Autopoiesis of The Sinitic Communication System

by

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A Summary

The Sinitic communication triad xing-yin-yi 形音義 is considered to be a synthesis of coordinated selections among the glyph xing 形 for certain message to be conveyed, the form yin 音 with which the message is expressed, and the meaning yi 義 by which the message is to be understood. The system of the triads therefore constitutes the requisite components amenable to an analysis using Luhmann’s systems theory. The Sinitic communication system with the said triads as the constituent components is therefore autopoietic: self-generating, self-regenerating, and self-organizing. The traditional scholarship on liu shu 六書, at least three thousand years old, actually prescribes six different modes of component generation, regeneration and organization in the Sinitic communication system (SCS), very much in line with Luhmann’s systems theory. The six modes of component generation are:

(1) xiangxing 象形 literal referencing
(2) zhishi 指事 figurative referencing
(3) huiyi 會意 compound referencing
(4) xingsheng 形聲 compound autologic referencing
(5) zhuanzhu 轉注 admission of environmental homosemic innovations, or calquing
(6) jiajie 假借 admission of environmental homophonic surrogations

Discussions on the liushu’s systems theory are carried out with historical usage examples. Items (5) and (6) deal with the actions SCS would take when faced with interaction with its environments, i.e., intercultural contact. In particular, under a second order observation, the following three items will be highlighted: (1) some 1300 pre-5th century historical calquings are seen to form autologic binoms and (2) a profile of post 5th century Sino-Turkic bilingual community as a case of institutionalized environmental homophonic surrogation made possibly by the Xianbei National Language is outlined, and (3) the concomitant life history of Turkic-rooted Mandarin grammatical elements discussed in detail.

The Chinese writing system is commonly associated with the Chinese term Hanzi Xitong 漢字系統. Hanzi 漢字, or kanji pronounced in Japanese, literally means Chinese characters and Han refers to the Han dynasties (206 BC – 220 AD). It is safe to assume that Hanzi had its presence in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam as early as in the 1st century BCE.
This author argues that the term Chinese Writing System has under-analyzed the intrinsic nature of the system with its social systems contents. As a result, it has been treated merely as a scripting scheme and nothing beyond that, while there are hidden social complexities behind the façade of a character. Additionally, the term is much too Han-Chinese-centric to obviate the historical events with significant foreign participation. We shall use the term Sinitic Communication System (SCS), instead of Chinese Writing System, to avoid anthropocentrism and the distracting functionalism of the word “writing”.

We shall demonstrate that, unlike any other languages in the world, more than 3300 years ago, Chinese language with its attending writing system already had in place the makeup of a social system which is amenable to an analysis with Luhmann’s systems theory (1996). We may begin by stating that a Chinese character is actually a synthesis of three items: the glyph, the sound, and the meaning. In Chinese traditional terminology, the triad is called xing-yin-yi 形音義 which corresponds to Luhmann’s designation for communication as a synthesis of three coordinated selections: the selection of information, the selection of form, and the selection of understanding.

Luhmann’s theory permits an integrative analysis of Sinitic communication system in a way never envisioned before. More than just the profile of communication triad, SCS actually generates and regenerates its own components. It organizes itself. That is, SCS is autopoietic.

In fact, we shall interpret the notion of liushu 六書 as ‘six ways of forming communication components’, known to exist in a classic called zhouli 周禮 ‘protocols of Zhou dynasty’, describes how SCS generates and regenerates its components. Liushu’s description of each of the six methods of component generation was given in three terse phrases. While meshing of Chinese with foreign language in a large scale may appear to be impossible for its tight closeness, however in the 5th century China, an epic merging of Turkic and Chinese were made possible by the Xianbei National Language (鮮卑國語 XNL). The latter was made of selected Chinese characters for their phonetic values only as alphabet to script the whole Turkic language as a functioning language at that time. Because XNL was a representation of Turkic language in SCS, it was re-introduced within the boundaries of SCS which became the media of the bilingual communities. This would be a case of how homophonic surrogates jiajie 假借 managed to re-enter into SCS and regenerated the components of the SCS. The regeneration and the subsequent code-mixing with indigenous Chinese in the bilingual community turns out to be very profound as manifested in Mandarin grammar. We believe that Luhmann’s systems theory offers a chance to perform an integrative analysis of the life history of Sinitic Communication System starting from its inception in the 1300 BCE, via the 5th century Turkic participation, to modern Mandarin and dialects. The subject of study is then to explore the intrinsic social systems nature of the Chinese writing system without resorting to piece meal discussions with anthropocentric biases.

If liushu 六書 was the six methods of component generation and regeneration for the SCS, it must have existed as part of the SCS system which would be of the era circa 1300 BCE. The term liushu 六書 first appeared in zhouli 周禮 which would predate Confucius in the 6th century BCE. Luhmann’s systems theory presumably deals with the 21st century modernity and yet 3500 years back we already had a case in SCS that would seem to have been made waiting to have an intimate conversation with Luhmann’s theory.
Liushu in its concise exposition actually described the framework of SCS with an autopoiesis underpinning. In this presentation, it will be shown that SCS is autopoietic through the framework of liushu 六書 “six methods of component generation and regeneration” and the six methods of liushu can be discussed in three orders of component generation:

The 1st order generation would generate glyphs based on single concept- or object-referencing and the two types are represented by:
(1). xiangxing 象形 ‘literal referencing’,
(2). zhishi 指事 ‘simple figurative referencing’,

The 2nd order generation would generate glyphs based on combination of two concepts or objects and there are two types:
(3). huiyi 會意 ‘compound referencing’,
(4). xingsheng 形聲 ‘autologic referencing’ which manifest in two distinctive forms: categorical autology and kernal autology. Components of xingsheng constitutes more than 80% of the SCS in the 5th century.

The 3rd order generation would admit regenerated glyphs based on interaction with its environments and there are also two types:
(5). zhuanzhu 轉注 ‘admission of environmental homosemic innovations’, or loan translation or calquing. Many historical calquing manifested as appositives and formed autologic binoms, such as 遙遠 yaoyuan、草莽 caomang、開閉 guanbi etc.. Most of the historical binoms have been used formulaically. Examples of modern calquing from English may include 下載 “to download”, 微軟 “microsoft”, 激光 “laser”.
(6). jiajie 假借 ‘admission of environmental homophonic surrogations’. Historical environmental surrogations may include: 佛圖 fotu “buddha” from Sanskrit, 賀蘭(山) helan(shan) “karlan, snow-covered” from Turkic, 拓跋 tuoba “toh beg, earth-featured nobleman” from Turkic.

Prior to the 5th century, most of the cognitively formed glyphs had already been in place as evidenced from the proportion made up by the first 4 modes of component generation. After the 5th century when Turkic speaking Tuoba 拓跋 conquered and ruled China for 200 years, with institutionalized sinification 全面漢化 plus grass-root motivated Xianbei Guoyu 鮮卑國語, the Sinitic language underwent a major restructuring in phonology (acquiring Turkic accents resulting into wenyan), grammar (converting Turkic grammar in northern vernaculars), and lexicography (attrition of old Chinese due to presence of wenyan 文言). This Turkic-induced metatypy can be explained adequately and integratively with Luhmann’s systems theory because the Sinitic Communication System is an organic, autopoietic social system.