

The Idea of Writing 2010:  
“Lapses, glitches, blunders — going astray in writing systems”

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## Tuesday, June 8, 2010

19:00 Welcome Apéro: Oechslin Library

## Wednesday, June 9, 2010

9:30-9:45 WOLFGANG BEHR (Zürich)  
Welcome/Introduction

9:45-10:30 THEO KRISPIJN (Leiden)  
Writing errors and hearing mistakes in the Old-Babylonian scribal schools ( $\pm$  1800 B.C.)

10:30-11:15 ELIESE-SOPHIE LINCKE (Berlin)  
Orthography, Orthopoetry and Re-Iconisation in Hieroglyphic Egyptian

11:15-11:45 (*coffee break*)

11:45-12:30 MAREN SCHENTULEIT (Heidelberg)  
Written to the best ability — lapses and unetymological writings in Demotic texts

12:30-13:15 ERIC BOOT (Leiden)  
“You’re stuck with how you wrote it”: Inside and outside the do’s and don’ts of Maya writing

13:15-14:30 (*lunch break*)

14:30-15:15 WOJCIECH SIMSON (Winterthur)  
Contaminations in Chinese Medieval Manuscripts

15:15-16:00 BRUCE RUSK (Cornell)  
Writing Beyond Meaning: Some Uses of Nonsense in Ming China

16:00-16:30 (*coffee break*)

16:30-17:15 SVEN OSTERKAMP (Kyôto)  
Klaproth’s Korean *kmis*, or: On the manners of distortion of the Japanese and Korean scripts seen in some early foreign sources

17:15-18:45 WERNER OECHSLIN (Einsiedeln)  
*tour through library*

19:00 (*dinner*)

## Thursday, June 10, 2010

- 9:00-9:45 THORSTEN TRAUlsen (Bochum)  
A Spelling For The Nation — The Development of Modern Korean Orthography in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- 9:45-10:30 HANS-JOERG DOEHLA (Zürich)  
“This book, there is no olive oil in it” – The early Kufic Arabic script and its origin
- 10:30-11:00 *(coffee break)*
- 11:00-11:45 ALEX DE VOOGT (New York)  
Pseudo-writing in the American Museum of Natural History
- 11:45-12:30 NADEJDA LEBEDEVA (Zürich)  
Lost in Transcription: Mismatch of Musical Notation and Rendering in 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Writing on Arabic Music
- 12:30-14:00 *(lunch break)*
- 14:00-14:45 ANDREAS NIEVERGELT (Zürich)  
Simply a slip of the stylus? — Obliquity in Old High German glosses
- 14:45-15:15 *(coffee break)*
- 15:00-16:00 ROMAN SHAPIRO (Moskva & Kuala Lumpur)  
Russian cacography in the ‘Olbanian’ language of the Padonki: a characterisation and comparison with Chinese and Hebrew deliberate misspellings
- 16:00-16:30 final discussion
- 16:30-17:30 *(facultative: tour of Einsiedeln monastery)*



“You’re stuck with how you wrote it”:  
Inside and outside the do’s and don’ts of Maya writing

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Maya scribes recorded short and long texts on a variety of media, from wood to stone to stucco. Within the currently known corpus of Maya hieroglyphic texts there are some intriguing examples in which scribes were confronted with writing errors and had to stick with them. In this presentation these errors and mistakes are discussed within the context of the do’s and don’ts of Maya writing. But, are all errors in Maya writing really errors?

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„This book, there is no olive oil in it” –  
The early Kufic Arabic script and its origin

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The Arabic script belongs to the Semitic writing systems, which in most cases only display consonants and/or long vowels. Looking back in history, the earliest quranic manuscripts (beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. AD) are written in the Kufic (or Hidjazi) script. This script is heavily defective not even distinguishing the consonants with dots or other diacritic systems, expressing 28 phonemes with 18 graphemes. Thus in many cases the correct reading of a sentence depends totally on the context and misinterpretations are a common feature. Kufic inscriptions older than the quranic manuscripts are few (cf. Grohmann 1967 and Gruendler 1993). This paper exhibits the main characteristics of the oldest non-quranic Kufic Arabic script and links them to the much discussed question of the origin of the Arabic script, trying to shed some light on the problem.

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Writing errors and hearing mistakes in the Old-Babylonian  
scribal schools (± 1800 B.C.)

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Many cuneiform documents excavated in Mesopotamia belong to the sphere of the

scribal school and contain information about daily exercises and the curriculum. We are able to form the most complete picture of the school of the Old-Babylonian period (2000-1600 B.C.). Just before the beginning of that period the older school system, that went back to 3000 B.C. and had become outdated, had been replaced by a new system, the 'Nippur school system'.

Nippur was at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. the main cult center of South Mesopotamia supported by the state. Because a considerable amount of scribes was needed for the administration and literary activities such as composing new poems and songs for temple and palace, Nippur attracted scribes and scholars, who settled in the city. Houses of scribes, that contained traces of school activities, were found together in one part of Nippur. That situation made earlier assyriologist think that these houses belonged to one big institution 'the school', which was known from literary compositions as the é-dub-ba.a "house where the tablets are distributed". Only recently it became clear that it concerned houses of individual scribes teaching their apprentices at home, which is the normal situation in later times. Although separately operating, they evidently shared the same educational system, the 'Nippur school system', for instructing young people in the art of writing Sumerian and (to a lesser degree) Akkadian. Many products of this school system from all levels of education have come down to us: the lentil shaped tablets of the beginners with their crude wedges and the firm script of the master, the single column excerpt tablets with Sumerian lexical series, the elaborate bilingual lexical texts and the beautifully written multicolumn tablets with literary compositions.

We know now, that there were two levels in school: an elementary first level, during which they learned basic Sumerian. This Sumerian was sufficient to be able to operate as clerk. The second level was for those who want to make carrier as scribe of literary works in the service of temple or palace. Only these highly educated scribes and scholars were able to make literary and scholarly compositions in the Sumerian language. On the one hand the apprentice learned to master all levels of Sumerian by copying words, phrases, sections, and whole compositions, on the other hand he learned to write Sumerian from dictation.

In my paper I will give examples of writing errors and the hearing mistakes the (apprentice) scribes made, while they were writing Sumerian. These examples have been taken from three learning stages: the beginning and the end of the first level, and from the second level. Starting from those examples I will try to sketch a typology of mistakes and draw some conclusions on the system behind these mistakes.

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## Lost in Transcription: Mismatch of Musical Notation and Rendering in 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Writing on Arabic Music

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The history of the reception of Arabic music in Europe dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, to the era of the Arabic caliphate in Andalusia; however, only since the 17<sup>th</sup> century the European interest in oriental music notably increased. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a decisive turn in the European view and influence on the Orient led to a significant change in the scientific approach and to a rise in the public interest in Arabic music.

The scientific work on music required writtenness to transform the transient acoustic phenomenon into an optically and temporally fixed object of knowledge. The adaptation from sound to written sign caused problems especially with the genuinely non-written Arabic music, because the notation used for this process originated from the completely different system of European music.

The tonal system of Arabic music differs from the European by the use of various scales (*maqāmat*) which are based on the division of the octave into 24 degrees. Apart from the whole tones of the European scale the neutral Arabic musical scale contains  $\frac{3}{4}$  tones, additionally  $\frac{1}{4}$  tones are derived from the  $\frac{3}{4}$  tones and whole tones. The traditional Arabic music is monophonically organised: It is completely oriented towards the melodic development and related to the human voice. It is passed on orally from one generation to the next. This method of tradition in combination with improvisation and the complex melodic and polyrhythmic texture essentially defines the character of Arab music. One of the main reasons for the lack of musical notation is generally seen in the constant need for new variations of musical sound. Arab music theorists used to depict musical information through drawing on the frets on the neck of the Arabic lute. A degree is not conceived as a sign (like on the European 5-bar notational system). Writing down Arabic music would contradict the musical intentions and mindset.

Because of the differences in the interval and rhythmic structure on the one hand and the abundant repetitions of single musical elements on the other hand the European listeners were mostly not able to perceive the tension within the Arab music. Nevertheless, before the invention of audio recording techniques written transcription was the only possibility to make this music available for researchers and interested laymen in Europe. These transcriptions enabled a connection between visual and acoustic components of music as well as an adoption of the “Other” cultural phenomenon to the own musical language.

The pioneering transcriptions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Villoteau (1809), Lane (1836), Burkhard (1831) and Kiesewetter (1842) employed various means of handling adoption difficulties: some invented new symbols for the “alien” degrees; others tried to remain completely within the traditional European music notation. A number of transcriptions devoted to Maqāmat structure developed and applied different techniques of transcriptions: using the European 5-bar system or “from the tablature deciphered numbers and notes” (Kiesewetter).

Against this background this presentation focuses on selected transcriptions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and treats the problems associated with the transfer of Arabic music to a notational system of a different origin, purpose and prerequisites.

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## Orthography, Orthopoetry and Re-Iconisation in Egyptian Hieroglyphic

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This talk is concerned with the iconic potential of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script (attested from c. 3000 B.C. – c. 400 A.D.) which is only one among several other writing systems in use in Ancient Egypt. Their seemingly iconic character had delayed the decipherment of the hieroglyphs for several centuries. Finally, Jean-François Champollion successfully established a non-iconic reading of an important part of the hieroglyphic sign inventory, claiming that these hieroglyphs are not to be analysed as „ideograms“ depicting an object, action or even a language independent idea. Instead, they should be read as arbitrary signs, representing consonantal phonemes of the corresponding spoken Egyptian language. However, iconic signs *do* exist in hieroglyphic writing. Their shapes stand in a motivated and semantically transparent relationship with the meaning of the lexeme (root) for which they serve as a logogram or classifier. They can iconically depict objects (nominal lexemes) or actions/events (verbal lexemes). Their iconicity follows rather strict – but so far unfortunately almost unexplored – rules that determine the form of an iconic hieroglyph (signifier), i.e. the elements of the object (signified) that have to be depicted and their configuration. A typology of these underlying rules will constitute the first part of this talk.

Apart from palaeographic variation, the form of an iconic hieroglyph is rather fixed and stable over a long time and across diverse texts. This means that iconic hieroglyphs get conventionalised and are generally not adapted to the form of a specific referent. Exceptions – that make playful use of and revivify the iconic potential of these hieroglyphs – will be shown in the second part of the paper.

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## Simply a slip of the stylus? - Obliquity in Old High German glosses

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Die schriftliche Überlieferung des Deutschen setzt im 8. Jh. in Form von Glossen — volkssprachige Übersetzungen einzelner Textwörter in lateinischen Handschriften — ein. Die althochdeutschen Glossen dokumentieren erste Versuche, die Muttersprache schriftlich zu fixieren. Es handelt sich um Verschriftungen, für welche sich die Schreiber nicht

an Vorbildern orientieren konnten. Umso erstaunlicher ist der hohe Grad an graphematischer Konstanz, in welcher uns, bei aller Variation, schon die frühe althochdeutsche Schriftlichkeit entgegentritt.

Unter dem Eindruck dieser Konstanz sind in der bisherigen Forschung Abweichungen in vielen Fällen voreilig als Versehen und Fehler der Schreiber abgetan worden. Zu nennen sind Phänomene wie Weglassung, Verwechslung und Vertauschung von Buchstaben. In ähnlicher Weise hat man Glossen, die auf den ersten Blick nicht zum Kontext passen, oft als Übersetzungsfehler bezeichnet. Tatsächlich kommen in den althochdeutschen Glossen da und dort unverständliche Schreibungen vor oder lassen sich die Interpretamente nicht sinnvoll auf den lateinischen Text beziehen. Nicht selten treten in ihnen bei näherer Betrachtung jedoch unerwartete Glossierungs- und Kommentierungspraktiken zu Tage.

Viele unserer Verständnisschwierigkeiten haben zudem nicht sprachliche, sondern eintragungstechnische oder kryptographische Gründe, oder rühren daher, dass wir bestimmte abkürzende und tachygraphische Verfahren nicht mehr kennen. Die Glossen weisen gegenüber den Texten nämlich eine medial äusserst vielfältige Repräsentation auf, indem in ihnen alternative Schreibtechniken (Griffel, Farbstifte), individuelle und wenig dem Standard verpflichtete Schriften, unkonventionelle und spontane Kürzungsverfahren, paraschriftliche Zeichen, kryptographische Experimente usw. zur Anwendung gelangten.

Bei „Verschreibungen“, ja bei allem, was in den Schreibungen der althochdeutschen Glossen „oblique“ erscheint, ist also mit den unterschiedlichsten Ursachen, beziehungsweise mit sowohl wirklichen als auch vermeintlichen Versehen zu rechnen. Worum es sich im konkreten Fall handelt, zeigt nur eine Analyse, die möglichst viele Aspekte, insbesondere auch äussere Merkmale einer Glossierung einbezieht. Das Spektrum reicht von tatsächlichen Schreibpannen und Schülerfehlern über Verschriftungsprobleme der Glossatoren bis hin zu versteckten Hinweisen, dass reflektierte Differenzierung vorliegt, gemäss derer unser Kenntnisstand zur althochdeutschen Sprachwirklichkeit zu verfeinern ist.

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Klaproth's Korean *kemis*, or: On the manners of distortion of the  
Japanese and Korean scripts seen in some early foreign sources

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In the present paper we will examine how the Japanese and Korean scripts, i.e. *kana* and *han'gŭl*, underwent various distortions in early foreign sources, both East Asian (Chinese, Japanese / Korean) and European ones.

We will first have a look at several early specimens of Japanese writing (excluding Chinese characters as such) written by non-native hands. Despite the fact that both Japanese syllabaries are Chinese in origin, especially the derivations of the syllabograms of the *hiragana* type (*kana* developed from cursively written Chinese characters used as phonograms, often going beyond Chinese *chaoshu*, or grass script) appear to have been unclear to Chinese



copyists, thus yielding results as if dealing with an entirely alien script. While there are numerous sources for *hiragana*, little can be found for *katakana* (*kana* developed mostly by isolating parts of Chinese characters used as phonograms on the *pars pro toto* principle). A rare exception is found in Chinese sources like *Liuqiu ruxue jianwen lu* 琉球入學見聞錄 (1764), which provide us with an idea as to how *katakana* were perceived through Chinese looking-glasses. Chinese characters of similar, albeit not identical, form and structure were available for most *katakana*, which lead to a strong tendency of graphical assimilation to the Chinese script. The importance of the relative graphical similarity between the scripts involved is thus apparent.

Such cases will be viewed in comparison to Korean sources – i.e. written from the point of view of mixed script usage, featuring both the Chinese script and a graphically and structurally dissimilar alphabetical script – as well as European ones. Do they differ from the Chinese ones?

Next we will consider early specimens of Korean writing, again excluding Chinese characters and concentrating on *han'gŭl* instead. The sources adduced here are likewise both East Asian, i.e. Chinese and Japanese, and European. An especially interesting case here is the well-known Korean medical work *Tongŭi pogam* 東醫寶鑑, which was first printed in Korea in 1613 but also enjoyed several editions in both China and Japan dating from the 18th century. The various disfigurations of the text portions in *han'gŭl* are sufficient to tell the non-Korean editions apart from the Korean ones at a glance. — As we will see the same kind of graphical assimilation to the Chinese script as observed with *kana* above is to be seen here, but how do the Japanese and European specimens of Korean writing present themselves in these terms?

To conclude we will reconsider orientalist Julius Klaproth's (1783–1835) account of the Korean script dating from 1832 and likewise those entries in the various glossaries of Korean he published which according to the author himself were taken from “a medical book printed in Korea” – as it turns out the above-mentioned *Tongŭi pogam*. Some long-standing puzzles in the history of early Western knowledge about the Korean script posed by Klaproth will be resolved, including the origin of the additional *han'gŭl* consonant letter <b> he introduced and of several phonotactically impossible “Korean” words in the glossaries – all based on the misreading or faulty graphical analysis of *han'gŭl* blocks as Klaproth found them in an already miswritten and severely distorted non-Korean original.

It is hoped that the paper will stimulate a discussion addressing issues such as:

- what is the influence the default script of a copyist exerts on the foreign script to be copied?
  - to what extent can errors and distortions be used to determine the source's provenance?
  - in how far do structural properties, e.g. linear vs. arrangement in blocks, play a role?
- &c.

## Writing Beyond Meaning: Some Uses of Nonsense in Ming China

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This paper discusses two related and overlapping textual modes that can, for convenience, be called ‘nonsense.’ The first is script of zero, low, or uncertain decipherability: writing that, from the perspective of certain readers or viewers, was just nonsense. The second category is display writing that is not sensical in ordinary ways, though it is usually perfectly readable; its words, often rote or repetitious, do not combine to form discursive content.

During the latter half of the Ming period (1368–1644), rising literacy and falling book prices made writing more accessible and widespread than in earlier periods of Chinese history. Both scholars and the less educated were fascinated with writing, not only as a medium of communication but also as a source of interest, perplexity, and power.

Sometimes illegible writing was the most powerful. Talismans and charms, which had long histories in Daoist, Buddhist, and popular religious practice, were ubiquitous in the Ming. They combined recognizable if archaic characters, often severally repeated, with images of demons or asterisms, diagrams of constellations, and/or other markings comprehensible only to the initiated — or to the supernatural entities they addressed.

Sometimes illegible writing was the most precious. Although its epigraphy (*jinsixue* 金石學) has been stigmatized as moribund by comparison with its Song (960–1279) predecessors, the Ming was in fact a period of systematization and dissemination: new compendia and dictionaries made ancient writing from stone inscriptions and bronze vessels more available than ever before. The decipherment of new or rediscovered specimens of ancient writing was a contentious field, with some scholars celebrating the recovery of lost knowledge and others accusing them of hubris or of falling for forgeries. Nonetheless, these pieces of writing became extremely popular, reproduced in multiple media across the empire, and eventually around the world.

Deciphering such texts was a scholar’s pastime, secondary to other, more important meanings evidenced by the uses to which they were put. They were symbols of the ancient sages, regardless of discursive content. Such semi-readable writing thus resembles its opposite, an apparently novel (in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) character-based decorative motif on both imperially-commissioned decorative objects and popular artifacts including woodblock prints. In this mode, easily-recognizable characters with auspicious meanings, *shou* 壽 (‘longevity’), *fu* 福 (‘good fortune’), and the like, were written in archaic scripts, integrated into the décor (for instance formed from the branches of a plant), or, most strikingly, repeated hundreds of times in slightly-differing ways.

Meaningful nonsense, all of it, but behind it lay a fear of error: of mistaken writing of powerful words, of mistaken reading of difficult characters, and of reading, mistakenly,

what shouldn't be read at all.

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Written to the best ability —  
Lapses, unetymological writings and translations in Demotic texts

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Socnopaïou Nesos, a town in Egypt's largest oasis, is a findspot of hundreds of Demotic texts of the Roman Era. Demotic as a late stage of the ancient Egyptian language in between Late Egyptian and Coptic is spoken and written from 650 B.C. to 5th century A.D. The origin of Demotic script from hieratic is evident, but the script becomes more and more cursive and especially in Socnopaïou Nesos the scribes have a distinctive handwriting. The documentary, literary and religious texts from this town form regarding linguistic and paleography a singular homogeneous corpus. Lapses and unetymological writings show the state of language development - the development from Demotic to Coptic - and how Egyptian scribes handled the problem of writing Greek foreign words especially *termini technici*.

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Russian cacography in the 'Olbanian' language of the Padonki:  
a characterisation and comparison with  
Chinese and Hebrew deliberate misspellings

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The most important case of Russian cacography (deliberate misspelling) is the language of Padonki (from Russian *podonki* 'scums', an Internet subculture), also called Olbanian. It is based on intentional breaking of Russian spelling conventions (when the standard spelling is phonetical, the Olbanian one is 'anti-phonetical', and vice versa). It is worth noting that Olbanian has developed its own spelling conventions. It is also characterised by lexical and semantic neologisms (new-coined words and existing words in new meanings).

Chinese and Hebrew also offer instances of cacography for comic/sociocultural effects, however another important issue with these languages is the deliberate retention of misspellings that must have been originally unintended (cf. allographs/*yitizi* 異體字 in Chinese classics and the tradition of 'what is read'/*qere* and 'what is written'/*ktiv* in the He-

brew Bible). Russian also knows this phenomenon, e.g. in proper names (cf. the surname *Kortoshkin* from *kartoshka* ‘potatoes’).

The Russian, Chinese and Hebrew scripts also pose the question of delimitation between deliberate errors and alternative orthographies (cf. the Russian pre-revolutionary spelling, currently used – often erroneously – on some Internet sites and in proper names; the Chinese systems of traditional, simplified and variant/*yitizi* characters; the three types of Hebrew spelling: original/*ketiv haser*, with dots for vowels/*ketiv menukad*, with additional letters for vowels/*ketiv male*).

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## Contaminations in Chinese Medieval Manuscripts

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After some preliminary remarks concerning the methodological problems in the study of textual corruption, a short introduction into the character of the Chinese manuscripts used for the present investigation will be given and their usefulness for this purpose will be established.

Contamination in a stemmatological sense – i.e. the deliberate introduction of readings from one strain of transmission into another with an emendatory purpose – shall not be discussed here, but only the unintentional confusion of readings within one and the same manuscript during the process of copying.

Simply speaking, copying a text consists in reading and writing it down again. When we look closer at it, however, it turns out to be a complex mental and physical process in which various kinds of perception and physical (re)production are involved and controlled by a human brain. The whole process is not only based on visual perception, but involves also phonetic, semantic and kinetic information that is activated in the copyist’s mind. Some examples can be given, in which only one of these channels can be made responsible for a contamination in the text. Though rare, these examples show, that the whole process of copying and textual corruption can be only understood in terms of these four channels of text processing. This fourfold approach corresponds neatly to what we know today about the working of the human brain.

Contamination might be expected to happen within a limited area of a text in such a way, that a previous passage or word influences a later passage or word, because the contaminating passage must still be present in the copyist’s mind while he contaminates another one with it. The investigated material shows, however, that the contaminated passage may come before the contaminating one, and that the distance between the contaminating and the contaminated passage can be considerable, in terms of copying time even several hours or even days. One explanation for this phenomenon is that in the used material the

whole text was memorized. One final, but very remarkable example shall show the complexities of the contamination process and throw some light on the mnemotechniques of Chinese students in the middle ages.

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A Spelling For The Nation —  
The Development of Modern Korean Orthography in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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The intrusion of Western culture in Korea at the end of the 19th century caused a reappraisal of traditional values in all aspects of everyday life. One of the most severely hit victims in this process was Classical Chinese (Hanmun) which has served in its written form as the High language variety in Korea's diglossic tradition of Written Chinese vs. Spoken Korea for almost two thousand years.

Although continuously used for centuries since its invention in 1443/4 in minor contexts such as in bilingual editions of important Chinese works or as an educational tool in teaching Chinese and other foreign languages, the orthographic situation of Written Korean was dominated by a large degree of inconsistency due to both intra-linguistic factors such as strong morpho-phonemic alternations and assimilation in suffixing as well as to historicisms reflecting and conserving sound shapes of the time of the alphabet's invention.

When modern Korean orthography was finally fixed in 1933 under the Japanese Colonial Government, the quest for a standardized spelling had seen a forty-year history covering territories such as early Bible translations, the emerging of newspapers, nationalistic language entrepreneurs and their endeavours in a in the beginning pro-Western, then anti-Japanese direction, as well as highly analytical approaches of Korean linguists, in some cases even pre-dating Western structuralist's concepts. The actors in these fields were in many cases overlapping.

Again, the division of the the Korean peninsula brought the issue of orthography back on the agenda mainly in North Korea both in connection with a nationalistic language purification as well as with the need to distinguish oneself from the South without letting the gap become too broad with regard to a possible reunification.

This paper examines these processes from around 1890 to 1960. The focus is laid on the interplay between purely linguistic problems in orthography and the social-political overtones they adopted during these turbulent decades on the Korean peninsula.

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# The role of museums in the preservation and creation of pseudo-script

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The American Museum of Natural History has three types of pseudo-writing in its collections. Together they show a curious group of objects for which it is less than clear whether the written part was a mistake, an act of deception or just part of honest ignorance.

A series of knives that were collected in Egypt show decorations that are partly (incorrect) Arabic and partly scribbles that resemble Arabic writing but that have no detectable or meaningful content. The decorative purpose of this writing may present a possible explanation for their existence but the presence of these knives in the Africa collection is rather curious. The reason for their purchase, their provenance and their collection context should shed some light on this question.

As part of the Asian collection, the museum features a large number of Tibetan religious statues that are engraved with Tibetan letters that identify the lama associated with the statue. Hidden on the bottom of these metal objects, this writing is hardly decorative. Some statues have no writing at all and a small number have characters that resemble Tibetan but cannot be deciphered by the Tibetan experts. Collections of these statues in other museums also feature occasional statues with pseudo-writing, a characteristic that so far has been given little attention.

Finally, as part of the Silk Road exhibit currently featured in the museum, the exhibition staff created a section dedicated to writing materials. They showed paper, parchment and papyrus. Two of these feature writing but the third one only features scribbles.

It is argued that museums, such as the American Museum of Natural History, are likely places to find pseudo-writing but for many different reasons. The collectors, curators and exhibition professionals all have a role to play in collecting, identifying or even creating such examples. To what extent any of these players were mistaken in their work depends on the context in which these objects are being studied.

