Dispelling the Alphabet Effect

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Abstract: Canadian communication theory has accepted as one of its major tenets the superiority of Western civilization brought about by the phonetic alphabet. Challenges to the theory either have not been incorporated into the research literature or have been represented as working theories rather than conclusive evidence. This article seeks to help redress this imbalance by detailing the main claims of the alphabetic literacy arguments in the context of arguments advanced in several disciplines, suggesting that the alphabet effect theory should be dispelled. The article argues that a writing effect unites Western alphabetic and Eastern non-alphabetic cultures in a common heritage, and that historical periods of social advancement of the West and East have alternated in pendulum fashion. The article also introduces alternative views of the relationship between Eastern communication technologies, culture, and history to support the writing effect and pendulum model of the impact of communication technology in the East.

Résumé : La théorie canadienne de la communication a accepté comme un de ses principes majeurs que l’alphabet phonétique est à l’origine de la supériorité de la civilisation occidentale. Quant aux défis posés à ce principe, soit on ne les a pas inclus dans la littérature de recherche, soit on les a représentés comme étant des théories de travail plutôt que des arguments solides. Cet article cherche à établir un équilibre en opposant les principaux arguments pour l’alphabétisation que l’alphabet phonétique a permis à des arguments soulevés dans diverses disciplines où l’on propose que cette théorie d’un effet alphabétique soit périmée. Cet article soutient qu’un effet d’écriture unit la culture alphabétique occidentale et la culture non-alphabétique orientale au sein d’un patrimoine commun, et que les périodes historiques de progrès social ont alterné comme une pendule entre l’Orient et l’Occident. L’article présente en outre des perspectives alternatives sur le rapport entre les technologies de communication, la culture et l’histoire orientales pour appuyer l’idée d’un effet d’écriture et d’un modèle de pendule décrivant l’impact des technologies de la communication en Orient.

Keywords: Alphabetic literacy theory; Literacy/literate culture/chirographic culture; Toronto School/Transformation theory

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Introduction

Canadian communication theory running from Harold Innis (1986; Babe, 2000) through Marshall McLuhan (1968; Babe, 2000), Walter Ong (1982), and others (Logan, 1986) has accepted as one of its major tenets the psychological and social superiority of Western civilization brought about by the phonetic alphabet, since its appearance in ancient Greece. The alphabetic literacy theory has remained prominent in communication studies in Canada (Crowley & Heyer, 1999, 2003) and in a branch of communication studies called media ecology in the United States (Postman, 1985). Challenges to the theory’s premises and conclusions either have not been incorporated into the research literature (Faigley, 1999; Goody, 1977, 1987, 1996) or have been represented in it as working theories rather than conclusive evidence (Schmandt-Besserat, 1996).

This article seeks to help redress this imbalance by detailing the main claims of the alphabetic literacy arguments in the context of the pioneering research of archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1996) determining the origin of writing as three-dimensional tokens, not pictographs, and of counter-arguments advanced by anthropologist Jack Goody, rhetorical scholar Lester Faigley, and others—in order to suggest that the alphabet effect theory should be dispelled in communication theory and history. In its place, the article will offer evidence from these critics to argue that a writing effect, not an alphabet effect, unites Western alphabetic and Eastern non-alphabetic cultures in a common heritage. An important element of the writing effect argument is that historical periods of social advancement of the West and East have alternated in pendulum fashion (Goody, 1996), not resulting in the permanent superiority of the West brought about by the alphabet and subsequent technologies.

The paper also will introduce two alternative views of the relationship between Eastern communication technologies, culture, and history (Bodde, 1991; Gernet, 1982) to support the writing effect theory and pendulum model of the impact of communication technology in the history of the East. This approach is also an effort to shift from the Western ethnocentrism of the alphabetic literacy theory—in particular, its understanding of the relationship between communication technology and culture. In this view, the social matrix (Bookchin, 1991) or cultural matrix (McLuhan, 1964) is the critical factor in explaining a communication technology’s impact on different cultures.

The alphabetic literacy argument

The alphabetic literacy theory attributes the West’s development of abstract thinking, deductive logic, science, mathematics, democracy, codified law, capitalism, and monotheism to the alphabet’s introduction in ancient Greece (Faigley, 1999; Logan, 1986). An important corollary claim is that writing systems evolved from pictographs to the alphabet (Faigley, 1999).

To argue that the alphabet brought about the superiority of Western civilization, this theory identifies China as the prime example in the East of the relative incapacity for abstraction, logic, rationality, analysis, and classification among cultures with non-alphabetic scripts (Logan, 1986). Innis (1986) dismissed China
in this fashion when he explored the relationship of communication technologies to the rise and fall of monopolies of knowledge. Innis found that the combination of paper and the alphabet in Europe was distinctly different from the combination of paper and Chinese characters. In his view, it was writing with an alphabet that checked the oral tradition (Babe, 2000). Paper plus the alphabet fostered secular works and created wider areas of administration.

Initiating a theme later echoed by Ong, Innis (1986) represented China as a hybrid oral-literate culture whose time-binding orality was checked in space-binding empire through literate communication media such as the invention of paper in A.D. 100 and the pictograph. Because the pictograph was never exposed to the conventionalization that occurred with successive conquests in the West, however, it remained unchanged so that each character represented a word. China attempted to preserve orality in a short-lived prohibition against books from 213-191 B.C., but paper established Confucianism and an administrative examination system after A.D. 124. The empire was organized to communicate through post relays of official reports, newsletters, and gazettes.

Reflecting the oral side of China’s oral-literate hybrid culture, public protests against officialdom were often embedded in songs and ballads. On the literate side, Buddhism was facilitated in China through the efficiency of paper and the emphasis on the importance of writing. Woodblock characters were printed on paper and sold as Buddhist charms, a labour that inspired state-subsidized, printed reproductions of Chinese classics from woodcuts. Innis maintained that orality in China was limited by a large number of dialects, but encouraged by a universally understood script that bridged enormous gaps. Although the empire’s spatial emphasis neglected time-binding concepts, the “tenacious language” fostered the development of political bureaucracy in China (1986, p. 137). Then, as Innis wrote, paper moves West, and China fades from communication history. Lewis Mumford (1947/1999) conveyed a similar sentiment, writing that printing and movable type originated in China and Korea and then moved to the West.

McLuhan contributed to the alphabetic literacy theory by comparing the dichotomies of visual Western culture and its alphabetic writing with acoustic Eastern culture and its ideogrammatic writing. He regarded Eric Havelock as the first classicist to examine the ways in which the alphabet disturbed the balance of the ancient world (Babe, 2000). In McLuhan’s comparison between ideogrammatic and alphabetic writing, he observed that the former retained a multisensory, aural quality, whereas the alphabet separated sight from sound to become visually abstract, that is, abstracted from the more inclusive form of the ideogram. McLuhan elevated the phonetic alphabet to the highest importance—together with typography—in the rise of visual Western culture. He wrote that the alphabet had, in effect, created civilization (McLuhan, 1968).

McLuhan (1964) argued that the “inclusive gestalt” of Chinese ideograms qualitatively separated them from the linear rationality and “analytic dissociation” of the alphabet. Consequently, he argued, although China was possibly superior in cultural expression and perception, retaining a depth of experience lost in “civi-
lized cultures,” it was unable to conceive of the individual or separate citizen (p. 87). Despite 2,000 years of writing and other literate-print culture technologies, China remained a predominantly oral society.

Ong (1982) furthered this argument by distinguishing the world’s many scripts from its one alphabet. Invented by the ancient Semites and perfected by the Greeks, the alphabet was a development of major psychological importance that was democratizing and adaptable as it reduced sound to written form. Ong categorized China’s writing system with other ancient but extinct scripts that are inferior in many ways to the alphabet. Because Chinese writing basically comprises pictures, he argued, the Chinese psychologically and culturally remain within the oral mode of consciousness. Extending this analysis to printing, Ong presented the alphabetic printing press as the critical development, despite the Chinese and other Asians having printed books since the seventh or eighth centuries. And although the Chinese had movable type, it was the alphabetic movable type of single letters that created the seminal psychological change, he wrote.

The most extensive application of alphabetic literacy theory has been Robert Logan’s *Alphabet Effect* (1986). Logan asserted that the alphabet enabled Western abstraction, deductive logic and rationality, analysis, and classification of information—none of which China or the East had achieved with its writing system. Logan identified differences not only in science, but also in religion and law, claiming the alphabet gave rise to monotheism and codified law, which are absent in China. Logan conceded that the practicality and concreteness of Chinese writing gave rise to many technological inventions—including media inventions such as paper, ink, and printing, among myriad others—but firmly asserted that science began in the West.

Although Logan praised China’s achievements in the arts, philosophy, religion, and technology as being surpassed by no one, he said China’s analogic and inductive reasoning lacked the West’s logic based on matching and deduction. As a result, China never systematically advanced technology in the same way that the West, long after the introduction of the alphabet, did during the Industrial Revolution. China also never codified its complex legal system, never experienced time and space with Cartesian dualism, and never developed its spiritual and mystical thought into monotheism—all in part due to its writing system.

Logan based his argument of the polarization of Western and Eastern thought on the contention that the alphabetic symbol representing the sound of a word is abstract and the Chinese character is less abstract. Logan devised 25 cultural patterns in law, science, technology, logic, and philosophy to illustrate the dominant characteristics of West and East. The “hidden effects” of Chinese script, which puts abstract terms in concrete form and defies classifying terms (p. 55), deny China the alphabet’s model of classification, standardization, and deductive logic. As a result, although China scholar Joseph Needham (1954) suggested that China did not develop modern science because of intellectual, social, and economic conditions, Logan argued that the lack of alphabetic writing played a part.
The Chinese writing system also stymied industrial development in China, Logan argued, because it encouraged conservatism and unification while discouraging innovation and mass production. Even when he acknowledged two aspects of Chinese writing that allow it to be both time-binding and space-binding, Logan interpreted these attributes as creating a conservative cultural force and hegemonic political power. First, because Chinese writing remained unchanged since ancient times, readers today have access to texts more than 3,000 years old. Secondly, because written Chinese was applicable to different languages, it spread across Asia as the single writing system.

Jack Goody & Ian Watt (1963, 1999) and Havelock (2003) provided similar evaluations of China’s writing system and culture. Goody & Watt relegated China to the status of a non-literate culture since its writing system’s relation to concrete thought and its emphasis on social action and traditional norms intensify the “homeostatic conservation” of oral cultures (1963, 1999, p. 49). China’s attitude toward categorization of knowledge and formal logic articulates the non-literate approach. Although not mentioning the Chinese, Havelock concluded that the Greeks invented the alphabet, literacy, and the literate foundation of modern thought, which made democratization possible (in Crowley & Heyer, 2003).

Within communication studies, the alphabetic literacy theory is largely supported and mildly challenged in previous editions of the seminal anthology textbook Communication in History (Crowley & Heyer, 1991, 1999). From the first edition in 1991 through the third edition in 1999, the editors included the 1960s work of Goody and Ian Watt as well as Havelock’s and Ong’s to support the theory. Goody & Watt’s classic article (1963, 1999) analyzed the extraordinary change effected by the Greek alphabet as it provided the foundation for Western thought and culture. Conversely, all three editions included (in abbreviated form) a classic work by Schmandt-Besserat.

In the most recent edition of their book, David Crowley & Paul Heyer (2003) have responded to the alphabetic literacy theory ambivalently. The editors dropped this excerpt from Schmandt-Besserat (1978/1991), arguing that three-dimensional tokens, not pictographs, were the precursors of writing (Schmandt-Besserat, 1996). This theory undercuts one of the underpinnings of the alphabet effect, namely that pictographs evolved into cuneiform writing, which in turn predates the alphabet. In its place, the editors include an anthropologist’s essay broadly evaluating the major impact of her work (Rudgley, 2003) and a narrower, descriptive history of the alphabet (Drucker, 2003). On the other hand, Crowley & Heyer have omitted the Goody & Watt article advocating the alphabetic literacy theory—which Goody has attempted to partially recant since the 1970s. Instead, though, the editors fortify the theory with an excerpt from Logan (2000, 2003).

More recently, applying Ong’s and Goody’s ideas to China, David Ze (1995) built a case that the Chinese writing system’s residual orality, combined with the notion of the political system’s restricted literacy, places China firmly in the oral culture sphere. The alphabetic literacy theory continues to inform communication research, and it appears to have become such a truism of media theory influenced
by this Canadian perspective that, as Neil Postman commented, the alphabet’s shift of perception from ear to eye was now a “commonplace among scholars” (Postman, 1985, p. 12).

**Challenging the alphabetic literacy theory**

The alphabetic literacy theory may have become an accepted idea, but it also has come under severe criticism through Schmandt-Besserat’s research and several partial retractions by one of its leading proponents, Jack Goody. In fact, during the last 25 years, Goody (1977, 1987, 1996) and Faigley (1999) have both opposed the alphabet effect theory, largely on grounds of its ethnocentrism and the emergence of contradictory evidence. Calling for a reappraisal in *The East in the West*, Goody (1996) wrote that he had been too close to the Western humanist tradition in making the “exaggerated” argument that the alphabet gave the West an advantage over the East (pp. 9-10). The writing effect, in Goody’s revised view, pointed to a shared heritage of writing and other factors that allowed the East to flourish at one time and the West at another, in pendulum fashion.

*The East in the West* was the latest in a 20-year process beginning with *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), when Goody first wrote that he and Watt, as well as Havelock, had attached too much importance to the alphabet in Greece. That work, he said, overlooked achievements in other societies using earlier forms of writing to achieve the same ends. One pitfall Goody identified that he had made in 1963 was seeing writing as the “objective correlative of speech,” which duplicated speech, rather than as a way of changing the nature of language use itself. The former assumption needed to be modified, he argued (p. 76).

After asserting that Schmandt-Besserat’s work would disprove the idea that cuneiform writing developed from earlier systems of pictographs (Goody, 1986), Goody more fully compares alphabetic and logographic writing systems in *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (1987). The alphabet had led to fewer symbols and a potentially less restricted writing system, and, in Greece, a possibly more open political system, he wrote. But there were simultaneous developments in new fields of knowledge and ways of knowing with the same potential in societies using logographic systems, including great advances in China, he countered. “It is a gross ethnocentric error of Europe to attribute too much to the alphabet and too much to the West” (p. 56).

The literacy thesis was not a simple shift from the oral to the literate, but also involved changes in the means and modes of communication, he elaborated before noting three important developments since his 1963 work with Watt, and the work of Havelock and others. First, newer dating of the origin of the Greek alphabet had emerged, which was earlier thought to have been adopted from the Phoenician alphabet about 750 B.C., but which other data moved to as early as 1100 B.C.

Secondly, and more importantly, Goody wrote that arguing for the importance of the Greek alphabet was a product of the European experience and classical education. That experience and education accepted the alphabet as
applicable only to Greek script, not its parent script. Such a view needed reassessment because logographic, syllabic, and alphabetic systems are not clear-cut, and the logographic leads quickly to phonetic signs. With phonetics embedded in the earlier system by the second millennium B.C., the gap between Greek and earlier systems was narrower than had been thought, as the consonantal alphabet spread over the Eurasian continent, with the Phoenician system in the West and the Aramaic system in the East.

Goody’s third point expanded on his view that earlier types of writing may have had the same liberating effects attributed to the alphabet. Although logographic script inhibited democratic literate culture, he thought, writing was used for “remarkable” advances in sciences and literature. In sum, the effect of the Greek alphabet was a “less dramatic event than we claimed” (p. 64).

In The East in the West, Goody (1996) included the effect of the alphabet as just one example of Western ethnocentrism, showing that he had followed the “humanist tradition too closely” in arguing that the West was ahead of the East because of alphabetic literacy in Greece (p. 10). Although not invalid, the argument was exaggerated because cultures using logographic or other writing systems had arrived at the same achievements associated with the alphabet. He also asserted that literacy was not important in pre-industrial society and that it was underestimated in non-alphabetic script societies, so that the sociocultural impact of writing was not affected by its elitism.

Goody challenged an array of studies that take the idea of rationality to be unique to the West (based on the “invention” of logic in Greece) or that focus on the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment periods to illustrate modern economic and intellectual developments in the West. By contrast, he argued, rationality is an attribute of all cultures. With the humanist argument, rationality or logic is said to begin with the Greeks, and the rationality debate represents a dichotomy of modern Western societies against primitive ones.

Instead, scholarship needs to consider the common heritage of the Bronze Age and ask why the East advanced at one time in one area and the West at other times in other areas. Western rationality or other unique features such as the alphabet should not merely be assumed to be a primary cause. Although Goody had contrasted alphabet and logographic systems with Watt, he has come to think that both forms of writing allow knowledge to be accumulated, synthesized, and formalized.

Writing developed in urban areas during the Bronze Age, with similarities in Europe and Asia, he argued. European and Asian societies at the time both expressed cultural traits not found in societies without writing. It is the ethnocentric bias of the West that has overvalued the achievements in Europe during the past 500 years while it underplayed achievements in the East during Europe’s “backward” Middle Ages. If advances in the West are attributed to permanent structural aspects, “the swings of the pendulum” will not be accounted for (1996, p. 246). Historically, modernization has alternated between the East and the West
based on factors including the accumulation of knowledge made possible by writing—not by cultural superiority.

Faigley (1999) focused on Schmandt-Besserat’s token research in his effort to undermine the pictograph theory, which he considers a foundation of the alphabetic literacy theory’s claim that the abstract quality of the alphabet is the impetus behind the rise of science, democracy, individualism, legalism, capitalism, and rationalism in the West. Faigley also traced the roots of the pictograph theory to the 1730s, when British cleric William Warburton suggested that all scripts descended from narrative drawings—a theory that retains many adherents despite certain contradictory evidence. The pictograph theory is essential to alphabetic literacy theory, because in the theory non-alphabetic writing systems are considered to be those that failed to evolve.

Moreover, Faigley questioned crediting the Greek alphabet, because abstract writing systems existed long before the Greeks, who simply adapted the Phoenician consonant characters, converted several to vowels, and added a number of signs. With the alphabetic Greek inscriptions dated from 730 B.C., which is late in the history of writing, Faigley argued that it would make more sense to look at the earliest written texts from 3500 to 3000 B.C. to study writing as one of the inventions that made civilization possible.

The key to the origins of these earliest written texts, the proto-cuneiform script of the Sumerians, is Schmandt-Besserat’s research into clay tokens found commonly throughout the Middle East dating from 8000 B.C. The crux of her theory is that two-dimensional symbols came from three-dimensional materials, not from pictographs, which are rare in early Sumerian texts. By 3000 B.C. Sumerian cuneiform script mixed phonetic symbols and ideograms, Faigley argued, to press his point that there are major shortcomings to the alphabetic literacy narrative. The opposite, he contended, seems to be the case: Cultures adopt and adapt writing systems when they need to.

According to anthropologist Richard Rudgley (2003), the pictograph theory had been dealt a “death blow” when no resemblance to pictographs was found in Sumerian script tablets unearthed in the 1920s and 1930s. Schmandt-Besserat provided a new theory when she began examining thousands of clay tokens that had been overlooked and stored in museums. Her research concluded that the tokens were a forerunner of the proto-cuneiform Sumerian texts. In an early phase from 8000 to 4400 B.C., plain tokens were used. In a second phase beginning in 4400 B.C. complex tokens were added. From 3700 to 3500 B.C., the tokens were sealed in clay envelopes with impressions of the tokens made on the envelopes. Between 3500 and 3100 B.C. it was realized the tokens themselves were redundant, and the token symbols were impressed directly onto tablets. Rudgley judged this theory to be a persuasive explanation of the emergence of the world’s first known writing.

Schmandt-Besserat (1996) described her token research dating to the 1970s as a result of chance that began when she was working on a study on the use of clay before pottery. Encountering the unexpected tokens, she learned that they
were widely used and appeared to be part of a system that no archaeologists had yet explained. She ultimately discovered that the token made up an accounting system that existed for 5,000 years from 8000 to 3000 B.C. throughout the Middle East. Although most significant is the tokens’ role in the gradual evolution from concrete to abstract counting, they also were part of a breakthrough in communication. The tokens were given specific shapes with unique meanings as the system grew to hundreds of concept signs. As the numbers and items counted were abstracted and numerals were invented, “writing could become phonetic and develop into the versatile tool that it is today” (1996, p. 125). Abstract numerals became both the beginning of mathematics and of writing.

In another comparison of writing systems that detracts from the alphabetic literacy theory, Andrew Robinson (1995/1999) pointed out that despite the dichotomy between the alphabet and Chinese characters, both use symbols to represent sounds. All writing systems use a combination of phonetic and semantic signs. The difference is one of the degree of phonetic signs. In the alphabet, the proportion is high; in Chinese, it is low—and Finnish is the most phonetic. The difficulty of learning Chinese characters compared to the alphabet is measurable, taking several years longer to achieve fluency in reading. Given the relative simplicity of the alphabet, however, many Westerners remain illiterate, he noted. For their part, Crowley & Heyer (1999) stated unequivocally that China was a literate civilization capable of research and development.

Alternative narratives of the East
One question raised in countering the alphabetic literacy theory is whether a culture’s history can rest on the difference between an alphabetic and a non-alphabetic script. Rather than pursue a causal relationship that privileges the writing system over the affected culture, communication theory should take into account the social matrix (Bookchin, 1991) or cultural matrix (McLuhan, 1964) in assessing the impact of writing on culture. Social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1991) argued that the organic or mechanistic character of the social matrix is the critical factor in determining any technology’s impact on a society. Examination of social changes that opened or closed a culture to technologies is needed to explain why technology failed in one society yet determined another society somewhere else or at another time. Contending that a society is ready or not for movable type or the steam engine ignores the relationship of culture to technology.

Building an alternative narrative to the alphabetic literacy theory also needs to take into account the existing evidence reviewed above and avoid Western bias. Two scholars of Chinese history and culture, Jacques Gernet (1982) and Derk Bodde (1991), provide glimpses of alternatives drawn from outside the sphere of the alphabetic literacy theory and incorporating the Chinese cultural matrix.

Gernet’s History of Chinese Civilization (1982) posited that the form of writing has profound effects on the direction a civilization follows. His interpretation of those effects in China, however, is vastly different from the alphabetic literacy theory interpretation. China offers the only example of a totally original, extremely complex writing system that served as the means of expression of a
large part of humanity. In any society, readers count for a small minority, and in China more people were educated than in the West. Even though learning the alphabet requires less effort, China emphasizes the value of writing and book knowledge.

Because Chinese has not been affected by phonetic changes, dialects, or linguistic structures, it has been a means of political unity since the end of the third century B.C. As it is designed for the eye, not the ear—a point Innis and McLuhan might consider—people can read a text even though they do not understand the oral language. Chinese thus became “a universal means of expression in every part of Asia” in contact with China, such as Korea and Japan, and gave rise to history, literature, and philosophy. Because of Chinese, East Asia became “a real community of civilization” (p. 32).

In addition, because Chinese is not affected by phonetic changes, it embraces a continuity of the written tradition found nowhere else: It is as easy to read a second-century B.C. text as it is to read a contemporary text. The same condition that gives rise to access to the accumulated thought of scholars through centuries also makes erudition requisite far beyond learning the script. As a result, China reveres the “lettered person” more than the orator, who was ascendant in the West (p. 33).

Gernet also noted that Chinese provided the first “shorthand” in history in order to record conversations, political discussions, and legal proceedings. Its many advantages inspired the same type of scripts across East Asia and became the foundation for Japanese and Korean writing.

This non-Western ethnocentric interpretation of the impact of Chinese script stands in stark contrast with Logan’s. What Gernet lauded as political unity, Logan mistrusted as hegemonic political power. What Gernet understood as a respect for erudition and the lettered person, Logan construed as a conservative cultural force.

Bodde (1991) offered a more richly textured analysis that combines all the criticisms of the alphabetic literacy theory while retaining some of its assertions. He noted that the description of Chinese as ideographic is “under scholarly attack” by those who note a phonetic element is present in most characters. The controversy, he argued, turns on taking different approaches to the same data. The pictograph proponents argued that even the phonetic elements are traceable to pictographs, while the phoneticists argued that the same characters contribute to sound, not meaning, and conclude that Chinese is “basically phonetic” (p. 18).

Bodde also would dispute the assertion that Chinese writing retains the quality of orality—or that Chinese literate culture ever was oral. China was scribal rather than verbal since the earliest stages of writing and did not go through centuries of oral transmission before committing works to writing, as occurred in India and, needless to say, Greece. As a result, the written form always dominated in China. The rarity, difficulty, and aesthetics of writing and literacy led to a “cult of the written word” (p. 28).

Reiterating Gernet’s point that writing allowed Chinese civilization to spread across Asia and remain accessible over millennia, Bodde offered a view of media
bias in a way that Innis would appreciate. Chinese writing gave China continuity in time and unity in space—in other words, a double bias.

While deflating much of the evidence that would be used to build a case for the alphabetic literacy theory, Bodde partially espouses some of its arguments in dealing with science in China. Working on a volume about intellectual factors affecting Chinese science up to 1600 for Joseph Needham’s classic *Science and Civilisation in China* (1954), Bodde developed differences of opinion with Needham that included whether Chinese writing was an effective medium for scientific thought.

Although it is easy to identify technological achievements in China, it is difficult to identify science as it deals with theories and ideas. As in Europe, laws of nature were not formulated to allow the growth of systematic positive knowledge in China before 1600. Despite its technological marvels before 1600, why did the scientific revolution not occur in China, Bodde asked. He speculated that Confucian opposition to war and Taoist distrust of technology might explain some of the answer, since so much Western science has come from its glorification of warfare and the resultant technology of global destruction that it has spawned.

The suitability of Chinese for formal logic nonetheless remained a nagging question to Bodde. Other scholars have found explicit and implicit logic in early Chinese texts, as well as “mass nouns” that imply ideal categories. A “lively” linguistic-logical debate has included comparisons of Aristotle with Mohist categories and the minimal adaptation Chinese needs to engage in logical discourse; yet except for the Mohists, few Chinese intellectuals are interested in logical demonstrations.

Positing that China had sciences, but no overarching, abstract science existing independently from philosophy, art, and cosmology, Bodde argued that to historians of science, Chinese classification of the five elements and yin-yang theories were ways of classifying the human world devoid of magic that added up to systematic attempts to explain nature coherently. Although seeking to avoid fallacies in asking why the scientific revolution did not happen in China by looking for intellectual or bureaucrat-scholar class factors or any other factors alone, Bodde still argued that Chinese writing was more harmful than helpful to scientific development.

Central to this issue is the fact that single characters embrace a range of meanings that always begin with the concrete and proceed to the abstract. Whether this causes the Chinese to see the abstract in terms of the concrete is the cause of much speculation. However, Bodde urged caution when considering the psychological impact of this “intangible topic” (p. 38). He did argue that the ambiguity and multiple meanings of characters led to the use of parallelism and antithesis to provide clarity in literary Chinese.

Parallelism—such as the phrase “spare the rod and spoil the child” (p. 43)—is blended with antithesis—such as the phrase “easy come, easy go” (p. 44)—to foster the type of reasoning known as analogical or correlative. This stylistic balance tended toward viewing the world as symmetrically paired analogies and
searching for harmony in the human, natural, and cosmic order. Antithesis also linked Chinese thinking to dialectics, as with the opposition of yin and yang. The search for order and harmony in an ever-changing universe may have ideological effects contrasted to those of the Greeks, Hindus, and others who tended to classify phenomena as unchanging categories because the different parts of speech in these Indo-European languages were categorical. After pursuing this thesis, however, Bodde commented that it is an “unprovable hypothesis” (p. 54).

In a similar vein, Bodde investigated how the lack of punctuation in Chinese prevents it from becoming a means of precise communication. He also detailed attributes of the writing and book-production system—such as a lack of an easy classification system, not using numerals for serial identification, and the lack of pagination—that made it difficult to find and cite texts. Further, use of extensive quotations, allusions, and historical precedents tended to fragment rather than synthesize texts and burden memory as scholars used a cut-and-paste means of compilation with lengthy quotes and minimal generalization.

Introducing arguments that minimize these criticisms, Bodde considered the view that if a language does not have a word for an idea, the idea does not exist in the mind; so, language always meets the needs of its speakers. He also argued that there is no ambiguity in Chinese texts if the thought of the author is clear, adding that ambiguity of language is a problem in European philosophy. The Chinese language in this line of thinking is not a reason to claim the Chinese failed to develop philosophical systems. Great Chinese thinkers have long used Chinese to clearly state their ideas.

As a means of thinking, Chinese is neither better nor worse than English, Bodde concluded. In Needham’s view, the common notion that Chinese writing inhibited modern science is “grossly overrated.” If social and economic factors had permitted, Chinese would have allowed scientific expression—and the West would be learning Chinese script instead of the other way around.

Conclusion
This article has attempted to build a case that the alphabetic literacy theory should give way in communication theory to a writing effect theory within the framework of a historical pendulum movement of the relative ascension and decline of Eastern and Western cultures. The alphabetic literacy theory has asserted the West’s permanent superiority over the East due to the psychological and cultural effects of the alphabet. Science, philosophy, logic, rationality, democracy, and monotheism are said to be inextricably linked to the alphabet in this theory.

This cultural advantage of the West has been theorized at the expense of an unbiased understanding of the East, particularly China, its culture, communication technologies, and history. As a comparative theory, the alphabetic literacy theory argues that the culture of reason fostered by the abstract symbols of the alphabet is vastly different than the less advanced thought that is bound by image-based non-alphabetic writing systems. These writing systems, like Chinese, are thought to be based on pictures and thus are lower on the evolutionary ladder since
the related pictograph theory maintains that abstract writing systems evolved from picture writing.

Established as a main component of the Toronto School from Innis to McLuhan, Ong, and Logan, and espoused by other scholars such as Goody, the alphabetic literacy theory retains a strong hold today despite a body of evidence that suggests the alphabetic literacy and pictograph theories are ethnocentrically biased and outdated. Schmandt-Besserat’s, Goody’s, and Faigley’s critiques of the alphabetic literacy theory and Gernet’s and Bodde’s narratives of China are offered as examples of the writing effect and the pendulum model of historical change in the East and West. Arrayed together in this article, it is hoped they can serve as an antidote to help dispel the continued popularity of the alphabetic literacy theory.

It is hoped that the deficiencies and the ethnocentrism of the theory have been detailed in a way that will help communication scholars seeking a more balanced and accurate narrative of the effect of alphabetic and non-alphabetic writing on civilization—both East and West. Communication scholars working with more contemporary and less ethnocentric historical, archaeological, and linguistic evidence may be better able to devise communication studies within the parameters of the writing effect and pendulum theories. Such research can continue to draw on this literature and redirect our understanding of historical and current intercultural and international communication issues.

References


