theories and methodologies

Scripts in Motion: Writing as Imperial Technology, Past and Present

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CIVILIZATION IS UNTHINKABLE WITHOUT WRITING. THIS STATEMENT IS A COMMONPLACE, AND LIKE ALL COMMONPLACES ITS REITERATION merits critical reflection, especially when we ponder why stakes become so high whenever writing is concerned. The shared modern Chinese and Japanese *kanji* rendering of the word for "civilization," for instance, means "enlightening through writing/text" (文明 [*wenming* in Mandarin]), which puts emphasis literally on the value of writing. For centuries, writing has been invoked as a positive index to the hierarchy of human societies and their intellectual attributes, whereby orality is relegated to primitive and pretechnological cultures. The presumed dichotomy of writing and orality often relies on a flawed, representational view of writing that is phonocentric to the core, à la Derrida, and remains almost always blind to the presence of script or medium—including that of alphabetical writing—which requires a different kind of analytical approach.

Suppose we reground the problem of language and writing in the materiality of script through a reexamination of imperial technologies in the *longue durée* and do so without having to choose between the critique of Western metaphysics and a defense of oral societies, which only ends up reifying the opposition of writing and speech. How might we frame such a study? Through what critical lens? This is the starting point of my critique of the predominantly language-centered approaches to empire that are widely adopted in contemporary literary, anthropological, and historical studies.

Before we get to the question of script as a material medium and consider why it has mattered to ancient and modern empires, we must confront another, related commonplace—the opposition of metropolitan literacy and native orality in postcolonial studies of the modern world—for this mental construct has impeded our understanding of how writing has functioned in imperial history. Again, either one comes to the defense of literacy in the name of modernity or one stands by oral cultures on behalf of tradition. Can we escape this deadlocked opposition and cease to be hampered by

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the inherited colonial assumption of metropolitan literacy and native orality? To be sure, that assumption derives from a history of Eurocentric theory-making and ought to be treated as such, but it must not serve as the starting point of any serious discussion of writing, language, and empire. Can we pay attention, for instance, to the material history of writing and script as imperial technologies that might offer new clues about how empires have historically interacted or clashed with one another? Conversely, will a comparative study of empires in the *longue durée* teach us something new about the role of writing in the management of space? It seems that we need some kind of conceptual innovation, a fresh point of departure in the theorizing of writing. Below, I provide some comparative reflections—historical as well as theoretical—on writing and script and explain why we need to rethink our language-centered approach to empire studies.

Let me start by outlining the major theoretical concerns that I want to address in this essay. These concerns motivate the sections that follow, though not strictly in this order. First, why is writing important for imperial ambitions, past and present? Second, by what script or visual medium is writing to be known or knowable? Third, what is the legitimate ground of comparison, if any, between alphabetical writing and nonalphabetical writing? Finally, can we develop a broader semiotic conception of visual, verbal, and spatial production of the sign—beyond the linguistic sign—to account for the evolution of writing as imperial technology in our own time?

Writing as Imperial Technology

Harold Innis was one of the first scholars to suggest that writing emerged as an imperial technology by virtue of its ability to communicate across vast spaces in times of imperial conquest. He made this argument with the help of a transhistorical analysis of the major empires in world history, showing how the technology of writing has been central to political governance and imperial projects (31–32). One may object to this view of empire by citing exceptions or historical alternatives—calling attention to the role of orality in imperial projects, for example—but exceptions cannot disprove the logic of Innis's argument on its own ground. And what is that logic? It is based not so much on the dichotomy of writing and orality as on what I call the spatial rationality of imperial conquest. This is an important distinction, and I would add that such rationality owes its existence to the medium of script—which has more in common with military cartography and numerical thinking (mathematics) than it does with speech. In short, the spatial rationality of empire has emerged in response to the political imperative of centralized authority as well as to the practical need for long-distance transmission of information and military intelligence—hence the vital connection between writing and imperial communication networks.

Innis calls attention not so much to the medium of script as to the materiality of writing in general, citing the Roman Empire as an institution in which "the written tradition dependent on papyrus and the roll supported an emphasis on centralized bureaucratic administration" (107). By contrast, the Catholic Church's monopoly of parchment production in Europe gave it a monopoly of knowledge through monasticism—eventually to be weakened by the introduction of paper and printing from China. The adaptability of the alphabet to movable type and large-scale print industry gradually translated into the expansion of literacy and the rise of newspapers, vernacular fiction, and advertising, as well as the development of new forms of trade and politics, specifically nationalism.[1] Does this familiar narrative imply a causal relationship or merely describe a historical development?

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It seems that the consensus among historians is that the rise of vernacular literatures and nationalism in Europe and around the world in particular is attributable to the global dissemination of print and, in Benedict Anderson's formulation, "print capitalism." This attribution hints at a larger, transhemispheric backstory of modern European history.

Precisely from the standpoint of that backstory in the *longue durée* can we no longer ignore the fact that print had long predated print capitalism, nor should we overlook the story of how the struggle over scripts has evolved—in print or otherwise—over time, often with civilizational consequences for the ancient and modern worlds. This is where my approach departs from Innis's seminal work on empire and the technology of writing: I am concerned not only with the materiality of writing in general but with the movement of script in particular as a technology of spatial rationality and political control that is closely associated with imperial expansion and conquests. This technology, along with its distinctive material and conceptual mobility, has not been grasped as such in the study of empire, largely because of the widespread confusion over how writing, script, language, and speech relate to one another conceptually.

From Scripts to Writing Systems

In common English parlance, *alphabet* is used interchangeably with *script* and *writing system*. We must, however, maintain a careful distinction among these terms when we discuss writing. To begin with, there are far fewer scripts in the world than there are writing systems; one may say that writing systems are language-specific whereas scripts are typically not.[2] For instance, when the Greeks adapted the conventional Phoenician Semitic consonantal alphabet and Cypriot syllabary to their spoken language, what they imported into Greek was not a writing system but foreign scripts out of which they fashioned a Greek writing system. To take another example, the Devanagari script in India is used to write a variety of languages such as Hindi, Nepali, and Marathi—multiple languages, one script, and several writing systems. Both Hindi and Urdu are associated with the same spoken language, but Hindi is written in Devanagari and Urdu in Perso-Arabic script (Daniels and Bright 384–90)—one language, two scripts, and two writing systems.

Contrary to common perception, the *hanzi* (漢字) square-character script is not unique to one Chinese writing system, having been adapted to create many writing systems in China and across Asia, including Japanese, classical Korean, Vietnamese, and a variety of systems in the history of imperial China, like the obsolete Tangut.[3] At the other end of the spectrum, there is the rare case of one script's coinciding with one writing system: the Korean phonetic script hangul, for instance, is used by no other language, even though some Koreans recently tried to promote it on a remote island of Indonesia.[4] The opposite is true of the Roman, or Latin, script. In the course of Christian evangelization and modern colonialism, this script has been adapted for numerous languages in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Although the Wade-Giles system and, more recently, pinyin are not themselves writing systems in China, these notational systems based on the Roman script are used to transcribe the syllables of written Chinese characters for standardized translation, school pedagogy, and, increasingly, for access to global electracy—electro-literacy—which is primarily coded in the English alphabet.

Foreign scripts, in times of imperial conquest—ancient and modern—are chiefly responsible for the creation of new writing systems. Michael Mann has shown how the Akkadian Empire adapted Sumerian writing into a simplified syllabic script after its conquest of the Sumerians, thus consolidating its control over the conquered (152). The Mongols offer another interesting example of a burgeoning

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empire's borrowing of a conquered people's script to invent their own writing system. During his conquest of the Naimans at the beginning of the Mongol Empire, Genghis Khan captured a Uighur scribe in 1204 and ordered him to develop a writing system for Mongolian by adapting the Uighur alphabet, a script that had itself been adapted from the Syriac script through the Sogdian language (Weatherford 70–71). This gave birth to the classical Mongolian alphabet, which had not existed before the rise of the Mongol Empire. Several centuries later, when the Jurchen leader Nurhaci ordered two men to create a "national writing system" for the Manchu language in 1599, he was in the early stages of an ambitious conquest of China that led to the overthrow of the Ming dynasty and the creation of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Nurhaci's men borrowed the Mongolian alphabet to produce a Manchu writing system, which was retroactively named *tongki fuka akū hergen* (script without circles or dots [Rawski 36]).

There is no doubt that the spatial expansion of empire and the bureaucratic centralization that comes with it require efficient communication systems across vast spaces. In addition to facilitating long-distance communication in foreign lands, the medium of script has been one of the most efficient technologies for imperial rule and social organization, and this by no means began with modern colonialism. Take Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), whose attention was immediately drawn to the written script on his conquest of China. The emperor imposed a standard script (the *hanzi* characters still in use today) with standard orthography (seal calligraphy) and a unified legal code and bureaucratic procedures, along with a uniform system of weights and measures, a uniform coinage, and uniform imperial road widths for centralized rule. Of course, the legal code, bureaucratic administration, weights, and so on relied on the standard script (including numerals) to function, as did the two-millennium-long, nearly unbroken imperial practice of record keeping in China.[5] The continuous historical writing known as the dynastic histories would have been unthinkable outside the textual tradition that employs a universal written script. This was the case regardless of which ethnic group happened to be in power or which writing systems were in use.[6]

A writing system cannot always be invented from scratch when an empire, a state, or a community decides that it needs a script to create one. So what does it do? It borrows another people's script. And where do other people's scripts come from? From archaeological evidence, we know that the earliest scripts were invented by at least four sedentary civilizations characterized by urbanization, division of labor, and a surplus economy in four parts of the world: Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica. These have evolved into the familiar scripts—alphabetical or nonalphabetical—that we still use or borrow in the writing of modern languages. With the probable exception of hangul,[7] most invented scripts around the globe, including the Roman script, *hanzi*, Arabic, and Cyrillic, have been borrowed repeatedly to write multiple languages. This explains why a large number of writing systems share a small number of scripts; and hundreds of thousands of languages have gone without writing, many becoming extinct without perceiving the need for a writing system.[8] A comparative overview of empires may suggest that the spatial rationality of imperial expansion often generates that need.

"Code Switch" in the Name of Language Reform

Why does our approach to language and imperial rule seldom engage with the materiality of script and its mobility around the world as a technology? I suspect that it is largely because we are still held hostage to the mod-

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ern, "national" view of language and writing that disavows the politics of script in the very making of national languages. Indeed, most so-called language reforms in recent history have in reality sought to eradicate one or another foreign script, resulting in a code switch that happened more radically at the level of script than it did at the level of language.

In colonial Vietnam under French rule, for instance, the romanization of the Vietnamese language simply meant replacing one foreign script—*hanzi*—with another. As a consequence, the centuries-long double writing system used by the Vietnamese ceased to exist and the vast number of historiographies and literatures composed by the Vietnamese themselves became foreign and inaccessible to future generations.[9] This double writing system consisted of *chữ nôm* (字喃) and *chữ hán* (字漢), which shared the *hanzi* script. *Chữ nôm* adapted *hanzi* to represent the Vietnamese vernacular, yielding Sino-Vietnamese, while *chữ hán*—classical Chinese writing, employed throughout East and Southeast Asia well into the first decade of the twentieth century—was the official medium used by Vietnamese court officials and scholars. This struggle over the life and death of a script ended in the abolition of the traditional writing system by the puppet emperor Khải Định in 1918 and the adoption of the Roman script as the *chữ quốc ngữ* ("national language script") of Vietnam.

Turkey, though not colonized, was likewise caught up in a perilous moment of imperial rivalry, when the Ottoman Empire wrestled with the encroachment of European powers. As in the case of Vietnam, Japan, and China, the push for civilizational progress and enlightenment led to the conversion of Ottoman Turkish from the Perso-Arabic script to the Roman script (Erturk). Words of Arabic and Persian origin were banished along with the old script to be replaced by native Turkish equivalents, but the native Turkish language came to be written in a borrowed script regarded as less foreign than the Perso-Arabic script. Once again, the code switch occurred primarily at the level of script: the Perso-Arabic scripts became "foreign" whereas the Roman script was adopted as a neutral, if not native, medium. This process is known everywhere around the world as national language reform—but the foreignness of the Roman script must be hiding in plain sight when it is no longer recognized as alien. Why replace one foreign script with another if the goal was to expel the foreign to make room for the national or the indigenous?

The answer is that a productive catachresis—politically effective and psychologically satisfying—camouflaged what was going on in so-called language reforms. To this day, many scholars, including some of the authors in this *PMLA* cluster, continue to turn a blind eye to the slippage between script and language. To my mind, the catachresis holds the key to the secret of worldwide romanization movements across the global platform of language reform—not only in Vietnam, where the Roman script for *quốc ngữ* became "the national language," but also in many other societies around the world where the push for enlightenment invariably looked on the Roman script as the universal medium of progress.

Such catachresis is politically effective and psychologically satisfying not because it is an imperial ruse invented to deceive people but because it disavows the processes whereby the Roman script was transformed into a global universal medium, sometimes in spite of itself. Herein lies the potency of the slippage between script and language: this catachresis—endorsed by colonial powers and nationalists alike—strips the Roman script of its cultural and historical baggage by turning it into a rational, transparent instrument of transcription for any language in the world. When that script became a truly mobile medium of universal applicability, any social reformer from any country could potentially instrumentalize it without jeopardizing his or her political cause, be it nationalist, royalist,

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or imperialist. I will explore the implication of this universal script for digital media in the postwar American Empire at the end of my essay.

In East Asia, the *rōmaji* (Roman script) movement in Meiji Japan and the multiple romanization movements in early-twentieth-century China had a lasting impact on modern education as well as on the countries' language and literary reforms. If Meiji Japan did not fully adopt *rōmaji* in the end, its intellectual elite made a concerted effort to minimize the elements of the *hanzi* script in its hybrid-script system of writing.[10] By the same token, the Chinese language reform in the first half of the twentieth century also moved toward romanization and spawned numerous spelling schemes in the name of enlightenment and social progress, the best known of which was *Gwoyeu Romatzyh*.[11] Christian missionaries and Chinese educators and intellectuals—liberals as well as left-wing radicals—competed strenuously to develop romanization programs for hundreds of languages of China in order to eradicate or marginalize the *hanzi* script as the French had done for Vietnamese (DeFrancis). These efforts went forward with little resistance until they were interrupted by World War II. We cannot know whether a program like *Gwoyeu Romatzyh* would have succeeded had it not been disrupted by eight years of organized resistance to Japanese invasion. Interestingly, it was through the failure of romanization movements in China that the *hanzi* script got a new lease on life and is still with us today.[12]

Historians have long wondered why romanization has prevailed in so many places. Is the Roman script inherently superior to other inventions? If not, how did it succeed in becoming the global, universal medium of writing? These questions have led to interesting, contentious speculations in the disciplines of linguistics, grammatology, and the history of writing.[13] But to my mind such questions distract us from a more fundamental issue: how did scripts become the battleground of universalism when they did? And why do they matter to empires (and nations) in the first place?

The Alphabet: A Universal Code?

One could hardly address these questions without revisiting the ground of comparison that motivated European comparative philology and orientalist scholarship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Europeans began to study archaic scripts and nonalphabetical writing systems in the course of their colonial travels and exploration, they identified and organized the differences of alphabetical writing, ideographs, pictographs, and hieroglyphs along familiar conceptual grids. In competition with the Jesuits' search for primitive or universal language, there emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century an evolutionary theory of civilizational hierarchy that associated types of writing with ranked stages of social development (enlightened/civilized, semicivilized, barbaric, savage). Thus, Jean-Jacques Rousseau hypothesized in *On the Origin of Language* that "the depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people; and the alphabet to civilized people" (17). Samuel Johnson called the Chinese "barbarians" on a sliding scale of progress because "they have not an alphabet" (qtd. in Porter 76). The alphabet—or rather the Roman script—was compared and contrasted with primitive representations of objects ("pictographs") or ideas ("ideographs"). The history of writing, therefore, became a story of progress from "primitive" picture writing and hieroglyphics to alphabetic writing "proper." This powerful evolutionary theory was in part responsible for the worldwide multiplication of the Roman script during the expansion of European empires into places where the desire to shed the image of backwardness and join the ranks of the enlight-

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ened and civilized became so strong that the colonized and conquered people embraced this foreign script, even as they resisted the colonial languages—English or French—that brought the script to them. These struggles—not always top-down colonial impositions—stripped the Roman script of its cultural and historical associations, transforming it into a pure instrument of transcription. The unintended consequence has been the mystification of the phonetic alphabet.

What I wish to highlight, finally, is not the victimization of nonalphabetical writing systems or their associated script—what the French did in Vietnam—but the fallacies concerning the phonetic alphabet itself, which date back to eighteenth-century Europe and have endured to this day. We often hear that each letter of the alphabet stands for a sound of speech, if not strictly for a phoneme. Is this the truth? C. K. Ogden, the architect of Basic English, pointed out the excessive irregularities of English sounds with respect to the letters that represent them.[14] He complained that "the vowels represent not 7 sounds but 54, the 26 letters of the alphabet giving a total of 107 values, or with the vowel digraphs ('each', 'ou', etc.) and multigraphs ('eau', etc.) 280" and that "[t]o distinguish all these in a vocabulary of 20,000 words, or even 2,000, necessitates an amount of drudgery which has given phoneticians and advocates of synthetic languages their opportunity" (21). Leaving aside the contested linguistic theory that discrete units of speech or phonemes are represented by particular letters—as in the case of the sound /*ks*/ being written as one letter, *x*, in English—there is the cognitive issue of how the written code relates meaningfully to the sound image in the mind. Saussure attempted to tackle the issue by attaching the notion of "concept" to the *signifié* (signified) in the linguistic sign, but, as Derrida has astutely pointed out, Saussure's signifying unit cannot but be embodied by the written letter, which turns the notion of the sound image into a sort of conundrum (Derrida 30–44).

These phonocentric fallacies about the alphabet have prevented theorists from developing a generalized semiotic conception of visual, verbal, and spatial production of the sign. The wider conception should no longer exclude numbers or numerical thinking from the semiotic productions that have characterized the spatial rationality of ancient and modern empires. For weights, measures, currency, taxes, and military organization presuppose accurate numerical notation and record keeping. Rather than a progressive evolution from pictograph to syllabic writing to phoneticization, scripts could have grown out of a set of semiotic situations much more complex than the need to record human speech. The predominance of numerical notations in some of the earliest recorded commercial transactions can be dated back ten thousand years, to when pebbles, tallies, tokens, or clay containers (*bullae*) were used as media for counting. On the basis of that evidence, scholars speculate that mathematics was the earliest precursor to writing (Schmandt-Besserat).

This conjecture is tangentially supported by the etymology of the Phoenician word *spr*, to which the English *scribe* and its Latin root and Greek equivalent can be traced. *Spr* descended from a Phoenician word meaning "to count" and did not acquire the meaning "to write" until later. The shared ancestry of *to write* and *to count* throws fascinating light on the alphabet as an alphanumeric script. In ancient Greek and other ancient writing systems, the function of the alphabet was constrained by the requirement of mathematics since the twenty-four letters of the alphabet plus three additional alphanumeric signs (*digamma*, *koppa*, *sampi*) notated the unspoken, mathematical concepts based on the Egyptian numerical system. In short, the twenty-seven-letter Greek alphabet was part of a total semiotic universe of writing and counting that encompassed phonetic

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representation and went well beyond it (Psychoyos 209).

The alphabet has always served a numerical function since antiquity, and yet we are so used to thinking of alphabetic writing as a phonetic system that we often overlook this fact. As one of the oldest extant technologies of human invention, the alphabetical script has evolved into the digital writing of our own time, and this development, known as the information revolution and digital media, took off in the Cold War under the aegis of the American Empire. In *The Freudian Robot*, I have shown that the MIT scientist Claude Shannon invented information theory in 1948 by approaching the English alphabet as a statistical system, which he termed Printed English. The novel English alphabet consists of the twenty-six-letter alphabet from A to Z plus a twenty-seventh letter, mathematically coded "space." The "space" letter—not a mere word divider—can be represented mathematically by *0* or by one or two types of electric pulse on a communication system. This addition not only facilitates the encoding of messages in information systems but also enables a rethinking of the idea of writing.

In the wake of Basic English, alphabetical writing has become more thoroughly and universally digital than it has ever been, thanks to the growth and dissemination of information technologies in the postwar expansion of the American Empire. Shannon's Printed English, in particular, has consolidated the hegemony of the Roman script as the global, universal medium of communication systems even in places where the English language is not spoken (Liu 39–97). Be it word processing, digital imaging, genetic engineering, interactive games, or simulated and actual warfare, digital media are transforming the world by turning one of the oldest technologies of world civilization—alphabetic writing—into a new imperial coding system.

Notes

1. Tsien provides a history of the invention of early woodblock printing, the spread of printing (including movable type) from China to Europe, and Johannes Gutenberg's exposure to this technology in the mid–fifteenth century (313–19).

2. Coulmas delineates the technical distinctions among language, writing, script, orthography, etc. (35–36).

3. Lurie recounts the history of writing in premodern Japan.

4. Lee Ki-nam, the businesswoman who initiated the program, has said, "I am doing for the world's nonwritten languages what Doctors Without Borders is doing in medicine. . . . There are thousands of such languages. I aim to bring Hangul to all of them" (Choe).

5. Mark Edward Lewis analyzes the role of writing in early imperial China.

6. Interestingly, the oldest surviving text of the written history of the Mongolian Empire, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, exists in *hanzi* transcription—each Mongolian word is transcribed phonetically alongside its Chinese translation—and was compiled for one of the dynastic histories of China.

7. This script was promulgated in the mid–fifteenth century by King Sejong of Korea's Chosŏn dynasty.

8. UNESCO monitors more than six thousand languages spoken in the world today, most of which are unwritten and undocumented, and warns that half this number will disappear by the end of the century ("UNESCO").

9. The situation of *quốc ngữ* in Vietnam contrasts sharply with that of the writing system in Senegal, another French colony. In Vietnam the Roman script replaced *chữ nôm* for vernacular writing and *chữ hán* for formal, official writing. Annette Lienau's essay in this cluster suggests that Senegalese writers continued to employ their vernacular language written in either an Arabic or a romanized script after colonization.

10. Kōjin Karatani calls the Japanese *genbun itchi* (unification of speech and writing) movement a new ideology of writing, pointing out that the movement originated in 1866 when Maejima Hisoka submitted a petition to the Tokugawa Shogunate called "Reasons for Abolishing Chinese Characters" (45–46).

11. This national romanization system for writing Mandarin Chinese in the Latin script won the endorsement of the Ministry of Education. For a recent study of this history, see Zhong.

12. There are a few success stories among some of China's ethnic minorities, such as the Zhuang ethnic group, whose writing systems are based on the Roman script, one of the several scripts that—in addition to *hanzi*—are officially recognized by the People's Republic of China. Pinyin—with twenty-one consonants and fifteen vowels/diphthongs—is not a writing system but a

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secondary, auxiliary aid for pronouncing written characters in China. Zhou studies China's multiple forms of writing in detail. For a study of the writings of the Chinese diaspora in *hanzi* script, see Tsu.

13. Most notable is the work of I. J. Gelb, who initiated "grammatology" for a generalized study of writing, an important concept that Derrida borrowed for his philosophical work in the 1960s.

14. Basic English, chiefly promoted by Ogden and I. A. Richards, was a product of Anglo-American imperial expansion in rivalry with the French and Germans. Its influence grew from the interwar years through the Cold War. "Basic" is the acronym for "British, American, Scientific, International, Commercial," and Basic English consists of an 850-word vocabulary.

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