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THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE AND WRITING IN CHINESE MYTHOLOGY, LEGEND AND FOLKLORE

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” -- NT, John 1

The stories of the creation of language, the Tower of Babel myth in the Bible, and Psammetichus' bold 'experiments' with two infants are familiar to modern Chinese historians of language. However, most Chinese books on the history of Chinese linguistics do not, as a rule, raise the question of the origins of language. Nor have Western historians of language dealing with the history of Chinese linguistics paid any attention to the question.

When reading various articles and accounts of the origins of language, I ask myself: Are there any similar language-origin myths in the corpus of ancient Chinese literature - which is often described as hao ruo yanhai ('abundant and copious as an ocean')? To arrive at an answer to this question, I began to search for similar accounts in various ancient Chinese texts. After six years of effort, however, I must now acknowledge that the results of my inquiry have been rather disappointing, for extremely little if anything in the Chinese corpus has been written and handed down on this topic. Furthermore, I wished to know why our ancestors seemed to neglect such a basic question. It seemed unlikely to me that the ancient Chinese scholars never contemplated the origin of language. On the one hand, it seems that all ancient civilizations, including China, have various myths about the creation of the Universe and the earth, of life and mankind. Yet on the other hand, while most ancient civilizations seem to possess various stories indicating how language came into being, the Chinese apparently have no comparable story to tell.

In this paper I' m going to suggest that one of the reasons we do not find such myths about the origins of spoken language in the classic Chinese texts is that the ancient Chinese were more fascinated with their complex pictographic writing system, and this fascination resulted not only in an almost exclusive emphasis on the origins of the Chinese characters themselves, but also in a conflating of the distinction between spoken and written language -- a scholarly bias that continues to the present day ...

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