CHAPTER EIGHT

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

8.1 Language and Writing

In analyzing encyclopaedias’ information on Chinese language and literature, we need to keep in mind, that European knowledge on these matters had been rather limited until the advent of sinology as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century. Despite this fact, Chinese language and writing had a prominent place in early modern European discourses on the origin of languages and in the search for a universal language.1 Moreover, early modern Europeans closely linked information on Chinese language and literature to discourses on Chinese philosophy.

In late seventeenth-century encyclopaedic reference works, information on the Chinese language in general had been derived from the presentation of the subject by the Austrian Jesuit Johann Grueber (1623–1680). Grueber’s text originally had been used by Athanasius Kircher. Shortly thereafter a French edition of the text had been published together with a reedition of Intorcetta’s translation of the Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean), one of the Confucian classics.2 The examples used for the description of the Chinese language prevailed in some eighteenth-century European encyclopaedias. This may be seen from the later editions of Moréri3 and from the Deutsche Encyclopädie.4 In his Nouveaux Mémoires sur l’état present de la Chine (1696), Le Comte provided another presentation of the Chinese language, that was referred to by European encyclopaedias up to the late eighteenth-century.5

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1 See Mungello, Curious Land, 174–207 (Chapter VI: Proto-Sinology and the Seventeenth-Century European Search for a Universal Language).
4 Deutsche Encyclopädie 5 (1781) 522.
5 For early European reports on the Chinese language (including the account of Le Comte) see Bai, Les voyageurs français, 322–331.
Only in mid-eighteenth century, encyclopaedias started to distinguish between the various Chinese dialects and between oral and written language. In the *Encyclopédie* we read that the Chinese would apply the term ‘Mandarin’ also to the learned language (*langue savante*) of their country: Apart from the proper and particular language of each nation and each province ‘Mandarin’ would be used as a mean of communication not only at court but also on all levels of administration.⁶

In most encyclopaedias, presentations of Chinese language and writing were crucial for the perpetuation of the widespread idea of the ‘otherness’ of China. Examples for this perpetuation include the first edition of Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* as well as the introductory remarks to the section on Chinese language and literature inserted in Rees’ *Cyclopaedia*.

In the first edition of Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* we find a condensation of Louis Le Comte’s description of the Chinese language.

F. le Comte observes, that the Chinese has no analogy with any other Language in the World: It only contains 330 Words, which are all Monosyllables; at least, they are pronounc’d so close, that there is no distinguishing above one Syllabic, or Sound in them. But the same Word, as pronounc’d with a stronger or weaker Tone, has different Significations: Accordingly, when ‘tis accurately spoke, it makes a sort of Musick, which has a real Melody, that constitutes the Essence and distinguishing Character of that Language.⁷

The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* relied on this entry of Chambers with slight changes in orthography and punctuation—omitting only the reference to the account of Louis Le Comte.⁸

These general remarks referred to the antiquity and singularity of the Chinese language and perpetuated the perception of Chinese as a difficult language.⁹ The *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* linked this information on the antiquity of the language to the European discourse on the stability or even immobility of China: “[…] the language has

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⁶ *Encyclopédie* 10 (1765) 12 (s. v. ‘Mandarin, (Littérat.’)).
⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (1771) 184 (s. v. ‘Chinese’).
⁹ For examples of perpetuating late seventeenth-century presentations of the Chinese language see Rees, *Cyclopaedia*, vol. 7, fol. 4Q2r (s. v. ‘China’).