CHAPTER II

CLASSICAL CHINESE:
THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

It would be difficult to overestimate the cultural significance of the classical Chinese script. From Shang times to the Ch’ing it had been the primary vehicle for the transmission of China’s entire cultural tradition. In late imperial times, familiarity with the literary language (wen-yen wen) in effect defined the Chinese elite. No attribute was more highly prized, none brought greater prestige or social rewards, and none was more closely linked with moral cultivation and personal refinement.

In the Ch’ing, as in earlier periods, Chinese characters had a magical, mystical quality, presumably deriving from their ancient use as inscriptions on oracle bones or on bronze sacrificial vessels. Many Ch’ing scholars traced Chinese writing to the revered I-ching. So venerated was the written word that anything with writing on it could not simply be thrown away but had to be ritualistically burned. One well-informed foreign observer during the late Ch’ing wrote: “They [the Chinese] literally worship their letters [i.e., characters]. When letters were invented, they say, heaven rejoiced and hell trembled. Not for any consideration will they tread on a piece of lettered paper; and to foster this reverence, literary associations employ agents to go about the street, collect waste paper, and burn it on an altar with the solemnity of a sacrifice.” These “altars,” known as hsi-tzu-t’a (Pagodas for Cherishing the Written Word) could be found in virtually every city, town, and village in traditional China.

The special reverence attached to Chinese writing may be illustrated in a variety of other ways. During the Ch’ing period an official could be degraded for miswriting a single character in a memorial to the throne, and stories of the political and personal consequences of using taboo or even improperly suggestive characters are legion. Inscriptions of various kinds, such as “spring couplets” (ch’un-lien) were believed to bring good luck to Chinese households and businesses, and the dissection of characters (ch’e-
tzu) was a popular form of divination. Calligraphic scrolls adorned every gentry home, and word games, including the rapid creation of classical verse, were a favorite social diversion of the gentry class. Many Ch'ing scholars, following the lead of the great pioneer Ku Yen-wu (1613-1682), took a special interest in phonetics, philology, etymology, and textual criticism. Ku's approach to "empirical research" (k'ao-ch'eng), which emphasized originality, evidence, and utility, led to much creative and iconoclastic work during the Ch'ing period. But Chinese characters themselves continued to be organized into the long-standing six categories: (1) representations of objects (hsiang-hsing); (2) characters whose forms indicate meaning (chih-shih); (3) grouped elements that suggest meaning (hui-i); (4) semantic and phonetic combinations (hsieh-sheng); (5) "borrowed" characters (chia-chieh); and (6) "turned" or "transformed" characters (chuan-chu). H. G. Creel writes that the last two categories are "so obscure that nearly two thousand years of discussion have not sufficed to produce an agreement, among Chinese scholars, even as to the fundamentals of their application"; but Cheng Chung-ying contends that the principles of phonetic borrowing and semantic extension expressed in these categories reflect certain basic Chinese philosophical concerns.

It may easily be argued that an understanding of the first four classes of characters is as important as an appreciation of the last two, particularly since the vast majority of Chinese characters are of the first four types. Representational characters, or "pictographs," such as jen (person), nii (woman), and k'ou (mouth) (see example a), formed the foundation of the Chinese written language. Indicative characters such as shang (up), hsia (down), and chung (middle) (example b), and associative characters such as hsi (to split; wood plus axe), nan (man; field plus strength), and hao (good or love; woman plus child) (example c), brought the language to a much higher level of sophistication. The significant point here is that these three types of powerfully visual symbols, rather than the semantic-phonetic combinations to be discussed, constitute "the basic building blocks for most early [Chinese] poetry, history and philosophy." The major paradigmatic writings of the Chou period are based primarily on a core vocabulary of only about 2,500 characters. The Lun-yi (Analects) of Confucius, for example, has only 2,200 different lexical items; the classic known as the Ch'ün-ch'iu (Spring and Autumn Annals), only 950. In these and other early influential writings, the majority of characters are either pictographic or ideographic. This is especially true of many important value terms, such as jen (humaneness), li (ritual), chung (loyalty), and hsin (faithfulness) (example d).

Following the standardization of the Chinese script in the Ch'in dynasty, semantic-phonetic combinations, sometimes called phonograms, became increasingly common in the language. This class of characters,
a. 人女口
b. 上下中
c. 析男好
d. 仁礼忠信
e. 妨
f. 討

Examples of Chinese Characters
which constituted well over eighty percent of the nearly 50,000 lexical items in the K’ang-hsi tzu-tien (K’ang-hsi Dictionary) of the Ch’ing period, had a semantic indicator or “radical” (often a pictogram) and a phonetic element representing one of only about four hundred total sounds. The phonetic element fang, for example, which has the semantic meaning of “square,” could be placed together with the “woman” radical to represent the idea of “hindering” (fang) (example e); with the “word” radical it meant “to ask” (fang) (example f), with the “silk” radical, “to spin” (fang) (example g), and so forth. Taken together, Chinese pictographs, ideographs, and even phonograms constituted a uniquely visual medium of communication, strikingly different from the Chinese spoken language in a number of ways. 8

One of the most frustrating features of the classical script is its lack of formal grammar. Chinese characters themselves do not indicate person, number, gender, case, person, tense, or mood. Moreover, depending on sentence placement, a Chinese character might function as a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb. The expression shang-ma (example h), for instance, may mean “to get up on a horse,” or “a superior horse (or horses)”; while the reverse expression, ma-shang, may mean “on top of a horse,” or, by extension, “immediately.” Similarly, the phrase ming ming-te, “to illustrate (or exemplify) illustrious virtue” (example i), employs the character ming (bright) in two different usages, first as a verb and then as an adjective. 9 Thus we find that instead of universal statements about Chinese grammar we get statistical correlations of the following form: “in context A, character X {serves as a means} Y n% of the time.” 10 And even in the same general linguistic environment a given character may occur, say 40% of the time as a noun, 30% as a modifier, and 30% in other grammatical forms.

Another problem facing students of the language is the great number of different meanings an individual character may have, irrespective of grammar per se. The common word ching (example j), for instance, can mean “warp” (as opposed to woof), “longitude,” “vessels in a body,” “to manage, plan, arrange, regulate, or rule,” “to pass through, experience, or suffer,” “constant or standard,” “classical canon,” and even “suicide by hanging.” With such a wide range of possible meanings for many of the most common Chinese characters, it is not surprising that classical texts are often highly ambiguous and subject to a wide variety of different interpretations—hence the great emphasis in Ch’ing times, and indeed throughout all of Chinese history, on commentaries and lexicons. Such works were also useful in identifying and explaining the wealth of recondite historical and literary allusions in Chinese writing, as well as the huge number of specialized meanings acquired by certain characters in different philosophical or other contexts.11
calm whether it is in a state of activity or a state of tranquility. One does not lean forward or backward to accommodate things, nor does he make any distinction between the internal and the external." (3) "The difference between righteousness and profit is only that between impartiality and selfishness. As soon as we depart from righteousness, we will be talking about profit. Merely to calculate is to be concerned with advantage and disadvantage." Significantly, in the last example cited, the term "righteousness" (i) was substituted for the original term "humaneness" (jen) in order to employ a more satisfactory juxtaposition of ideas, namely, i-li. In translation, formulations such as those cited above often appear insubstantial and unsatisfying, but to the Chinese reader, fully conversant with the full range of meanings and associations of a given word, term, or phrase, they were not only beautiful, but also compelling.

The same emphasis on rhythm and balance in the use of polarities may be found in the use of whole phrases in classical Chinese. In the Wen-hsin tiao-lung (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons), considered by the Ch'ing scholar Juan Yuan (1764-1849) to be the very foundation of China's "literary laws," we find the following passage in the section on "Parallelism": "The 'Wen-yen' and 'Hsi-tz'u' [Commentaries] of the Book of Changes embody the profound thought of the Sage. In the narration of the four virtues of the hexagram ch'ien [i.e., yang], the sentences are matched in couplets, and in the description of the kinds of responses evoked by the dragon and the tiger, the words are all paralleled in pairs. When describing the hexagrams of ch'ien and k'un [i.e., yin] as easy and simple respectively, the passage winds and turns, with lines smoothly woven into one another; and in depicting the going and coming of the sun and the moon, the alternate lines form couplets. Occasionally there may be some variation in the structure of a sentence, or some change in word order, but parallelism is always the aim." This parallelism, in the view of the author, Liu Hsieh (c. A.D. 465-562), was as natural as the endowment of living things with paired limbs.

Of the four main types of parallelism distinguished by Liu Hsieh, the most esteemed was the couplet of contrast. Liu provides an example: "Chung I, the humble, played the music of Ch'u; Chuang Hsi, the prominent, groaned in the manner of Yuieh." Both parts of the couplet refer to spontaneous expressions of homesickness, and each requires, for full appreciation, familiarity with a historical background naturally assumed by the author.

Virtually all of the most esteemed forms of Chinese writing, prose as well as poetry, exhibited various types of linguistic parallelism, and a good "eight-legged essay" for the examinations could not be written without it. Balanced phrases of three, four, five, or six characters, typical of so much of Chinese prose, required considerable stylistic manipulation in the form
Given these features of the classical script, there was no real alternative to rote memorization as a means of mastering the language. Students simply committed to memory vast amounts of diverse literature, and in so doing, internalized specific patterns of characters contained in a wide variety of paradigmatic sources. Over a long period of time, and with Herculean effort, the student acquired the necessary skills to chart his own scholarly path.\(^{12}\)

This approach to learning was facilitated by another characteristic feature of the Chinese language—its emphasis on rhythm and balance. Although the classical Chinese script had always been a visual rather than a verbal medium, each character, if pronounced, was monosyllabic, and each occupied the same amount of space in a text, regardless of the number of strokes (i.e., lines) it contained. Thus each character became a convenient rhythmic unit. This naturally encouraged the Chinese, perhaps more than any other culture group, to think and write in terms of polarities. In the words of the sociolinguist Y. R. Chao: “I venture to think that if the Chinese language had words of such incommensurable rhythm as male and female, heaven and earth, rational and surd, there would never be such far-reaching conceptions as yin-yang, [and] ch‘ien-k‘un.”\(^{13}\)

But yin-yang and ch‘ien-k‘un (the symbolic equivalents of yin and yang in the hexagrams of the I-ching) were only two of a huge number of such polarities. Many, if not most, of these polarities can be correlated directly with yin and yang—an expression of the central Chinese notion that ideas are complemented and completed by their opposites.\(^{14}\) One indication of the prevalence of Chinese polarities is their frequent use as subject headings in the great Ch‘ing encyclopedia Ku-chin t‘u-shu chi-ch‘eng (Complete Collection of Writings and Illustrations, Past and Present). In the sub-categories on Human Affairs (jen-shih) and Social Intercourse (chiao-i), for example, we find many two-character headings such as love-hate (hao-o), guest-host (pin-chu), teacher-pupil (shih-ti), fortune-misfortune (kuo-fu), high-humble (kuei-chien), etc. In the sub-category on Confucian Conduct (hsüeh-hsing, literally “scholarship and conduct”) there are dozens of common polarities, including righteousness-profit (i-li), good-bad (shan-o), influence-response (kan-ying), substance-function (t‘i-yung), knowledge-action (chih-hsing), names-realities (ming-shih), and hard-soft (kang-jou).\(^{15}\)

Such polarities were not only semantically significant, they were also aesthetically attractive. Good prose demanded them. Consider the following examples taken from the enormously influential compilation entitled Chin-ssu lu (Reflections on Things at Hand): (1) “In the changes and transformations of yin and yang, the growth and maturity of things, the interaction of sincerity and insincerity, and the beginning and ending of events, one is the influence and the other, the response, succeeding each other in a cycle.” (2) “By calmness of nature we mean that one’s nature is
of either expansion through the addition of "empty characters" (hsü-tzu) or ruthless contraction. Victor Purcell has observed: "The rule is, if you can possibly omit, do so. The result may be that the meaning is quite hidden, but the reader is supposed not only to have an encyclopaedic knowledge to assist him in his guess work, but to have unlimited time for filling in ellipses. This does not mean that the language has no words to fill in the ellipses, or that there are no words to convey tense, number or mood. It merely means that the spirit of the language is against their use." Many other authorities, Western and Chinese, have made the same basic point.

The brevity and grammatical flexibility of classical Chinese has been compared to modern telegrams and newspaper headlines; but the parallel can be taken no further. Rhythm, poetic suggestiveness, and economy of expression were not simply convenient means in China but rather literary ends. Chinese authors regularly and happily sacrificed precision for style, encouraging an intuitive as well as an intellectual approach to their work.

What is the larger cultural significance of the classical Chinese script? Certainly it is closely related to Chinese aesthetics as a whole. We see in it a characteristic concern for, and esteem of, balance in composition and subtlety in expression. It also reflects, as Chu Yu-kuang and others have noted, an emphasis on patterns and relationships rather than discrete elements. At the core of Chinese aesthetics, and the language as well, lay the yin-yang notion of reconciliation of opposites.

In more concrete terms, the classical script exerted a profound influence on the nature and style not only of Chinese literature, but also of Chinese art. Calligraphy, for example, became an important independent art form during the early Six Dynasties period—just about the time that aesthetic values became "well established as legitimate and conscious concerns of cultivated men" in China. By the late imperial era, calligraphy and painting had become inextricably linked in the elite cultural view. Not only were the same media and basic methods used, but the two art forms often came to be combined in a single creative work. Moreover, painting, like calligraphy, was viewed as an expression of the artist’s moral worth. Chiang Yee has suggested that the style and spirit of Chinese calligraphy may have influenced other areas of art, in addition to painting, such as Chinese sculpture, ceramics, and architecture.

What does the Chinese language tell us about elite social attitudes? Chang Tung-sun asserts that "the most numerous terms in China come from two realms," kinship and ethics. It would not be difficult to demonstrate that for thousands of years the Chinese have shown an abiding interest in the family. The early Chinese lexicon known as the Erh-ya, for example, which dates from the pre-Christian era, contains over one hundred terms for various family relations, most of which have no counterpart in English. And surely it is unnecessary to document the consuming interest
of Chinese philosophers in ethical matters. At a more mundane level, Chang Kwang-chih has employed an analysis of early Chinese texts and terminology to support his contention that the Chinese are "probably among the peoples of the world most preoccupied with eating." 25

Further investigation of Chinese dictionaries, encyclopedias, proverbs, and fixed expressions (ch’eng-yü) will undoubtedly yield additional information not only on elite social attitudes, 26 but also perhaps on the relationship between elite and popular culture. My suspicion is that the balance and brevity of classical Chinese, expressed in proverbs and ch’eng-yü, brought elite values more easily within the mental reach of the illiterate masses in China than one might at first suppose. Consider, for example, the famous phrase chün-chün ch’en-ch’en fu-fu tzü-tzü, "Let the sovereign be a sovereign, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son" (example k). Surely such Confucian aphorisms were part of the cultural baggage of all members of society, even though they had been lifted verbatim from the Lun-yü itself.

The relationship between Chinese language and formal philosophy has been much discussed. Clearly, as with Chinese thought generally, the two enjoyed a mutually supporting, mutually enriching relationship. 27 Yet it may be argued that classical Chinese had an especially significant impact on the development of Chinese philosophy, not only because it endured so long as a living language (a point we shall take up later), but also because of the striking visual properties of the characters themselves. 28

It seems evident, for example, that the ideographic features of Chinese characters encouraged thinking along concrete, descriptive lines. Many scholars have observed that classical Chinese is relatively poor in resources for expressing abstractions. Thus the idea of "Truth" devolves into something like "that which is true"; and "Man" into "the people" (general but not abstract). 29 Yet it certainly cannot be said that the Chinese lacked the capacity to think abstractly. What can be said is that the Chinese tended to view the abstract and general in terms of the concrete and the specific. 30 The I-ching, as Cheng Chung-ying has observed, is an especially apt illustration of this particular attitude or orientation. In the highly refined symbolic system of the I-ching, philosophical principles are "embodied in concrete instances of things and their relations." 31 Viewing the matter from a somewhat different perspective, we might say that universal or abstract principles have been significant to the Chinese only when realized or revealed in concrete things and particular contexts. This may help account for the practical orientation of so much of Chinese philosophy, the general lack of speculation for speculation’s sake in China. 32

Another prominent feature of Chinese philosophy may also be explained by reference to the classical language: the strong emphasis on what
has been called "relational thinking." Henry Rosemont writes, for example, that traditionally "the Chinese concern was not so much with ontology or epistemology as it was with relations among and between things, events, and qualities."\(^{33}\) Chu Yu-kuang asserts that "emphasis on word relations [in classical Chinese] is probably correlated with relational thinking ... in many areas of Chinese life and culture."\(^{34}\) We have already noted Cheng Chung-ying's use of the *I-ching* as an illustration of Chinese relational thinking; other Chinese scholars, such as Chang Tung-sun, have also used the classic to make the same important point.

China's "logic of correlative duality," to borrow Chang Tung-sun's felicitous phrase, certainly differed from classical Aristotelian logic in the West.\(^{35}\) Yet it must be stressed that this does not mean that the Chinese lacked the capacity to think "logically." Many authorities—Westerners as well as Chinese—have demonstrated with abundant documentary evidence that logical rigor was possible, and even prominent, in certain types of Chinese philosophical discourse.\(^{36}\) Overall, however, it is true that the structure of the Chinese written language, and the aesthetic associated with it, made some forms of argumentation far more appealing than others.\(^{37}\) Thus the tendency toward correlative or relational thinking seems to have contributed to the strong Chinese preference for argument by analogy. Similarly, relational thinking, together with an emphasis on balance and rhythm (and the attractiveness of puns) in the Chinese language may help explain the popularity of philosophical "definitions" of the following sort: *jen*-che *jen*-yeh ("*jen* [humanness] means to be human") (example I); *i*-che *i*-yeh ("*i* [righteousness or duty] means what is appropriate") (example m); *cheng*-che *cheng*-yeh ("*cheng* [government] means what is correct") (example n). Henry Rosemont argues that the advantage of such formulations is that they allowed a Chinese thinker to "maintain the semantic richness of his general terms and their relational representations yet unpack them when necessary—with or without logical explicitness—to elaborate one of their specific significations."\(^{38}\)

All the features of the classical language mentioned above help account for the popularity and effectiveness of the "chain syllogism," or *sorites*, in Chinese philosophical writing. This type of "logic" is exemplified in the following quotation: "If the ministers are without depravity, then all under heaven will be peaceful. If all under heaven is peaceful, then the ruler will be awe-inspiring and venerated. If the ruler is awe-inspiring and venerated, then supervision and responsibility will be fixed. If supervision and responsibility are fixed, then that which is sought after is obtained. If that which is sought after is obtained, then the state will be prosperous. If the state is prosperous, then the ruler's joy will be abundant." On its face, in translation, this quotation is simply a string of non-sequiturs. But underlying it are a large number of unstated assumptions and associations
which, together with the language itself, make the argument an attractive one. Each sentence consists of three characters, followed by the character tse ("then"), and then three more characters. The effect, achieved through rhythm and balance, is one of powerful forward movement that propels the reader to the climax.

Like analogies and other popular forms of Chinese argumentation (including reference to historical precedent and traditional authority), Chinese sorites appealed as much to the heart as to the mind. Although early Chinese philosophers distinguished between "learning" (hsüeh) and "thinking" (ssu), and between "erudition" (po) and "grasping the essence" (yüeh), neo-Confucian "rationalism" on the whole did not involve a conscious exaltation of reason over intuition. Indeed, Chinese thinkers have often shown a marked preference for the latter—perhaps in part because the brevity, subtlety, and suggestiveness of the classical language have encouraged an intuitive approach to the most profound understanding. In the words of A. C. Graham, the Chinese have generally been most impressed by "the aphoristic genius which guides thought of the maximum complexity with the minimum of words, of which the Tao te ching [The Way and Its Power] presents one of the world's supreme examples." Graham might easily have used the I-ching as illustration.

Joseph Needham and others have pointed out that the negative influence of the Chinese language on Chinese scientific thought has been vastly exaggerated, that the limits to China's scientific development must be attributed primarily to non-linguistic factors. Yet there can be little doubt that the classical Chinese language was not the most congenial medium for the expression of scientific ideas. Nor did it provide particularly fertile soil for the independent growth of foreign ideas. Arthur Wright has discussed in detail the many problems of translation facing proponents of foreign concepts in China, from the Buddhist missionaries in the Six Dynasties Period to the Jesuits and other Christian missionaries during the Ch'ing. Time and again factors such as the semantic "weight" of Chinese characters—whether used as conceptual equivalents or merely in transliteration—tended to affect the meaning of the original foreign ideas. Thus the classical Chinese script contributed to the cohesiveness and continuity of Chinese civilization by helping to "sinicize" alien and potentially disruptive doctrines.

The classical language contributed to cultural continuity and cohesiveness in at least two other important ways. First, it established a direct linguistic link between the Chinese present and a distant but not forgotten Chinese past. Since the ancient classics and contemporary documents were all written in the same basic script, a Ch'ing scholar had immediate intellectual access to anything written in China during the past three thousand years. The language remained alive and well, part of a long-
standing and still vital literary tradition and cultural heritage. Second, the script gave tremendous cultural unity to China across space. Because each Chinese character had the same basic set of meanings and associations, regardless of how it may have been pronounced, the literary language transcended the hundreds of local dialects scattered throughout the country, many of which were otherwise mutually unintelligible. There was thus no development in China comparable to the decline of Latin and the rise of national vernaculars in Europe. There was only the glaring fact that until well into the nineteenth century, the Japanese, the Koreans, and the Annamese all continued to use classical Chinese as the principal means of written communication. This, of course, only fed China's already well-nourished sense of cultural superiority.

NOTES


8. Ibid., especially pp. 71-75, 80, and 85-88.


15. Ku-chin t'u-shu chi-ch'eng (hereafter TSCC), tien 13, 15, and 22.


39. The examples given are taken in modified form from Derk Bodde, China's First Unifier (London, 1967), pp. 228-229. The Chinese use the term hsin to refer both to "heart" and "mind."


