

THE
CHINESE
LANGUAGE
AND
HOW TO LEARN IT

華
英
文
義
津
逮

伯
唐
汪
大
...



THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

I.

THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE.

It is commonly asserted that there are two languages in China—the written and the spoken. This statement requires qualification, but it is sufficiently accurate to justify the treatment of the two branches as separate and distinct when attempting a popular exposition of the subject. Of the difficulty of both there can be no doubt, but as the written language presents more difficulties than the spoken, it will be convenient to reverse the usual order of things and to deal first with the former.

The genesis of the written language of China is largely a matter of conjecture, but Chinese scholars from time immemorial have been almost unanimous in the opinion that it was pictorial in origin. The subject has been dealt with by numerous Chinese writers, and those who are interested in a more scientific treatment of the matter than the following chapter is intended to present are referred to an elaborate and learned article on the subject by the late Mr. T. Watters, a profound Chinese scholar, who, in his *Essays on the Chinese Language*, deals at length with this complicated question.* It will be sufficient for present purposes to refer to the most widely known of the Chinese authors, a scholar called Tai T'ung, who lived six hundred years ago, and wrote a treatise which is often cited as an authority in the great Lexicon of Kang Hsi, the standard dictionary of the Chinese; it is also quoted by most foreign authors of works on the Chinese language.†

* *Essays on the Chinese Language*, by T. Watters, Shanghai. Presbyterian Mission Press, 1889. See also an Article entitled *Prehistoric China*, by Dr. E. Faber, published in Vol. xxiv. Part 2 of the *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

† A translation of the work of this author, under the title of *The Six Scripts*, has been made by Mr. L. C. Hopkins, H.M.'s Consul-General at Tientsin

This is what Tai T'ung says with regard to the Chinese written character:

“Spoken sounds preceded written figures, and before the invention of written symbols, dealings by means of knotted cords came into existence. These were followed by cutting notches on wooden materials, which gave way, in turn, to figures representing natural objects, and forms indicative of actions, states or relations, cut out into lines to serve as counterparts of the spoken names of the same objects, actions, states or relations. With these came graving knives, and tablets for graving upon, and this was writing, the whole object of which was to make speech visible.”

In tracing the evolution of the written character, Chinese scholars divide its progress into six marked stages:

1. Pictorial.
2. Indicative.
3. Suggestive compounds.
4. Deflected characters.
5. Phonetic.
6. Adoptive, or characters which are used in place of others.

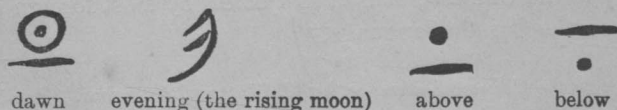
Pictorial characters are those in which the forms of objects are copied, such as



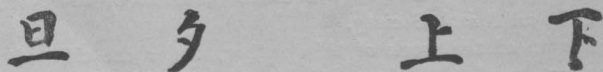
now written



Indicative characters are those which are formed by indicating the essential features of physical action, state or relation, such as



now written



Suggestive compounds are figures pointing out some property or relative circumstance. Thus, the union of the sun and moon expresses brightness; a tree or piece of wood in a doorway, obstruction; two trees, a grove, or forest; two men on the ground, the act of sitting; the sun seen through the trees, east.



bright



obstruction



a wood



to sit



east

now written



Deflected characters are represented by inverted delineations of symbols, either in whole or in part.



right hand



left hand



sundered threads



continuous

now written



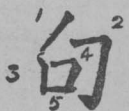
To each of these idiograms a certain sound was attached, and the next and greatest step, the phonetic stage, was the invention of compound characters in which symbols representing sounds by which objects were named were combined with other symbols giving an indication of the sense or meaning.*

The following example will be sufficient to illustrate this idea. Let it be taken for granted that the accompanying combination of strokes—交—is pronounced *chiao*. It means, when taken singly, to blend, unite or join, though it has some eight or ten other distinct meanings in combination. Place 虫, an insect or reptile, at the side of it, and it becomes 蛟, a species of dragon; substitute 魚, a fish,

* Professor Giles, *China and the Chinese*, p. 29. Columbia University Press, 1902.

and it is 鮫, a shark; 犛, a dog, and it is 狡, wily, or crafty; 女, a woman, and we have 姣, handsome; 糸, silk thread, and we get 絞, to bind around, also to strangle. Now, all these characters, and many more with the same sound symbol, are read *chiao*, but, as is shown, they each have a different meaning in accordance with the character which is added to the symbol. We thus divide Chinese characters into two parts—one, the *sound* indicator, to which the name “phonetic” is generally given; the other, the *idea* indicator, which is commonly called the “radical.” Every character in the Chinese language, unless it happens to be a radical itself, is divisible into these two parts. The radicals are limited in number, there being only 214 of them altogether. Some of them, such as 口 mouth, 人 man, 子 son, 魚 fish, 山 hill, 日 sun, 月 moon, are obviously pictorial, but a large number are certainly not pictorially suggestive. The character 鼻 *pi*, for instance, is a radical, and means a nose, but neither in this, its modern, nor in its primitive form can it be said to have the slightest resemblance to that organ. Yet we know, when we see it in combination, that the compound character must have something directly or indirectly to do with the nose. Thus, 齁 *hou*, to snore, 饜 *nang*, a cold in the head, 齏 *nang*, to speak through the nose; the radical on one side giving the clue to the meaning, the phonetic on the other giving the clue to the sound. One or two more instances will suffice. Radical 魚 *yü*, a fish; 鱈 *chi*, a mullet; 鱧 *shan*, an eel. Radical 風 *feng*, wind; 飄 *p'iao*, to be blown about. It will be noticed in this last character that the radical is on the right hand side, and not on the left. It seems probable that at one time it was always in a fixed position, but that variations were adopted for the sake of symmetry. There are now many Chinese characters the radical of which is placed at the top, below, or at one or other side, and in a few instances its position is determined by the fancy of the writer.

Besides being an indicator of the meaning, the radical has a further, and most important, value. By its aid it is possible to find any character in a dictionary of the Chinese language, whether purely native, or prepared for the use of the foreign student. Let us take the character 齏 for an example, the radical of which is 鼻, a nose. Now count the number of strokes in the phonetic. If we look up the radical 鼻 in



The list of radicals at the beginning or end of the dictionary, as the case may be, where it will be placed in the numerical order of the strokes of which it is composed, we shall be able to trace it to its place in the body of the volume, and there we shall find the character we are in search of placed in the list of characters of five strokes ranged under that radical. In an Anglo-Chinese dictionary the sound will naturally be given as well as the meaning, but as the Chinese have, obviously, no system of spelling such as is supplied in an alphabetical language, they have to adopt another method of indicating the pronunciation. By this method of spelling, if it can be so called, which was introduced by Buddhist monks from India,* the sound of a character is given by means of two other characters of which the first is the initial and the second the final; these two are manipulated in such a way as to yield the sound required. It might here be mentioned that each Chinese word sound belongs to one of four (in composition, five) gradations of tone which can also be indicated by the above method, but an explanation of the tone system will find a more appropriate place in the remarks which follow on the spoken language.

To illustrate the Chinese method of spelling the reader is referred once more to the character 鱈, an eel, which will be found in the list of phonetics of twelve strokes under the radical 魚, a fish. Immediately below this character in the dictionary we shall find two others: one pronounced *shang*, and the next *yen*. Place them together—*shangyen*; eliminate the termination of the first and the initial sound of the second—*sha(ngye)n*—and we get *shan*, which is the sound of the character we are looking for. In the case of characters of a complicated nature in which the radical is not easily distinguishable, the dictionaries supply a further assistance by furnishing a list of these characters arranged in order of the total number of strokes, including the radical, which is shown against the character. Where characters are formed by a combination of two or more radicals there is nothing to do but try them all until the right one is discovered.

To return for a moment to the phonetics. A Chinese gets to

* Probably about 510 A.D.

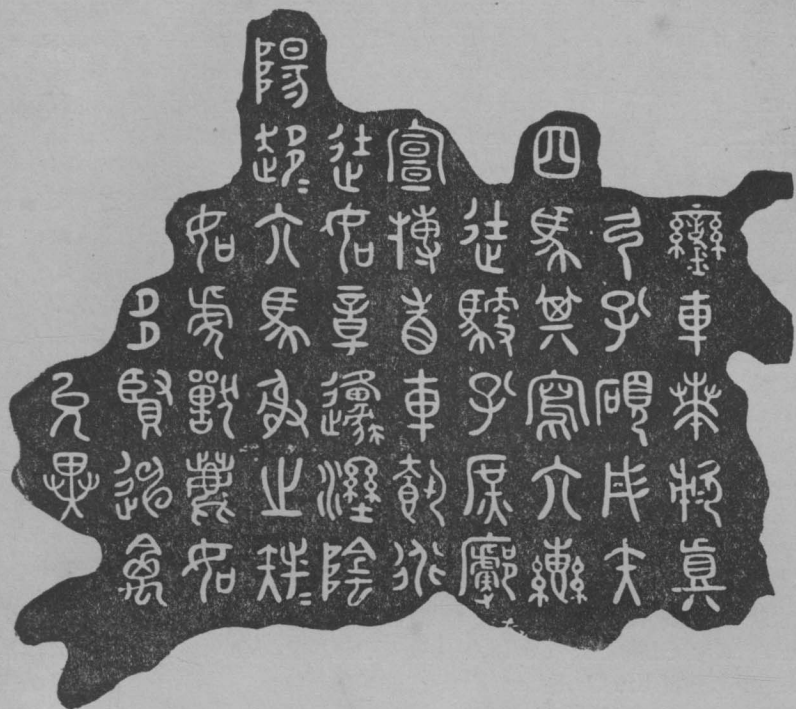
learn these by practice at school, and knows them intuitively, but European investigators have discovered that their number is limited, for practical purposes, to something between 1,600 and 1,700, from which, by the addition of one or other of the 214 radicals, at least seven-eighths of the characters in the Chinese language, variously estimated at forty or fifty thousand, are found. It is possible, therefore, by learning these phonetics, or primitives as they are sometimes called, to make a very close guess at the sound of any Chinese character, though it must be admitted that there are many exceptions to the rule.

Illustrations have been given above of the primitive and modern forms of certain Chinese characters. The former, it may be well to repeat, are more or less conjectural, for there is probably no genuine specimen in existence of a purely pictorial character. The so-called modern form is modern only by comparison, for it dates from at least the 2nd century B.C. It probably has remained unchanged from the time of the invention of printing in China, which, according to Mr. Watters, dates from the Sui Dynasty (A.D. 589-619), and we are safe in assuming that the written language of to-day "is to all intents and purposes the written language of twenty-five hundred years ago."* The earliest genuine specimen of connected Chinese writing is to be found on certain stone blocks or cones, commonly called the "Stone Drums,"† which are now deposited in the Confucian Temple at Peking. There are isolated specimens of an undoubtedly earlier date than the stone drums which have been copied from old coins and vases, but for the purposes of this chapter they need not be taken into consideration, as the originals are now probably not in existence. The exact age of the "Stone Drums" cannot be positively determined, but Chinese writers, with a few exceptions, agree in assigning them to the period of Hsüan Wang, in the Chou Dynasty, two centuries before the time of Confucius, which would make them about 2,700 years old. The inscriptions consist of poetry, written in what is known as the old seal character, commemorating one of the hunting expeditions of

* Professor Giles, *China and the Chinese*.

† An exception should, perhaps, be made in favour of a bronze tripod in a temple on "Silver Island," in the river Yangtze, which is also assigned by many Chinese experts to the same date as the Stone Drums.

Hsüan Wang, who is supposed to have reigned from B.C. 827 to 781. Only a small portion of these inscriptions is legible, but a facsimile is appended of a rubbing taken from one of the stones in the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960-1127).*



It is not until a much later period that anything like examples of a thoroughly systematized form of writing can be found. Silk preceded paper as a material for writing upon, and it was in the first century A.D. that paper was invented. The introduction of a hair pencil or brush is ascribed to a general of the Emperor Shih Huang Ti (B.C. 221).

The various styles of writing recognized as orthodox by the Chinese may be reduced to six, if we exclude a fanciful ancient form

* I am indebted to Dr. S. W. Bushell, C.M.G., for permission to use this specimen. An article on the Stone Drums of Peking, by Dr. Bushell, was published in Vol. viii. of the *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, 1873.

known as the "tadpole-headed," in which all the characters are made to terminate in a form similar to the tail of a tadpole. Of this latter form few, if any, genuine examples exist, though tradition has it that a copy of a portion of the Chinese Classics written in the "tadpole" script was discovered about the year 150 B.C. hidden away in the walls of the house originally occupied by Confucius, where it had been placed by some of his descendants to escape the burning of all written records by the Emperor Shih Huang Ti in B.C. 213. The first of the above mentioned six styles is known as the *Chuan Shu*, commonly called the "Seal character" by Europeans. It is said to date from the reign of King Hsüan (B.C. 827) whose hunting exploits are supposed to be recorded on the Stone Drums.

宋 艸 行 楷 隸 篆

The next is the *Li Shu*, or style of official attendants or clerks. It was used by writers in the public offices, and possibly dates from the time of Chi'n Shih Huang Ti (B.C. 213).

宋 艸 行 楷 隸 篆

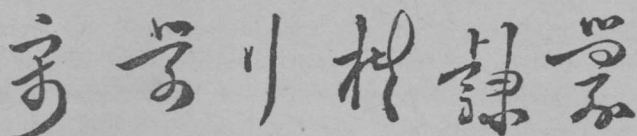
The third is the *Ch'iai Shu*, or pattern style, from which all modern forms have originated. This probably dates from the beginning of the Christian Era.

宋 草 行 楷 隸 篆

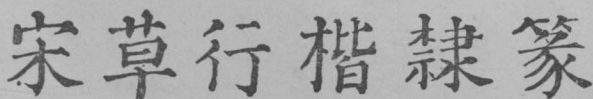
The fourth, the *Hsing Shu*, may be translated as the "running hand," the pencil being carried from stroke to stroke without being raised from the paper, but no abbreviations unauthorized by the dictionaries appear to have been introduced. Date, about A.D. 200.

宋 草 行 楷 隸 篆

The fifth style, *Ts'ao tzü*, or "grass characters," dating from about the same period, is a freer style of the running hand than the foregoing, and is full of abbreviations which render it very difficult even to an educated native. It is still in common use, and is largely employed in Japan and Korea



The sixth and last class, known as the *Sung T'ü*, or style of the Sung Dynasty, is the printed style introduced under the Dynasty whose name it bears. It was adopted in the early part of the tenth century, and since that period it has undergone no material alterations.

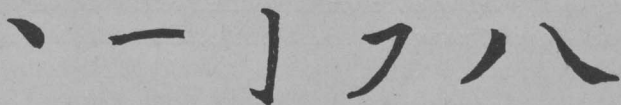


A description has been given of the method of looking up characters in a dictionary by counting the number of strokes the character contains, exclusive of the radical. Some knowledge of the mode of writing is necessary for an accurate calculation of the number of strokes. The pencil, it may be well to explain, is held in a vertical position between the thumb on one side and the forefinger and second finger on the other. The following character is said to include the elements of all the strokes required in Chinese writing:—



Horizontal strokes are drawn before perpendicular ones; central strokes before those on each side; and those on the left before those on the right. A single stroke often takes one, and sometimes two,

curves, as on the left side of the above character, which is formed of six strokes, in the following order :



The above brief description will, it is hoped, enable the reader to understand something of the form and structure of this marvellous script, which has been for ages past, and still continues to be, the medium of communication between a vast proportion of the human race. In its present form it is read and understood, not only throughout the whole dominions of an Empire embracing—to take the popular estimate—three hundred and sixty millions of human beings, but it is also extensively used in adjacent kingdoms. In Korea, the Chinese Classics are studied in all the schools and exert no inconsiderable influence on the character of the nation, while Chinese is the common vehicle of official correspondence; in the Loochoo Islands many of the inhabitants read it fluently; in Tonking a knowledge of it is possessed by the educated classes; while in Japan it still constitutes the basis of the written language. Ever since the days of Confucius it has practically remained unchanged in construction, and the style of books published two thousand years ago differs little from the written language of the present day. It is hardly to be wondered at that so ancient and so widely diffused a script should be an object of veneration to the Chinese scholar, who regards it, from its universality and its adaptability to any system of speech, as vastly superior to all others. He admires it not less for its intrinsic beauty and excellence than for the vast stores of knowledge and wisdom which he considers it to embrace. To many thoughtful Chinese it is a matter of surprise that this script has not been adopted as a common medium of communication throughout the world. “Attach,” they say, “what sound or pronunciation to the character you like, the meaning will still remain invariable. Why multiply scripts and invent complicated systems when you have ready to hand a language free from grammatical intricacies, a language that has stood the test of ages, and in which it has been found that no changes were necessary or desirable? It can keep pace with modern requirements, for when

a new word or term has to be employed it is perfectly easy to invent a symbol to indicate it, while there is not a single thought, phrase or idea that is not capable of expression in Chinese."*

All this is, theoretically, true enough, but what the Chinese enthusiast loses sight of is the immense amount of study required to obtain a working knowledge of even the small proportion of the forty odd thousand characters that are required for practical purposes, while nothing but constant practice will enable any one to write these characters correctly. Chinese calligraphy is an art in which few, if any, Europeans have ever become proficient. It is possible to acquire facility in writing, but elegance of style can only be arrived at by those who have commenced to learn in childhood and have practised daily throughout the years of their educational life. There is another point overlooked by the Chinese enthusiast which is at the root of the supreme difficulty attending anything approaching to proficiency in the written language. It is not impossible to obtain a working knowledge of three, four, or five thousand symbols, which is all that a man of average education need have at his command—a knowledge of 2,000 characters would be sufficient to take one through the whole Chinese Penal Code, for instance—and if each character expressed only one word or idea, and was always limited to that one word, the difficulty would be comparatively small. But this is not the case. Almost every character, by being placed in a different position in a sentence, or used in a different combination, assumes, in some instances a different shade of meaning, and in others expresses an entirely new idea. The absence of grammar, which the language is popularly supposed to enjoy, does not present such a difficulty to the student as might be supposed. Indeed, it may be said to be somewhat of a luxury to find oneself untrammelled by the forms and accidents of grammatical rule. Number, case, mood, tense, &c., can be indicated by particles, while the value of the word which does duty impartially for noun, preposition, or verb can generally be discovered by a study of the context. The real

* "The works of Darwin and Mill were soon rendered into Japanese, equivalents for the many novel terms they contained being manufactured from the ideographic vocabulary, far the most elastic and capable instrument of speech that exists."—Tokio Correspondent, *The Times*, Jan. 18th, 1904.

difficulty in the comprehension and use of the written language for anything beyond the simplest purposes lies in the fact that it abounds in metaphor and allusion. The elegant writer loves to display his erudition by the employment of quotations from the books, canonical and historical, the study of which is a necessary part of his education. If he wishes to express a thought out of the common, or a complex idea, he dives into his store of recollection and quotes a word or two from the sayings of some ancient sage which are suggestive rather than perspicuous. If he wanted to speak, for instance, of the "uses of adversity" in an English composition, he would refer to a "toad's jewel," and pre-suppose the reader to be fully acquainted with the passage in Shakespeare that compares adversity to the precious jewel in the head of the toad. It is this that makes it impossible for the ordinary foreigner to do more than spell his way through a modern official document, or to understand anything but an ordinary note. In fact, it may safely be said that the average educated Chinese is incapable of expressing himself elegantly in his own language. He can understand what he reads, but he cannot write a polished letter, or turn out a finished despatch. The ancient forms of Chinese verse, or the writings of Confucius or Mencius, are child's play compared with the works of later authors, while an elegant essay, composed for an examination for example, would be almost unintelligible to an ordinary individual without the aid of a dictionary of reference or the explanations of a well-read scholar who had history at his fingers' ends, and could supply the context from which the numerous quotations are taken. In almost all Chinese composition, again, measured periods, not unlike blank verse, abound, and are esteemed by the scholar as a capital beauty of the language. Ideas, it may be said, often form the secondary object of consideration, the mode in which they are expressed claiming first attention. Thought also is stereotyped, and all the ideas which the Chinese wish to cherish or indicate are contained, as stated above, in those records which have come down to them from the sages of antiquity. Excellence in composition, therefore, consists in arranging anew orthodox phrases which are to be found in the ancient classics or in the formidable list of historical or poetical works that the scholar delights to study. Each branch, moreover, of Chinese literature possesses a peculiar style of its own. Any one who could read official Chinese,

of which the *Peking Gazette* may be taken as a typical exemplar, would not necessarily be able to understand an historical work, while books on philosophy, on Buddhism or on Taoism would be almost unintelligible without a special study of their style. Modern literature can hardly be said to exist, and novels, as we understand them, are almost all placed under the ban of Imperial prohibition. They are to be found in limited numbers, it is true, but there are no modern society novels. Those which are procurable place the scene in a bygone dynasty, and few are free from objectionable episodes. The educated classes profess to despise fiction, but I suppose that there is not a single Chinese of the lettered class who has not read the few historical novels that are not in the "Index Expurgatorius," and are considered to be classics in their particular line.

I close these necessarily condensed remarks on the written language with a few examples illustrative of various styles of Chinese composition.

The first is the opening verse of an ode in which a gentleman deploras his disappointment in not meeting a lady according to engagement. It is selected, more or less at random, from the *Shih Ching*, or Book of Odes, collected by Confucius. The date is not known, but it must have been composed long before the time of Confucius, who was born B.C. 552. Against each character the meaning is placed, in order to show how it is that the Chinese language is, to a certain extent, independent of grammar or grammatical particles, and also how easy it is to arrive at the meaning of many passages of primitive Chinese. It should be noted that Chinese characters are written in columns, commencing on the right hand side of the page.

scratch	搔	love	愛	wait	俟	quiet	靜
head	首	yet	而	I	我	girl	女
undecided	脚	not	不	at	於	her	其
halt	踟	see	見	city wall	城	beauty	姝
				corner	隅		

Here is the rendering given in Dr. Legge's translation * :—

How lovely is the retiring girl,
 She was to await me at a corner of the wall.
 Loving and not seeing her
 I scratch my head and am in perplexity.

* *The Chinese Classics*, Dr. Legge, Vol. i., Part 4. p. 68.

All this is simple enough. Any one with a knowledge of the radicals and with the aid of a dictionary could make it out for himself, filling in the grammatical *lacunae* as suited his fancy. The same may be said of the following, taken from the *Lun Yü*, or collected sayings of Confucius, called by Dr. Legge the Confucian "Analects." Their antiquity is beyond question, and we may safely consider them to date from some time before the Christian Era.

yet	而	proud,	驕、	Tsze	子
happy,	樂、	how	何	Kung	貢
rich,	富	as.	如。	say	曰
yet	而	master	子	poor,	貧
like	好	say,	曰	yet	而
propriety	禮	can,	可	not	無
person	者	final	也、	flatter, 諂、	
terminal particle	也	particle }			
		not	未	rich,	富
		as,	若	yet	而
		poor	貧	not	無

Dr. Legge translates as follows, supplying, as before, the gaps:—

Tsze Kung said, "What do you pronounce concerning the poor man who yet does not flatter and the rich man who is not proud?" The master said, "They will do, but they are not equal to him, who, though poor, is yet cheerful, and to him who, though rich, loves the rules of propriety."

I treat my third and last example in the same manner as the foregoing, placing the more or less elementary meaning of the word against each character.

yellow	黃	drive,	驅、	at	於
cart	車	hundred	百	this	是
attendant	使	insects	蟲	control	司
one,	者、	take	將	heat	烜
bright	爛	army,	軍、	inform	戒
the	其	brightness	煥	order,	令、
filled	盈	as	然	o	闕
door,	門、	burning	烈	po	伯
red	絳	few,	澤、	front	前

room.	屋	finish	畢	cloud,	雲、
		then	方	rise	起
		fly	飛	and	而
		and	而	roll up	捲
		rise	升	mist,	霧、

The above passage is taken from a letter in the published collection of the correspondence of one Yuan Tzū-ts'ai, a scholar holding office at Nanking in A.D. 1716, whose style is held in high esteem. The writer condoles with a friend on the occasion of his house being burnt down. The elementary meanings of the various characters are given, as stated above, but many of these have various significations either singly or in combination, and any one with a knowledge of Chinese would be assisted in his selection by experience, as well as by examples quoted in the dictionary. Even so, there is certainly no European scholar, and probably very few Chinese, who could understand the passage without the assistance of a commentary. It consists of eight sentences, and eight elliptical quotations from various authors, none of which could be intelligibly rendered without considerable amplification of the context from which they were derived, accompanied by copious notes. It should of course be understood that the passage has been selected as an illustration of the difficulties with which the Chinese can, if they like, beset their own language. Happily it is by no means necessary for any one, even a Chinese himself, to indulge in this literary jugglery. The modern style of Chinese composition that is daily gaining ground, partly in consequence of the revised system of education, which is placing classics and poetry somewhat in the background, and also through the influence of the newspapers, which are now read by millions of people, is bringing a much simpler form of composition into vogue which can be read with comparative ease.

II.

THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

DURING its progress through a long series of ages the Chinese spoken language, it may readily be supposed, underwent many changes. To refer to one proof alone, the specimens of ancient poetry still in existence establish this fact by the rhyming of words which have now, in many instances, no uniformity of sound. Its origin is, and must remain, a mystery in spite of the array of opinions and judgments concerning it, and as none of them can possibly be conclusive, or indeed more than purely speculative, it seems advisable to leave theory alone, and to pass on at once to modern fact. Those who are interested in the attempts to trace the origin of the language to its source, and to establish its family relationship with the great clan of human tongues, are referred once more to Mr. Watters' *Essay on the Chinese Language*, and particularly to the chapter entitled "Some Western Opinions." They will there find that it has been regarded by some as a special creation, by others as the language spoken by Noah, and Shem, the son of Noah, who moved into China in time to escape the confusion of tongues; that others, again, discover a relationship between the language of China and that of ancient Egypt, while some investigators try to prove that there is a connection between Chinese and the Hebrew tongue.

Wherever it sprang from originally, we know that the pronunciation of the language in the days of Confucius and that of the present day is so dissimilar as to make it a matter of certainty that Confucius would understand nothing of the speech that now prevails at his native place in the province of Shantung. He might, probably, according to Mr. E. H. Parker,* an eminent authority, be more at home in Korea, or Annam, or, possibly, Canton, but he certainly would be unable to understand his own remarks as recited by the modern school-boy in any part of the Empire. And it may

* Professor of Chinese at Owen's College, Manchester.