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Magical Alphabet in the Indian and Chinese Minds

From the Garland of Letters to Master Pu'an's Siddham Mantra

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The pursuit of a pure and refined language, hence *saṃskṛtam* (*sam* "completely," + √*kṛ* "to do"), by the ancient Indians, was motivated by a practical concern that the Vedas would be efficacious only when properly enunciated. As a result, a highly sophisticated science of phonetics was developed to ensure that the Vedic texts and mantras were correctly pronounced and transmitted.[1] This was the prime motivation for the analysis and arrangement of the Sanskrit syllables, which became in turn the basis for the construction of the written alphabet.[2]

When the Indic languages were first introduced to China through the translation of Buddhist texts starting from the first century CE,[3] the Chinese were fascinated by the Sanskrit language and its alphabet. This fascination continued for centuries in China up to the present day, despite Sanskrit as a language itself was largely forgotten. In this chapter I shall examine the Sanskrit alphabet, how it was conceived by the Indians, and how it underwent a series of transformation in the Chinese minds as it was absorbed into the East Asian culture.[4]

2.0 SANSKRIT *AKṢARA*-S IN INDIA

The Sanskrit syllables, commonly known as *akṣara* (lit. "imperishable"), or *varṇa* (lit. "color"), suggesting likely how they were conceived analytically by the Indian phoneticians, were considered the smallest unit of sound which possesses various phonetic qualities. The study of such basic units of the language, known as *śikṣā* (lit. "training," equivalent roughly

to "phonetics" in modern terminology) is considered an important branch of the traditional Vedic lore. Not until the modern time, the highly sophisticated oral tradition of the ancient Indians had made writing an accessory rather than a necessity.[5] The alphabet appeared to have spread in India only after the invention of the Brāhmī script sometime during the first millennium BCE.[6] Unlike in China where writing was much revered, writing was largely utilitarian to the early Indians; later on, exercises of the Sanskrit alphabet were prescribed exclusively to children as part of their elementary education (figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1.   Child learning Brāhmī alphabet (Sugh, Haryana, c. second century BCE. Terracotta from Delhi National Museum Collection). Source: Photo by author.

2.1 Phonetic Science of Ancient India

Unlike the Western alphabet which was arranged in no apparent order, the enumeration of Sanskrit syllables or *akṣarasamāmnāya* ("recitation of the alphabet"), known popularly as the *varṇamālā* ("garland of letters"), reflects the phonetic knowledge of the Indians. Phonetic analysis such as the differentiation between vowels and consonants, places of articulation, and features of various sound units were described in early phonetic works such as the *Taittirīya-prātiśākhya*. An example of such analysis is the organization of the twenty-five plosive+nasal consonants known as *pañca-pañca vargāḥ* ("five-by-five square") familiar to the students of Sanskrit:[7]

Table 14.1.

Position of contact (*sparśa*)	*First: voiceless (aghoṣa), unaspirated*	*Second: voiceless, aspirated*	*Third: voiced (ghoṣavat), unaspirated*	*Fourth: voiced, aspirated (hakāra)*	*Final: voiced, nasal (anunāsika)*
Velar (*hanūmūle*)	ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa
Palatal *tālau*	ca	cha	ja	jha	ña
Retroflex (*mūrdhani*)	ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa
Dental (*dantamūleṣu*)	ta	tha	da	dha	na
Labial (*oṣṭhābhyāṃ*)	pa	pha	ba	bha	ma

   As a pedagogical tool for both phonetics and writing, the alphabet was taught to children through two main methods: 1) enumeration of the alphabet starting from the vowels followed by the consonants as in the *varṇamālā*; 2) various consonant-vowel permutation such as *ka, kā, ki, kī, ku, kū, ke, kai, ko, kau, kaṃ, kaḥ / kha, khā, khi, khī, khu, khū. . . . ptai, pto, ptau, ptaṃ, ptaḥ*. Unfortunately, except for rare fragments such as the "Florence Fragment," (figure 14.2) no "textbook" on Sanskrit or Indic orthography had survived in South Asia, suggesting either that such work was considered too trivial to be canonized, or that it was meant only as writing exercise using sand board rather than the more precious materials such as palm leaves or birch bark.[8] The Chinese, however, took these phonetic/orthographic exercises very seriously, which became an integral part of the traditional Sanskrit studies in East Asia (§3.2).
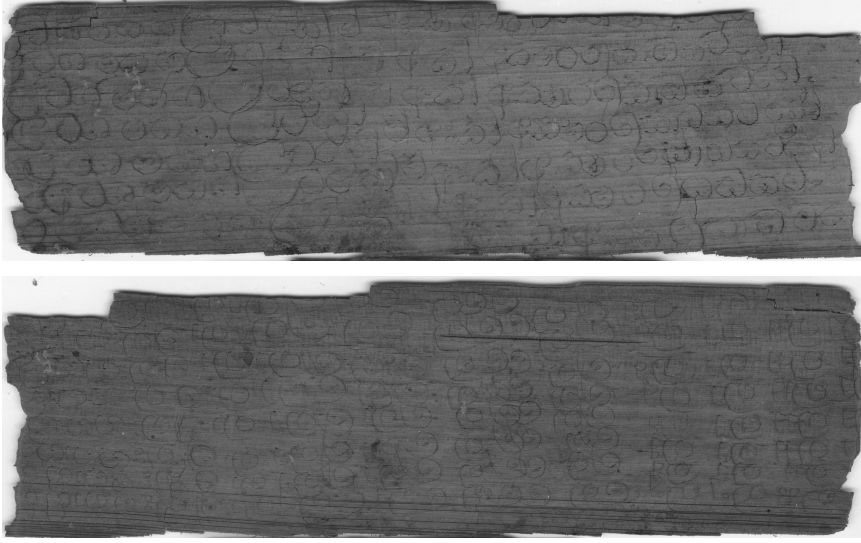
Figure 14.2. Florence fragment from the collection of Instituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli." Sinhalese script. The fragment contains two main elements copied in repetition: (a) *Varṇamālā* **". . . *(ra)-la-va-śa-ṣa-sa-ha-ḷa (vada) (ki)m[virāma]aḥ k(iṃ) akṣarasoḍasa (v)ada k(iṃ) . . ."* **and (b)** *Ṣoḍaśākṣarī* **". . . *(kh)ṛ-khṝ-khḷ-khḹ-khe-khai-kho-khau-khām-kaḥ-ga-ghā-ghi-gh(ī). . . ."* **Initial transcription by Jacob Schmidt-Madsen with correction by Rangama Chandawimala. Images courtesy of G. Bastianini. Note the repetition of each line which suggests the text to be some form of writing exercise. It is possibly part of an orthographic textbook which is no longer extant. Although the dating of the Florence fragment is uncertain, Rangama Chandawimala pointed out to me that on orthographical ground the folios are unlikely to be older than the twelfth century. Source: Collection of Instituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli."**

2.2 Alphabet as Mnemonics

The alphabet has proved a useful invention and was employed in a number of non-linguistic ways, from practical matters such as inventory[9] and mnemonics, to the esoteric exegesis based on the analyses of words. The Sanskrit alphabet was enumerated notably in a number of early Mahāyāna texts as a kind of "exegetical *dhāraṇī*,"[10] embedded either within the text proper (e.g., *Lalitavistara*) or as an independent chapter known as *Akṣaraparivarta* as in the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Avataṃsaka*. In the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā*, we find the description of what is called the "Door of letters" (*akṣaramukham*), a mnemonic device which connects a letter to a certain Buddhist doctrine, for example, "*a*" for "*anutpanna*" (non-arisen), "*ra*" for "*rajas*" (impurity) and so on:[11]

4.0 CORRUPTION OR INDIGENIZATION?

Despite the corruption, the structure of the PAZ shows its author's aware-ness of the internal organization of the Sanskrit alphabet.[43] It is most likely that before the PAZ was canonized in its corrupted form, somewhere along the oral transmission of this XTZ-based mantra, the linguistic un-derstanding of the XTZ was compromised by the artistic interpolation of the transmitters—that is, by making repetitions and different types of variations to impress upon the listeners a more acoustically convincing form and hence a larger structure.[44]

Another curious development of the PAZ is found in Zhao Yiguang's 趙宦光 (1559–1629 CE) study of the PAZ in his *Xitanjingzhuan* 悉曇經傳 (1611 CE).[45]

Although the author was familiar with the XTZ, he did not connect it with the corrupted PAZ. Instead, he went on to reconstruct its Sanskrit form by transcribing the Chinese pronunciation of the PAZ in *rañjana* script. In other words, Zhao considered the PAZ an efficacious mantra when uttered by a Chinese.[46] The Sanskrit transcription served not only to persuade the readers of the authenticity of the mantra, but also preserved the historical Chinese pronunciation of the mantra.

Through the examination of the evolution of the PAZ, certain strands of the Chinese ideas concerning Sanskrit may be identified. The Chinese were first and foremost fascinated by the alphabetical writing system of Sanskrit. Despite attempts to understand the phonetic principles which underlie the Indian language, the Chinese were generally more interested in the concept of Sanskrit sounds rather than the sounds themselves, which led to the blatant corruption and sinicization. If such trajectory were to be followed, the Sanskrit sounds themselves could have been altogether discarded, leaving behind the mere idea of a mysterious yet spiritually potent language. This turns out to be the case for certain musi-cal renditions of the PAZ, many of which survive as *guqin* tablatures with-out the mantric text which (d)evolved from the original texted version.[47]

While the idea of a Sanskrit mantra without the mantra might seem preposterous, it attests to what the Chinese must have imagined to be the essence of a sacred, magical language known as Sanskrit. In a way, it was the logical conclusion of what a truly esoteric language should be—a pure sonic experience beyond language, that is, the Brāhma Sound, or *fanyin* 梵 音, analogous to certain recurring themes in Chinese philosophy, namely the Daoist "nameless name" and the "inaudible sound."

To sum, the sinicization of Sanskrit mantras may be seen as an example of cultural appropriation which accounts for their living though "cor-rupted" presence in Chinese Buddhism.[48] Their evolution follows the trajectory of the Chinese's pursuit of the transcendent and the beyond.

Figure 14.6. "Siddham Mantra" in Zhao Yiguang's *Xitan Jingzhuan* (1611). Source: Rao Zongyi (1999).

Figure 14.7. Guqin tablature "Xitan zhang" in Sanjiao tongsheng (1592). Source: *Qinxuejicheng* 6.110.

The ways these mantras were adopted by the East Asian Buddhists are of methodological interest as the absorption of sinicized Sanskrit mantras into Chinese Buddhism points to the larger questions of how the sinicization of Buddhism might have taken place and what the driving mechanisms and parameters could have been.

ABBREVIATIONS

PAZ	Pu'anzhou 普庵咒
HYDCD	Hanyu dacidian 漢語大辭典
J	Jiaqingzang 嘉慶藏
T	Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大蔵経
XTZ	Xitanzhang 悉曇章

NOTES

1. Staal 1986: 8.
2. For an overview of the Sanskrit writing systems, see Diringer 1948: 301ff, Salomon 1998: 7–41.