Introduction

The Singlish Affair

The world is of the opinion that those who know Chinese characters are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know characters are simple and stupid.

Zheng Qiao (1104–1162), Tông Zhi
[Encyclopedic annals]

This is a report on my discovery of material exposing what has since come to be called The Singlish Affair. The discovery came about when I chanced upon a forgotten carton of wartime documents in the Tôyô Bunko Library in Japan while pursuing research on the fate of the Chinese writing system in China, Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam.¹

The material consists of a hodgepodge of manuscript documents and notes prepared by a small secret group of scholars with the innocuous name of the Committee on English Language Planning. Attached directly to the office of General Tôjô, the supreme commander of the Japanese armed forces, the committee was headed by his close personal friend, Prof. Ôno Kanji, and included only three other members, all collaborationists from lands occupied by the Japanese—a Chinese, Li Yiliàn; a Korean, Kim Mun-yî; and a Vietnamese, Phi De Giua. Information is lacking on how these four scholars came to be selected for membership in the committee, a point of considerable interest, for it would be hard to imagine a less harmonious group of coworkers. The documents reveal that they were continuously involved in ethnocentric bickering on what to an outsider seem to be quite trivial points of detail.

On only one thing were they fully agreed. This was the astonishing notion that, in anticipation that first Hawaii, then Australia and New Zealand, and eventually the continental United States itself would be conquered and incorporated within the Japanese empire as part of an expanded East Asia Coprosperity Sphere, it was necessary to plan for the day when policy would be implemented for reforming the writing systems of these English-speaking countries by forcing them to abandon their traditional orthography based on the Latin alphabet and to adopt instead a system based on Chinese characters.
The precise nature of this projected new system of writing was a matter of acrimonious dispute among the scholars. To the various schemes that they proposed, and to the single scheme, whatever it might turn out to be, that they were mandated by General Tôjô to try to reach agreement on, they gave the portmanteau name of Singlish.

**RATIONALE FOR SINGLISH**

Although information is lacking on how this grandiose idea originated, the rationale for it was most clearly stated by the Vietnamese member of the committee, the venerable Phi De Giua, who at nearly eighty years of age was apparently the oldest, though only by a decade or so, of this group of hoary academicians. From what little additional information I have been able to glean about him he appears to have been a scholar of considerable erudition both in traditional Confucian learning and in Western, especially French, scholarship. He was an unyielding advocate of a return to the pre-French Vietnamese orthography—that is, the abandonment of the French-promoted romanization, called Quốc Ngữ (“National Language”)*, and the restoration of Vietnamese writing based on Chinese characters. He was also virulently anti-Western. These attitudes explain the rationalization he presented for the promotion of Singlish, a rationalization centered on two main themes.

In a position paper, Phi De Giua argued that Asian hegemony (he was writing at the height of Japanese victories in 1942 and 1943) justified imposing the superior culture of Asia on the decadent West. He invoked in support of this thesis the same argument which as a young man in his early twenties he had heard presented by Resident General Paul Bert in 1886 in justification of French control over Viet Nam. Phi De Giua recalled the following passage from a letter addressed to scholars like himself by Paul Bert in the hope of winning their collaboration:

> If, four hundred years before Christ, when our ancestors were subsisting on fruits, and when Confucius was writing the Book of History, a Chinese fleet had invaded our shores, bringing to these rude tribes an already refined civilization, advanced arts and sciences, a strongly organized social hierarchy, and an admirable moral code, Chinese

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*English renderings of expressions given in transcription have been placed in double rather than single quotation marks to follow popular rather than technical usage.
modern French sinologist Georges Margoulies as exponents of the superiority of Chinese characters as a universal means of intellectual communication. In his extensive references to Margoulies it is apparent that Phi De Giua had succeeded, surprisingly quickly, in obtaining access to a book-length study that the French sinologue published in 1943 under the title La langue et l'écriture chinoises. He especially quotes the appendix to this work, in which, after a lengthy eulogy of the Chinese writing system, the author takes up "le problème d'une langue internationale" and finds the solution in the universal use of Chinese characters. Margoulies envisioned that the semantic value of the characters would be the same in all languages, just as is the case with the arabic numerals, and that they would merely be pronounced differently and arranged in different order according to the phonological and syntactical habits of each language that they represented.

CHINESE ÜBER ALLES

Li Yilián, the Chinese member of the committee, seized upon Phi De Giua’s presentation to advance the view that the English-speaking countries should be made to repeat the history of Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam in first adopting the Chinese language and the Chinese writing system in toto as the primary system of intellectual communication. He pointed out that Chinese had been introduced into Viet Nam not long after the assertion of Chinese suzerainty in 111 B.C., into Korea about the same time, and into Japan a few centuries later. For a great many years (more than a millennium in the case of Viet Nam), classical Chinese was the only medium of written communication in all three countries. He acknowledged that these countries lacked an indigenous system of writing when they first came in contact with Chinese culture, whereas the English-speaking countries were equipped with an orthography of sorts, albeit one based on mundane letters rather than on the aesthetic characters. Nevertheless, paralleling the views expressed by Aymonier, Li argued for the adoption of classical Chinese as la langue véhiculaire in the educational systems of the English-speaking countries. He did not specify whether English in both its spoken and written forms was to be completely eliminated, with all instruction to be given exclusively in Chinese from the first day of class in the first year of primary school (as Aymonier recommended for French in Viet Nam), or whether the use of a spoken form of English would be permitted to explain Chinese in the initial stage, which might last for one, two, or even three or more years of school before the complete transition to classical Chinese could be effected. In any case, following Aymonier, he envisaged the eventual abandonment of their native language by the subject peoples; at best only a few vestigial words of English would be absorbed into Chinese.

The non-Chinese members of the committee objected to these views as unrealistic. They felt that this extreme approach might work in Hawaii, Australia, and New Zealand with their smaller populations but argued that it was not feasible to expect that the more numerous Americans in the continental United States could be made to abandon completely both their spoken and written languages for Chinese. Li Yilián thereupon retreated to the position that in the initial stage, while tolerating the use of their own speech by the natives, all writing in English should be sternly forbidden and only writing in classical Chinese should be allowed. At first this approach would require the importation of a substantial number of Chinese scholars, as had happened in the case of Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam in their initial contacts with Chinese, but eventually, Li said, an indigenous class of collaborationist scholars would emerge who would be able to express themselves in the new medium of writing. These scholars, following the path of their predecessors in Asia, could be counted upon to guard their monopoly of learning, take pride in their newly acquired knowledge, extol the merits of Chinese over their own language as a medium of communication, and develop a refined literature the appreciation of which would be restricted to those few with enough resources to acquire a command of classical Chinese.

Li envisaged, for example, that Westerners would start their schooling, as in the traditional Chinese educational system, with the study of the classical Chinese rhymes contained in the Zhou dynasty (1027–221 B.C.) Book of Poetry. Here is the opening stanza of such a poem widely quoted in anthologies of Chinese literature, for which I provide a transcription and character-for-character translation:

野有死鹿野 yé yǒu sǐ jùn  wilds there’s dead doe
白茅包之白 máo bāo zhī white reeds shroud it
有女懷春有 yǒu nǚ huái qīn there’s girl feels Spring
吉士誘之吉 shì yòu zhī fine knight tempts her

yè yǒu sǐ jùn
bái máo bāo zhī
yǒu nǚ huái qīn
jí shì yòu zhī
BROKEN CHINESE

The other committee members were opposed to the idea that Westerners should be made to start their study of Chinese with something as difficult as classical poetry. They pointed out that poetry, even more than other forms of writing, is dependent for its beauty on how it sounds, and it is precisely with respect to pronunciation that foreigners are most seriously guilty of speaking broken Chinese. Li Yilián conceded that it would be easier to teach Americans to write elegant Chinese than to get them to pronounce Chinese with any degree of accuracy. He was aware even some of the most highly acclaimed Chinese programs in American universities had failed to give their students a modest command of spoken Chinese. Tones would undoubtedly be the first casualty, as they had been in Korea, Japan, and, to a lesser extent, Viet Nam, where the indigenous language was either tonal to begin with or became tonal in the course of its history. Li Yilián admitted that Americans, notoriously incapable of pronouncing Chinese even approximately correctly, were sure to massacre the poem cited here by pronouncing it with outrageous phonetic distortions, much as if the lines were written in traditional English orthography:

yeah yo s-s-s june
bye maugh baugh jer
yo new hwigh chune
gee sher yo jer

Warming to the subject, he said Americans would surely confound mā ("mother"), mā ("hemp"), mā ("horse"), and mā ("revile"), pronouncing all of these words as undifferentiated ma. Thus if they were to say something that they might write in their traditional orthography as my ma it would be impossible to tell whether they were saying māi mā ("bury mother"), māi mā ("buy hemp"), or māi mā ("sell horses"). These words are, of course, clearly distinguished when written in Chinese characters or when accurately pronounced in Chinese.

The other committee members, however, were not much concerned with the phonetic modifications that Americans would make in pronouncing what they called Sino-English, which they said would inevitably come into being, just as Sino-Korean, Sino-Japanese, and Sino-Vietnamese had resulted from the phonetic modification of Chinese words as pronounced by speakers in the borrowing countries. They were perfectly aware, to give one example, that the modern Chinese word guō ("country"), which when it was borrowed in the first few hundred years of our era was pronounced something like kwak in Chinese, became Sino-Korean ku, Sino-Japanese koku, and Sino-Vietnamese guo. Li Yilián was sure that it would undergo even greater distortion when borrowed into Sino-English. What else, he observed, could one expect of people who perpetrated such monstrosities as the GI distortion of "Chiang Kai-shek" as "Chunce Jack"?

The Korean member remarked, rather smugly, that in the inevitable process of bringing many Chinese loanwords into English he hoped it would be possible to avoid the Vietnamese, and more especially Japanese, precedent of basing the Chinese borrowings not on a more or less homogeneous variety of Chinese but on phonologically quite disparate forms belonging to different Chinese dialects during different periods of time. Thus a Chinese character meaning "to kill" was taken over into Japanese as seti in the "go' on" pronunciation of the Shanghai area in the third to sixth centuries and as satu in the "kan' on" pronunciation of Northwest China in the seventh to tenth centuries; in addition to these pronunciations in Chinese loanwords it was also used to represent the stem of the purely Japanese word korosu for "to kill." In defense of such different pronunciations, which make it very difficult for Japanese to know what reading to assign to Chinese characters, the Japanese member, Ōno Kanji, pointed out that English was not without similar problems, citing the case of the following expressions:

4th (fourth), where the four is of Germanic origin.
4to (quarto), where the quar is of Latin origin.

While acknowledging the existence of such variant pronunciations of the same written symbol, Kim Mun-yi remarked that they were no more numerous in English than in his own language. Kim urged that every effort should be made to emulate the Korean success in avoiding excessive irregularity and complexity in phonological borrowings.

All four members agreed, in any case, on the need for the large-scale importation of Chinese loanwords into English and indicated their own preferences regarding the terms that should be brought in. Li Yilián, an avid performer on the two-stringed Chinese violin who
was inordinately proud of having played 二胡 ("second violin") in some of the leading Chinese orchestras, was eager to have his instrument replace the conventional Western violin and to import the terminology accompanying this change. He noted that the term 二胡, for example, would probably be taken over as erhu, a phonetic-semantic borrowing whose Sino-English pronunciation was not far from the original. The committee compiled a list of ten thousand such phonetic-semantic loanwords they believed were needed to improve the English vocabulary.

CHINESE CHARACTERS AS PHONETIC SYMBOLS

Although there were varying degrees of concern over the problem of Sino-English distortion of Chinese loanwords, with the Chinese member naturally expressing the greatest worry on this score, all four members expressed even greater concern about the problem that had plagued their own countries: how to express non-Chinese terms in Chinese characters. The Chinese were the first to deal with this problem, which they did by extending the principle, already adopted in their own language, of using characters to express sounds. In the Book of Poetry the cries of birds were expressed by characters used solely for their phonetic value. When the Chinese were confronted with the problem of expressing foreign terms and names, as happened on a large scale with the introduction of Buddhism in the first century A.D., they did so by further extending the use of Chinese characters as phonetic symbols. The word Buddha itself came to be represented by a character which at one time had a pronunciation something like 仏 and now, after a long process of phonological change, is pronounced 佛.

The phonetic use of Chinese characters was also applied by the Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese in rendering words in their own language. The earliest recorded example of this usage in Viet Nam occurred in the year 791 when two Chinese characters with the modern pronunciation 佛 and 袈 and the literal but irrelevant meanings of "cotton cloth; arrange; publish" and "to cover; roof; to build" respectively were used in their phonetic value to transcribe two Vietnamese words which are usually identified as 佛 袈 ("father and mother") (DeFrancis 1977:22). In Korea and Japan this phonetic use of Chinese characters to represent indigenous words has an even longer history.

Such writing was called 仏 ("Clerk Reading") in Korean; Man'-yōgana (literally "Borrowed Names of the Man'yōshū," one of the earliest works in which this system was used) in Japanese; and Nôm or Châu Nôm in Vietnamese, a name which in the original Chinese form had the meaning "babbled words" but was changed by the Vietnamese to a nonpejorative character meaning "southern words" (DeFrancis 1977:27-28).

The committee members agreed that their English-speaking subjects should be permitted a similar use of Chinese characters to render English names and terms. Thus the personal name Anna was to be rendered as 土 良. This for Chinese-speaking purists would have the pronunciation ən-nə. There was some disagreement, however, over which characters should be selected to represent these names. Should the first syllable, for example, be represented by the ən 土 meaning "peace" or by the ən 土 meaning "dark, gloomy"? Should the second syllable be the nə 土 meaning "elegant, fascinating" or the nə 土 meaning "to patch"? Li Yilián held out for the use of characters with pejorative meanings. He pointed out that the Chinese had done just this in rendering foreign names into Chinese in their early contacts with Westerners before they were forced to abandon the practice in the nineteenth century in treaties imposed upon them by the imperialist powers. Phi De Giua agreed with Li and also noted with considerable glee that the surname of Paul Bert’s unsuspecting successor, Paul Doumer, was given a Vietnamese rendering that sounded like the vulgar Vietnamese expression which in expurgated translation can be rendered as əu-me “to copulate with one’s mother.” (DeFrancis 1977:127). Although the other committee members sympathized with this crude but subtle way of mocking the despised Westerners, they all finally agreed that from a long-range point of view it was better to adopt characters with auspicious or at least neutral meanings, as in the name Anna, which was already well established in Chinese in the form cited.

The scholars agreed, on the basis of precedents in their own countries, that one of the first uses of English expressions written in Chinese characters would undoubtedly occur in rendering English words, including personal and place-names, in an otherwise wholly classical Chinese passage. This approach was somewhat as if an American using the Latin alphabet and composing in Latin were to write "John amat Mary, sed Mary non amat John."
ENGLISH WRITTEN IN CHINESE CHARACTERS

From discussion of the isolated rendering of English words in Chinese characters the scholars passed on to consideration of the inevitable next step that would repeat the history of writing in their own countries. This was the major extension of the use of Chinese characters in their phonetic value to represent the indigenous Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese languages in their entirety. In applying the characters to the English language, the committee prepared a sample text from which I quote the following opening passage of fourteen characters:

A brief examination of this passage shows that the characters are not being used in their semantic values, for their meanings, as the following glosses show, make no sense:

If we examine the characters with respect to their phonetic value, we find that they would be rendered in present-day Mandarin as follows:

At first glance this rendering too seems to make no sense, especially since the Chinese script gives no indication of what syllables are to be read together—that is, whether the first five syllables, for example, are to be read as indicated (that is, separately), as fō ēr sī guō-ēr, or as fō-ēr sī guō-ēr, or as any one of the hundreds of other combinations that might be possible. However, some knowledge of how Chinese transcribes foreign sounds provides clues in the decipherment. Thus several of the characters are conventionally used to transcribe certain foreign sounds, and we also see that some of them are repeated:

With hints such as these, we arrive at the following:

Not much knowledge of the contrastive phonology of Chinese and English is needed to recognize this passage as “Four score and seven years ago.” The whole of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address was rendered by the committee in the same fashion, but this excerpt is enough to reveal the general procedure adopted in transcribing the sounds of English by the use of Chinese characters.

MIXED USE OF CHARACTERS

At this point in their deliberations the committee members turned their attention to the possibility of the mixed use of Chinese characters in their semantic and phonetic values. Here they were simply following the evolution of writing in Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam. It was pointed out, for example, that in the opening passage of the Gettysburg Address the numbers mentioned there could just as well be represented by Chinese numerals. The following table contrasts the alternative phonetic and semantic representations of the numbers in question:

Phonetic

four 佛爾 (meanings irrelevant)
score 斯國 (meanings irrelevant)
seven 色文 (meanings irrelevant)

Semantic

four 四 (pronunciation sì irrelevant)
score 廿 (pronunciation bàn irrelevant)
seven 七 (pronunciation qī irrelevant)
Among the documents discovered in the Singlish file are two texts from which I cite the following opening passage:

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A. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7-8
四 壹 七 年 斯 以 前

B. 1 2 3a-3b 4 5 6 7-8
四 壹 三 年 斯 阿 鑽

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It is readily apparent that we have here two different Singlish versions of the opening passage in the Gettysburg Address. In both cases the grammar is English, not Chinese. Text A makes greater use of characters as semantic units; only the sixth character is used in its phonetic value. Character 1 means “four,” character 2 “score,” and character 4 “seven.” Character 3 occurring between the two numbers for “score” and “seven” is a conjunction meaning “and” that is never used in this position in Chinese. Character 5 means “year.” Characters 7-8 form a compound meaning “ago, before.” Its position at the end of the phrase happens to coincide with the position that its equivalent occupies in English. Thus, except for the sixth character, all others are used in their semantic value. If we represent characters used semantically by capitalized words and characters used phonetically by italics we can render Text A as follows:

A. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7-8
FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEAR s AGO

Text B makes greater use of characters as phonetic symbols. In addition to character 6 s at s we have 3a-3b en-de as “and” and 7-8 a-gou as “ago.” Text B can therefore be rendered as:

B. 1 2 3a-3b 4 5 6 7-8
FOUR SCORE and SEVEN YEAR s ago

At this point Ono Kanji made a strong bid for a further extension in the use of Chinese characters along lines most extensively developed by the Japanese. He pointed out that so far the committee had been considering the application of Chinese characters to English in three different ways common to the Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese—as purely phonetic symbols, as purely semantic symbols, and as mixed phonetic-semantic syllables. He illustrated each of these uses as follows:

1. **Purely phonetic:** representing the sounds of English words by using similarly sounding Chinese characters without regard to their meaning—for example, the use of 佛 習 (fó-ér) to represent “four.” (The meanings of fó [“Buddha”] and ér [“you”] are irrelevant.)

2. **Purely semantic:** representing the meanings of English words by using Chinese characters with the same meanings without regard to their sound—for example, the use of 四 to represent “four.” (Its pronunciation of sì is irrelevant.)

3. **Phonetic-semantic:** representing Chinese loanwords taken into English by using characters in both their original phonetic and semantic values—for example, 二 胡 (“second violin”), which would be read as erhoo in Sino-English.

To these three uses of Chinese characters in Singlish, Ono proposed a fourth in which the characters would function as rebus symbols, which means to represent English words or syllables by Chinese characters whose English meanings resemble the intended words or syllables in sound.

To illustrate the manner in which this extended use developed by the Japanese should be applied to English, Ono drafted a memo in which he showed how the simple Chinese character 二 could also be used as a rebus symbol. The basic semantic value of this character is “two”; it also has the derived meaning “second” in some usages. Its pronunciation in Chinese is èr, which in Sino-English would become er—fairly close to the Chinese original except for the lack of tone. As a rebus symbol it would be used to symbolize English words homophonous with “two,” namely “to” and “too.” He further explained these four usages by presenting the following illustration of the character’s use in sentences which, to focus attention on the varied uses of the character, he wrote as a mixture of Chinese and English orthography:

1. **Purely phonetic:**
   To 二 is human. (To err is human.)

2. **Purely semantic:**
   It’s 二 o’clock. (It’s two o’clock.)
   The 二 violin is out of tune. (The second violin is out of tune.)
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3. Phonetic-semantic: The シ hoo is out of tune. (The erhoo is out of tune.)
4. Rebus:
   It's シ your advantage. (It's to your advantage.)
   It's シ expensive. (It's too expensive.)

In this way the character シ would acquire several different meanings and readings in Singlish, a state of complexity that Ono insisted would not be excessive for Singlish as a whole. Singlish would still be easier than the character-based orthography used in Japanese.

Ono also argued that the attention of Singlish readers, like those in Japan, would be kept always on the alert by the constant need to guess just how a character is being used. In fact, he predicted that some writers would follow the Japanese lead in deliberately making their texts difficult to read and creating graphemic puns and puzzles. He illustrated this point by composing the first of the preceding sentences, first using the Chinese character in its rebus value and then in its purely phonetic value:

シ is human.

The committee members could not decide whether only the first three usages should be applied to English, as the majority advocated, or whether all four should be used, as the Japanese member stubbornly insisted. There were several other major points that evoked sharp disagreement among the committee members. Each advanced his own Singlish version of the Gettysburg Address incorporating his pet preferences.

VIETNAMESE VS. JAPANESE VS. KOREAN MODELS

The Vietnamese member advanced a version that was more in keeping with the way in which his forebears had adapted Chinese characters to his own language. He noted that after a stage of exclusive use of classical Chinese as the instrument of written communication, the Vietnamese began to use Chinese characters chiefly for their phonetic value to represent the words of Vietnamese, and toward this end they even coined new characters that more or less resembled traditional characters but were unintelligible to Chinese readers. So he proposed that to represent English “four,” instead of simply using the character

四 (“four”) they should create the new character 四, the left-hand side of which, consisting of the character 四, would give the meaning “four,” and the right-hand side, consisting of 四 ( whose meaning “Buddha” is irrelevant), would suggest the sound. In this way every syllable in English would be written with a distinctive character that would at least give some indication of the sound and might in some cases, as in the one just cited, also provide a semantic clue.

The other members of the committee objected to this approach on the grounds that since English had more than eight thousand distinct syllables, to represent each one of them by a separate character would place too much of a burden on readers and writers of such a Singlish script. They remarked, rather caustically, that Vietnamese with its approximately 4,800 distinct syllables had a notoriously difficult script based on Chinese characters that had died out because it was so cumbersome, whereas those in the other Sinitic countries had survived.

The Japanese member of the committee proposed instead that they follow the precedent initiated by his own countrymen in the evolution of their writing system. While initially the Japanese had used whole Chinese characters to represent Japanese sounds, they subsequently abbreviated the characters and eventually developed the simple kana syllabaries known as hiragana and katakana. Thus the Chinese character 唐, which is now pronounced きん but had the pronunciation か when the Japanese took it over some fifteen hundred years ago (its meaning of “add” is irrelevant here), was abbreviated to き in hiragana and to が in katakana. Thereafter the Japanese syllable か was represented by these abbreviated forms, and no longer by the full form, and other sounds were similarly provided with simple syllabic representations. Similarly, the unstressed English syllable an could be represented by a reduced form of the Chinese character 二 (en; the meaning is “grace” but this is irrelevant), for which the Japanese member suggested the abbreviated form わ written with one continuous stroke of the pen. The syllable de could be represented by a reduced form of the character 得, for which 徳, which could also be written with one continuous stroke of the pen, was suggested. In response to objections made by his colleagues, Ono acknowledged that the simpler syllabic structure of Japanese made it possible to represent that language with only forty-seven signs, whereas considerably more would be needed for English, but he pointed out that the result would still be much easier than the Vietnamese proposal. As in

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Japan, he said, writers of Singlish would compose in a mixture of standard characters and abbreviated syllabic signs. The phrase “four score and seven” could be rendered by replacing the whole-character approach (shown first below) with the reduced-character modification (shown in the second line) for the characters representing the sound and:

四  Rc 者得 七
FOUR SCORE and SEVEN

Ono Kanji pointed out that, as in Japan, the more characters a writer used, the more he could display his erudition. He also noted that women were the first to write exclusively, or almost exclusively, in the simple syllabary—the well-known Tale of Genji is an early (eleventh century) example of such writing—and he predicted that “women and other less well educated writers” of Singlish would produce some works entirely in the simple syllabary that he was proposing for English. He did not envision that the more complex characters would ever be completely eliminated from the Singlish script, however, since the scholars could be counted upon, as always, to show their erudition by larding their compositions with as many characters as they could.

The Korean member of the committee advanced the view that a Japanese-style Singlish orthography, while simpler than the Vietnamese proposal, was nevertheless not as good as one modeled on Korean writing. He pointed out that the Koreans, like the Japanese, had gone through the stages of first using pure Chinese, then using whole Chinese characters to represent some Korean sounds, and then mixing both. They had improved upon the Japanese reduced-character syllabary, however, by producing, as long ago as the middle of the fifteenth century, a completely new set of phonetic (more properly, phonemic) symbols called hangul that took the further step of representing the basic units of sound. The common surname Kim, for example, which would be represented in Chinese by the single character 韩 and in the Japanese syllabary by the two symbols かん, having the value of ki for the initial and み (m) for the final, could be represented in the Korean alphabet by three separate symbols for k, i, and m. In Korean orthography these three letters, owing to Chinese influence, are written not sequentially but in a square, as ꝝ, much if we were to write Kim as KI M.

In the Singlish orthography the simple hangul alphabet could be combined with characters as in the Korean writing system. Though denouncing the idea, advanced especially by Koreans of communist persuasion, that the Chinese characters should be eliminated completely from the Korean orthography, which would then be written solely in the phonetic hangul alphabet, Kim Mun-yi nevertheless seemed open to the possibility that the English speakers might be permitted to eschew characters in Singlish if they would abandon their atrocious orthography for the superior hangul script.

CHINESE CHARACTERS AS A UNIVERSAL SCRIPT

There was general support for the principle, common to both Korean and Japanese orthographies, that in the Singlish orthography the main words should be written in characters and the verb endings, conjunctions, and so forth in a phonetic script. The Chinese and Vietnamese members of the committee, however, aware that their languages as traditionally written lacked a simple system of representing sounds, were jealously opposed to the use of anything like the Korean or Japanese creations in the Singlish orthography. Instead they insisted that if the general principle of combining semantic characters with phonetic symbols was adopted for Singlish, one might as well retain the conventional roman letters instead of using hangul or creating a whole new set of symbols on the Korean or Japanese models. They therefore argued that the opening phrase of the passage cited should be written like this:

四  Rc 者得 七 年 s ago

To show how the Chinese characters could function as a truly universal writing system they also presented the same passage in a Sino-
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French orthography. I cite the following opening phrase, to which I have appended the equivalent in conventional French:

Il y a vingt sept ans

The foregoing excerpts from the Singlish file appear to represent the last stage of the committee’s deliberations. It was, however, by no means the final or definitive form which the committee was struggling to achieve. There were still many points of disagreement. The Korean member, for example, argued that the word “and” should be written, Korean style, as AN. The Vietnamese member pressed for

however, that their mentor, General Tojo, evaluated their work very highly and intended to implement their proposals as soon as his forces completed the conquest of the English-speaking populations.

In the war crimes trial of General Tojo his role in The Singlish Affair received no mention. The four members of the committee who were his accomplices in this dastardly affair succeeded in remaining in complete obscurity, thus avoiding being brought before the bar of justice. There is reason for believing, in fact, that they are still at large and, under assumed names, are continuing to influence the writing systems of their own countries and have joined with Western accomplices to plot further advances for the Chinese characters on an international scale.

EPILOGUE

When the foregoing essay was first presented to some colleagues several years ago, I assumed they would immediately catch on to what I was doing. To my utter consternation, this assumption turned out to be unwarranted. I therefore added a note specifically stating that the Committee on English Language Planning never really existed and that the so-called Singlish Affair is a figment of the imagination—a literary device designed to make more interesting an otherwise unadorned discussion of the Chinese writing system, its adaptation in the writing systems of Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam, and some of the problems involved in its use as a universal system of writing.

Yes, the whole of the preceding essay is a joke. Actually, it is a very serious joke, one intended as entertainment, to be sure, but entertainment with a purpose. My primary purpose was to poke fun at the romantic nonsense about Chinese characters that culminates in the notion that they can function as a universal written language. What better way to point up the absurdity of this idea, I thought, than by burlesquing it?

But even specialists, contrary to all my expectations, were, with few exceptions, fooled by my elaborate joke. In retrospect it is clear that my original expectation that they would be able to penetrate my ploy was quite unreasonable. Thus it is I rather than my readers who displayed inadequate understanding. My colleagues were better able than I to appreciate that the attachment to characters can be so intense as to make quite plausible an all-out defense of character-based scripts and the desire to extend their application to users of
implausible as I had thought it to be. There were other factors, of course, in the acceptance of my essay at face value, including the mechanical aspect of footnotes and references (all of which, incidentally, are authentic) and other features that give the essay the appearance of ordinary academic writing, in which seriousness is generally expected to be cloaked in solemnity rather than in humor.

Apart from the specialist colleagues for whom the essay was primarily intended, many others, including students at various levels, have read it in mimeographed form. Their almost unanimous reaction has been one of delight on discovering that they have undergone an entertaining but highly unorthodox educational experience. The approach has proved to be a particularly effective teaching device for sound scholarship is not incompatible with having fun.

In The Singlish Affair I have indulged in a number of puns and word games that in some cases are perhaps impenetrable private jokes. In the case of the names of the four members of the “committee,” for example, those who know the meaning of kanji as “character” will perhaps recognize “Ono Kanji” as an intended pun on “Oh, no characters!” Phi De Giua might more easily be identified if we follow the Vietnamese pronunciation and give the first syllable the sound “fee” rather than “fi,” in which case the name will sound more like the intended “fille de joie.” Kim Mun-yi is the feeblest joke of all: “Kim” means “gold,” and “Mun-yi” is supposed to evoke “money.” The most complex is the name Li Yilitian. Those who know Chinese may get the point if it is written in characters: 禮儀廉 or, in simplified characters, 礼义廉. The three characters mean respectively “propriety, morality, modesty” and form part of a four-character phrase listing a number of Confucian virtues of which the fourth is 責 (chì “a sense of shame”). The omission of the fourth character is part of a Chinese word game in which the reader is supposed to guess the last item when it is omitted (Kroll 1966)—much as if we had to tell what is lacking in the list of the three Christian virtues of “Faith, Hope, and ——.” The omission of the fourth character is expressed as 無 (wú “lacking a sense of shame”). In short, calling someone Mr. Li Yilitian seems to praise him as Mr. Propriety, Morality, and Modesty but actually insults him as Mr. Shameless.

In keeping with my description of the original essay as a serious joke, I shall conclude by taking up again the tongue-in-cheek reference in the final paragraph to the fact that the four members of the “committee” involved in the dastardly Singlish Affair had managed to avoid being brought before the bar of justice. I intend to see that
justice is done by presiding, in the manner of the omnipotent Walter Mitty, as chief justice of a tribunal trying the case of those plotting further advances for the Chinese characters on an international scale. Emulating the operatic Mikado's "object all sublime . . . to let the punishment fit the crime," I hand down the following dread decree:

Anyone who believes Chinese characters to be a superior system of writing that can function as a universal script is condemned to complete the task of rendering the whole of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address into Singlish.

FIGURE 1. Chinese Writing: Oracle Bone Inscription
This Shang dynasty inscription incised on an animal shoulder bone asks if there will be any calamities, notes the spirits' affirmative answer, and reports later verification that calamities did indeed occur. Reprinted with permission of the publisher from Tsuen-hsuin Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 32.
FIGURE 1. Chinese Writing: "Radical + Phonetic" Characters
An assembly of Shang and Zhou dynasty graphs "compiled expressly to illustrate the advanced nature of the [radical + phonetic] form of characters from the earliest times of which we have examples." The asterisked characters were no longer used after the spelling reform of the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.). Reprinted with permission of the publisher from Barnard, "The Nature of the Ch'in 'Reform of the Script,' " in David T. Roy and Tsuen-hsuin Tsien, Ancient China: Studies in Early Chinese Civilization (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979), pp. 202–203.

FIGURE 2. Chinese Writing: Calligraphy as Art
Regular, running, and cursive styles of writing displayed respectively in (a) a stone rubbing of a pair of commemorative scrolls written in 1953 by Shao Lizi, a prominent Guomindang supporter of the PRC; (b) a rubbing of a commemorative inscription written about the same time for the same commemorative purpose by Mao Zedong; and (c) a hanging scroll with a poem written by the seventeenth-century poet and calligrapher Fu Shan. A and b are taken from Chen and Chen, Jimei Aoyuan tike thanben; c reprinted with permission of The Art Museum, Princeton University. The Jeannette Shambaugh Elliot Collection.
FIGURE 4. Chinese Writing: Characters vs. Pinyin

Three versions (Pinyin, new simplified characters, and old complex characters) of part of a poem dedicated to Wu Yuzhang (1878–1966), language reformer and president of People’s University. The third version is the author’s addition. From Yuwen Xiandaihua no. 3 (1980): 349.

FIGURE 7. Japanese Writing: Characters Plus Syllabic Kana
Kanji and hiragana intermixed in the main text. The kanji under the oracle bone are accompanied on the left by the katakana rendition of their go 'on pronunciation and on the right by the hiragana rendition of their kan 'on pronunciation. Reprinted from AJALT (Association for Japanese-Language Teaching), 1978, p. 3.
This excerpt from the Korean-language government publication The Korean Economy Yesterday and Today (Seoul, 1965), p. 62, represents one of the two contending orthographies in South Korea, the other being the more popular Hangul-only script. In North Korea all publication is in the simpler Hangul script, underlined in the first line of the excerpt.

The origin and development of nine representative cuneiform signs from about 3000 B.C. to about 600 B.C. The shift from pictographic to stylized forms was accompanied by a shift from semantic to phonetic values for the signs. The latter have been added on the right. The original meanings are as follows: (1) heaven, (2) earth, (3) man, (4) pudendum, (5) mountain, (6) slave girl, (7) head, (8) mouth, (9) food. Reprinted with permission from Samuel N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 302-304.

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1. Characters over which a line is printed are, in the papyrus, written in red.