

Names as witness to a script in decline

Alex de Voogt

The Caroline Islands script, as it was known in the western part of the Pacific Ocean, was in use for less than fifty years and primarily for writing short messages and names on objects such as canoes. It suggests that writing names may be one of the first applications of a newly developed writing system. In contrast, the Naxi writing system, found in Yunnan Province, China, existed for centuries but is now also in decline. The number of people with the ability to read and write the Naxi script is limited to a few Dongba priests. The main application of this writing system today is thought to be decorative. In Lijiang, the touristic center of the Naxi culture, Dongba priests write personal names of tourists on request. In addition, nearly all store fronts have multiscriptual signs that include the store name in proper Naxi script. Names are arguably the main application of the Naxi script today. Both the Caroline Islands and the Naxi script feature names as either one of the first or one of the last applications of the writing system.

Curiously, the Naxi script can only be read by a few people so that most of the Naxi signage is unintelligible to the inhabitants of Lijiang and the many tourists that visit the town. This paper will explore the purpose of writing names in relation to their possible audience and reflect on the continued use of writing systems that have a particularly limited number of users.