Writing English with Chinese characters: an eccentric view of what the written Japanese language is like

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Abstract: We make an attempt at showing an English speaking audience what the Japanese language feels like, without having to teach Japanese. We can do this by showing how to write English using Chinese characters instead of, or mixed in with, alphabetic characters. Doing this requires a lot of adjustments and difficult choices — choices that Japanese scholars must have had to make when adopting the Chinese writing system for their native language.

Japanese is widely regarded as being a difficult language for native English speakers to learn. In fact, the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, in its published ranking of world languages by their estimated time to achieve proficiency, puts Japanese in a special category entirely on its own. While European languages such as Norwegian and Spanish are estimated to require a native English speaker about 24 weeks of study (at 25 hours of study per week), German is estimated to require 30 weeks, Greek, Russian, and Turkish about 44 weeks, and Arabic, Chinese and Korean about 88 weeks. Japanese, on the other hand, is listed as ">88 weeks", but how much greater than 88? If my own personal experience is any guide, then something like 160 weeks would be close to the number. But I suspect that I'm somewhat slow, so if we pick somewhere in the middle then perhaps 120 weeks is a better estimate.

So, why is the Japanese language so hard to learn? The spoken language is actually not so difficult. It has a range of sounds that resembles those of Spanish, and has a very limited use of tones (pitch accents). The real difficulty with becoming proficient lies in the writing system. So, how did the Japanese language acquire such a complex writing system?

Two of the prominent writing systems that exist today — the Western alphabetic system and the Chinese logographic system — take very different approaches to communicating language, and although a significant fraction of modern Chinese learn some minimal form about alphabetic writing, few people in the Western cultural sphere learn anything at all about the Chinese writing system. One goal of this article is thus to introduce this new system to those who have never seen it before, and to give a feel for what it is like to use it. And all the while, we can still stick to using English!

While the early Chinese writing system was extremely influential and spread throughout much of East Asia, most regions outside of the modern borders of China have since reduced or eliminated their use of logograms and have switched to alternative writing systems. Japan, however, is a prominent exception (the only other such exceptions being Taiwan and Singapore). Perhaps one reason that the Chinese system has been less widely adopted than the alphabetic system is that it places heavier demands on raw visual memorization. Another reason, though this reason is equally shared by the alphabetic writing system, is that the system evolved from a language in which it is well-adapted. If we try to insert it into a different language, then we find the need to make messy adaptations.

It is probably not a surprise, therefore, that anyone learning the Japanese written language quickly comes to feel that the Chinese writing system did not fit the Japanese language very well. The two are not closely related linguistically, and have different grammatical constructions. As a result, the process of adopting the Chinese writing system must have required a lot of adjustment. We shall explore just how this must have felt — how to adopt a writing system into a language that is not well suited to it, and how this effects the adopting language. While we will be doing this here for English, it gives a good feel for what the Japanese language feels like from the inside.

1 Writing with logograms

Since we will be discussing a lot about how words and spoken and written, it will help to start by introducing the characters for speak (言) and write (書). But what if we want to use past tense for these verbs? While we can now use the character 書^writ e in place of the English for the present tense, it might not be clear how we can make use of this for *wrote*. But this is mainly because the verb is irregular. If it were regular, then the past tense would be *writed* — the same thing but with a *-ed* at the end of it. So, let's write the past tense as 書^writ ed by adjusting the characters attached the end, just as Japanese likely did for at least some of its verbs. Similarly, the regularized past tense of 言^speak would be *speaked*, and therefore 書言^writ speak ten

as 言[speak]ed. Or, if we want to preserve the sound structure of the language at all costs, we could write this as 言[speak] in present tense but 言[spok]e in past tense. If we don't keep the hint on top of the character, then we just need to remember which pronunciation form to use in each context. Japanese definitely makes a lot of use of that irritating approach.

This kind of inflection of characters to produce contextual endings is actually something that English already does, in the way that we use numbers. If we see "2" we think "two", but "20" is now "twenty", and "2nd" is "second", as in "He came in 2nd place."[1]

Next, we define the symbol for a "character" (or "symbol") (字). Whichever one of these two words this 字[symbol] represents, we could leave entirely up to context (as is sometimes done in Japanese), but let's change the ending to indicate the choice we want, as in 字[charact]er versus 字[symb]ol. In order to talk about languages (語), if we also define England (英), Japan (和), and China (漢), we can 書[writ]e about the corresponding 語[language]s as 英語[Eng. lang.] and the 和語[Jap. lang.]. (I am abbreviating in order to make the hinting fit.) Or, to refer to an 英[Engl]ish or 和[Japan]ese person (人), we write 英人 and 和人. By combining 漢字[Chin. charact]ers, we can quickly modify words. So, if we want to 言[talk] about an 英語[Eng. lang.] 言[speak]ing 人[person], then we can write 英語言人. You can see how the hints are 柔[flex]ible, and this too follows a similar path to 和語[Japanese] usage.

We will be comparing things, and so we need to define 字[symb]ols for good (良), bad (悪), and not (不). These first two are 不常[irregular] ("irregular" = 不 常[not-regular]) adjectives, and so we need to decide what to do with "better" and "best". We can 書[writ]e these as 良[good]er and 良[good]est, and just remember to pronounce (言音: talk-sound) them as "better" and "best". In other words, we decide that the 字[symb]ol does 不[not] define the 言音[pronunc]iation, but that the 言音[pronunc]iation is determined by context of what word (句) it is being used in. This is an all-too-familiar choice for 英語[Eng. lang.] users. So, we follow the same process for defining bad, worse, and worst: 悪[bad], 悪[bad]er, 悪[bad]est. We keep in mind that each 字[charact]er has a base 言音[pronunc]iation, and an 不常[irregular] location-dependent 言音[pronunciation]. While one could 書[writ]e hints like 悪[wor]se and 悪[wor]st, this becomes quite messy as our vocabulary expands. Over time, as we all get used to 書[writ]ing in the new system, we can expect that people (等 人)[plural-person] will slowly adjust to modifying their 言音[pronunc]iation to "baddest" and throw away the current 不常[irregular] form of "worst". The 書[writ]ing system is therefore nudging the 語[language] to become more 常[regular]. Perhaps it is all for the 良[good]er.

In my experience, when the 話[conversat]ion with a 和人[Jap. person] turns to the 和語[Jap. lang.], they like to claim that 和語 is 良[bett]er because it allows for more 縮[compress]ed 書[writ]ing. Naturally, 英語人[Eng. speakers] find this 不[un]convincing. First of all, this should be an argument for 用[us]ing 漢語[Chinese], which is 全[entire]ly 漢字[logogram]s, rather than 和語[Japanese], which mixes 漢字[logogram]s with other 字[symb]ols, just like we are doing now. 及[And] 不[not] only that, but why should 縮[compress]ion be the criterion for the 良[b]est 書[writ]ing system?

One advantage of our new 書[writ]ing 系[system] is that whereas alphabetic (alphabet = 音素字表)[sound-element-character-list] 英語[English writ]es both the 人[person] 及[and] the 語[language] as "Japanese", here we 書[writ]e them as 和人[Japanese] or 和語, such that the 書[writ]ten form clearly distinguishes between the two even though the 音素字表[alphabet]ic form does 不[not]. This is a 常[common] feature of 和語[Japanese], though it can sometimes be 難[difficult] to remember which 字[symb]ol to 用[us]e when.

英語[English] is 知[know]n for being 柔[flex]ible with its nouns (名詞), verbs (動詞), 及[and] adjectives (形容詞). When 言[talk]ing about a 人[person] who supports the 赤[red] team, we can call him "a 赤[red]", 換[convert]ing the 名詞[noun] into an adjective. Similarly, something that is "wet" can wet the tongue (形容詞[adjective] → 動詞[verb]), 及[and] if we 言[say] "a 濡[wet]", we can immediately 想[imagin]e that it is perhaps it means a 濡[wet] place or maybe a 濡[wet] 人[wet person]. The 名詞[noun] form is clearly marked for us by the indefinite particle "a" — one of the particle's main functions. We also often use stress syllable location or variations in 言音[pronunc]iation to differentiate between 名詞[noun]s, 形容詞[adjective]s, 及[and] 動詞[verb]s. For example, we 書[writ]e "家"[house] for both a 名詞[noun] (the place we live) 及[and] a 動詞[verb] (to provide shelter), but 言音[pronunc]e them as *haus* 及[and] *hauz*. Perhaps this is why many Asian 語言人[language speakers] (among 多 他[many other]s, I assume) feel annoyed by the seemingly-random (well, to them it seems so) use of definite 及[and] indefinite particles in 英語[English].

漢語[Chin. lang.]-influenced 書[writ]ing 系[system]s, however, have 小[little] need for this because it is easy to differentiate 句[word] forms by attaching 字[character]s. I 知[know] almost nothing of the 漢語[Chin. lang.], but have 読[read] that 漢語[Chinese] can simply add 不 to negate something, use 過[too-much] to imply too much, or 少[little] to imply too 小.[2] If you think I am defining 過多[too-many] 新字[new charact]ers 過早[too-quick]ly, then you now 知[know] how to communicate that.

If we are feeling 熱[enthusias]tic here, we can 増[add] some more 字[charact]ers to reduce our dependence on the 音素字表[alphabet]. We can define an "adjectivizing/adverbalizing" 字[symb]ol 的, such

that strong (強) becomes 強的^(strongly), giving us that -ly ending. Thus 音素字表^(alphabet) ic becomes 音素字表的^(alphabetic), fortunate (運) becomes 不 運^(unfortunate) 及 不 運 的^(unfortunately). No more messy endings! Among the population (人 数)^(person-number) of 英語言人^(Eng. speaker) s, there may be some 少 熱^(less-enthusias) tic holdouts who will cling to the use of 音素字表的^(alphabetic) endings, though. But an enthusiastic academic may want to charge through regardless of the consequences. This 新 系^(new system) is giving us such 強^(power)! So we also 増^(add) a "verbalizer" 字^(symb) ol that 換^(convert) a 名詞^(noun) into a 動詞^(verb): 為. 日本語^(Japanese) itself does 不^(not) make 多^(a lot) of use of this, since it is already so 柔^(flex) ible with 換^(convert) ing 名詞^(noun)s into 動詞^(verb)s. But, hey, we are aiming for 縮^(compress) ion, right?

Someone resisting the 新^(new) language will 泣外^(cry out): this is going 過遠^(too far). These 新^(new) 字^(charact)ers are complicated 及^(and) take 過長^(too long) to 書^(writ)e. Just take a look at the 字^(charact) er we 用^(us)e for "use". Just 書^(writ)ing the 音素字表的^(alphabetic) 字^(charact) ers u 及^(and) s, they continue, is far 早^(fast)er than writing 用. Enthusiasts would reply, however, that the *real* 強^(power) here is the 縮^(compress) ion: we are replacing 二^(two) 字^(charact) ers with only 一^(one).

2 Names (名 s) in the new system

One place where 漢語 字^(Chin. charact)ers do a 悪^(poor) job is dealing with foreign (外国: outside-country) 語^(language) 名^(nam)es. While you can get away with 名^(nam)ing cities, say, as northern capital (北京) or river metropolis (川都) in your own 国^(countr)y, continuing in this vein for 外 国^(foreign countr)ies 早^(quick)ly becomes confusing. We 要^(need) a way of 用^(us)ing our 字^(charac) ter 系^(system) to describe 名^(nam)es in some way that reflects what 外国人^(foreigner)s call them. If some far off 国^(country) calls their 京 都^(capital city) some strange 名^(nam)e like "London", then how shall we deal with that?

In 和^(Japan), their choice was extremely practical. They adopted some of the practices of 漢^(China) — this was, after all, where they learned how to 書^(writ)e in the first place — but mostly they just threw up their 手^(hand)s and decided 不 用^(not to us)e the 漢語 字^(Chin. charact)ers for this at all. They came up with a native syllabary, something much like an 音素字表^(alphabet), and to 書^(writ)e 名^(nam)es just like they are 言 音^(pronounc)ed. Or, well, how they are 言 音^(pronounc)ed by 和語人^(Japanese), of course.

From what I 分^(understand) , the 漢語人^(Chinese) went 全^(all)-in. They have these 字^(charact)ers for 書^(writ)ing, and that's 全^(all) they have to work with. So they made the only choices available 下^(under) those restrictions: they either invent 字^(symb)ols for each and every

新^(new) location, or they 用^(us)e some of their 字^(symb)ols 全的^(entirely) for their 言 音^(pronunc)iation and 不^(not) for their meaning. From what I can tell, both are involved: Vietnam = 越, United States = 米, France = 仏, Germany = 独、Iceland = 氷, Ireland = 愛, Norway = 諾, etc. If we did this in 英語^(English) using our Latin (拉語) 及^(and) Greek (希語) roots, then a 国^(countr)y called "Myrmedonia" would be 書^(writ)ten like myrme-dom-ia (ant-house-country). We just realize from context that the 句^(word) is not referring to ants (*myrmex-*) and houses (*domus*) but rather to a 国^(countr)y.

3 Forming compound words (連句)

A feature of the 英語^(Eng. lang.) that native 言人^(speaker)s make 常 用^(regular us)e of is the 多 数^(large number) of 拉語及希語^(Latin and Greek) 句 素^(word element)s that are 早的^(readily) combined to create 連 句^(compound word)s. Thus, if we were to 用^(us)e the familiar prefix pyro- 及^(and) suffix -phobia, we create the word *pyrophobia* whose meaning is 早的^(readily) 分^(understand) ed even if the 読人^(reader) has never 見^(see)n it before. More unusual 連 句^(compound word)s, with much narrower meanings are also possible. Thus, even if we were to 見^(see) the unfamiliar 句^(word) *peripyrochromatic* we could already guess that this seems to refer to the color (色) at the edge (境) of a fire (火) — a guess we could easily improve on if the 書^(writ)er supplies the proper context. Maybe the 書人^(writer) is some researcher who 学^(stud)ies 火^(fire), and who is trying to point out some feature of the 色^(color)ation at its 境^(edge) (which is a phenomenon that actually *is* 学^(stud)ied, by the way).

On reflection, we can 見^(see) that the behavior of these 句 素^(word element)s, largely borrowed from 拉語 及 希語^(Latin and Greek), perform a function in 英語^(English) which is quite similar to how the 漢語 字^(Chinese charact)ers are used in Japanese: since each 漢語 字^(Chinese charact)er (in principle, if not in actual practice) represents a concept, placing multiple 字^(charact)ers together generates a 連 句^(compound word). Thus *peripyrochromatic* would be 書^(writ)ten as 火境色的 (fire-boundary-color-related).

We can also consider, however, that 不 全 句 素^(not all word element)s are from 拉語及希語^(Latin and Greek). There are a 大 数^(huge number) of Anglo-Saxon roots as well (burn [焼], king [王], land [土]), though native 言人^(speaker)s will generally 考^(think) of them as full 句^(word)s rather than word roots (sunburn [日焼], heartburn [心焼], eyeburn [目焼]; kingmaker [王作人], unkingly [不王的]; overland, landlocked). These are often so 早的^(easily) stuck together, that it may be 不透^(unclear) whether one should 用^(us)e a hyphen, as in double-cross or doublecross, half-wit or halfwit. Some native 英語言人^(Eng. speaker) s will come to 見^(see)

some as 句[word] roots if they happen to 知[know] something of another 独的語[Germanic language]: (for-bid) (hus-band), (kinder-garten) (pumper-nickel).

As a result of its total fluency with creating compound words, 漢語[Chinese] and Japanese speakers are often puzzled by the 英語言人[Eng. speaker]'s assertion about the 大数[huge number] of 句[word]s in the 英語[English] vocabulary. But we can 始[start] to 見[see] the 元[source] of the confusion: if we can invent 句[word]s like 不王的語縮[unkingly language compression] — and actually be 分[understand]ed — then counting 句[word]s starts to lose meaning. If we have, say, 4000 different characters available to choose from, and allow 句[word]s of up to 5 characters long (a number which is much less than those languages limit themselves in practice) then we come up with $4000^5 \approx 10^{18}$. While this is something of an overestimate (we would not make any sense of 句[word]s like 不不不不不) it is still so far beyond the number of 句[word]s 英語[English] provides that the number of 句[word]s in 英語[English] would seem close to zero in this context. Of course, the truth is that the comparison is quite unfair, since 英語[English] speakers count 句[word]s from a dictionary — where one would search in vain for comprehensible (well, to some) 句[word]s such as the 上[above] "peripyrochromatic". If we want a fairer comparison, we would allow free use of the 拉語及希語句素[Latin and Greek word elements] (should we call that a word)? If we know that *myrmex-* is the 拉語[Latin] root for *ants*, then we 知[know] too that a myrmecophiliologiphobe is a 人[person] who is scared of 人人[people] that study ants.

4 Abbreviations in the logogram (漢字) system

A 常[common] complaint one hears (聞) about modern 英語[English] is about its profusion of acronyms. 人人[People] have learned the utility of 短[shorten]ing 不要的[un-necessar-ily] 長[long] phrasing that AFAICT doesn't really disrupt the overall 語[language] much, IMHO, because acronyms are generally awkward to 言音[pronounc]e. They stand out as different from 常句[regular word]s. This 限[limit]s their diffusion into the 語[language]. Occasionally, however, one encounters an acronym that is so 良[good], and so 用[us]eful, that it 換[transform]s into a 句[word] of its own. 一[One] example is LASER, which also spawned a related 動詞[verb] ("to lase").

Since the 中語字[Chinese charact]ers adopted directly from 漢[China], on the other 手[hand], are so easy to clump together, one finds it very easy to invent 句[word]s on the fly, or to throw together strings of 字[charact]ers to create 長句[long word]s, much in the way that

独語[German] is famous for doing among the 欧語[European language]s. 独語[German] is an "agglutinative" 語[lang.]. However, much as we showed 上[above] with 拉語及希語句素[Latin and Greek word elements], once the 句[word]s become unwieldy then 人人[people] will 見[look] for a shortcut. In 和[Japan], these shortcuts take the form of removing 字[charact]ers from a 長句[long word] — choosing only 二[two] to 四[four]字[charact]ers that are distinctive (do 不[not] show 上[up] in other 句[word]s, or with a 言音[pronunc]iation that may be confused with some other 句[word] in the current context) and retain some of the feeling of the original 長[long] form. While this 音[sound]s fine, its proliferation is at a scale far beyond that of acronyms in 英語[English], and there is no easy way to distinguish between the original forms of the 句[word]s and their 短[word]ed forms. Eventually, 人人[people] will come to forget the original forms and remember only the 短[abbreviat]ion. But the problem with this is that we are left with a collection of 字[charact]ers whose individual meanings are no 長[long]er 透的[clearly] connected to the 上全[overall] meaning of the 句[word].

For example, in 英語[English] we 短[shorten] the United Nations to U.N., making sure to 用[us]e periods in order to indicate the 短[abbreviat]ion and not the 句素[word element] "un-". In 和語[Japanese], this is 国際連合 (international-connect-fit), which gets 短[shorten]ed to 国連, which literally means nation-connect. We lose a bit of the original sense there, but not 過悪[too bad]. However, more specialized 語[language] tends to be more 短[abbreviat]ed. At universities, a department of Applied Physics would be 応用物理学 (apply-use-physics) but usually 短[abbreviat]ed as 応物 (apply-thing), which 不長[no long]er makes sense by itself. Likewise, Applied Chemistry (応用化学, apply-use-chemistry) becomes 応化 (apply-change). Someone unfamiliar with these can easily mistake them as words rather than 短[abbreviat]ions, but if the sentence were something like "I am going to 言[talk] to the head of apply-change" or "Apply-change is restructuring", you might be forgiven for 考[think]ing you mis-聞[hear]d what I said.

Over time, you can 想[imagin]e that such 短[abbreviat]ions take on a life of their own and become 句[word]s. Indeed, the 句[word] for electronic calculator is the unwieldy 「電気式卓上計算機」 (electric-style table-top calculation-machine) which 分[understand]ably gets 短[abbreviat]ed, but becomes 「電卓」 (electric-table) which makes no sense whatever as a 句[word] that should be built from two concepts. Or how about the 短[abbreviat]ion 「国保連」 (nation-protect-connect) for the annoyingly 長句[long word] 「国民健康保険団体連合会」, but which refers to an insurance 系[system] for national government employees. You can 見[see]

how, if this got 外[out] of 手[hand], it 始[start]s to cause havoc with the logic of the 語[language]. And so it does.

But the 悪[bad]dest perpetrators of these 語[language] atrocities are 不[un]questionably the journalists, who go 全外[all-out] to 縮[compress] their 書[writ]ing into as 小[small] a space as possible, to an extent that would likely make their 英語[Eng. lang.] counterparts envious. For a 外国[foreign] 読人[reader], this makes 読[read]ing newspaper articles quite a chore.

5   Going all out on compression

You can 見[see] that as we 増[add] more 及[and] more 字[charact]ers to our 系[system], we can reduce the 数[number] of 字[charact]ers we use for 書[writ]ing. Once we get 用[us]ed to it, and we 不長[no longer] 要[need] the hinting 上[above] the 字[charact]er, then maybe this will 短[short]en the 数[number] of pages that books 要[requir]e. However, with a 小[little] 熱[nthusias]m, we can milk this 書[writ]ing 縮[compress]ion 物[thing] even 長[furth]er. By condensing it down, we can create the *dulce leche* of 書[writ.] 系[system]s. And taking it 全[all] the way to its extreme, we can create the 白矮星[white dwarf star] of 書[writ]ing systems. 不運的[Unfortunately], we will see that 食[eat]ing 白矮星[white dwarf star] diamonds does not make for a 大良[great] meal.

Since we are going to push way beyond what the ancient Chinese ever envisioned, we are now jettisoning their characters and building our own. We moderns walk around all the time with computers in our pockets, and no longer have any need to put pen to paper for writing, we can go far beyond what paper-based writing could ever achieve. Now, if we are aiming for making symbols that compress information down into a single symbol, well, what kind of symbol are we talking about? Any word, after all can be regarded as a symbol — and we can put a box around each word to reinforce the concept. These symbols might not all be the same size, but us alphabet users are already used to that — after all, an "i" is much narrower than a "w".

So, if we think of each word as being an individual symbol, then the "compress individual concepts down into individual symbols" gang in East Asia should now see that we're not so different after all. We just don't fit our symbols into squares, and alphabet-derived symbols are much more flexible, in addition to giving strong hints to their pronunciation, so that the memorization requirements are much relaxed. Advanced technology, that. But if compression is what you want, compression you shall have. After all, why stop at a word as an individual symbol? What about a sentence? A paragraph? Even better, a page? Each page has the same shape,

right? So, if we want uniformly-shaped symbols, then we can take a page of text and, well, that's our symbol. Is the symbol too big? No problem. We have computers — just tell your computer display to shrink it down to fit into whatever space you like. In fact, here are the pages of this article: ▯▯▯▯▯. Five pages, five symbols. It's all there — just zoom right in. And now our writing system has achieved a wonderful compression. One book now fits onto a single page. An entire library onto the pages of one book. But then again, we could just digitize it, converting text to a much more efficient format.

Now we have come full circle. Once we see words as individual symbols, we alphabettors can say that we have way more symbols than the logogram users do, and therefore more possible combinations. If they could achieve $4000^5 \approx 10^{18}$ combinations, the English dictionary with its million words, taken five at a time, can do $10^{6^5} = 10^{30}$ which is so many more than they can achieve that it makes their vocabulary look like zero. They reply, however, that this isn't fair. Alphabetic words contain more than single logogram symbols do, so we should be comparing their "words" to our words, and so their vocabulary would then leap up to $4000^{55} \approx 10^{90}$. We counter, however, that 25 of their symbols is like a sentence in our alphabetic writing, and so that's not a fair comparison. For a full sentence of 20 words, we should allow something like $10^{6^{5^{20}}} = 10^{600}$. Hey, that's not fair, they retort. They have sentences too.... Through this mock debate, the pointlessness in the compressibility argument becomes clear.

6   Conclusion

The advantages and disadvantages of adapting the Chinese characters to writing English are evident. The trouble with memorizing all of the many various shapes. The inconsistency in the "hinting", and the fact that different people can potentially pronounce the same character differently depending on their interpretation of the context. The need for a secondary writing system to allow verbs and adjectives to inflect. The fluidity with word-boundaries and the ease of creating new words. All of these are likewise features of the Japanese writing system. And many of the difficult decisions that we have seen would go into adapting the Chinese writing system to English likely reflect what early Japanese scholars had to do.

Finally, we should make sure not to go too far with showing the difficulties of using Chinese script, since similar adjustments are also required for languages adopting the alphabetic system. We can see this, for example, in the large number of diacritics used in modern Vietnamese writing, in order to force it to express the extra vowel sounds and tonal structures that are not present in the circle of Latin-based languages.

A Postscript

One inspiration for writing this article was a blog post "If English was written like Chinese" by Mark Rosenfelder. Rosenfelder's post, however, focuses mainly on character creation, rather than adoption of writing from Chinese. So his approach show something more like what the English language writing system would have looked like if we had started out like the Egyptians did — from pictographics that then could have been simplified over time into logograms, as the Chinese system did (and as the demotic script evolved from the ancient Egyptian hierogyphs, and bits of which survive even into modern times inside the Coptic script).

References

[1] . This example closely follows that posed by a comment on Reddit. Unfortunately, I can no longer locate it to credit its author.

[2] . This example is adapted (and closely follows) that from Tae Kim's blog article "Which is harder? Japanese or Chinese?", located at: `https://www.guidetojapanese.org/blog/2006/07/20/which-is-harder-japanese-or-chinese/`