



KUZUOĞLU, Uluğ. 2024.

*Codes of Modernity:
Chinese Scripts in the Global
Information Age.*

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I CORALINE JORTAY

is Research Fellow at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), UMR 7172 THALIM, INHA, Galerie Colbert, 2 rue Vivienne, 75002 Paris, France (coraline.jortay@cnrs.fr).

A noteworthy addition to a growing body of academic monographs dealing with modern Chinese linguistic history (e.g., Zhong 2019; Tam 2020; Munning 2022; Chen 2023; Roche 2024), Uluğ Kuzuoğlu's *Codes of Modernity* explores the knowledge economies and technoscientific networks that sparked script reform proposals in twentieth century China. Some of the episodes examined here may be relatively familiar to scholars in the field. Yet, Kuzuoğlu's book stands to radically reframe our understanding from at least two perspectives.

First, in using the history of information as its main framework, he unravels how reform proposals for phonetic scripts and simplified characters arose from a primary concern with efficiency that mimicked the mechanisation of factory labour in the realm of knowledge production. Building on the informational turn of academia, *Codes of Modernity* seeks to further its scope by foregrounding pre-digital, non-Western perspectives. Reciprocally, this informational perspective enables Kuzuoğlu to account for the historical emergence of phonocentrism in China, in which shifts in the knowledge economy spurred reformers' interest in the materiality of scripts as technologies of communication first and foremost. Concerns with speech or language, he argues, merely stemmed from the former.

Second, *Codes of Modernity* offers a truly impressive multi-sited, multilingual study of the transnational networks that enabled this transformation, juggling sources in multiple Turkic, Arabic, Chinese, and Latinised scripts gathered from locations as diverse as the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, the Shanghai Municipal Archives, and the Academia Historica in Taipei. In one of the book's most thought-provoking contributions, Chapter Five reenvisions the genealogy of the Chinese Latin alphabet (CLA, Sin Wenz or *xin wenzi* 新文字) before Qu Qiubai's 瞿秋白 (1899-1935) well-known collaboration with Russian linguists. Kuzuoğlu traces its earlier roots to the phonetic values of the New Dunganese Alphabet, the letters of which were

largely based upon the Unified New Turkic Alphabet that was devised as an internationalist medium after the First All-Union Turcology Congress held in Baku in 1926. Building upon these linkages, Chapter Six charts the CLA's rise and fall as it crossed from Central Asia into China, unravelling the conundrum of its converging linguistically with KMT-endorsed Gwoyeu Romatzyh while simultaneously being envisioned as a counter-technology to KMT communication networks. Simultaneously, Kuzuoğlu shows it diverging from Soviet linguistic policies in a blueprint vision for a multilingual Chinese nation that would not survive the early People's Republic of China. Meanwhile, Chapter Seven demonstrates, the CLA morphed into pinyin as multilingualism was abandoned in favour of Mandarin, and what became a teaching auxiliary for the Han majority was used post-1958 in the Chinese borderlands to push for a pinyinisation that shared strong similarities both with KMT propaganda technologies and with earlier USSR cyrillisation campaigns.

The book's earlier chapters, too, pay close attention to the transnational dynamics at work in the shaping of script information technologies. Chapter One charts the changing clerical and mental labour practices that arose from nineteenth century industrialisation, with a focus on the advent of telegraphy, and the late-Qing script reform proposals that emerged therefrom. Chapter Two recounts the history of the 1913 Conference for the Unification of Pronunciation that adopted Zhang Taiyan's 章太炎 (1869-1936) National Phonetic Alphabet, highlighting the central role that missionaries played in promoting the script in the absence of a strong centralised government. Chapter Three reexamines the history of mass literacy in the 1920s and 1930s through the lens of communication engineering and information management, exploring its links to the measurement movement born out of American behavioural psychology. Delving into the advent of intelligence testing and its impact in China, this chapter shows how competing literacy schemes often shared common technoscientific origins despite markedly different political end goals. Chapter Four returns to the same transnational scientific networks to highlight how instrumental they were in bringing about character simplification through studies on reading speed, reading direction, and text mining, reframing character simplification as an informational endeavour rather than as a linguistic one.

Overall, I wholeheartedly share the author's view that technologies, including scripts, must be situated as political artifacts within economies of information – a claim that the book demonstrates brilliantly. At times however, I cannot help but wonder whether some passages might default too quickly to ideological explanations to account for linguistic policy changes – something that felt somewhat surprising, given the book's purported foregrounding of the materiality of scripts and its claim that “scripts did not follow language politics (...); they came prior to them, defined them, structured them” (p. 14). For instance, Kuzuoğlu accounts for the sudden policy backtracking on the first set of officially sanctioned simplified characters in January 1936 by explaining that simplification's association with Communism had become anathema to the KMT. That is, a mere five months after the new set was approved and announced by the Ministry of Education, the abandonment of the associated Chinese

traditions would have become entirely incompatible with the outlook of the New Life Movement. Here, the suddenness of the turnaround might suggest more than an ideological explanation (the New Life Movement had been ongoing since February 1934, after all). Another plausible answer might lie in recent work on script and materiality by Jeffrey Weng: after the new character set was announced, the excruciating prospective financial burden of simplification (one that the government was not prepared to shoulder) might have caused massive lobbying from major presses, who feared that the measures would bankrupt them (Weng 2023). Similarly, Kuzuoğlu's assertion that the leftist "handy characters" (*shoutouzi* 手頭字) were "winning the race" in terms of practical typesetting and printing at a time when "the government and the Preparatory Committee were trying to distance themselves from the leftists" (p. 148-50) might be slightly overreaching when many of the magazines that endorsed and printed the *shoutouzi* manifesto were unable to procure the typesets for the very characters that they were promoting. Even the editors of 太白 *Taibai*, the periodical spearheading the movement, apologised profusely that they did not have the typesets for *shoutouzi* ready and were still printing with temporary fonts. They even included partial reproductions of authors' handwritten drafts featuring *shoutouzi* to make up for their shortcoming.¹

These minor reservations aside, *Codes of Modernity* stands powerfully as a contribution to the field and draws due attention to the knowledge economies and communication technologies that undergirded twentieth century Chinese linguistic reforms. In this, Kuzuoğlu's emphasis on script perhaps brings it closest to another recent brilliant addition to the field of Asian language history: Prachi Deshpande's *Scripts of Power: Writing, Language Practices, and Cultural History in Western India* (2023). The former's keen interest in tracing the materialisation of a scriptural economy invites us to further research the quotidian linguistic lives of the many who remain in historiographical shadows: "the infantilised, neoliterate 'ordinary speaker' in whose name many demands are both made and denied" (ibid.: 267). In drawing our attention to the materiality of scripts, both books provide us with tools to take onboard and write new language histories from below.

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1. See two articles by Feng Zikai 豐子愷 in the 20 March 1935 issue of *Taibai*.