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Lecture

“Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, Basil Hall and the Ryūkyūan language:

On the Possibility of using the Chinese Script as a Pasigraphy”

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Some twenty-five years ago, in a Parisian antiquarian bookstore, I came across a volume entitled *A Dissertation on the Nature and Character of the Chinese System of Writing*, dated 1838 and published at Philadelphia for the American Philosophical Society. Its author, Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, despite his likely French origin, was then totally unknown to me. Browsing the book, I discovered that it contained considerations on the language and the use of Chinese writing in Ryūkyū, accompanied by references to **Basil Hall**'s and **Frederic Beechey**'s travel narratives (published in 1818 and 1817 respectively) for their observations on these subjects. It also included a letter from the author to Captain Hall dating back to 1828. With no hesitation, I purchased the book. Soon after I would learn that Du Ponceau was a highly respected scholar and public figure in his lifetime, and that he had actually developed friendly relations with Basil Hall during the latter's visit to the United States in 1827 and 1828. Later on, I also came to know that, following the publication of his book, Du Ponceau had an epistolary exchange with the missionary **Charles Gutzlaff**, in which Ryūkyū was again mentioned. Since this book has been in my possession, I have always had in mind that it could be of some historical interest to bring back to light the discussions concerning Ryūkyū which resulted from its author's innovative and critical reflections on the Chinese writing system. I am glad that this workshop gives me the opportunity to tackle this issue.

The western fascination for Chinese writing.

Since its discovery in the 16th century, Chinese writing has always been intriguing to Westerners. The alleged possibility of its use as a “universal language”, or *pasigraphy*, counted for a lot in that fascination. Until the first half of the 19th century, but the opinion still lingers on today, it was dominantly conceived as being of ideographic nature, in other words, as being made up of characters or symbols which would convey their meaning directly to the mind and could be understood without requiring prior acquaintance with the Chinese speech.

What John DeFrancis, in his book *Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (1984), calls the “ideographic myth”, took shape with the first European reports on China. In his account of 1569, the Portuguese Dominican missionary **Gaspar da Cruz** wrote that “[The Chinese] have a great multitude of characters, signifying each thing by a character in such sort that one only character signifies ‘Heaven,’ another ‘earth,’ and another ‘man,’ and so forth with everything else.”

The same idea is repeated and developed by the Spanish Augustinian missionary **Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza** in his *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* of 1585: “[The Chinese language] is better understood in writing than in speaking, by reason of the certain distinction of points that is in every character differing one from the other, which in speaking cannot be distinguished so easily.”

Mendoza further adds, mentioning Ryūkyū in passing:

“It is an admirable thing to consider how that in that kingdom they do speak many languages, the one differing from the other: yet generally in writing they do understand one the other, and in speaking not. [...] And in this order do communicate with them the Japanese, Ryūkyūans (Lechios), those of Sumatra and those of the kingdom of Cochin China and other borderers unto them: whereas in their speech or language, there is no more understanding than is between Greeks and Tuskanians.”



Juan Gonzalez de MENDOZA

History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China, 1585

This view was thereafter enhanced and expanded by missionaries to China, such as the Jesuits **Matteo Ricci** and **Joseph-Marie Amiot**, and cabinet scholars alike, such as the Sinologists **Étienne Fourmont** and **Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat**, as late as in the early 19th century. In Du Ponceau’s own eloquent words, Chinese characters were conceived as being

composed of “images and symbols which speak to the mind through the eyes”, without the aid of articulate sounds, and “can be read in all languages”. As the Jesuit **Pierre-Martial Cibot** put it (1773): “These symbols and images [...] form a sort of intellectual painting, a metaphysical and ideal algebra, which conveys thoughts by analogy, by relation, by convention, and so on.”

This opinion was probably best formulated by **Étienne Fourmont**, a professor of Arabic at the Collège de France who could also develop a serious interest in Chinese thanks to the presence in Paris of Arcade Huang (Huáng Jiǎlüè), when he wrote, in the 1720s, as quoted by Du Ponceau: “[The Chinese have] found the art of painting speech and speaking to the eyes.” It is interesting to note that almost the same words are used by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** in his *Essay on the Origin of Language*, posthumously published in 1781, to define Chinese writing: “A painting of sounds and a speech for the eyes.”

It is true, as Du Ponceau does not fail to point out, that in China too literati inclined to refer to their writing as “painting”. In sum, Chinese writing appeared to be, potentially, a universal script which any reader, whatever his or her own particular speech, would be able to understand in the same way. On such premises some missionaries fancied they could spread the New Testament to all nations.

Accordingly, scholars imagined that the characters or graphic signs had been invented separately from the Chinese idiom. At a later stage, the words of the spoken language would have matched with the writing and thus been made the pronunciation or name of the characters.

Since the Renaissance European scholars were preoccupied with the search for a universal language. The Chinese characters, as they were then understood, attracted the attention of philosophers and mathematicians, among whom scholars of high repute such as **Francis Bacon** and **Gottfried Leibniz**. The latter, for instance, in his quest for a *characteristica universalis* (“universal characteristic”, or universal system of notation), entertained, for a while, the idea that the discovery of the key to the composition of Chinese writing could be “useful for the analysis of thought” and could also provide what he called “an alphabet of human thought”. But he eventually dismissed the Chinese characters as too fuzzy to offer a model for a universal symbolic language. His interest then shifted to the *Book of Mutations* (*Yijing*, *Ekikyō*) and to a more deliberately formal and algebraic approach. Other scholars pursued the search of a concealed order and logic in the structure and combination of the Chinese characters conceived as ideographic signs.

Du Ponceau's life and his acquaintance with Captain Basil Hall.

In the 1820s, these fallacious ramblings on the pictographic and ideographic nature of the Chinese script were thoroughly contradicted by the brilliant analysis of the linguist Peter Stephen Du Ponceau. He was neither a Sinologist nor a specialist of Chinese, and we have no precise indication on how he became interested in the subject. But, as a linguist, he was already an esteemed scholar for his pioneering research on American Indian languages.

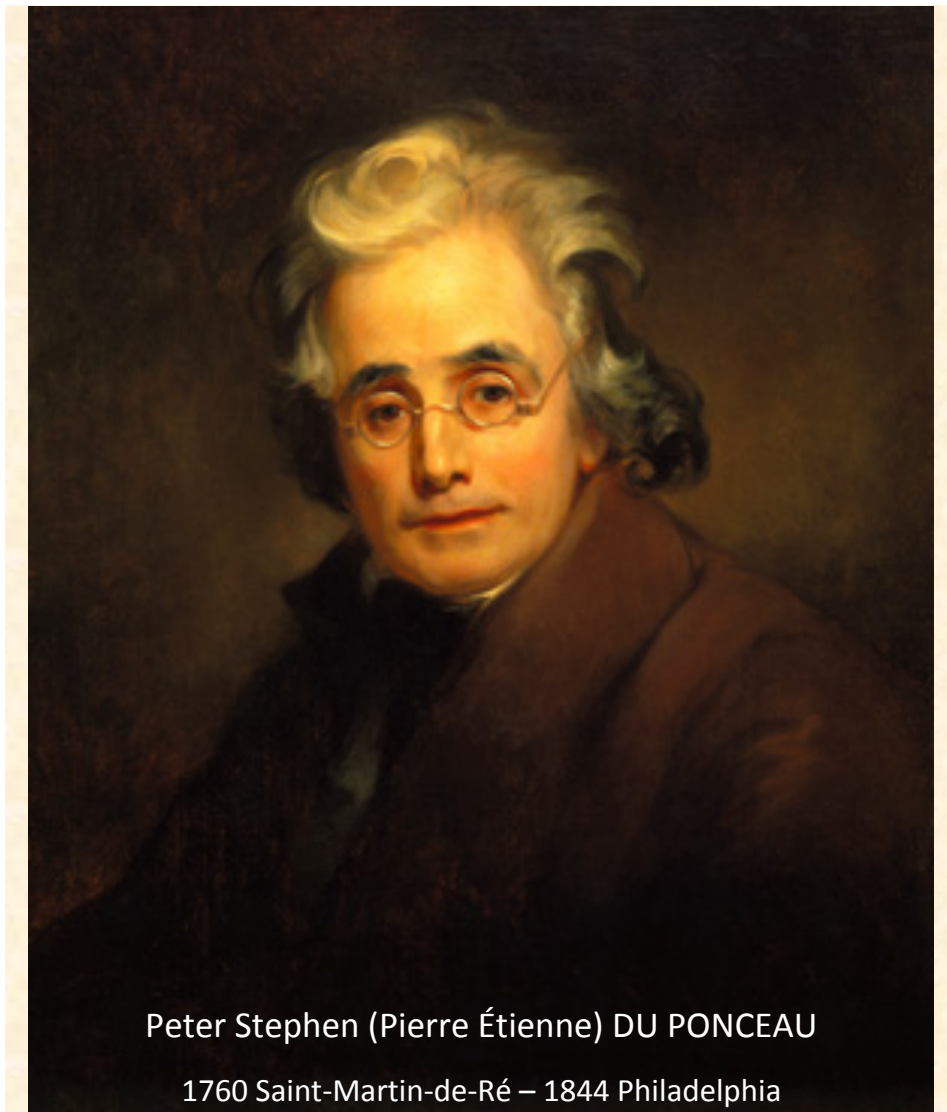
The book he published in 1838 gathers the results of his reflection on Chinese writing. It is comprised of a letter to **John Vaughan**, the librarian and editor of the American Philosophical Society, dated November 1836, which is Du Ponceau's original analysis, and of an introduction written two years later, which appears to be a revised and more concise version of the former study. A letter of Du Ponceau to Basil Hall of 1828, an anonymous article of 1830 from the *Canton Register*, an extract from a memoir of the Sinologist **Abel-Rémusat** and another one from **Frederic Beechey's** *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* are added as appendices to the letter to John Vaughan. The rest of the book, about half

of it, is made up of a detailed examination of the meaning attributed to Chinese characters in Vietnamese vocabularies.

A
DISSERTATION
ON THE
Nature and Character
OF THE
CHINESE SYSTEM OF WRITING,
IN A LETTER TO JOHN VAUGHAN, ESQ.
By PETER S. DU PONCEAU, LL.D.,
President of the American Philosophical Society, of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,
and of the Athenæum of Philadelphia; Corresponding Member of the Institute
of France, &c. &c.
TO WHICH ARE SUBJOINED,
A VOCABULARY OF THE COCHINCHINESE LANGUAGE,
By FATHER JOSEPH MORRONE,
R. C. Missionary at Saigon,
WITH REFERENCES TO PLATES, CONTAINING THE CHARACTERS BELONGING TO EACH WORD,
AND WITH NOTES, SHOWING THE DEGREE OF AFFINITY EXISTING BETWEEN THE
CHINESE AND COCHINCHINESE LANGUAGES, AND THE USE THEY RESPEC-
TIVELY MAKE OF THEIR COMMON SYSTEM OF WRITING,
By M. DE LA PALUN,
Late Consul of France at Richmond, in Virginia;
AND
A COCHINCHINESE AND LATIN DICTIONARY,
IN USE AMONG THE R. C. MISSIONS IN COCHINCHINA.
PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, BY THEIR HISTORICAL
AND LITERARY COMMITTEE.
PHILADELPHIA:
PUBLISHED FOR THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY,
BY M' CARTY AND DAVIS, 171 MARKET STREET.
1838.

Du Ponceau's biography is worthy of attention, in particular as it explains the quality of his English and his acute insight into the working of language and writing. He was born Pierre Étienne Du Ponceau on June 3, 1760, at Saint-Martin on a small island flanking the south-west Atlantic coast of France, the isle of Ré (or Rhé), where his father held a military command. His childhood already reveals a mind turned towards learning. As he himself recalls, he learned by heart a Latin vocabulary prior to the age of six. It is also from an early age that he developed a fondness for the English language after he had found an English grammar at a neighbor's house. Irish and English regiments serving the French crown were stationed on the island, and his intimacy with their families helped him soon to reach a good mastery of English, so much, as he himself states, that he would be better acquainted with Milton, Thomson, Pope or Shakespeare than with French authors. He received formal instruction both in an excellent grammar school and from private teachers before being eventually sent, during a year dedicated to scholastic philosophy, to a Benedictine college where he was nicknamed "the Englishman" (*L'Anglais*).

At the age of fifteen, he lost his father and, upon his mother's strong insistence, engaged in priesthood studies. But that proved to be too much at variance with his natural inclination, and a few months later, with only *Paradise Lost* in one pocket and a shirt in the other, as he recounts, he absconded from the seminary and made his way to the royal court at Versailles. Disappointed to see that he could not quickly obtain some official clerkship, he left the court for Paris where he worked as a secretary and translator, successively for a high-ranking figure of the kingdom, the Duke of Orleans, and, with more intellectual profit, for a famous philologist and specialist of Antiquity, the Protestant **Antoine Court de Gébelin**, the author of a nine-volume work entitled *Le Monde primitif* (1775-1784). Introduced to the entourage of the well-known author and businessman **Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais**, he then made the acquaintance of the Prussian Baron **Friedrich von Steuben** (1730-1794).



Peter Stephen (Pierre Étienne) DU PONCEAU

1760 Saint-Martin-de-Ré – 1844 Philadelphia

Beaumarchais was an early supporter of American independence. As financier and manager, he played a major role in delivering French munitions, money and supplies to the American army. Steuben himself was about to embark for America with the aim of bringing active support to the United States in its war against the British crown. He offered Du Ponceau to enter at his service as a secretary and interpreter, a position that the young man, aged only seventeen, readily accepted. Apart from English, which had become like a native tongue to him, he also had command of Italian, German, Spanish, Danish and Dutch. Steuben and Du Ponceau landed at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in December 1777. The following year

George Washington appointed Baron von Steuben Major General, and his name went down in history as a leading figure in the War of Independence. Du Ponceau was assigned his aide-de-camp and himself gained the rank of Major. He developed a lasting friendly relation with **General Lafayette** and became acquainted with, or known to, major figures of the time.

When the war came to a close, Du Ponceau had transformed into a convinced Republican and a stern patriot. Moreover, prior to his departure for America he already inclined toward Protestantism. In 1781, he took the oath to become an American citizen and settled in Philadelphia. For twenty months, he served the U.S. government as under-secretary to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs **Robert R. Livingston** (who would later become, from 1801 to 1804, Minister to France). Thereafter pursuing a career as a lawyer and influential jurist with a special interest in comparative law and in the training of lawyers (Nadelmann 1953). In 1785 he was admitted an attorney of the Supreme Court of the State. On his proposal, the Law Academy of Pennsylvania was founded in 1821.

Throughout his life Du Ponceau also showed a great interest in philological questions. As early as 1791 he joined the American Philosophical Society, which he would serve as president from 1828 to his death in 1844. In his later years he was also raised to the presidencies of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and of the Athenæum of Philadelphia. But it is not before the 1810s, when his professional position in the field of law was well established, that he began to devote more and more of his time to linguistic inquiries. His correspondence with many eminent scholars of Europe bears witness to the wide range of his activities, “a Jack of all trades” as he labeled himself. His writings on law, on the American Indian or Berber languages, and later on Chinese and other Asian languages earned him recognition and honors from the most prestigious institutions — they number at least forty-five — in his adopted country and throughout Europe.

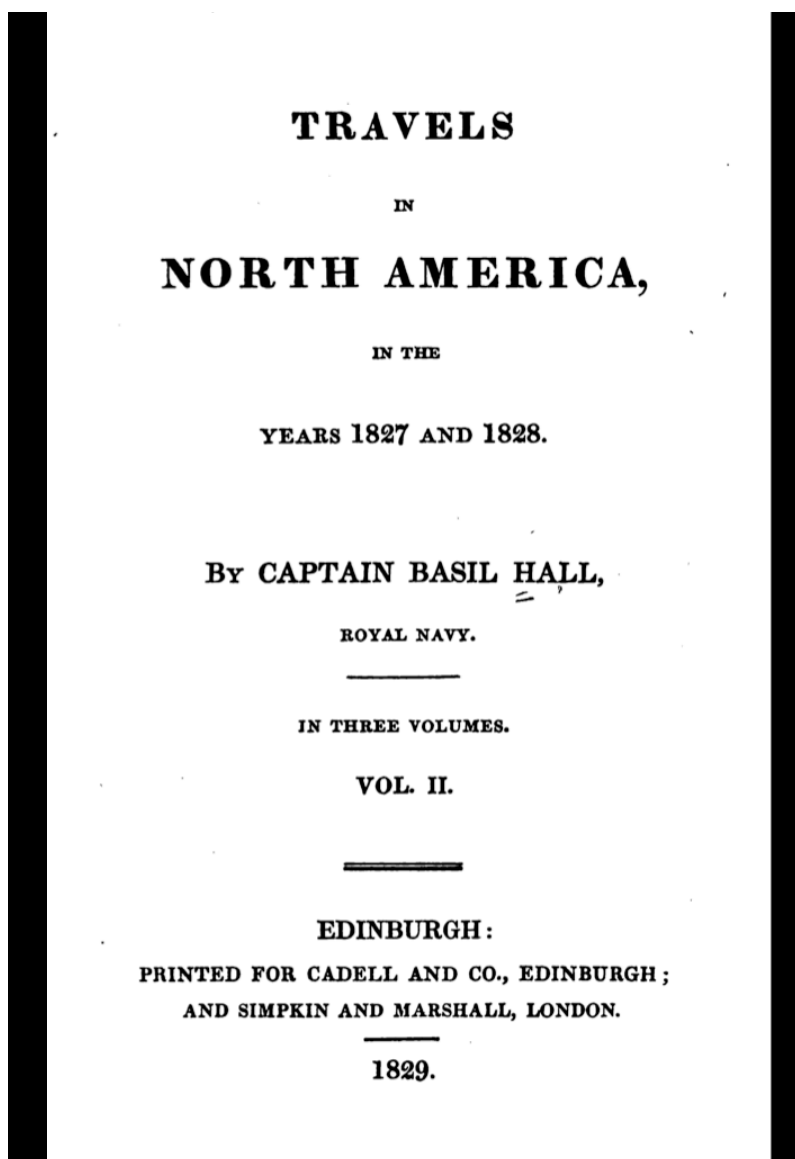
Basil Hall, a British naval officer of Scottish descent, was famous for his *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and to the Great Loo-Choo Island* published in 1818. A more accessible pocket-sized version of his narrative, which appeared as volume one of the “Constable’s Miscellany of Original and Selected Publications” (Edinburgh 1826), ensured him a wider readership.¹ From May 1827 to June 1828, he toured Canada and the United States. His encounter with Du Ponceau took place on December 8, 1827, at a Wistar Party in Philadelphia. The Wistar Parties were intellectual gatherings named in honor of the late Professor Caspar Wistar, a renowned physician and a member of the American Philosophical Society, who commenced organizing them. The admission was restricted to members of the Philosophical Society and people introduced by its members. The parties were taking place every Saturday at some member’s house.

Du Ponceau, who had always evinced a keen interest in explorations and travel narratives, was well acquainted with Basil Hall’s account of his expedition to the East China Sea. In a rather direct manner, it would seem, Du Ponceau engaged him in conversation on the chapter of writing in the vicinity of China. In his *Travels in North America* (vol. II, pp. 368-369), Hall recounts the scene with obvious distance and becoming modesty:

“In the course of the evening, I fell into conversation with Mr Du Ponceau, a gentleman well known to European and to American literature, as one of the most

¹ Basil Hall was Walter Scott’s close friend. In his *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1827), the latter mentions Hall’s memorable visit to Napoleon in his exile on St Helena Island in 1817 (reported only in Hall 1826). Hall’s narrative having not been translated into French, it is most likely through the French translation of Scott’s *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*, published the same year as the English original, that the French public became aware of Hall’s visit to Napoleon in St Helena and of the deposed emperor’s colorful reaction to his description of the Ryukyuan society. The great French writer Chateaubriand, in his *Memoirs from beyond the grave*, touched on the event by quoting from Scott’s book.

learned philologists alive. He attacked me, with great good-humour, and much more learning than I could stand under, upon a statement I had published some years ago, respecting the nature of the languages used on the shores of the China sea. I had taken upon me to say, that in every one of those countries, China, Japan, Corea, and Loo-Choo, though the spoken languages were different, the written character was common to them all, and, consequently, that when any two natives of the different countries met, though neither could speak a word of the other's language, they could readily interchange their thoughts by means of written symbols. Before Mr. Du Ponceau had proceeded far in his argument, he made it quite clear that I had known little or nothing of the matter; and when at length he asked why such statements had been put forth, there was no answer to be made, but that of Dr. Johnson to the lady who discovered a wrong definition in his dictionary, ‘Sheer ignorance, madam!’”



In a footnote of his travel narrative to the China sea, Korea and Loo-Choo, Hall had stated, without giving it a second thought:

“In China, Japan, Corea, and the islands in the adjacent seas, the spoken languages are different from one another; the written language, on the contrary, is

the same in all. [...] Their ideas are committed to writing at once without the intervention of sound, and their characters may therefore be called symbols of ideas.”

COAST OF COREA.

17

directions of the Chief, and partly from his own ideas, as well as the occasional suggestions of the bystanders. The written part was then torn off from the scroll and handed to the Chief, who delivered it to me with the utmost confidence of its being understood: but his mortification and disappointment were extreme on perceiving that he had overrated our acquirements*.

* *Note on the peculiar character of the written language in that quarter of the globe.*

In China, Japan, Corea, and the islands in the adjacent seas, the spoken languages are different from one another; the written language, on the contrary, is the same in all. Thus a native of China is unintelligible to a Corean or Japanese, while he is speaking, but they mutually understand one another when their thoughts are expressed in writing. The cause of this may be thus explained. We in Europe form an idea in the mind, and this we express by certain sounds, which differ in different countries; these sounds are committed to writing by means of the letters of the alphabet, which are only symbols of sounds, and, consequently, a writing in Europe is unintelligible to every one who is ignorant of the spoken language in which it happens to be written. The Chinese and the other natives in these seas have, on the contrary, no alphabet; no symbols of sounds; their ideas are committed to writing at once without the intervention of sound, and their characters may therefore be called symbols of ideas. Now, as the same characters are adopted in all these countries to express the same ideas, it is clear that their writings will be perfectly intelligible to each other, although their spoken languages may be quite incomprehensible.

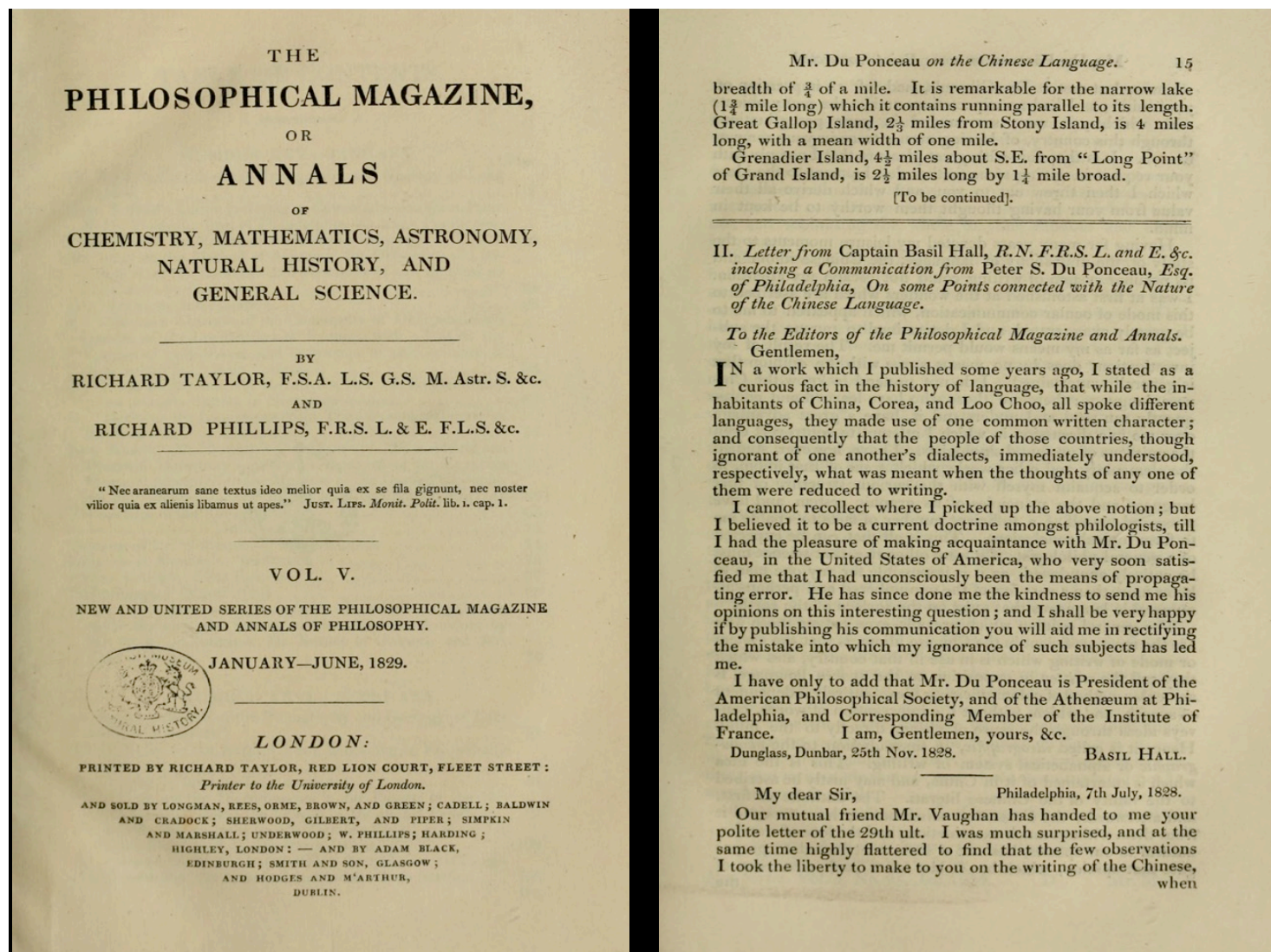
The case of the Roman numerals in Europe furnishes a ready illustration of this symbolical language. There is nothing in the symbols 1, 2, 3, &c. by which their pronunciation can be ascertained when presented to the eye, yet they communicate meaning independent of sound, and are respectively intelligible to the inhabitants of the different countries of Europe; while, at the same time, the sounds by which a native of one country distinguishes the written symbols 1, 2, 3, &c. are unintelligible to all the rest.

Basil Hall,
1818

Although Du Ponceau's vigorous assertiveness could have surprised him, Hall, as he depicts himself in his travel account, appeared quite receptive to these critical remarks, only asking to be given more details. Du Ponceau willingly complied with that request in a letter dated July 7, 1828, that is, almost a week after Hall's departure from America. Hall himself was to give Du Ponceau's lengthy letter to the *Philosophical Magazine* in London for publication. It appeared in the issue of January 1829, preceded by a short letter from Hall, which is dated Dunbar, in Scotland, November 25, 1828. In that introductory letter, Hall was asking the editor of the magazine, by publishing Du Ponceau's letter, "to aid [him] in rectifying the mistake into which [his] ignorance of such subjects had led [him]." He also specified that the error, which he has unconsciously propagated, was "a current doctrine among philologists." Du Ponceau's letter to Hall was thereafter included in his book of 1838 as appendix A.

We have no clear indication of how many times Hall and Du Ponceau saw each other. In his letter to Hall of July 7, 1828, Du Ponceau has these words, "when we last met at Dr. Gibson's", which would induce us to think that they met at least twice in Philadelphia.

That Dr. Gibson was most likely James Gibson, a member of the Philosophical Society and a participant to the Wistar parties. In the same letter, Du Ponceau refers to a letter from Hall of June 29, 1828, that is, dated on the eve of his return crossing from New York to England. But we do not know if that letter is still extant somewhere.



Besides, we learn from Richard Heathcote Heindel, later first Dean of Faculty at Pennsylvania State University's Capitol Campus, who published some letters of Du Ponceau in 1936, that the latter had translated, from the French, the first volume of the Danish scholar Martin Hübner's work dedicated to the "rights of neutrals" (*De la saisie des bateaux neutres* [On the capture of neutral vessels], La Hague, 1759), and that he had given the second volume to Basil Hall who would have translated it. But nowhere could we find trace of the publication of that translation.

Du Ponceau's demystification of the Chinese script.

As mentioned before, Du Ponceau was not a specialist of the Chinese language. It is as a linguist with a particular interest in what today one would call phonetics that he tackled the issue of the nature of Chinese writing. For that purpose, he relied on knowledgeable

specialists of Chinese, especially on the work of the French Sinologist **Abel-Rémusat**, whose rather naïve position on the issue would in the end be demolished by his analysis.

By immersing himself in scholarly analyses and classifications, and also by examining vocabularies gathered by missionaries, Du Ponceau acquainted himself, in general terms, with the structure, semantics and practical working of the Chinese characters. Here is how he summarizes the dominant opinion on Chinese writing prior to his critical examination of the issue:

“[Chinese writing] is an ocular method of communicating ideas, entirely independent of speech, and which, without the intervention of words, conveys ideas through the sense of vision directly to the mind. Hence it is called ideographic, in contradistinction from the phonographic or alphabetical system of writing. This is the idea which is entertained of it in China, and may justly be ascribed to the vanity of the Chinese literati. The Catholic at first, and afterwards the Protestant missionaries, have received it from them without much examination; and the love of wonder, natural to our species, has not a little contributed to propagate that opinion, which has taken such possession of the public mind, that it has become one of those axioms which no one will venture to contradict.” (1838:106-107)

The reasoning behind Du Ponceau’s counterfactual demonstration involves both theoretical thinking and common sense concerning the nature of writing in general. Three short sentences taken from the conclusion of his dissertation suffice to sum it up:

“All writing must be a direct representation of the spoken language” (that is, of either words, syllables or more elementary sounds).

“Chinese characters represent words of the Chinese language, and ideas only through them.”

“The Chinese system of writing is essentially phonetic, because the characters represent words, and words are sounds.”

No. I.

LETTER

FROM

PETER S. DU PONCEAU

TO

JOHN VAUGHAN, Esq.,

OR

THE NATURE AND CHARACTER

OF THE

CHINESE SYSTEM OF WRITING.

Read before the American Philosophical Society 2d of December, 1836,
and referred by them for publication to their Historical and Literary
Committee.

1

Consequently, Du Ponceau insists on at once abandoning the adjective “ideographic” to describe Chinese writing and on definitely considering it to be “lexigraphic” or “logographic” (each character representing, respectively, a word or a sound). One may notice that at the time of his letter to John Vaughan (1836) he was using the term “logographic”, while in the introduction to his book (1838) he then seemed to have opted for the term “lexigraphic”.²

Although Du Ponceau’s name and work soon vanished from the memories of Sinologists, interrogations on the nature of the Chinese writing system have not stopped until today. In this respect, the articles of J.M. Unger and M.S. Erbaugh, quoted in **Matsunaga Sachiko**’s article, show the confused

² Not long ago, concerning the Japanese *kanji*, Matsunaga Sachiko has suggested that they would be more appropriately designated as “morpho-phon(et)ic characters”.

fascination that still surrounds Chinese characters for their supposedly ideographic nature. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the renewed attempts of Sinologists to clarify the matter made Du Ponceau's name surface again. For instance, the learned article of the Russian Peter **Alexis Boodberg** on the evolution of archaic Chinese, published in 1937, though, or because, it does not mention Du Ponceau, triggered the remembering of the latter's masterful demonstration by some of its reviewers such as **Chao** and **DeFrancis**.

In his book of 1984, already quoted, DeFrancis restores Du Ponceau's contribution in the following words:

“Boodberg's objections to describing Chinese writing as ideographic were anticipated by a century in **a remarkable book by Peter S. Du Ponceau**. The author, a leading scholar who was president of the American Philosophical Society, was one of the outstanding general linguists of the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States. Although his work has been briefly noted by Edgerton (1944) and by Chao (1940), **it has not received the attention it deserves among Chinese specialists**. I must confess to having failed to check his views until quite recently, **a failure which has put me in the position of reinventing the wheel**. For Du Ponceau, with an insight that is truly astonishing in view of the limited sources available to him, **presents cogently reasoned arguments against the notion of Chinese as an ideographic script and against the whole concept of ideographic writing**. His presentation, though faulty in some points (as noted by Chao 1940), constitutes what is probably the most extensive refutation yet written of the Ideographic Myth.”

Du Ponceau's interest and embarrassment with the case of Ryūkyū.

However conclusive his demonstration concerning the intimate relationship between writing and speech in Chinese, like indeed in any other language, may be, Du Ponceau had still to give an explanation for the countless observations made by Western travelers of all conditions — missionaries, merchants or naval officers — which provided undeniable evidence that Chinese writing could serve as a means of communication between people who were ignorant of each other's spoken language. As mentioned before, such were the observations made by Gaspar da Cruz and Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza as early as in the sixteenth century.

The observation of a shared understanding of the Chinese characters, as a sort of *scripta franca*, seemed to hold true not only between the various regional components of the Chinese empire, but also, and more surprisingly, between China's neighboring nations, with very differentiated spoken languages, such as the Vietnamese, Ryūkyūans (Loo-Chooans), Koreans and Japanese. These observations appeared to be undisputed facts that could likely cast doubt on Du Ponceau's definite conclusions.

Du Ponceau distinguishes between the *monosyllabic* languages, such as the “Cochinchinese” language (Vietnamese), a category which also includes the Chinese dialects, and the *polysyllabic* languages, such as Ryūkyūan, Japanese and Korean. In the case of the peoples using a monosyllabic idiom based on the Chinese model, Chinese writing “may be applied [... but not without] modifications and alterations producing material differences in the value and significations of the characters.” He further specifies:

“If those nations whose languages are monosyllabic, and who use the Chinese characters lexigraphically, can understand Chinese writings without knowing the language, it can only be to a limited extend, which it is one of the objects of this

publication to ascertain.”

Du Ponceau finds it more difficult to explain the usage and the understanding of the Chinese characters by people whose language is polysyllabic. In his opinion, it can only result from some form of study of the Chinese language. In the case of the Japanese, his explanation eventually rests on the hypothesis that the educated people have a learned knowledge of the Chinese language (which would manifest itself as the ability to read and understand characters with pronunciations borrowed from the Chinese, known as *on-yomi*, or “Chinese style reading”), while ordinary people would only use and understand *kun-yomi*, that is, the Japanese language proper.

“Nations, whose languages like the Japanese, and, as is said, the Loo-chooan, are polysyllabic, and have inflections and grammatical forms, although they may employ Chinese characters in their alphabet, cannot possibly understand Chinese books and manuscripts, unless they have learned the Chinese language.”

In fact, concerning the case of the Ryūkyūans, Du Ponceau had been hesitant as to the nature of their spoken language. In his letter to John Vaughan, on the basis of Basil Hall’s observation and in disagreement with Frederic Beechey’s, he first tended to think that it was a monosyllabic language, but cautiously asked for further investigations on the matter.

At that time, it is true, a great deal of uncertainty prevailed as to the exact nature of the Ryūkyūan language. In his essay of 1758, the Jesuit **Antoine Gaubil** had stated that three different languages were spoken in the Ryūkyū Islands, which were neither the Japanese nor the Chinese. According to him, the educated people were acquainted with the Chinese characters and communicated through them. Concurrently, Buddhist monks from Japan had introduced the “Japanese alphabets” (*i.e.* *katakana* and *hiragana* syllabic scripts), especially the one called *i-ro-ha*. Most of the monks living in Ryūkyū also knew the Chinese characters. In practice, what concerned domestic matters was written with Japanese characters and in the local language. Books of morals, history, medicine, astronomy or astrology were written with Chinese characters.

But according to **Julius Klaproth** the Ryūkyūan, at least the language spoken on Okinawa Island (then designated as the “Great Loo-Choo”), was a dialect of the Japanese undeniably, although it contained many borrowings from the Chinese (1823, 1824):

“The priests of Fo (or Buddha), having arrived from China, brought with them Chinese characters of writing; so that it is possible, through their means, to make oneself understand by the islanders, even without being acquainted with their language. In those islands, one more frequently uses the Japanese syllabic writing, which is more appropriate to the language spoken in the archipelago. That idiom seems to be, at least in the Great Loo-Choo, a dialect of the Japanese: it is said that, in those islands, one also speaks two other languages, or rather two dialects.”

The Italian **Adriano Balbi**, in his linguistic atlas published in French in Paris (1826), disagreed with both Gaubil and Klaproth, and he actually proved better informed: Unlike the former, he thought that the three different languages were actually three dialects of the same language; unlike the second, he inclined to see in the Ryūkyūanan speech not a dialect of the Japanese, but a real language, which however undoubtedly belonged to the Japanese linguistic family.

Eventually, in the introduction to his book, Du Ponceau was to revise his opinion concerning the nature of the Ryūkyūan language, recognizing it as being a Japanese dialect

and hence a polysyllabic language:

“I think proper to mention here, that somewhere in the following Dissertation I have expressed a doubt of the correctness of Captain Beechey’s opinion that the language of the Loo-Choo Islands is polysyllabic, and a dialect of the Japanese. Further examination has satisfied me that that gentleman had good grounds for advancing that opinion, and it is with great pleasure I take this opportunity of doing him the justice to which he is entitled.”

But this admission does not in the least militate against the principles that Du Ponceau had previously laid down:

“If the Loo-chooans, as now appears probable, speak a polysyllabic Japanese dialect, they do not apply the Chinese characters to it otherwise than the Japanese themselves.”

“On this subject I must refer the reader to what I have said in my Dissertation, and in my letter to Captain Basil Hall, where I think I have sufficiently proved that the Japanese do not make use of the Chinese characters to represent the words, but only the syllables of their vernacular language; and that there is no reason to suppose that the Loo-chooans have done otherwise. If, therefore, they can read and understand the Chinese writing, it appears to me that no [other] reason can be given for it than they have learned that language, as is done by so many other nations who have adopted the religion, the manners, and the literature of the celestial empire.”

Du Ponceau found intellectual satisfaction, and even experience a sense of pride, in noticing that the eminent Sinologist **Abel-Rémusat**, to whom he was much indebted, had eventually revised his previous opinion on the Chinese script, bringing further strength to his own analysis. In 1827, in his “*Remarques sur quelques écritures syllabiques tirées des caractères chinois* (Remarks on some syllabic writings derived from the Chinese characters)”, Abel-Rémusat then clearly rejected both the idea that the understanding of the Chinese characters was indifferent to all pronunciation and the possibility to create a *pasigraphy* or universal writing based on that script. He further wrote, in accordance with Du Ponceau’s narrow understanding of the issue, that it was false to think that the people living in the vicinity of China could read Chinese books in their own language:

“The pronunciation which they apply to each word is taken from that of the Chinese themselves, and does not differ more from it than that of certain provinces of the empire differs from that of the Mandarin language. [...] The Chinese of those books is altered and corrupted, but it is still Chinese.”

“The grammar remains the same: But then that is a learned language which is specially studied, and is not understood by the mass of the inhabitants.”

Du Ponceau’s crucial demonstration did not go without causing some vivid reactions from people with an experience of living in the Far East.

One of those reactions, dating from March 1830, is included in Du Ponceau’s book. It is anonymous and comes from the periodical *Canton Register*. Its author takes **Basil Hall** to task for having “yielded his opinion to Du Ponceau’s.” He himself asserted that he had “interchanged thoughts in the Chinese characters with the Cochinchinese, Japanese and Loo-

chooans, without understanding their respective languages.” Moreover, he regretted that that fact should lose its hold on the mind of any Christian philanthropist by the confessions of Captain Hall! Unsurprisingly, Du Ponceau reacted to this side remark by saying that he could not understand how religion came to be called in aid of any man’s opinion in a mere question of fact.

A year after the publication of Du Ponceau’s book, in a letter to the American Philosophical Society read in June 1839, **Gutzlaff** took up again the claim that the Chinese characters were a means of communication between people who can neither speak nor understand each other’s oral language. He gave the example of the Loo-Choo Islands where “men of distinction talk the Chinese with great fluency, but the bulk of the people speak a dialect of the Japanese, and use the Chinese characters as well as the Japanese syllabary.”

In his answer to Gutzlaff, read to the Society in September of the same year, Du Ponceau, quoting the latter’s observation, first seems to acknowledge that he has found himself embarrassed by the facts reported by Gutzlaff concerning Loo-Choo (p. 12). But he hurries to contradict those facts by referring to the work of Reverend Medhurst who relates that the books of Confucius used in Japan have a Japanese translation interlined. This shows, he pursues, “that Chinese books, as they stand, are not intelligible to the mass of the Japanese, and need some addition, in order to general circulation.”

In the same letter, Du Ponceau addresses the cases of both Japan and Ryūkyū. Here he states that, although as yet very little is known concerning the vernacular language of the Loo-Choo Islands, “It is, however, well ascertained that it is a dialect of the Japanese, and like it, polysyllabic. It is probable that those islands are inhabited by colonies from Japan.” If the Japanese, and this also applies to the Ryūkyūans, can communicate with the Chinese by means of the characters, it is because they have learned their meaning, that is, as Du Ponceau conceives it, the *on-yomi*. But this only holds for the educated people, and Du Ponceau adds that he “cannot so easily conceive how peasants and fishermen acquire sufficient knowledge [of Chinese] to enable them to do so. I can only account for it by the Chinese, or *koye*, being a religious as well as a learned language. Religion can perform wonders.”

In conclusion, one cannot but acknowledge that Du Ponceau has convincingly and beautifully refuted the notion that the Chinese script was of a pictographic or ideographic nature, and that, accordingly, it could serve as some universal tool of communication, carrying immediate meaning to the mind, with no necessity to be acquainted with the Chinese language proper. Like any other writing system, the Chinese characters or signs carry meaning only because they are associated with, or “represent”, the semantic units, or “words”, of a spoken language. They hold no intrinsic — or better say pre-speech — significance, and their significance only originates from a preexisting spoken language to which they are linked. Speech, that is meaningful sounds, ontologically precedes concepts, and even more their graphic representation. To repeat Du Ponceau’s concise phrasing: “The Chinese system of writing is essentially phonetic, because the characters represent words, and words are sounds.”

But there remained to explain the use of Chinese writing as a *scripta franca* in China’s neighboring societies (the so-called Sinosphere) to communicate either with China or between these societies, by people who had no understanding of spoken Chinese. That possibility of mutual intelligibility through writing had been reported by too many Western visitors to dismiss it simply as an illusion. But Du Ponceau has obviously been at pain to provide an acceptable solution to that apparent conundrum. For lack of direct experience or relevant enough description, he was unable to realize that these languages, including the polysyllabic ones, were also paired — in somewhat complex and specific ways — with the Chinese

writing system so that the characters could represent words belonging to languages other than Chinese while conveying a meaning identical or close to the meaning of the Chinese words originally associated with these characters. Put another way, non-Chinese speakers can also intercommunicate through the use of Chinese characters, each user reading and understanding them through the words of his own vernacular. Historically, the appropriation of the Chinese writing system by China's neighboring peoples (who had no script of their own before) started with the mastering of spoken Chinese by a minority of people (monks in particular). Through their efforts, the Chinese characters were then pragmatically appropriated to the representation of their vernacular, to its syntax, grammar and vocabulary. Words borrowed from Chinese were also incorporated in their native language. Besides that general appropriation process, it is also noticeable that officials and literati of these societies continued to write in Chinese proper, sticking to the Chinese syntax (a writing style called *kanbun* in Japanese), even if these Chinese texts were usually meant to be read in the vernacular.

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