CLAVIS SINICA: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LONG BATTLE FOR THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM IN THE WEST BETWEEN THE XVI AND XIX CENTURIES[1]

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▪ ABSTRACT: This paper aims to present a brief history of ideas in Europe between 1550 and 1900 on the spoken and written languages of China. With the support of Sylvain Auroux moderate historicism (2004), I have chosen as a guideline to focus on the discussions regarding the nature of Chinese writing: ideographic or phonographic. While refusing to take sides, I intend to show that this debate has developed around recurring issues that have been revisited throughout this period of more than three centuries and that the studies published by the Europeans are deeply rooted in their cultural, social and ideological context of production. The precarious status of *writing* in the history of linguistic ideas is an outstanding evidence that is related to the historical leading role of the written Chinese influencing the development in the West of the concepts pertaining to writing, in particular in its representational possibilities. Finally, I propose that the ongoing debates on the subject still reproduce many of the issues explored throughout this history, the resolution of which is still far from being reached.

▪ KEYWORDS: History of Linguistics Ideas. Chinese. Europe. Writing.

Introduction

Chinese writing has always held a fascination in the West for its beauty and exoticism. Although initially it appears to constitute an impossibly complex array of hundreds or even thousands of small random "drawings", the Chinese script (*hànzì* 漢字, "Chinese character") has an underlying intricate structure which spatially arranges the graphical components of sinographs. The characters are "built up" from a limited repertoire of about one dozen *traces* (points, vertical lines, horizontal lines, lines with "hooks" at their end, etc.), which are then combined into *simple characters (dútǐzì* 独体字, literally: "characters with single body") indecomposable (except for

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traces that form it[2]), in order of a few hundred. These simple characters may be used in pairings of two or more to compose *complex characters (hétǐzì* 合体字, literally "characters with joined body") and may have a clear iconic import, some kind of stylized semantic indication, or symbolic and/or a more or less precise indication about its pronunciation. The nature and organizing principles of these graphic components and their combinations into simple and complex characters have been the subject of heated debates over the Chinese script among sinologues and people interested in China for over 500 years.

The concern of the Chinese about the organization of their script dates back at least to the first formal dictionary extant in China, the Ěryǎ 爾雅, dating between the fifth and the first century BC. (BOTTÉRO, 2011, p.41; AUROUX, 1995, p.435) An even more fundamental work was compiled around 123 AD by *Xǔ Shèn* 許慎 (c. AD 58 – c. 147 AD), the *Shuōwén Jiězì* 說文解字, which has served as the primary model for most of the future lexical works of China. The *Shuōwén* was the first text to propose a classification of Chinese characters into six categories[3] and to sort them according to their *radicals (bùshǒu* 部首, lit. "head part"), which were 540 chosen components of characters – later this list has been modified many times and the more widespread current standard has 214 radicals – each one with a purported semantic import. Most traditional lexical works in China employed these semantically based radicals as a classification criterion, except a minority of those that had a particular concern about the sound(s) of the Chinese language(s).[4]

Furthermore, Chinese writing impressed not only due to its visual appearance, but also for its long history which has shown a remarkable diachronic stability from the *Qín* 秦 dynasty (221-206 BC), when it was reformed during the reign of Emperor *Qín Shǐhuáng* 秦始皇. The style was then further standardized in the *Hàn* 漢 dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), which succeeded the *Qín*, being then called *lìsh*ū 隸書 or "clerical writing" – a script already used by the *Qín* in certain special functions. Since then the Chinese characters showed calligraphic variations basically and maintained an extraordinary structural diachronic stability. A key consequence of the reform of the *Qín* and *Hàn* for the studies on Chinese writing was the end of the rampant inconsistency and lack of regularity in the use and design of the characters before its restructuring, which eventually became a formidable barrier to the decipherment and reading of the pre-*Qín* texts.[5]

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[2] This means that the graphical parts (or traces) of the simple characters cannot in isolation constitute new characters and are just graphical units without neither semantic nor phonetic import.

[3] The categories are: 1) 象形 *xiàngxín*, pictographs, lit. "appearance in form"; 2) 指示 *zhǐshì*, indicative characters, lit. "to point and show"; 3) 會意 *huìyì*, associative characters, lit. "to assemble meaning"; 4) 形聲*xíngshēng*, characters with a radical and a phonetic element, lit. "appearance and sound"; 5) 轉注 *zhuǎnzhù*, derivated characters, lit. "to move and to concentrate"; e 6) 假借 *jiǎjiè*, borrowed characters, lit. "to lend and to borrow."

[4] For more details on the emergence of the phonological studies in ancient China, see Elman (1982), Lepschy (1994), Auroux (1995), and Wang (2010).

[5] For introductory studies on Chinese writing, see Wendan (2009), Alleton (2010) and Barros Barreto (2011).

The present paper discusses the long and complex history of the Western[6] views on spoken and written Chinese – with an emphasis on the latter – from the Jesuit expeditions beginning on the last decades of the sixteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth century. One of the most widespread concepts in Europe on the Chinese language during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the so-called *clavis sinica*, the "key" to a faster and more direct decipherment of the Chinese writing. Knowledge of the *clavis* would enable a much faster learning of the Chinese characters and, consequently, the whole language. The principle behind the *clavis* was initially based on the possibility of a universal language and on Chinese as its candidate *par excellence,* either because it was closely related to the original primitive language – predating the post-Babelian confusion – but also through the concept of the *real character*, which permitted that "writing represents not mere words, but also things and ideas". (MUNGELLO, 2013, p.100) The principles of the *clavis sinica* and *real character* were supported by a certain egalitarianism and a relativism characteristic of early European Rationalism – pre-dating the future encroaching Eurocentrism which tended to accept the cultural and technological superiority in Europe – showing some openness to the Chinese ideas, although laden with European motivations. (LEE, 1991, p.49) Gradually along the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the idea of *clavis sinica* evolved from a key to rapid learning of Chinese to be related to the Chinese grammar itself, at a time when writing progressively lost ground in the mainstream studies of Sinology.

This is a very broad and complex topic, which is addressed here in an introductory way, driven by the primary objective of presenting a history of ideas in Europe about the status of Chinese script in relation to its speech, highlighting the recurrence of its argumentative patterns, which, even if within a pre-modern historical context, has continued to have a profound influence on the formation of the Western concepts about China, its writing and speech, up to the present times.

We also take notice that the status of *writing* within language studies has always seemed precarious and ambivalent. Western studies were for the most part deeply influenced by the Greek representational view of language – that the linguistic sign means/represents ideas or things of the world,[7] – which generally considers writing as a visible representation of sound, thus a sub-tool parasitically dependent on speech. This theoretical approach is conventionally named here the *phoneticist theory of writing* or, more succinctly, *phoneticism.* In very general terms, for phoneticism the "ideal" writing is supposed to be the one that offers in the most transparent way possible through its

[6] The terms *West* and *Western* used in this article do not imply any intention to simplify or essentialize the lives, histories and cultures of any of the regions underlying the areas of influence of the Indo-European languages and the Chinese culture in the Far East. Historically there is a strong tendency of scholars in Europe to see China as a monolithic entity, the same applying to Europe itself and the "Western world." For more information, see Nancy (1997, p.6), Norman (1988, p.16), Zhang (1998), Casacchia (*In* AUROUX, 1995) and Porter (2001).

[7] The *locus classicus* of this viewpoint is the brief passage 16a3 in Aristotle's treatise *De Interpretatione*.

grapheme the corresponding pronunciation in speech. The spoken words are the primary object of interest of linguistics.[8]

On the other hand, as already noted, the Chinese spoken and written language has always captivated the imagination of the West. Since this script is the only one currently in widespread use that appears to employ semantically informed characters – and this is the central issue disputed by the scholars on Chinese writing, – it has become a subject of particular interest to Western grammatology[9] and has presented a challenge for a phoneticist theory of writing. Semantically based Chinese characters risk to become a "black swan", which could in theory falsify phoneticism, at least in its more extreme versions, and thus the Chinese script suggests the alternative of a *semanticist theory of writing*, or *semanticism*.

The discussion on the phonetic or semantic representation in writing is not restricted to Chinese. Although there are other examples of writing systems that have a semantic component, such as the Sumerian and Aztec scripts, as well as mixed systems, such as the Egyptian and Mayan scripts, Chinese, because of its millenary unbroken history, offers a much richer picture of its historical contexts of use. Additionally, Chinese characters (used in Chinese as well as in Japanese) can be observed in use through contemporary techniques of writing and reading analysis. Finally, its use for different languages that are typologically very diverse, such as Japanese and Korean, raises even more complex and challenging new questions.

The debate over whether Chinese writing mainly represent the sounds of the Chinese language(s) or more directly its meaning is still ongoing and it is far from reaching any unanimity. This discussion often puts sinologues on one side and linguists on the other and its outcome may have important implications for a theory of writing and even for the linguistic theory as a whole.

This paper endorses the moderate historicism of Sylvain Auroux (2004) and therefore it considers that what has been written in the West about China has been motivated by its specific ideological and socio-historical contexts of production and needs to be taken into account in the formation of Western representations about the Chinese script in Europe (and later, in the Americas). The "otherness" of the Western eye offers the opportunity to think about Chinese culture from a "foreign" point of view, as well as it bids a chance of a glimpse on the ethnocentric prejudices and their universalist ambitions. Additionally, still following Auroux, we should recognize that our current interpretations have been influenced by our history and by the consolidation of our viewpoints and of those around us. Such perspectives will eventually constitute theses and theories that have solidified with time and have helped to shape our evolving common sense.

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[8] For details, see Barros Barreto (2011).

[9] The term *grammatology* has various meanings and its use by Derrida in the homonymous text of 1967 has been particularly influential. In this paper it is being used in a more general way as "the study of writing system of the world". As informs Daniels (1990), it was I. G. Gelb who first coined the word in his prestigious *Study of Writing* of 1952.

The radical increase in the importance of China in the world economic – as well as political and cultural – scene has recently generated a parallel increase in the Western interest in theoretical discussions about the Chinese script.[10] However, these are views "dedicated less to its historical development than to a metadiscursive critique of certain conceptions of the Chinese writing system". (LURIE, 2006, p.251) The present paper, by contrast, follows authors such as Porter (2001), Lurie (2006) and Zhiqun (2008) in promoting the so-called historical point of view. Its main goals are: 1) to present a brief historical overview of the texts in the West about the spoken and written Chinese between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; 2) to give evidence of the continuity of the questions and theoretical assumptions underlying this debate, which is still ongoing today, although configured in an entirely different discursive modes; and 3) to show the close relationship between the historical and cultural moment in Europe and its representations about China, in particular the views on Chinese writing and its role in that language.

Chinese writing as a solution to ideal writing

European impressions about China have undergone constant and radical corrections in course since the knowledge about the Chinese and their country has spread on the continent from the time of the European commercial maritime expansion in the sixteenth century onwards. China was admired for its millenary history, its scale, its enormous cultural and human achievements and the extent of its domains. On the other hand, the Chinese civilization was also often seen as one associated with a backward empire, impervious to modern ideas, consumed by obscurantist worldviews that were at odds with the Enlightenment increasingly prevailing in Europe. At the center of this debate stands the absolute dissimilarity of the Chinese speech and its "hieroglyphic" written language.[11]

The Jesuits were the first Europeans in the sixteenth century who brought more consistent reports on the Chinese life and customs. Motivated by their proselytizing anxieties, the Jesuits tried to reconcile Christian and Confucian beliefs, seeking to assimilate Western values and concepts in the Chinese language and to cross the seemingly insurmountable paths that cut through the alien-like forest of the Chinese characters. Although these attempts had ultimately met defeat,

[10] See, for instance, Alleton (1997, 2008), Mair (2002), Galambos (2006), Bottéro & Djamouri (2006), Wendan (2009) and Branner et al. (2011).

[11] Since its "rediscovery" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chinese writing was often called "hieroglyphic" because the pictorial parallels perceived by European scholars with the writing of Ancient Egypt. The two writing systems were often studied and grouped together. For details, see Hudson (1994), Auroux (1995) and Lepschy (2014a,b).

> [the] early history of the first Western responses to Chinese writing [...] reveals a long-standing, almost compulsive desire to read it as an impossibly pure form of signification and to systematize its notation in a relentless quest for an original and transcendent order. (PORTER, 2001, p.9)

As Latin in Europe inexorably followed its way into oblivion, Chinese writing proved to be a candidate for a potential new model of language stability and "universal meaning," to be admired against the unpredictability of the new European vernaculars. Thus, European historians turned to the immense task that was to fit the Chinese world into the universal order of the Christian West. (RAMSEY, 2001).

Ideography – the concept that writing could represent the ideas without the mediation of speech – should be considered in this context, "as the domestication of the foreign sign, the process by which the unintelligible becomes is rendered legible and interpreted within a more familiar matrix of meanings [...]" (PORTER, 2001, p.20) The Chinese characters were considered as signs of "ideas", transcendental and universal concepts, which would in theory enable perfect translation and interlingual communication. They could be the ultimate solution to the problems identified by authors such as Francis Bacon and John Locke, with the elimination of "ill defined names" and the "abuse of words" by the natural identity of the linguistic sign that was offered by means of what was called the *real character*, in stark contrast with the Aristotelian arbitrariness of the Western linguistic sign.[12] As witnessed by the studies of authors such as Locke, Wilkins and Leibniz for the "perfect language," "the Chinese language attracted a significant amount of attention, […] beyond a small circle of missionaries and travelers associated with China". (TONG, 2007, p.502) The Chinese "ideograms" seemed to show to the European eyes their direct and everlasting relationship with the transcendent concepts they allegedly represent, even if the key to this relationship – the legendary *clavis sinica* – remained a baffling mystery to the European scholars.

Thus, Western representations of Chinese writing was balanced between two opposing forces: firstly, the huge influence of the myths of the total ideography and perfect translatability, suggesting that the characters were supposedly of such a primeval origin that their solution (a "key") was lost and needed be reconstructed. Later – particularly from the eighteenth century – a second force was driven by the desire to include the Chinese script in the universal model of linguistic representation of discourse through writing and the idea of ideography progressively became an embarrassing encumbrance.

Thus Chinese ideography gradually acquired the label of a "myth" and increasingly became anathema to the rationalism of modern times, when the hermetic solutions prominent in the sixteenth century were to decrease significantly in influence after the

[12] On the search for the *real character* in Europe after the eighteenth century, see Hudson (1994), Lepschy (1994b) and Harris and Taylor (1997).

eighteenth century. Thus came a time after the nineteenth century – and especially in the twentieth century – when the new task of linguists and sinologues was to eradicate this "retrograde macula" from the linguistic and cultural studies on China.

The West and the Chinese language in 13th-17th centuries

The reasons listed in the previous section have motivated much of the speculation in Europe about the written and spoken Chinese, which commenced with the first contacts of Europeans with China after Classical Antiquity. The long tradition of works written by Westerners and published in Europe and in China itself began with travelers' accounts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during the Mongol Empire, with names such as the Franciscans Giovani del Carpine (c. 1240) and William of Rubruck (1253) and the famous Marco Polo (c. 1300). These authors, however, have dealt only very briefly with the question of Chinese writing. (AUROUX, 1995b, p.300) With the collapse of the Mongols and the foundation of the *Míng*明 dynasty, Christians were expelled from China in 1369, postponing for almost 200 years new contacts and the exchange of information between East and West.

From the last decades of the sixteenth century many European missionaries, this time mostly belonging to the Jesuit order, returned to China and wrote important treatises on the subject of that civilization, where the issue of the written and spoken Chinese finally begun to be addressed in some more detail. It was a time of intense European overseas exploration that has extended to the following centuries, when compilations of an increasing number of spoken and written languages of the known world were edited and the Chinese script gradually took a more prominent role in language studies.

The first book we know which has mentioned the Chinese writing with some more detailed references was published in 1569 by the Portuguese Gaspar da Cruz (1520-1570), *Tractado em que se co[n]tam muyto por este[n]so as cousas de China...* (UNGER, 1990, p.393; DeFRANCIS, 1984, p.133), scarce six years after the arrival of the first Jesuits in Macau. (WITEK, 2001, p.15) Less than two decades later, in 1585, the Spaniard Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza (1545-1618) wrote his great book, *Historia de las cosas de mas notáveis, ritos y costumbres, del gran Reyno Dela China*. Mendoza was an Augustinian monk who transmitted stories told to him by Spanish and Portuguese priests in the East and China. Until 1600 his book had 46 editions in seven European languages and many scholars consider it the first book on China since Marco Polo that had reached a broader audience in Europe, and where the "European readers encountered actual Chinese characters for the first time". (PORTER, 2001 p.35). Mendoza dedicated chapter XIII to an extended study on the Chinese characters, from which we have the following excerpt:

> [Chinese writing] does not have a number of letters in the same way that we, but all that is written is [done] through drawings, and they learn

> [them] over a long time and with great difficulty, because almost every word has its character [...] [the Chinese] use more than six thousand different characters that they signal with great enthusiasm [...] It is a language that is understood better written than spoken, such as Hebrew, because [of] the [written] strokes which differentiate a character from another, while [by] talking [the words] cannot be distinguished easily. [...] It is admirable that while in that realm many languages are spoken, some different from the others, everyone usually understands each other in writing, even if they cannot understand by speaking [...] (MENDOZA, 1585, p.104-105)

This excerpt already points to three key recurring properties of Chinese writing as represented by the Europeans: 1) Chinese writing is difficult to master and only a few reach its command; 2) writing takes precedence over the spoken language (i.e., the language is better understood written than spoken due to its high homophony); and 3) through writing people in China who speak different languages but share this writing system can understand each other. These attributes will return in one form or another in most books on China in the subsequent centuries.[13]

Thirty years after the publication of Mendoza's book, in 1615, a second book was published which has helped to consolidate this initial representation of the language and customs of the Chinese with the Europeans for the next two hundred years. (PORTER, 2001, p.36) In that year father Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628) released a long and detailed commented version of the diaries that the renowned Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) wrote in China, in the work entitled *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu*, which has brought to Europe for the first time a more rigorous and in-depth knowledge about the country and its language:

> The appearance of Trigault's book in 1615 took Europe by surprise. It reopened the door to China, which was first opened by Marco Polo, three centuries before, and then closed behind him by an incredulous public, who received the greater part of its fabulous narrative as the beguiling tale of a capricious traveler. (GALLAGHER, 1953, xvii)

The first edition of 1615 was followed in the next ten years by several full or partial reeditions in Latin, French, German, Spanish, Italian and English. The examination of the manuscripts attributed to Ricci and his superior Michelle Ruggieri led to the discovery in 1934 of a Portuguese-Chinese dictionary in 189 folios, which has the oldest

[13] The books of Mendoza, and also the edition *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* of José de Acosta (1590) have had a direct influence on Francis Bacon (1561-1626) when he published his prestigious *The Advancement of Learning* in 1605. In an important passage (book 6, chapter 1) Bacon uses the example of the Chinese script to question the traditional Greek idea of writing as representation of speech, assuming that the Chinese characters could be possible candidates for *real characters*, a universal form of communication between people speaking different languages.

Romanization known of the Chinese sounds in what was probably the first European-Chinese bilingual dictionary, written in the 1580s (WITEK, 2001), demonstrating the depth of the knowledge of the two Italians about Chinese. Unfortunately the dictionary was not published contemporaneously in Europe nor included in Trigault's book and so it had insignificant influence in the European knowledge of the Chinese language at that time.

The works of Jesuits based in Macau marked the beginning of the "first phase" of the learning process in Europe about China, discernible by impressions of a Chinese script which increasingly appears to fulfill the European wishes to correct the inherent "faults" of the natural languages. Europe at that time was influenced by the publication in 1660 of the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée* of Port-Royal and by the papers published in England that promoted the search for a universal language and the *real character* of writing, by authors such as Francis Bacon (*The Advancement of Learning*, 1605), Cave Beck (*The Universal Character*, 1657), George Dalgarno (*Ars Signorum*, 1661), John Wilkins (*An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical* Language, 1668), Francis Lodowick (*Of an Universall Real Character*, 1686), up to John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689).[14] (PORTER, 2001; HARRIS; TAYLOR, 1997; LEPSCHY, 2014a,b; and AUROUX 1995a,b) For these authors, the ideal (or idealized) language is one that should be ancient, simple, usually modest, with vitality and brevity. (RAMSEY, 2001, p.501) These were characteristics often associated in the seventeenth century with the spoken and written language in China.

The scholars on China of the period argued that the Chinese ideography was presented as the ideal alternative to the unpredictable scenario of the vernacular forms that sprang up and rapidly expanded throughout Europe. At the same time, the Chinese alternative offered an apparent direct and unmediated relationship between words (at least in their written forms) and their meanings. As a last point in its favor, the literate elites in China have always seemed to the Europeans as quite successful in maintaining the purity of their literary language, something that was certainly not happening in Europe at that time. (PORTER, 2001, p.38-39)

Half a century after the book edited by Trigault, one of the most influential books for the European representations of China was published in 1667: *China Monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae e artis Spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata,* commonly known as *China Illustrata*, by the German Athanasius Kircher (1601/2-1680). Although Kircher – a Jesuit scholar mostly based in Rome with a special interest in deciphering ancient writings – had never visited China, he was the first to launch in Europe the widespread discussion on the

[14] Locke's work in some ways marks the beginning of the end of the search for the ideal of linguistic purity when this author admits that the faults and misinterpretations of language are inevitable. For Locke the myth of the perfect language was due to the mistaken notion that language referred to the things of the world, when in fact languages were motivated by the subjective ideas that each has on the world (LOCKE, 1690 [1894]; HARRIS; TAYLOR, 1997; PORTER, 2001). However, as we shall see, the choice of Chinese writing as an alternative to this natural (and not arbitrary) connection remained alive for decades after Locke.

origins of the Chinese culture and language. (SZCZESNIAK, 1952, p.21) His work garnered enormous prestige and his suggestion to link the Chinese and Egyptian origins was defended by some authors up to the nineteenth century and tied for a long time the fates of Chinese writing and that of the ancient Egypt under the common label of "hieroglyphic writing".[15]

Another very influential work in the European discussion about the origins of the Chinese language was *An historical essay endeavoring a probability that the language of the Empire of China is the primitive language*, by the English architect John Webb, published in 1669 and considered by some authors as the first specific treatise on Chinese language that has been widely distributed in Europe. (PORTER, 2001; AUROUX, 1995b, MUNGELLO, 1985) Webb presented a long discussion about the origins of language based on the sacred scriptures with many references to the works of Kircher. For the English author, an intact and perfect Chinese language laid behind the immense wealth and millenary history of their civilization, "because the China possess the primitive language, their society has never lost dominion over nature". (RAMSEY, 2001, p.488-489) His influence on European thinking on China was profound since Webb proposed to have "solved" the problem of Chinese script accommodation that had been preserved from the time of Adam and Eve – and therefore having predated and then overcome the Babelic collapse – setting it within a revised biblical narrative. The author assumed that Noah had built his ark in China itself, and that after the flood he and his family had returned to their original lands in the East. The Chinese would have escaped the confusion caused by the fall of the Tower of Babel because of the geographical distance of its land and have continued to preserve traces of the primitive language of mankind. (VAN KLEY, 1971; RAMSEY, 2001)

The Orientalist and theologian Andreas Müller (1630-1694), also inspired by Kircher's *China Illustrata*, published a short announcement in 1674 titled *Inventum Brandenburgicum sive Andreae Mulleri Greiffenhagi, Praepositi Berlinensis, Proposito super Clave sua Sinica* which became renowned for being the first work to explicitly formulate the problem of the *clavis sinica*. Frustrated at not getting what he considered sufficient compensation for his efforts, Müller refused to reveal his "key" and ended up burning his writings on the subject shortly before his death. (PORTER, 2001; MUNGELLO, 1985) Müller's work was soon followed by that of Christian Mentzel (1622-1701), who in 1685 published *Sylloge minutiarum lexici latino-sinici-characteristici*, considered the first Chinese lexicon published in Europe.

The bases of the knowledge on written and spoken Chinese that have been built in the seventeenth century have profoundly affected Western studies on China until at least the nineteenth century and some of its concepts have remained practically unchanged. Porter (2001) proposes three reasons as the bases for the preservation of the Western fantasy about the linguistic legitimacy of the Chinese: 1) the moment of origin of a

[15] For a critical reading on the impact of Kircher's *oeuvre*, see Szczesniak (1952), Hudson (1994), Porter (2001) and Lepschy (2014a).

legitimate language is the one when the meaning of their words is authoritatively established, and the older the origin, the stronger is this authority; 2) the true meaning is that one which is coated with immutability, which has an exceptional resistance against the changing forces of history; 3) the causal link between the authority and the immutability of such language lies in its internal code, which, in the case of Chinese, can be solved by the *clavis sinica*. The idea that Chinese had a unique legitimacy claim over all other languages has peaked with Joseph Prémare – as we shall see in the next chapter – already by the early eighteenth century and fifty years after Webb's book.

However, the slow but continued tide of political and cultural changes in Europe, the development of new ideas about language and the increasing knowledge about written and spoken Chinese from the second half of the seventeenth century into the early eighteenth century began to undermine the project of creating the Chinese language as the "ideal language" and gave hints to the "downfall" of Chinese writing in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards.

The West and the Chinese language in the 18th-19th centuries

Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), a brilliant mind and prolific author in several areas of human thought, showed a particular interest for the Chinese language and its script. In 1679 Leibniz, passionate about the possibility of a universal language, wrote about Müller's *clavis sinica* (PORTER, 2001; MUNGELLO, 1985) and saw Chinese as its most likely candidate. "If God had taught man a language, this language would be similar to the Chinese", was a phrase that appeared in 1715 in the *Lettre sur la philosophie chinoise* from Leibniz to Nicolas de Remond. The German philosopher wrote that the Europeans, because of their scientific knowledge and more analytically biased spirit, could offer the Chinese the solution so that they would be able to rediscover the lost antiquity of their own language. Chinese writing, Leibniz reasoned, was by its nature the most convenient basis for a universal language, and it only seemed to be lacking a still elusive underlying rational principle, the same conclusions of Wilkins, Webb and other a few decades before. (AUROUX, 1995b; RAMSEY, 2001)

One could argue that Leibniz was a transitional author. He belonged to what we called here the "first phase" of China's representation in Europe, the founding period characterized by the work of the Jesuit missionaries, when a structured grammar of Chinese was still not known in Europe, marked by the triad of properties of writing highlighted above, and under the strong influence of authors such as Kircher and Webb and the attempt to equate Chinese as an universal language. On other hand, Leibniz is also part of a "second phase", which has consolidated itself during the first half of the eighteenth century. This is a more complex and ambiguous epoch for which Mungello (2013) proposes a heuristic classification of three "types" of studies and scholars on China prevalent at that time. The *first* type still consisted of the Jesuits' works, less and less influential, which possessed a deeper understanding of the spoken

and written language, basically focusing its interest in the accommodation of Chinese beliefs to those of Europe. The *second* was represented by an increasing number of "proto-sinologues", scholars who also had some in-depth knowledge of Chinese, and who were still motivated by ideas of a universal language (Leibniz would be one of those). The major contrast of this new phase comes mainly from the growing influence of the *third* group, constituted by the "popularizers", who were motivated by the hopes of finding support in China for their political and intellectual ideas and movements in Europe, especially promoting the Enlightenment. These authors formed an ensemble with a more superficial knowledge of the Chinese culture and language and were those with the greater ability to produce distortions about the information from the East that reached the average European reader. Regarding the Chinese script – the focus of this article – the popularizers were among those responsible for keeping alive and well the idea of semantic-biased Chinese writing to the detriment of its spoken language, which was considered as "simple-minded," and therefore limited in its capacity to articulate ideas. Such points of view were built on fragile and superficial bases, making them easy target for the more rigorous sinologues who later dismantled what they pejoratively labeled as the "myths" about Chinese writing. Leibniz, while praising the Chinese writing as well as believing in the limitations of the Chinese cultural genius and its spoken language, is an author with links to both phases discussed here

The European technological advances opened an increasingly wider gap during the eighteenth century in comparison to the techniques and technical treatises available in China, which was then very firmly anchored in its ancient past. The contempt for the Chinese empire has eventually counterbalanced (and overtaken) the fascination of the European public with the exoticism of their culture (a tendency that was later called *Orientalism*), a move that was reinforced by the work of the popularizers. Their works gradually presented a stronger distinction from the studies of sinologues, who were in turn focused on the inclusion of China and Chinese in the European categories of world. The movement of rejection of China gained momentum at the time when a progressively ubiquitous Eurocentrism was taking hold of Europe and the Jesuit attempts to accommodate Confucian ideas to Christian theology were eventually abandoned. (MUNGELLO, 2013)

Regarding the work of sinologues (the first and second "groups" of Mungello), the presence of the Jesuits – as Joseph Prémare (1666-1736) and Jean Baptiste du Halde (1674-1743) – gave way to secular scholars – for example, Étienne Fourmont (1683-1745) and Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749). As the European linguistic studies gradually opted for the theoretical primacy of speech over writing, Chinese ideography was losing its status as an object of study among sinologues. Although it was still a time when Europeans in their large majority considered Chinese writing as a direct representation of ideas and things, in the new intellectual scene in Europe the Chinese script became identified as a mere initial step in the temporal evolutionary chain of writing systems which culminated with the alphabetic writing. This idea

was tremendously reinforced by the publication in 1737 of *The Divine Legation of Moses*, the influential book of the Englishman William Warburton, which was the first to propose the hypothesis that the writing systems of the world all followed a shared evolutionary line.[16]

The work of the Jesuit Joseph Prémare (1666-1736), *Notitia Lingua Sinicae*, published in 1720, constituted the ultimate pinnacle of the old attempt to legitimize Chinese writing as the perfect ideography, the foundations of which dated back to Kircher. Prémare basically found support on the ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuōwén* to coat the sinographs with the necessary legitimacy, proposing a pseudo-systematic ordering of characters. Motivated by a "quasi-mystical speculation on the proto-Christian origins of [Chinese] symbols" (PORTER, 2001), Prémare wanted to show that the key to Chinese writing could only be rediscovered by the intervention of the Christian European knowledge.[17]It should be noted that despite these erroneous speculation about Chinese writing, Prémare was considered the most advanced grammarian of Chinese of his century (AUROUX 1995b; PORTER, 2001; ALLETON, 2004), with a much more effective teaching technique than most of the other grammars produced by other Europeans during the course of the eighteenth century.

It was fundamental to the argument of Prémare that the Chinese of his day had "forgotten" the "true nature" of their script, compelling them to seek the help of Western missionaries equipped with their "scientific" analysis in order to recover the lost knowledge. Thus, a version of the myth of Babel was established in the context of the Chinese language, strongly based on pictographic and symbolic aspect of Chinese writing.

The hypothesis of Prémare paradoxically led the Chinese script to a weaker position before the European eyes. Whereas the legitimacy of Chinese writing was based on their supposed Christian origin, the loss of his "perfect original meaning" by the Chinese of the eighteenth century would make the ("post-Babelic") Chinese of that time a pale reflection and a bastard son of the original language, this one being the only truly "legitimate" language.

This reversal of fortune of Chinese writing (and its spoken language) is essential in order to understand the progress and context of the studies about China during the eighteenth century. The interest on the Chinese script was marked by a frustration with the lack of systematicity that Prémare attempted to justify as caused by the "lost knowledge" that could, in theory, only be regained via techniques and rationality solely

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[16] An excerpt from Warburton's book that deals the "hieroglyphic" writing systems - including Chinese – was soon translated into French in 1744 by Marc-Antoine Léonard des Malpeines, with an article on the Chinese written by Nicolas Fréret.

[17] Prémare belonged to the group in China called the *figurists* (MUNGELLO, 2013; LEE, 1991), authors who have been influenced by Prémare's teacher, Father Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) and who were convinced that the Chinese canonical books hid the truth of the original Christian revelation through figurative and symbolic forms. Contrary to authors who saw in Chinese an universal truth emanating from their own system of writing and speech, to Prémare the truth of the Chinese characters was based on the word of the Christian God, and therefore inaccessible to the Chinese of his time.

accessible to Westerners. Despite the intimate connection of Chinese "hieroglyphic" writing with the Christian universal truths, Prémare saw in contemporary Chinese writing a system which lacked efficiency and he showed a clear preference for alphabetic system. Prémare is thus one of the authors who inaugurated the separation of writing from speech in the studies related to the Chinese language.

Since present-day Chinese writing has decayed and lost its original purity with the passing of the centuries, grammar was to become the new focus of the studies on the Chinese language. The first book to be considered as fully devoted to the Chinese grammar was published in 1703 – that is, nearly twenty years before the major book of Prémare – in Guangzhou, called *Art de la lengua mandarina* by Francisco Varo. (COBLIN; LEVI, 2000) However, with the Chinese characters still monopolizing the interest of the European public, books like Varo's – that had no Chinese characters in its text – had but a diminished impact and influence at the time of its publication.

One of the first authors to write consistently in the eighteenth century on the Chinese language was Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749), an eminent historian and fierce critic of the theories of Athanasius Kircher, who promoted a new rational scrutiny of old competing theories that were still under strong influence from Kircher and Leibniz's ideas. Fréret published in 1718 his *De la langue des Chinois: reflexions sur les principes généraux de l'art d'écrire, et en particulier sur les fondements de l'écriture chinoise*, where he suggested a brief history of writing without resorting to classic or Biblical stories. Fréret was much influenced by the book of Warburton, and placed the Chinese script in the English author's scheme as belonging to the category of "paintings and symbols". In other words, Chinese should not be considered a verbal writing and had no indication of the associated pronunciation of their characters, which were "immediate signs of the ideas they express". (MALPEINES, 1744, p.539) On the other hand, Chinese was to be considered as just another writing system, being devoid of the extraordinary potentialities given to it by Leibniz and his followers.

If authors like Fréret and the Jesuit Jean Baptiste du Halde[18] still viewed Chinese as an eminently "philosophical" language – in the sense that each character represented a concept or something "universal" to mankind – Thomas Percy in his *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese* of 1762 saw the total absence of a relationship between speech and writing in Chinese not as sign of its unique origin, but as the mark of a primitivism, a writing founded by "barbarians". The Chinese spoken language, with its lack of affinity with writing and the phonetic deficiency of its few indeclinable monosyllables, all were indications to the English author of the "uncultivated" character of the Chinese.

We can notice that the contrast between the "simplicity" of the Chinese grammar together with the extreme "complexity" of its writing provoked conflicting perceptions about China and the Chinese language. From being a probable candidate for the Adamic

[18] Du Halde wrote his *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* [...] in 1736 and advocated a clear separation between written and spoken Chinese, arguing that the second could not be limited by the first.

language or a perfect writing, as we have seen it in the influential book by John Webb, it would, a few decades later, be rejected by authors like Percy as a simplistic language serving a backward civilization and a retrograde empire.

The (gradual) rise of phoneticism

Although Du Halde and Fréret were some of the first to call attention to the importance of spoken Chinese, they continued to consider Chinese writing as "ideographic". Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, however, we have seen the increased presence of sinologues specialized in Chinese language and customs attempting to dismantle the "myth" of a Chinese writing fully independent from its speech, authors who would open the ground for the pioneering work of Abel Rémusat and others in the nineteenth century.

A contemporary of Du Halde, Theophilus Bayer (1694-1738) (*Museum Sinicum*, 1730) was regarded as "the most eminent sinologue of the eighteenth century" (PORTER, 2001, p.59), who has used Müller and Mentzel work as the starting point for his own, proceeding to write the first textbook of Chinese to be printed in Europe. Bayer had the support of Étienne Fourmont (1683-1745) – *Meditationes Sinicae* (1737) and *Linguae Sinarum Mandarinicae hieroglyphicae grammatica duplex* […] (1742) – to suggest that there was a logical system underlying the Chinese script. Fourmont, one of the few scholars of his time who have used Varo's grammar, was an influential French Orientalist and member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* and one of the first Frenchmen to undergo an in-depth study of the Chinese language. He was among those responsible for disseminating the idea of separate origins of the written and spoken language in China (BRANNER, 2011, p.108) and he has also insisted that the kind of *clavis sinica* imagined by Leibniz "really existed" (PORTER, 2001, p.61), therefore mixing seventeenth century ideas about the *clavis* with the new knowledge on the grammar of Chinese.

Despite the innovative proposals of these authors, in reality there has been no continuous movement of divorce between written and spoken Chinese. Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800) (*Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*, 1759) was a student and Fourmont's successor at the *Royal Bibliotheque de France* who obstinately defended the idea that the Chinese nation had been founded by the Egyptians and that the two writing systems were closely related. (HOOKER, 1990; AUROUX, 1995b) Resistance in the European imaginary against the abandonment of Chinese ideography was also evident in the work of Joseph Hager (1757-1819), an Austrian Arabist and historian naturalized Italian. His book, *An explanation of the elementary Characters of the Chinese with an analysis of their ancient symbols and hieroglyphics*, of 1801, was very well received in Europe and was full of calligraphy and models of character based on the I-Ching (*Yìjīng* 易經). As we have seen, the European public at large rejected the more

"theoretical" books as Fourmont's and Varo's, embracing those, like Hager's, which were lavishly illustrated with drawings of Chinese characters. (AUROUX, 1995b) Even later during much of the nineteenth century, works that consider the Chinese writing strictly an ideography (or pictography) continued to enjoy high prestige and appeal to the audiences in Europe.

This scenario in Europe, in which the question about what the Chinese writing really represented remained very uncertain and took a radical change of course with the revolution in language studies that occurred in the continent especially after the second half of the nineteenth century. Europe was taken by the romantic wave originated in Germany and, from the second half of the century, the evolutionist ideas of Darwin. With Romanticism, the dialectic of culture and nature began to have a prominent influence on all human sciences.

Evolutionism gave a big boost to the theories (like Warburton's) which considered that the writing systems also followed an evolutionary-like process, from pictographs to alphabets, the latter – pinnacle of human genius – being a principle that was considered more efficient and superior to all other forms of writing and thus strengthened the aversion to ideography. Hegel, a dominant intellectual figure in the Romantic Period, criticized the admiration of Leibniz for the "hieroglyphic" writing and vehemently defended the alphabets and the primacy of speech as the basis for human communication. (HUDSON, 1994) Thus, gradually writing yielded to speech the place of importance in language studies, not because it was perceived as a threat, but rather due to its perceived innocuity: the most efficient script would be the one as transparent as possible in the phonetic representation of its characters.

Chinese characters, which over the centuries had attracted attention as privileged object of interest of lay people and scholars alike and had been considered by many Europeans as remnants of a perfect language lost in the distant past, began to occupy a secondary place in the work of sinologues. The professed goal at that moment was the search for its systematicity through some form of phonetic representation of the Chinese characters and the diachronic reconstruction of the historical forms of spoken Chinese. It was mainly through this careful and thorough study by the sinologues, with the added new ambition of linguistics to be recognized as a legitimate science, that Chinese – and all natural languages of the world – could have their respectability restored within the comparative linguistics and structuralist framework of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Within this context, we can appreciate the influential book *The Dissertation on the Nature and Character of the Chinese System of Writing* by Peter DuPonceau (1760-1844) published in 1838, called "the first truly modern synthesis of Chinese writing". (ALLETON, 1994; see also CHAO, 1940; DeFRANCIS, 1984) DuPonceau was a prestigious French-American linguist, who for seventeen years presided the *American Philosophical Society*. In his view the Chinese characters were, and could only be, the representation of Chinese (spoken) words, and therefore DuPonceau's "modernity" is marked by his break with what he considered obsolete conjectures

about Chinese writing in its speculative direct relationship with the abstract world of "ideas".[19]

It is undoubtedly remarkable that even in the absence of more concrete data on the Chinese historical phonology, authors such as DuPonceau and J. M. Callery were able to postulate this link between Chinese writing and speech. DuPonceau has based much of his research in the study of the French Sinologue Abel Rémusat and his much praised main book *Elements de la grammaire chinoise* of 1822, who is recognized as having founded "the modern academic Sinology" (PORTER, 2001, p.73), "the first attempt at a logic synthesis and well-reasoned construction of the Chinese language" (PEYRAUBE, 2001, p.345), when for the first time "knowledge of China in France left the sphere of philosophy [to linguistics]". (LEE, 1991, p.161) DuPonceau was adamant on his defense of a close link between the written characters and the spoken words when he wrote: "Every one of these significant syllables or words has one or more characters appropriate to it, and every character has a corresponding word". (DuPONCEAU, 1838, p.109)[20]. DuPonceau was also clear when he emphasized the primacy of the Chinese speech as the only true Chinese language: "The Chinese language, I mean as it is spoken, for I do not call any writing a *language*, except metaphorically […]" (DuPONCEAU, 1838, p.108)

The theory of DuPonceau and its influence on the development of a phonetic representation theory of Chinese writing is clear from this passage written by Stephen Andrews in 1854:

> Since then, the learned world has leaned quite to an opposite extreme, called the phonetic theory, contended for by Mr. Duponceau, [...] This theory asserts that the great body of the characters of the Chinese system of writing are not ideographic, or that they are so in part only, while they are also phonetic; that is, that they have been formed upon the plan of denoting the sound of the spoken words […] (ANDREWS, 1854, p.33)

It is necessary to note that the semanticism of Chinese writing still remained very much alive even after the DuPonceau's book.[21] However, an increasing number of

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[19] Two other pioneering authors of the phoneticist approach were the Portuguese Joaquim Afonso Gonçalves (1781-1834) and the Franco-Italian J.M. Callery (1810-1862). Gonçalves wrote *Arte China: constante de alphabeto e grammatica* (1829) and created an "alphabet" for the Chinese characters, graphics signs in the characters which he called *differences*, adding up to 1411 phonetic groups, in what could be the oldest Chinese syllabary conceived by a European. Gonçalves' book was soon followed by Callery with his *Systema phoneticum Scripturae Sinicae* in 1841. Callery was a Catholic missionary who also made a proposal for a Chinese syllabary, with 1,040 characters representing the phonemes in the Chinese spoken language.

[20] DuPonceau made this claim relying on quotations from the work of Rémusat, though the text of the latter is less assertive and even went so far as to state that "the signs of the [Chinese] writing, taken in general, do not express their pronunciation, but rather, ideas. The spoken and written languages are therefere quite distinct and separated". (RÉMUSAT, 1822, p.1)

[21] Some examples are: Léon de Roisny, *Les écritures figuratives et hiéroglyphique des différent peoples* (1860); Frank Chalfant, *Memoirs of the Carnegie Museum: Early chinese writing* (1862); and John Chalmers, *Origin of the Chinese* […] (1866).

books and articles were published in the last decades of the nineteenth century which dealt mainly with the Chinese grammar and the sounds of its spoken language and that have also proposed to provide lists of so-called *phonetic indicators* ("syllabaries") for the characters. Teaching manuals have nevertheless often continued to use the support of traditional semantic indicators,[22] while academic studies still explored tentatively the phonetic representation models in the Chinese script, seeking to apply DuPonceau's ideas.

Being interested in the sounds of Chinese speech and its representation in writing, by the end of the nineteenth century some authors wrote what later the famous Swedish sinologue Bernhard Karlgren (1889-1978) would call "somewhat amateur attempts on the phonetic history" of Chinese, speculating on the possibilities of representation of diachronic Chinese speech in its writing, in this way trying decipher the famous *clavis sinica* with the support of Chinese speech.[23] The theoretical ideas proposed by DuPonceau were finally consolidated on a basis deemed compatible with the new scientific methods of the linguistics of the twentieth century with the work of Karlgren, which elaborated on the diachronic relationship between writing and speech in China since the *Hàn* dynasty, an orthographic survey of 2000 years! In 1915 Karlgren began his pioneering studies on Chinese phonology with the work *Etudes sur la chinoise phonologie* after his doctoral thesis in Uppsala, completing them in 1926. The Swedish linguist was considered by many the first European to use the historical linguistic methods applied to Chinese and he revolutionized the knowledge of Chinese historical phonology through a careful reconstruction of Middle and Old Chinese, using data from Sinitic languages and other relevant languages, as well as Japanese and Chinese readings of the Chinese characters in Japanese writing. Thereafter, in the world of Sinology, the idea that this was the founding moment of a scientific knowledge about the history of written and spoken Chinese was consolidated: "The scientific study of Chinese dialects [and its diachrony] began with the work of Bernhard Karlgren and Y.R. Chao". (NORMAN, 1988, p.5)[24].

From this new "founding moment", in the dawn of the twentieth century, China itself, humiliated politically and economically by the Western powers, turned itself against what it considered his retrograde past and voraciously opened up to the modern scientific thought that was being imposed from the West. The Japanese occupation of China during World War II and the subsequent American victory in the Pacific helped

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[22] One exemple is: William Martin, *The Analytical Reader: a Short Method for Learning to Read and Write Chinese* (1897).

[23] Some works of this period were, for example, J. Edkins with his *Introduction to Chinese Characters* of 1876 and Z. Volipicelli in 1896 with *Chinese Phonology.*

[24] Despite the invaluable importance of Karlgren work to provide historical phonological information necessary for a phoneticist theory of Chinese writing, the Swedish sinologue maintained a somewhat "oldfashioned" view of Chinese writing as ideographic, as is shown in his *Sound & Symbol in Chinese* (1923) (adapted from *Ordet och Pennan i Mittens Rike* of 1918): "as they [Chinese characters] do not constitute a phonetic but an ideographic script, they give no hint of the *sounds* that formed the words in ancient Chinese". (KARLGREN, 1923, p.16). It should also be noted, however, that the reconstructions of Karlgren were extensively reviewed and critiqued by modern and contemporary sinologues, as in Baxter (1992) and Baxter and Sagart (2014).

solidify the Western vision of China as a "sick" nineteenth century giant, which could only be cured through the radical transformation coming from Europe and North America (MUNGELLO, 2013, p.2). Throughout the twentieth century a new historical phase of studies on the spoken and written Chinese has consolidated itself, a veritably new world where the rhetoric of discovery and scientific optimism sought to achieve the definitive phonetic reconstruction of diachronic Chinese and its parallel representation in Chinese writing. Although largely unwary, the linguists and sinologues of twentieth and twenty-first centuries are arguably still motivated by the aspirations and visions of European missionaries in China of centuries ago stuck in the perennial debates on the relationship between speech and writing.

Conclusion: Modern reflexes and phoneticism

The book of the well-known American sinologue John DeFrancis (1911-2009) entitled *The Chinese language — fact and fantasy*, published in 1984, aimed at a more comprehensive group of lay readers, was an important work for the defense of phoneticism. The author advocated the explicit intention to dismantle the "myths" related to the Chinese language (spoken and written), resulting, in his view, from centuries of misunderstandings about China and its language. When presenting Chinese writing, the author clearly stated: "Speech is primary, writing is secondary" (DeFRANCIS, 1984, p.37). DeFrancis introduced himself as a linguist and sinologue who had studied Chinese with the "science of language" in mind and his arguments clearly show his commitment to the practice of linguistics. With this authority, he peremptorily rejected everything that was not in agreement with his concepts, labeling them as *myths* against which he claimed to present incontestable *facts*. According to Lurie (2006, p.262.): "The link between insistence on the narrowly phonographic nature of writing and the scientific nature of linguistics as a discipline is also a hallmark of the Critique of the Ideographic Myth".

DeFrancis is a representative of a group of authors of the twentieth century[25] who, despite their immense respect and emotional attachment to China and its traditions, have brought – perhaps inadvertently – their Western scientific apparatus to understand the mechanisms of the inscrutable Chinese script and have elected phoneticism and phonography, eminently Western concepts, to classify and to organize it.

China, separated by physical and cultural distance, enclosed in its borders, was a culturally relatively homogeneous empire which already had had thousands of years of history by the twilight of the sixteenth century, when it was "rediscovered" by European missionaries. The knowledge about China that was created at this time was strongly influenced by reports of those early visitors and then "frozen" in the books by the

[25] Among others, Peter Boodberg (1937, 1940), George Kennedy (1951), Marshal Unger (1990, 1993), William Boltz (1994), Victor Mair (2002) and Imre Galambos (2006).

Jesuits of the seventeenth century. In this article, we intended to show that their views of language led Chinese to be recognized as a difficult language to learn, monosyllabic and highly homophonous. The tens of thousands of Chinese characters of its script would represent each one a "thought" or "concept" and, thus, writing should enable interlingual understanding. Europe, faced with the decline of Latin as their *lingua franca*, embraced the Chinese language as a new candidate for a universal language, and considered that Chinese was the oldest spoken and written language, protected by the imperial central power, kept pure and unchanged throughout the centuries, a language whose authority and longevity were founded on its external code, the direct link between its script and the "real" world, objects, concepts and ideas.

However, the reputation of China and its language in Europe followed a tortuous path. After the mid-eighteenth century many European scholars, frustrated with the apparent inaccessibility of the *clavis sinica* and motivated by Eurocentrism and the libertarian and progressive spirit of the Enlightenment, came to see Chinese writing as a hindrance to literacy and repudiated the superficial lack of grammar of what became recognized as a simple-minded language. The idea of ideography, though still fascinating to some scholars and extremely captivating to the European lay reader, became increasingly identified in the academic discourse as a mere first step in the evolution towards a more evolved alphabetic writing. Moreover, European scholars, whether religiously motivated or not, have become progressively convinced that the purported noble origins of the spoken and written Chinese language could only be deciphered through Western lenses, using Western rational tools.

The backwardness of the Chinese in the late nineteenth century was both symbolically evidenced by its obsolete ideographic script and its ailing empire ravaged by opium addiction and vulnerable to the forced installation of Western protectorates areas in the country. To finally overcome it, as Europeans and Americans believed – and the Chinese for the most part were also led to agree with it, – would only be viable through the paradoxical influence of the West itself. The fate of the Chinese script could not be more symbolic of this turn: its writing would be considered a phonography, a "visible speech". Parasitical dependence of writing on speech has guided the reconstruction of the corresponding spoken Middle and Old Chinese, which in turn directed the "solution" of the problem of phonetic representation in writing. Phonography, in the eyes of an increasingly universally biased West, became the *clavis sinica* of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

BARRETO, C. *Clavis sinica*: breve história da longa batalha pelo sistema de escrita chinesa no ocidente entre os séculos XVI e XIX. **Alfa**, São Paulo, v.61, n.1, p.197-222, 2017.

▪ *RESUMO: Este artigo tem por objetivo expor uma breve história das ideias na Europa, entre 1550 e 1900, sobre a língua falada e escrita na China. Seguindo o partido teórico do historicismo moderado de Sylvain Auroux (2004), sugerimos como fio condutor os discursos na*

disputa pela natureza da escrita chinesa: ideográfica ou fonográfica. Recusando-nos a tomar partido de uma ou outra alternativa, mostramos que este debate se desenvolve em torno de questões revisitadas ao longo destes mais de três séculos e que os estudos publicados pelos europeus encontram-se profundamente enraizados em seu contexto cultural, social e ideológico de produção. O status precário da escrita na história das ideias linguísticas se sobressai e aponta para o papel protagonista da escrita chinesa nas concepções de escrita desenvolvidas no ocidente, em particular sobre suas possibilidades representativas. Propomos, por fim, que os debates sobre o tema hoje reproduzem muitas das questões exploradas ao longo desta história, cuja resolução permanece ainda longe de um consenso.

- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: História das Ideias Linguísticas. Chinês. Europa. Escrita.*

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