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Svantesson, Jan-Olof (1991)
Språk och skrift i Öst- och Sydostasien
[Language and writing in East and Southeast Asia].
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This book provides an introductory survey of the languages and writing systems of East and Southeast Asia, aimed especially at language students. In addition to four major chapters, dealing with the geographical distribution of the languages, their linguistic relationships, language structure, and writing systems, the book concludes with a brief but helpful and very up to date chapter giving pointers to further reading on the various languages and language families as well as to general works on the languages and writing systems of the world and to relevant bibliographies, in Swedish, English, German, and French.

The first chapter, organized geographically, lays out the distribution of the languages as well as ancillary information such as the number of speakers. The second chapter, organized by language family, gives an appropriately conservative classification, in which, for example, Japanese and Korean are listed separately from Altaic, and Hmong-Mien is listed separately from Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic. Proposals for more distant relationships are mentioned briefly.

The third chapter, on language structure, is the weakest of the book, largely due to the fact, no fault of the author's, that it is not possible to say very much about the many and diverse languages of this area in a slim volume such as this. The topics covered are: tone, morphology, word-order, theme and rheme, classifiers, and polite forms. Of these, the sections on tone, theme and rheme, classifiers, and polite forms deal with phenomena widely distributed in the area and likely to be unfamiliar to speakers of European languages, which therefore merit a place in a volume like this one. The sections on word-order and morphology are less appropriate as in these respects (S)E Asian languages are neither exotic nor particularly homogeneous. The author might consider eliminating these sections and expanding the others, e.g. to include a discussion of the different dimensions of politeness systems such as markers of politeness to addressee, subject honorifics, and humble forms.

The fourth chapter, on writing systems, comprises half the book. It includes a brief history of the Chinese writing system, explanations of the major transcription systems for Chinese and of the methods by which Ancient Chinese phonology has been reconstructed, and expositions of the writing systems of Japanese, Korean, Thai and many less well known languages and writing systems such as the Pahaw Hmong and the Arabic-based scripts for Uighur and Malay. In general an adequate explanation of the structure of the writing system is given, along with a chart of the graphs, but in some cases, such as Shan, Karen, and Makassarese, the author follows the irritating practice of all too many descriptions of writing systems of giving only

a specimen text, which serves only to tantalize the reader and conveys virtually no information.

This attractive volume is well printed and profusely illustrated, with four maps (minority languages of China, mainland SE Asian languages, island SE Asian languages, and Chinese dialects), 25 tables and diagrams, and many illustrations of writing systems. A helpfully detailed table of contents is complemented by a very detailed index.

All in all, this is a useful introduction to the linguistic situation in East and Southeast Asia for the person who wants to know what languages and writing systems are to be found there and to learn a little bit about some of them, including students of the languages and cultures of this area, and linguists desiring an orientation.

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