



# PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

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## When the Wrong Alphabet Is Right

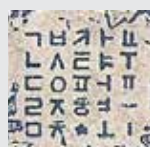
Peter T. Daniels

The nations of the world use more than thirty different alphabets and other kinds of writing. Most of them use varieties of the Roman alphabet, a goodly number use versions of the Arabic, and quite a few use adaptations of the Cyrillic alphabet—which is most familiar on stamps of Russia. But a number of countries use alphabets of their very own, shared with no or very few other countries. From time to time, such countries celebrate their scripts in stamps—such as Korea, which in 1946 commemorated the 500th anniversary of the invention of its alphabet (fig. 1).



1. Korea, 1946 [Sc74]

Professor Young-Key Kim-Renaud (George Washington University) points out that the alphabet is to be read in columns from left to right. The shapes are the original forms of the letters, which were first used in woodblock printing



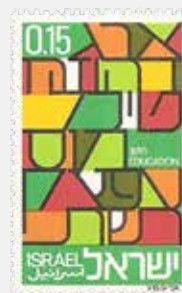
Detail from Fig 1.

ㄱ	ㅂ	ㅋ	ㆁ	ㆁ	k	p	k'	a	yo
ㄴ	ㄷ	ㄸ	ㄹ	ㄹ	n	sh	t'	ya	u
ㄷ	ㄷ	ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	t	ng	p'	ō	yu
ㄷ	ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	r	ch	h	yō	ū
ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	ㅌ	m	ch'	*	o	ī

The arc at the top (fig. 1), she explains, reads 한글오백주년기념우표 *han'gŭl o.baek.chu.nyōn u.p'yo* “stamp commemorating the 500th anniversary of Han'gŭl.” You can see how the letters of the alphabet combine into groups, looking a little like Chinese characters, for each syllable:

ㅎ+ㅏ+ㄴ=한 *han*, ㄱ+ㅏ+ㄹ=글 *gŭl*, etc. At the bottom 오십전 *o.ship.chōn* “fifty cents.” The name of the country does not appear on the stamp—the alphabet was considered distinctive enough to identify the stamp’s origin. Fifty and seventy years later, South Korea [Sc1899] and North Korea [Sc5368] again celebrated the invention of their alphabet.

Israel used the Hebrew alphabet in 1972 to illustrate “Education” (fig 2). The color-field treatment of the Hebrew letters may make them a bit hard to identify. The letters read as follows (right to left, in rows from top to bottom):



2. Israel, 1972 [Sc475]

א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת	g	b	ʔ	h	z	w	h	d	l	k	y	t	s	n	m	q	i	s	p	ʕ	t	sh	r
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----	---

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Once in a while, though, a stamp is issued with the “wrong” script on it—a script not usually used on the country’s stamps. Our first two examples are also from Korea and Israel. In 1969, South Korea issued a stamp (fig. 3)—in a series of definitives—honoring the Tripitaka Koreana, an astounding collection of no less than 81,258 carved woodblocks, created in the 13th century AD, bearing an immense library of Buddhist scriptures and texts rendered in Chinese. The Tripitaka Koreana is stored in Haeinsa, a Buddhist temple in South Gyeongsang Province.



Fig. 3. South Korea, 1969 [Sc650].

The stamp depicts one of the rows of shelving that hold the blocks, with a view of one inscribed side of a block and, above it, the four lines of a colophon describing the contents and creation of a particular block. Prof. Ross King (University of British Columbia) identifies the four columns of Chinese (read them from right to left) as the colophon to one of the Buddhist sutras included—probably the Taebanya paramilta kyong, v. 370. The text on the tablet itself isn’t rendered clearly enough to read.

In 2015, Israel, like a number of countries, noted the exhibition loan of the “Cyrus Cylinder” by the British Museum for display in Teheran, Iran (fig. 4). Cyrus was the Achaemenid (Persian) emperor who vastly expanded the boundaries of his realm around 500 BCE, and he issued an edict that has been seen as the first expression of human rights in all of history. The clay cylinder bearing the edict is written in Akkadian, a Semitic language (related, that is, to Hebrew and Arabic, among others), with the cuneiform system of writing. Tens of thousands of cuneiform texts have come down to us because the script was impressed with a corner of a stylus made of



Fig. 4. Israel, 2015 [Sc2057]. Detail below.



reed onto a smoothed clay surface; and dried clay, even if it hasn’t been baked in a kiln, will last through the ages so long as it doesn’t get wet (or stepped on).

This stamp is especially interesting because in the caption at the top left, the third line translates “Declaration of Cyrus” into both Arabic (as is normal on a stamp of Israel) at the beginning of the line, and into Persian, the language of Iran, at the end of the line!

Arabic منشور كورش *manshur Kurush*  
 Persian بیان کورش *bayan Kurush*

The three symbols on the left edge near the stamp’s top corner were rather mysterious, but Marian Mills, of the American Philatelic Society’s Philatelic Research Library, obtained the following information from the Israel Philatelic Service: the symbols are meant to represent the name *Yhd*, or *Yehud*—the name of their province—in the letters in use there at the time Cyrus granted autonomy to the Jews. You need to turn the stamp counterclockwise and read them right to left (the shapes are quite stylized).

Pre-revolutionary Iran was a good source of unusual scripts on stamps, because the succession of empires before the advent of Islam in the 7th century used a succession of scripts, especially on coins, a number of which have been depicted on stamps. But here’s a somewhat surprising example: a set of five stamps—all different sizes—honored UNESCO’s World Congress on the Eradication of Illiteracy that met in Teheran in 1965. One of the values (fig. 5) shows not one but two “wrong” scripts, Chinese and Roman. The first row of characters in the “globe” is Chinese, but they don’t make much sense; the first two might mean “magazine.” The second row is the first four letters of the Persian alphabet, reading right to left, and the fourth row is the first four Persian numbers, reading left to right. The high value of the set (fig. 6) translates the title of the Congress into (besides French and Spanish) Russian, using the Cyrillic alphabet, but is even more interesting for its background. Not easy to notice is the



Fig. 5. Iran, 1965 [Sc1347]



Fig. 6. Iran, 1965 [Sc1350].  
Left, stamp includes cuneiform inscription in white against the gold background. The top ten lines are Old Persian Cuneiform, and the two lines at the bottom are Elamite cuneiform.

cuneiform inscription picked out in white from the “gold” background, and sideways with respect to the Shah’s portrait. The first 10 lines are in Old Persian cuneiform, the last 2 are in Elamite cuneiform.

The text, discovered in 1936, is an inscription of Darius I on gold and silver plates from Persepolis, the great capital city that was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 325 BC. The text, identified by Prof. Matthew Stolper (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), boasts of the extent of Darius’s empire: “From the Scythians who are beyond Sogdiana, thence unto Ethiopia, from Sind, thence unto Sardis” (translated by R. G. Kent, 1953). The designer of the stamp used just the middles of the first 12 lines, cutting off 5 or 6 characters from the beginning and end of each line. (Five lines of the Elamite version, and all 8 lines of the Babylonian version, are excluded.) This may well be the only stamp ever issued bearing an inscription in Elamite!

Speaking of cuneiform, I’ve no idea why Argentina chose to recognize the contribution of Immigration from Syria by means of Ugaritic cuneiform (fig. 7). The first five Ugaritic letters appear at the top of the central panel (left to right), adding the Arabic

equivalents below them and the explanations below that. Ugaritic cuneiform, dating to 1200 BCE, is connected with Akkadian or Elamite cuneiform only in that it, too, was impressed with a stylus on clay, but the shapes were probably imitated from ink-written letters like those on the upper left edge of



Fig 7. Argentina, 2008 Sc2500. Detail below.



figure 4. Almost as soon as it was discovered, Syria put on a stamp a Ugaritic clay tablet showing the complete alphabet (ScC223), and they did the same with an Eblaite tablet decades later (Sc1138), but those don’t fit our theme here because the stamps actually celebrated the archeological discoveries.

More than three dozen times, as documented by Diann Pinkowski in the January 2018 *American Philatelist*, the United States has entered into joint issues with other countries, commemorating people or events of interest to both nations. Even though they would have been great opportunities for dual-language (if not dual-script) stamps, almost every time, the identical or very similar U.S. designs have simply had their legends in English, while the other country’s legends were in its language(s). There are two exceptions, though.

The emblem of the joint Apollo–Soyuz mission appears on one of the two seven-tenant stamps in the 1965 joint issue (fig. 8). The emblem at the lower right reads “Apollo СОЮЗ” on both the American and the Soviet stamps.

The 1992 U.S.–Russia “Space Achievements” block of four, perhaps by accident, also show “wrong scripts” *cont. on next page.*



Fig. 8. Top. USA, 1975 [Sc1570].  
Bottom. Russia, 1975 [Sc4340]





Fig. 9a. Left. Russia, 1992 [Sc6081 and 6083]. Fig. 9b. Right. USA, 1992 [Sc2632 and 2634].

Russia replaced the Soviet Union as the issuing authority, and national emblems on the spacemen’s uniforms were replaced by emblems of their space agencies. Each stamp depicts spacecraft of several eras. These are more fraternal twin than identical twin stamps—they differ in both size and color. The upper-right Russian stamp from a block of four (fig. 9a) shows “NASA” on the astronaut’s chest (in Cyrillic script it would look like “HACA”), and the lower-right U.S. stamp from a block of four different (fig. 9b) shows “CCCP” on the Soyuz craft (in Roman script it would be SSSR). The design wasn’t altered and so is historically accurate.

in both varieties. Pinkowski explains that the design was changed at the last moment when



Fig. 10. USA, 2004 [Sc3880]. Below, enlarged detail showing two Hebrew letters.



Even the first U.S. Hanukkah stamp, in 1996 (Sc3118), although it was a joint issue with Israel and was reissued several times where only the denomination changed, bears no Hebrew letters. Eventually, though, a new Hanukkah stamp in 2004 (which also survived several rate increases) featured a dreidel, on which two Hebrew letters can be discerned (fig. 10).

A dreidel is a toy top, used in playing a game of put-and-

take by the light of the Hanukkah candles. Each of the four sides bears the first letter of a word in the Hebrew motto **נס גדול היה שם** *Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*, “a great miracle happened there.” When playing the game, *N* stands for Yiddish *nikhts* “nothing,” *G* for *gants* “all,” *H* for *halb* “half,” and *Sh* for *shtel ayn* “put in”—the Yiddish alphabet comes from the Hebrew. The letter **ה** *H* can just barely be made out on the upper face of the dreidel on the stamp, and the letter **ג** *G* at the top of the right-hand face.

The U.S. did much better by the stamp for the two Muslim holidays of ‘Eid: ‘Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting by day; and ‘Eid al-Adha, marking the end of a pilgrimage to Mecca. The eminent American calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya was commissioned to create the design, which was first issued on September 1, 2001 (fig. 11a).



Fig. 11a. Left. USA, 2001 [Sc3532]. Fig. 11b. Center. USA, 2011 [Sc4552]. Fig. 11c. Right. USA, 2016 [Sc5092]

The inscription reads “blessed ‘Eid,” with the first word of script below the second word of script. Over the years it took on new colors and was reprinted with rate changes, and a revised design in 2011. In the later version without the frame around the stamp, the second word of script is split below and above the first word (fig. 11b). In 2016 the format was changed to horizontal and Zakariya took the opportunity to add two letters to the inscription (fig 11c). The inscription now reads “may your ‘Eid be blessed.” Details can be found at <http://pakistanlink.org/Community/2016/May16/20/03.HTM>.

2001 **عيد مبارك** ‘id mubarak “blessed ‘Eid”  
 2016 **عيدكم مبارك** ‘idukum mubarak “may your ‘Eid be blessed”

The Golden Quill, or Brush, for excellence in “wrong scripts” on U.S. stamps, though, goes to

the Lunar New Year series that began in 1992/3 (the first one was issued in December 1992 for the Year of the Rooster that began in January 1993 [fig.



12. USA, 1993 [Sc2720].

12]; since then, they've been issued in January). The Chinese “Zodiac” names years rather than months as the Western Zodiac does, and the series that began with this stamp appears to be the very first one issued outside an East Asian country, as the APRL’s Marian Mills determined for me. After twelve annual issues, ending with the Ram in 2003 (Sc3747), the set was reissued in 2005 as a souvenir sheet of 37c stamps (Sc3895) starting at the top left with the beginning of the cycle, the Year of the Rat (Sc3895a) The souvenir sheet was issued again at 39c the next year (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13 USA, 2006 [Sc3997].

The series of stamps depicts the year’s titular animal in paper-cut art, identified only by its name in Chinese. Each stamp bears two characters in a calligraphic style called “running hand.” It’s usually not too hard to recognize the formal shapes of the characters in this style, in which the brush is not always lifted between the separate strokes of the character. The strokes of a character are always made in the same order, so the links between the strokes are predictable.

(A new series began in 2008, properly starting with the Rat [Sc4221]. Its artist has included the

paper-cut art from the first series in a smaller size in each otherwise symbolic design, sometimes including the character for the animal, sometimes others. With the Dog stamp of 2018 [Sc5254], that series is all but completed.)

The set of Zodiacal animals with their characters is as follows (laid out to correspond to the arrangement in the souvenir sheets). The second character on each stamp—below or to the right on each US stamp—means “year.” Prof. Richard V. Simmons (Rutgers University) guided me through this topic.

Rat	鼠 <i>shǔ</i>	Ox	牛 <i>niú</i>	Tiger	虎 <i>hǔ</i>
Hare	兔 <i>tù</i>	Dragon	龍 <i>lóng</i>	Snake	蛇 <i>shé</i>
Horse	馬 <i>mǎ</i>	Ram	羊 <i>yáng</i>	Monkey	猴 <i>hóu</i>
Rooster	雞 <i>jī</i>	Dog	狗 <i>gǒu</i>	Boar	豬 <i>zhū</i>
		year	年 <i>nián</i>		

Nations around the world have imitated the practice of recognizing the Lunar New Year, some of them putting out an entire set of twelve every year. The 2017 set from France (Sc5168–79) is especially gorgeous.

With the plethora of Lunar New Year stamp sets around the world, it’s no longer difficult to find “wrong scripts” on stamps. But hunting for them in less obvious places can be very rewarding!

*Peter T. Daniels is a linguist specializing in writing systems. His book An Exploration of Writing was published earlier this year.*