

Foreign Banks in China is a deeply researched history of DAB and its operations in China as well as a study that makes broader points about the integration of China into world financial markets. These two points are related, and Moazzin's in-depth case studies provide convincing evidence of the multifaceted and dynamic relationship between DAB bankers, German government officials, bankers from other countries, merchants, and representatives of the Qing Dynasty and early Republican government. Potential readers should not be put off by worries about more technical aspects of banking practices, as Moazzin aptly explains the essential things to know and, even though it may not seem like it from the title, the book contains much drama.

Foreign Banks in China also perhaps represents, sadly, one of the last of truly globally oriented books in Chinese history that we might see for a few years. Based on multiple archives from Beijing to Berlin, from Taipei to Tokyo, and from Shanghai to London, it is the result of many years of work. Looking back from late 2022, it was much easier for a PhD student to carry out multi-continent and multi-archival research in the middle of the 2010s than it has been for the past several years. From Coronavirus lockdowns to the Zero Covid policy in China, to potential economic and academic decoupling between China, Russia, and the rest of the world, it will be a challenge for young scholars to produce such dynamic and richly textured books in the future. With such worries in mind, we must appreciate volumes such as this one.

Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern

By Jing Tsu. New York: Riverhead Books, 2022. xix + 314 pp. \$28 (cloth)

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It would be virtually impossible for readers of the *Journal of Chinese History* to be ignorant of Jing Tsu's new book, *Kingdom of Characters*. With numerous reviews and several dozen podcasts, the word is out, to say the least; knowing I would be reviewing this work, I have tried to ignore them all, so as not to be influenced.

I am not entirely sure what the title or subtitle of the book mean. If the Chinese language constitutes a kingdom, that hardly justifies "revolutionary." By the same token, I have always assumed that the extraordinary and long tradition of the Chinese people sprang from the fundamental consistency and longevity of the Chinese language over the centuries: again, what is revolutionary about that? But titles in contemporary Western scholarly writing rarely convey the work's content directly; they bring to mind the late Achilles Fang's famous alleged saying regarding "radicals" (< classifiers) in the written Chinese language: "As in politics, so in Chinese, radicals mean nothing."

Tsu's book is a series of seven chronologically organized chapters, each including a number of often fascinating vignettes of scholars, almost all Chinese, who have in myriad ways struggled with the Chinese language. Their struggles range from efforts to come up with romanization schemes to library access systems to dictionaries to telegraphy and typewriting and finally to computer and internet issues. Undoubtedly because this volume is aimed at an educated but popular audience, some of the early chapters rehearse stories known, often well known, to scholars in the field; but on the other hand the later chapters on coding and the internet were actually too complicated for me. Perhaps this is a comment more on my generation than on the book itself, but the disjunction is nonetheless odd.

Tsu tends to write in a highly dramatic style. Indeed, there is more than a hint of triumphalism in this book about Chinese linguistic developments in the People's Republic. Let's look at a few cases. Chapter One begins right in the year 1900 with the interesting character of Wang Zhao and the Qing dynasty on its last legs; Tsu notes (p. 4) that the dynasty would last "nearly another decade and a half"—actually, only eleven years—and calls were out to radically increase Chinese literacy to save the nation. This is the beginning of the era of massive flow of Chinese students to study in Japan, though Tsu does not focus on these men, and some women, who played important political and cultural roles in the early twentieth century. She points out (pp. 9–10): "China's neighbor and recent colonizer Japan began to reduce the number of Chinese characters in its lexicon and experimented with romanization—distancing itself from a character-dominant writing system and admitting that the West, with its alphabetic languages, was superior." What Japan's "recent" colonizing activity has to do with this is altogether unclear, except insofar as many Chinese students there saw Japan's ability to seize land (Taiwan and later Korea) as an indication of strength—and while they weren't necessarily happy about it, it was nonetheless plain to see. Experimentation with romanization mentioned here in connection with Japan is something of a red herring; it was an entirely minor affair that never gained the least traction. Japan did not "reduce the number of Chinese characters in its lexicon," at least until after the war; anyone who, like me, has worked in Meiji–Taishō–early Shōwa materials can vouch for that. If it had, would that in itself be an admission that the West was superior because of its alphabet? Is not reducing the number of graphs in popular usage precisely what the PRC has been doing ever since 1949?

Wang Zhao was single-mindedly determined to see his own Mandarin lect of Chinese become the "national language" (*guoyu* 國語) of all Chinese, for without that, he thought, China's fate to fail in the (dysfunctional) family of nations was set. He did not see this objective attained in his lifetime, but enforcing Mandarin has indeed been the aim of the Communist regime for the past three-quarters of a century. In that regard he was prescient and, indeed, an interesting figure in his own right.

Tsu's next chapter deals with another seemingly impossible task: how to construct a Chinese typewriter, a topic well researched by Thomas Mullaney in his *The Chinese Typewriter: A History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). Tsu accords Mullaney's 481-page book a single stray footnote—and it can't be because she didn't know of the book, for it has been widely promoted on social media and has received various national awards. Tsu presents a number of fascinating case studies of men trying to find a way to have a relatively small machine capable of printing out thousands of graphs (> characters). The hero of this chapter is Zhou Houkun, also examined by Mullaney, who worked tirelessly to construct such a machine. Zhou had earned the "licentiate" degree under the civil service examinations of the late Qing, which, Tsu

writes (p. 52), was “equivalent to earning a bachelor of arts”; he later worked at the Commercial Press under Zhang Yuanji who “had qualified for the distinguished imperial scholar ranking (the equivalent of a doctorate)” (p. 83). Although we are not told the Chinese names for these degrees, they must be *shengyuan* 生員 and *jinshi* 進士, respectively; I’m sure Tsu gave these Western equivalents for her non-specialist readers, but there is no way the *jinshi* equals a PhD (and scarcely any for a *shengyuan* to equal a BA). Civil service degrees in the Chinese examination system were based on a deep cultural knowledge, but they aimed to produce men to staff the imperial bureaucracy. As many scholars have demonstrated, educational posts like those a PhD might attain were often the ken of those who had failed the examinations or retired from the state bureaucracy.

Chapter 4 tells the story of Wang Jingchun and the fascinating effort to use Chinese for international telegraphy. Virtually everything in this chapter was new to me, so it was a thorough learning experience. A minor quibble: on page 107, Tsu produces a chart from Viguier’s “*Dianbao xinshu* 电报新书” (New book for the telegraph); and on p. 112, she has a chart from Zhang Deyi’s “*Dianbao xinfa* 电报新法” (New method of telegraphy)—both titles with these graphs. Both of these works long predated the simplification of graphs she assigns here, so their usage is strange, especially in a volume about Chinese graphs and what they have putatively done for China. One further complaint is Tsu’s effort to paint a picture of events at the time they were occurring, even if over a century ago and even if there is no evidence provided or likely available. For example, on p. 115, she writes: “Wang sat through the conversation and no doubt tried to figure out how he could steer the conversation without seeming partisan to China’s own national interests, so as to gain the trust and respect of his international counterparts.” Whether Wang was a nationalist is not my concern here; I would be surprised if he was not. How do we know, however, what he was thinking during this “conversation”? By inserting the expression “no doubt,” Tsu dodges any need for hard evidence, but it also is itself *prima facie* evidence that she has no such proof. This style of dramatic, even overly dramatic, writing pervades the volume as a whole.

Tsu next takes up another seemingly impossible task: how were modern librarians to arrange Chinese works in a card catalogue? Unlike telegraphy, though, this is not solely a modern issue. Chinese people have had libraries and accompanying organizational methods for millennia, and Tsu should have pointed to this long tradition and the influence it may have exerted into the twentieth century. The concern here is the modern library and its card catalogue, not libraries writ large. The great Lin Yutang plays the central role, followed by the less well-known Du Dingyou. Lin’s name is widely known in scholarly and more general realms, if only because he wrote popular works about China in English. With a maiden publication in his early twenties in *Xin qingnian*—oddly, Tsu notes of its French subtitle, *La Jeunesse*, that it “signaled a cosmopolitan flair with a Marxist edge” (cosmo, yes; Marxist?)—he was associated with the main players in the “literary revolution.” Tsu also focuses briefly in this chapter on Lin’s contributions to the issue of a typewriter for China, and she touches on his association with Wang Yunwu’s efforts to arrange a Chinese dictionary, a discussion that trails off into the issue of the “Four Corners” indexing system, now largely forgotten except by some lexicographers. (For some reason, the quotation from Lu Xun on p. 128, presumably the same Chinese source as the quotation from him in the volume’s epigraphs, are translated differently.)

Chapter 5—entitled “When ‘Peking’ Became ‘Beijing’”—will warm the hearts of many of us who lived through changes in Chinese romanization systems over the past fifty years. The connection between romanization and increasing literacy has always

stumped me. Tsu and many others have accorded the *pinyin* romanization scheme the great honor of radically increasing the massive Chinese population's ability to read. We are told (p. 170) that on October 1, 1949, "more than 90 percent of the country" was illiterate; I'm not sure if this figure is simply wrong or just meaningless. In urban areas, such as Shanghai, the literacy rate would have been much higher, meaning that an undifferentiated rate for the whole country would not carry much import. Assuming the number is true (or close) and that literacy is said to have soared to 65.5 percent in 1982 and 96.8 percent in 2018, as she notes, how would *pinyin* be the hero here? Twenty-four letters and a fleeting diacritical used only rarely are responsible for teaching a billion people to read? Read what? *Mao zhuxi yulu* 毛主席語錄 (Quotations from Chairman Mao)? Seems like a stretch. Also, supporting the figures for 1982 and 2018 is an online UNESCO report, and the likelihood that the United Nations carried out literacy analyses for every country in the world (of which this is a part) is extremely doubtful, meaning that the Chinese themselves reported these numbers. We are entering grain-of-salt territory.

Tsu takes us through a number of the romanization schemes concocted over the middle decades of the twentieth century—all very interesting—but the main story being told reaches a crescendo when Wade-Giles must give way to *pinyin*. (There is a small error on p. 207; *chi* should be *ch'i* in proper Wade-Giles.) The crescendo reaches its peak in 1958 as the National People's Congress ratifies the change. The next paragraph bears quoting:

The mood was euphoric and fervently patriotic. The change would impact more than 500 million people. Nothing like it had ever been attempted in the history of the world. ... Internationally, pinyin would be the name and spelling by which Chinese would henceforth be known—and no foreigner would ever be able to interfere again. Existing foreign-made Romanization systems like Wade-Giles, it was hoped, would be phased out from international usage once China started to circulate its own system. No longer would the Chinese have to tolerate Wade-Giles's confusing use of apostrophes. Nor would they have to live with Wade-Giles's "Peking"; henceforth the capital would be known in pinyin as "Beijing."

A couple of quick corrections: (1) those are not "apostrophes" in Wade-Giles; they are aspiration marks, telling the reader effectively that *chi* and *ch'i*, to use the same example, are the same phoneme with the exception that in the latter one forces air out of the mouth; and (2) "Peking" is *not* a Wade-Giles romanization—it's from the older Postal Atlas system (as is "Nanking") and is based on a southern pronunciation; in Wade-Giles it would be "Pei-ching," which is almost never seen except in romanized titles. (Incidentally, the Chinese and their leaders would have little to be "euphoric" about in 1958, as that year the worst man-made cataclysm in Chinese, perhaps even world, history was about to unfold with the Great Leap Forward and its tens of millions of deaths.) The paragraph also suggests that the victory of *pinyin* over Wade-Giles was a victory for the Chinese people and the end of foreign meddling in how the graphs of Chinese were to be represented. As the late Nathan Sivin noted, however, *pinyin* originated in Soviet efforts to Cyrillicize written Chinese during the heyday of the Sino-Soviet "love" affair.¹ The Soviets were foreigners, too.

¹Nathan Sivin, *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1987), xxvii–xxviii.

Aspiration markings were to help foreigners learn to pronounce Chinese; they should not be criticized for not helping the Chinese learn to read the graphs of their own language. Neither Tsu nor other boosters ever explain how learning *pinyin* enables a native speaker to learn to read their native language. In fact, all romanization systems used to represent any non-roman-alphabetic language are for the foreign learners. Most American students of Chinese in the late 1960s to early 1980s used a system not mentioned in Tsu's book: the Yale romanization scheme of Fred Fangyu Wang 王方宇 (1913–1997). The omission is especially odd given that Tsu is a chaired professor at Yale University. Like *pinyin*, the Yale system did reflect a northern dialect, now standard Mandarin, but it did so explicitly. Thus, the “i” in *pinyin* can be articulated either as a long “e” (as in *qi*) or as an “r” (as in *chi*); like Wade-Giles, the Yale system eliminated this confusion. As Tsu notes, Chao Yuen Ren's (1892–1982) romanization system had the unique advantage that it contained the northern dialect's tones. One advantage of *pinyin* is that it occupies fewer spaces, if that's a concern.

Given the intentions and varying strengths of different romanization systems, why all the hoopla here for the *pinyin*? Are “q”s and “x”s easier than aspiration marks? We in the Anglophone world use the same alphabet as the Austrians and Italians and Poles, but we still use, respectively for their national capitals, Vienna, Rome, and Warsaw (not Wien, Roma, and Warszawa). I'm sure politics must play a role here, but it's not entirely clear in what way. Referring back to the romanized form of the Chinese capital, the oldest Chinese university there to this day remains (in English): Peking University (here is its online presence: <https://english.pku.edu.cn/>); same is true for its local competitor, Tsinghua (not *Qinghua) University (see: www.tsinghua.edu.cn/en/). So, 1958 notwithstanding, *pinyin*'s “conquest” remains incomplete.

Tsu's triumphalism surrounding *pinyin* troubles me. The rest of the world has not felt forced to Sinicize their respective languages; in that sense, the adoption of *pinyin* suggests that the alphabetic West has actually won the language game, so to speak. Yet, many countries with ancient pasts and cultures have had to face modernity head on to adapt their ancient languages in the contemporary world—think of Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew, to name just three. Homer had no word for ashtray, nor did the Hebrew Prophets have a term for *caffè latte*. In this way, Chinese is not unique, and comparison with a handful of peers in linguistic modernization would have added a welcome dimension to Tsu's analysis. Chinese vocabulary could modernize without *pinyin*, and it is not clear why *pinyin* would aid literacy rates.

What I really missed in Tsu's account, however, was discussion of Japan's full-fledged role in the entrance of the Chinese language into the modern age. The modern Chinese lexicon is overwhelmingly indebted to the thousands of Japanese neologisms from the turn of the last century, all produced in Chinese-graph compounds, as has been amply demonstrated in the work of Tam Yue-him, Federico Masini, Douglas Reynolds, Lydia Liu, and many other scholars. Neither Confucius nor Zhu Xi had a good word for telephone, by way of example, but the Japanese coined one that is still used in both countries (J. *denwa* 電話; Ch. *dianhua*). Also, the emergence of the written vernacular in the 1910s in China was presaged by, and must have been influenced by, a similar event a generation earlier in Japan, the *genbunitchi* 言文一致 movement (unifying the written and spoken languages). There are occasional nods to Japan in Tsu's work, but the topic deserved at least a chapter.

The last chapters take up issues of computer coding and the internet, and they are also very personal. Apparently deep in the weeds of this highly complex business, Tsu offers blow-by-blow accounts of meetings all over East and Southeast Asia. My

confusion in these chapters suggests a possibly bizarre problem with this volume overall: It will at certain points be too elemental to academic readers and at others too complex for the uninitiated.

This book has caught on in a big way with the wider public, acquiring far more reviews than your average academic book. What can be the causes of such success? Aside from an active agent and a motivated trade press, part of the answer is the mixture of explanations of common events and trends in modern Chinese history aimed at educated non-specialists. The fact that the author is Chinese herself and a professor at Yale certainly enhance the appeal to that audience. I would argue, though, that a major share of the attraction in the wider educated community of readers is what has become known as “Orientalism,” a term I personally despise but which seems to capture the exoticization of all things intellectually Chinese (and Japanese, by the way). Those of us who have spent the lion’s share of our lives working with the Chinese language have long ago overcome this infatuation, but for those who see Chinese as infinitely complicated and a wonder to behold, a book like Tsu’s poses as simultaneously authoritative and explanatory.

The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775

By Sophie Volpp. *Premodern East Asia New Horizons*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. x + 245 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper), \$34.99 (eBook)

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In her second monograph, *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775*, Sophie Volpp focuses on the objects depicted in late imperial Chinese fiction, shedding new light on the material turn in the study of Chinese literature since the 1990s and arguing for an alternative way of approaching these objects that goes beyond locating their historical counterparts. If the keyword for her first book, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China*, was “theatricality,” the keyword for *The Substance of Fiction* is “fictionality,” which she holds in a significant, if not superior, position to argue against the myth that there exists a historical condition prior to the creation of a fictional world. Focusing on the often-overlooked inconsistencies in the descriptions of the same objects, Volpp argues for the importance of readers’ imagination and engagement in bridging the gaps between fictionality and the material world, which will eventually lead to an understanding of the illusory nature of not only the literary texts but also our quotidian existence.

Each chapter of the book discusses one canonical text that has been widely used in classrooms, such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅, Ling Mengchu’s (凌濛初) vernacular fiction, Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 story of Du Shiniang 杜十娘, Li Yu’s 李漁 short story “A Tower for the Summer Heat” 夏宜樓 and finally *The Story of*