

# *Chinese and Culture*

Louis Chor

Translated by the author from the Chinese, with slight textual changes.

Originally published as “Zhong wen yu wen hua” in *The Canadian Chinese Times*, a weekly Chinese community newspaper in Edmonton, Canada, on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2002.

Corrections to some information in the original essay are given as endnotes.

The original Chinese essay follows this translation.

According to the English newspaper *Edmonton Journal*, Chinese newspapers in the United States would start to be printed in the horizontal text direction [as a change from the present vertical text direction]. This news made me feel much perplexed. Having recovered from this shock, I decided to render grievance into words. Whether it is vertical or horizontal, the text direction may not seem to affect the general taste. But since what this involves is a cultural issue, it deserves serious consideration.

It is said that because the early Chinese characters were written in ink on bamboo strips, therefore unlike other written languages which move horizontally from left to right or from right to left, Chinese characters naturally proceed from top to bottom, with columns of characters moving from right to left, forming the tradition.<sup>1</sup> As I understand, among the thousands of languages in the world today, there are no languages, other than Chinese, Japanese and Korean of former times, which have vertical written scripts.<sup>2</sup> We do not treasure this unique written manifestation of the language, but instead discard it like worn-out shoes. Yet on the other hand, we are talking nonstop about promoting and glorifying Chinese cultural heritages. Would this stance seem logically tenable? Under the influence of Western culture for over a hundred years, there is nothing to be criticised that most people have been accustomed to write Chinese horizontally from left to right. However, in printed Chinese, computerisation allows for either vertical or horizontal layout as a matter of choice. On the principle of upholding our indigenous cultural heritages, what is more worthwhile than using vertical print layout? Perhaps some people think

that the horizontal text direction is a world trend, so written and printed Chinese should go along with this global current. Actually, globalisation is nothing but global Westernisation. What concerns me is the waning of the Chinese language heritage.

More and more I find that the people who can best preserve the heritage of Chinese characters are the Japanese. Japanese characters – be it kanji, hiragana or katakana – were all born from Chinese characters. This was probably in the time of China’s Tang dynasty [618-907 CE] about 1,200 or 1,300 years ago. While the advanced technological achievements of Japan today are beyond doubt, eight or nine out of ten publications in Japan, especially in the humanities, are printed in the vertical text direction. Even reference tools such as dictionaries are no exception to this general practice. Technological advance has not resulted in any disdain for the language tradition of their own nation. For many years I have been working in libraries in Hong Kong and Canada, and have the opportunity of regularly handling Chinese and Japanese publications. I am impressed by the quality of printing and binding of Japanese publications. This is a comment of conscience, not a flattery favouring a country not my own. Comparing the quality of the history dictionary *Kokushi Daijiten* [Grand dictionary of national history] in vertical text published in Japan with the history dictionary *Zhongguo Li Shi Da Ci Dian* [Grand dictionary of Chinese history] in horizontal text published in China, I feel ashamed to face our so-called 5,000-year civilisation.<sup>3</sup>

Westernised Chinese has other aspects besides the arrangement and layout of the characters. In grammar, for instance, there is the common practice of unnecessarily adding tense structure to verbs, such as adding the character “jiang” before a verb to indicate a future action or appending the character “le” to a verb to denote a past action.<sup>4</sup> This is like adding legs to it when drawing a snake. In the process, the crisp, subtle and free-flowing style of expression intrinsic to the Chinese language is being eroded. In his essay “Wen xue yu xuan xue: guan yu *Lingshan*” [“Literature and Mysticism: About *Soul Mountain*”], Gao Xingjian gives us his thoughtful views on the unique features of the Chinese language and the phenomenon of Europeanised Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever I come across horizontal Chinese or Westernised Chinese, I ponder: Why does the Chinese language always have to emulate Western languages? Have

Western languages ever adopted the traditional style and grammar of Chinese? The answers are always not affirmative. Therefore, I will still keep on maintaining the heritage of the Chinese language, in the same way as other peoples are respecting and embracing their own language heritages. The foundation of culture is language. The essence of language is writing and its written form. At the time when many countries are working hard to protect their own cultures, are we not heading in the reverse direction?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Subsequent to the writing of this essay, I began to harbour the thought that the vertical text direction of Chinese characters is not the result of using bamboo strips as the writing medium in the earliest days of character invention. This bamboo strips idea is still commonly held. I tried to prove the fallacy of this idea in my essay “Left-to-Right or Right-to-Left? An Inquiry into the Text Direction of Chinese Characters,” *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, no. 155 (October 2012): 29-36. Those narrow bamboo strips were merely human artefacts prepared from bamboo trees to contain the columns of characters in the preferred top-to-bottom style, just like shoes are artefacts we make to fit our feet, and not the other way round.

<sup>2</sup>Later I learnt that the Mongolian language also has a vertical script, but with columns of characters or letters proceeding from left to right. The Manchu written language also seems to have the vertical layout.

<sup>3</sup>Actually, for the Chinese history dictionary, I was referring to the condensed version in two volumes. The full version from the same publisher, comprising fourteen volumes, was published from 1983 to 2000. The Japanese history dictionary was published from 1979 to 1997 in seventeen volumes.

<sup>4</sup>Although not having any linguistic knowledge, as I understand there is no tense structure as such in the Chinese language. The temporal or time dimension of verbal and written discourses is given in, and understood from, the context and situation.

<sup>5</sup>Gao Xingjian is the Nobel laureate in literature of 2000, probably best known for his novel *Lingshan*, which was translated into English as *Soul Mountain*. The essay, originally a speech delivered at the University of Stockholm, was published as a chapter in his book *Mei You Zhu Yi* [Without isms] (Xianggang: Tian di tu shu you xian gong si, 2000).

— Translation with notes added, August 31 2016

# 中文與文化

原刊加拿大愛民頓市社區報『加華報』二〇〇二年四月十一日

左永業

英文『愛民頓報』載，美國的中  
文報章決定將中文橫行排印，這消  
息令我惶惑不已，驚魂甫定，決化  
悲憤為文字。中文豎排橫排，似乎  
無傷大雅，但這牽涉的，是一個文  
化的問題，有慎重商榷的必要。

據聞由於早期的中國文字是用墨  
寫在竹片上的，因此順理成章文字  
是由上而下、由右而左，成為傳統，  
而非像其他文字左右或右左橫行，  
若蟹行狀。筆者才疏，所知在當今  
世上數以千計的語文中，直行書寫  
的文字，除中文、日文和以前的韓

文外，似沒有其他。如此獨特的文  
字表現形式，我們不珍惜，反棄之  
如敝屣，但另一方面又不停說要把中  
華文化傳統發揚光大，這在邏輯上  
似說不過去吧。手寫中文，在百餘  
年的西風薰陶下，左右橫書已成了  
很多人的習慣，無可厚非；但印刷  
中文，有電腦之助，直行橫行任擇，  
在維護國粹的大前提下，直行排印  
何樂不為？或有人認為，文字橫行  
是世界大趨勢，中文理應順應全球  
化潮流；其實，全球化也者，全球  
西化而已，我關心的，是中文傳統  
的沒落。

越來越發覺，最能保存中華文字傳統的民族是日本人。日本文字——漢字也好，平假名也好，片假名也好——全脫胎自中國文字，這大概是一千二百年前唐代的事；今天日本在科技上的進步，無容置疑，但日本出版的報紙書刊，尤其是文科方面的，十居八九是直行排印，即工具書如字典等亦不例外，並未因科技先進而蔑視本國文字的傳統。我在香港和加拿大的圖書館界工作多年，日常接觸中文和日文書刊甚多，對日本書刊高質素的印刷裝幀，印象甚深。此乃平心而論之言，幸勿以余為媚外也。日本出版直行的『國史大辭典』與中國出版橫行的『中國歷史大辭典』，質

素一比較下，實在使我汗顏，愧對所謂的五千年歷史文化。

西化中文，牽涉面甚廣，非僅限於文字排列問題，文法上，如畫蛇添足般硬把時態（TENSE）加在動詞上，濫用「將」（如將會）和「了」（即粵語的「咗」，如舉行咗談判），把中文固有的簡潔含蓄而自由的表現方式損削不少；高行健在「文學與玄學——關於靈山」一文中，對中文的獨特性格和歐化中文有精闢的見解，值得我們參考。

每當碰到橫行中文或西化中文時，我總會反思：為甚麼總要中文學西文？西文有曾接受中文的傳統形式和文法嗎？答案都不是肯定的，既

如此，我還是會把中文的傳統延續下去，正如人家尊重和固守本身的語文傳統一樣。文化的根基是語言，語言的精華是文字，當各國都在努力保護自身的文化的時候，我們是否背道而馳？

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## 中文與文化

· 左永業 ·

英文《愛民頓報》載，美國的中文報章決定將中文橫行排印，這消息令我惶恐不已，驚魂甫定，決心悲憤為文字。中文豈非橫排，似乎無傷大雅，但這牽涉的，是一個文化的問題，有慎重商榷的必要。

據聞由於早期的中國文字是用墨寫在竹片上的，因此順理成章文字是由上而下、由右而左，成為傳統，而非像其他文字左右或右左橫行，若橫行狀。筆者才疏，所知在當今世上數以千計的語文中，直行書寫的文字，除中文、日文和以前的韓文外，似沒有其他。如此獨特的文字表現形式，我們不珍惜，反棄之如敝屣，但另一方面又不停說要把中華文化傳統發揚光大，這在邏輯上似說不過去。手寫中文，在百餘年的西風薰陶下，左右橫書已成了很多人的習慣，無可厚非；但印刷中文，有電腦之助，直行橫行任擇，在維護國粹的大前提下，直行排印何樂不為？或有人認為，文字橫行是世界大趨勢，中文理應順應全球化潮流；其實，全球化也者，全球西化而已，我關心的，是中文傳統的沒落。

越來越發覺，最能保存中華文字傳統的民族，並非中國人，而是日本人。日本文字——漢字也好，平假名也好，片假名也好——全脫胎自中國文字，這大概是一千二百年前唐代的事；今天日本在科技上的進步，無容置疑，但日本出版的報紙書刊，尤其是文科方面的，十居八九是直行排印，即工具書如字典等亦不例外，並未因科技先進而蔑視本國文字的傳統。我在香港和加拿大的圖書館工作多年，日常接觸中文和日文書刊甚多，對日本書刊高質素的印刷裝幀，印象甚深。此乃平心而論之言，幸勿以余為媚外也。日本出版直行的《國史大辭典》與中國出版橫行的《中國歷史大辭典》，質素一比較下，實在使我汗顏，愧對所謂的五千年歷史文化。

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