

Everything you wanted to know about East Asian writing but didn't think to ask: the history and structure of scripts for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese

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In what ways is the Chinese-character script similar to and different from alphabetic scripts?

This presentation will explore (and demolish) a number of myths about Chinese characters and Chinese writing, characterize Chinese writing within the framework of the script typology used by linguists, and explain the internal structure of Chinese characters in light of the historical development of the script since its invention of 3,000 years ago. The adaptability of Chinese characters (and of scripts in general) will be illustrated through the historical uses of the script to write non-Chinese languages including Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese. The talk concludes with recent developments in East Asian writing systems: the bifurcation of Chinese writing into "simplified" and "traditional" variants, the replacement of Chinese characters with the Korean and Vietnamese alphabets, and the transformation of Chinese characters into Japanese hiragana and katakana scripts. Along the way we will consider the role of the ampersand in English writing, how Unicode deals with an open-ended script and variant character forms, and what's up with spaces (or the lack thereof) as word delimiters.