

Hypothesis on the Co-evolution of Old Chinese and the Ancient Chinese Writing System

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The emergence of the Ancient Chinese Writing System (here forth ACWS) is a significant event in world's history by all means. In this talk I argue that this event bears a strong correlation with the linguistic evolution of Old Chinese, and it is not accidental that Old Chinese, among other languages, became the first language that developed an independent writing system in Southeast Asia. According to this scenario, the word structure, phonology, and morphology of Old Chinese altogether provide the basis of a well-functioned writing system. What kind of writing system could be invented for Old Chinese? To answer this question, we need to consider several aspects. First, alphabet writing system is not possible for Chinese (and probably for most languages in Southeast Asia) because phonological knowledges at a subsyllabic level were non-existent in native tradition. Therefore, the phonological units must be activated at a level as no smaller than syllable. Second, since the dominant word structure in Old Chinese is a monosyllable (with a possible pre-initial or pre-minor-syllable), the most straight forward strategy is to develop a syllable-based writing system. However, the number of syllables in Old Chinese is too large to be exhausted by iconic symbols. Third, Old Chinese is a language with rich morphological alternation, applied by such phonological contrasts as 四声, 清浊, 等 (tone, voicing/phonation, medial in Middle Chinese respectively). If these morphologically related phonological contrasts are omitted, the number can be dramatically reduced from syllables to a unit called "syllable group". When the number of "syllable group" could be exhausted by iconic symbols invented by the Chinese ancestors, it is possible to record the language systematically. According to the hypothesis, several working hypotheses, such as the evolutionary stage of Old Chinese at the invention of the ACRS, and how to use evidences from writing system to reconstruct Old Chinese, ought to be reconsidered.