readers will thus be at a loss as to how to actually read the transcriptions. The discussion also neglects to make use of the transcriptions to illustrate any of the tonal features that we are told the poets were manipulating. So the inclusion of the *pīnyīn* transcriptions is ultimately of little value. (Furthermore, in many places in the book the *pīnyīn* lacks tone marks; and there are also occasional misspellings of the *pīnyīn* here and elsewhere.) The usefulness of this section is further flawed by its lack of sources and bibliographic information for the poems cited.

The remainder of the book continues in the same vein. It reads as a uncritical, haphazard romp through the author’s impressions of the tokens and manifestations of Chinese culture and China’s linguistic history. The lack of a well-focused thesis and clearly formulated argument leaves nothing with which we can engage in useful discussion or fruitful debate. Too much of the book also simply makes little or no sense, as when we are told in the concluding paragraphs that, “This book demonstrates

that the real dynamic of linguistic evolution in China is the historic accumulation of expressive variations and multitudes” (p. 210). The volume’s conclusion also notes that this study’s “non-absolute, non-structural approach to linguistic history in terms of accidental and concrete interaction between literary language and non-literary expression challenges the basic presumptions of the ‘science of language’” (p. 211). The author’s approach is definitely “non-structural.” But exactly how it challenges the “basic presumptions of the science of language” is anybody’s guess. For she never tells us what those basic presumptions actually are.

The volume has an extensive bibliography, about forty pages, with thirty or more entries per page, listing many significant works of scholarship in sinology and other fields, primarily in English, many of which are cited in the chapter notes included in the book. Sharron Gu has sorted through a fair amount of valuable scholarship on the Chinese language in compiling this volume. Unfortunately, she has not succeeded in successfully synthesizing what she gleaned from that process into a coherent discussion and fruitful analysis. Readers will have to look elsewhere for lucid and accurate presentations that do justice to the depth and richness of China’s linguistic history. Many of the books listed in the bibliography would be a better start.

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