Alphabetical disorder

SIR — In the article "China still hopeful ten years on", you mentioned[1] "... the sheer difficulty of learning the Chinese ideographs, which necessarily occupies several years of early schooling, raising the question whether China can successfully modernize itself without devising a more manageable script". This appears to betray a slight alphabetocentric tendency. One can equally say that it takes years of early schooling to learn the "unmanageable" spelling of English.

It is indeed true that learning Chinese ideographs takes much more time than learning the alphabet. Nevertheless, just to know the basic units of an alphabet does not convey anything about the language. Knowing the Roman alphabet tells one nothing about English, for example. Knowing the ideographs, on the other hand, actually tells one quite a lot about the language already, because each unit is a morpheme

in Chinese, while in the Roman alphabet each unit is at best a phoneme. This has been extensively discussed elsewhere[2]

It probably takes as much time to learn Chinese as to learn English. The difference is in the amount of time spent on learning different aspects of the written language. In Chinese it is the ideographs, while in English it is the way alphabetical units are strung together to make words. I have some limited experience of learning Babylonian, where the script, the grammatical structures and the syntactical structures are very different from either English or Chinese. A lot of time is spent on learning the *stati* of the nouns and the different forms (Gt, Gtn and so on) of the verbs, but this can be mastered without undue difficulty.

Moreover, the Chinese script co-evolved with the Chinese language over 30 centuries, and they are best suited to each other. Not many languages, with the possible exceptions of Sumerian (cuneiform logograms) and Korean (the Han'gul script), can lay claim to such an efficient system. In English, the spelling is so irregular and unpredictable that even native speakers such as Noah Webster or Bernard Shaw wanted to reform it or to adopt a new alphabetical system[3]. Part of the reason is that the Roman alphabet was an adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet[4]. The latter was designed for

Semitic languages which had few vowels. The Roman alphabet inherited this scarcity of vowels, and when it is used to write English, we see the problems that we are familiar with today.

You also mentioned[1] that "there is no real likelihood that China will abandon Chinese for some other language (English for example); the cultural tradition is simply too vivid and too strong". Why should we Chinese abandon our mother tongue for an alien language? Chinese may appear difficult to the non-Chinese, but to us it is an elegant and expressive language, easy to learn, beautiful in its spoken and written forms, and free of declensions, conjugations and such "absurdities" (when Chinese children learn an Indo-European language, they all have great difficulties with declensions and conjugations because they do not exist in Chinese). From a Western viewpoint Chinese may seem an inefficient language, but from a Chinese point of view all Indo-European languages appear cumbersome and unwieldy.

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3. Haas, W. *Alphabets for English* (Manchester Univ. Press, 1969).
4. Gelb, I. J. *A Study of Writing* (Univ. Chicago Press, 1963).