

Human diversity and the genealogy of languages: Noah as the founding ancestor of the Chinese

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Abstract

The characteristics which were held to define the Chinese language within the Western intellectual tradition placed it for a time at the centre in discussions of the genealogy of mankind. The dominant premodern paradigm for the explanation of human linguistic diversity was Biblical exegesis, as discussed and elaborated within the framework of ‘universal history’. A number of Western scholars argued that the Biblical patriarchs could be identified with legendary figures from Chinese history and that there was a direct link between the Chinese language and the pre-Babel linguistic order. The Chinese language, in particular its writing system, had universal characteristics, making it central in the quest for the restoration of the linguistic and conceptual unity of mankind. The rise of a modern linguistics marginalized universal projects of etymological speculation, and it was concluded that there was no cognate relationship between Chinese, Hebrew and the European languages. Both the language and the writing system were increasingly seen as anomalous and unnatural. Western understandings of the Chinese language and the Chinese writing system need to be contextualized within the evolution of conceptualizations of the natural and artificial.

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1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with how evolving language ideologies impacted on Western views of the Chinese writing system and of the Chinese language. The position of the

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Chinese language within Western linguistic debates is instructive, as the characteristics which were held to define the Chinese language within the Western intellectual tradition placed it for a time at the centre in discussions of the genealogy of mankind. The dominant premodern paradigm for the explanation of human linguistic diversity was Biblical exegesis, as discussed and elaborated within the framework of ‘universal history’. A number of Western scholars argued that the Biblical patriarchs could be identified with legendary figures from Chinese history and that there was a direct link between the Chinese language and the pre-Babel linguistic order. The Chinese language, in particular its writing system, had universal characteristics, making it central in the quest for the restoration of the linguistic and conceptual unity of mankind.

However, for many 18th century scholars and scientists, expanding horizons of knowledge and new scientific methodologies, not least the assertions of geologists that the earth was millions of years old, made the Biblical model look distinctly antiquarian. The Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726–1797) argued that investigation of the age of the earth could not draw on ‘human record’ but ‘natural history’. This was matter for empirical inquiry not Biblical interpretation, so that the investigation proceeded from direct observation: ‘it is proposed to examine the appearances of the earth’ (Hutton, 1790, p. 4).

In the 19th century, the rise of an ideology based on linguistic ‘naturalness’ led to the radical marginalization of Chinese within Western views of global linguistic diversity. The characteristics attributed to the Chinese language remained broadly the same, but the value attributed to them declined. In the age of nationalism, European understandings of individual and group identity were profoundly shaped by a ‘Protestant’ emphasis on transparency and vernacular orality in fusion with Romantic-organicist notions of personal and collective identity. Within this framework, the Chinese language was perceived as radically artificial. Its artificiality was perceived to be reflected in the unnatural dominance of writing over speech, and the Babel-like chaos afflicting its spoken manifestations.

2. The Biblical model and universal history

The Bible was the grand narrative of Western thought. Questions that preoccupied premodern scholars concerned with universal history included the identity of the original ‘Adamic’ or ‘primitive’ language, the geographical location of the Garden of Eden, and the linguistic genealogy of mankind (Olender, 1992). The nature of language and of linguistic affinity was fundamental, and linguistic inquiry often took the form of etymological speculation as to the original unity concealed beneath the apparent fragmentation of the present. Debates about linguistic affinity were set within a wider framework of analogical thinking, in which similarities across different nations and cultures of ritual, custom, legend, design, etc., were seen as potentially pointing to obscured historical affinities. The passing of historical time was understood as involving the fragmentation of a lost unity.

On the Biblical model, human diversity was understood in terms of three main branches of humanity descended from the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japhet (Genesis 10). Human history involved the further sub-division of these. By counting the descendants of Noah listed in the Bible, commentators concluded that there were 70 or (following the Septuagint) 72 post-Babel nations and languages. In the early modern era, proto-nationalist discourse became increasingly concerned with making more particular

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