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Unity and Variety

A Study of the Chinese Language and Its Cultural Implications

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Chunlin Li

Committee in charge

      Professor Wai-lim Yip, Chair
      Professor Marcel Hénaff, Co-Chair
      Professor William Arctander O'Brien
      Professor Kuiyi Shen
      Professor Yingjin Zhang
      Professor Oumelbanine Zhiri

2010

The Dissertation of Chunlin Li is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010

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A NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

I have adopted the pinyin system of romanization of Chinese names throughout the dissertation, except for those names that have long established forms like Confucius or the *I Ching*. If Wade-Giles spellings are used in a quoted text, I have not bothered to change them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Master Li Hongzhi and Falun Dafa. The cultivation in Falun Dafa has brought transformative changes to my life and my thinking. I would not have been the person I am now but for Falun Dafa.

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Special thanks are due Mrs. Yip and Mrs. Zhang. They have created a family atmosphere for me and for my fellow students. I will look back at these years with fond memories because of them. I also want to acknowledge Pei-Chia Chen for her generous help during the past few years. Ana Minvielle and Thom Hill of the Literature Department provided me with help, whenever help was needed. I thank them for their kindness.

VITA

1997	Bachelor of Arts, Nankai University, China
2000	Master of Arts, Beijing University, China
2001-2006	Teaching Assistant, Chinese Studies Program, University of California, San Diego
2004	Master of Arts, University of California, San Diego
2007-2009	Lecture, Chinese Studies Program, University of California, San Diego
2010	Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Unity and Variety

A Study of the Chinese Language and Its Cultural Implications

by

Chunlin Li

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Wai-lim Yip, Chair
Professor Marcel Hénaff, Co-Chair

Unity and Variety is a study of the relationship between language and culture in pre-modern China. Language here is understood as both speech and writing. In fact, the written form of Classical Chinese is the focus of the current project. The dissertation argues that there is a clear affinity between the Chinese language and diverse cultural expressions, including philosophy, literature, particular ways of

theorization, historiography, etc. The Chinese written character and its consequences on the grammatical level have far-reaching influences on the perceptual modes and expressive strategies of ancient Chinese people. Therefore, an adequate understanding of the language, including the writing system, is essential for the proper understanding the culture. "Unity and Variety" in the title means through the single most essential feature of the language we may find the key to understanding a variety of cultural issues. The key I identify in this dissertation is xiang, or image, an idea systematically introduced in *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, and later embodied in the Chinese writing system.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter One, "Introduction," propounds the thesis of the dissertation, defines key terms in the title, and discusses the scope, methodology, structure, and possible contributions of the dissertation. Chapter Two, titled "Xiang, Chinese Character, and Imaged Thought in Chinese Literature and Culture," is a systematic investigation of the idea of xiang, or image, its embodiment in the Chinese writing system, and its manifestations in various domains of Chinese culture. Chapter Three, titled "Syntax and Chinese Historiography: Reconsidering the Form of *Shiji*, *Record of the Grand Historian*, from a Linguistic Point of View," attempts to give an explanation for the unique form of *Shiji*, annals-biography, based on linguistic analyses. Chapter Four "Conclusion" summarizes the main points of the dissertation and points to possible directions for future research.

Unity and Variety

A Study of the Chinese Language and Its Cultural Implications

Chapter One

Introduction

Unity and Variety is a study of the relationship between language and culture in pre-modern China. Language here is understood as both speech and writing. In fact, the written form of Classical Chinese is the focus of the current project. The dissertation argues that there is a clear affinity between Chinese language and diverse cultural expressions, including philosophy, literature, particular ways of theorization, historiography, etc. The Chinese written character and its consequences on the grammatical level have far-reaching influences on the perceptual mode and expressive strategy of ancient Chinese people. Therefore, an adequate understanding of the language, including the writing system, is essential for the proper understanding of the culture. "Unity and Variety" in the title means through the single most essential feature of the language we may find the key to understanding a variety of cultural issues. The key I identify in this dissertation is xiang, or image, an idea systematically introduced in *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, and later embodied in the Chinese writing system.

In this short introduction, I shall briefly discuss the terms that appear in the title

of the dissertation. I will subsequently discuss the scope, methodology, and structure of the study and suggest the ways in which it can contribute to our understanding of the Chinese language and culture.

Culture is one of the most complex words in the English language.[1] It almost has a quality similar to the concept of time in Augustine's *Confessions*: "If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to one that should ask me, plainly I know not."[2] There are two main reasons for this difficulty. First, there exist a variety of cultures, and the number of different cultures can be increased *ad infinitum* based on the practical needs of one's discussion. Anthropology, archeology, sociology, and contemporary cultural studies have recognized a host of cultures according to their own definitions and standards, and these conceptions of culture inevitably have overlapping areas. Secondly, the concept of culture sometimes gets changed at will to suit the need for a particular discourse. For example, when someone talks about "music and culture," he[3] seems to be isolating music from everything else humanly constructed that is not music. In the same vein, people talk about economy and culture, politics and culture, literature and culture, etc. Here we cannot but notice a concept of culture whose contour is forever changing like the shape of an amoeba. In Chinese, the equivalent of the English word "culture" is *wenhua* 文化, which is as volatile as, if

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[1] Raymond Williams explains "culture" as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". See *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, p. 87.

[2] Augustine, *St. Augustine's Confessions, with an English Translation*, Book XI, Chpt. XV, p. 239.

3 For convenience's sake, I will use "he," "him," "his" instead of "he/she," "him/her," or "his/her" throughout this dissertation, when I refer indefinitely to a person.

not more volatile than, its English counterpart. Therefore we have tea *wenhua*, wine *wenhua*, tourist *wenhua*, aesthetic *wenhua*, etc. The word *wenhua* is so pervasive that people jokingly comment that it is "a basket in which you can practically fill in anything."

If the word culture has occasioned, for its volatility, much confusion and anxiety in academic discussion,[4] it has also provided a very useful conceptual tool. A prominent feature of the concept is its utmost inclusiveness. For example, when we talk about a music culture, we are not talking about music as an art, but about music as a primarily human phenomenon. Here music in the narrow sense has become a node around which a whole range of activities are organized and examined. These activities include, but are not limited to, the creation of musical works, performances, reception and appreciation of music as an art, the production, circulation, and consumption of music as a commodity, the use of music as a means of education, and the abuse of music as an ideological apparatus. It shows that the word culture enables us to talk about a subject in its totality, i.e., a subject in the infinite relations it bears toward the world near and far.

This inclusiveness can be utilized for the advantage of academic discussion if we pay enough attention to avoid its pitfalls. I have mentioned briefly one such pitfall at the beginning of this introduction, i.e., to isolate one's own topic from its context

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[4] According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, by 1952, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn had cataloged over 100 different definitions of the word. See "Culture," *The Columbia Encyclopedia*.

and name what is left out as culture. This way of juggling with concepts has made culture "the name of the other." This terminological opportunism, if I may coin such a term, will create a situation in which people only seemingly communicate on the same plane and about the same issue. To achieve methodological rigor, we need a definition of culture that reflects the "all-inclusiveness" of the concept. Raymond Williams has observed that "in archaeology and in cultural anthropology the reference to culture or a culture is primarily to material production, while in history and cultural studies the reference is primarily to signifying or symbolic systems."[5] I propose a synthesis of these perspectives and define culture as the integrated system of human beliefs, values, practices, institutions, codes of conduct, cognitive and behavioral patterns, and the products of human activities informed by their knowledge and values. Culture thus defined would encompass everything either totally humanly contrived or saturated with human consciousness. It provides a hypothetical framework which enables us to see different strata and departments of culture in perspective and proportionate to each other. It is against this background that I conduct my study on the Chinese language and its implications for Chinese culture.

Language is by general agreement one of the most important strata of culture. In the twentieth century, the centrality of language in human sciences was emphasized to a degree unknown to past ages. Contributing to this tide were not only philosophers

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[5] Williams, "Culture," in *Keywords*, p. 91.

like Ludwig Wittgenstein who asserted that "the limits of *language* mean the limits of *my* world,"[6] and Martin Heidegger who declared that "Language is the house of being," but also anthropologists and linguists who based their theoretical formations on empirical study. Of the latter group Benjamin Lee Whorf was a representative. In a theory commonly known as "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" or "linguistic relativity," Whorf proposed that the worldview encoded in each language determines its speakers' perception and understanding of the world. He argues that

> the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas….We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages…organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties on an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language….[Not] all observers are…led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar.[7]

The strong version of linguistic relativity is not held by many linguists nowadays because it entails the utter impossibility of translation between speech communities. Linguistic relativity, after all, should also be understood relatively, because the human body does not differ greatly from nation to nation, and human cultures are ultimately commensurate. On the other hand, the mild version of the hypothesis keeps finding support from researchers in historically unrelated and structurally very different

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[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logical-Philosophicus*, p. 68.
[7] Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Science and Linguistics*. Quoted in Zdenek Salzmann, *Language, Culture, and Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, pp. 45-46.

languages.[8] It is generally held now that the importance of language lies in the fact that we depend on it to organize our experiences. Therefore, besides being a stratum of culture, language is also constitutive of other strata of the same culture. In this sense, it enjoys a certain privilege over other strata of a certain culture.

The present dissertation is a study of the Chinese language with a view to gauge the extent of its impact on Chinese culture, which includes not only what Whorf calls "worldview," but also more specific cultural activities and productions. By language I mean not only speech but also writing. The priority of speech over writing has been an entrenched idea in the Western philosophical tradition, of which Saussure was a modern proponent. In his tremendously influential *Course in General Linguistics*, he postulated unequivocally, "The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object."[9] The whole system of his revolutionary linguistics and semiology starts from the notion of the linguistic sign, which he defined as a "two-sided psychological entity" composed of concept (signified) and sound-image (signifier), and writing in the system is relegated to a derivative and subordinate position. It is Jacques Derrida who offered a powerful critique of what he calls phonocentrism, and its philosophical counterpart, logocentrism, in the Western tradition. Based on information provided by linguists and

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[8] Positive appraisals of the theory of linguistic relativity can be found in John Gumperz, and Stephen Levinson, eds., *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*.

[9] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 23-24 .

sinologists, he boldly asserted that Chinese "remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism."[10] He did not, however, give a more specific exposition of his stimulating viewpoint.

Without espousing the whole range of his claim, I believe Derrida rightly estimated the vital role writing plays in Chinese culture. The generic term for "philology" in pre-modern China, *xiaoxue* 小學, embraced three branches of learning in its mature form since the Song dynasty (960-1276), namely, grammatology, phonology, exegesis and hermeneutics. However, when the term was first applied to the study of language in the Former Han dynasty (202 BCE—9 AD), it referred exclusively to grammatology, the study of writing.[11] Throughout Chinese history, writing enjoyed a highly esteemed position in society. Many factors contributed to this reverence. To list just a few, first there was the belief in the sacred origin of writing, and, related to it, the belief in the sacred power of writing. Second, in the imperial examination, good writing was absolutely essential to one's success, especially at higher levels of these examinations. Third, calligraphy as an art was held in much higher esteem than painting in pre-modern China. This third point, of course, was related to the first two points. Consequently, a study of the relationship between Chinese language and culture is incomplete if it fails to integrate writing into its

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[10] Jacque Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 90.
[11] Hu Qiguang 胡奇光, *Zhongguo xiaoxue shi* 中國小學史 [A history of Chinese philology], pp. 1-4.

formulation.

In fact, the discussion of the written form of Chinese and related issues constitutes the main body of this dissertation. One reason is that researches, both intralingual and interlingual, in this area have largely neglected writing, and it is time to rectify this myopia. Compared with Endo-European languages which are all alphabetical, Chinese has its claim to uniqueness largely based on its picto-ideo-graphic writing system.[12] Another reason is, as the object of this study is pre-modern Chinese language and culture, the only reliable and easily available source from this period is language in its written form.

It remains to estimate how legitimate it is to study pre-modern Chinese culture as if it were an unchanging, monolithic, homogenous entity. Just like any culture, Chinese civilization has experienced constant changes and engaged in constant exchanges with other cultures. There were two major waves of cultural inflow in Chinese history. The first one was the so-called "Buddhist conquest of China" (or China's conquest of Buddhism, depending on how you view it), starting from the Later Han dynasty in the first century CE, ending in the Song and Yuan dynasties (about thirteenth century). This huge cultural inflow brought to Chinese vocabulary about

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[12] Chinese writing has been variously labeled pictographic, ideographic, ideogrammic, picto-ideo-phono-graphic (Derrida). "Ideographic" and "ideogrammic" are roughly synonymous. It seems to me that pictographic writing—writing based on pictorial representation, and ideographic writing—writing that reflects ideas, are closely related terms that emphasize different aspects of the same object. I will not try to make a fine distinction between the two in this dissertation, and will mostly use "pictographic" to designate Chinese. I find Derrida's naming most felicitous, as it reflects both the pictographic aspect and phonological aspect of Chinese. However, the phonological features of Chinese lie out of the scope of the present study.

35,000 new words, had some impact on the syntax of Chinese, especially its vernacular variety, and left an indelible mark on Chinese thought, literature, arts, and society.[13] However, the influence of Buddhism on Chinese characters was minimum, and its impact on prose and poetry written in Classical Chinese, as far as form was concerned, was considerably less than its impact on Chinese thought and vernacular literature.[14] The second wave of cultural inflow started from the late Ming dynasty in the sixteenth century, when Jesuit missionaries came to China, bringing with them Western science, technology, and ideas.[15] The inflow was drastically accelerated after the Opium War (1840-1842), when Qing government suffered successive military defeats and diplomatic humiliations.[16] The social and political changes in the late Qing and the twentieth century have transformed Chinese society and culture tremendously. However, because the changes are quite recent, I shall not take them into the scope of the current project.

After all, no matter how amorphous or fluid Chinese culture has been, we can still identify a number of features that more or less run through its whole course. One

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[13] See Gu Zhengkun, *Zhongxi shi bijiao jianshang yu fanyi lilun* [China and West: comparative poetics and translatology], pp. 486-487. Ma Zuyi discusses the impact of the introduction of Buddhism on the Chinese language and literature more comprehensively. See his *Zhongguo fanyi jianshi—wusi yiqian bufen* 中國翻譯簡史——"五四"以前部分 [A concise history of Chinese translation—prior to the May-Fourth Movement], pp. 83-95.

[14] The development of prosody in China was largely due to the influence of Buddhism. But as it lies outside the scope of the dissertation, I will not go into detail about it here. See Ma Zuyi, *Zhongguo fanyi jianshi—wusi yiqian bufen*, pp. 85-86; Hu Qiguang, *Zhongguo xiaoxue shi*, pp. 141-142.

[15] Ma Zuyi, *Zhongguo fanyi jianshi—wusi yiqian bufen*, pp. 261-304.

[16] Ibid., pp. 327-458.

of the goals of this study is to identify such "cultural constants." I set the historical

span of this study roughly within Confucius' time (sixth to fifth century BCE) and the

Southern Song dynasty (fourteenth century). This by no means indicates I believe the

features I identify existed only within the time frame. In fact, imagistic thinking,

which I examine in Chapter Two, exists till today, due to the fact that Chinese writing

system remains largely intact.[17] But let me content myself with the delimitations set

above, as the scope is large enough for such a project.

The methodology of the project is, first of all, interdisciplinary. Given the

complex nature of the subject, it is only fitting that I incorporate methods adapted

from philology, grammatology, linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, poetics, intellectual

history, etc., to shed light on the issues tackled. Secondly, I also employ comparative

method where it seems appropriate. For example, I will compare Ogden and Richards'

"Semantic Triangle" with the Chinese "Grammatological Triangle" in Chapter Two.

When discussing the unique form of *Shiji*, or *Record of the Grand Historian*, I also

turn to Western historiography for a revealing comparison.

I would also like to draw attention to three characteristics of the present study.

First, it reflects an effort to bring philosophical ideas into mutual illumination with

philological and linguistic properties. This effort is clearly shown in Chapter Two in

which I demonstrate that the idea of xiang or image rooted in pre-Qin thought is

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[17] Simplified writing system adopted in mainland China in the 1950s did not fundamentally change the structures of characters.

embodied in the Chinese written character. I have noticed that some fundamental philosophical ideas form analogous or homologous relationship with one or more aspects of language, i.e. they mutually express each other and reinforce each other. That is exactly why I title the dissertation "Unity and Variety"—the unity of the philosophical idea finds expression in the variety of verbal constructs.

The second characteristic I would like to draw the reader's attention to is that I do not conduct my study along conventional demarcation lines between different schools of thought—Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Legalism, etc. Nor do I honor the division between different genres of literature. The reason is simple. Language is the very substance with which all schools of thought express themselves; it underlies all philosophical, historical, and literary genres. Studies of this kind seek to transcend traditional intellectual confines and aim to reveal what is universal within a linguistic community.

The third characteristic I want to highlight is the fact that in Chinese-west comparison, I have emphasized divergences rather than convergences, differences rather than similarities. Needless to say, between two cultures there are always similarities and convergences, otherwise all cross-cultural communication is impossible. But the revealing of differences, especially deep, fundamental, structural differences, can lead to profound cultural self-consciousness and truly meaningful cross-fertilization. Frederic Jameson speaks of the same effect eloquently when

commenting on Gadamer's hermeneutics:

> "Fusion" is not to be understood as the abolition of difference, as the "formation of one horizon"… but a preservation of tension, as coexistence within radical difference, a relationship by way of radical difference.[18]

This dissertation consists mainly of two parts. Chapter Two, the longer part which is titled "Xiang, Chinese Character, and Imaged Thought," deals with xiang or image, an idea set forth in *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, its embodiment in the Chinese written character, and its manifestations in various cultural expressions. It argues that xiang, rooted in the pre-Qin divination book, *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, shares a number of important attributes with the Chinese writing system, which was developed mainly on the basis of pictorialism. Influenced by the idea of xiang in *I Ching* and its numerous commentaries, and conditioned by the writing system, Chinese philosophy, theoretical thinking, literature, and popular culture all display some unique features that distinguish them from their counterparts in cultures with alphabetical writing systems.

Chapter Two is divided into eight sections. Section I is a short introduction to the topic under investigation, including an explication of the character xiang 象, and definitions of key terms. Section II "Debating the Chinese Written Character" surveys the debate about the nature of the Chinese writing system in the West since the sixteenth century. Section III "Xiang: Its Foundation in Pre-Qin Thought" traces the

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[18] Quoted in Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances*, p. 5.

origins of the idea of xiang in the pre-Qin philosophical systems of *Laozi* and *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*. Section IV "Imaged Thought Embodied in the Written Character" contains a detailed analysis of Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*, *Explicating Simple and Complex Characters*. Special attention was given to three of the "six formative principles of Chinese script." I also discuss the correspondences between *I Ching* and the Chinese writing system.

In Section V, I delineate a tradition of imagistic interpretation in Chinese literature and culture. The tradition dates back to the sixth century BCE, the Spring and Autumn Period, and lasts till today. I contend that to evaluate the tradition of imagistic thinking, we have to go beyond the confines of etymology and philology, and employ an interdisciplinary approach. Section VI surveys the unique way of philosophizing or theorizing in Chinese culture, "establishing xiang to express meaning exhaustively," resulting from the influence of *I Ching* and the writing system. I focused my analysis on two cases: Jiao Yanshou's *Jiaoshi yilin*, a versified commentary on *I Ching*, and *Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry*. Based on these case studies, I expound the differences between imagistic thinking and conceptual thinking. Section VII explores the influences of xiang and the Chinese written character on Chinese poetry. I choose to discuss four aspects: the written character as image, the juxtaposition of images and emergence of meaning, verbal alchemy and the poetic eye, transcending images and the poetics of silence. Through the discussion in this section,

it is made clear that xiang is a major poetizing factor in Classical Chinese poetry, and it gives rise to a number of qualities that are either absent or indistinct in other literary traditions. In Section VIII I summarize the arguments of the whole chapter and make a few additional comments.

Chapter Three is titled "Syntax and Chinese Historiography." It explores the impact of Classical Chinese language on the unique form of *Shiji*, the *Record of the Grand Historian*, by Sima Qian (ca. 145-86 BCE), the first dynastic history of China in the form of *jizhuan*, annals-biographies. It argues that the syntax of Classical Chinese language was one of the most important factors that contributed to the shaping of the form of *Shiji*. Because of the semantic under-differentiation of the Chinese word / character, Classical Chinese syntax is characterized by looseness, flexibility, and lack of grammatical markers. As a result, in Classical Chinese, the syntagmatic axis of the language is relatively weak, while the paradigmatic axis relatively strong. This gives rise to a number of characteristics of Classical Chinese narrative. For example, the high frequency of the use of parallelism, both on word level, sentence level, and discourse level. For another example, the Chinese narrative is weak in indicating linear progression and causal relationship. These characteristics, collectively, mold *Shiji* into its present form. This particular form of historiography can shed light on contemporary debates on history and history writing.

Chapter Three is divided into four sections. Section I "The Mystery that Is the

Form of *Shiji*" surveys the puzzlements of modern scholars about the form of *Shiji*.

Section II "From a Linguistic Point of View" identifies the characteristics of Classical

Chinese language and writing, and explores how these characteristics influenced the

composing of *Shiji*. Section III "Understanding the Form of *Shiji*" analyzes the

prominent formal and thematic features of *Shiji* on the basis of the discussion in

Section II. Section VI "The Significance of an Alternative Historical Writing"

discusses *Shiji*'s significance for us moderns to understand history and history writing.

Chapter Four summarizes the arguments of the whole dissertation and points out

directions for future research.

Chapter Two

Xiang, Chinese Character, and Imaged Thought

in Chinese Literature and Culture

I. Introduction

"What fills up the universe is nothing but xiang 盈天下者皆象,"[19] declares

Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, the encyclopedic philosopher of the seventeenth century. This

observation is not a hyperbolic remark uttered casually by a Confucian scholar, but a

well-thought statement made by one of the most esteemed experts on *I Ching*, the

Book of Changes, after studying strenuously for nearly 40 years the 2,000 years' worth

of *I Ching* scholarship and writing 8 books on the topic.[20] The dictum aptly captures

the spirit of what might be termed a xiang-centered monistic worldview 象一元觀,

which existed side by side and vying for acceptance and allegiance with such well

established worldviews as Dao-centered monistic worldview 道一元觀, qi (vital

energy)-centered monistic worldview 氣一元觀, li (reason)-centered monistic world

理一元觀. To enter xiang as one of the candidates for the leading worldview of

ancient China, one is expected to provide unusually compelling evidence. Wang Fuzhi

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[19] Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, *Zhouyu waizhuan* 周易外傳 [External commentary on the *Book of Changes*]，
p. 213.

[20] For a comprehensive study of Wang Fuzhi's *I Ching* scholarship, see Xiao Hanming 蕭漢明
Chuanshan yixue yanjiu 船山易學研究 [A study of Wang Fuzhi's *I Ching* scholarship].

presented a strong case not because of his brilliant philosophical speculation, as brilliant as he was, but because he had the wealth of *I Ching* philosophy, both the canon and the commentaries, and the far-reaching influence of this tradition, to support him. The purpose of this chapter is not to evaluate the viability of the xiang as *the* Chinese worldview, but, acknowledging the importance of the xiang in the Chinese tradition as a fact, to gauge the extent to which it has influenced, and in certain instances even shaped, various areas of Chinese literature and culture, and examine the ways in which it was able to do so.

What indeed is the xiang? This question inevitably leads us to the Chinese character 象, which, interestingly enough, denotes primarily an animal—the elephant. It is still a mystery today why this word came to occupy a central position in the Chinese intellectual life, since China, as far as geographical studies find, does not claim the elephant to be her native resident. The earliest Chinese dictionary[21] *Shuowen jiezi,* or *Explicating Simple and Complex Characters* 說文解字, which was compiled in the second century CE, defines xiang properly as a "huge animal in South Asia with long trunk and tusks that has a three-year reproductive cycle."[22] It goes on to say that the character simulates the tusks, the trunk, and four feet of the animal 長鼻牙，南越大獸，三季一乳，象耳牙四足之形.[23] Over years the character has

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[21] Strictly speaking, *Shuowen jiezi* is a "character book." It is different from what we know as a dictionary. But for convenience's sake, I will loosely call it a dictionary in this dissertation.

[22] Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Explicating simple and complex characters], p. 198.

[23] Ibid., p. 198.

acquired the following meanings: a. elephant, the largest mammal extant on land; b. image, scenery; c. appearance, portrait; d. (verb) to imitate, to resemble. Qian Mu 錢穆, a leading historian and cultural philosopher in the twentieth century, suggests that precisely because the elephant is the largest animal on land, to recognize the elephant as the elephant requires that one sees the entire body rather than parts of the body.[24] In a famous fable, a group of blind men feel the elephant to find out what it is like, and different people draw different conclusions as they happen to feel different parts of the animal. Qian Mu's interpretation, though not corroborated by any archeological and philological evidence, has a certain advantage to other speculations in the sense that it has a moral, which I think is proper for this issue: the word xiang, from its inception, suggests comprehensiveness and wholeness in representation, and this feature has been retained in the character down the ages.

Xiang, as a fundamental philosophical / cultural concept in the Chinese tradition, had its roots firmly planted in *I Ching*, one of China's most ancient texts, divinatory and philosophical in nature, and revered by both Confucians and Taoists. The idea of xiang found its expression in the Chinese writing system, which is both phonetic and ideographic, initially more ideo-pictographic than phonetic. This writing system, in its turn, exerted tremendous influence on the cultural productions in China, literary and otherwise, and has induced a way of thinking distinctively enough to be called

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[24] Qian Mu 錢穆, *Wan xue mang yan* 晚學盲言 [Thoughts of an elderly blind man], p. 25.

Chinese. To showcase this way of thinking, it is desirable to survey fields as diverse as epistemology, poetics, hermeneutics, theories of visual arts, among other intellectual discourses and artistic expressions. I will call this particular way of thinking "imagistic thinking" or "imaged thought," hence the phrase in the title of this chapter.

An explanation is in place about definitions and translations. As the discussion about the etymology and meanings of the character xiang shows, we can hardly find an equivalent in English that can capture all the ramifications of this word. I decide, for convenience's sake, to translate invariably the word into "image" in this paper. I am aware, though, of the implications and connotations the word "image" carries in different disciplines in the Western tradition. To avoid confusion, unless otherwise noted, I would use the word in its commonsense meaning, i.e., the external form of an object or the representation thereof, without alluding to any particular school or scholar who also uses the word. The particular way of thinking induced by xiang and its various expressions I would call imagistic thinking or imaged thought, with the former stressing the dynamic process of thinking, while the latter stressing the static product.

In addition to translation, I would also like to give a few definitions here, as they are necessary for the discussion in this Chapter. First, the Chinese character is the smallest unit in the Chinese writing system that corresponds to a syllable and can be used independently. The word is a concept related to yet different from character.

While the character is a unit of writing, the word is a lexical unit. However, in Classical Chinese where most words correspond to single characters, sometimes it is unnecessary to distinguish character and word, if the topic is both the writing unit and the lexical unit, or both units in one. I will sometimes use the term "word / character" to highlight the fact that the character and the word are actually two sides of the same coin. These, of course, are only very rough definitions. More will be said regarding the classification of the characters in the following, which will have a bearing on our understanding of their nature and their relationship to the idea of xiang.

II. Debating the Chinese Written Character

Before we plunge into the details of xiang and its myriad manifestations, it is necessary to take a quick look at the changing conceptions of the Chinese writing system in the West. One of the first Western thinkers who touched upon the issue of Chinese writing was Francis Bacon, who asserts without citing any concrete examples that "it is the use of China and the kingdoms of the High Levant to write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions; insomuch as countries and provinces which understand not one another's language can nevertheless read one another's writings, because the characters are accepted more generally than the languages do extend; and, therefore, they have a vast multitude of

characters, as many, I suppose, as radical words."[25] It is the Catholic missionaries that

ushered in a new epoch in which intercultural communications were carried out on a

certain magnitude. The nature of the Chinese language, expectedly, became a topic

that drew tremendous attention. The first account of the characteristics of Chinese

writing was generally attributed to the Portuguese Dominican Friar Gaspar da Cruz

who wrote in 1569:

> The Chinas [Chinese] have no fixed letters in their writing, for all that
> they write is by characters, and they compose words of these, whereby
> they have a great multitude of characters, signifying each thing by a
> character in such sort that one only character signifies "Heaven,"
> another "earth," and another "man," and so forth with everything else.[26]

The view that held the most currency in the 17th and 18th centuries was advanced

by the renowned Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). As a renowned Jesuit

who spent most of his adult life in China, spreading religious ideas in the native

language in both its spoken and written forms, Ricci conferred an authority to his

linguistic views no serious scholar of Chinese could ignore. He told the European

readers that the Chinese have a writing system "similar to the hieroglyphic signs of the

Egyptians" and that they "do not express their concepts by writing, like most of the

world, with a few alphabetic signs, but they paint as many symbols as there are

words."[27] In the two centuries or so between Gaspar da Cruz's discovery and the

French Revolution, Chinese was either imagined as the *lingua universalis* or

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[25] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, The Second Book, XVI, p. 137.
[26] C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 161-162.
[27] Quoted from John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*, p. 134.

condemned as the primitive language incapable of expressing spiritual realities and transcendental being on more or less the same grounds. Though attitudes towards this perceived peculiarity of Chinese writing differed among people of different backgrounds, it was agreed that the Chinese written symbol represents notion or the thing itself without the interpolation of speech sound.

It seems that China, like any other time-honored tradition, must be rediscovered and reinvented by different generations. In the twentieth century, the Chinese written character came to the attention of the Western literary circle much to the credit of Ernest Fenollosa, whose essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" occasioned enthusiastic acclaim as well as unusually harsh criticism. In this seminal essay, Fenollosa observes that "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols," rather, it is "based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature."[28] Citing three Chinese characters "man sees horse," Fenollosa argues for the pictographic nature of the Chinese writing (Figure 1). His description of the characters runs as the following: "First stands the man on his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs."[29] He concludes that "in reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching

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[28] Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, p. 7.
[29] Ibid., p. 8.

things work out their own fate."[30]

Figure 1. Chinese characters "man sees horse"[31]

Fenollosa's essay, through Ezra Pound, ignited the imagination of a whole generation of Western poets. Pound embraced his idea whole-heartedly and repeated on many occasions that Fenollosa's study of the Chinese written character is one of the most important essays in our time. Hugh Kenner calls it "the *Ars Poetica* of our time," and Donald Davie says that it is "fit to rank with Sidney's *Apologie*, and the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, and Shelley's *Defense*."[32] To Pound's credit, we have at least three highly fertile compositional methods and critical concepts: imagism, vorticism, and the ideogrammic method in poetry writing.

On the other hand, sinologists were almost unanimously unsympathetic with Fenollosa's view.[33] While acknowledging the fruitfulness of the so-called ideogrammic method of poetic writing, James Liu calls Fenollosa's approach "seriously misleading" as an introduction to Chinese poetry,[34] on the grounds that

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[30] Ibid., p. 8.
[31] Reproduced from Fenollosa, p. 8.
[32] Quoted from Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram: History of a Poetic Method*, p. 15.
[33] For example, see Achilles Fang, "Fenollosa and Pound."
[34] James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 3.

Pound refuses "to recognize the phonetic element of Chinese characters."[35] Since Liu,

the criticism of Pound's ignorance or intentional ignoring of the phonetic element of

Chinese has become a commonplace in linguistic and literary circles. John DeFrancis

the linguist and sinologist works out a systematic refutation of what he calls the

"ideogrammic myth" about the Chinese character in his *The Chinese Language: Fact*

and Fantasy, a book often returned to by future critics of the like-minded of Pound.

He uses Gelb's theory of the two stages in the development of writing to explain away

the apparent pictographic element of Chinese writing: "In the first stage… the symbols

are clearly pictographic in form." However, in the second stage, "the pictographic

form may be carried over from the first but the wholly new principle of using them to

represent sounds makes its appearance, at first haltingly, then increasingly, until it

eventually becomes the dominant feature. At this point, 'full systems of writing' come

into being."[36] DeFrancis hastens to add emphatically, "One must insist on this clearly

dividing line between the two stages of writing. If we look only at the surface

similarly in the depiction of objects in various forms of writing, we shall overlook the

significance of the use of a particular picture or sign as a purely phonetic symbol."[37]

He argues that by the time of the Shang dynasty a new function—the rebus

function—had been introduced to the symbols, the importance of which cannot be

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[35] Ibid., p. 5.
[36] DeFrancis, pp. 137-138.
[37] Ibid., p. 138.

overestimated. To illustrate his point, DeFrancis employs a rebus consisting of four

pictures (Figure 2):
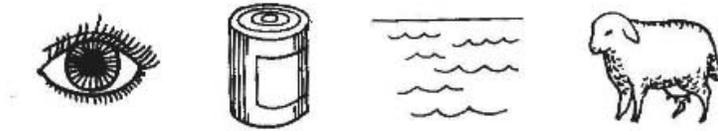
Figure 2. Rebus: eye can sea ewe (I can see you)[38]

He explains that "these pictographs make no sense as meaning-symbols but do make

sense as sound-symbols: eye can sea ewe."[39] To DeFrancis, this rebus idea

"constitutes a stupendous invention, an act of intellectual creation of the highest

order—a quantum leap forward beyond the stage of vague and imprecise pictures to a

higher stage that leads into the ability to represent all the subtleties and precision

expressible in spoken language." He then triumphantly announces, "Writing is now

directly, clearly, firmly related to language: to speech."[40]

Despite sinologists and linguists' jeering of Fenollosa and Pound's knowledge

of Chinese, Jacques Derrida the philosopher singles out China as a "civilization

developing outside of all logocentrism."[41] It is in this light that he revaluates the work

of Fenollosa and Pound:

> This is the meaning of the work of Fenellosa [sic] whose influence
> upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known; this irreducibly

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[38] Reproduced from DeFrancis, p.139
[39] DeFrancis, p. 139.
[40] Ibid., p. 139.
[41] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 92.

graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance.[42]

It is not surprising that a work of such sweeping scope and stunning originality should evoke much controversy and debate. Zhang Longxi, for one, maintains that phonocentrism is not only symptomatic of the Western culture, and Chinese culture also has a share in phonocentrism and its philosophical dimension, logocentrism, as the Chinese writing is not pictographic as Derrida was deluded into believing. He says,

> [R]eading Chinese is, like reading any other language, a linguistic act of comprehending the meaning of a succession of signs, either with silent understanding or with utterance of the sounds; it is not an archaeological act of digging up some obscure etymological roots from underneath a thick layer of distancing abstraction.[43]

Zhang thus laments the fact that Derrida falls prey to the "same prejudice or hallucination that annulled the Leibnizian project and finally trapped in the old snare of logocentrism."[44] Following Zhang's step were Haun Saussy and Rey Chow, who similarly base their arguments on philological grounds and imply that Fenollosa, Pound, Derrida, and their like-minded are guilty of complicity in perpetuating the orientalist myth of the pictorialism of Chinese writing and naturalness of the Chinese language.[45]

Looking retrospectively, this strand of intellectual history obviously reflects the

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[42] Ibid., p. 92.
[43] Longxi Zhang, "The Tao and the Logos: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," p. 390.
[44] Ibid., p. 389.
[45] See Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*, pp. 35-74; Rey Chow, "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory. " See also Longxi Zhang, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*, pp. 28-30.

changing social, political, and cultural situations both in the West and in China. However ideologically laden and emotionally charged, the discussions did bring out important layers of the issue that deserve our serious attention. James Liu, DeFrancis, Zhang Longxi, Haun Saussy, and Rey Chow are doubtless right in pointing out that there are phonetic elements in Chinese characters that should not be overlooked if one is to arrive at a balanced, synthetic understanding of the writing system. However, there might be certain stumbling blocks to which they unconsciously fall victim. First, they seem to hold a dichotomous, one-dimensional, either/or kind of mentality when it comes to deciding the nature of a language and its writing system: either Chinese is ideo-pictographic, or it is alphabetic and phonetic as all Western languages are. In fact, in the traditional Chinese philology, *xiaoxue* 小學, it is a cliché that each written character is analyzed in the tripartite paradigm: pronunciation 音, form 形, and meaning 意. The uniqueness of the Chinese writing system may most likely lie in the fact that it represents both the phonetic aspect and the picto-semantic aspect. This point shall be further pursued later in this study, as it lies at the very foundation of the whole issue.

Secondly, it is desirable, or even necessary, to go beyond philological scrutiny to achieve a perspective which might be conveniently termed "culturological."[46] We

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[46] I am inspired by Gu Zhengkun in proposing this new branch of study, "culturology." See Gu, *Hugou yuyan wenhua xue yuanli* 互構語言文化學原理 [Principle of interstructural linguistic culturology], p. 3.

need first to acknowledge the phenomenon and try to give it a cultural explanation. Even if the belief in the pictorialism of Chinese writing is simply an old myth refusing to die, there must be a *reason* for its persistence. Consequently, examination of this phenomenon may generate interesting and inspiring results that will shed light on many ongoing academic inquiries.

Thirdly, there is a disturbing, subtle Euro-centrism in the arguments of the detractors of Pound and Derrida despite their intentions. Why should Chinese possess the same properties before it can be put on equal footing with Western languages? Why should Hegel's scornful comment that Chinese is not fit for metaphysical thinking weigh so heavily on one's mind that in order to win respect for one's mother tongue one has to put Chinese in the procrustean bed of a supposedly universal model? As a matter of fact, to recognize the differences between Chinese and Western languages as they truly are is the very starting point of any valid comparative study.

The present study is both ambitious and humble in its scope and method. Ambitious, because it will go beyond the confines of any single discipline, be it philosophical, linguistic, philosophical, literary, or visual arts. It revolves around the concept of xiang which is rooted in *I Ching* and finds expression in the Chinese written characters and various cultural activities, including calligraphy, poetry writing, and philosophizing. If "culture" is indeed an all-encompassing concept, then it might be feasible to call this study an excursion into "culturology," a kind of inquiry I

envision that examines a culture as a whole. Humble, because it is more descriptive than normative or analytic. I take the prevalence of xiang and its many expressions in Chinese culture as a phenomenon to be recognized without making preemptive judgments about whether the individuals involved are informed or qualified by the standard of modern critical theory. Only after that will I try to give some preliminary interpretations as to their origins and implications.

I will start by exploring the foundations of xiang in pre-Qin thought, which will be followed by a discussion of characters and character formations found in the first Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi*, or *Explicating Simple and Complex Characters*, compiled by Xu Shen 許慎(c. 58—c.147) in the second century CE. Following that I will attempt to delineate a tradition of imagistic interpretation in Chinese history which lasts to the present day. Then we will discuss the various expressions of the imagistic thinking or imaged thought in Chinese cultural life including the inventing and using of epistemological xiang in philosophy and other domains of social life, and the composing and reading of poetry. Towards the end of this chapter, I will discuss some residual issues vis-à-vis relevant Western ideas.

III. Xiang: Its Foundations in Pre-Qin Thought

The idea of xiang, like most major Chinese philosophical ideas, can be traced

back to the rich soil of pre-Qin thought. Though implicit in many different schools, its main expression is indisputably *I Ching*, or better known as *the Book of Changes*. The multi-part *I Ching* came into its present form through several stages over a period of time as long as, some believe, two thousand years. Legend has it that "three sages contributed to its making, and the whole process lasted three ages 人更三聖，事歷三古."[47] The three sages refer to the three legendary kings who reigned in prehistoric times, namely Fu Xi 伏羲, who invented the eight trigrams; Shen Nong 神農, who doubled the trigrams and made them into hexagrams; and King Wen 文王, who added hexagram statements and line statements. Confucius was believed to have appended commentaries to *I Ching* in ten parts—*I Zhuan, Commentaries on* I Ching—and brought the work into completion.

Before we examine *I Ching* in more detail, let us first turn our attention to another Pre-Qin book *Laozi*, where inchoate ideas about xiang can also be found. The character xiang has two occurrences in *Laozi*, in Chapter 14 and Chapter 21 respectively.

> What cannot be seen is called "yi" (without color); / What cannot be heard is called "xi" (without sound); / What cannot be touched is called "wei" (without shape); / These three things can be in no way defined, / So they are combined into one. / Above it there is no light; / Below it there is no darkness; / So vague as to defy any description. / It is categorized as the Nothingness, / And is called the shape without shape / as well as the xiang without substance. / It is hence named as

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[47] Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 [The history of the Former Han dynasty], Vol. 6, p. 1704.

"huhuang" (vague and only dimly visible). (Chapter 14)[48]

視之不見，名曰夷。聽之不聞，名曰希。搏之不得，名曰微。此三
者不可致詰，故混而為一。其上不皦，其下不昧，繩繩不可名，復
歸於無物。是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍。

The form of the great Teh (virtue) / Exclusively depends on the Tao. /
The Tao as a thing / Is vague and indefinite. / Vague and indefinite, / It
presents xiang; / Indefinite and vague, / It embodies substance. / Distant
and dark, / It embraces semen-like essence. / The essence is a genuine
existence / That can be tested as true. (Chapter 21)[49]

孔德之容，惟道是從。道之為物，惟恍惟惚。惚兮恍兮，其中有象。
恍兮惚兮，其中有物。窈兮冥兮，其中有精。其精甚真，其中有信。

For Laozi, the eternal Tao is unspeakable. If one is to describe the Tao at all, one needs

to employ such nebulous terms as *xi* (colorless), *yi* (soundless), *wei* (shapeless), and

huhuang (vague yet dimly visible). However, the "nothingness," though without

substance, does possess an "image" through which it can be accessed. This image,

therefore, can be regarded as the intermediary between the tangible and the intangible,

the physical and metaphysical, and the perceiving subject and the ultimate Tao.

If xiang in *Laozi* is still a concept, a mere word, an unrealized potential, in *I

Ching* it becomes a fully developed idea, guiding the construction of its entire

metaphysical system. Hellmut Wilhelm rightly points out that "[t]he system of

existence and events underlying the Book of Changes lays claim to completeness,"

and that "[t]he book attempts a correlation of the situation of life in all strata, personal

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[48] *Lao Zi: The Book of Tao and Teh* 老子道德經, p. 95.
[49] Ibid., p. 117.

and collective, and in all dimensions."[50] This ambition is laid bare in numerous places in *I Ching* and its commentaries. For example, in Part I of "The Great Treatise," the most important of *I Zhuan, Commentaries on* I Ching, it is stated that "The Book of Changes contains the measure of heaven and earth; therefore it enables us to comprehend the tao of heaven and earth and its order 易與天地準，故能彌綸天地之道."[51] In Part II the same Treatise, it is further stated that "The Changes is a book vast and great, in which everything is completely contained. The tao of heaven is in it, the tao of the earth is in it, and the tao of the man is in it 易之為書也，廣大悉備。有天道焉，有人道焉，有地道焉."[52]

I Ching tries to live up to its claim of completeness and exhaustiveness through a system of representation, which starts from xiang—image: "Thus the Book of Changes consists of images. The images are reproductions 是故易者象也，象也者像也."[53] What are exactly reproduced in the all too abstract trigrams and hexagrams? The story necessarily starts from the basic units of the trigrams and hexagrams, the unbroken Yang line —— and broken Yin line —— "That which lets now the dark, now the light appear is tao 一陰一陽之謂道, "[54] Wilhelm's translation of this statement is a bit awkward. In fact, the original statement is simple enough to be translated as "Yin and Yang following each other—that is Tao." I should hasten to add

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[50] Hellmut Wilhelm, *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes: Seven Eranos Lectures*, p. 3.
[51] *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, Trans. Richard Wilheilm, and Cary F. Baynes, p. 293.
[52] Ibid., pp. 351-352.
[53] Ibid., p. 336.
[54] Ibid. p. 297.

that, as the Tao is eternal, Yin and Yang not only follow each, but also follow each other *in a cycle*. Therefore if one reverses the order of Yin and Yang, he will get exactly the same result.

It is then necessary to decide the nature of Yin and Yang, the two basic componential units of trigrams and hexagrams. Different from Saussure's view of language as a system of differences without positive terms, the concepts of Yang and Yin do have intrinsic qualities besides the differences between them.[55] In Part II of "The Great Treatise" we find the following exposition: "The Master said: The Creative and the Receptive are indeed the gateway to the Changes. The Creative is the representative of light things and the Receptive of dark things 子曰：乾坤，其易之門 邪？乾，陽物也；坤陰物也."[56] By insisting on translating Yang and Yin as light and dark, Wilhelm again risks sounding too Zoroastrian, and thus bookish and circuitous, if not completely off the mark. The literal translation is perhaps more appropriate and more economical in this context. The commentator simply says Qian 乾 (the Creative) ☰, the hexagram comprising purely of unbroken Yang lines, refers to the male organ, and Kun 坤 (the Receptive) ☷, the hexagram comprising purely of broken Yin lines, refers to the female organ.[57] As a matter of fact, the translation of Yin and Yang

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[55] Ferdinand de Saussure says: "[T]he concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (*Course in General Linguistics*, p. 117).

[56] *The I Ching,* p. 343.

[57] Scholars have different opinions regarding the origins of the Yin and Yang lines. Guo Moruo holds that they originated from the resemblances of the male and female organs. I think this explanation coheres well with the text of *I Zhuan*, or *Commentaries on* I Ching. See Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Zhongguo*

(and the correlated terms Qian and Kun) is worth much deliberation. Take, for example, the following OED definitions of Yin and Yang:

> Yang: In Chinese philosophy, the masculine or positive principle (characterized by light, warmth, dryness, activity, etc.) of the two opposing cosmic forces into which creative energy divides and whose fusion in physical matter brings the phenomenal world into being.

> Yin: In Chinese philosophy, the feminine or negative principle (characterized by dark, wetness, cold, passivity, disintegration, etc.) of the two opposing cosmic forces into which creative energy divides and whose fusion in physical matter brings the phenomenal world into being.

Though rightly relating Yang and Yin to masculinity and femininity, this pair of definitions nevertheless associates Yang and Yin to such binary oppositions as positive / negative, active / passive, light / dark, etc. These concepts conjure up instantly a hierarchical order in which the first term is superior to the second. However, it should be emphasized that Yang and Yin exist in a complementary rather than hierarchical relationship. They are mutually dependent, sometimes challenge each other, and are always becoming each other. "The Great Treatise" uses *jian* 健 to summarize the property of Qian and *shun* 順 to summarize the property of Kun. In Wilhelm's translation, "The Creative is the strongest of all things in the world….The Receptive is the most devoted of all things 夫乾，天下之至健也。夫坤，天下之至順也."[58] Again, Creative / Receptive fall into the rigid binary opposition with a hierarchical order, and strong / devoted are a bit too slippery. To set the record straight, Yin is not passive. If

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gudai shehui yanjiu 中國古代社會研究 [A study of ancient Chinese society], p. 33.
[58] *The I Ching*, p. 353.

Yang is creative, Yin is co-creative. If Yang is active, Yin is also active. To make a finer differentiation, Yang is *initially* active, while Yin is *responsively* active.

Contrary to some scholars' supposition, *I Ching* is a closed system instead of an open system of representation. In the *I Ching* cosmology, the universe starts as a Great Primal Beginning, at once pure being and pure nothingness, a void with undifferentiated matter and chaotic energy. The matter and energy, or the unity of matter / energy, of its own accord, begets two primary forces, Yang and Yin. It is from there that the ball is set rolling, and in time, there emerge the four images, eight trigrams, *ad infinitum*. This process is summarized succinctly in "The Great Treatise:" "Therefore there is in the Changes the Great Primal Beginning (*taiji*). This generates the two primary forces. The two primary forces generate the four images. The four images generate the eight trigrams 是故易有太極，是生兩儀。兩儀生四象，四象生八卦."[59] It is worthwhile to quote Hellmut Wilhelm's lucid exposition of this creative process:

> Starting with the two primary lines, yang and yin, he obtains the fundamental line of the individual hexagram and a twofold division of the whole system:
>
> ⚊　　⚋
>
> Then he adds above each of the two a yang line and a yin line. With this the individual sign gains in complexity, and the total system is divided into four:
>
> ⚌　　⚎　　⚍　　⚏

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[59] *The I Ching*, p. 318.

At first merely graphic images, these four line complexes also suggest an analysis from the standpoint of content; they are called the big yang, the little yang, the little yin, and the big yin—the lowest line in each case determines their character. To each line complex is now added a yang line and, again, a yin line: an eight-fold division is obtained, consisting of trigrams in the following new arrangement:

☰　☱　☲　☳　☴　☵　☶　☷[60]

Interestingly, a passage in *Laozi* seems to address the same process in a different, more metaphysical manner: "The Tao begets the One; the One begets the Two; the Two begets the Three; the Three begets the myriad things 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。"[61] This genetic process can be shown with the following graph (Figure 3).
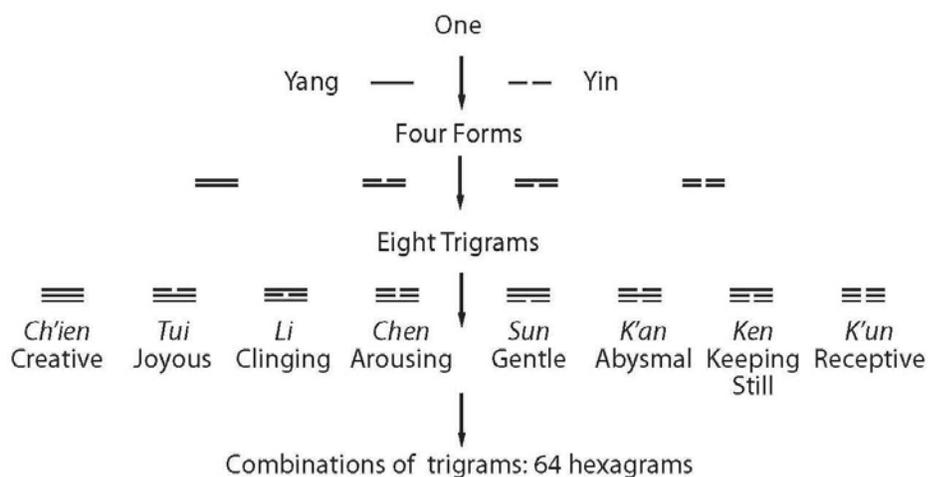
Figure 3. Formative process of hexagrams[62]

It is in this closed, exhaustive cosmological system that we are going to situate the concept of xiang. As *I Zhuan*, *Commentaries on* I Ching, is a book of

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[60] Wilhelm, p. 7.
[61] *Lao Zi*, Chpt 42, p. 189.
[62] Reproduced from Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances*, p. 153.

miscellaneous origins,[63] we should not be surprised to find inconsistencies and contradictions in it. It seems that the commentator (or commentators) uses the word xiang in different senses, or at least stresses different aspects of it. Take, for example, the following three passages, all from "The Great Treatise":

(1) The Master said: Writing cannot express words completely. Words cannot express thoughts completely.

Are we then unable to see the thoughts of the holy sages?

The Master said: The holy sages set up the images in order to express their thoughts completely; they devised the hexagrams in order to express the true and the false completely.[64]

子曰：“書不盡言，言不盡意。”然則聖人之意，其不可見乎？ 子曰：“聖人立象以盡意，設卦以盡情偽，系辭焉以盡其言。”

(2) The holy sages were able to survey all the confused diversities under heaven. They observed forms and phenomena, and made representations of things and their attributes. These were called the Images.[65]

聖人有以見天下之賾，而擬諸其形容，象其物宜，是故謂之象。

(3) When in early antiquity Pao Hsi ruled the world, he looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens; he looked downward and contemplated the patterns on earth. He contemplated the markings of birds and beasts and the adaptations to the regions. He proceeded directly from himself and indirectly from objects. Thus he invented the eight trigrams in order to enter into connection with the virtues of the gods and to approximate the conditions of all beings.[66]

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[63] See Huang Peirong 黃沛榮, ed., *Yixue lunzhu xuanji, fu Zhu Xi zhouyi benyi* 易學論著選集，附朱熹周易本義 [Selected studies of the *Book of Changes*, and Zhu Xi's *Original Meaning of the* Book of Changes], pp. 227-342.

[64] *The I Ching*, p. 322.

[65] Ibid., p. 304.

[66] Ibid., pp. 328-9. With my modifications in two places. First, I think the word "light" is redundant in

古者包犧氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地，觀鳥獸之
文與地之宜，近取諸身，遠取諸物，於是始作八卦，以通神明之德，
以類萬物之情。

Upon a closer look, we can find that the account of the origin of xiang in passage one subtly differs from that in passage two and passage three. Suppose the xiang passage one talks about is the same as that in passages two and three, then we have two theories about the origin of xiang. We can call the first account the "expressive theory," while the second and third (which are essentially the same) the "mimetic theory." There is yet another approach to the discrepancy, which may yield some interesting insights. The word *jin* 盡 (to exhaust, to express completely) is very much emphasized in passage one. To express the sages' thoughts completely requires nothing less than the cosmological pattern consisting of trigrams and hexagrams which are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. However, the xiang in passage two and passage three is the outcome of the sages' observation, classification, simplification, and simulation. If the xiang in passage one is mathematical, deductive, and idealist, the xiang in passages two and three is naturalist, inductive, and empiricist. It is therefore necessary to introduce a distinction between the different types of xiang spoken of in various contexts of *I Ching* and its commentaries, i.e. *gua* images 卦象, or images of trigrams and hexagrams which are mutually exclusive and collectively

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the phrase "the virtue of the light of the gods" which translates 神明之德; second, I think 類 should be translated as approximate, imitate, simulate, etc., instead of "regulate," so I replaced the word "regulate" with "approximate."

exhaustive, and therefore identical with the structure of the universe, and worldly images 物象, which take roots in natural phenomena and worldly situations. To be sure, the worldly images are invariably correlated with the *gua* images by the authors of the hexagram statements and line statements and commentaries. We should therefore examine the legitimacy and implication of this correlation.

In "Shuo Kua: Discussion of the Trigrams," one of *I Zhuan, Commentaries on* I Ching, we are given a number of symbols that correlate with the eight trigrams. "The Creative acts in the horse, the Receptive in the cow, the Arousing in the dragon, the Gentle in the cock, the Abysmal in the pig, the Clinging in the pheasant, Keeping Still in the dog, the Joyous in the sheep 乾為馬，坤為牛，震為龍，巽為雞，坎為豕，離為雉，艮為狗，兌為羊."[67] More symbols are given for each trigram in the following. Qian, the Creative, thus we are told, "is heaven. It is round, it is the prince, the father, jade, metal, cold, ice; it is deep red, a good horse, an old horse, a lean horse, a wild horse, tree fruit 乾為天，為圜，為君，為父，為玉，為金，為寒，為冰，為大赤，為良馬，為老馬，為瘠馬，為駁馬，為木果."[68] Kun, the Receptive, is "the earth, the mother. It is cloth, a kettle, frugality, it is level, it is a cow with a calf, a large wagon, from, the multitude, a shaft. Among the various kinds of soil, it is the black 坤為地，為母，為布，為釜，為吝嗇，為均，為子母牛，為大輿，為文，為眾，為柄，其

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[67] Ibid., p. 273.
[68] Ibid., p. 275.

於地也為黑."[69] Exactly on what ground these objects or attributes are grouped together we do not know. If we try really hard, we may find, to a very limited extent, a family resemblance between the objects and attributes in each group. It seems that the author of this commentary intends to identify relevant things in the world to shed light on the essential property of the trigram in question. These things I would call worldly images. The very multiplicity of these images testifies to the somewhat arbitrary and indeterminate nature of the correlation. In other words, the worldly images only *imperfectly* reflect the *gua* images, which in turn *perfectly* reflect the structure of the universe, or the thoughts of the holy sages. Finding or inventing worldly images to explicate the meaning of the *gua* image is an interpretative act which, if carried too far, may seriously limit or even impair the signification of the latter.

Having established the distinction between the *gua* images and worldly images, let us now anatomize a specific hexagram, Chien 漸/ Development (Gradual Progress) ䷴, to see its internal structure as an image. This hexagram consists of two trigrams: below is Gen 艮, or Keeping Still ☶, above is Xun 巽, or The Gentle ☴. The Judgment 卦辭 reads: "Development. The maiden is given in marriage. Good fortune. Perseverance furthers."[70] The Image, a commentary that explicates the symbolism of the images, reads: "On the mountain, a tree: The image of Development. Thus the

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[69] Ibid., p. 275.
[70] Ibid., p. 204.

superior man abides in dignity and virtue, in order to improve the mores."[71] And thus

go line statements:

> Six[72] at the beginning means: The wild goose gradually draws near the shore. The young son is in danger. There is talk. No blame.
>
> Six in the second place means: The wild goose gradually draws near the cliff. Eating and drinking in peace and concord. Good fortune.
>
> Nine in the third place means: The wild goose gradually draws near the plateau. The man goes forth and does not return. The woman carries a child but does not bring it forth. Misfortune. It furthers one to fight off robbers.
>
> Six in the fourth place means: The wild goose gradually draws near the tree. Perhaps it will find a flat branch. No blame.
>
> Nine in the fifth place means: The wild goose gradually draws near the summit. For three years the woman has no child. In the end nothing can hinder her. Good fortune.
>
> Nine at the top means: The wild goose gradually draws near ht cloud heights. Its feathers can be used for the sacred dance. Good fortune.[73]

初六：鴻漸于干，小子厲，有言。無咎。
六二：鴻漸於磐，飲食衎衎。吉。
九三：鴻漸于陸，夫征不復，婦孕不育。兇，利御寇。
六四：鴻漸於木，或得其桷。無咎。
九五：鴻漸於陵，婦三歲不孕，終莫之勝。吉。
上九：鴻漸于陸，其羽可用為儀。

Without bothering with the specific meanings of these statements, we can

nonetheless extract a number of features of the *I Ching* hermeneutics from the above.

First, each line has a concrete meaning within the structure of the hexagram, besides

its original determinateness as the Yin or Yang stroke. Secondly, the reading of the

lines is sequential, i.e. one always reads from the bottom upward to the top. Thirdly,

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[71] Ibid., p. 205.
[72] Six in the line statements refers to the Yin line; nine refers to the Yang line.
[73] Ibid., pp. 205-208.

the two trigrams that make up the hexagram also have their disparate meanings, in this case, mountain and tree. And the whole hexagram has a meaning somewhat related to the meanings of its component parts, yet not equal to their sum. The hexagram is not only the combination of Yin and Yang strokes, but configuration of them, in which not only the numbers of Yin and Yang strokes count, but their relative positions count as well.

We are still far from exhausting the readings of the hexagram. According to Jing Fang 京房 (77-37 BCE), the *I Ching* scholar in the Han dynasty, the hexagram can generate much more meanings by way of recognizing nuclear trigrams and implementing line changes. It means, in Wai-lim Yip's summary,

> …within one hexagram there are four trigrams: the upper trigram, lower trigram, inner nuclear trigram, and outer nuclear trigram. In the hexagram Wu Wang (無妄, Innocent [the Unexpected] ☰☳ , for example, the upper trigram is Ch'ien (乾, the creative) ☰; the lower trigram is Chen (震, the Arousing) ☳ , the inner nuclear trigram—that is, lines 2 to 4 from bottom—is Ken (艮, Keeping Still) ☶; and the outer nuclear trigram—line 3 to 5 from bottom—Sun (巽, the Gentle) ☴.[74]

Things became more dramatic with Yu Fan 虞翻 (170-239) of the Later Han dynasty, who discovered numerous ways to change, exchange, overturn the lines, trigrams, and hexagrams. By way of what some may regard sleight of hands, Yu Fan is able to generate all 64 hexagrams with the two basic hexagrams, Qian the Creative and Kun the Receptive. Therefore each line is related to any other line, each trigram to any

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[74] Wai-lim Yip, *The Diffusion of Distances*, p. 151.

other trigram, each hexagram to any other hexagram. It is precisely in view of this endless play of combination and permutation that Wai-lim Yip propounded his theory of "secret echoes and complementary correspondences," a thorough-going theory of intertextuality.[75] Therefore we can add to our list of the features of the *I Ching* hermeneutics on top of the four we have already identified. Namely, a line, a trigram, or a hexagram is capable of multiple interpretations when they are brought into relationship with different parts of the system.

When one uses *I Ching* for divinatory purpose, which of course is how the book was intended to be used, he first generates a hexagram through an apparently random operation of 50 yarrow stalks. The process also shows one of the six lines of the resultant hexagram "moves," i.e. becomes a different line—Yin to Yang or Yang to Yin. Consequently the diviner has two hexagrams in his hand, with one line setting them apart. His interpretation will be based on the Judgment of both the hexagrams and the line statements. The moving line in the primary hexagram is therefore of considerable importance. I would call this the dynamic feature of the *I Ching* hermeneutical process

To sum up, the idea of xiang first appeared in two pre-Qin philosophical texts, *Laozi* and *I Ching*. While xiang in Laozi was still an inchoate idea, it was fully developed in *I Ching*, which claims to be a complete representation of the universe. The basic componental units of *I Ching* representation system are Yang and Yin,

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[75] Ibid., pp. 138-162.

which were originally simplified, stylized depictions of masculinity and femininity. The connection between the Yang and Yin strokes and the objects they purport to represent, though tenuous, is nonetheless detectable. In other words, there is still an element of pictorialism retained in these two basic units. A distinction is then made between the *gua* images and worldly images, and six features of the *I Ching* hermeneutical system have been identified. The points we have discussed in this section set up a framework in which we will discuss, in the following section, the genesis and analysis of the Chinese written character.

IV. Imaged Thought Embodied in the Written Character

It is no accident that Xu Shen, the first of great Chinese lexicographers, author of *Shuowen jiezi*, or *Explicating Simple and Complex Characters*, traced the origin of the Chinese written character to the invention of the eight trigrams. In fact, for this purpose, he copied almost verbatim from "The Great Treatise" appended to *I Ching*:

> When in early antiquity Pao Hsi ruled the world, he looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens; he looked downward and contemplated the patterns on earth. He contemplated the markings of birds and beasts and the adaptations to the regions. He proceeded directly from himself and indirectly from objects. Thus he invented the eight trigrams to give laws and images (to humanity).[76]
>
> 古者包犧氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地，觀鳥獸之

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[76] Xu Shen, Postscript to *Shuowen jiezi*, p.314. Translation was based on Wilhelm's translation of the similar passage in *I Ching*.

文與地之宜，近取諸身，遠取諸物，於是始作八卦，以垂憲象。

However, Xu Shen did not simply identify the origin of the Chinese character with that of the eight hexagrams. In the "Postscript" to *Shuowen jiezi*, he delineated the genesis of the Chinese script in three stages. According to this delineation, after the invention of the eight hexagrams by Pao Hsi, Chinese writing underwent two major changes in the hands of Shen Nong and Cang Jie 倉頡, respectively.

> Then Shen Nong tied knots with ropes to unify the various operations. However, with human affairs became more and more complicated, there emerged diverse manipulations and artificial inventions (of the knots). Cang Jie, the royal historian of Emperor Huangdi, seeing the markings of birds and beasts, realized that dividing lines and intercrossing patterns can indicate differences, and, therefore, invented writing and inscriptions.[77]

> 及神農氏，結繩為治，而統其事。庶業其繁，飾偽萌生。黃帝史官倉頡，見鳥獸蹄远之跡，知分理可相別異也，初造書契。

From the two passages quoted above, it is clear that Xu Shen believes that there are certain connections between *I Ching* and the genesis of the written character. In the following discussion, I will try to gauge to what extent the two systems are connected by analyzing four of the "six formative principles of Chinese script 六書" he summarized. Emphasis will be laid on the role pictographic aspect plays in different types of characters. The following table shows the evolution of Chinese characters, and prepares the reader who are not familiar with the Chinese writing system for our following discussion.

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[77] Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, p. 314.

Column headers (left to right): Happiness, Myriad, Upright, Eye, to defend, Heaven, Uniform, Corn, to obtain, Tiger, Moon, Sun

Row labels (top to bottom):

Ancient Images (about 19th cent. B.C.)

Shell-and-Bone Characters (about 18th cent. B.C.)

Ta-Chüan (about 17th–3rd cent. B.C.)

Hsiao-Chüan (246–207 B.C.)

Li-Shu (about 200 B.C.–A.D. 588)

Changes after Han Dynasty (after A.D. 588)

Figure 4. Evolution of Chinese characters[78]

Though not the first one to use the term "six principles 六書,"[79] Xu Shen has

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[78] Reproduced from Chiang Yee, *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, p. 34.

[79] Before Xu Shen, *Zhouli* (The Book of Rites of the Zhou Dynasty) and Bangu. See Qiu Xigui,

been generally credited with the currency the theory subsequently gained in Chinese

grammatology. It is worthwhile to quote the entire passage in which he defines the six

principles and gives examples to each category.

> [According to] the *Zhōulǐ*, at the age of eight [one] undertakes primary studies. The Protector instructed the scions of state by first teaching them the *liùshū* ("the six principles of writing"). The first is called *zhǐshì* ("indicate things"). As for the *zhǐshì* graphs, when seen they can be recognized; when inspected their meaning becomes apparent. The graphs 上 "above" and 下 "below" are such. The second is called *xiàngxíng* ("resemble form"). As for the *xiàngxíng* graphs, one makes a drawing of an object and follows the sinuousity of its physical form. The graphs 日 "sun" and 月 "moon" are such. The third is called *xíngshēng* ("form and sound"). As for the *xíngshēng* graphs, based on a thing, one creates a written word and takes a [phonetically] analogous one and combines them. The graphs 江 "river" and 河 "river" are such. The fourth is called *huìyì* ("conjoining meanings"). As for the *huìyì* graphs, [one] matches [semantic] types and combines their meanings in order to reveal the meaning which is indicated. The graphs 武 "martial" and 信 "trust" are such. The fifth is called *zhuǎnzhù* ("evolving and deriving"). As for the *zhuǎnzhù*, one establishes [graphs of] similar categories under one head, by the shared meanings they are mutually … related. The graphs 考 "deceased father" and 老 "aged" are such. The sixth is called *jiǎjiè* ("loan-borrowing"). As for the *jiǎjiè* graphs, originally having no proper graph, by just relying on the sound, it [the sound] is entrusted to the thing [referred to]. The graphs 令 "to lead" and 長 "leader" are such.[80]

> 周禮八歲入小學，保氏教國子，先以六書。一曰指事。指事者，視而可識，察而見意，上下是也。二曰象形。象形者，畫成其物，隨體詰詘，日月是也。三曰形聲。形聲者，以事為名，取譬相成，江河是也。四曰會意。會意，比類合誼，以見指撝，武信是也。五曰轉注。轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考老是也。六曰假借。假借者，本無其事，依聲託事，令長是也。

Of the six principles discussed here, we can put aside the last two, which are

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Chinese Writing, p. 151.
[80] Quoted from Qiu Xigui, p. 152.

derivative and concern the use rather than the formation of characters. The pictographic element plays a role, in varying degrees, in all the other four methods. This is most obvious with the *xiàngxíng* with which the writer attempts to capture the form of a living being or physical object. In addition to the two examples Xu Shen gives in the above, we can readily think of examples such as 木 tree, 魚 fish, 鳥 bird, 馬 horse that belong to this category. Though the motivated nature of these signs seems self-evident, some people are not ready to accept it. To go back to the founder of Western semiotics, both Saussure and Pierce maintain that there are "conventions that underlie even the most 'natural' behavior and representation."[81] More specifically, Haun Saussy believes that the "very existence of ideograms in the strong sense (Fenollosa's sense) of the word is … challenged by illiteracy, by the fact that people can fail to make sense of the system."[82] To be sure, the very example he cites is the small seal script of 鳥 bird, which, according to conventional reading, reflects the physical likeness of a bird. "You say *niao* 鳥 (or even its archaic form…) is a picture of a bird; I say it is a conventional mark that readers are trained to read as meaning the word 'bird.'"[83] It should be admitted that there is a certain truth in Saussy's argument that cannot be countered. The making of the character does involves substantial abstraction and simplification, sometimes even based on a

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[81] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, p. 24.
[82] Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, p. 57.
[83] Ibid., p. 57.

somewhat arbitrary selection and maneuver. However, if we compare the Chinese 鳥

with the word denoting bird in any alphabetic language, the difference cannot be

clearer. The word bird (or oiseau, Vogel, etc.) denotes the meaning "bird" by first

conjuring up, in the mind of the reader, the pronunciation of the bird, which in turn

evokes the meaning of the word. The word points to the concept only through the

mediation of pronunciation. The Chinese character, on the contrary, points to the

concept of bird without the phonetic intermediary, though it does possess a phonetic

value and, when necessary, it can relate to the pronunciation directly. In the graph

below (Figure 5), I try to illustrate the contrast between Chinese and alphabetical

languages. The graph on the left shows that the Chinese written character (form) is

linked respectively to the sound and to the meaning. Yet, it does not depend on the

sound to make meaning. On the other hand, the sound in an alphabetical language

plays a pivotal role between the written word and its meaning. If one derives meaning

by simply looking at the written word, that is because he has acquired the conditioned

reflex as a result of longtime practice and enculturation.
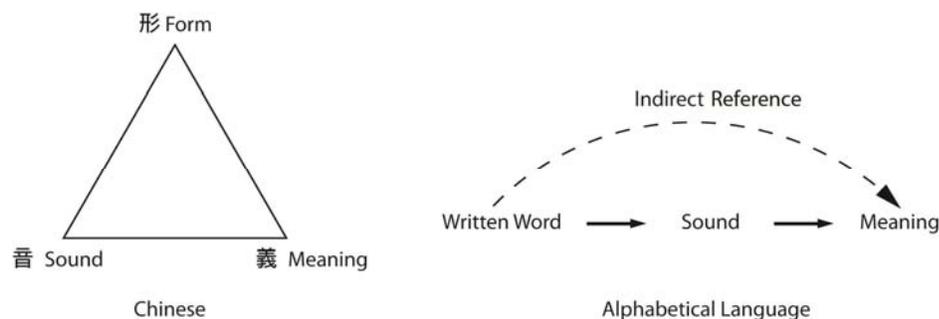
Figure 5. Contrast between Chinese and alphabetical languages

It should be pointed out that something significant happens when Xu Shen defines the characters in *Shuowen jiezi*. For example, he defines the character *niao* 鳥 in the following way. "[It is] a generic name for long-tailed birds. It resembles the form of birds. As the claw of birds resembles a dagger, the character belongs to the 'dagger subclass.' All birds are subsumed in the *niao* subclass. 長尾禽總名也。象形。鳥之足似匕，從匕。凡鳥之屬皆從鳥。" In this definition, the abstract pictorial presentation of the bird is linked with the concept of "bird" in no uncertain terms. I would call this process of metonymic transference "semantic leap." If we examine the entire *Shuowen jiezi*, we will find this method of definition prevalent. In fact, I think *Shuowen jiezi* symbolizes, in a sense, an important moment in the history of Chinese language and culture, a moment when vague visual representations were yoked to unequivocal denotative meanings by dictionary making and language regulation. This moment was of tremendous significance, as we will show later in this study.

The pictographic element is also very conspicuous in the *huìyì,* or "conjoining meaning" method of character formation. According to Xu Shen, to form a *huìyì* character, one "matches [semantic] types and combines their meanings in order to reveal the meaning which is indicated." The table below lists four typical *huìyì* characters:

Table 1. Four *huìyì* characters

Small seal graph	Modern form	Pronunciation (*pinyin*)	The sense-making mechanism	Lexical meaning
	旦	dàn	The sun rises above the horizon.	dawn
	莫（暮）	mù	The sun sets in grasses.	dusk
	東	dōng	The sun entangled in the branches of a tree.	east
	西	xī	A bird perches on his nest.	west

As in *xiàngxíng* graphs, there is also a metonymic transference, or semantic leap, involved in the signification of the *huìyì* characters, and more drastic at that. Take xī or west 西 for example. The *Shuowen jiezi* definition runs as follows: "[The graph indicates] a bird on the nest. It resembles the form. The bird rests on the nest when the sun sets in the west. Therefore this graph is taken to mean 'west' as in the phrase 'east and west' 鳥在巢上。象形。日在西方而鳥棲故，因以為東西之西." To make sense of this character, one has to make three leaps in cognizance. First, he has to decipher the semantic components represented by the two graphic elements. Second, he has to interpret the juxtaposition of the graphic elements in a proper way to understand the meaning of the rebus. Third, he has to make a yet greater leap, i.e. relate the picture with the concept of "west" by a metonymic transference, i.e. substituting the picture of a bird perching on the nest for the idea of the direction in which the sun goes down.

The first two steps, arguably, can be accomplished with one shot. However, the second cognitive breakthrough is not that intuitive and there is undeniably a certain amount of arbitrariness in the sense-making process.

A question should be raised here as to whether the definition exhausts the meaning of a given character. As we can see, all the four *huìyì* characters listed above compose of more than one component part. The meaning of each character is not determined by any of the component parts, but by the interaction of all the component parts. Moreover, there is a calculating process by means of which the meanings of the component parts are translated into a unified meaning of the whole graph. But can the meanings of the component parts be translated without remainder? Will there be a surplus meaning or meanings after the lexical meaning of the graph is successfully deducted? The answer to the latter question should be affirmative. In this sense, dàn 旦 is not the semantic equivalent of dawn, because it not only denotes the lexical meaning of dawn, but captures, with its very form, the relationship between the idea of dawn and the rising sun above the horizon. In fact, if we translate dàn into morning, we run the risk of losing part of the essence of the character.

A *huìyì* graph, just like a rebus, is capable of multiple interpretations. Its lexical meaning or the dictionary definition is only one possible interpretation, and probably not the best one. To illustrate this point, maybe we can re-scrutinize an example Zhang Longxi uses to deny Ezra Pound the title of translator. This example concerns the

translation of the first sentence of the *Confucian Analects*. The character xí 習, according to Zhang Longxi, means "to practice," instead of "white feature," though it is composed of two elements, a "feather" on top of "white." Pound, fascinated by the pictographic aspects of Chinese writing and obsessed with ideogrammic interpretation, translated the opening sentence as "Study with the seasons winging past, is not this pleasant?" Yet, according to Zhang Longxi, this sentence should be translated as: "The Master says: to learn and to practice from time to time—is this not a joy?"[84] However, his interpretation is by no means final, and Pound could at least cite two reasons for adhering to the image of "wings." First, according to *Shuowen jiezi*, the character xí, feather on top of white, means "to fly repeatedly 數飛也."[85] The meaning "to practice" is only the metaphorical meaning derived from the literal meaning. As Confucius' text is a literary as well as philosophical text, it is important and desirable not only to convey the meaning of the expression, but the mode of it as well. There is nothing to blame about Pound's choice of keeping the "wing" image, though he actually did make a mistake, falling victim to an Ancient Greek cliché ("winged" as an epithet in the Homeric epics). Secondly, there is another interpretation of the word xí that is equally, if not more, plausible than the definition given by *Shuowen jiezi*. The word can actually mean (the bird) constantly keeping the feathers white and clean. When understood this way, it suddenly gives philosophical depth and poetic force to

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[84] Zhang Longxi, "The 'Tao' and the 'Logos': Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," p. 389.
[85] Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*.

the line, which is all too fitting for the opening of such a major, semi-sacred text. As Confucius advices his disciple, an outstanding person should aspire to attain the Tao 士志於道. It is only likely that at the beginning of the book he talks about the study of Tao instead of just any kind of study. If that is the case, the practitioner of this spiritual discipline should engage in the negative process instead of the positive process.[86]

The distinction of the two different processes is best elucidated by Laozi who in Chapter 48 made the memorable dictum, "One who seeks learning increases everyday; one who seeks the Tao reduces everyday 為學日益，為道日損." To illustrate this apparently paradoxical doctrine, he used the mirror metaphor in Chapter 10, a metaphor which gained much currency among later mystics: "Cleaning the miraculous mirror, can you make it without blemish 滌除玄覽，能無疵乎?" In the same vein, Zhuangzi declares, "The supreme one uses his heart like a mirror 至人用心若鏡." This conception is by no means confined to Taoism. In Confucian classics we can find comparable passages. It is recorded in "The Great Learning," a chapter in the *Book of Rites*, that Emperor Tang, a sage king of the Shang dynasty, inscribed in a plate the following motto: "If you aspire to be a (morally) renewed person, strive to be renewed each day, incessantly 苟日新，日日新，又日新." This constant striving to be "new," contrary to the popular belief, does not entail innovation in any sense, but entails

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[86] See Fung Yulan, *A Concise History of Chinese Philosophy.* "The positive method" and "the negative method," p. 330, p. 340.

relinquishing the evil, the corrupt, and the degenerate.[87] In this sense, Confucius is linked to the Taoist belief and practice not only by purported apprenticeship with Laozi, but also by the inner logic and coherence of the Confucian canon. Against this background, to understand xí in the opening line of the *Confucian Analects* by way of the image of a bird pruning and cleaning his feathers is not only a viable interpretation, but a plausible and even preferable interpretation as well. Pound was indeed wrong in his translation, but not because he kept the "wing" image.

The thorniest issue regarding the pictographic nature of Chinese writing is the existence of *xíngshēng* graphs, or phonograms 形聲字. The percentage of phonograms in the Chinese writing system has been estimated by many to be more than eighty percent. Hu Qiguang pins the number down at eighty-one percent.[88] It is therefore perfectly legitimate to ask, if such a high percentage of phonograms exist in Chinese, is Chinese then primarily a phonetic language, not so different from Indo-European languages?

As the name *xíngshēng* indicates, this class of characters each consist of two parts, a pictographic element 形旁 and a phonetic element 聲旁. Because the pictographic element indicates the meaning of the character, it is also called the semantic element 義符. It is obvious that the *xíngshēng* character depends heavily on the graphic component to make sense. However, quite often, many characters share

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[87] Cf. *I Chuan*: "It is a magnificent virtue to strive to be new each day 日新之謂盛德."
[88] Hu Qiguang, *Zhongguo xiaoxue shi*, pp. 87, 213.

the same pictographic element, and these characters cannot mean the same thing. The pictographic element only supplies part of the "intention" of the concept implied by the character. The characters in the same subclass are further differentiated by their phonetic elements. This is enough evidence to show that *xíngshēng* characters are semi-pictographic and semi-phonetic, and I have no intention to challenge this view. But I should add that there exists a group of *xíngshēng* characters in which the phonetic element also plays the role of a pictographic element.[89] In fact, these characters can be interpreted as both *xíngshēng* and *huìyì*. Zhì 志 is a case in point. *Shuowen jiezi* defines zhì as "intention, in the 'heart' subclass, pronounced as zhī 意 也, 從心, 之聲." However, Zhu Xi 朱熹, the eminent Confucian scholar of the Song dynasty, defines zhì purely on a *huìyì* basis: "zhì is where the mind goes 志者，心之所 之之謂."[90] He clearly understands the zhī on top as a semantic element instead of the phonetic element as *Shuowen jiezi* holds it to be.[91] If we survey more characters, we will find many other examples that indicate the phonetic element is not chosen at random. In the case of 志 intention, 愁 worry, among others, the makers of these characters simply had more than one choice when seeking a sound-indicator. The fact

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[89] See Shen Jianshi 沈兼士, "Youwenshuo zai xunguxue shang zhi yange jiqi tuichan" 右文說在訓詁 學上之沿革及其推闡 [The theory of "semantic element on the right": its tradition and interpretation] in *Shen Jianshi xueshu lunwen ji* 沈兼士學術論文集 [Collected scholarly papers of Shen Jianshi], pp. 73-185; Huang Yongwu 黃永武, *Xinsheng duo jian huiyi kao* 形聲多兼會意考 [Most phonograms are simultaneously syssemantographs: a study].

[90] 朱熹《論語集注·述而》："志者，心之所之之謂。" in Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 [The four books with collected annotations], p. 94.

[91] The component part on the top of zhì can also be understood as "to go."

that they finally decided to use 之 "to go" and 秋 "autumn" should not be thought as completely accidental.

Towards the end of this section, let us try to decide what relationship Xu Shen's "six formative principles of the script" bear towards the *I Ching* system. First, we can find pictorialism in both *I Ching* and the six graphic methods. Secondly, we detect that a process of what I call "reasonable abstraction" at work in both systems. Thirdly, composite characters and trigrams and hexagrams share a constitutive principle that can be termed "juxtaposition," i.e. the making of new signifying units by juxtaposing simple elements. Fourthly, the lines in trigrams and hexagrams follow a definite order, so do the strokes in a character. Therefore we have the principle of sequentiality. Fifthly, in actual divination, the lines of hexagrams move to render the original hexagram into a new one; the characters are also written with moving brushes or awls. A kind of tension is thus created between the original hexagram and the new hexagram, and between consecutive strokes and adjacent characters.

As we discussed in the previous section, *I Ching* claims to be a complete and exhaustive representation system. Though Xu Shen believes there was a connection between the invention of the eight trigrams and the invention of writing, he apparently does not claim that Chinese writing represents nature in a comparable manner. There exists, perhaps, one exception. That is the Chinese character yī 一, one. Influenced by Han cosmology, Xu Shen defines yī in a metaphysical, if not mystic, manner: "In the

primordial beginning, the Tao was built upon one, which created and separated heaven and earth, and generated myriad things 惟初太始, 道立於一，造分天地，化成萬物." Thus perceived, the one is the initial stroke that separated the primordial Void into Yang and Yin, a divide comparable to the line between Yang and Yin in the *taiji* graph. Though accused by some to be anachronistic and erroneous,[92] this gloss would in time produce the most profound Chinese theory of painting.[93]

Imagistic thinking, as embodied in the pictorialism of *I Ching* and Chinese written character, was to manifest in various domains of Chinese cultural life. Before we examine philosophy, literary theory and poetry, let us first look at some of its expressions in popular culture.

V. The Tradition of Imagistic Interpretation

It was a searing summer in 597 BCE, a year in the tumultuous Spring and Autumn Period. Zhuang, the King of the rising Southern power Chu, led his army to a sweeping victory over Jin, the Northern power, at Bi, a territory in the modern Henan province. Overwhelmed by rapture not without a tinge of malicious vengeance, Pan Dang, a nobleman at the Chu court, counseled King Zhuang to build a tower with the bodies of the Jin soldiers to memorialize the feat and preserve for generations to come

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[92] Zongqi Cai, *Configurations of Comparative Poetics*, p. 178.
[93] See, for example, Ju-hsi Chou, *The Hua-Yu-Lu and Tao-Chi's Theory of Painting*.

a monument of military prowess. King Zhuang bluntly dismissed his proposal, citing, surprisingly, an analysis of the character *wǔ* 武, martial or prowess, based on its component parts, *zhǐ* 止, to stop, and *gē* 戈, dagger-ax. King Zhuang said, thus we are told by *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳, or the *Zuo Commentary on the* Spring and Autumn Annals, "You simply don't understand. As far as writing goes, to halt weapons constitutes true prowess 非爾所知也。夫文，止戈為武" (Figure 6). Having explained what he understood to be true military prowess by quoting past sages for the dumbfounded Pan Dang, King Zhuang finally declared, in a solemn tone: "True military prowess resides in curbing violence, terminating warfare, sustaining power, effecting successes, safeguarding the people, and increasing wealth 夫武，禁暴、戢兵、保大、定功、安民、豐財者也." In a rare moment of modesty, this King of the ascending, militaristic Kingdom of Chu, denied that he had any of the seven prerequisites for true military prowess and ordered his army to retreat after simply offering sacrifices to the God of the Yellow River and his own ancestors.[94]

Figure 6. Wǔ 武, martial, military, prowess (small seal script)

King Zhuang's declaration at the bank of the Yellow River marked not only an

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[94] Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, ed. *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 [Annotated *Zuo Zhuan*, the Zuocommentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*]. Vol. 2, pp. 745-747. My translation.

important chapter in Chinese political philosophy, but also a decisive moment in Chinese philology, as he set up a classic case of interpreting a character on the basis of its pictorial components and configuration. Xu Shen, as we remember, cited exactly *wǔ* as a typical example for the formative principle of *huìyì*, conjoining meanings. In fact, King Zhuang stood at the beginning of a long line of interpreters of Chinese characters who assign primary value to the pictographic elements. If Xu Shen was correct, Confucius himself was a practitioner of imagistic interpretation, as *Shuowen jiezi* recorded that Confucius said "He who induces the one (一 single principle) from the ten (十 diverse phenomena) is a shì (士 scholar, soldier, nobleman) 推十合一為士." As we can see, Confucius here is explaining the character shì solely on the basis of its form, i.e. ten on top of one. Duan Yucai 段玉裁, a Qing annotator of *Shuowen jiezi*, further elaborated on the idea: "A scholar returns to simplicity after he masters multiplicity, thus Confucius says 'A scholar induces the one from the ten' 學者由博返約，故云推十合一."[95] It seems that, thus understood, the Confucian nobleman shì, a kind of combination of scholar and soldier in their best senses, is no much different from the Baconian inductive logician who creates universal rules out of particular data. We must remember, however, Confucius was more concerned, as always, with the moral aspect than with the intellectual aspect.

Belonging to this tradition is also Hanfeizi 韓非子 (c. 281 BCE-c. 233 BCE),

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[95] Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Shuowen jiezi *zhu* 說文解字注 ［An annotation of *Shuowen jiezi*］.

the pre-Qin legalist philosopher who defined selfishness as "self-enclosing" based on the shape of the small seal script of sī 厶, selfishness, and defined gōng 公, public-spiritedness, as the "opposite of selfishness" on account of its two component parts, sī 厶, selfishness, and bā 八, "opposite of" or "to counter." 自環者謂之私，背私謂之公[96] (Figure 7). In the Han dynasties, it is the occultist philosophy known as chènwěi 讖緯[97] that pushed the imagistic interpretation of characters to the extreme. However, as Confucianism became the dominant ideology in the Former Han dynasty and went on to be increasingly institutionalized in subsequent ages, chènwěi was kept in a marginalized position throughout Chinese history, only to emerge now and then to exert some influence on those who cared to look into this huge, if unkempt, body of literature.

Figure 7. Sī 厶, selfishness; gōng 公, public-spiritedness (small seal script)

In the Northern Song dynasty, the imagistic interpretation of characters found a powerful champion in Wang Anshi 王安石(1021-1086), famous reformer, erudite

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[96] Hanfeizi 韓非子, "Wu Du" 五蠹 [Five vermin of the State], *Hanfeizi*.

[97] Strictly speaking, chèn 讖 and wěi 緯 are two different practices, though often related. Chèn literally means prophecy; it also refers to the words, graphs, objects, etc. which have the function of prophecy. Wěi refers to a variety of exegeses of the Confucian Canon prevalent in the Han dynasties which combine the ideas of Confucianism, Taoism, Yin-Yang School, etc., and tend to turn to supernatural causes to explain natural anomalies and human affairs. See Zhong Zhaopeng 鐘肇鵬, *Chènwěi lunlue* 讖緯論略 [A concise treatise on Chènwěi], pp. 1-26.

scholar, and the author of *Zi shuo*, or *Explaining Characters* 字說. Wang, a firm believer in the motivated nature of both language and writing, employed various approaches to explicate the character, the most prominent of which, as many have pointed out, was "conjoining meanings." For example, to explain rú 儒, Confucian, a character consisting of the "human radical" 亻 and the "need radical" 需, he asserted in an offhand manner that "what everyone needs is a Confucian 人皆需之謂之儒."[98] *Zi shuo*, on the one hand, was tremendously popular with students and officials when Wang was at the zenith of his power as a trusted prime minister; on the other hand, it drew criticisms and ridicules from scholars the moment it got into circulation. Wang's friend Su Shi 蘇軾, the witty and versatile poet, made fun of his method by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, saying: "If 'wave' is water's skin, is 'slippery' water's bone?"[99] Unfortunately, good-humored intellectual discussion was soon forced to an end when Wang, losing his political campaign, was exonerated from office and his political opponent immediately banned his book. The official *Dynastic History of Song* dismissed *Zi shuo* contemptuously as "farfetched and strained 穿鑿傅會."[100] The book did not survive except bits and pieces quoted by other authors.

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[98] Zhang Zongxiang 張宗祥, ed, *Wang Anshi* Zi shuo *ji* 王安石《字說》輯 [Wang Anshi's *Zi shuo*], p. 31.

[99] Originally from Yang Shen 楊慎, *Shengan quanji* 升庵全集 [Complete works of Yang Shen]. Collected in Zhang Zongxiang, p. 199. The Chinese character for "wave," bō 波, consists of two parts: the water radical 氵 and the simple character pí 皮, skin. The Chinese character for "slippery," huá 滑, consists of two parts too: the water radical 氵 and the simple character gǔ 骨, bone. Hence Su Shi's pun and ridicule.

[100] Originally recorded in "Wang Anshi zhuan" in *Songshi* 宋史·王安石傳 ["Biography of Wang Anshi" in Dynastic history of Song]. Collected in Zhang Zongxiang, p. 166.

In the Song dynasty, a method of divination flourished which made full use of the pictographic nature of the written character. This divination, known as cèzì 測字, or "scriptomancy," if I may coin a neologism, is conducted by way of inspecting a character or characters to foretell one's fortune. The most famous scriptomancer in this period was Xie Shi 謝石, a Sichuan native living in the twelfth century. It is recorded that Emperor Gaozong (reign 1127-1162) had his fortune told by this miraculous man. Once Emperor Gaozong, disguised as a commoner, inspected the city and met Xie. Out of curiosity, the Emperor drew a horizontal stroke—which is precisely the Chinese character "one 一"—on the ground with his walking stick and asked what Xie could make of it. Xie, startled, did not respond immediately. Instead, he asked Emperor Gaozong to write another character. So Emperor Gaozong drew the character wèn 問, "to ask," on the ground. Xie, now convinced, bowed and replied respectfully: "The first character was a 'one' drawn on the earth, which made it a 'king'; the second character you wrote was a wèn, which can be read as 'monarch' from either left or right. I suppose you are the Emperor my Lord" (Figures 8 and 9) .

Figure 8. The making of the character wáng 王, king

問 → 咠 + 司 → 君 + 吾

wèn (to ask)   jūn (monarch)   jūn

Figure 9. The reading of the character wèn 問, to ask,
as monarch 君 from both left and right

Emperor Gaozong, now trusting Xie's ability, called him to the imperial court the next day. He was, as he should be, more serious this time, intending to find out the fortune of nothing less than the well-being of his empire. He gave Xie a chūn 春, spring, to start with. Xie, as if knowing what the Emperor wanted to know, uttered a sentence as bold as perspicacious: "This character, Your Majesty, indicates the head of Qín is too heavy, so heavy that the sun gets overshadowed 秦頭太重，壓日無光" (Figure 10). Hearing this, Emperor Gaozong was only reduced to silence, a kind of limbo state in which embarrassment and resentment mixed and fermented. He did not ask Xie to say more. In fact, Xie's message could not be clearer. It was an open secret the Qin Hui, the treacherous and manipulative Prime Minister in Gaozong's court, gained dominance over the Emperor and was issuing orders for many state affairs. "The sun overshadowed by the head of Qin," a political allegory hardly needing interpretation, was too bitter for the Emperor to swallow.

Figure 10. "The head of Qín is too heavy, so heavy
that the sun gets overshadowed"

Xie was to pay dearly for his boldness, loyalty, and lack of political strategy. Qin Hui, the Prime Minister in question, reacted in a way only expected of him. Finding, if not inventing, a trivial excuse, he exiled Xie to a remote province of the empire. On his way to the exile under the escort of a guard, something dramatic happened to Xie. One day when they were travelling, Xie spotted an old man standing beside a mountain, with a banner fluttering above his head. On the banner was written in bold letters: SCRIPTOMANCY. Xie, in a mood of amused wonder, murmured to himself, "How can anyone be better in this art than *I*?" To test the ability of this old man, Xie wrote a character on his own palm for him to interpret. The character, to be sure, was his very given name Shí 石, rock. Without any hesitation, the old man proclaimed: "A bad omen indeed! A rock would be 'broken' upon meeting the skin, and be 'smashed' when meeting a soldier" (Figure 11). Looking down at his palm (skin) and then looking sideways at the guard (soldier) who escorted him, Xie suddenly realized that the old man was precisely predicting his imminent ruin. Moreover, what was remarkable about the old man's prediction was that, when he said a rock would "be 'smashed' when meeting a soldier," he was punning on Xie's given

name which was exactly Shí, rock. In other words, he not only used the character Xie wrote on his own palm for the divinatory purpose but extended his reading to Xie the person as well. As a superior scriptomancer, he did not honor the conventional distinction between writing and writer, text and world in his divination. In a matter of seconds, he was able to correlate writing, man, and his environment in an ingenious, yet appallingly accurate way.

石 + 皮 = 破
rock   skin   broken

石 + 卒 = 碎
Shí (rock)   soldier   smashed

Figure11. The master-scriptomancer's interpretation of shí 石, rock

Knowing that he had met a true master of fortune-telling, Xie prostrated himself in front of the old man and entreated him to disclose his true identity. Slowly and in a heuristic manner, the master-scriptomancer said, "Why, then, should not you take *me* as a sign?" Xie raised his head, only to witness a scene as simple as revelatory: a man side by side with a mountain, the very ideograph of xiān 仙, immortal (Figure 12). Eventually, the old man declined Xie's request to be his disciple, but not before he pointed out the difference that set the two scriptomancers apart: "While you read *signs*

as signs, I read *men* as signs. It's as simple as that." These parting words would give

Xie food for thought for the many years ahead, before he died a lonely death in his

exile.[101]

人 ＋ 山 ＝ 仙
man   mountain   immortal

Figure 12. Reading men as signs

The imagistic interpretation managed to survive into the twentieth century

despite the overwhelming scientistic trends in linguistic, literary, and philosophical

studies that sought to reduce Chinese writing to mere arbitrary linguistic signs with but

meager connection with its pictographic roots. Thanks to a few discerning critics and

scholars, this interpretative strategy found expression in more intellectual domains

than the traditional philology and occultist philosophy and practice. François Cheng,

for instance, is fully aware of the "evocative power of the imagistic aspect of the

characters that is constantly made available and magnified by a calligraphic art whose

execution allows multiple meanings to emerge from the multiple graphic strata of the

signs."[102] By analyzing the pictographic constitution of a five-character line from a

quatrain by the Tang poet Wang Wei 王維, he shows how the poet "is able through

his contemplation of the tree to become of 'one body' with the tree and to perceive

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[101] Zhou Lianggong 周亮工, Zi cu 字觸 [Touches of written characters], in *Zhou Lianggong quanji* 周亮工全集 [Complete works of Zhou Lianggong, Vol. 6, pp. 87-93.

[102] François Cheng, *Chinese Poetic Writing*, p. 9.

from the 'interior' of the tree the experience of its blossoming."[103]

<div align="center">

木　末　芙　蓉　花

branch　end　hibiscus　flowers

</div>

Observing that "Even the reader who does not know Chinese can easily become sensitive to the visual aspect of these characters," Cheng continues to write:

> [T]he succession of the characters taken purely from the point of view of their visual aspect is completely in accord with the lexical meanings of the characters, and finally of the line itself. Viewing these characters in order gives the visual impression of the process of a tree blossoming into flower (first character: a bare tree; second character: something is born at the end of the branches; third character: a bud breaks out, being the radical of grass or flower; fourth character: the bursting open of the bud; fifth character: a flower in its fullness).

As amazing as this discovery may be, it is only half of the story, and not the important half at that. Cheng states further:

> [A] reader who is familiar with the language will not fail to note in addition, through the ideograms, a subtly hidden idea, that of the man who enters the tree in spirit and who therefore participates in its metamorphosis. The third character (芙) contains the element 夫 "man", which itself contains the element 人"Man" (homo); thus, the tree presented by the first two characters is from this point onward inhabited by the presence of the man. The fourth character (蓉) contains 容"face" (the bud breaks out into a face), which contains the element 口 "mouth" (this speaks). And finally, the fifth character contains the element 化"transformation" (man participating in the universal transformation).

Cheng concludes, "By an economy of means, and without recourse to external commentary, the poet re-creates, before our eyes, in its successive states, a mystical experience."[104]

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[103] Ibid., p. 9.
[104] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

Cheng manages to find in the corpus of Classical Chinese poetry a number of examples which can be interpreted both intriguingly and convincingly by attending to their pictographic aspects. These interpretations reveal important layers of meaning implicit in the poetic works that all too often elude the modern reader who is accustomed to reading words for their denotative meanings only. The coherence and felicity of these readings must give one pause and shake him out of the condescending scornfulness he may have towards imagistic thinking. Cheng's and others' literary or philosophical interpretations therefore not only greatly enrich our aesthetic experience, but point to important directions for linguistic, literary, and philosophical explorations.

Imagistic thinking and imagistic interpretation manifest themselves more freely in Chinese wordplay, literary games, and popular culture. For example, the Chinese riddle is a very unique kind of wordplay that oftentimes works the language to its exhaustion. While riddles in other cultures rely heavily on homophonic and homographic puns, and metaphorical and metonymical transferences, Chinese riddles have at their disposal vast pictographic resources to exploit. Take, for example, the following riddle which targets a written character:

輕　舟　載　著　東　風　來
light　boat　carrying　east　wind　comes

It should be pointed out that the long tradition of making and cracking riddles in Chinese culture has helped establish many conventions the help of which a seasoned game player would enlist only subconsciously when engaged in such a game. One

such convention is that one or more components of the riddle should be understood both referentially and self-referentially. That is to say, one of the characters or a combination of two or more characters must be understood not only denotatively as referring to their normal lexical meanings, but also reflexively as referring to themselves as linguistic signs. By linguistic signs I am not only talking about their phonological aspects but their pictographic aspects as well, about characters taken at "face value" as pictographs and ideographs. When the target of the riddle is a written character, the pictographic aspects often outweigh the phonological aspects, which is exactly the case with the cited example. To cut a long story short, "light boat" in the riddle is not about the boat as boat, but about the boat as the character 舟. Then "light boat" may indicate the boat character after being stripped of some of its strokes or parts. Let us leave it at that for the time being. If we turn to the second half of the riddle, we will reasonably guess that "east wind" may stand for 彡, a radical that evokes visually the association of wind, though etymologically it derives from the resemblance of decorative pattern made of feathers.[105] Bearing this in mind, we begin to search in our reservoir of Chinese written graphs the possible radicals or simple characters that can be combined with 彡 to form complex characters. This search, of course, must be conducted within the framework delimited by the first half of the riddle, i.e. "light boat" and its variants. Now it should be obvious enough that the key

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[105] According to *Shuowen jiezi*, 彡 stands for decorative feather patterns; it resembles the form 毛飾畫文也，象形.

cannot but be 彤 (tóng, red), which consists of 丹 (dān), a character we get from the boat character 舟 after shedding two of its strokes, and 彡, the radical we derive from the latter half of the riddle (Figure 13).

Figure 13. The Chinese riddle targeting the character tóng, red

Activities that involve playing with the pictographic nature of Chinese characters are so many that we hardly need to give more examples to prove the point. As we have come to understand that the distinctions between high-brow and low-brow literatures, between elite culture and popular culture, and between great tradition and little tradition are but contingent and temporary, it is only expected that imagistic thinking in popular culture and little tradition would have an impact on elite culture and great tradition. It is a sad fact that an ingrained prejudice against the imagistic method in philology has prevented many from taking these activities seriously, and Wang Anshi and Pound, as far as their understanding of the Chinese character goes, have for too long been objects of ridicule.

Without espousing Wang Anshi's specific conclusions regarding individual characters or embracing the occultism of Xie Shi's scriptomancy, I would argue that there are important lessons to be learned from both of them. In fact, Wang was not the

inventor of "interpreting a character on the basis of conjoining meanings." As I have demonstrated earlier, he only inherited a method from King Zhuang of Chu, Confucius, Hanfeizi, and, most important of all, Xu Shen the lexicographer himself. To many people, Wang's downfall lies in the fact that he pushed to extreme this method which often resulted in farfetched and strained overinterpretations. However, what is valid interpretation and what is overinterpretation can only be gauged in the frame of reference in a given cultural milieu. For example, Wang's explanation of zhèng 正, uprightness, righteousness, justice, etc., as "that which stops at the One," may have sounded suspiciously philosophical to his contemporaries. However, the oracle bones excavated in and after the late Qing dynasty (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) show that the lower part of the character zhǐ 止 was originally a pictograph of a foot on oracle bones. It evolved into two characters: zhī 之, to go, to approach; and zhǐ 止, to stop (Figure 14). Therefore, in some cases, this character as a component radical means "to go" and "to stop" simultaneously, as its etymology traces back to the undifferentiated foot image. That is exactly the case with zhèng, which can be interpreted as "that which approaches the One and, arriving, stops at the One." Wang's explanation did reveal an important aspect of the character unknown to Xu Shen because Xu did not have the fortune of seeing the oracle bones.[106] From this

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[106] See Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances*, p. 46; Yi Xiwei 宜希微, "Zheng wen dian zi: zheng" 正文典字："正" [Explicating the character Zheng].

case we can reasonably infer that Wang's book contains valuable messages for us to decipher.

Figure 14. Zhǐ 止 was originally a pictograph of a foot on oracle bones. The four graphs above show the character in regular script, small seal script, metal inscription script, and shell and bone script.[107]

In fact, to understand Wang Anshi, Xie Shi, and Pound adequately, it is imperative that we go beyond the realms of etymology and philology, and engage in an interdisciplinary inquiry that would encompass linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, theories of arts and literature, among others. Only by discarding old biases and habits, dismantling unnecessary barriers and framings, are we able to fully appreciate the revelation provided by the tradition of imagistic interpretation in Chinese culture.

VI. Establishing Xiang to Express Meaning Exhaustively

Philosophy, according to Hegel, is "a peculiar mode of thinking—a mode in

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[107] Reproduced from Yi Xiwei 宜希微, "Zheng wen dian zi: zheng" 正文典字：“正” [Explicating the character Zheng].

which thinking becomes knowledge, and knowledge through notions."[108] The later

Hegel believes that philosophy must be conceptual, and it is the philosophy's task to

capture the wealth of empirical, emotional, and religious experiences.[109] Bearing this

standard in mind, Hegel had a rather low opinion of Chinese philosophy. For example,

he contends that "he (Confucius) is hence only a man who has a certain amount of

practical and worldly wisdom—one with whom there is no speculative philosophy."[110]

Following his suit, many modern scholars consider Chinese way of thinking

"impressionistic," "imprecise," and thus belongs to an underdeveloped phase of

human intellect. In fact the use of the term "philosophy" (*zhexue*) has always been

contested in Chinese academia since its introduction into China at the beginning of the

twentieth century. Is there really such a thing as Chinese philosophy? If there is a

distinctive way of theorizing, what is its relationship with the Chinese language and

writing? This section will approach these questions by discussing a tradition of

"establishing xiang to express meaning exhaustively 立象盡意" in Chinese culture.

The abundance of imagery and metaphors in Chinese philosophical writing is at

least partly responsible for the ambiguous state of philosophy in China.[111] The idea of

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[108] G. W. F Hegel, *Hegel's Logic*, p. 4.
[109] Hegel, Preface, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 1-45.
[110] Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on the History on Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Vol. 1, p. 121.
[111] Fung Yu-lan discussed the "briefness and disconnectedness" of Chinese philosophical writings. He attributed them to two reasons: first, there were no professional philosophers in China; second, Chinese philosophers were accustomed to express themselves in aphorisms, apothegms, or allusions, and illustrations. He did not pursue further these problems. See *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 11-14.

"establishing an image to exhaust meaning" was first propounded in the Appended

Commentary of *I Ching*.

> (2) The Master said: Writing cannot express words completely. Words
> cannot express thoughts completely.
>
> Are we then unable to see the thoughts of the holy sages?
>
> The Master said: The holy sages set up the images in order to express
> their thoughts completely; they devised the hexagrams in order to
> express the true and the false completely.[112]

This way of thinking, initiated by *I Ching* and amplified by voluminous *I Ching*

commentaries, became a shaping force for Chinese philosophizing and theorizing in

various fields. We find in the fables of *Zhuangzi*, in the *Thirty-six Military Strategies*,

in *ars poetica* such as *Twenty-four Categories of Poetry*, among others. I will analyze

examples taken from two texts in this section, namely Jiao Yanshou's 焦延壽

Jiaoshi yilin 焦式易林, or *Forest of Changes by Jiao* and Sikong Tu's 司空圖

Twenty-four Categories of Poetry 二十四詩品.

Jiaoshi yilin, or *Jiao's Forest of Changes* is now believed to be authored by the

I Ching scholar Jiao Yanshou of the Former Han dynasty. Taking his cue from the

numerological tradition of *I Ching* studies prevalent in the Han dynasties, Jiao

Yanshou matched each of the 64 hexagrams with every one of the 64 hexagrams, thus

doubled the hexagrams and got a new permutation consisting of 4,096 scenarios. He

further appended mostly four-character, four-line poems to elucidate what he

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[112] *The I Ching*, p. 322.

perceived to be the meaning or situation of the resultant 12-line *gua*. For example,

when Qian, or the Creative ☰, is placed on Qian, one gets a 12-line *gua* with all

unbroken Yang lines. He then proceeded to interpret this 12-line *gua* with a short

poem. The poem attached to Qian upon Qian goes as follows:

道陟石阪。[When traveling,] one [is forced to] climb a rocky mountain.
胡言連謇。[People, speaking] foreign languages, babble on and stutter.
譯瘖且聾，The interpreter, being both mute and deaf,
莫使道通。Can't help to find a through path.
請謁不行，The invitation and consultation can't be completed.
求事無功。The effort to ask for favor is in vain.

Using the images of a blocked path (spatial and geographical barrier), unintelligible

foreign babble (linguistic barrier), the interpreter who cannot perform the function of

an interpreter (physiological barrier), the author creates a desperate situation resulting

from failures of communication. To shed light on this situation, Qian Zhongshu

invokes the curse of Babel and western discourses on "solitary confinement inside

one's self," and thus proves the universality of this scenario.[113]

Jiaoshi yilin, to be sure, was continuing a tradition starting from the Judgment

of *I Ching*, i.e. using verbally constructed images to approximate the *gua* images

generated in the divinatory process. So instead of an interpretation of *I Ching*, it offers

a versified amplification of it. As *I Ching* claims completeness in representation, as I

demonstrated in a previous section, so does *Jiaoshi yilin*. The concept of image,

however, should be understood as to embrace not only static visual images, but also

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[113] Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, Vol. 2, p. 540.

kinetic images, situational images, mental images, etc. The images presented in the 4,096 poems can roughly be divided into four categories: cosmological-natural; physio-psychological; socio-historical; imaginary-fantastic. It should be emphasized that, different from parable or fable, which are morally driven and do have morals explicitly expressed, the images in *Jiaoshi yilin* are descriptive rather than prescriptive or normative. For example, to illustrate the scenario that "a wise person shuns risky situations," the author describes in the following way:

室如懸磬　The room, like a dangling chime stone,
既危且殆　Is dangerous and about to collapse.
早見之士　The wise man of insight,
依山谷處　Resides by the valley

The difference between this poem and an Aesopian fable that carries a moral lesson is only subtle. It lies in the fact that, instead of saying "one should behave like the wise man and reside by the valley when his house is in danger of collapsing," the poem states in a matter-of-fact manner a state of affair that actually exists in the world.

To illustrate the situation of "seeking something out of its natural abode," Jiao composes the following poem:

取火泉源　Seeking fire from the well,
釣魚山巔　Fishing at the mountain top.
魚不可得　Fish won't be obtained,
火不可燃　And flame won't burst out.

These acts, as absurd as they seem, often mark the times which are out of joint. Thus Qian Zhongshu comments, this poem "demonstrates the absurdity of the world with

preposterous behavior 以行事之荒謬，示世道之反常失經."[114]

These, of course, are only a couple of branches of Jiao Yanshou's vast and exuberant *Forest*. As we can see, the author of this unique work did not seek to reduce the world to some formula, axioms, or principles. Instead, he devised xiang—images of various kinds, magnitudes and complexities—to represent the myriad cosmic-natural phenomena, social-historical situations, or imaginary scenarios. Without attempting to evaluate how well his images match up the world, we should commend his approach for its simplified yet not simplistic, reduced yet not reductionist representation of the human condition. He provides a system of cognitive models for human beings to comprehend, classify, and react to their environment. The devise of such a sophisticated system presupposes seasoned human wisdom, the result of rich worldly experiences, painstaking observation, and detached reflection.

Imagistic thinking is by no means confined to *I Ching* scholarship. As I demonstrated in the above, Chinese writing carries so many features of the *I Ching* representation system that it necessarily diffuses this mode of thinking into other domains of Chinese cultural life. Talking about "establishing image to express meaning exhaustively," it is imperative to look into Chinese literary theory in general, and Chinese poetic discourses in particular. It is a well-known fact that except *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, or *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, by Liu Xie

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[114] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 558.

劉勰 (c. 465-522), a systematic treatment of literary form and substance conceived under the Buddhist influence, and a handful of other works of lesser scope and achievement, Chinese thinkers of the literary have mainly produced impressionistic, yet insightful criticisms, scattered in miscellaneous writings such as epistles, sketchbooks, and *shihua* 詩話, a genre that gained much currency in and after the Northern Song dynasty, a causal potpourri of textual criticisms, biographical sketches, critical remarks, and anecdotes. In this unwieldy body of works *Twenty-four Categories of Poetry* occupies a unique position. A work generally attributed to the Tang poet Sikong Tu (837-908),[115] *Twenty-four Categories of Poetry* consists of twenty-four four-character, 12-line poems under the rubrics of twenty-four chosen aesthetic qualities of poetry. It is a kind of *ars poetica* that aspires to approximate the effect of certain aesthetic experience induced by poetry reading, rather than elucidate it discursively. Take, for example, the category of *chongdan* 沖淡, in Stephen Owen's translation "limpid and calm:"

素處以默，Reside in plainness and quiet:
妙機其微。How faint, the subtle impulses (chi).
飲之太和，Infusing with perfect harmony,
獨鶴與飛。Join the solitary crane in flight.
猶之惠風，Like that balmy breeze of spring,
荏苒在衣。Pliantly changing in one's robes.
閱音修篁，Consider the tones in fine bamboo--
美曰載歸。Lovely indeed, return with them.
遇之匪深，One encounters this not hidden deeply away;

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[115] Chen Shangjun of Fudan University, Shanghai, has suggested that the book might have been composed by an anonymous author in the late Ming dynasty. The question is still being debated as the evidence he presented was not conclusive.

即之愈希。Approach it and it grows more elusive.
脫有形似，If there is some resemblance of shape,
握手已違。The grasping hand has already missed it.[116]

From line 3 through 10 we find four images, or four clusters of images. Consider the two clusters of images in line 5-6 and 7-8. To be sure, the author is not comparing the quality of "limpid and calm" to the "balmy breeze," neither is he likening it to the "tones in the fine bamboo." What he strives to capture is exactly the feeling of elusiveness the breeze and the tones of bamboo give to the person. This is made clearer in the ensuing lines, when the author states his point more discursively: "One encounters this not hidden deeply away, / Approach it and it grows more elusive." In other words, the quality of "limpid and calm" does not reside in the objective world, neither does it reside in the subjective consciousness. It is the subtle interaction of the subjective and the objective that produces this subtle, elusive, ethereal beauty of the realm of superfine serenity.

The "Twenty-Four Categories" Sikong Tu chooses to elaborate on are almost entirely of this order. They are not ideas; they are certainly not things. They are all about the subtle and sudden epiphany in which consciousness merges into a fleeting and revealing moment of the world. When we are finally able to appreciate the flavor of these qualities, we will truly marvel at the ingenuity with which he gives shape to the almost inexpressible realm of the aesthetic.

The way of thinking embodied in *Jiaoshi yilin* and *Twenty-Four Categories of*

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[116] Steven Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, p. 306.

Poetry, which can be called "imagistic thinking," possesses distinctive characteristics

which sufficiently set it apart from conceptual thinking, the kind of thinking valued by

Western philosophy. The Hegelian concept, distinguished from being and essence on

the one hand, and from object and objectivity on the other, is "a universal

representation [*Vorstellung*] or a representation of that which is common to several

objects."[117] Thus it necessarily selects to represent one single aspect of the object. The

representation of being and essence relies on the dialectical movement of the concept

rather than the concept in isolation and stasis. While a concept (which is a signifier on

the linguistic plane) bears only an arbitrary relationship with its referent, the image

(embodied in the written character) captures more features of the object it represents

and thus retains more information from the external world. In other words, while

concept is higher-altitude abstraction of reality, image is a lower altitude abstraction. It

manages to simplify without being overly reductionist (Figure 15). Secondly, the

image is more concerned with the holistic pattern and inner structure of the piece of

reality it represents. It is qualitative rather than quantitative. Thirdly, the image is more

concerned with the function of its component parts and the relation between them than

with the substantive qualities of the entities. Fourthly, the image is more concerned

with the synchronic dimension than with the diachronic dimension. In a sense,

Chinese writing as a medium for theoretical expression would inevitably lead to a way

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[117] Quoted in Micheal Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, p. 58.

of theorizing highly dependent on imagery, metaphor, and analogy.[118]
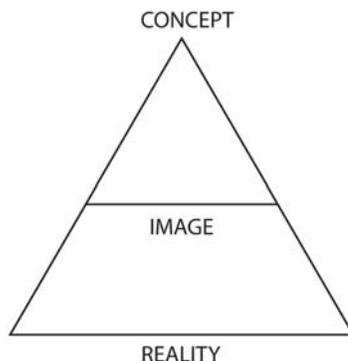
Figure 15. High-altitude abstraction of concept vs. low-altitude abstraction of image

VII. Xiang, Written Character, and Classical Chinese Poetry

i. The Written Character as Image

Through the analyses in the previous sections, we have recognized the *radical visuality* of Chinese writing, written signs taken at their face value and perceived as images. This necessarily has an impact on Chinese poets who use characters as their medium for poetic composition. In fact, Liu Xie, the first systematic theorist of Chinese literature, believes that the origin of writing and the origin of poetry are analogous in the sense that both of them strive to reproduce and represent the pattern of the cosmos.[119] If that is the case, then a written character can be regarded as a

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[118] The relationship between imagery, metaphor, and analogy is a very complicated issue which deserves a separate treatment.

[119] Liu Xie, *The Literary Mind and the Carving Dragons: A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature*, pp. 12-21.

visual, concrete poem in the simplest form. This primordial poem is painting, calligraphy, and literature in one.

Chinese written characters as images would naturally lead to a mode of poetic writing that foregrounds visuality; and Nature, in time, would become the target of artistic expression and focus of aesthetic experience.[120] Look at míng 朙, bright, luminous, brilliant, the character Hui Lin 慧琳, the Buddhist philologist in the Tang dynasty, defines as resembling moonlight shining through window.[121] It does not take any insight to find the similarity between the form of this character and the depiction of Li Bai's famous five-character line, "In front of the bed: moonlight," 床前明月光 both in presentation and in mood. Another example is dōng 東, the character for "east," the idea of which is expressed by a sun 日 behind the tree 木. Read another Tang poet Chang Jian's 常健 "A Visit to the Broken Hill Temple" and witness how remarkably reminiscent the second line is of the character dōng:

清晨入古寺，At daybreak I come to the ancient temple,
初日照高林。The first rays of the sun shine through tall trees.

In both cases, the poetic line can be seen as an expanded version of the image depicted by the character. Here I am not implying that the poets, when they composed the poems, did nothing but play with characters. On the contrary, they very probably never

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[120] For a discussion of the development of Chinese landscape poetry, see Wai-lim Yip, "Aesthetic Consciousness of Landscape in Chinese and Anglo-American Poetry," in *Diffusion of Distances*, pp. 100-137.

[121] "朙, 從囧，囧象窗，月光入窗明也." Quoted in Hu Qiguang, p. 177. It should be noted that this character has two forms: one is comprised of the ideographs of sun and moon 明, the other is comprised of the ideographs of window and moon 朙. *Shuowen jiezi* defines 朙 as "to shine 照也."

realized the visual affinity between the characters and the poems in the moment of creation. However, the pictographic nature of Chinese writing and the poets' subconscious motivation of approximating the cosmic wén 文 (pattern) necessarily led to the crossing of paths.

There are a variety of ways in which the written character as image can contribute to the aesthetic effect of poetry. Take, for example, Liu Yuxi's 劉禹錫 (772-842) "Qing Ming," a poem long celebrated for its crisp diction, vivid presentation, and expressive spontaneity. Once we introduce the imagistic dimension into the reading of this poem, we will be surprised to find a plane of signification independent of and complementary to the lexical meaning of the words therein. I shall make it clear that the reading of the characters and their component parts are not strictly based on etymology. It is a kind of over-interpretation intentionally done in the spirit of experimentation in order to call attention to the pictographic nature of the written characters and highlight their signifying potential as poetic medium.

清	明	時	節	雨	紛	紛
qīng	*míng*	*shí*	*jiē*	*yǔ*	*fēn*	*fēn*
Limpid,	luminous,	time /	season,	rain,	confused like tangled silk	

路	上	行	人	欲	斷	魂
lù	*shàng*	*xíng*	*rén*	*yù*	*duàn*	*hún*
Road,	on,	traveler,	would / almost,		broken,	soul

借	問	酒	家	何	處	有
jiè	*wèn*	*jiǔ*	*jiā*	*hé*	*chù*	*yǒu*
Ask,		tavern,		where,		is

牧	童	遙	指	杏	花	村
mù	*tóng*	*yáo*	*zhǐ*	*xìng*	*huā*	*cūn*
Shepherd,		afar,	points to,	apricot flowers, village		

In Qingming season, rain is like tangled silk.
On the road, a traveler is filled with sorrow.
"Shall I ask, the country tavern, where is it?"
The shepherd points afar: "Apricot Flowers Village!"

Qingming, the fifth solar term in the lunar calendar, comes in early April. It is a time to offer sacrifices to ancestors and sweep ancestors' tomb. In South China, Qingming is a time characterized by profuse rain and thriving vegetation. For travelers in ancient times, the continuous rain in Qingming season can be rather annoying and dispiriting. The poem opens with the name of the season, a name that immediately evokes in the seasoned reader a feeling of misty atmosphere and mild melancholy. The character qīng 清, clear, limpid, liquid purity, contains the "water" radical 氵 on the left, and the moon radical 月 on the right. Míng 明, brightness, radiance, brilliance, is composed of the radicals denoting the sun 日 and the moon 月. We further find the sun radical on the left side of the third character shí 時, time. So in the first three characters we find each of the sun and the moon radicals appears twice in an order indicating the succession or cycle of these radiating heavenly objects: the moon, the sun, the moon, the sun, which suggests the lapse of time. The fifth character in the first line, yǔ 雨, rain, together with the water radical 氵 in the first character, bracket off the sun and the moon. In the first five characters of the poem, we are transposed, by

means of graphic and pictographic elements, into a world where the sun and the moon are eclipsed, a world moistened by prolonged spring rain.

At the end of the first line, the poet uses doubled fēn 紛 to portray the special character of the rain. Fēn, profuse, tangled, and confused, comes from the "silk" radical 糸. It immediately evokes the image of tangled silk, including its color, feel, and texture. Interesting enough, we find the "silk" radical again in the second line, and with increased density, too. The sixth character in the second line, duàn 斷, to break or broken, contains four "silk" radicals, which doubles the number of "silk" in both "fēn" combined. The visual intensity indicates that the rain grows only heavier as time passes by.

The mood of the traveler is increasingly melancholic too. This is not only indicated by the lexical meaning of duànhún 斷魂, literally to have one's soul broken, dispirited, sorrowful, and despondent; but also by the pictographic values of fēn 紛 and duàn 斷, the two characters containing the "silk" radical 糸, on which the poet depends for an effective description of the rain. We notice that there is a "knife" radical 刀 in fēn and an "ax" radical 斤 in duàn. When we read the two characters separately, i.e. out of the poetic context, the "knife" and "ax" radicals are directed towards the "silk" radical, hence the lexical meanings of fēn (confused) and duàn (broken). However, in this particular poem, as silk is used as an image of rain, the knife and ax are metaphorically directed toward the rain too and it has two

layers of implication. First, the traveler is walking against the silk curtain of rain, and wherever he moves, he cuts into the curtain and leaves it open, albeit momentarily. Second, he grows more impatient with the rain and more dismayed about his condition, and the transition from "knife" to "ax" symbolizes both his increasing frustration and his intensifying resolution to leave behind him the annoying weather.

Things take a dramatic turn in the third line of the poem. We find the water / rain element nearly disappears in these two lines, except one water radical in the character jiǔ 酒, wine. On the other hand, the sun element and the moon element emerge again, at the beginning (借) and end (有) of the third line, and in the middle of the last line (指). Though all the three occurrences are in the lower, marginal positions of the characters, they definitely point to a change in the weather and a suddenly kindled hope in the heart of the traveler. This change of mood is brought about by a shepherd, who, when asked about the country tavern, replies with both a gesture of pointing and a terse phrase "Apricot Flowers Village!" The last three characters, with two "tree" radicals 木 in xìng 杏, apricot, and cūn 村, village, and one "grass / flower" radical 艹 in huā 花, flower, present the picture of a village located in exuberant plants and blossoming flowers, where the traveler finds comfort, protection, and a sense of community. The man 人, lonely and desolate in the middle of the second line, is now cozily nestled under the roof of the flower-embraced country tavern, as is shown in the "human" radical 亻 in huā 花, flower, reconciling to the

spring rain, which, he now realizes, is necessary for bringing about the luxuriance of nature and perpetuating the rhythmic vitality of the cosmos.

Going back to the shepherd, we find him a witty, confident, and amazingly lively character. This is not only shown by the poet's description of his gesture and words, but also by the graphic elements of the written characters chosen. See the four characters at the beginning of the last line:

牧　童　遙　指

牧

Figure 16. Mù 牧, to herd, shepherd, in small seal script.
The radical on the left is the image of a buffalo;
on the right is a hand holding a stick, a whip, or some light weapon.

The first thing we see is a buffalo 牛 in the mù 牧 (to herd, shepherd) character (Figure 16). When we read on, we find that both hands of the shepherd are present in the picture. The first hand is found in the right side of mù, the radical pū 攵, which resembles a hand holding a whip or a stick and literally means "to knock lightly." The second hand is in zhǐ 指, to point, which has the "hand" radical 扌. The shepherd himself, indicated by the character tóng 童, child or lad, stands upright, composed and confident, which we can see clearly from the "to stand" radical 立 at the top.

Though many aspects of the poem are still left untouched in the brief discussion above, we have come to realize, through the analysis of its graphic elements, that it is

about the cycles of day and night, about the life-giving power of the spring rain, about the traveling man's search for protection and community, and about the joy and serenity of country life. If we know more about Chinese history and culture, we will probably figure out that the traveler in the poem is not just any traveler. He is very likely one of those aspirant Confucian scholars, probably in his middle age, who travel far from home, either to take part in the Imperial Examination, or to visit powerful officials, in the hope that he would thus secure a position in the bureaucratic system. His worldly concerns and efforts are thrown into relief by the contrast with the calm and carefree shepherd. However, the poem does not present the traveler in an ironic tone. Instead, the diminished human figure (人) in the middle of the second line is securely encircled by cosmic elements—the sun, the moon, the rain, and the trees, and the fact that the poem starts with "water" (the "water" radical 氵 in qīng 清) and closes with "tree" (the "tree / wood" radical 木 in cūn 村) seems to promise a renewed sense of life, harmony, and communion with nature.

See another example from a longer poem by Du Fu (712-770), one of the greatest masters of poetic language of the Tang dynasty.

白	鷗	沒	浩	蕩
bái	*ōu*	*mò*	*hào*	*dàng*
white,	gull,	submerge,	vast and mighty	

萬	里	誰	能	馴
wàn	*lǐ*	*shuí*	*néng*	*xún*
ten thousand,	miles,	who,	can,	tame

> The white gull submerges into the mighty vastness,
> When he's ten thousand miles away, who can tame him?

When reading these two lines, one is immediately caught by the "water" image in the last three characters of the first line. As their radicals 氵 indicate, both "hào" and "dàng" derived meaning from water, denoting the vastness and impetuousness of flood.[122] The use of the word, however, is not limited to the description of water; it can be used to describe anything vast, boundless, and characterized by mighty movement of energy. That said, I would still like to emphasize the point that it is essential to pay attention to the water image, as it adds to the fullness of meaning of the poem. For one thing, the increasing complexity of the three characters corresponds to the centrifugal movement of the gull, who, at last, disappears into distance ("ten thousand" here refers to an infinitely large number). For another, the three "water" radicals easily conjure up the character for water 水, the shell and bone script of which resembles a river (Figure 17). The effect of this line is a visual image in which the gull flies parallel trajectories to the wavy water of the river. Understanding this will enable us to see the irrelevancy of the Song scholar Song Minqiu's 宋敏求 challenge of Du Fu's choice of the word "mò," to submerge, on the ground that "gulls cannot submerge (into water)."[123] The gull does not plunge into water or submerge

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[122]The "Canon of Yao" of *Shangshu* 尚書·堯典 [The book of documents] reads, "[D]estructive in their overflow are the waters of the inundation. In their vast extent they embrace the hills and overtop the great heights, threatening the heavens with their floods 蕩蕩懷山襄陵，浩浩滔天."

[123] Su Shi 蘇軾 writes, "Song Mingqiu said to me, 'Gulls cannot submerge (into water). It should be changed to waves.' 宋敏求謂餘云，'鷗不解沒，改作波字。'" See Su Shi, *Qiuchi biji* 仇池筆記

under water; it flows with the energy of the river, and thus harmonizes, resonates, identifies, and is at One with it.
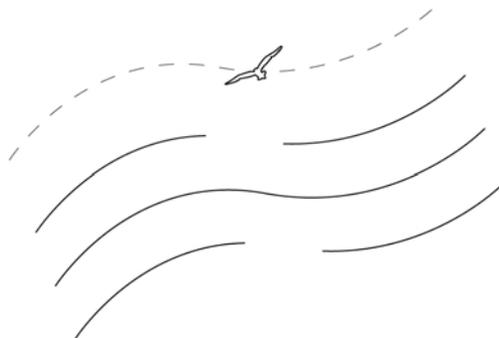
Figure 17. The gull flies a parallel trajectory to the waves of the river. The river in the picture resembles the shell and bone script of the character "shuǐ," 水, water.

ii. The Juxtaposition of Images and Emergence of Meaning

Of the six formative principles of Chinese characters defined by Xu Shen in *Shuowen jiezi*, huìyì, or conjoining meanings, is obviously the "most poetic." The reason is simple: a huìyì character consists of two or more component parts, each part coordinates, corresponds, and correlates with other parts, thus enables the production of a multiplicity of meanings. The written character, as word, is characterized by semantic richness or nebulousness. It gives rise to the absence or under-markedness of such grammatical categories as number, gender, tense, case, and voice, hence an extremely flexible syntax. As a poetic medium, the strength of Classical Chinese lies precisely in representational immediacy, i.e., the representation of phenomenon in its sensuous concreteness with minimum intellectual intervention on the part of the poet.

[Qiuchi sketches], in *Quan Song biji diyi bian* 全宋筆記第一編 [Complete collection of literary sketches of the Song dynasty: first series], p. 198

This potential is best shown in poetic lines entirely or almost entirely composed of nouns. Take, for example, a poem by the Tang poet Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠 (c. 812-870):

雞	聲	茅	店	月
Rooster, crow / sound,		thatch,	inn,	moon
人	跡	板	橋	霜
Man	footprints,	woodblock,	bridge	frost

Compare the original with an English translation by William Schultz:

A cock's crow, a thatched teahouse in the moonlight,
Human footprints on the frosted bridge planking.[124]

In the original the poet follows and reproduces the experiential process of the early traveler by successively juxtaposing images that present themselves to his senses: first comes the cock's crow, which leads him to look afar where he finds an inn; looking beyond the inn, he further discovers the moon in the sky. The second line captures a parallel visual process: first he sees the footprints, which make him realize it is a wood bridge that he is treading on; the footprints lead him to look about, and he now realizes the bridge is covered with frost. In contrast, the translation has to depend on prepositions and syntactic structures to explicate the relations between the objects: "a thatched teahouse *in* the moonlight," "footprints *on* the *frosted* bridge planking." As we can see from the original, the poet is precisely not talking about the light of moon, but about the weakness of its glow, as he is able to see the inn and the moon only as a consequence of hearing the cock's crow, presumably coming from the inn, or, at any

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[124] Wu-chi Liu, and Irving Yucheng Lo, eds, *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, p. 246.

rate, from the direction of the inn. The second line suffers a similar distortion in translation as it loses the experiential immediacy by imposing a grammatical relation in "the frosted bridge planking." If in the original meaning *emerges* on its own, in the translation meaning is deducted by the poet's intellectual activity.

iii. Verbal Alchemy and the Poetic Eye

Classical Chinese poetry is noted for its radical economy of language. The poet, to achieve maximum effect in the given space of a short poem, must pay heed to each character he chooses. This is especially true for *jintishi* 近體詩, the recent-style poetry, a genre coming into maturity in the Tang dynasty. In both writing and reading poems in the recent-style, awareness of the "poetic eye" is supremely valuable. The poetic eye can be defined as the word in a certain poetic line that claims the most aesthetic intensity and creative originality. It is comparable to Pound's vortex, "the point of maximum energy,"[125] but takes on many different forms. It is mistaken to assume that the poetic eye belongs to the category of "poetic diction," as oftentimes it is a word completely plain and quotidian.[126] In this case, finding the most felicitous poetic eye can be regarded as a verbal alchemy that transforms the utterly ordinary words into dazzlingly fresh and intensely gratifying poetic language. It lies beyond the scope of the current project to study the poetic eyes in a comprehensive manner. I only

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[125] Ezra Pound, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*, p. 278.
[126] The word can be quite extraordinary, too.

intend to investigate the dynamics of the poetic eye in relation to the special nature of the written character, especially the graphic principle huìyì, conjoining meanings.

In one of the most lyrical episodes in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Xiangling,[127] a little girl infatuated with the poetic art, has a lively discussion with Miss Lin Dai-yu, the heroine of the novel. When prompted by Dai-yu to share what she learned from her reading experience of the Tang poet Wang Wei, Xiangling has the following to say:

> [A]s I see it, poetry is very good at saying things which you can't exactly explain but which leave a very vivid impression in your mind; also it often says things which at first seem illogical but are quite logical and natural when you stop to think about them.

Xiangling cites the third couplet from Wang Wei's five-character regulated poem "On the Frontier" to make her point:

> 大漠孤煙直，Vast desert: a lone smoke, straight.
> 長河落日圓。Long river: the setting sun, round.

Xiangling continues her musing:

> Now how can smoke really be "straight"? And why "the round sun"? *Of course* the sun is round! Yet when you close the book and start thinking about those lines, the scene they describe is so vivid that it's almost as though you had been there. And if you ask yourself what other two words he could have used instead of "straight" and "round", you realize that there aren't any.[128]

The beauty of the two lines quoted by Xiangling consists in their utter simplicity. The two lines contain four images: the desert, the smoke, the river and the sun. The vast

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[127] Hawkes' rendition of her name is Caltrop.

[128] Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, trans. Hawkes, Vol. 2, pp. 459. I have adopted Wai-lim Yip's translation of the two lines by Wang Wei, instead of Hawkes' original rendition. See Wang Wei, *Hiding the Universe*, p. 35.

desert and long river set the background of the whole picture, upon which the lone smoke and the setting sun are to be painted. The simplicity of the first four characters of each line leads the reader to expect something unusual, sublime, and spectacular; some poetic diction to fulfill his expectation of reading a poem. However, the fifth character of each line turns out to be utterly mundane, even prosaic. Only when he reflects on the whole line, would he find that the ordinariness of the fifth character is precisely what the poem relies on for its poetic effect. While the poem attains to an unforgettable austere beauty and sublime simplicity, the reader obtains a renewed sense of the poetry of the northern frontier.

> Xiangling has more to say about another couplet by the same poet:

> 日落江湖白，When the sun sets, the water whitens;
> 潮來天地青。When the tide rises, all the world is green.

> "Whiten" and "green" at first seem like nonsense; but when you start thinking about it, you realize that he had to use those two words in order to describe the scene exactly as it was. When you read those lines out loud, the flavor of them is so concentrated that it's as though you had an olive weighing several thousand catties inside your mouth![129]

Here she touches upon an important issue of reading Chinese poetry in general and reading Chinese landscape poetry in particular. As far as the former is concerned, she is meditating on the art of choosing a poetic eye. As far as the latter is concerned, she is theorizing about what we may conveniently call the "reception aesthetics of xiang." When talking about the act of definition giving that happened in the

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[129] Ibid., pp. 459-60.

compilation of *Shuowen jiezi*, I have pointed out there was a metonymic transference or semantic leap when Xu Shen assigned definitive denotative meanings to the written characters. After this moment, the character as a pictographic representation turned into a word with definitive denotative value. In the poem given above, there are two visual images in the first line: the setting sun and the water (in the original, river and lake).The poet can choose to let the images "work out their own fate" by avoiding intellectual intervention and imposing a specific way of seeing on the reader. He can also choose to bring forth the potential of the images by means of ingenuously thought out diction. The poet here obviously resorts to the second strategy. What he does have some resemblance to the act of definition giving of the lexicographer, as well as important differences, i.e., he is not interpreting the scene; he simply offers another image to approximate his sensory impression of it.

It is interesting to compare this poetic writing and reading process to the process of puzzle making and solving. The poet juxtaposes the images as if creating a picture puzzle (rebus). He can disclose the answer to the puzzle if he pleases. In fact, it is by controlling the choice of the "answer" that the poet exercises his supreme authority as an artist. He can choose either to frustrate the reader's expectation or to satisfy it. He surmises, tantalizes, conceals and reveals at will. The reader, on the other hand, is not a passive receiver of poetic effect. On the contrary, he is actively involved in the production of the poetic meaning. If we can magnify the process to observe its details,

we will find, while reading, the reader constantly guesses, imagines, and comes up with his own diction and even creates his own phrases and lines. He negotiates, disputes, and discusses with the poet. The poetic line thus becomes a ground where intensive intersubjective, intertextual activities take place. The successful poet is the one who can bring about epiphany-like experiences in his reader by means of the dynamics of images and the poetic eye.

iv. Transcending Images and the Poetics of Silence

Chinese written characters are spatial constructs that resemble various kinds of buildings. As Laozi comments, the usefulness of the house depends precisely on its emptiness.[130] Ever since Chinese antiquity, special attention has been paid to blank or void in philosophy and arts. This penchant had its root in both *I Ching* and *Laozi*, but it was given a tangible form and reinforced by the Chinese writing system. In Chinese calligraphy, there is a well-known dictum that, in order to decide the dimensions of the brushstrokes, one needs to measure the blank space on the paper 計白當黑. Xiang, embodied in the written character and as a visual or verbal construct, is the unity of presence and absence, ink and blank, speech and silence. This idea has been a defining characteristic of Chinese arts, including painting, calligraphy, and literature.

According to a popular anecdote, once the Imperial Academy of Painting of the

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[130] *Lao Zi*, Chpt. 11, pp. 86-87.

Song dynasty solicited paintings that would suit the title "An Old Temple Hidden in the Mountain 深山藏古寺." The Song dynasty boasts many artists; many painters came to try their luck. The first painter came with a painting on which a temple was carefully painted with abundant details squarely situated in the center of the canvas. Despite his amazing mimetic ability, he was castigated for lack of originality and artistic taste, because the temple is not *hidden* in the mountain. The second painter, obviously of higher caliber and more ingenuity, did not paint the temple in its totality. Instead, he painted only a corner of the temple's hall, with a corner of the temple's flag fluttering in the wind. On the mountain path beside the temple, a woodcutter stopped and looks to the way of the building, as if listening to the bell. This painting gained much praise, but the examiners of the Academy were still not fully satisfied. Finally came a true master-painter who brought with him a work destined to astonish everyone—he did not paint the temple at all. In his painting people saw a path leading to a stream, where a monk is getting water. Other than that, there were only a few rocks, flowers, and pines.

The secret for the success of the last painter lies precisely in his recognition and manipulation of the audience's imaginative power. By not saying what he has to say, he manages to say more by enlisting the help of the audience's imagination. In Classical Chinese poetry, intentional silence and masterful manipulation of speech and silence, presence and absence, and being and non-being is a technique utilized with

great success. Wang Wei's quatrain is an example of this technique:

新豐美酒斗十千，The good wine of Xinfeng costs ten thousand coins.
咸陽遊俠多少年。Knights of Xianyang: many are in prime years.
相逢意氣為君飲，In camaraderie they meet and drink,
系馬高樓垂柳邊。Horses tethered beside the tall building and drooping
willows.

After building a momentum with his narrative about the good wine, the knights in

their prime years, and the enthusiasm with which they meet for a banquet, the poet

stops abruptly and shifts to the depiction of what is seen outside the restaurant. As the

banquet scene is totally omitted from the poem, the reader has to mobilize his own

lived experience to imagine the atmosphere of the gathering. Martin Heidegger seems

to be musing about this technique of Wang Wei and many like-minded Chinese poets

when he writes: "Poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies

and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the

familiar."[131]

VIII. Conclusion and More Reflections

This chapter is a study of one of the most important philosophical concepts in

the Chinese tradition, xiang, and its manifestations in the Chinese written character

and various domains of Chinese culture. It argues that xiang, rooted in the pre-Qin

divination book, *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, shares a number of important

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[131] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 68.

attributes with the Chinese writing system, which was developed mainly on the basis of pictorialism. Influenced by the idea of xiang in *I Ching* and its numerous commentaries, and conditioned by the writing system, Chinese philosophy, theoretical thinking, literature, and popular culture all display some unique features that distinguish them from their counterparts in cultures with alphabetical writing systems. I propose to redefine "imagism" to best describe the unique cognitive model and expressive mode fostered by the idea of xiang and the Chinese written character. Given the complexity of the issues dealt with in this chapter, I would like to summarize the main points of each section in the following. At the end of this section, I will discuss some residual problems.

Section I is a short introduction to the topic under investigation, including an explication of the character xiang 象, and definitions of key terms. Section II "Debating the Chinese Written Character" surveys the debate about the nature of the Chinese writing system in the West since the sixteenth century. Often based on imperfect knowledge of the Chinese language, Francis Bacon, the Catholic missionaries, and later orientalists intuitively sensed the fundamental difference between Chinese writing and alphabetical writing systems. Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound are responsible for rekindling the debate about the Chinese written character in the twentieth century. Although their works contain many philological errors, and draw much criticism, their ideas are seminal and intuitions often revealing. The French

philosopher Jacques Derrida in his tremendously influential *Of Grammatology* reassessed the contributions of Fenollosa and Pound and surmised China is a "civilization developing outside of all logocentrism."[132] This section concludes by suggesting that we should go beyond any single discipline in our investigation of the Chinese written character. The synthetic method may be called "culturology."

Section III "Xiang: Its Foundation in Pre-Qin Thought" traces the origins of the idea of xiang in the pre-Qin philosophical systems of *Laozi* and *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*. The character "xiang" appears twice in *Laozi*, but the idea is rather vague. It is in *I Ching* that the idea of xiang was given its definitive elucidation. *I Ching* is a cosmological representation system based on the binary opposition of Yang and Yin and their combinations and permutations. *I Ching* is a closed system of representation. It claims completeness and exhaustiveness. The basic Yang and Yin lines had their pictorial roots in nature. I then introduced a distinction between *gua* images, i.e., images of trigrams and hexagrams, and worldly images and discussed their differences. An analysis was then given of a specific *gua*, the Judgment, and line statements. At the end of this section, it was hinted that many of the characteristics we find in the representation system of *I Ching* were to be found in the Chinese writing system.

Section IV "Imaged Thought Embodied in the Written Character" contains a detailed analysis of Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*, *Explicating Simple and Complex*

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[132] Derrida, p. 92.

Characters. Special attention was given to three of the "six formative principles of Chinese script," namely *xiàngxíng* (resemble form)*, huìyì* (conjoining meanings), and *xíngshēng* (form and sound). I argue that pictographic elements play a role, in varying degrees, in all the four methods including the three listed above and *zhǐshì* (indicate things). While admitting that there is certain arbitrariness in the pictorialism of the Chinese character, I nonetheless maintain that a fundamental difference exists between Chinese writing and alphabetical writing. I analyzed Xu Shen's dictionary-compiling activity and pointed out that there was a metonymic transference or semantic leap at the moment of definition-giving. In the remaining of this section, I discussed *xíngshēng*, and demonstrated why the phonetic element is not totally free from pictorialism. I finally discussed the correspondences between *I Ching* and the Chinese writing system.

In Section V, I delineated a tradition of imagistic interpretation in Chinese literature and culture. The tradition dates back to the sixth century BCE, the Spring and Autumn Period, when King Zhuang of Chu interpreted the character wǔ 武, military or prowess, based on its graphic roots. This interpretation was adopted by Xu Shen, the compiler of *Shuowen jiezi*. Confucius and Hanfeizi, two pre-Qin thinkers, are also practitioners of this interpretative method. I then discussed two proponents of imagistic interpretation in the Song dynasty, the statesman and scholar Wang Anshi, and the scriptomancer Xie Shi. To illustrate that the tradition continues to the twentieth

century, I cited the interpretation of a five-character poetic line by François Cheng. To prove the popularity and prevalence of imagism as a way of thinking, I resorted to the analysis of a riddle targeting a written character. I finally proposed that to evaluate the tradition of imagistic thinking, we have to go beyond the confines of etymology and philology, and employ an interdisciplinary approach.

Section VI surveys the unique way of philosophizing or theorizing in Chinese culture, "establishing xiang to express meaning exhaustively," resulting from the influence of *I Ching* and the writing system. I focused my analysis on two cases: Jiao Yanshou's *Jiaoshi yilin*, a versified commentary on *I Ching*, and *Twenty-Four Categories of Poetry*. Based on these case studies, I explicated the differences between imagistic thinking and conceptual thinking. To highlight the differences between the two ways of thinking, I coined a pair of terms: the high-altitude abstraction of concept and the low-altitude abstraction of image.

Section VII explores the influences of xiang and the Chinese written character on Chinese poetry. As poetry is a verbal art most intimately bound to the nature of language, there are many ways for us to approach this problem. I chose to discuss four aspects: the written character as image, the juxtaposition of images and emergence of meaning, verbal alchemy and the poetic eye, and transcending images and the poetics of silence. In "The Written Character as Image" I offered a kind of experimental (over)interpretation of a quatrain based on a pictorial understanding of the characters,

to draw attention to the pictorial aspect of Classical Chinese poetry. Through the discussion in this section, it should be clear that xiang is a major poetizing factor in Classical Chinese poetry, and it gives rise to a number of qualities that are either absent or indistinct in other literary traditions.

Having summarized the main points of this chapter in the above, it is time for some additional reflections on the problem.

1. From Semantic Triangle to Grammatological Triangle

In their very influential book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Ogden and Richards devised a semantic triangle to show the relations between symbol, thought or reference, and referent. While it may be a useful or even adequate diagram to account for the workings of alphabetical languages, when applied to Chinese which has a mainly pictographic writing, it needs revision. I therefore propose that we can use "Grammatological Triangle" to account for the workings of the Chinese language including three aspects. It should be noted that I am not the inventor of this diagram. I only bring it into contradistinction with the semantic triangle (Figure 18) .
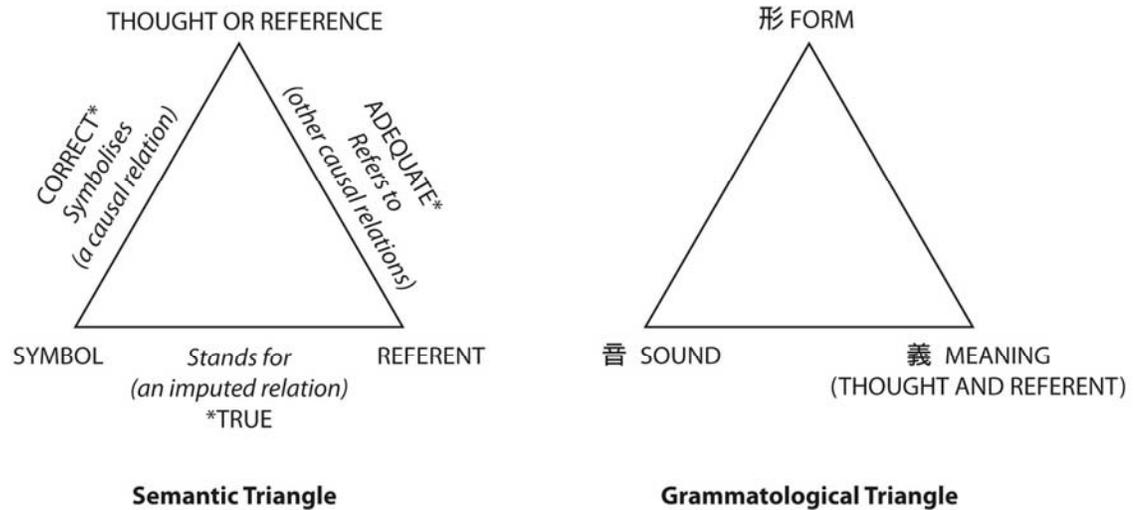
THOUGHT OR REFERENCE

CORRECT*
Symbolises
(a causal relation)

ADEQUATE*
Refers to
(other causal relations)

SYMBOL *Stands for*
(an imputed relation)
TRUE REFERENT

Semantic Triangle

形 FORM

音 SOUND 義 MEANING
(THOUGHT AND REFERENT)

Grammatological Triangle

Figure 18. A comparison of the Semantic Triangle[133]
and the Grammatological Triangle

Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* mention in passing, as if there were no need for an explanation, that meaning is the "pivotal term of every theory of language."[134] This observation must have been based on the experiences of a speaker and student of the Indo-European languages. In traditional Chinese philology, the written form of a character, its sound, and meaning are always considered as interrelated aspects of a philological / linguistic sign. Where Ogden and Richards find it necessary to distinguish thought and referent,[135] the Chinese philologist consigns both to the category of meaning. This suggests that traditional Chinese people did not find it imperative to make a distinction between subject and object. The category of meaning in the Grammatological Triangle is both subjective and objective. This

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[133] Reproduced from Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 11.
[134] Ogden and Richards, p. 48.
[135] Probably they were only reiterating a commonly-held belief.

conclusion echoes surprisingly with William James' "radical empiricism," a theory

which posits that subject and object merge indistinguishably into experience.[136]

2. Semantic Under-differentiation and Built-in Polysemy

In the fifth section I made a distinction between the high-altitude abstraction of

the concept and the low-altitude abstraction of the image. We can approach the

question from a different angle. The pictorialism of Chinese character has an

important effect on the semantic level of the language, i.e., the semantic

under-differentiation of words / characters, because complex relations exist between

the multiple component parts of a character. As a result, the character can be

understood in many different ways when appearing in different contexts.

Linguists have long noted the nebulousness or imprecision of Chinese, and

many regard it as a deficiency and token of backwardness. However, Henry Rosemont,

Jr. offers a different appraisal:

> In addition to carrying its own linguistic weight the semantic
> component of classical Chinese therefore had to perform functions
> which are more commonly served by the phonological and syntactic
> components of the grammars of other languages … the heavy
> grammatical burden placed on the semantic component of classical
> Chinese contributes to what may appropriately be called "semantic
> overload" in the literary language. … Many scholars have of course
> called attention—often loudly—to this ambiguity and lack of precision
> in classical Chinese, seeing it as a distinctive linguistic liability. But
> perhaps their perceptions are biased; the lack of precision could be a

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[136] William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, pp. 3-20.

decided communicative asset.[137]

Though inspiring in some ways, upon closer scrutiny, we will find that he perhaps has made two mistakes. First, there is a supposition of universalism in the argument, i.e., he assumes that there are grammatical "functions which are more commonly served by the phonological and syntactic components of the grammars of other languages." The fact may be that the semantic richness of the written character renders these grammatical functions (number, gender, case, tense, etc.) unnecessary in the first place. The second mistake is derivative of the first one. He attributes the "semantic overload" to the fact that the semantic element has to take on additional grammatical functions. In reality, the reverse may be true. As semantic richness is inherent in the character, few phonological or syntactic elements are needed. In other words, it is semantic richness that gives rise to the lack of phonological and syntactic components; not the lack of phonological and syntactic components that gives rise to the semantic overload of Chinese. This is precisely an effect of Chinese writing being primarily pictographic. It is therefore more appropriate to use "semantic under-differentiation" or "built-in polysemy" than "semantic overload," as the latter suggests that some pre-existing functions are loaded onto the Chinese word.

The semantic under-differentiation of Chinese word / character has a series of structural influences on the Classical Chinese language. I shall discuss some of them

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[137] Henry Rosemond, Jr., "On Representing Abstractions in Archaic Chinese," in *Philosophy East and West* 24.1 (1974), pp. 83-84.

in Chapter Three, "Syntax and Chinese Historiography."

3. The Ambivalence of Definition-Giving and the Return of the Repressed

When talking about the act of definition giving that happened in the compilation of *Shuowen jiezi*, I have pointed out there was a metonymic transference or semantic leap when Xu Shen assigned denotative meanings to Chinese characters. Through this act of definition giving, the ambiguous, undifferentiated semantic space of the written character took on a lexical determinateness, the function of which was ambivalent. On the one hand, it standardized the uses of characters and thus facilitated the integration of the hitherto less than consolidated linguistic community. For the first time in history it accomplished a heroic feat of associating the form, sound, and meaning of characters based on standardized graphs, and classifying the graphs according to the neatly formulated six principles. As far as this was concerned, it should be hailed.

On the other hand, it imposed a rigid definition on each character, thus limits, if not impairs, its semantic potential. This interpretative violence has not been admonished against, challenged, and guarded against except by a few scholars and artists. But the character cannot simply be reduced to its lexical meaning, and the pictorial element would surface from time to time in literary and philosophical interpretations. This resurfacing of the pictorial element can be regarded as "the return of the repressed," a revolt against the rigidity of the lexicographer's definition-giving,

an act comparable to Confucius' "rectification of names." While the latter, when implemented by later imperial regimes, institutionalized hegemonic power in the socio-political sphere, the former imposed a straitjacket on the Chinese word / character, which at times can be rather debilitating.

4. Studies of Language and Culture Should Take Writing into Consideration

By now, it should be very clear that the study of the relationship between language and culture should absolutely take writing into consideration. While this principle is universally applicable, it is especially true when it comes to the Chinese tradition. The insistence on the primacy of speech is an entrenched bias of Euro-centrism. Unfortunately, starting from the twentieth century, as Western paradigms of human sciences were introduced into China, so were biases and myopias. Grammatology was marginalized and writing was debased. One of the goals of this project is to reintroduce the Chinese written character to the center stage of the scholarship about language and culture. It will not fail us and will open new vistas onto future.

Chapter Three

Syntax and Chinese Historiography

Reconsidering the Form of *Shiji*, *Record of the Grand Historian*,

from a Linguistic Point of View

> The reason for this failure [to integrate Chinese history into world history] is not merely lack of knowledge, formidable as this is. It is rather the lack of the means of fitting the vast mass of detail of Chinese history into familiar patterns of Western history. For it obviously will not help very much simply to take Chinese history as it has been narrated by its own historians and to add it on in an arithmetical way to one's account of European history. To be rendered intelligible to Western readers Chinese history must undergo a process of translation, and not of words alone but of whole concepts and systems of concepts. Further, if it is to be made congruent with Western history, our concepts for dealing with Western history must also come under criticism and new concepts must be devised which will be adequate to render each culture intelligible in terms of the other.
> —E. G. Pulleyblank, "The Beguilement of Historicism"

Though universally acclaimed as the greatest work of Chinese historiography,

Sima Qian's (ca. 145–86 BCE) *Shiji* presents modern scholars of literature and history

a number of puzzlements, not the least of which concerns the innovative and eclectic

form of the work. While various sub-genres of Chinese narrative, both historical and

fictional, have drawn considerable critical attention since 1970s and the study of early

Chinese historiography is gaining momentum since 1990s, an important dimension has

been curiously absent in the discussions of the historiographical form of *Shiji*, i.e. the

impact of the Classical Chinese language, the very medium with which Sima Qian

composed his *magnum opus*, on the form of his writing. From the vantage point of contemporary scholarship on language and philosophy, the present chapter attempts to revisit the problem of *Shiji*'s form.

It should be understood that I do not intend to offer an apology for the genre of *Shiji*, nor do I attempt at a systematic analysis of its form. After all, as many scholars have pointed out, *Shiji's* form was a synthesis of previous historical writings. What I propose to do is to offer an explanation for several major features of its form, especially the inclusion of *liezhuan* 列傳, parallel biography, in such a historical work. The method I employ is in line with the theoretical framework of this dissertation, i.e., I will approach the problem from a linguistic point of view. Special attention will be paid to the characteristics of Classical Chinese grammar resulting from or related to the nature of the Chinese writing system. I shall begin by citing some representative authors who have voiced their puzzlements about the form of *Shiji*. Then I will provide an analysis from the linguistic point of view. The implications of this special mode of historical writing will be analyzed towards the end of this chapter.

I. The Mystery that Is the Form of *Shiji*

Shiji, or *Record of the Grand Historian*, was compiled in the genre of *ji-zhuan* 紀傳, or annals-biography, which was to become *the* genre of the official dynastic history of China. *Ji-zhuan* is a synthesis of the earlier genres of historical writing,

including annals, event-centered histories and speech-centered histories. It is in this genre that the voluminous *Twenty-Four Histories*[138] were to be composed, which constituted the main body of the "Treasury of History," one of the four classes of books in the fourfold bibliographical system of pre-modern China.[139] However, when it comes to the specific form of *Shiji*, the tone of modern scholars of historiography and Chinese narrative is quite often one of resignation and apology. Questions on *Shiji*'s form arise from the following four angles. As *Shiji* is the quintessential traditional Chinese historical narrative, these questions might be, to some extent, taken as interrogations on traditional Chinese historiography in general.

First, early Chinese historians did not develop the art of historical criticism. Myths, legends, fantastic happenings and fanciful thinking are mixed together with what truly happened. With such an inadequate historical awareness, historical truth can hardly be retrieved. J. H. Plumb comments on *Shiji*: "Legends and truth are intermingled, particularly in the biographies of dukes, officials, sages and bandits which form so large a part of his work."[140] It should be pointed out that, in the eyes of Chinese scholars, *Shiji* marks the beginning of mature historical writing in China. There are more unbelievable things recorded in other histories. It is not hard to

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[138] The name was first used in *Siku quanshu*, or the *Complete Library of Four Treasuries*, a huge collection of books compiled in the eighteenth century. The term "Twenty-Five Histories" is also used to designate the *Twenty-four Histories* and the *History of Qing*.
[139] This bibliographical system was adopted in the Tang dynasty in the eighth century. The other three categories are Confucian classics, philosophical writings, and *belles lettres*.
[140] J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past*, p. 21.

imagine what strictures Plumb would have for other historical writings.

The second observation is that Chinese historiography is in the main moral discourse instead of historical discourse, for it has substituted moral explanations where historical explanations are in order. "[P]erhaps the greatest weakness," Earl H. Pritchard writes, "in Chinese historical writings, despite the tradition of objectivity, was to see in history the working out of certain Confucian moral principles which expressed itself in the form of praise or blame evaluation of rulers and officials."[141] Similarly Plumb makes the following remarks in reference to Sima Qian: "The past for him was a moral guide, the example of the higher truths, an illustration of principles, not a matter for analysis. …His book, vast and valuable as it is, is more a narrative of morality than a narrative of history."[142]

The third criticism is that Chinese histories simply record isolated incidents, but fail to weave the incidents into a synthetic narrative where the causal relations are spelled out. It seems to a modern reader that the bits and pieces contained in *Shiji* are only unprocessed raw materials awaiting further research and reflection; or, to put it bluntly, it is not yet at the height of mature historical writing.

E. G. Pulleyblank is representative of this view:

> From our modern point of view one of the most serious limitations of Ssu-ma Kuang's method—*an often-mentioned limitation of almost all*

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[141] Earl H. Pritchard, "Traditional Chinese Historiography and Local Histories." In Hayden White, ed., *The Uses of History: Essays in Intellectual and Social History*, p. 201.

[142] Plumb, p. 22.

traditional Chinese historians—was the restriction of attention to one isolated event at a time, with a certain amount of backward and forward glancing, generalizing about a man's character, etc., but without the attempt to see each event interwoven into a complex mesh of interrelationships with other events. What resulted from the enormous labours of Ssu-ma Kuang and his team was a superb chronicle, but still a chronicle and not a history in our modern sense. (italics mine)[143]

Last but not least, what is most difficult to understand about traditional Chinese historiography is that the dominant genre is annals-biography. In fact, *Shiji* is a book composed of five mutually complementary parts, namely, the basic annals, the chronological tables, treatises, hereditary houses, and parallel biographies. Of the five parts the basic annals and parallel biographies constitute the main body. The basic annals are devoted to men who either ruled the country, or exercised the greatest authority over a large area of the country for some time. There are ten chronological tables, each covering a period of time, longer or shorter, when significant events happened. The eight treatises are on the eight important aspects of the culture and governance of the empire, including rites, music, astronomy, waters and irrigation systems, etc. "Hereditary houses" cover basically feudal lords and their states. Parallel biographies are devoted to people Sima Qian thinks worth recording, such as prime ministers, scholar-officials, wandering knights, merchants, and virtuous hermits. Since the acceptance of the annals-biography genre as the official genre of history in the South dynasties[144], pre-modern Chinese historians have taken the genre as granted and

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[143] Beasley W. G., and E. G. Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan*, p. 158.
[144] The Liang dynasty, sixth century.

seldom questioned its legitimacy. However, this form struck Burton Watson as "radically different from the general Western concept of the form of a history."[145] To convey to the Western reader what this form looks like, Watson devises an outline of the history of the United States in this form. I will quote two paragraphs from the outline on basic annals and parallel biographies respectively to pave the way for my analysis.

> The "Basic Annals" would be devoted to the lives of men who exercised authority over a large section of the country. If England were considered as the dominant power of colonial times, we would expect an "Annals of English Rulers" arranged in chronological order and ending with a biting portrait of George III, weak, degenerate, and the victim of evil counselors. There would follow the "Annals of the Presidents." For the less important men this would be hardly more than a list of names with dates of office. But in the case of more important figures, men who had captured the imagination of their ages, such as Washington, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts, we should have fairly complete biographies beginning with their childhood (the cherry tree, the long cabin, recorded in order to indicate the unusual character and determination of these men even in their youth) and concentrating on a few dramatic and significant scenes in their life. …
>
> Finally would follow a series of short chapters devoted for the most part to individuals. The first chapter would relate the story of Leif Ericson, with speculations upon the reliability of his legend and general remarks on the difficulties of writing history. Then would come short biographies of outstanding statesmen of the colonies, early explorers, generals of the Revolutionary War, etc., some already mentioned in previous sections, some appearing for the first time, arranged more or less in chronological order. Other chapters (chronological order goes to pieces here) would discuss important statesmen—Franklin, Paine, Seward; men of letters—Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe (with quotations from their works); thinkers—Cotton Mather, Emerson, Dewey;

[145] Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China*, p. 104.

generals—Jackson, Lee, Pershing, MacArthur; patriots—Paul Revere, Betsy Ross, Barbara Frietchie. One chapter would discuss the influence upon history of presidents' wives, with sketches of Martha Washington, Dolly Madison, and Eleanor Roosevelt; another would be devoted to great financiers—Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Gould, Ford, Rockefeller. Several chapters would describe Indian tribes, Mexico, and Canada, and relations between the American government and these peoples and lands. Others might be devoted to famous inventors—Morse, Edison, the Wright brothers; to the movie industry, with lives of outstanding actors; to western pioneers and outlaws, etc. The work would end with an autobiography of the historian and a brief exposition of his aims and methods in composing his work.[146]

Jaroslav Průšek was one of the first scholars who attempted to unravel the mystery of

Sima Qian's historical narrative form. He throws into relief the formal uniqueness

against the background of European historical narrative tradition started by Herodotus'

History, which derived its narrative principles from the Greek epics. "The structure of

[Herodotus'] history," Průšek quotes Ferdinard Stiebitz, "resembles the epic technique.

Just as a large number of epic events are piled around the main narrative line in the

Iliad, so it is in the *History*, especially in the first volume."[147] Turning to the Chinese

tradition, Průšek recognizes that "the basic structure of Chinese historical works is the

direct opposite of the homogeneity and continuity demanded …for an epic work."[148]

He characterizes the two disparate traditions with the terminology employed by the

German scholar Hirt: "I would say that in Chinese works the 'Treppenabsatz'

(segmented progress) is emphasized rather than the 'ununterbrochener Fluss'

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[146] Ibid., pp. 105-107.

[147] Jaroslav Průšek, *Chinese History and Literature: Collection of Studies*, p. 18.

[148] Ibid., p. 18.

(unbroken flow)."[149] Contrary to the European historian who "had to deform and by force press his material into this mould which was very unsuitable for his varied and rich material," the Chinese historian only presents "isolated short episodes." In other words, the Chinese historian "does not create, but he arranges."[150]

In fact, the looseness of structure of Chinese narrative in general, not only historical narrative but fictional narrative as well, has baffled many a reader. Scholars of Chinese narrative seem to be under pressure to give a sort of explanation, if not justification, of the phenomenon. Several papers collected in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* start with this perceived lack of structural consistency.[151] Two recent studies, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* by Stephen W. Durrant, and *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History* by Grant Hardy, both discuss the formal anomalies of *Shiji* at considerable length. Hardy, in particular, coins two apt phrases, "the web of history" and "multiple narration," to designate the lack of linearity and multiple points of view entailed by the annals-biography genre of *Shiji*.[152]

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[149] Ibid., p. 18.
[150] Ibid., pp. 23-24.
[151] For example, Peter Li quotes Richard G. Irwin, "*San-kuo yen-i* and *Shui-hu chuan* suffer from the structural weakness and rudimentary characterization typical of such pioneering efforts. The limitations of *San-kuo yen-i* derive from its factual basis and from a lack of selection, while the demands of an artificial mold make for the uneven narrative quality found in *Shui-hu chuan*," and starts his argument from there. See Peter Li, "Narrative Patterns in San-kuo and Shui-hu," in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* edited by Andrew H. Plaks. As historians and novelists share a large common ground of cosmological framework, conceptual assumptions, and aesthetic preferences, discussions of Chinese novel prove to be exceptionally illuminating for the study of Chinese historical narrative. For example, see Yu-kung Kao, "Lyric Vision in Chinese Narrative: A Reading of *Hung-lou Meng* and *Ju-lin Wai-shi*" in the same collection.
[152] Grand Hardy, *Sima Qian's Conquest of History*, pp. 62-85.

II. From a Linguistic Point of View

i. Semantic Under-differentiation and Its Consequences

In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I have mentioned the semantic under-differentiation of the Chinese word / character as a result of the pictorialism of Chinese writing. Scholars in the past have touched upon the same problem from different angles. For example, at the beginning of *Guan zhui bian*, or *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*, Qian Zhongshu discusses the phenomenon in Classical Chinese that characters have multiple meanings which can be used simultaneously.[153] He starts from the name of *I Ching*, "I 易," which ancient Chinese philologists believed to have three meanings simultaneously present in the name: change, simplicity, and constancy. He goes on to register a plethora of examples culled from Classical Chinese philosophy and literature, thus establishes that polysemy is an inherent property of Classical Chinese.

The semantic under-differentiation has important implications for different levels of the language. First, it results in the relative independence of words / characters from syntactic structure in Classical Chinese. It is generally believed that Classical Chinese is, in the main, an isolating language, an extreme case of analytic language, in which

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[153] Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-8; *Limited Views*, trans. Ronald Egan, pp. 202-207.

words are composed of single morphemes.[154] It should be added that the majority of morphemes in Classical Chinese correspond to single characters. Consequently, we have the unmarkedness of words and the paucity of cohesive devices. It is a well known fact that in Classical Chinese there are no hard and fast demarcations between parts of speech. In many cases, a character / word can be used as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc., and there are no formal grammatical markings that set these uses apart. To give an example, according to Yang Bojun's 楊伯峻 statistics, the character shí 時, time, appears forty-two times in *Mencius*. From a modern grammatical point of view, this word can be subsumed under the categories of 1) noun, meaning "time," "age"; 2) noun, meaning "season", "a certain moment"; 3) adjective, meaning "timely"; 4) adverb, meaning "at that time"; 5) pronoun, meaning "this."[155] Numerous similar examples can be found from philosophical, historical, and literary texts alike.

ii. Strong Paradigmatic Relationship vs. Weak Syntagmatic Relationship

The independence of words / characters further results in comparatively weak syntagmatic relations and strong paradigmatic relations in Classical Chinese. The contrast of syntagmatic relationship and paradigmatic relationship is a theoretical formulation of structural linguistics, especially that of Saussure and Roman Jacobson.

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[154] I will not go into great detail about the discussion revolving around the nature of Classical Chinese, which will be too technical for the present paper.

[155] Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 [Translated and annotated *Mencius*], p. 414.

Syntagmatic relationship refers to the relation a signifier has with the preceding and following signifier in a sentence. Paradigmatic relationship refers to the relation a signifier has with similar or contrasting signifier in the given language. Two signifiers are said to have a paradigmatic relationship if they can substitute each other functionally in a given sentence.[156] In the sentence "Peter eats an apple," the relationships between the four words therein, "Peter," "eats," "an," "apple," are syntagmatic. The subject "Peter" can be substituted by any noun denoting a living being that can eat an apple. The object "apple" can be substituted by any noun denoting edible material. "Peter" and "apple" have a paradigmatic relationship with all their potential substitutes.

Coming back to Chinese, we notice that due to the high degree of independence of the word / character, the syntagmatic relationship in the language is too flexible to be cast in a reasonably small number of rules. This is clearly shown in the modern practice of labeling the multi-functionality of Classical Chinese words as huóyòng 活用, or flexible usage (of one class of words as another class).[157] However, huóyòng is very probably the projection of the modern notion of grammar onto Classical Chinese. It presupposes the universality of the distinction between parts of speech which may not have existed in Classical Chinese in the first place.

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[156] Giulio C. Lepschy, *A Survey of Structural Linguistics*, pp. 50-52. Saussure uses "associative" instead of "paradigmatic" in his writing.
[157] Most studies of Classical Chinese contain discussions about huóyòng. For example, see Zhang Zhongxing 張中行, *Wenyan he baihua* 文言和白話 [Classical and vernacular Chinese], pp. 65-67.

On a different plane, my hypothesis that in Classical Chinese syntagmatic relationship is underdeveloped and paradigmatic relationship is comparatively developed is corroborated by two facts. First, formal grammar was practically absent in pre-modern China. By formal grammar I mean prescriptive formulations of grammatical rules for didactic and scholarly purposes. The first attempt at a systematic formulation of the grammar of Classical Chinese was made by Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠 towards the end of the nineteenth century. He modeled his formulation on the Latin Grammar.[158] Second, there existed in pre-modern China a variety of reference books that highlight synonymity, functional equivalence, and the notion of set.[159] For example, the first "word book" (as opposed to "character book" such as *Shuowen jiezi*) in Chinese history, *Erya* 爾雅, literally "Approaching the Common Language," which was compiled in the beginning of the Former Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE), gave a prominent position to classified synonyms. The first chapter of the book catalogues 11 characters synonymous with "to begin" or "beginning," 10 characters synonymous with "prince" or "monarch," 39 characters synonymous with "big" or "great," 13 characters synonymous with "to go," "to reach."[160] Qi Gong 啟功, a modern scholar,

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[158] See Sun Liangpeng 孫良朋, *Zhongguo gudai yufaxue tanjiu* 中國古代語法學探究 [Inquiry in the study of grammar in ancient China].

[159] See Qi Gong 啟功, "Shuo bagu" 說八股 [On eight-legged essay]，in *Hanyu xianxiang luncong* 漢語現象論叢 [A collection of essays on certain phenomena of the Chinese language], p. 143. Qi Gong lists a number of reference books compiled in different dynasties, mostly for practical purposes in the spirit of stylistic manual and thesaurus for literary composition.

[160] *Erya* 爾雅 [Approaching the common language], in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Thirteen Confucian classics with annotation].

lists a number of reference books compiled in different dynasties, mostly for practical purposes in the spirit of stylistic manual and thesaurus for literary composition.[161]

iii. Syntactic Looseness

In the following I will use examples, mostly drawn from *Shiji* and occasionally from works before it, to illustrate some major characteristics of classical Chinese syntax, which I think were a major influence on the making of the specific genre of annals-biography.

A modern reader is likely to be struck by a very simple fact the moment he starts to read *Shiji*. He will find the sentences are mostly very short by modern (Western) standard. For example:

> 項籍少時，學書，不成；去，學劍，又不成。項梁怒之。（1: 295）[162]

> When Hsiang Yü was a boy he studied the art of writing. Fail<u>ing</u> to master this, he abandoned it <u>and</u> took up swordsmanship. <u>When</u> he failed at this also, his uncle, Hsiang Lang, grew angry with him.[163]

It should be noted that Burton Watson intentionally adds cohesive devices to make the discourse flow better. While in the original there is a succession of actions: studying writing, failing, quitting, studying swordsmanship, failing again, in the translation we see subordinate structures like "failing to master this he abandoned it…" which the

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[161] For a general discussion of *Erya*, see Hu Qiguang, *Zhongguo xiaoxue shi*, pp. 56-67.

[162] For convenience's sake, I will put volume number and page number in parentheses after the quote for all quotations from *Shiji*.

[163] Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the* Shih chi *of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, p. 68. I underlined the words Watson added. I also made changes to the punctuation of the original.

translator takes liberty to supplement, presumably for a clearer elucidation of the logical progression of the events. This example, as small as it is, is revealing as to the differences between Classical Chinese and English and the assumptions underlying the differences. Generally speaking, in Classical Chinese prose, sentences are organized according to chronological order. Little efforts are made to construct the sentences / discourses into logically coherent wholes. This feature is so prominent that people take it for granted and seldom bother to use cohesive devices (conjunctions, for example) to accentuate the logical relationships between different parts of the sentences / discourses. Another example is from "Lao Tzu and Han Fei, Memoir 3":

> 秦王以為然，下吏治非。李斯使人遺非藥，使自殺。韓非欲自陳，
> 不得見。秦王後悔之，使人赦之，非已死矣。(7: 2155)

> The King thought they were right <u>and</u> sent down officials <u>to</u> deal with Fei. Li Ssu sent someone <u>to</u> give Fei poison, allow<u>ing</u> [Han Fei] to kill himself. Han Fei wished to present his case before the King, <u>but</u> was not given the chance. The King of Ch'in later regretted his decision <u>and</u> sent someone <u>to</u> pardon him, <u>but</u> Fei had already died.[164]

We can clearly see that the underlined words (mostly conjunctions like "and" and "but") in the translation spell out logical relations which are only *latent* in the original. In fact, many translators have been plagued by the absence of connectives in Chinese sentences / discourses and the radical "looseness" of the Chinese sentence structure. It has been a rule of thumb tacitly followed by translators from Chinese to Western languages that to make the translation more readable and less exotic, one needs to

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[164] William H. Nienhauer Jr., ed, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Vol. VII, p. 29, with my changes.

render loose sentences into compound sentences with subordinate clauses whenever possible. In the above-quoted passage, the series of actions are narrated chronologically and the sequence is self-explanatory. But the translator, obviously under pressure to explain more expressly the logicality of the discourse, adds "and"s and "but"s (underlined words in the above) where he can.

The features of *Shiji* narrative will be brought into relief if we compare it with Western historical narratives.[165] Read, for example, the second paragraph, Chapter I, of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

> The principal conquests of the Romans were achieved under the republic; and the emperors, for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions which had been acquired by the policy of the senate, the active emulations of the consuls, and the martial enthusiasm of the people. The seven first centuries were filled with a rapid succession of triumphs; but it was reserved for Augustus to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils. Inclined to peace by his temper and situation, it was easy for him to discover that Rome, in her present exalted situation, had much less to hope than to fear from the chance of arms; and that, in the prosecution of remote wars, the undertaking became every day more difficult, the event more doubtful, and the possession more precarious, and less beneficial.[166]

We find in the above-quoted passage by Gibbon several features that are, in large measure, absent from *Shiji*. First, there is a grave concern over the exactitude of time. Hence the first sentence clarifies that the conquests were "achieved under the republic" and there appear in this short passage many indicators of time. Second, there

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[165] Needless to say, there are many kinds of historical narrative in the West. Here I do not intend to make a systematic comparison and evaluation. The comparison is made to throw light on the characteristics of Chinese historiography, of which *Shiji* is a representative.
[166] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 11.

is a strong drive to give explanation of causal relations between events. Therefore, the phrase "those dominions" is immediately followed by the qualifier "which had been acquired by the policy of the senate." Third, there is an urge to find the motive of the historical figure, and to dig out the psychological motivation of history. Thus we are told that the emperors "for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions"; the psychologism escalates until it reaches the pinnacle at the long speculation of Augustus' mental state, which almost resembles a piece of interior monologue. Compared with the explanation-driven and interpretation-laden historical narrative of Gibbon, *Shiji* seems simple, loose, and content with the narration of the exteriority of historical occurrences.

iv. Multiple and Mobile Perspectives

The second feature of the Chinese syntax is closely related to the first one. Using analogy from painting, the Chinese sentences can be said to employ a "multi-perspective," while the English syntax can be called "single-perspective." In the English sentence, the focus is always the subject-predicate construct, and there is only one focus in one sentence. But the Chinese sentence can have a number of foci, because (1) Chinese sentences are generally very short; (2) subjects are varying; (3) the logical relations between different parts of a sentence are very vague. Compare the following passage taken from the "Lao Tzu and Han Fei, Memoir 3" and its English

translation:

> 鳥，吾知其能飛；魚，吾知其能遊；獸，吾知其能走。走者可以為
> 網，遊者可以為綸，飛者可以為矰。至於龍吾不能知，其乘風雲而
> 上天。吾今日見老子，其猶龍邪！(7: 2140)

> Birds I know can fly, fish I know can swim, and beasts I know can run.
> For that which runs, one can make snares. For that which swims, one
> can cast lines. For that which flies, one can make arrows with strings
> attached. As for the dragon, I can never know how it mounts the wind
> and clouds and ascends into the sky. Today I have seen Lao Tzu; is he
> perhaps like the dragon?[167]

According to *Shiji*, Confucius visited Lao Tzu (Laozi) to ask for his teachings about the ancient rites. Stupefied by Lao Tzu's personality, Confucius thus related his encounter to his disciples. Though the translator makes efforts to retain the effect of the original (the reversal of word order, etc.), the English version differs in many ways from the original. The sentences in Chinese actually read (with my stylistic labels):

> Birds. (mimesis) I know they can fly. (diegesis) Fish. (mimesis) I know
> they can swim. (diegesis) Beasts. (mimesis) I know they can run. That
> which runs. (mimesis) Can make snares. (diegesis) That which swims.
> (mimesis) Can cast lines. (diegesis) That which flies. (mimesis) Can
> make arrows with strings attached. (diegesis)

My punctuation, strange as it appears, is justified by the fact that punctuation marks were not used in ancient China at all. When reading the passage aloud in the original, after "Birds," "Fish," and "Beasts," there are shorter pauses; after "fly," "swim," "run," there are longer pauses. In this reading, the four images of birds, fish, beasts, and dragon are foregrounded. The author leads the reader from one image to another, without explaining the logical relationships between them. The center of the pictures

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[167] Nienhauer, Vol. VII, p. 22.

moves freely from one creature to another and no single perspective is assumed to be the correct one. The effect of the whole passage is that of a montage, juxtaposing four images, and the viewer infers for himself what the author wants him to know. In the sentence "Birds. I know they can fly" the word "Birds" is self-complete and self-sufficient; it is not a grammatical object placed at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. On the contrary, the English translation "Birds I know can fly," though the psychological highlight is "birds," the logical center is nonetheless the subject-predicate construct "I know." While "I" is very present in the English translation, "*wǔ*," the equivalent of "I" in Chinese, withdraws to a layer much lower than the four images Confucius invokes, in terms of degree of psychological prominence. If the overarching principle of the English translation is the unity of action, a logical coherence guaranteed by successive subject-predicate constructs, that of the Chinese original is, so to speak, the movement of energy, a kind of psychological force that follows the natural contours of events. The images, therefore, stand out and speak for themselves, rather than being narrated by an external voice. The different perspectives in the Chinese narrative mutually complement each other, creating a meaningful whole that is very rich in connotation.

The multi-point perspective is at the same time a highly mobile perspective. In a string of adjacent short sentences, the author changes freely and constantly from one subject to another, violating the consistency of perspective. Take the following passage

as an example:

> ①張耳者，大梁人也。①其少時，及魏公子毋忌為客。①張耳嘗亡
> 命游外黃。②外黃富人女甚美，嫁庸奴，③亡其夫，去抵父客。④
> 父客素知張耳，乃謂女曰：＂必欲求賢夫，從張耳。＂⑤女聽，⑥乃
> 卒為請決，⑦嫁之張耳。(8: 2571)

> ①Chang Erh was a man of Ta-liang in Wei. ①In his youth he became a follower of Wu-chi, prince of Wei, ①but later fled into hiding and journeyed to Wai-huang. ②In Wai-huang there lived a rich man who had a very beautiful daughter. He married her to a day laborer, ③but she deserted her husband and ran away to the home of one of her father's followers. ④This man had known Chang Erh for some time, and he said to the girl, "If you are determined to find a worthy husband, you should give yourself to Chang Erh!" ⑤The girl consenting, ⑥he asked her father on her behalf that the former marriage be dissolved and ⑦she be given to Chang Erh [by her father].[168]

In a short passage like this, the historian shifts his standpoint from Chang Erh to the man in Wai-huang, then to his daughter, then to one of the rich man's followers, then back to the rich man's daughter, then back to the follower again, and finally back to the rich man himself.[169] The reader of this passage gets an impression that all the persons involved simply refuse to wait in the background; instead, they push to the foreground and hasten to the spotlight to perform themselves instead of being narrated by the narrator's monopolizing voice. This phenomenon is precisely analogous to the fact that many major events in *Shiji*, such as the warfare between Xiang Yu's 項羽 Chu 楚 army and Liu Bang's 劉邦 Han 漢 army, get a number of, sometimes more

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[168] Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China,* Vol. 1, p. 171.

[169] ① Chang Erh, ②=⑦ The rich man in Wai-huang, ③=⑤ The rich man's daughter, ④=⑥ The rich man's follower. Interestingly, the last word in the paragraph is "Chang Erh," the very word that starts the paragraph. So the whole paragraph is like a full circle.

than ten, different versions of narration; the individuals involved refuse to be subordinated in a master narrative under the rubric of a dominant ruler or hero. Sima Qian, with the help of the flexible Classical Chinese syntax, is able to give each of the vying voices an opportunity to present itself.

v. Signification by Parallelism

The third characteristic I identify of the Chinese syntax is a unique mode of signification that can be called "signification by linguistic and structural parallelism." This, of course, has everything to do with the prevalence of parallel structure in the Chinese written language. Linguistic parallelism is a special verbal construct made possible by the phonological pattern and writing system of the Chinese language. Classical Chinese is basically a monosyllabic language, with each word corresponding strictly to one syllable. The written characters, simple or complex, occupy equally large spaces on the paper. Language with these features is naturally conducive to such linguistic devices as parallelism. In fact, from the very beginning of Chinese literature, this rhetorical device was invented and used amply. It is undoubtedly responsible for the later invention of *pianwen* 駢文, a kind of prose exclusively composed of antithetical sentences, with the two halves neatly contrasting in both sound and sense, and *lüshi* 律詩, or regulated verse, the most structurally rigorous poetic genre.

The earliest occurrence of linguistic parallelism is found in *The Book of*

Documents 尚書, one of the oldest Confucian classics believed to be the collection of

official documents of the legendary kings of Chinese antiquity:

> 滿招損，Fullness (of self) brings decrease;
> 謙受益。Modesty receives increase.

In strictly symmetrical form, the structure makes the contrast between two opposite

attitudes ever so clear and memorable. The pervasiveness of parallelism in Classical

Chinese literature led Liu Xie, the first systematizer of Chinese literary thought, to

devote one of the fifty chapters of *Wenxin diaolong*, *The Literary Mind and Carving of*

Dragons, to lìcí 麗辭, linguistic parallelism:

> Nature, creating living beings, endows them with limbs in pairs. The Divine Reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary language, and in doing this it organizes and shapes one hundred different thoughts, making what is high supplement what is low, and spontaneously producing linguistic parallelism.[170]

> 造化賦形，支體必雙，神理為用，事不孤立。夫心生文辭，運裁百慮，高下相須，自然成對。

It is clear that Liu Xie believes that linguistic parallelism derives from parallelism in

nature. So in order to capture the pattern of nature, it is imperative for an author to

resort to parallel structures.

There are, to be sure, a variety of different parallel structures. In Liu Xie's

words, there are "the verbal couplet, the factual couplet, the couplet of contrast, the

couplet of agreement." [171] Without going into detail about different types of

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[170] Liu Xie, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature*, p. 369.
[171] Ibid., p. 371.

parallelism, let it be said here that parallel structures enable the author to create tensions between the contrasting elements, and thus achieve great economy of expression. This point can be shown by analyzing some examples from *Shiji*. Though the prose style of *Shiji* was held to be the model *guwen* 古文, or classical prose, a style contrasted to *pianwen* 駢文, or parallel prose, antithetical parallelisms can be found everywhere in the text. Again in "Lao Tzu and Han Fei, Memoir 3":

> 以為儒者用文亂法，而俠者以武犯禁。寬則寵名譽之人，急則用介
> 胄之士。今者所用非所養，所養非所用。(7: 2147)

> He [Han Fei] felt that "Confucians use decorum to disorder the laws, and knight-errant violate the prohibitions with their violence. When times are slack they [the authority of the Kingdom of Han] coddle men with high reputations and when times are dire they use knights with armor and helmets. Those who are now cultivated are not those whom the ruler uses and those whom the ruler uses are not those whom he cultivates.[172]

Three pairs of antithetical parallelism are found in this passage:

> 儒　　者　　用　　文　　亂　　法，
> Confucians　use decorum (to) disorder the laws,
> 俠　　者　　以　　武　　犯　　禁。
> Knight-errant with　violence　violate the prohibitions.
>
> 寬　則　寵　名　　　譽　之人，
> [When times are] slack then coddle known and reputed people,
> 急　則　用　介　　胄　　之士。
> [When times are] dire then use armored and helmeted knights.
>
> 所　用　非　所　養，
> The used are not the cultivated,
> 所　養　非　所　用。
> The cultivated are not the used.

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[172] Nienhauer, Vol. VII, p. 25.

If the words "Confucian" or "knight-errant" are ambiguous by themselves, they are clearly defined by their opposites in the antithetical parallelism. What is a Confucian? He is not a knight-errant. What is a knight-errant? He is not a Confucian. It should be emphasized that this way of definition and signification reveals an important aspect of Chinese thinking: In Chinese thought, concepts are defined relatively and functionally, instead of internally and substantively. In the first parallelism listed above, what the author intends to say is, in fact, that many challenged the authority of the law in their own ways. By naming two typical instances, he manages to cover the entirety of the relevant field by way of suggestion. The figure below will shed light on this special mode of signification, the kind of signification targeting on nothing less than the *fullness* of meaning:
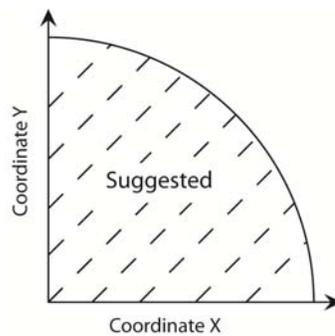
Figure 19. Signification of parallelism, scenario 1: covering the entire semantic field

This mode of thinking was present in the earliest Chinese philosophers, who were extremely reluctant to give definitions to their terminology. Laozi formulated a full-fledged dialectical theory by playing with antithetical terms:

The whole world knows the beautiful as beautiful / Only because of the

existence of the ugly; / The whole world knows the good as good / Only because of the existence of the bad. / Hence the Being and the Nothingness exist in opposition; / The difficult and the easy complement each other; / The long and the short / Manifest themselves by comparison;/ The high and the low are inclined / as well as opposed to each other; / The consonants and vowels / harmonize with each other; / The front and the back follow each other.[173]

As a matter of fact, early Chinese philosophers almost always think in binary oppositions. The two terms of the opposition are functionally defined and the philosophers know all too well that the two entities were constantly becoming their opposites.[174]

This special mode of signification has at least three advantages: First, the tension between the two terms of opposition gives rise to a plethora of meanings. Second, by dividing, conceptually, the object into two functionally complementary aspects, the object is analyzed without ceasing to be organic wholes. Third, the two terms, functionally defined, are both vague and precise. Vague, because the semantic boundaries are not demarcated with hard and fast lines; precise, because it is clear what it is not and it is also clear where the meaning centers on. Let me cite a specific example. Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, a learned historian in the twentieth century, maintains that "good couplets must have three phases: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." What he says helps one understand my points in the above:

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[173] See, for example, *Lao Zi*, Chpt. 2, p. 61. "天下皆知美之為美，斯惡矣；皆知善之為善，斯不善矣。故有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。"

[174] In modern vernacular Chinese, we still find such words as "large-small," "high-low," and "long-short" denoting the concepts of size, height, and length.

The two phases of a certain couplet, thesis and antithesis, have corresponding or contrastive parts of speech and prosodic values; and, moreover, their meanings, echoing with and complementing each other, generate a new meaning when thus organized. Though different from the two initial phases of thesis and antithesis whose meanings are explicit and intelligible from the words, this new meaning can indeed be comprehended by the intelligent imagination of the reader. This kind of couplet has attained the third phase, synthesis, and therefore belongs to the highest order of couplets.[175]

"正"及"反"前後二階段之詞類聲調，不但能相當對，而且所表現之意義，復能互相貫通，因得綜合組織，別產生一新意義。此新意義，雖不似前之"正"及"反"二階段之意義，顯著于字句之上，但確可以想像而得之，所謂言外之意是也。此類對子，既能備具第三階段之合，卽對子中最上等者。

I wish to show the special mode of signification of parallel structure with the following figure (Figure 20).
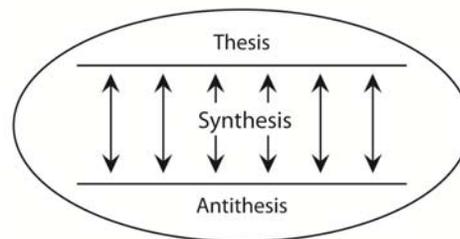

Figure 20. Signification of parallelism, scenario 2:
the emergence of the synthetic, new meaning

III. Understanding the Form of *Shiji*

i. Understanding *Liezhuan*, Parallel Biography

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[175] Sun Shangyang 孫尚揚, and Guo Lanfang 郭蘭芳 eds. *Guogu xinzhi lun: xueheng pai wenhua lunzhu jiyao* 國故新知論: 學衡派文化論著輯要 [National Culture and New Knowledge], p. 442.

After the preliminary linguistic discussions above, it should be fairly easy for us to understand the reason for the inclusion of *liezhuan*, parallel biography, as a major form of *Shiji*. First, the associative way of thinking inherent in Classical Chinese with strong paradigmatic relationship plays an important role in the historian's choice. Strictly speaking, he is concerned with *both* historical causality and classification of historical figures and events. However, from time to time, he seems to be more concerned with the latter than with the former and demonstrates an intense interest in pairing people up or classifying them in categories. In many cases, the two or more individuals he treats in one chapter are many years apart. For example,

> 管仲卒，……後百餘年而有晏子焉。(7: 2134)
> Guan Zhong died. Over one hundred years later, there was Yanzi.
> 孫武既死，後百余歲有孫臏。（7: 2162）
> Sun Wu died. Over one hundred years later, there was Sun Bin.
> 自屈原沉汨羅後百有余年，漢有賈生。（8: 2491）
> Over one hundred years after Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo
> River, there was Jia Yi of the Han dynasty.

His groupings work effectively to convey his judgments and evaluations of historical figures. Second, linguistic parallelism suggests itself to the historian as a viable mode of signification. Sima Qian applies parallelism on a grander scale, and invents the form "parallel biography," i.e., personalities narrated side by side with each other.

After reading closely the chapters in the form of parallel biography, we find that he accomplishes three things with the form. First, he accomplishes a highly original typological study. Sima Qian is credited with the invention of many categories of

historically significant people which were to be adopted by later historians, such as knight-errant 游俠, harsh officials 酷吏, money-makers 貨殖, etc. Second, he traces the trajectory of influence by grouping people from different ages into the same category. For example, he groups Laozi, Zhuangzi, Hanfeizi, among others, in one single chapter. This is counter-intuitive at first sight, because Laozi and Zhuangzi's Taoist philosophy are nothing but non-acting and quietistic. It forms a sharp contrast with the belligerent and harsh Legalism of Heifeizi. However, a deeper study does reveal the indebtedness of Hanfeizi to Laozi's Taoism. Third, the historian expresses his value judgments implicitly by juxtaposing one individual with another. This is clearly shown by his grouping of Jia Yi 賈誼 together with Qu Yuan 屈原, the wronged official who drowned himself to protest the injustice against him and demonstrate his uprightness. As Jia Yi was also an official for the Han court, it would be perilous for Sima Qian to voice his sympathy too openly. He therefore resorts to insinuation by way of classification and, I should say, the purpose is well served.

ii. Understanding the Lack of Causal Interpretation

Let us then consider another feature of *Shiji* which draws much criticism, namely the lack of causal interpretation. It is on this account that people have raised the issue that Chinese histories simply record isolated incidents, but fail to weave the incidents into synthetic narratives in which causal relations are laid out clearly.

It would be interesting here to compare the origin of the English word "history" and that of Chinese "*shi*" (history). The Greek root means "knowing or learning by inquiry," an activity not far removed from theorization. In Chinese the ancient character "*shi*" is a symbol showing a person (presumably an official with secretarial duties) holding a book. Thus the difference between the attitude of Chinese historian and that of the Western historian may have arisen from the difference in the initial conceptions of history. Though Sima Qian set himself the goal of "examin[ing] into all that concerns heaven and man," "penetrat[ing] the changes of the past and present," and "completing all as the work of one family",[176] he confined himself in making only general remarks about the formation of and the causality in history. His insight as a historian is shown mainly through his selections of materials and the judgments he passed on his characters implied in his narration of their words and deeds.

In his inspiring study *Metahistory*, Hayden White distinguishes five levels of conceptualization in the historical work: (1) chronicle; (2) story; (3) mode of emplotment; (4) mode of argument; (5) mode of ideological implication (5). He continues to describe the process of conceptualization in history composition:

> First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangement of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a "spectacle" or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end. This transformation of chronicle into story

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[176] Quoted in Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of Chin*a, p. 66.

> is effected by the characterization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs.[177]

If we apply his definitions to *Shiji*, we will find that this work seldom goes beyond the second step of conceptualization, i.e. the transformation of chronicles into stories. At times the narrative is between chronicle and story, and quite often it is closer to chronicle than to story. The typical narrative pattern of *Shiji* is to give a time, then state the thing that happens at the time, with absolutely no allusion to events prior to it or after it. Because of the radical sparing use of connectives, both the Chinese sentences and the discourses are extremely loosely connected. The reader is allowed a huge free space to make his own interpretations of the events. White further identifies the three strategies used by historians to gain what he calls "explanatory affect." They are explanation by formal argument, explanation by emplotment, and explanation by ideological implication.[178] It should be noted that these three strategies correspond to the last three levels of conceptualization cited above. Because *Shiji* never attains to the "height" of "emplotment," it consequently does not share these "explanatory affects." This leads us to the understanding that by virtue of a more "primitive" level of narritivity, the annals-biography genre of Chinese historiography has successfully avoided ideological over-codification. No one, of course, will be so naïve as to believe that *Shiji* is free from ideology; in fact, the Confucian bent of Sima Qian is all too

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[177] Hayden White, *Metahistory*, p. 5.
[178] Ibid., p. 6.

obvious, and the commentaries he appends to each chapter are both emotional and ideology-laden. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the ideological hues of the book are only loosely "embedded," rather than "interwoven," in the texture of the narrative and it is in the main easily extricable.[179] The ideological residues in *Shiji* are much easier for the reader to discern and dispel than the ideological factors in the highly accomplished narratives of modern times. Sima Qian sometimes ascribes what he deems incomprehensible happenings to such factors as "heaven," "fate," or "timing," but these terms, used more for convenience's sake than as substantive concepts, testify, paradoxically, to his historical consciousness—he would rather leave the incomprehensible in suspension than make do with slip-shod, improbable explanations based on facts violently yoked together.

iii. "He Had a Penchant for the Wondrous and the Extraordinary"

In *Guan zhui bian*, Qian Zhongshu traces the origins of Chinese historical criticism.[180] First he disqualifies Confucius, Zhuangzi and Qu Yuan as the candidates of earliest Chinese historians. In Qian's view, when Confucius refuses to talk about "the supernatural, the violent, the chaotic, and the divine" (*Analects* Chpt 7) or Zhuangzi says, "As to what is beyond the Six Realms, the sage admits its existence but

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[179] Many critics have noticed that Sima Qian, by separating commentary from narrative, is consciously avoiding subjective intervention in the history writing process.

[180] Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, Vol. 1, pp. 251-3.

does not theorize" ("Discussion on Making All Thing Equal"), they are expressing a philosophical attitude different from the historian's positivistic spirit. *Zuo Zhuan*, or *Zuo Commentary*, comments on Dong Hu 董狐, an official historian in the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BCE), "He was a good historian of the past. He never concealed [the evil doings of the statesmen]."[181] Qian thinks the author of the *Zuo Commentary* understood that a historian should "praise the virtuous and condemn the vile," but did not know that priority should be given to distinguishing what are reliable sources and what are not. According to Qian, Mencius made a decisive step towards this direction, who, remarking on an ancient text, says, "It is better not to have books at all if one believes every word in the books." It is Sima Qian who established the principle of historical criticism for the first time in Chinese history, i.e. legends and quasi-histories should be rejected from historical records.

It is truism that one's practice may not conform to his professed principles. Sima Qian, Qian Zhongshu finds, kept many unbelievable events in his book. One example is found in the "Basic Annals of the Five Emperors." Shun the ancient sage-king, was famous for his filial piety. Shun's father remarried after his wife died and he adored his second wife and their son, so much so that he always had the intention to kill Shun. Once he made Shun dig a well. When Shun was in the well, his father and younger brother began to fill up the well with dirt. Shun, having already had a prescience of

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[181]   Quoted in Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, Vol. 1, p.251.

this, made a side passage on the wall of the well before he went down. Thus he escaped, and loved his parents and brother more attentively. A second example is Emperor Kao-tsu Liu Bang's unusual birth. According to *Shiji*, Liu' mother "once rested on the banks of a great marsh when she dreamed she had an encounter with a spirit. At this time there was lightning, thunder, and it grew dark; T'ai-kung (Liu Pang's father) went to look for her and saw a kraken atop her. Not long afterward she was with child and then gave birth to Kao-tsu."[182]

Another example is found in "Bian Que and Cang Gong, Memoir 48," Bian Que is reported to have learned shamanism from an immortal: "Following his instructions, Bian Que took the medicine for thirty days. Then he could see people through the wall. He used this eyesight to see patients and was able to detect the causes of their diseases" (9: 2785). Qian Zhongshu interprets this as the "comforting of the heart and a sign of wish when the goal is beyond reach." He then generalizes, "Most myths and magic can be approached this way."[183]

Qian Zhongshu perhaps has reasons to reprove Sima Qian for his credulity. However, what is at issue here is not whether Bian Que had this ability or not. What is of general interest is a theoretical problem: How should a historian treat things he does not believe but for which there are historical evidences? Croce argues that "every true history is contemporary history," because "it is evident that only an interest in the life

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[182] Nienhauer, Vol.2, pp. 1-4.
[183] Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, Vol.1, p. 344.

of the present can move one to investigate past fact" and "this past fact does not answer to a past interest, but to a present interest, in so far as it is unified with an interest of the present life."[184] Paradoxically, though one is motivated to investigate into the past only by an "interest in the life of the present," if he does not go beyond his own horizon in this process, he would learn nothing but his own biases and prejudices. What can be instantly understood in history is nothing but a mirror image of the reality of the historian's own time. True, he learns some facts and reads some documents; but what he has learned does not *substantially* augment to his knowledge; it only *superficially* gives more information to the historian. It is in this spirit that the French philosopher Michel de Certeau formulated his dictum, "the past is the fiction of the present."[185] To make use of history for the present, one has to learn to digest the indigestible, to understand the incomprehensible, and to put up with the incongruent.

Sima Qian's world was quite different from ours. What we find "supernatural" and "unbelievable" was perhaps commonplace for him and his contemporaries. It is said that he "had a penchant for the wondrous and Extraordinary" 好奇.[186] But he also found many tales hard to believe, though some of them were supposed to take place in his own age. He recorded those things with his own commentaries and

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[184] Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, p. 12.

[185] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 10.

[186] Sima Zhen 司馬貞, "Shiji suoyin houxu" 史記索引后續 [Postscript to Index to Shiji], in Sima Qian, *Shiji*, Vol. 10, p. 9.

expressions of doubts.[187] Thanks to these records, we have access to the ancient world,

so different from ours, and so vividly kept in the Grand Historian's brisk narrative.

Michel Foucault writes in the "Introduction" to *The Archeology of Knowledge*,

> There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent
> monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the
> past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only
> through the restitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play
> on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of
> archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument.[188]

If one day humankind finally works out the mechanisms that render intelligible the

hard-to-digest phenomena of antiquity, Sima Qian perhaps will be acknowledged for

his *preservation* of these facts or beliefs more than anything else he has done for

Chinese culture. In the Foucauldian sense, these things are the monuments of history.

IV. The Significance of an Alternative Historical Writing

Having surveyed the factors that contributed to the shaping of the form of *Shiji*,

we are now ready to examine the significance this form entails for historians,

philosophers, and the general reader.

First of all, *Shiji*'s perspective on history is, let me repeat, a multi-point

perspective. Nearly all major events recorded in the book are narrated from different

perspectives in the biographies of different individuals. Though the author's authority

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[187] Best examples can be found in "Treatise on the Feng and Chan Sacrificial Ceremonies." The form word "*yun*" at the end of a sentence indicates the author does not have confidence in the reliability of the source. For instance, "Jian daren ji yun" (It is believed that they saw the footprints of giants). Cf. Wai-yee Li's admirable study, "Knowledge and Skepticism in Ancient Chinese Historiography."
[188] Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge,* p. 7.

is exercised to some extent and his own perspective is somewhat privileged, this is not done at the cost of stifling other voices. As a matter of fact, Sima Qian makes it a point that these different voices should be retained. For example, while praising in the basic annals the Filial and Cultured Emperor of the Han dynasty 孝文皇帝 as lenient, generous, exemplary in both imperial duties and personal life, he does not hesitate to add, in a number of memoirs, the Emperor's less than exemplary conducts, such as the all too costly dotage of fools and eunuchs. It should be noted that the co-existence of different, oftentimes conflicting, perspectives in *Shiji* is not a deviation from the norm; it is the norm itself. It is amazing to find how dexterously Sima Qian moves from one standpoint to another, as if reliving radically different lives. Those who demand a consistence of the author's standpoint will definitely be frustrated by the reading experience of *Shiji*.

Considering that no human being is equipped with the Godly, Emersonian "transparent eyeball" that is "nothing" but "sees all," the annals-biography genre of history is arguably even closer to our sense of reality. Nobody, but, perhaps, those with an unusually strong theoretical bent, sees history in making in such terms as "the fall of Han" or "the economic and social history of Former Han."[189] When we reflect upon our own experiences of the present we will find that what Sima Qian has managed to represent in *Shiji* is rather truthful and lifelike, in the everyday sense of

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[189] Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1. pp. x, xi

the words. He puts together dozens of frames of pictures, each picture depicting a slice of life revolving around the person depicted. (Figure 21) To accept such a view of history is, in a sense, to acknowledge the priority of the life world to the theoretical analysis and conceptual regimentation of that world. To accept such a view of history is to let individual human beings, from the depth of history, speak directly to the reader for themselves, instead of speaking for them as a sort of mediator between the past and the present. To accept such a view of history is to give up the attempt at the only correct interpretation of history. To accept such a view of history is to admit that polyphony and heteroglossia are historical truth par excellence.
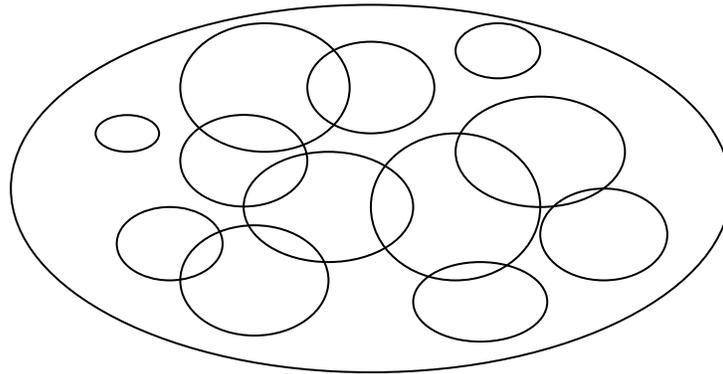

Figure 21. Multiple perspectives of the "annals-biography"

Secondly, human beings are the "ultimate purpose"[190] in the historical world of Sima Qian. Though he devotes some space to the discussion of the institutions of the Han dynasty and to other macroscopic treatment of social change, what constitutes the

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[190] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 279.

main body of the text is the description of individual human-beings, their birth and upbringing, family and associates, education and career, words and deeds, victories and defeats, arts and thoughts, reputation and criticisms, virtues and vices. Contrary to what French historians have ironically called "*l'histoire événementielle*," *Shiji* pays equal attention to people's private life and their public life. Here history and anthropology are inseparably interwoven into a single texture.

The people-centered historiography suggests a certain possibility of the dissociation of individual from history. In the event-centered history, the overarching principle is the unity of action and people are only actors that serve an external purpose—the narrative pattern that particular historian adopts. In the annals-biography genre, people serve no external purposes; they are the purposes themselves. Therefore, these human beings do not derive value or meaning from the history where they dwell only accidentally—they do not mind being there, either—they are readily separable from the historical process without losing identity.

It should not be hard now for us to understand why Sima Qian wrote about so many hermits and recluses in his work. The first of memoirs is about Bo Yi and Shu Qi, about whom scarcely anything verifiable was know in Sima Qian's time. Deeming that the takeover of throne by the Wu Emperor of Zhou 周武王 was not right, Bo Yi and Shuqi hid themselves in the Shouyang Mountain and, determined not to eat any grain of Zhou, starved to death eventually. Though these two people hardly

participated in the process of history making, they have left indelible traces in Chinese history with their unyielding moral courage.

Modern Western conception of history marked by the linear progressivism can be traced back to various adaptations of Christian worldview in late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.[191] It is small wonder that *Shiji*, separated by the vast time and space from the European tradition, embraces a totally different worldview and life philosophy. As *Shiji* suggests, history provides a stage for human actions. Each human being, be he an emperor, a general, a wandering knight, a merchant, or a hermit, is potentially self-sufficient as a performer on this stage. He is not obliged to internalize history, to be the carrier of its meaning, or to witness its vicissitudes with unfailing attentiveness. This may be one of the important lessons we learn from *Shiji*, with its unique form of annals-biography.

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[191] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 57-78.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Since the German philosopher and philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt published

his ground-breaking *On the Comparative Study of Languages* in 1836 and established

the position of speech as the anchor of thought, the perception of the relationship

between language and thought has taken a dramatic turn. If previously language was

perceived as a coat of thought that could be readily discarded, now it was believed to

possess a much higher intimacy with the latter, and to dismantle the expression of a

thought amounts to dismantling the thought itself. The recognition of the central

position of language in culture was further buttressed by the so-called "linguistic turn"

in philosophy and the pronouncement by American anthropologist and linguists

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf that language itself is a worldview. Though this

view is still known as a "hypothesis" and being debated, the legitimacy, even primacy,

of linguistic methods in humanities and social sciences seems to be unanimously

accepted in academia. As a result, various aspects of culture are examined from

different disciplines through their manifestations in language.

However, the domain of language is as vast as that of culture. The detour we

take to understanding human culture through examining linguistic phenomena does

not necessarily lead us any nearer to the object of study we desire. We need certain

coordinates in the language, certain anchors that we can hold fast to, in order to navigate the ocean of any given national nature. The present dissertation, titled "*Unity and Variety: A Study of the Chinese Language and Its Cultural Implications,*" was conceived out of a desire to identify the unity underlying the variety of linguistic and cultural phenomena in the Chinese context. It is an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between language and culture in pre-modern China. The unity it identifies is in xiang, an idea first put forward in *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, and later embodied in the Chinese written character. The Chinese written character, with its primary roots in graphic resemblance of the world, in turn served as a center of gravity in the cultural history of China.

The project consists of two case studies, linked to each other by a common bond which is the written character. The first part, titled "Xiang, Chinese Character, and Imaged Thought in Chinese Literature and Culture," is a systematic investigation of the idea of xiang, or image, its embodiment in the Chinese writing system, and its manifestations in various domains of Chinese culture. Xiang arguably lies at the center of the Chinese conception of the world and its properties find expressions in the Chinese writing system. In turn, the idea of xiang, together with the Chinese written character, gives rise to a host of cultural formations and ways of thought.

The second case study, titled "Syntax and Chinese Historiography: Reconsidering the Form of *Shiji*, *Record of the Grand Historian*, from a Linguistic

Point of View," also has its logical starting point in the written character. Because of the pictographic nature of the Chinese writing, the Chinese word / character has a property that I call "semantic under-differentiation." This, in turn, has a series of implications for the Chinese grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. The Grand Historian, Sima Qian, writing in Classical Chinese, necessarily adopted the ways of thinking dictated by his linguistic medium. He created the synthetic form, annals-biography, on the basis of previous histories, but also under the influence of the language he used. *Shiji*, therefore, has a number of characteristics that have everything to do with the properties of Classical Chinese. On the one hand, it highlights classification of historical figures and events; on the other hand, it downplays historical causality and linear progression of events. It employs multiple and mobile perspectives to accommodate a multiplicity of voices. It creates a field of historical signification by extensively using structural parallelism.

The inquiry in these two case studies offers us a number of inspirations. First, introducing writing into linguistic and cultural studies can be most rewarding. Second, it is possible, to certain extent, to identify cultural constants which run through the whole gamut of a certain society and have an impact on most activities and the majority of its members, insofar as the society constitutes a linguistic community. Third, interdisciplinary approaches to cultural issues have great potential for major theoretical breakthroughs. In fact, I envision a kind of research that leaves nothing

outside its scope. I propose to call this approach "culturology." To put it simply, culturology employs interdisciplinary approaches to investigate complicated cultural issues.

Maybe we can use the conclusions we have reached in this study to approach some difficult problems of philosophy and intellectual history yet to be solved. In a paper entitled "On the Absence of Reductionism in Chinese Thought," Benjamin Schwartz attempts to give an account for the absence of reductionism in all major Chinese philosophical schools. He defines reductionism as "that view of reality which regards the cosmic manifold in all its variety as 'reducible' to a kind of 'stuff' (or even a kind of energy) with minimal physical properties of extension, of mass and of a capacity for mathematical arrangement in space (the so-called 'primary qualities' of the Newtonian universe)." [192]After surveying all major Chinese philosophical schools and establishing the absence of reductionism, he goes on to surmise that there may be two contributing factors. He writes:

> The dominant image of procreations turns one's attention to the thought of a pre-existent fullness of being, of a kind of emanation rather than of making or creating…. Another line of speculation points to the early emergence within Chinese culture of a vivid concept of a total all-embracing socio-political order organized along bureaucratic lines. The bureaucratic view of reality does not attempt to reduce the manifold realities of human society and culture. It rather attempts to classify them and establish routines for governing them from a center – a center which in Confucianism is the fountainhead of a kind of spiritual power.[193]

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[192] Benjamin I. Schwartz, "On the Absence of Reductionism in Chinese Thought," p. 28.
[193] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

I agree with him that there is no manifest reductionism in Chinese thought. I also think the two factors he considers do contribute to the absence. However, I argue that a more fundamental factor is the philosophy of xiang (image) expounded in *I Ching*, and the embodiment of xiang in the Chinese written character. Each trigram or hexagram is a structural whole, resistant to be reduced to any single dimension. So is the Chinese written character. Each trigram / hexagram / character is a cognitive model with which the Chinese man apprehends the world and organizes his experiences. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their ground-breaking work *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* demonstrate, "The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical."[194] Images embodied in written characters are the Chinese counterparts for the metaphors they mention here as epistemological models. This, of course, is a very complex issue. Let us content ourselves with the preliminary remarks in the above for the time being.

In his monumental *Science and Civilization in China*, Joseph Needham has the following to say regarding the Chinese way of thinking:

> A number of modern students—H. Wilhelm, Eberhard, Jablonski, and above all, Granet—have named the kind of thinking with which we have here to do, 'coordinative thinking' or 'associative thinking'. This intuitive-associative system has its own causality and its own logic. … H. Wilhelm contrasts it with the 'subordinative' thinking characteristic of European science, which laid such emphasis on external causation.

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[194] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought,* p. 3.

> In coordinative thinking, conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a pattern, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of 'inductance'.[195]

We find a surprising affinity between the ideas expounded in this passage and our findings in Chapter Three, regarding the strong paradigmatic relationship and weak syntagmatic relationship in Classical Chinese. In fact, an examination of the language and writing will definitely reveal the deep structure of a given culture, and lay bare the bedrock upon which the thought of that nation is built. Unfortunately, Needham only names the phenomenon without providing an explanation. I believe my discussion about the Chinese written character and syntax points to the prospect of satisfactorily accounting for the phenomenon he identifies. But, to systematically tackle these issues does not lie in the scope of the present dissertation, and I will simply save these traces of thought as pathmarks for future research.

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[195] Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. 2, pp. 280-281.

Character List

Cang Jie 倉頡
cèzì 測字
Chang Jian 常健
Chen Yinke 陳寅恪
chènwěi 讖緯
Chu 楚
Dong Hu 董狐
Duan Yucai 段玉裁
Erya 爾雅
Fu Xi 伏羲
guwen 古文
Han 漢
Hanfeizi 韓非子
Hui Lin 慧琳
I Ching 易經
Jia Yi 賈誼
Jiaoshi yilin 焦氏易林
Jiao Yanshou 焦延壽
jintishi 近體詩
ji-zhuan 紀傳
lìcí 麗辭
liezhuan 列傳
Liu Bang 劉邦
Liu Xie 劉勰
Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫
lüshi 律詩
Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠
pianwen 駢文
Qi Gong 啟功

Qian Mu 錢穆
Qu Yuan 屈原
Shangshu 尚書
Shen Nong 神農
shihua 詩話
Shiji 史記
Shisanjing zhushu 十三經注疏
Shuowen jiezi 說文解字
Shuowen jiezi zhu 說文解字注
Sikong Tu 司空圖
Song Minqiu 宋敏求
Su Shi 蘇軾
Wang Anshi 王安石
Wang Wei 王維
wenhua 文化
Wen Tingyun 溫庭筠
Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍
Wu Du 五蠹
Xiang Yu 項羽
Xie Shi 謝石
xiang 象
xiaoxue 小學
Xu Shen 許慎
Yang Bojun 楊伯峻
Zhang Zhongxing 張中行
Zhu Xi 朱熹
Zi Shuo 字說
Zuo Zhuan 左傳

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